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#### THOUSAND WHISPERS

#### CREDITS

2

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### LIVE-ACTION ADAPTATIONS FOR LAWS OF THE EAST

Like previous Dharma Books, this book contains sidebars to let you integrate the material herein with Laws of the East, the Mind's Eye Theatre supplement for the Middle Kingdom. Whether you use dice or rockpaper-scissors, you'll find all you need to portray followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers in these pages.

Look for the live action sidebar at the end of the "Wearing the Mask" chapter. Remember that the Storyteller has the final say as to which systems are available in her game.



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MANGA: A THOUSAND CUTS LEAVING NO TRACE (OVERVIEW) KILLING THE BUDDHA (THE BROKEN MASK TECHNIQUE) THE EMPTINESS INSIDE (TRADITIONS & TENETS) BECOMING NOBODY (ORGANIZATION) WEARING THE MASK (RULES & ADVICE) LIKE WIND AND WATER (TEMPLATES) APPENDIX: AUSPICIOUS WISE CENTIPEDES

4



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When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself. — Shunryu Suzuki

## LETTERS FROM THE DEAD

It is common for Rootless Trees to write letters to the people they have known in a particular life before bringing that life to an end and moving on. These writings help the Kuei-jin to understand the lessons that existence has taught them. By explaining their way, they come to understand it more fully.

That is the Dharma of my kind. We are the Kuei-jin, reborn by taking the Second Breath. I follow the Path of a Thousand Whispers. While most of my kind are reborn only once from the Thousand Hells of Yomi, followers of my path are reborn over and over again. We live a thousand lives before reaching the slopes of the mountain of enlightenment — a long climb on the Road Back. We learn the lessons of many lives, and the most important of these is to let go of life. It is the hardest lesson of all, my love. Even now, I struggle in my heart to accept it. Jotaro's life, your life, all life is only an illusion. We are born, we live, and we die, coming from nothing and returning to nothing, existing in and between nothingness. In knowing this, in letting go, we are made free, and we break the chains that bind us to existence. My teachers told me this, and they told me it would be difficult to let go of my lives, as difficult as it was to let go of my very first life, to fall into death. We die over and over until we no longer fear death, until all the masks are stripped away. Others do not understand us. I am sure now you are saying you do not understand, and it is difficult for me to explain. Other Kuei-jin think we are mad for our beliefs, for choosing to die a thousand different times, discarding everything we have gained in each life before moving on. They look at our actions and shake their heads in confusion but only because they have not walked our path. They have not seen through other eyes, and so, they cannot understand.

5

The following text, which continues in subsequent chapters, is one such ritual letter.

Dearest Michiko,

As I put pen to paper to write of this life, I realize there is so much to tell. The thoughts and memories hammer at the gates of my mind, crowding to rush onto the paper. Like a general, I must marshal and control them, setting them into orderly rows to await their time in turn. There was so much to say, and there is so little time left.

The first that is clear to me — standing apart from everything else — is that I love you. I hope it will carry me through everything else I must say. You have taught me about love, and I hope I have shown it to you in equal measure. That makes following my path all the more difficult and all the more important.

I am not the man you believed me to be. More accurately, I was that man, but I will not be for much longer. Jotaro was your love, and I will kill him. Some might say Jotaro was nothing more than a mask I wore. They do not understand because they were not Jotaro. I was. I was Jotaro in every way that mattered. I lived his life, wore his skin and loved and hated with his heart. Now he is dead.

They call us Rootless Trees, and that is what we are. Not rootless because we lack grounding, but rootless because we are

#### THOUSAND WHISPERS

not bound by the past, not ensnared by our lives. We grow upward, always reaching toward Heaven, giving no more thought to what was than a tree gives to the soil.

And we do not leave everything of our lives behind. We take the lessons each life gives us and leave the rest behind, separating the high from the low. The others, they sway so far in one direction or another they cannot see any other way. We stand at the center. Our branches reach out to east and west, north and south, but our trunk always stands tall, in balance between all things.

We may do things that seem extreme, like how I have treated you, but always, we return to the quiet and stillness of the center, the Still Earth Flowing. Others become tangled in the roots of their way, as they slowly dig deeper and deeper into the earth, tying them down and hardening their minds, their hearts, and their spirits. We pull up our roots and continue following the road, always moving forward, always returning to balance.

That is where I must go now, Jotaro's love. Through death, I return to balance, the state of peace denied me in my first death. From that place of peace, I will choose my next life and follow it to its end. I thank you for the lessons you have taught me, and I honor your place under Heaven. I will say a prayer for your spirit to carry it on its way as I continue along mine. When I touch these papers to the flame, it will turn them to ash, like Jotaro's life, and the smoke will carry your spirit to Heaven.

Farewell.

# TAKE UP THE MASK

They live a thousand lives, moving through the world like shadows, only to die and rise again to repeat the cycle. The Kuei-jin following the Path of a Thousand Whispers are the most mysterious and inscrutable of their kind Many Kuei-jin call them mad and treacherous and say it is impossible to know what one of the Rootless Trees will do from one moment to the next. The followers of the Whispering Way know the truth. While other paths describe themselves with sutras and koans, the Rootless Trees have seen the emptiness within and embraced it. Their lives, their riddles, their words are all nothing more than masks worn to cover the Void. The Rootless Trees use the technique of the Broken Mask to slowly strip away these things, to become aware of the emptiness, embrace it and finally become one with it. In this way, they achieve enlightenment.

More important than the ability to adopt the many lives called for by their path is the ability to end those lives gracefully. The Broken Mask teaches Kuei-jin detachment and the ability to face death without fear, seeing it as an ally and teacher instead. A Rootless Tree must live each life to the fullest, then bring it to an end. In so doing, the vampire gives up everything she gained in that life save for her memories and experience. She sacrifices friends, family, possessions and all other ties on the altar of enlightenment. Only by learning to break such ties can the Rootless Trees achieve wisdom and true understanding.

This causes some concern for other Kuei-jin, since it makes the Whispers not only unpredictable, but even dangerous if they decide the ties they must cut include their wu or court. Fortunately, Whispers begin their journey with their mortal masks, maintaining their immortal existence among Kuei-jin as a kind of fabric through which to weave the threads of their other lives. Only when they have achieved a great deal of wisdom do Whispers see the need to destroy the fabric as well as the pattern. Thus, the more advanced followers of the Dharma are also the most feared, because they are the least predictable. A true master of the Dharma is like a force of nature, uncaring and unpredictable.

#### STILL EARTH FLOWING

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The Path of a Thousand Whispers embodies equilibrium between the forces of Yin and Yang, Hun and P'o. It is aligned with the center direction, between all the opposing forces that war within the Kuei-jin. Surrounded on all sides by Dharmas devoted to one aspect of Kuei-jin nature or another, the Hollow Reeds consider themselves responsible for maintaining balance.

6

## OLD LIVES, BROKEN MASKS

The Broken Mask Technique is at the heart of the Path of a Thousand Whispers. It is the art of adopting new mortal lives following the Second Breath, living among mortals as one of them. The lives of a Rootless Tree are ideally as many and varied as possible. Whispers often adopt multiple lives at once, living them as fully as possible and learning all the lessons life has to teach them. Where many Kuei-jin hold themselves aloof from mortals, seeing them as only pawns or prey, the Rootless Trees plunge into the sea of humanity like pearl divers, rising only occasionally for breath, with pearls of wisdom clutched in their hands.

Balance for the Whispers is not cold, emotionless asceticism. That is the way of Yin and the Song of the Shadow. For the Hollow Reeds, balance allows for complete freedom. They can follow any of the virtues or directions, but they must always compensate for their actions and return to the center. This balance is often not apparent to others, even those as long-lived as fellow Kuei-jin. A Rootless Tree in one life might be as monstrous as a Devil-Tiger, then in another life as kind and devoted to virtue as the most saintly Resplendent Crane. Balance comes over a period of time, not from counting every single thought and action like scattered grains of rice.

Still, the Wise Centipede is aware of every action and its place in the path. It is all too easy to mistake the mask for the truth and fall into imbalance with respect to a particular virtue. The Path of a Thousand Whispers is littered with Kuei-jin who have fallen victim to that particular trap, unable to see their own imbalance, but gladly pointing out such failings in others.

#### THE COMING STORM

Where other Kuei-jin fear the imminent arrival of the Sixth Age, the followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers welcome it (merely confirming their madness in the minds of some). To them, the Age of Sorrow is not the end of the world,

#### LEAVING NO TRACE

but merely another ritual death. They see the changing of the Ages as similar to their own cycle of many lives. Although each Age is radically different from the one before it, it is still a natural part of the path, a new existence offering its own unique lessons and wisdom, and not a thing to be feared.

Because of this, the Hollow Reeds are remarkably unperturbed by the signs and omens of the Sixth Age. They go about their business much as they have for millennia, ignoring the scurrying and wailing of other Kuei-jin. Although some accuse them of ignoring their Heavenly duties altogether, the Rootless Trees know they are doing just the opposite, keeping faith with their Dharma no matter the circumstances. The Whispers have compromised few of their tenets and traditional ways out of feelings of urgency. Some young Reeds have shown a tendency to change masks more often, a trend quietly frowned upon by their elders, who stress patience and encourage their students to explore each life in depth. "Taste fully of each dish before moving on to the next in the banquet," they say.

## How TO USE THIS BOOK

The Path of a Thousand Whispers is perhaps the most difficult Dharma, both to play and to include in a **Kindred** of **the East** game. The ways of the Hollow Reeds are complex and often apparently at odds with the beliefs and traditions of Kuei-jin society. How, for example, does a Rootless Tree maintain ties with her *wu* and court over the course of multiple lives? When do the Whispers choose to move from one life to another, and what happens to them when they do?

This book provides answers — and guidelines — examining the Path of a Thousand Whispers in more depth, looking at the Rootless Trees' relations to others and to Kuei-jin society in general and offering advice on playing and running them, along with additional information on their unique rites and abilities. Most of the information in this book takes the form of writings from a Hollow Reed as he prepares to end one life and move to the next. While the words of this nameless vampire are largely accurate, they are colored by a particular point of view (even the Hollow Reeds can be only so objective). Storytellers should feel free to modify the ideas behind the words in this book. Like the followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers, listen to not only the words, but also the meaning behind them, and consider how best to include them in your game. Middle Kingdom and elsewhere in the World of Darkness.

Wearing the Mask contains rules and advice for playing Thousand Whispers characters, including new Merits, Flaws and rites.

The book concludes with Like Wind and Water, a collection of templates, and Auspicious Wise Centipedes, descriptions of some renowned followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers.

## LEXICON

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Over their many lives, the Whispers have built a common vocabulary. Some of it is shared or adopted by other Kuei-jin, while other parts of it remain a mystery to them.

**Bunraku:** "Invisible Puppeteers." The Bunraku are Rootless Trees of the north direction. They enforce and maintain balance, usually operating behind the scenes.

Broken Mask, the: The central technique of the Path of a Thousand Whispers, where a Kuei-jin adopts one life after another, learning its lessons, then undergoing a ritual death before moving on.

Dancing Peacocks: Thousand Whispers of the east direction. They act to watch over mortal society and are strongly drawn to mortal life.

Dark Jade Lover, the: Hollow Reed personification of death, viewed as the Kuei-jin's ally, teacher and constant companion.

**Exalted Jade Masks:** Thousand Whispers of the west direction. They redress ancient imbalances signaled by the spirits of the dead and send on ghosts who linger too long, earning them the nickname "ghost-killers."

Hollow Reed, The: Important sutra of the Path of a

7

Killing the Buddha talks about the Broken Mask Technique, how and why the Thousand Whispers adopt their different lives and how they end them.

The Emptiness Inside looks at the history, traditions and tenets of the Path of a Thousand Whispers — how the Dharma began and what the Hollow Reeds believe about their path.

Becoming Nobody describes the diversity within the path, along with the Rootless Trees' relationships with other Dharmas and factions of the Middle Kingdom. It looks at the ongoing concerns of the Rootless Trees, and how they are dealing with the changes happening in the Thousand Whispers, praising the value of moderation and emptiness. Followers of the Dharma often refer to themselves as Hollow Reeds.

Rootless Trees: A name for followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers.

Scarlet Centipedes: Thousand Whispers of the south direction. Associated with rebellion and rabble-rousing but also skillful warriors.

siddhis: Disciplines. Abilities the enlightened develop as they progress along their path. Some Rootless Trees consider them more a distraction from the path than a blessing.

Still Earth Flowing: A metaphor for the state sought by the Whispers: solid and firm like the earth, but also ever changing, as the earth itself changes.

Void, the: The nothingness that underlies all things, which the Whispers seek through the Broken Mask Technique.

Wisdom of the Centipede, The: Important sutra of the Path of a Thousand Whispers, involving observations on the life of a centipede and the lessons they offer follows of the way.

Wise Centipedes: A name for followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers. It both honors their teachings and serves as a warning of their unpredictable behavior.



KILLING THE BUDHA

# KICCINC THE BUDDHA

If you meet the Buddha along the road, kill him. — Buddhist saying

You will never see these words that I write, my love, but that makes them no less important. I write to make you understand, so that I might understand. And if the smoke rising from the ashes carries some of what I have written up to Heaven, then so much the better for us both.

# TAKING UP THE MASK

The key to understanding our path is the technique of the Broken Mask. When you step onto the Path of a Thousand Whispers, you must put aside your self and learn to become something other, as I have done.

Since taking the Second Breath, we are ageless. In my meditations, I have begun to notice a separation from the

currents of time. How many years has it been since I clawed my way back up from Hell to reunite with this dead flesh? I do not know for certain — the years have begun to pass like smoke on the wind.

An ageless body and spirit are the keys to following the path, because they allow us to take up the Broken Mask, to live new lives and learn all they have to offer, before moving on to other lives and still others after that. It is our humble emulation of the Wheel of rebirth all living things enjoy but from which we are forever barred. A thousand lives make up the path before me, a thousand lifetimes to walk the Road Back and join with the Hundred Clouds, if I am worthy. The road is long, but it is the journey itself that matters most.

## THE FIRST MASKS

The creation of new life is not an easy thing for the dead. I lived my first existence, before the Second Breath, with as little thought about what I was doing and why as any mortal — perhaps even less than most. Truth be told, that lack of awareness is one of the reasons that I walk my path now. I realize now both the importance and the ultimate futility of identity. All our lives are masks, to be worn and later discarded.

My sensei gave me my first masks, as his sensei before him, and hers before her. From them, I learned how to weave the pattern of a life. By living it, I learned all the nuances involved becoming someone else, knowledge that helped me to create Jotaro and to *be* him. It is like being reborn. We Hollow Reeds have a deeper understanding of life than any others because we must know how to create life and shape it like an artist's brush captures the world on paper.

But we cannot forget that we are no longer of the world of the living. Although we move among you, we are not of you. While maintaining our mortal identities and becoming part of them, we must also remain apart from them. Detachment is a central part of the path. Although we feel and see and do many things in our lives, we must always know that we are empty inside, a vessel waiting to be filled. That is why Jotaro had to die, because otherwise he never would have lived. What is life without the sweet promise of death?

## MAKING LIVES

After discarding the first masks given to us by our

not see that such influence is a means to an end, not as they might believe, an end in and of itself. Our mortal lives are not always ones of power and influence. There is as much to be learned — if not more — from being a servant or slave as from being a master.

Along with the mundane details of a new life, we must breathe in the vital spark, the energies that make the life truly alive: hopes, fears, loves, hates, desires, goals and all the other touchstones of the human heart. Without these precious elements, the life is hollow and meaningless and can teach us nothing. With them, it becomes a true step on the path toward enlightenment.

## TAKING LIVES

We not only make lives; we also take them, for such is our karma. My kind takes the Chi we need to survive from others, as I have taken yours, my love. I feel it now, pulsing through me, warm and vital. It becomes a part of us, like the memories of our lives, and I know you will be a part of me always because of it. Our knowledge of making life also tells us when to take it and the ways that are least likely to be noticed.

Masters of the Path of a Thousand Whispers can learn to hear the voices that whisper in the Chi they take from mortals. A true master can take a mortal's Chi and with it her life and spirit, putting on that mortal's life like a garment, becoming them in every way. Some believe this way of gaining a new life is superior, because it grants a life that is whole and offers unexpected challenges and insights . But it also brings with it unexpected karmic ties and debts. I am content with creating my own lives rather than taking on the lives of others, and thankfully, my duties have never required me to do so.

teachers, we create new ones on our own. Once our teachers give us those first gifts, they move on and give us nothing more. What more can one ask from a parent, an elder, than life?

Part of the creation of a new life involves building up the many small things to which mortals give little or no thought: a legal identity, a home, a source of history and legitimacy in the eyes of society. This is more difficult now than ever. In days past, it was easy for a stranger to establish a life in a far away place, but now it is necessary to go to great lengths to create a life. These new challenges keep us from becoming complacent, and I welcome them.

Influence in the mortal world is one of the reasons we maintain close ties with the courts of the unliving and use the mortal agents they call Scarlet Screens. They give us the means to take up new lives when the time comes. We even maintain Scarlet Screens specially trained to handle the mundane details of moving from one life to another, from paperwork to covering up any minor inconsistencies that might draw the attention of the mortal authorities.

Some point to our involvement with the Scarlet Screens and claim we have faltered in our beliefs. They do

## ON LIVING THE LIFE

When I wear the mask of a life, I am that person, with all my being. But I still strive to remain hollow and empty inside, to let the experiences of that identity flow into me like water filling a jug. I must forget it when the time comes to live another life. There is only the life we live right now, only the present moment. There is nothing beyond it, a Void connecting our lives together and making them one, like a strand of pearls on an invisible thread.

It is not necessary to experience every life as fully as every other. Each has things to teach us but in its own way and time. Therefore, we often take on greater and lesser masks to experience life as completely as possible. A greater life is experienced in all its richness, a fully formed identity and experience that is born from us, lives and dies in its time, like Jotaro. A lesser life is more like a true mask, one we take up for a short time — perhaps as little as a single night — then put aside. Sometimes when we end a greater life, we take one of the lesser and put flesh to its bones, making it a greater life in turn.

#### KILLING THE BUDHA

# BREAKING THE MASK

Our technique is known as the Broken Mask for a reason. We take up masks and wear them, only to remove and shatter them when they no longer serve us. By taking up new lives, we open ourselves up to death again, and this is as it should be, for life has no meaning without death as its ultimate end. Other Kuei-jin fear even the Little Death, since it is too great a reminder of their time in Yomi. We Hollow Reeds make death our friend and our ally, even our lover — a companion along the Road Back.

When an identity has taught us all that it can, it is time to end it and move on. To cling to a life that is no longer useful is dangerous, because it distracts from the path and leads to imbalance. Many Hollow Reeds have fallen from the way because they could not leave a treasured mask behind. Ending a life means embracing death, to make the choice few of us were given before our Second Breath, to choose our place and time of dying, to truly feel and understand its meaning. We know the time has come when a mask has become comfortable and familiar, with no surprises or challenges.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SHADOW LIFE

If each life we live is like a perfect pearl, then our unlife is the pale white thread that connects them into a necklace or surpassing beauty. Each life is a step, and unlife is the road we walk on. Our ageless existence binds all our lives together and gives them meaning. Kuei-jin society and our Dharma underlie all the lives we live. We are able to put aside our masks to walk among our kind and fulfill our duties at court, although these things are also masks, in their way. At first, our ties to other Kuei-jin are vital because they represent our learning and the means by which we create new lives. Our wu and court are part of our invisible, shadow existence - our true life in unlife. In all our forms, we are bound to the hidden society of the Hungry Dead, as surely as the pearls are bound to their thread. Those that neglect the shadow life, focusing solely on their masks, find the way along the Road Back blocked. The lives we weave can become a trap for those unable to cut their ties and die anew, as I have done. It is a difficult thing but a necessary part of the path. Eventually, even the strictures of unlife may become a subtle trap. True masters of our path face the time to sever their ties with their wu, their court and even with Kuei-jin society altogether. They break the thread to scatter the pearls of their lives. There are no pearls. There is no thread. There is no life. But they are truly wise and ready for such a journey. I do not yet fully comprehend the truth behind their words. Until that time, I learn the ways of unlife as carefully as any mask, waiting for the time to kill even death.



## THE RITUAL OF & THOUSAND CUTS

The first step in ending a life is what we call the Ritual of a Thousand Cuts, where we carefully and systematically sever the ties that bind us to that persona, cutting each tie with the precision of a surgeon. With each tie we sever, we become lighter and less encumbered, ready to move along the path and be reborn again. It begins with small, simple things. I recall how you noticed Jotaro becoming withdrawn and losing interest in many of the things important to him. Selling the swords and art books and other trinkets he loved. Then leaving his job, putting his affairs in the material world in order. You thought those things were indications of depression at first, perhaps contemplation of suicide, and you were close to the truth. For he -I — was contemplating death.

Then the way his friends were driven away by his callousness, his cold and indifferent attitude toward them. Only a handful endured those days, including you, bewildered by his strange behavior, unable to draw him out and get at the root of the problem because Jotaro was rootless in truth. The mysterious illnesses and accidents that struck those who remained, the last cuts that brought the attention of the authorities, turning Jotaro into a fugitive.

You began investigating, so certain of my innocence, and discovered things you should not have. At the last, I was clumsy, wounding you with my failure to make a clean cut. I hoped to spare you pain, but I failed to cut the thread between us and only pulled you into my world. The Yama Kings thought to use you to make me dance to their tune, grabbing at my heart and pulling the string like the puppet-masters they are. So the first rite of Embracing the Dark Jade Lover is a gentle one. We lie down in deep meditation, appearing to the world as if we are dead. In this state we reflect on the lessons we learned in our previous life, picking the grains of wisdom and discarding the chaff of memories and ties from that identity. This meditation takes many days, but it is a mark of skill and enlightenment to be able to complete it without interruption, without retreating from the nearness of death, the feeling of stillness and silence. In this way, we grow comfortable with what we are, the Hungry Dead.

#### THE RITE OF THE EARTH'S EMBRACE

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The second rite is that of the Earth's Embrace, where we are actually buried in the living earth during our meditation. Funeral rites often accompany the entombment, especially if we can make arrangements during our previous lives for them. I recall the first time I undertook this rite and how it evoked recollections of awakening from the Second Breath, clawing my way out of the cold ground to reach the night air above. Shadow soul is perhaps the greatest risk in all these rites. I had to struggle to restrain the Demon within, but those struggles strengthened me and showed me that fear is an illusion. My tomb is prepared to receive me once I have completed my work, and I await its cool and sheltering touch.

Some Hollow Reeds choose to have mortals from their former lives maintain vigils over their resting place, delaying the final of the Thousand Cuts until their awakening, whereon they simultaneously slake their hunger for Chi and sever their final ties with their previous life. Others choose to do as I have done and ask fellow followers of our path to watch over them as they rest in death's embrace, departing once we begin to stir toward awakening.

#### THOUSAND WHISPERS

The final tie, waiting to be broken. The final cut to be made. I will seek penance for my failing, my love. In my next life, I will not hesitate to act. It is one of the lessons you have taught me.

## EMBRACING THE DARK JADE LOVER

But I confess, I long now for the arms of another lover. I have rested too long in the embrace of life, and now I must return to the bosom of the Dark Jade Lover who is death. From her, I will learn to love life again. The cycle will turn once more, and I will rise up again. As I am only a humble student, I do not know my mysterious lover as the true masters do. My rites are only a shadow of what is to come, as I learn to give myself completely over into her kiss, to become nothing, the stillness of void and shadow. We follow four rites that bring us into her embrace.

### THE RITE OF GENTLE REPOSE

First is the Rite of Gentle Repose. In our first masks after taking the Second Breath, even we fear the Dark Jade Lover. The memories of our time in Yomi are too fresh, like a wound that has not fully healed. There are Kuei-jin who follow other paths and never overcome their fear of the Dark Lover, but we must.

### THE RITE OF THE LITTLE DEATH

Those ready for a deeper cut between personas undergo the Rite of the Little Death, where Rootless Trees deliberately seek the Little Death to better honor and understand the Dark Jade Lover. Each Hollow Reed must choose the manner of his or her death; belly cutting and throat slitting are common enough. The use of a blade is quick and ensures a proper death, whereas other methods risk True Death if they are not carried out properly. I assisted my teacher when he chose this rite and watched as he sliced open his belly after reciting the death-poem he composed for the occasion. My blade is sharp, resting on the fine white paper beside me. I can almost feel its touch on my skin as I consider the rite.

In the Little Death, our soul is freed from the body to enter the Mirror Lands, though it must linger close to the body. In this state, we are even closer to the Dark Jade Lover and can better understand her ways. The spirit may wander in the Mirror Lands for a time before setting to the task of restoring the body. There are many

#### KILLING THE BUDHA

spirits there that can teach us their secrets, but many others seek to keep a wandering soul prisoner. The passage through death brings on shadow soul, as the Hun and P'o natures struggle for control. Kuei-jin may awaken from this rite as mad and ravenous as *chih-mei* or with some modicum of control, although they must still satisfy their hunger.

#### THE RITE OF THE TRUE DEATH

A true arhat of the Path of a Thousand Whispers can carry out the Rite of the True Death. This death rite destroys the body altogether and brings a Hollow Reed as close to the Final Death as is possible without the spirit being cast into oblivion. The rite demands complete perfection; anything less results irrevocable destruction. Preparations take months, since one must plan each element with the greatest of care. The result is pure harmony and balance, most beautiful to behold.

When all is in readiness, the Hollow Reed performs the rite and accepts the Final Death, usually by Facing the Eye of Heaven at dawn, although other methods are used, including self-immolation. The body is reduced to dust and ash by the rite, carried away on the spirit winds. If it is successful, the Kuei-jin's spirit is loosed to roam the spirit courts, the depths of the Yin and Yang Worlds, unfettered by dead flesh. There, it learns and gathers wisdom.

No one, not even the performer of the rite, knows how long the spirit will wander. Time is without meaning in the depths of the spirit world. When it is ready, the spirit returns. The dust and ash of the body swirls up and reforms. The Hollow Reed returns to the Middle Kingdom, perfect in form, wise in spirit, filled with the power of Chi. Facing the True Death in this way often signifies that a Hollow Reed is prepared to follow the final lives necessary to attain the Hundred Clouds. I can only hope to be worthy enough to face it myself one day. Dragon and the Dark Kingdom of Jade. The spirits and ghosts who abide there can teach many lessons about life and death (something our fellow Kuei-jin, particularly those following the Song of the Shadow, also understand). In particular, I have visited the Whispering Jungle, a sacred realm for those of my Dharma. The great arhat, Marble Gong, is said to have spoken with one of the Makade, the iron demon centipedes of that land, and learned the secrets of centipede wisdom from it. Others have attempted to do the same and become food for the Makade for their presumption.

Still, the wise Hollow Reed does not neglect to visit the Yang World, since it is a place of restless energy and insight into the forces that both create and destroy life. The inhabitants of the Yang World understand the arts of inspiration, creation, change and disguise and may teach these arts to those they deem worthy.

# TAKING NEW BREATH

But the spirit world is not our home. We Wan Kuei are creatures of the Middle Kingdom. Once the Dark Jade Lover's embrace ends, we must return to our unlife to take up a new mask and continue along the path. Although it is not as difficult as our first return from the spirit worlds — clawing our way up from Hell — the first moment of a new life is an echo of the Second Breath and carries with it many similar traits.

## UNLEASHING THE DEMON

The Dark Jade Lover's embrace rouses the power of the P'o, the Demon within. Returning to unlife requires the Demon's aid and so invokes the shadow soul, as the awakened P'o struggles to gain control of the corpse and raise it up again. Unleashing the Demon like this cultivates the P'o and reminds us of our Demon nature. Newly awakened Wise Centipedes allow the P'o free reign for a time. This helps to balance the Demon nature, and the unleashed P'o severs any remaining ties from the old life that might still remain, with ruthless efficiency and dark joy, like a cleansing fire. I am pleased to have ended things between us with some measure of grace and balance, despite my blundering, my love. It is not a matter I would have wanted the Demon to resolve. Kuei-jin avoid the awakening of a Hollow Reed from the tomb because of the danger posed by the unleashed Demon. Even when we guard the resting place of another follower of our Dharma, we withdraw just before they awaken, so we will not be forced to battle one of our own. Mortal guardians are usually not so well informed and serve as nourishment for the Demon's hunger, pleasure for its needs. If no ready food is at hand, we must hunt, and the Demon is the greatest hunter.

## WALKING IN THE SPIRIT WORLDS

It is common for Hollow Reeds who embrace the Dark Jade Lover to wander the spirit world in their time of contemplation. There is much wisdom to be gained in there, but there are also dangers that threaten the unwary and the unwise.

The Mirror Lands are a reflection of the Middle Kingdom (or perhaps it is the other way around). Travels through the Mirror Lands teach us to look beneath the appearances of things to see the truth in their reflection. The spirits that dwell in the Mirror Lands sometimes offer helpful advice and insight, although they can also be treacherous and lead wanderers astray.

Hollow Reeds wandering beyond the Wall most often visit the Yin World, since it is the land of the Ebon

THOUSAND WHISPERS

## THE NEXT BREATH

Walnut with a sale boundary

After allowing the Demon its freedom, it is necessary to return to the center. As I said, the Demon is a cleansing fire, burning away any remaining vestiges of the old mask, shattering it with the truth of what we are: the Ten Thousand Demons. But the Demon is only one part of our nature, and it must exist in harmony with the others. So it is necessary to emerge from shadow soul and take up the business of a new life. This test strengthens the will and the power of the Hun, keeping it in balance with the P'o. Those Wise Centipedes who cannot control the Demon are in the end controlled by it. Some fall from the path, either becoming servants of Yomi as *akuma*, or devolving into *chih-mei*, beasts entirely overcome by their Demon nature.

Once we have emerged from death once again, centered and replenished, having learned the lessons our previous life had to teach us, then are we ready to take up a new mask, to step into a new life and begin the cycle anew. Once the rituals are complete, the former life is gone. There is no happiness and no pain, only its experience and lessons remain.

I eagerly await that state of grace.









# THE EMPTINESS THEIDE

We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want. - Tao Te Ching

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I have told you of the Broken Mask. Now I must explain the path that technique supports, the Path of a Thousand Whispers. As my sense told me, I cannot truly understand what I cannot teach.

So teach I shall.

# SHADOWS ON & STAGE: THE BEGINNING OF THE PATH

Ours is an ancient heritage, born of worlds that rose and fell long before this one. Long, long ago, my people were not the fallen souls we are today, but servants of the August Personage of Jade, the Celestial Emperor himself. We were the Wan Xian, the Ten Thousand Immortals, charged with ordering all things in the Middle Kingdom and given powers beyond those of mortals. My people were princes of this world, before they grew too full of pride and failed to fulfill-their appointed tasks.

In falling from grace, the Wan Xian became the Wan Kuei, the Ten Thousand Demons, cursed with an insatiable hunger for Chi. Where once we had been gods, my people now became the very demons they at one time fought in the name of Heaven, ripe prey for the temptations of the Yama Kings and their minions. Such was the Age of Beautiful Sadness.

Everything has a purpose under Heaven, and the Ebon Dragon and the Scarlet Queen left the seeds of hope when they withdrew from the Middle Kingdom. A Wan Kuei known as Xue, seeking solace from his cursed existence, found these seeds in the most unlikely of places, nurtured them and helped them to blossom into the Fivefold Way to enlightenment, the Dharmas we now follow.

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## THE VISION OF XUE

Grand Arhat Xue stopped in his wanderings to meditate alongside a river. There he sat for the entire night, seeking to still his mind in the harmony of the water's flow and the sounds of the night creatures. He retreated to the safety of the shadows with the coming of dawn, only to return to the river each night, for 10 nights, seeking the inner peace and tranquility that eluded him.

On the 10th night, Xue felt a touch on his foot and looked down to see a centipede crawling there. Rather than swatting it away, he calmly observed the insect's progress, remaining as still and silent as a tree, rooted to the Earth. The gleaming, black centipede slowly crawled up along the arhat's foot to his leg and along his leg to his body. Xue observed how harmoniously it moved, each segment of its body like a separate thing, but each moving in accord with the others.

The centipede's hundred legs beat a gentle rhythm against the arhat's flesh, like a caress or the whisper of a hundred voices raised in a chorus. As the centipede climbed up his torso, Xue lost sight of it and listened instead to the whispering beat of its legs touching his body, the rippling sensation of energy flowing with it, up toward his head.

When the centipede crawled across Xue's eyes, they were opened and he was enlightened. He saw the lesson in the centipede, in the many separate parts that form a harmonious whole, in the humble made glorious through the power of attention. He humbly thanked the centipede as it crawled away into the reeds along the shore of the river before rising and continuing his journey.

Thus was our Dharma born.

# THE FIRST LIVES OF THE SECOND BREATH

We Hollow Reeds hold a reputation among Kuei-jin as fine teachers of *chih-mei*, those that have newly returned from Yomi, overcome by the power of the Demon. Part of this skill comes from our own relationship with our Demon nature, as we become almost like *chih-mei* after embracing the Dark Jade Lover and must leash and balance the P'o's power over us. Only the Devil-Tigers equal my Dharma in reputation for training *chih-mei*. What they do with hot irons and sharp blades, the sensei of the Thousand Whispers do with words and ideas, surely the superior way of teaching. I hope one day to become worthy of the title of sensei, this work one mere step on that path.

I recall my own time as chih-mei, newly risen from the grave, my soul torn and tortured by the devils of Yomi, the Demon within me in control, gripping my soul with iron claws. I was nothing more than a beast, satisfying my hunger for Chi and my most base instincts. Fortunately, I was found and captured by the Rising Wind wu and given into the hands of Sensei Omi-sama for my teaching and training. I now realize that if Omi-sama had been unable to teach me, he would have been responsible for destroying me as unfit to join proper society. He would have been right to do so. Bound with chains to restrain my savage strength, I was kept in Omi-sama's dojo while I vented my rage against anything that came within my reach. Each day, Omi-sama came into the dojo and sat calmly on a tatami mat on the floor, just out of my reach. He spoke in soothing tones to me, offering words of wisdom. I do not recall most of what he said, so consumed with rage was I until my sensei spoke his first koan to me. He held up a mirror close to my face. "What is it you see in the mirror?" he asked. I looked and saw a demon looking back at me. Eyes filled with hate, rage and most of all hunger, a beast, a creature from the depths of Hell.

hold it in check. My vision cleared, and I beheld my teacher, as if for the first time. He nodded and approached me without fear, releasing the chains that bound me. "Now," he said, "we begin."

From then I became *hin*, given into my master's hands. At his feet, I learned the history and ways of the Kuei-jin, of the Second Breath and of the Ten Thousand Things. More importantly, I learned discipline and the skills I needed to survive as one of the Hungry Dead. Those first lessons were often difficult ones, since I did not understand my sensei's reasons for what he required of me. There was labor more difficult than any I'd faced in life, coupled with meditation, study and more koans to ponder.

I struggled with these the most of all because the questions Omi-sama posed often seemed to make no sense at all, nor did my answers satisfy him. I earned no praise or words of kindness from my sensei, only more tasks, more discipline. I feared I would prove a disappointment to him, worse yet, that I would be judged unworthy by the ancestor of the court and destroyed, my soul cast back into Yomi. I could not bear the thought of it. I feared it more than anything else.

## THE FACE IN THE MIRROR

After a year of training at Omi-sama's dojo, I had learned a great deal. I was strong in body and mind, able to recite passages from the *Blood Sutras* and *The Wisdom of the Centipede* from memory. I learned to control and balance my Hun and P'o natures. But still, I could not grasp the real lessons my master sought to teach. The time when I would be presented to the court grew near, and I felt I was unworthy, that I could never pass the ancestors' scrutiny.

At that moment, something changed within me. I found the strength to wrestle with my Demon nature and

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My sensei summoned me into his presence again, and I knelt before him. He produced the small mirror I had seen the day I became *hin* and held it in front of me.

"What do you see in the mirror?" he asked again, as he had done many times. All the answers I'd given were ignored, because I had not given the true answer, the answer I feared to give. And Omi-sama knew it.

"I... sensei," I said, feeling the fear rise within me and the Demon with it, thrashing at its bonds.

"What do you see in the mirror?" he repeated calmly. I looked again and thought of the first time I looked into the mirror, of what I saw there.

"I see a demon, sensei," I said, "a monster."

The master shook his head sadly. The hand holding the mirror did not waver.

"What do you see in the mirror?" he asked again. I looked and felt the fear almost overwhelm me. I didn't understand! I had offered the best answer I could, the only answer I had left. Then a chill seized my soul, and the Demon howled within me. I knew what Omi-sama was telling me.

"I see death, sensei," I said.

"Then prepare yourself," he said and suddenly he was on his feet. He struck me before I even realized that he'd

#### THE EMPTIMESS INSIDE

moved. The blow sent me sprawling, and I scrambled to get to my feet and take a defensive pose, like I'd been taught. But I was fighting the teacher who taught me, who took the Second Breath before I was even born, and he slapped me down again before I could rise.

"Master, please!" I said, and he struck again.

"Is that begging I hear!" Omi-sama shouted at me, his voice becoming impossibly deep. "Do you scream for mercy like a child or do you fight?"

I felt the Demon thrash within me, and this time, I did not fight it. I welcomed it because it promised me the strength to survive, to fight, to win, like it did in the Yomi World, like it did when it brought me back for the Second Breath. I felt the Demon's Chi flow into my limbs and I struck back.

"Yes," Omi-sama said to me, horns sprouting from his head as his body swelled and his skin turned a vivid red, the color of blood. "Fight back! Call up the little Demon within you, so that I may rip out its heart."

I was consumed with anger and hatred for my mentor. I believed that he cared about my fate, but now I knew I was truly alone. The fire of the Demon filled my body, and I charged at him with a shriek torn from the depths of my soul.

It might as well have been a feather for the way Omi-sama turned aside my clumsy attack, sending me spinning to the ground. In an instant, he was upon me, his left hand tightening around my throat. I felt the sharp claws of his right hand at my chest, ready to tear out my heart.

"You match your Demon against mine?" Omi-sama said to me in almost a whisper. "I have Demons in my soul you cannot imagine, and gods, and heroes, and sages, and more. Your soul is like mine, like everyone's, large enough to contain everything that ever was. The Ten Thousand Things are all in there!" he said, stabbing at my heart, and I felt a searing pain in my chest. "If only you make room for them. Look!" A scaled hand thrust the small ornate mirror in front of me. "Look into the mirror! Look! What do you see?"

I looked into the mirror and, at that moment, I embraced the Dark Jade Lover. The fear of death I'd carried with me since the Second Breath melted away, and I saw, as if for the first time. I felt the Demon fade away like snow melting in the sun as I was captured by the vision of what I saw there.

"Nothing," I whispered in awe. "There's nothing. I am nothing."

"Yes," Omi-sama said. He had released me from his grip and stood above me. The terrible Demon was gone, and he looked like the dignified teacher I'd known, but



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I knew the Demon was still there. "Now we begin," was all he said as he helped me back up. Not long thereafter I was presented to the uji and became a true disciple. Omi-sama gave me the mirror as a gift, and I carry it with me even now.

# THE EIGHTFOLD WAY OF THE HOLLOW REED

The Path of a Thousand Whispers rests on eight perfect tenets, handed down to us from Grand Arhat Xue and carrying the seeds of his enlightenment. Although interpretations vary from place to place, these tenets are at the heart of my Dharma, and all that claim to follow the path heed them.

## TENETS OF THE PATH OF & THOUSAND WHISPERS

1. Live 1,000 lifetimes, each one different from the last.

2. Learn what you can from each life.

3. Change as much as possible between breaths.

4. If you grow too close to something, kill it. It will only hinder you.

5. Turn your back on each life as you leave it.

6. Give when generosity is required; take when theft is required.

7. Pry open the eyes of the sightless, and make the mute defend their wordless state. All beings must confront their choices, so question them as you pass.

Each mask also contains a lifetime of moments, each one different from the one before. Over time, we come to appreciate the different experiences it has to offer. Many Hollow Reeds seek to make "perfect" lives, with none of the mistakes they made before taking the Second Breath. In time, they learn such perfection is doomed to failure because it is unbalanced. A life with no mistakes offers no lessons. In fact, I am grateful for the ending of this mask. Your suffering was not in vain, my love, for it has taught me much.

Fear. Fear is the purpose of the first tenet, the inability to accept the Second Breath or existence as one of the Ten Thousand Demons. Fear leads the Rootless Trees to cover the truth with a thousand masks, seeking to hide what they have become. But the truth cannot be denied. When all your masks are broken, there will be no escape.

## THE SECOND TENET: LIFE'S LESSONS

I see that the Demon speaks through my hand, so let this work be balanced through its voice.

The second tenet of the path is "learn what you can from each life." Every mask has its lessons, and we strive to learn all that we can from them. I recall my first masks made me wonder about this tenet because they were so mundane. What could I learn from being a beggar, living homeless on the streets of Nagasaki? Would I not learn more as a priest or wandering monk? Surely another life would teach me more.

8. When something appears to be out of balance, correct it. If you cannot, destroy it.

## THE FIRST TENET: THE LONG ROAD BACK

The foundation of the Path of a Thousand Whispers, and the lesson my sensei taught me long ago, is that we must make ourselves empty vessels, then fill ourselves again. As the hollow reed is used to make a flute, so must we use the emptiness inside us to create beautiful music. Where other Kuei-jin seek the Road Back through experiencing part of their unliving nature to the fullest, we seek to balance those extremes and find wisdom in the mortal life we have left behind. Our ageless existence gives us the benefit of seeing life from every angle and every point of view. Why cling so fervently to one belief throughout the centuries?

This tenet is fulfilled through the Broken Mask Technique, in which we learn to take on different lives, experience them to the fullest, then kill them when the time is right and move on to a new life and new experiences, taking only the lessons of the old with us. We seek to make each new mask as different from the one before as possible, so we can experience everything our existence has to offer.

But that life did hold lessons for me, as has every one since. The key is in finding the wisdom within each and learning to heed it. Sometimes, the insight does not come until the life is over and I contemplate it in the embrace of the Dark Jade Lover. Only then can I see clearly, standing outside and looking back.

In some cases the insight is not clear. The tenet admonishes us to learn what we can. Sometimes the lesson is that there is no lesson. I recall a mask I once wore that seemed meaningless - how I despaired at my failure and feared for my progress on the path. It taught me to understand that there is more of a purpose to wearing the mask than looking for lessons. As The Journey of a Thousand Steps tell us, "The mask is not a lesson. Life is not a lesson. Life is life. The lesson comes in the living." A student who always keeps an eye out for a lesson has only one to see with.

Are there supposed insights in these masks, these shadow plays, or is there only meaning because we put it there, unwilling to acknowledge the real truth, that nothing has meaning? Meaning is as we make it, lessons are learned, themes repeated, over and over, until none of them carry any meaning and the dark flower of the void opens.

## THE THIRD TENET: STILL EARTH FLOWING

"Change as much as possible between breaths," the third tenet tells us. Change is at the heart of the path, moving from one life to another, from one moment to the next. Nothing remains the same. Even the still earth flows, and it is impossible to step into the same river twice. Rather than resist inevitable change, we embrace it and become a part of it. By swinging from side to side, we remain balanced in the center, changing while the world changes around us.

The third tenet also refers to our changes from one life —one "breath" — to another. We make each life different and unique in order to learn from it. There is nothing to be gained in moving from one life to another that is exactly the same. Our balance is a dynamic one, embracing change, embracing action.

Avoiding what is. Change so long as the change is not too great, too different, too much. The greatest change comes between the First and the Second Breaths, the change from mortal to immortal demon, the change all Kuei-jin fear and deny. Embrace change, and deny the greatest change in your existence. Cast off the chains of your mortality! Accept the change you truly fear.

## THE FOURTH TENET:

But the discriminating gardener pulls up only weeds, leaving the flowers. The wise man discriminates between high and low, the *I Ching* tells us. So the Wise Centipede learns what things are hindrances along the path. It is a lesson we each must learn, a lesson others suffer to teach us.

Instify killing however you wish, the path is painted with blood. Killing shows the power of death, the power you hold in your hands. Does the tiger kill because the prey Keeps him from being a tiger? Or does the tiger kill because killing *makes* him a tiger? Kill whatever you want, it is all a dress rehearsal, preparing you for killing yourself.

## THE FIFTH TENET: A THOUSAND CUTS

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The fourth tenet leads into the fifth, which tells us to "turn your back on each life as you leave it." Letting go of a life is even harder than breaking all ties with it. I tell you truly, my love, that, although I know you are gone, I have not rid myself of the feeling of your touch, the smell of your hair, the sound of your laughter or your screams. I remember our first kiss, the first night we made love. Only when I have exorcised these memories through this work and the embrace of the Dark Jade Lover will I be ready to move on to the next breath. Does it seem callous of me, to want to forget you?

My sensei once told me a tale of two monks traveling, seeking enlightenment. They came to a flooded river where a beautiful woman stood, unable to cross because the bridge had been washed away. The elder of the two monks offered to carry the woman across the river on his back, and she accepted. She lifted her kimono and wrapped her legs around the monk as he carried her across, then left her on the opposite shore. The monks continued on their way until the younger monk finally spoke.

### KILLING THE BUDDHA

The fourth tenet is a lesson you helped to teach me, my love. It says, "If you grow too close to something, kill it. It will only hinder you." Wise men say if you meet the Buddha along the road, kill him, because the Buddha is not the way. These words are not the way. Only the way that cannot be described, only known, is the true way.

Attachments to anything else are like chains dragging us down, keeping us from following our path. Oh, how there was a time when I wanted nothing more than to remain with you forever, to give up everything for you. But I know now that would be foolishness because, although my love for you was true, our life together was an illusion, like everything else in this world. You never knew what I truly was until the end, and that moment showed me that we could never be. I killed you, killed myself, and in so doing, set myself free.

As my master showed me, only when death is at hand, only when we embrace the Dark Jade Lover and look into the mirror to see nothingness reflected there, do we understand that life is an illusion and we are part of the nothingness within it. There is no love, no truth, no sadness, no pain, no life, no death, only the path. Anything that draws us from it must die for us to continue on the Road Back. "Brother," he said. "I do not understand. We are sworn to abstain from things of the material world, and yet you carried that woman, touched her flesh, felt her body against yours. How could you do such a thing?"

"Brother," the elder monk replied calmly, "I left that woman back by the river, but it seems to me that you are still carrying her."

Carrying things from one life to the next weighs us down until we can no longer walk the Road Back. That is why we must leave each life behind. We take nothing with us but the wisdom we have gained. All the rest is left behind on the shore of the river we have crossed.

What the Thousand Cuts make is food for me. It is a hell of your own making, shaped by your hand. Like Yomi, you cannot survive it without me. Pain, suffering, fear, hatred and regret are a sublime banquet, a feast to sustain me on the

#### THOUSAND WHISPERS

journey through death, giving me the power to drag you screaming back into unlife once again. Throw away all that you have gained. I will show you how to find more. Feed and strengthen me, so we might survive.

## THE SIXTH TENET: MAINTAINING THE BALANCE

The sixth tenet of the path says, "Give when generosity is needed; take when theft is required." This is the balance we strive toward throughout our many lives. The balanced Kuei-jin flows with the current of circumstance rather than fighting against it, able to manifest what is needed at the time rather than trying to force circumstances to fit a narrow view of things. Others say this makes us unpredictable, but that is not so. It is the ways of Heaven that are often mysterious. We merely react to the changes happening around us, without guilt or remorse.

The only shameful act is to upset the balance of things because balance is the natural way. If it were not for the dance between Yin and Yang, the Middle Kingdom would not be. We Kuei-jin are made up of a balance of forces -Ying and Yang, Hun and P'o — and we must keep these forces in balance, lest we be torn apart by them and pulled from the path. That is not to say we do not experience the passions those forces represent. Quite the opposite, in fact. The Kuei-jin following the Storm of Inward Tempest espouse a stark philosophy of moderation and abstention, but we drink deeply of what each and every way has to offer. But we understand the importance of balancing our indulgences with their opposite, like the Scarlet Queen balances the Ebon Dragon. I have felt the rage and hunger of a Devil-Tiger, debated virtue with Resplendent Cranes, listened to the whispering of ghosts in Bone Flower temples and danced and drank and loved with Thrashing Dragons. But I have allowed none of these paths to consume me, because they are not my path, only a part of it.

It is not as crude as that, of course. We work through words much of the time, but there comes times when words are not as effective as actions, and the wise man recognizes that time. Sometimes an action speaks louder than the mightiest shout, and sometimes, a whisper is more powerful than the sharpest sword. That is why a Hollow Reed can go from being a quiet philosopher to a raging demon, like Omi-sama did with me. Such sudden change can, on occasion, crack even the cold disdain of a Bone Flower or the rigid discipline of a Resplendent Crane, giving them something to think about.

Questioning the beliefs of others means never having to question your own. Spouting riddles and Koans makes you look wise because you never have to offer any answers. Who is really afraid to look into the mirror? Perhaps it is the one wearing the mask.

## THE EIGHTH TENET: BALANCE AND HARMONY

The eighth and last tenet places balance as the greatest virtue we can seek. The fall of the Wan Xian resulted from their lack of respect for this principle, and it is our sacred duty to maintain the balance of things in the Middle Kingdom.

If something is out of balance, it is our duty to correct it, whether it is a conflict between the August Courts or disharmony within our wu. If the balance cannot be restored, then we must end the conflict. We must restore or break a wu torn by imbalance, but we cannot allow it to deteriorate further, perhaps falling into corruption and the manipulation of the Yama Kings. A mortal out of balance must be restored or else destroyed and allowed to return to the Wheel, to seek balance in their next life. Many Hollow Reeds devote themselves to strengthening a particular type of balance, such as the relations between the courts. This goal may be for a single mask, or it may continue through many lifetimes. Following this tenet gives us a reputation for contrariness among our kind. "Whichever way the wind blows," said Han Fu, "the Rootless Tree walks against it." That is a limited understanding of this tenet at best. It is true that you are likely to see a Hollow Reed take the side of the weak, the waning, the lost against the more powerful or the majority. That is because we seek to strengthen the marginal and weaken the powerful to achieve balance between them.

## THE SEVENTH TENET: POSING THE QUESTION

It is the seventh and eighth tenets of the path, in particular, that give us a reputation among the Sunset People as mysterious and unpredictable. The seventh tenet extends the precepts of the sixth, admonishing us to make others think about their state of balance and their place under Heaven. We pose questions and riddles to others that serve as mirrors like the one my master first showed to me. We ask them to look at themselves and consider what they see. More often than not, they do not wish to see and choose to cover the mirror of their self and avoid their reflection. We tear away the covering and force them to confront what they would turn away from.

It is this devotion that makes us sought after as diplomats and negotiators, envoys to the Beast Courts and other *shen* that have dealings with the August Courts. A solution worked out by a Wise Centipede is certain to be

#### THE EMPTIMESS INSIDE

the most balanced, even if it is not always to the satisfaction of all sides involved.

Of course, there is a danger of becoming so caught up in the quest for balance that we lose sight of its goal: harmonious existence under Heaven. Taken too far, the quest for balance can become an obsession, another chain holding us back from the path that must be broken before we can move on.

Balance is not freedom; it is a prison. Freedom is living according to one's true nature, without fear or regret. Balance is experiencing freedom, then returning meekly to your cage and calling yourself free. It is running along the edge of the abyss, waiting to fall. Imbalance calls out for balance? No, it is balance that calls out for a hard shove to push it over the edge!

# BALANCING THE HARMONIOUS WHEELS

My master told me once that we Hollow Reeds need to learn to be alone in a crowd. At first I thought that was because our path is a lonely one, but this koan, like others, has unfolded for me over the years, revealing new layers of meaning. Although we are empty and alone, we are also part of the crowd, part of many crowds. We are part of Kuei-jin society, part of a *wu*, part of a court and, through our mortal masks, part of the mortal world, with its own ties and connections. To understand being alone is only the first step, to realize you are still a part of the crowd is the next. Although I am alone and empty inside, I am part of many circles, of wheels made up of others. hand. The wu is a microcosm of the Middle Kingdom. If the wu falls out of balance, it is our duty to help bring it back into balance or to ensure it is broken so the wu cannot fall to the akuma and the Yama Kings. I have found wu valuable lessons in balance and how to maintain it. In particular, I have learned that it is often best to allow balance the opportunity to right itself rather than trying to manage every aspect of it. A farmer may plow the soil, plant the seeds, weed the garden and harvest the produce, but he does not tell the plants how to grow or when to go to seed. Likewise, a Wise Centipede helps to balance the wu but knows too much interference can be just as unbalancing as none.

In time, Hollow Reeds may outgrow their need for a *wu*, seeking to cut their ties and continue their journey along the Road Back alone, but these are truly enlightened masters, able to see the slopes of Mount Meru and the Hundred Clouds for themselves. They are beyond such things, but humble students like myself continue to rely on the assistance of our blood families in following our path.

## THE COURT

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Beyond the *wu* revolve the wheels of the courts, often grinding like the gears of a mechanism in need of oil and maintenance. More often than not, Hollow Reeds serve as the grease that helps the gears turn smoothly. Those who misstep in the complex dance of diplomacy and court politics can find themselves ground up in those gears just as easily.

Wise Centipedes make up many of the renowned diplomats, negotiators, envoys, messengers and ritualists of the August Courts of the Quincunx, serving similar roles in the Green and Golden Courts and among the uji of Nippon. The Middle Kingdom is not without its Hollow Reed mandarins and ancestors as well. Maintaining the balance of a court is much like maintaining the balance of a wu on a grander scale - a greater challenge for one who has mastered balance on a smaller scale. My sensei said learning to master the balance of a court can lead to a greater understanding of personal balance or can be a distraction from the path if one becomes too caught up in intrigues and minutiae. Still, Hollow Reeds like the Whispering Princess and the Shogun of the Seven Thunders are still considered auspicious and skilled ancestors. As the saying goes, "within the court, seek out the Devil-Tiger for battle, the Bone Flower for knowledge, the Resplendent Crane for virtue, the Thrashing Dragon for pleasure and the Rootless Tree to settle disputes between them." We are also considered valuable for carrying messages from court to court, even in the most dangerous of circumstances. The road and the maze are natural companions to us, and we are known as fearless messengers.

## THE WU

The first and most central wheel we exist in the middle of is the *wu*, our "corpse family." The concept of the successful and auspicious *wu* is based on the idea of balance and complimentarity among its members, a concept we help to support. Hollow Reeds most often take the center direction of the *wu*, helping to keep all the other members in balance (and from each other's throats, sometimes). As my sensei told me, a *wu* is useful to a Hollow Reed for many reasons, some of which we share with other Kuei-jin. The *wu* is a place of support and understanding, a new family for our unlife after the Second Breath. For us, a *wu* provides part of the thread running through the pearls that are our mortal lives, part of the shadow life that supports us along the path and reminds us of the Road Back, lest we become too caught up in our masks.

A wu also offers us the opportunity to carry out the tenets of our Dharma among the Kuei-jin closest at Shortly after the fall of the Scarlet Phoenix Court in Malaysia, the Blood Court sent the noble ancestor True Jade as their envoy to the *penangallan*, to encourage them to reform their court along more noble, respectable lines. True Jade was greeted with suspicion by the Golden Queen of the *penangallan*, who listened to the arguments he presented on behalf of the Quincunx.

Angered by the Blood Court's presumption, the Queen told True Jade she would have him tortured to reveal what he knew about the court's plans. He merely said, "As you wish," before the *penangallan* dragged him away. Days later, after hearing that he would not break, the Queen visited True Jade in the depths of her dungeon. He was beaten, bloody and scarred, seared by hot irons and stung by scorpions, but he remained steadfast in his loyalty. She asked him if he suffered, and he said, "Yes." She asked him to reveal all he knew of the Blood Court, and he said "No." She asked him if he wanted his freedom, and True Jade said to her, "As you wish."

The Golden Queen had True Jade released and chose her most seductive *penangallan*, more skilled in the arts of pleasure than any mortal woman. They fed him, looked after his wounds, comforted him and, in time, pleasured him amid the luxury of the Golden Courts. Once again, the Queen visited True Jade and asked if he was enjoying himself. "Yes," he said. She offered him a place in her court, if only he revealed what he knew, and he said, "No." She threatened to take away all she'd given and return him to the dungeons, to be tortured to death. He said, "As you wish."

In the end, the Queen came to take True Jade's life with her own hands. He was near death, his body drained of Chi, tortured by those who took their lessons from their time in Yomi. The Golden Queen offered the envoy one last chance to save himself, and he refused. "Then you will die!" she screamed in rage, assuming her terrible demon aspect to tear him limb from limb. As his head fell to the bloody floor, those present heard a sound escape True Jade's lips that sounded like "As you wish."

To those who have embraced death like a lover, there is no fear.

## THE DEATH OF AGES

Many of the Wan Kuei look on the coming of the Sixth Age with feelings of fear and resignation, the same fears they hold of the True Death. This is because they do not understand that the Sixth Age, the Age of Sorrow, is not a fate to be avoided. It is the turning of the Wheel of Ages, part of the Great Cycle of being. Like the ritual deaths we undergo along the Road Back, the turning of the Ages is a shedding of the masks of the world, a death that leads to a new life, a new Age, where the Cycle can



#### THE EMPTIMESS INSIDE

continue on its way. In time, the Sixth Age, too, will pass away, as the Wheel turns once more. Only a fool fights against the tide or shouts at the wind, but some Kuei-jin seem determined to keep the Sixth Age from coming, as if such a thing were possible.

There is much talk — most of it in hushed tones — about what the Sixth Age will spell for the Sunset People

and the other *shen* of the Middle Kingdom. I have heard everything from a reunion with the courts of Heaven to the rise of the Yama Kings to overthrow the August Personage of Jade. Regardless of the fate that awaits us, it is nothing to fear, nor does it change what happens now in the Middle Kingdom.





# RECOMINC NORDY

The game is not about becoming somebody, it's about becoming nobody. —Baba Ram Dass

# PATHS FROM THE CENTER

It is the way of our Dharma to remain at the center of things but to still move forward. A journey along a path requires movement. It is the motion of life combined with stillness of spirit that leads us along the way. An important element of this dynamic motion is the direction we are called to upon taking the Second Breath. It determines our role and place in Kuei-jin society and colors the lives we lead and the way we walk our path. Over time, teachers and masters of our Dharma have developed unique traditions and teachings to suit those facing particular directions. These traditions are intended to improve the student's understanding of the path and better allow them to fulfill their duties, as dictated by their direction and their court. As I am of the center direction, I do not practice any of these ways myself, though I have met other Hollow Reeds that do. My sensei followed the teachings of the Scarlet Centipedes of the south, and the Bunraku of the north are well known in my native Nippon. Of late, some have voiced concern that these "wandering paths" (as one mandarin called them) threaten the harmony and balance of the disciple rather than enhancing them. Some feel they emphasize the peculiarities of each direction over the overall balance of the path, leading Hollow Reeds into imbalance and causing them to fall from the path. I do not know if this is so, but if it is, then it is a great concern to all Wise Centipedes.

## NORTH: THE BUNRAKU

The Bunraku of the north are named for the "invisible

men" of Nippon theatre. Dressed entirely in black, they are the puppeteers the audience pretends to ignore, as if they were invisible, even though they can be seen clearly. Bunraku Hollow Reeds occupy a similar place in Kuei-jin society. They are devoted to the maintenance of order, balance and harmony within and between the courts and houses of the Middle Kingdom. Bunraku uphold traditions and punish transgressors, but they carry out their duties quietly, behind the scenes, like shadows that are always watching and waiting, pulling the strings of the court to suit their idea of balance and harmony.

The Bunraku began in Nippon, where a great many Hollow Reeds seemed destined to follow the north direction following the opening to the West. The Bunraku saw it as their duty to uphold the traditions of Nippon against the invading Westerners and to protect Kuei-jin society from becoming corrupt and falling further from the harmonious ways dictated by the August Personage of Jade. Tales I have heard associate the Bunraku with the remnants of the shinobi clans of Nippon, the legendary ninja, masters of stealth, invisibility and assassination.

Although they failed to keep the West out of Nippon, the Bunraku still strengthened the power of the Kuei-jin *uji* there and worked to cast the heretical Sotogawa No from the islands. Before the appearance of the Bunraku,
Hollow Reeds of the north direction individually served the interests of the courts, but no one body governed them. The *uji* traditions of Japan allowed the Bunraku to present a strong and unified force. It was not long before shadowy figures dressed in black became a common sight throughout the courts of the Middle Kingdom, as ancestors called on the assistance of Bunraku to dispense justice and maintain balance and order.

Although their purpose is maintaining harmony and traditional ways, the Bunraku carry out their work quite untraditionally. They do not operate in the open like most Kuei-jin judges and magistrates, holding court and hearing pleas. Instead, they work behind the scenes as investigators, inquisitors and even executioners. What courts the Bunraku hold are shadow courts, dramas held in secret places ordained by the ancestor to whom the Bunraku owes loyalty. In these places, the fate of transgressors is decided. This suits the ancestors of the August Courts,

#### A BUNRAKU SPEAKS

"Although common lore claims our tradition began in Nippon, it has roots that are far deeper, dating back to the beginning of the August Courts. Blackclad Hollow Reeds served the ancestors of the courts in enforcing the rule of law and meting out judgment to transgressors. Wise Centipedes of the north direction assisted in overcoming the *gaki* of Nippon, proving valuable warriors in the shadow war for the control of that land. The Bishamon learned to respect our prowess even as they were driven into hiding in the wild parts of the islands.

"The Wheel turns, and the rule of House Genji

who often prefer that such matters be handled quietly, and it suits the Bunraku, allowing them to do their work.

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Coldly logical and objective, the Bunraku carry out their duties without pity or remorse. They are particularly devoted to the tenets of the path regarding balance and keeping things in balance or destroying them to ensure the imbalance does not spread. Ironically, their cold devotion to balance can lead to Bunraku becoming unbalanced toward Yin, finding greater virtue in the cold mind. For this reason, many Bunraku wear Yang masks, living mortal lives of indulgence and excess and shadow lives of duty and objectivity. Outsiders may find this contradiction hypocritical, but that only shows they do not understand the demands of our path. After all, is not devotion to duty worthy of some indulgence?

The Bunraku traditionally dress in black, including black masks, when they go on errands of secrecy. They are skilled in stealth and disguise, and I suspect more of them operate in the courts than any Kuei-jin but the ancestors are aware of.

### EAST: THE DANCING PEACOCKS

To the east, the Dancing Peacocks are responsible for the caretaking and harmony of the mortal herds, the counterparts of the Bunraku who watch over the balance of Kuei-jin society. Like the Bunraku, the Peacocks move invisibly through mortal society, although, more often than not, their "invisibility" comes from a skill at hiding in plain sight. These often flamboyant Hollow Reeds are the most at home among humanity and find themselves strongly drawn to the society they have left behind, sometimes too strongly. They favor the bright, iridescent colors of their namesake, particularly finely dyed silks of blue-green. The Dancing Peacocks are found throughout the Middle Kingdom, although they began in the Court of the Scarlet Phoenix, what is now the Golden Courts. Kuei-jin from that region following the Path of a Thousand Whispers were (and remain) relatively rare. Those Hollow Reeds associated with the east were often drawn to the life and strong Yang of the Scarlet Phoenix, and they helped to serve as a tempering element to the fiery nature of the penangallan and their wild excesses - not tempering enough, however, to prevent the fall of the Court of the Scarlet Phoenix to the Yama Kings. Although the Golden Courts were purged of akuma, their failure to maintain balance remains a great shame to the Dancing Peacocks, one of the strongest reasons they turned their attention toward the lives of mortals rather than the corrupt world of the Hungry Dead. Throughout the Middle Kingdom, Dancing Peacocks serve as guides and guardians of mortals, keeping them from noticing the work of the Ten Thousand Demons, while also protecting them from some of the worst excesses of our kind. They are the most skilled of all Hollow Reeds in creating and handling the Scarlet Screens that shield

grew unbalanced as the power of the Five August Courts waned. Our revered ancestors saw the imbalance in Nippon and took steps to correct it. They secretly contacted the scattered remnants of House Bishamon and gradually earned their trust. The exiled *gaki* sought allies among the other *shen* of Nippon, perfecting their power over the natural magic of the islands.

"The Bunraku offered aid against House Genji to balance the Wheel once again. With our aid and teaching, House Bishamon overthrew the Genji in the Year of Black Kites. From that time on, the Bunraku remained allies of the Bishamon, although the ancestor of the house has always made it clear that he does not trust us too much. After all, when the Wheel turns again, might not the Bunraku turn against the Bishamon as well? The ancestor is wise.

"After our success in Nippon, we sought to balance conflicts in the August Courts and throughout the Middle Kingdom. Envoys sent from Nippon aided other Wise Centipedes of the north, spreading the secrets we learned in Nippon and the art of invisible judgment across the Middle Kingdom and throughout our Dharma."

our courts from prying eyes. Because of their ties to mortal society, they are also the most skilled of our Dharma in creating new mortal identities from whole cloth. The assistance of a Dancing Peacock can greatly enhance the validity of a mask in the eyes of the mortal authorities, something I have found useful in the past.

So close to mortals, to the pulse of life, it is no surprise that Peacocks have a penchant toward Yang Chi that can become an imbalance. They develop attachments to mortals, commonly taking mortal lovers, which, in a Yang-unbalanced state, can lead to the creation of dhampyrs (little wonder so many dhampyrs hail from the Golden Courts). Some Peacocks deal with imbalances through periods of solitude and meditation, but they are always drawn back to the warm glow of Yang, like moths to a flame.

Although their duties are important, eastern Whispers tread the most dangerous path, because the demands of their calling are often at odds with the tenets of our Dharma. Peacocks form attachments that can hold them back unless they are willing to sever them without remorse. The Dancing Peacocks become so adept at adopting mortal masks that they begin to forget they are only masks, falling close to the beliefs of the Flame of the Rising Phoenix in seeking to recapture the life they have lost forever. And this step off the path brings them one step closer to becoming dupes of the Yama Kings, who promise pleasures and gifts to those willing to serve them.

#### A DANCING PEACOCK SPEAKS

"The Golden Courts dance on the edge of the abyss, skirting close to the grasp of the Yama Kings before dancing away like a flirtatious girl, tempting and teasing. And the Yama Kings join in this dance of seduction; only it remains to be seen who is seducing whom. The Kuei-jin of the Golden Courts concern themselves with the manifold pleasures unlife has to offer, often forgetting that our greatest source of pleasure is mortal life. Mortals are a precious resource; more than that, they are vital to us. Yes, I can imagine your disdain. Mortals, vital to us? Are we not the Ten Thousand Demons? Are we not the princes of this world? Perhaps once, but no longer. "Now we are the Hungry Dead, preying upon mortals for the Chi we need and, perhaps if we are fortunate, stealing among them to savor precious moments of pleasure outside our own bloody courts. We Dancing Peacocks watch over and cultivate mortals like the hot-house flowers they are, keeping them from being consumed by the fires that burn in the hearts of the Golden Courts, but also hiding those fires from mortal eyes because we know another truth most choose to ignore. If they choose, mortals have the power to destroy us, should enough of them learn our secrets."

### SOUTH: THE SCARLET CENTIPEDES

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Change is the essence of the Path of a Thousand Whispers and Kuei-jin of the southern direction embrace it with open arms. Like their namesakes, the Scarlet Centipedes always seem to be scurrying one way or another in search of new experiences, new places and new opportunities to sting at the tender feet of the courts in order to shake their preconceived notions of... well just about everything. These Hollow Reeds are known for wearing at least one piece of scarlet clothing. On formal occasions, I've seen Scarlet Centipedes dressed like living flames, covered from head to foot in shades of red that proclaim their direction for all to see.

Hollow Reeds have a reputation for what others see as unexplained changes in behavior. (There is an explanation, of course, if only one understands the path.) Scarlet Centipedes are even more prone to unpredictable behavior, to the point that some are considered mad because they seem to be as changeable as the wind. Indeed, southern Kuei-jin on the Path of a Thousand Whispers tend to emphasize the third tenet of our Dharma above all others. While each of us seeks to live a thousand lives, each different from the last, the Scarlet Centipedes strive for as wide a range of experience as possible, making an art out of building and living new lives to find the pearls of wisdom hidden within them.

The Scarlet Centipedes turn their backs on the ties of their previous lives easily, all too eager to move on to the next mask. Indeed, sometimes their eagerness can lead them to rush through a life rather than taking their time and savoring each moment fully. My sensei said it was difficult for him to learn the discipline to allow his lives to unfold slowly, in the fullness of time, rather than rushing them along. "You cannot rush the chrysanthemum's bloom," he said. I believe his discipline gave me a greater appreciation for my own masks. The southern Centipedes also take great delight in following the seventh tenet of our path, forcing others to confront their choices and explain them. The Scarlet Centipedes are often agitators within the courts, challenging what is traditional and accepted, to the dismay of the mandarins and ancestors. The Scarlet Centipedes are perhaps the greatest warriors of the Thousand Whispers. At the least, they have the greatest love of war. Conflict of any sort, from wars of weapons to wars of words, draws them like a hunter to blood. They excel in competition and thrive on conflict. They are most skilled at correcting imbalance through confrontation, either agitating for change or rooting out the problem and destroying it. In this, the Scarlet Centipedes compliment their cousins to the north, the Bunraku. While the northern Whispers work silently from the shadows, the Scarlet Centipedes work openly, one often aiding or concealing the former.

THOUSAND WHISPERS

#### A SCARLET CENTIPEDE SPEAKS

"Tradition, 'the way we have always done things.' What a load of bullshit! Tradition is the way the mandarins and ancestors dismiss anything that doesn't make sense to them and how they keep the rest of us in line by telling us how we should and shouldn't do things. Most of the elders haven't left their precious temples and hidden courts in so long they wouldn't even recognize the world outside. It's time to give up on how things were done a thousand years ago or, at least, seriously think about updating things for the 21st century! There's so much out there to see and do, and we have a hundred lifetimes to do it in, but what do most of us do? Try and recapture the glories of the past. Just because we're dead doesn't mean we have to live in the past.

"About the only thing the August Courts have done right is to decide to take it to the *gweilo* and pay them back for the years of grief they gave us. There are some old, old imbalances that need to be addressed here, which is why I left Hong Kong in the first place. But make no mistake, once things are settled here, it's time to bring everything we've learned in the West back home to make a difference there, too."

### WEST: THE EXALTED JADE MASKS

The Hollow Reeds of the western direction speak with the spirits the dead and listen to the ancestors seeking to be heard. Their duty is to redress ancient and often longlasting imbalances in the Middle Kingdom. The Exalted Jade Masks teach that the dead who led balanced lives pass from this world entirely or watch from a great distance; those who leave an imbalance in their wake haunt the living and call for equilibrium to be restored. Ghosts are partial spirits, crying out for crimes to be punished and wrongs to be righted. The Jade Masks follow their cries and help lay them to rest.

Only critical imbalances leave the angry or suffering shades of the dead to haunt the living, so the Exalted Jade Masks must often take drastic actions. They do so only after careful consideration, however, analyzing a situation thoroughly before they strike to restore balance. This act can be a deadly blow or a simple word of kindness. If a ghost lingers after the situation that created it is resolved, the Jade Mask's duty then becomes to send it on. A victim whose desire for vengeance outlives his murderer is an imbalance in and of himself, say the western Reeds. I should say that the imbalances that result in our rebirth,



in our rise from Yomi, is beyond the Exalted Jade Masks' purview. We have each come back from Hell to restore that balance, and it is our personal duty to do so.

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The scrutiny required to follow the echoes of spirits makes western Hollow Reeds skilled envoys, unfailingly loyal and devoted to their duty. The diplomat True Jade, who was tortured and killed by the Queen of the Golden Courts, was an Exalted Jade Mask.

In living their mortal lives, the Jade Masks rarely put their duties far from their minds. They often take on masks that allow them to correct some ancient imbalance of karma or to aid the descendents of a spirit and right a wrong, restoring the balance and allowing the ghost to rest peacefully. Western masters of the path have been known to use the discipline of Chi'iu Muh to take on an unbalanced soul that can be corrected in no other way, accepting the burden of setting things right as their personal duty.

Hollow Reeds of the west typically wear some piece of white clothing, dressing entirely in white for occasions like an important ritual or an execution. Oftentimes, they wear real masks of jade when performing their duties, particularly as executioners. The white-robed and jademasked envoy is a sight many Kuei-jin rightly fear.

#### AN EXALTED JADE MASK SPEAKS

"The spirits of our ancestors watch from the depths of the Yellow Springs, and it is proper that we honor them. But when they walk the Mirror Lands, when their cries wake mortal children or call out for vengeance, it is a sign of grave imbalance. These are not simply the living transformed by death, but echoes of life, incomplete shades consisting of rage, sadness and other longings. They exist to call out for balance to be restored. "We honor the ghosts' cries and relieve their pains by righting the wrongs that created them. If a victim points to her murderer, we bring the criminal to justice. If a dead lover never admitted feelings for her paramour, we speak on her behalf. If a dead tyrant is wracked by regrets, we help restore his kingdom to prosperity and justice. In this, we are the allies of shades. "But we are not their friends. If they linger once balance is restored or if they cause imbalance themselves, then they must be dealt with. They are the cries of the world, and once the wound is mended, the cries must be silenced - by whatever means are necessary."

not claim a name or title for ourselves; we are all Hollow Reeds, Wise Centipedes, students of the path.

The duty of center-facing Hollow Reeds is to maintain the balance, nothing more, nothing less. And no duty could be both so simple and so complex. Kuei-jin society is filled with imbalance, shifting this way and that. How easy it would be, I thought as a *hin*, newly recovered from the shadow soul that almost consumed me at the Second Breath, if only we could enforce balance. But it is not so easy. Enforced balance leads only to stasis, stillness and death. Without the constant tug between forces — Yin and Yang, Hun and P'o — there is nothing. The August Personage understood this and separated Yin from Yang so that we might know them as distinct parts of a dynamic whole.

No, maintaining equilibrium is a more complex matter. It is balancing spinning plates atop sticks or juggling knives or burning torches: You have to keep everything in motion, everything in the right place, and if you move the wrong way, you're likely to get hurt or something is likely to get broken. Balance is a delicate thing, but a thing of beauty when it is achieved, something well worth maintaining. It is the duty first given to the Wan Xian, a duty we Hollow Reeds continue to uphold.

### CONCERNS OF JMBALANCE

So you can understand, my love, why the greatest concern of the Hollow Reeds is the imbalance spreading steadily throughout the Middle Kingdom and the spirit worlds, signs of the coming of the Sixth Age — but also signs that the Wan Kuei are falling even farther from the Mandate of Heaven. We do not fear the coming of the Age of Sorrows itself, but we do fear that it will arise from our own shortsightedness. Many of us are too caught up in ties to ambition, dogma, old ways that no longer serve and new ways that, in the end, serve only the Yama Kings — a web of ties that threatens to choke us all.

### CENTER

Finally, there is the center, the direction most Kueijin on the Path of a Thousand Whispers are drawn toward. All the other forces of the Middle Kingdom orbit the center, a place of serenity and calm we can venture out from into the world to experience all it has to offer. We do

### IMBALANCE WITHIN THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

The surest sign of imbalance in the Middle Kingdom is the poisoning of the dragon nests and the Chi that flows from them. Disregard for the rites of *feng shui* and other traditions among mortals has led to blockages in the healthy flow of Chi throughout the land, polluting wellsprings and leading only to misery and misfortune for those unknowing mortals. The depredations of Kuei-jin and chi'n ta sorcerers hungry for Chi deplete the nests further, despite the best efforts of some hengeyokai and *hsien* to guard them. Here in Nippon, the atomic fires of the Burnings have poisoned the land's Chi and resisted our efforts to cleanse the taint of the Unholy Fire.

The imbalance of Chi within the land is akin to an imbalance within the body, leading to an illness that must be corrected. Many believe this sickness heralds the coming of the Sixth Age, and it may be that the land must perish of fever in order to be reborn to new life, but I do not believe that means we should abandon the Mandate of Heaven. We should do all that can be done to restore the balance before deciding it is inevitable and allowing the land's life to end. The Keepers of the Two Flames in Nippon — which include a number of Hollow Reeds believe the poisoning of the Chi is an auspicious sign, that only the strong and worthy Kuei-jin will survive the cleansing fire of tainted Chi to inherit the next Age. To me, the idea speaks of the blind hope of those unwilling to accept the burden of their duty.

### IMBALANCE AMONG THE DIRECTIONS

Once there was harmony among the directions of the compass, providing balance to the center. That is no longer the case, as Kuei-jin of more extreme views band together in like-minded *wu*, where causes are espoused without consideration of their effects on the greater whole.

Even on our path, there are Hollow Reeds who venture further and further afield in search of new experiences from which to gain enlightenment. Without returning to the center they travel out from, these students of the way become lost and eventually fall from the path, some even fall prey to the wiles of the Yama Kings and becoming *akuma*. This is most common among the Wise Centipedes of directions other than the center. They form factions of those directions and embrace imbalance as a way to enlightenment, going against the very tenets of our path.

### IMBALANCE AMONG THE COURTS

Where once the courts of the Middle Kingdom existed in balance, now there is conflict - between the August Courts of the Quincunx, between the uji of Nippon, in the shadows of the Green Courts and in the jungles of the Golden Courts. Court wars upon court in shadowy battles fought with words and warriors in the dead of the night. Scarlet Screens serve as pawns to battle on behalf of their Kuei-jin masters. Indeed, I know that merely writing these thoughts would be enough to have me declared akuma in some of the courts I have visited, which is why these words are only for you and the eyes of Heaven, my love. Mandarins and even ancestors grow more concerned with matters of power and influence than the Mandates of Heaven. Like Hollow Reeds too attached to a mortal life, these Kuei-jin become entangled in their ties like a fly caught in a spider's web. And many of those hungry spiders are Yama Kings and their akuma servants, who infiltrate the courts to spy and corrupt from within, furthering imbalances, whispering poisoned words into the right ears and carrying more souls back to their masters in Hell. The courts are also torn by the conflict of the old traditions upheld by enlightened masters and the new ways found or sought by Running Monkeys. There are so many now, they seem to overwhelm the voices of their elders, in need of quick answers and solutions, drawn to

the lure of the West. In this, we Hollow Reeds must provide a worthy example. We uphold the importance of questioning and of breaking away from old ties that no longer serve, but we must tread cautiously, lest we encourage a rebellion that will overturn all that we have built throughout the Ages. As Xue says, "A man who lives many lives, but learns nothing from them, is no more wise than an infant."

### IMBALANCE AMONG THE WU

All the imbalances at work in the Middle Kingdom can be seen at work in many *wu*, since a corpse family is merely a reflection of the ways of the greater world. For us, the *wu* serves as part of the path, a vehicle to carry the experiences of our mortal lives forward as we walk the way. An unbalanced *wu* offers us the opportunity to restore harmony, but some *wu* force us to act on the eighth tenet of the path; they are so unbalanced that nothing can bring them harmony, and they must be broken and destroyed.

More than one Hollow Reed has been the cause of a wu's dissolution, either because the corpse family could not withstand the Centipede's efforts to restore balance or because it was so unbalanced that the Centipede had to destroy it. Others do not always understand our reasons for doing what we are called upon to do, so they say that the Rootless Trees cannot be relied upon, even that we are treacherous. From their point of view, I can see how it might seem so when a Hollow Reed they consider a part of their family seemingly breaks faith with them, turns on the family and seeks to change them or even sever their relationship. But, like a parent must often be harsh with a child, we are often called upon to make difficult choices in order to follow our path and do what is best for the wu and for our kind. Of course, I do not lay all imbalance within the wu at the feet of others. More than one Hollow Reed has been the downfall of a wu, often by turning the need for harmony and balance into an obsession that rules them as much as the worst demon. The sad fate of the Gnashing Dragon wu is an example of this, where the two Thousand Whispers belonging to the wu took it upon themselves to ensure balance at all costs, even to the point of bargaining with the Yama Kings to achieve their goals. They paid for their mistakes when they met the Final Death and their souls were sent screaming into the pits of Yomi Wan.

### ON THE SOCIETY OF THE SUNSET PEOPLE

The Path of a Thousand Whispers is not the only Road Back. The Grand Arhat's vision is one of many ways, not unlike our own. From our place in the center, we can see the paths of the other Dharmas stretched out before us like spokes on a wheel. It is our duty, therefore, to always question the followers of other ways, to make them justify

and explain their choices. If they cannot explain their path, how can they hope to understand it? Other Kuei-jin think us ignorant because of all our questions, when, in fact, it is often their own ignorance they do not wish to see.

Still, the Fivefold Way envisioned by the Divine Xue is holy. Those who follow its tenets are our brothers and sisters, and there are lessons to be learned from them. To ignore the other Dharmas is to ignore our own path, for they are a part of what we are.

#### CHANGING DHARMAS

Although we Hollow Reeds change from one life to the next, we must not forget the calling of our Dharma, the thread that binds our lives together and gives them meaning. Others may believe that the changes we pass through are an inability to remain on the Road Back, but in truth, they are an affirmation of it. Our lives are only steps on the path, not the path itself. Those with only one life often fail to see the forest for the trees. Whether I am standing in the highest building of Tokyo, looking down upon the world below, or begging in the streets of Osaka, watching the masses of humanity pass me by, whether devouring the soul of a sinner or easing the labor of a mother, I am still on the Path of a Thousand Whispers.

There are Hollow Reeds who step out from the center and fail to return. They become filled with a particular life and mistake its lessons for the path, which leads them away. Sometimes, they must follow this divergent trail to the end in order to rejoin the true path they have wandered from, and they learn wisdom in so doing. Other times, these wayward Kuei-jin wander too far and lose their way. They choose to leave the Path of a Thousand Whispers behind and take up another. They are lost to us and, worse yet, lost to the Hundred Clouds because they have seen the truth and chosen to flee from it. These poor souls often wander from one Dharma to another, fleeing from the truth they cannot accept --that unlife is change. They want the certainty of dogma and unshakable tradition, building it into a wall around them. They build a prison for their spirits and willingly lock themselves in. It is our duty to question their decisions, to make them justify what they have done. If they have fallen so far that no Dharma can help them, then it is our sad duty to end their suffering.

cultivate their P'o, the Demon within, and, like fire, it is both a useful tool and a savage destroyer.

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The truly enlightened Devil-Tigers learn to go beyond the pain and torment they inflict on themselves and others, making it a ladder reaching toward the Hundred Clouds. It is all too easy for them to fall into the trap of luxuriating in their pain and power, mistaking their tools of enlightenment for enlightenment itself. Xue had to tear away his own face and cast it into the flames he made to become enlightened through pain. There comes a time when each Devil-Tiger must do the same, but too many are unwilling to tear away their frightening masks because they fear the Void that lies beneath them. It is our duty to help these Tigers by questioning their decisions and lighting the way for them. Yes, it is dangerous to question the tiger, but it is too easy to only question those who cannot strike back.

### THE WAY OF THE RESPLENDENT CRANE

The virtuous life has many lessons to offer. The enlightened Hun can carry one toward the vaults of Heaven. Law, virtue and discipline teach us to leash the Demon within and to walk the straight and narrow path. The Shining Ice Guardians provide an example to all Kuei-jin of the redemption that they believe we can find. However, they place themselves above all others, secure in their virtue and the rightness of their path. I have found that many Resplendent Cranes do not question enough and do not wish to be questioned about the rightness of their way. They seek to deny the Demon within them, rather than using its flame to illuminate the virtues they seek. I have seen Shining Ice Guardians punish sinners and those fallen from virtue with great zeal. They and the Devil-Tigers the Resplendent Cranes consider beneath them are not so different in the end.

### THE HOWL OF THE DEVIL-TIGER

What magnificent devils these are! What lessons in cruelty and punishment they can teach us. The Devil-Tigers understand the subtleties of pain and the enlightenment it brings like no other. They are fierce warriors and guardians, and some Hollow Reeds have been honored by having Devil-Tigers offer to watch over their resting places while they embrace the Dark Jade Lover. In a struggle for survival, Devil-Tigers are powerful allies. However, when one rides the tiger, one must be careful not to be thrown. The Devil-Tigers

### THE SONG OF THE SHADOW

Bone Flowers have enticing petals indeed, but they are cold to the touch. In some ways, they are the Kuei-jin who understand us the most — and the least. Their minds are sharp like cold steel, apprehending much wisdom and lore. They are skilled in ritual and have a hunger — I hesitate to say "love" — for knowledge that rivals our own. But their thoughts and wisdom are as cold as their hearts and minds, without passion or life. They learn from the dead but fear to come too close to the life they have left behind.

I once knew a Bone Flower who took the Second Breath after taking his own life out of despair. Rather than seeing his return from Yomi as an opportunity to take a different path, he wrapped himself in melancholy and shadows and stepped even further away from the life he'd chosen to leave. I did everything in my power to try and make him laugh, to reignite the spark of life in his heart, but he only called me a fool and sent me from him. I have loved and laughed, suffered and cried since then. Which of us is the fool?

I have heard rumors of a prolonged shadow war between the Bone Flowers and the Exalted Jade Masks, those of my Dharma who face west. The followers of the Shadow Song hold the Jade Masks responsible for the murder of ghosts, as if such a thing were possible. They do not realize that shades are signs of imbalance, not whole souls. Apparently, stealthy assassins from both traditions hunt each other through the Yin World and the Middle Kingdom alike, pursuing a centuries long war in twilight. I do not face west, so I do not know the truth of the matter, but the image of white-clad Jade Mask warriors facing night-black Bone Flower attackers has a certain balance to it.

### THE DANCE OF THE THRASHING DRAGON

The Laughing Rainbows seek to understand life in all its many forms. From them, we can learn passion, motion and mutability. Those moving to the Dance of the Thrashing Dragon often know the secrets of changing form like a leaping flame, seeing the world through other eyes, as we do. They realize that reality is an illusion, like the colorful rainbow. But that is where their similarity to our way ends.

The Thrashing Dragons embrace life, but they fear death. We take on different lives and live them to the fullest, but we understand when the time for an ending has come. Without death, life has no meaning. The Thrashing Dragons can become lost in their endless orgies of sensation, without any time of silence and darkness to cool the fires in their blood. Their way is seductive, and I know more than one Hollow Reed who has become unable to give up the pleasures of life to embrace the Dark Jade Lover, even for a short time.

### THE LONGEST WAR

The rumors of a prolonged shadow war between Bone Flowers and the Exalted Jade Masks are true, after a fashion. The battle has been raging in one form or another since the fall of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China and the dawn of the Fifth Age. It is an exaggeration to say that the entire Shadow Song Dharma is at war with every west-facing Hollow Reed, of course, but various luminaries of each faction have taken up the battle at different times.

The shadow war began when the Japanese Jade Mask Silent Blossom destroyed the ghost of a Chinese general in 1372. The general had been murdered by his aid centuries before and become a spirit of rage and vengeance, terrorizing the Japanese Yin World. When Silent Blossom ended its reign of terror, she did not know that the ghost had a longstanding pact with the Bone Flower mandarins of P'yong'yang in Korea. Those necromancers immediately sought redress in the Azure Dragon Court, but Silent Blossom refused to apologize. Other Jade Masks backed her rationale and other Japanese *gaki* supported her simply to put the Koreans in their place. The necessary rituals were performed, and a war in twilight began.

The Azure Dragon Court did not survive much longer, in part because of the twilight war. Ironically, that very fact helps keep the war alive. The ritual conflict began under the auspices of the court, and with its disintegration, there is no authority that can formally and completely end it. Every few decades, tensions grow between the factions and someone announces that they will continue the unending war. In especially dire times — like during the Opium Wars - the battle becomes a no-holds-barred war at midnight, which lasts until some authority steps in to end matters (for a time). Such luminaries as True Jade, the west-facing diplomat of Rootless Tree legend, and the Bone Flower sensei Kuro-sama have participated in various salvoes in the ongoing war. (See Shadow War for more on the process of ritual combat. Details on Kuro-sama appear in Dharma Book: Bone Flowers.)

### THE HERETICAL DHARMAS

The Fivefold Way is not the only way, but it is the only way for Wan Kuei who wish to avoid the wrath of the August Courts. Even our Dharma, the least understood of the paths passed down by Xue, is at least considered valid. Those following the heretical Dharmas are true outcasts. Although we may still learn from them, it is mostly a lesson of the mistakes to avoid.

#### THE FLAME OF THE RISING PHOENIX

Omi-sama told me, after the Second Breath, to let go of my mortal life. "You are dead," he said, "to pretend otherwise is foolishness." He might well have been talking about the Kuei-jin following the Flame of the Rising Phoenix. These deluded souls cling to a life that is no longer theirs in hopes of righting the karmic debts that earned them a place among the Kuei-jin. There is no way they can further themselves in unlife when they are unable to release the memories and learn the lessons of their first life. They are to be pitied, and questioned when the opportunity presents itself. Perhaps they can be led to true understanding of the ways of Xue.

#### THE TEMPEST OF INWARD FOCUS

Their devotion to balance would make them our natural allies if it were not for their equally strong fear of becoming unbalanced, of experiencing that which their nature as Kuei-jin has to offer them. Their path has merits, but their exploration of the world is timid and weak. They are like a man standing on a mountain peak, balanced so precariously he cannot step in any direction for fear of falling. They have not risen to the heights I have risen to, nor have they sunk to the depths I have known, and so, they do not understand. Their state of calm makes for a long, slow journey on the Road Back.

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#### THE FACE OF THE GODS

These would-be Godlings are another example of attachment to a particular ideal leading to a twisted path. They think to declare themselves gods and therefore become fit to enter Heaven, when, in fact, their arrogance is like a chain weighing down their souls. My masks have taught me how illusory such lives are. Although there may come a time when I chose to take up the persona of a god, I will also know there is a time for even a god to die. The Godlings often learn that lesson only when the claws of a Devil-Tiger are at their throat.

#### THE SPIRIT OF THE LIVING EARTH

These Kuei-jin have learned an essential truth, that the world of material things is only an illusion. However, they have mistaken it for *the* truth and embrace the world of spirit as reality, even thought it too is only an illusion. Cerulean Veils cling to their traditions, rituals and taboos, following the advice of spirit masters and guides with the zeal of the converted. They weave a complex web of ceremonies and rites around them that only binds them. They wrap themselves in a comforting blanket and ignore the greater truths their way hints at.

### YULAN-JIN

We share a special bond with the soul jumpers. We both understand what it means to live a thousand different lives; only for the Yulan-jin, it is often literally --- and tragically - true. These wretched souls, torn and battered by the razor winds of Yomi and the tortures they suffered there, no longer have the strength to claim their original bodies in the Second Breath. Instead, they must take bodies that are not theirs and have only a tenuous hold on unlife in the Middle Kingdom. Although there have been times when I have admired, even envied, a Yulan-jin's ability to truly take on another's life, I pity them their fate under Heaven, so often denied the time needed to follow the Road Back and learn the lessons each life has to teach them. We Hollow Reeds live each life as fully and completely as possible. Only when a life no longer offers us any new lessons do we seek to embrace the Dark Jade Lover and move on. Yulan-jin, however, do not always have a choice. Their spirit is only partially rooted in the body, so when they become weak in spirit or suffer the Little Death, they must move on, regardless of their wishes. Since the process of seeking a new body is often nearly as terrible as the Second Breath itself, clawing the way up from Yomi and back into unlife, the Yulan-jin bear many scars upon their souls.

the body, do not. I have known Yulan-jin Hollow Reeds, and they often have great insight, at least until a traumatic death flings them back into Hell and they rise in a new body, battered in spirit and weakened in faith. Still, those Yulan-jin who take care to guard their bodies and prepare can advance further on our path than any other.

In fact, it has been said that Yulan-jin have insights into our Dharma that are denied us because of our attachment to the body. I have heard stories of Hollow Reeds who have relinquished their bodies to become Yulan-jin,

#### YULAN-JIN ON THE PATH

Although no Dharma is easy for the soul jumpers to follow, the Path of a Thousand Whispers is the one most compatible with their unique nature and problems. Yulan-jin already live different lives, so why, they reason, should they not benefit from their unfortunate state of being? The number of Yulan-jin on the path is one of the things that make other Kuei-jin somewhat wary of the Rootless Trees. One never knows if a particular Rootless Tree is a true Kuei-jin or a Yulanjin, and the behavior of the Yulan-jin can be even more erratic than the legendary eccentricity of the Wise Centipedes.

A Yulan-jin does gain some slight benefit from following the Path of a Thousand Whispers. All the normal rules from the Kindred of the East Companion apply to Hollow Reed Soul Jumpers. But if they are permitted the opportunity to undergo one of the rites of embracing the Dark Jade Lover (see p. 57), the Yulanjin do not suffer any loss of memory or Dharma for changing bodies. However, this is only in cases where a Hollow Reed would normally abandon a mask, once it has taught all the lessons it can, and requires the Yulan-jin abide in the same body for at least a few years (taking great care not to be ousted before then). It does not affect occasions when circumstance forces the soul jumper to seek a new body; then they suffer the usual effects. There are even occasions when a Rootless Tree might become a Yulan-jin, either because they have the Tenacious Spirit Merit (see p. 51) or they choose to undergo the Rite of Loosing the Spirit's Ties (see p. 54). A Wise Centipede who commits a particularly egregious act of blindness (most likely one resulting in the Little Death) may also become Yulan-jin. The difficulty of existence as a soul jumper serves as karmic payment for the crime. The later situation is purely up to the Storyteller. Whether or not Yulan-jin can ever become Kueijin (or return to being Kuei-jin, if they once were) is a matter also left up to the Storyteller. At the very least, such a feat should involve a great quest, possibly a powerful and secret ritual or the aid of enlightened spiritual beings or bodhisattvas.

Still, of all the Dharmas, our way speaks most strongly to our body-changing cousins. They immediately understand the wisdom of our way, where others, more rooted in cutting one of the most precious of ties to hurl their spirits out into the Void. The very idea is terrifying, which assures me that it can be a source of great insight, like the rites of the Dark Jade Lover.

There are also tales that claim a Yulan-jin who attains sufficient enlightenment along the path can cease its wanderings and find a true home in the body, becoming Wan Kuei. I do not know anyone who claims to have done this, and it may be nothing more than a legend, but I hope, for their sake, that the Mandate of Heaven permits it.

#### DHAMPYRS

One of the things I most recall from my last life is the desire to sire children, to create life with you, my beloved. But one of the lessons I take with me is that we cannot create true life, only creatures of half-life and half-death, dhampyrs. Filling with roiling Yang energy, a Wan Kuei can conceive a child, but it is an ill-conceived child indeed. Not only are dhampyrs cursed by their half-dead nature, they are also outcasts in the society of our kind. Part of both worlds, welcome in neither.

Still, I have known Hollow Reeds willing to devote the time necessary to raise a dhampyr child. Many of them have made some of the best parents for these children, since they are often motivated by a sincere desire to experience life as a parent, something that may have been denied them in their first life. It is a rare and fortunate dhampyr that has a caring Wan Kuei parent, even though these Hollow Reeds eventually leave that life behind and sever all ties with their offspring. Is it greater fortune to have a caring parent that changes and leaves you behind or an uncaring parent that sees you as nothing but a tool?

For better or for worse, we walk the Road Back through the masses of humanity. We can choose to hold on to the illusions of the past, to lives that are no longer ours, or we can choose to throw ourselves into the tide and flow with it, to see where it will carry us.

#### HENGEYOKA

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The beast-folk are wise in the ways of the Yang World and understand the power of change and transformation. They also fiercely guard their Emerald Mother and gladly tear to shreds anyone foolish enough to intrude on their territory. Most of the hengeyokai are warriors, caught up in their own battles and best avoided in my experience, since they see virtually every situation as a battle to be won. They consider Wan Kuei enemies by virtue of our existence and, in particular, consider the inspiration of our divine path to be corrupt. They fear the coming of the Fifth Age and often see death in the form of the centipede, as we do; only they do not consider death an ally, but their greatest enemy.

Still, there are those among the beast-people who have lessons to teach, for those willing to learn. The Tengu raven-folk of Nippon know many secrets and understand the ways of the spirit world. Meanwhile, the wise and clever Kitsune nine-tailed foxes come the closest to understanding our way of any of the hengeyokai tribes. They, too, are masters of illusion and have therefore learned to recognize the truth that lies hidden beneath the masks of the world. The Kitsune dance on the edge of the Void and know the paths of the Yin World. They can be valuable allies, but anyone who trusts a nine-tail richly deserves whatever cruel trick the Kitsune has planned.

### ON MORTALS AND SHEN Mortals

Once the Wan Xian were charged with the protection and guidance of mortals, overseeing the proper flow of Chi under the sight of Heaven. Now, we are fallen from our rightful place, and mortals are our prey, our victims and perhaps, our hope. Where others see mortals as nothing more than sources to feed their endless hunger (or, worse yet, blame them for our shame and try to find the Road Back in human suffering or joy), I see humans as the blades of grass that make a field or the petals that make up a flower. Individually, they are beautiful, but together, they create something even greater. Through a single mortal life, we can begin to understand, but by living a hundred lives, a thousand, we see the path laid out before us.

Other Kuei-jin try to prune mortals like bonsai, molding them into the shapes and forms pleasing to the Kueijin in question. They want to punish the wicked, to reward the just, to turn the tide of humanity toward their way of thinking because they see it as their duty under Heaven. But the duties of the Wan Xian are no more, and the tide cannot be turned, no matter how often it is commanded.

### CHI'N TA

The sorcerous Lightning People understand that the substance of the world is illusion — so much so that they bend it to their wills and shape it like clay. But no artist ever worked with a more dangerous medium. The powers they wield are formidable and terrifying. Reality can melt and flow like hot wax in the presence of a powerful sorcerer. In my experience, it is best to avoid them and their doings. I have from time to time assisted the subtle ladies of the Wu-Keng, for it is unwise to anger them and good to be able to call upon a debt from them. The Dragon Wizards and the others are best left alone, since all too often they consider Kuei-jin blood and hearts useful tools in their workings.

### HSJEN

Others say we are unpredictable, untrustworthy, but the *hsien*, the ancient keepers of the dragon nests, are chaos incarnate. Still, we do understand them in ways other Sunset People do not. The *hsien* wear masks of mortality to walk in the Middle Kingdom, much as we do, and they follow the turning of the Wheel, reincarnating in new lives.

But there our similarity ends. The *hsien* hate us for the sins of the Wan Xian, who caused the August Personage of Jade to turn his face from the Middle Kingdom. They jealously guard the dragon nests against us, and some consider it their mandate to punish us for our sins. Worse yet, some Kuei-jin, particularly the Devil-Tigers, hunt *hsien* for the potent *yugen* they contain. It is only through the diplomacy of Wan Kuei like us (and a few others) that the courts maintain any sort of peace with the *hsien*. Even under the best of circumstances, it is best to tread carefully around these children of nature.

### SPIRITS AND CHOSTS

For all our interest in the Middle Kingdom and mortal masks, we Hollow Reeds know the paths of the spirit world well. The Bone Flowers may know more of the Yin World and the spirits of the ancestors, and the Thrashing Dragons may dance with the spirits of the Yang World, but we walk in both lands. We speak with all the spirits. We do not devote ourselves to either side, but see the wisdom of both. Still, our path is through the Middle Kingdom, not the spirit world, which is a place of extremes. Spending too much time there can be a distraction.

Ghosts in the Yin World can be valuable sources of wisdom, and they greatly value the jade we bring to them.

But the more experienced a Wise Centipede becomes, the less attraction the spirit worlds, particularly the Yin World, hold. The Yellow Springs often hold ties to former lives, things we have turned our backs upon. Traveling there risks meeting one of those ghosts and awakening feelings and connections best left dead. I tremble even now at the thought of walking through the Dark Kingdom of Jade and seeing you there, my love. Perhaps my sensei was right in telling me to avoid staying overlong in the Yin World. Likewise, the Yang World can become home to too many discarded and broken ties, although the *shen* of the Yang World are longer lived and more strongly tied to our shadow lives than any masks we wear.

#### DEMON HUNTERS

We have long masked our presence from mortal eyes, operating in the shadows and behind Scarlet Screens. To most mortals, we are nothing but legends or half-remembered truths of a time long past. I recall you telling me about the ghost stories and tales that frightened you as a girl, not knowing then that you took a demon into your bed. For that act, and many others, there are mortals who would destroy us both, if they could. The problem of the matter is that it appears some mortals can.

There have been mortals who hunt Kuei-jin and



other *shen* since the Fourth Age. We have avoided their notice when possible, fought to protect ourselves when necessary. Because we take on mortal masks, Hollow Reeds are more vulnerable than others should a hunter pierce our masks and discover our true nature. Even if we escape their blades, our mortal persona lies shattered and torn. Now there are stories of mortal hunters like none before, seeking us out with great fervor and ferreting out some of our secrets. This is a dangerous time to walk among mortals.

### Kin-jin

The demons of the West are a curiosity at best to us. Their ways are foreign and strange, making them little more than barbarians, crashing about and stumbling into things they do not understand. Still, warring against them is wasteful and pointless — they are a symptom of the imbalance that plagues the Middle Kingdom, not its cause. Where they violate our law and custom, let the Devil-Tigers and the Shining Ice Guardians drive them out. But where the Kin-jin slink and keep to the shadows, they are hardly worth our attention. There are far more dangerous foes for our warriors to battle and greater problems for our leaders and scholars to address.

The Resplendent Cranes support a crusade against the Kin-jin because they would like to lay the blame for the imbalances in our lands at the feet of the foreign devils, when, in fact, the truth lies much closer to home. Still, it is easier to attack a collection of *gaijin* than it is to recognize the imbalance in one's own soul and correct it. I have no quarrel with the Kin-jin, so long as they respect our ways and do not threaten the balance any further. The coming of the Sixth Age will sweep them away like ants in a flood. We should be more concerned with securing our own house against it. their corruption. Certainly, the Yama Kings have not forgotten and seek to further lure us away from our duty. Only by resisting their temptations can we find the Road Back and achieve enlightenment.

Fortunately, the Yama Kings thrive on desire, while the Wise Centipede understands that desire is at the root of all suffering. Strong ties to anything are chains binding us and weighing us down, chains a Yama King can seize and pull on. Be without desire, without connection to the world, and you place yourself beyond the reach of the Yama Kings, like the Buddha resting beneath a tree. No matter what desire of his the demons of Hell offered to fulfill, be it pleasure or an end to pain, they found nothing to bargain with. I follow this example and make emptiness my shield against their empty promises.

#### AKUMA

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Those who underestimate (or, perhaps, overestimate) the lords of Yomi Wan become *akuma*. It is surely a sign of imbalance among the courts of the Middle Kingdom that accusations of *akuma* have become so numerous. Not that so many Wan Kuei have fallen into the grip of the Yama Kings, but that so many mandarins and ancestors see *akuma* in every misdeed, every defiance of old traditions and ways.

The word has taken on more of a political meaning than before, a means of branding an enemy or a rival, even an annoyance, by placing her in league with our ancient enemies and thus disgracing her before Kuei-jin society. In truth, I fear that such accusations create more than a few true akuma, when disgraced Kuei-jin are left with nowhere else to turn but to the Yama Kings and little left to lose from doing so. Of course, what akuma lose are their souls, given into the greedy grasp of the lords of Hell. Though they may gain in power, what they lose is their opportunity to achieve enlightenment and any hope of redemption in the eyes of Heaven. Although I wish I could say that Wise Centipedes were wise enough to not become akuma, the truth is that we are as vulnerable to the temptations of the Yama Kings as any. The lords of Hell know every weakness there is to exploit. We protect ourselves with emptiness but make ourselves vulnerable through our thirst for new experiences and the very balance called for by our path. Some foolish Whispers have sought out the Yama Kings in order to experience lives of power, indulgence or even servitude, thinking that service to the lords of Yomi Wan was merely another mask they could put on and take off as they willed. They believed they could resist the temptations of the Yama Kings and, in so doing, strengthen their spirit by tempering it in hellfire, or else they foolishly underestimated the power of the Yama Kings. Since they escaped from the grip of Hell once, could they not do so again? They forgot that the Yama Kings are not so willing to let a prize slip away a second time. I know of no Wise Centipede who has agreed to serve the Yama Kings who

### ON THE YAMA KINGS

It is said that the Yama Kings were among the first servants of the August Personage of Jade. If so, then they are a sign of how far we may yet fall, and their servants are reminders to us that the distance is not as far as we like to think. Though we are the Ten Thousand Demons, we seek to remain true to the Mandate of Heaven. Those who do not risk falling prey to the lies and promises of the Yama Kings.

They know us well, the lords of Hell do. For were we not all their "guests" in Yomi once? We have all tasted of the Yama Kings' ministrations, and more importantly, they have tasted of our souls and hunger for more. I believe these dark lords reserve their special interest in us because we once belonged to them but fought our way back to the Second Breath, cheating them of their prize. They are willing to go to any lengths to recover what they have lost.

We should also not forget that part of the original Heavenly Mandate of the Wan Xian was to battle against the Yama Kings and protect the Middle Kingdom from

has not eventually fallen to their temptations. At best, they risk being declared *akuma* and being driven into the waiting hands of their new masters.

The other tragic occasion for Hollow Reeds bargaining with the Yama Kings is the breaking of guanxi. The ties that bind a wu are powerful indeed, often the strongest we accept in our unlives. Sometimes, those ties can imprison us within an unbalanced wu. Although petitioning an ancestor can break the unwanted ties, pride sometimes leads a Whisper to deal with the matter alone. Such poor fools petition a Yama King for the power to break their guanxi and show their wu the error of their ways. Such a petition is nearly always granted, with the Yama King encouraging the unwise Centipede to heed the admonitions of the eighth tenet and destroy the wu, usually by giving their souls into the grip of Yomi.

To seek to restore balance through greater imbalance is a difficult road to walk. Tenichi of the White Crane wu stepped onto this path, realizing too late what he'd done. After his ties to the White Crane were broken, Tenichi committed *seppuku* in front of his former wu-mates by Facing the Eye of Heaven, seeking to spare them from the grasp of the Yama Kings. His death was judged auspicious and worthy, and the White Crane wu corrected the imbalance Tenichi showed them, going on to become well known in Nippon.

Most Kuei-jin who fall into the clutches of the Yama Kings never realize their mistake. The Jade Ancestor of Changan at the end of the Ming dynasty, whose name is stricken from the annals of the Wan Kuei, was *akuma* in service to the Yama Queen Tou Mu. He was once considered a great master of our path, and the balance and harmony of his court an inspiration to all Hollow Reeds. Then his true allegiance was revealed, and the balance of the Jade Court was shown to be a clever mask. Did the luminaries of the Jade Court believe they served the greater good by bargaining with the Yama Queen? Did they believe the only way the corrupt and fallen could find balance was through the power of Hell? Unfortunately, we may never know.



## Auspicious Wu

Still, not all Hollow Reeds are so infamous, my love. Many of us have left a worthy legacy, and the histories of my Dharma speak of numerous auspicious corpse families. These few are only a humble sample of the many that come to mind when I consider the manifold ways my path touches on the Fivefold Way, the valuable role we serve and the lesson of neglecting our duties.

### THE FIVE-PETAL LOTUS

The Five-Petal Lotus *wu*, established in the Jade Court of China well over 300 years ago, was something of an experiment at the time. Whether it was successful or not remains to be seen. The *wu* consisted entirely of Wan Kuei following the Path of a Thousand Whispers, one member from each of the directions to provide the diversity and the balance the *wu* required for harmonious existence. The *wu*'s teacher and mentor, the Hollow Reed bodhisattva Marble Gong, encouraged the members of the *wu* to explore their path with each other's aid, learning from their different insights and experiences through the Broken Mask Technique.

40

I am told the *wu* maintained a fine tomb somewhere within the Jade Court where they often undertook the rites of the Dark Jade Lover together, sharing experiences from their masks before ending those lives and moving on to new ones. Their shared experience did seem to enhance their understanding of the path because the members of the *wu* quickly became known for their wisdom and insight. They often served as emissaries of the August Courts throughout the Middle Kingdom.

After dealings with the Beast Courts of China fell into bitter conflict over the dragon nests, the Five-Petal Lotus *wu* expressed its displeasure with the ancestors of the August Courts in the only way it could. The members of the *wu* invited a small number of friends and prominent ancestors to a ceremony where they all Faced the Eye of Heaven. After they read their deathpoems (words spoken of highly by Hollow Reeds to this day), the sun rose and the Kuei-jin of the *wu* rotted away to dust blowing on the wind. It is said that their spirits still wander the spirit world, waiting for an auspicious time to return. I hope that it is soon, because the August Courts could use their guidance.

### THE LAUGHING MASKS

The Laughing Masks wu employs something more



Kuei-jin could use to their benefit: humor. Made up of Kuei-jin following the Thrashing Dragon and Thousand Whispers Dharmas, the *wu* disguises itself as a troupe of wandering actors and performers. They travel mostly through the Golden Courts but have visited virtually every court in the Middle Kingdom at one point in their unlives.

They perform plays and dances for audiences of mortals and shen alike, literally wearing many different masks in the course of a single night. I chanced to see one of their performances during my time in Bangkok, and never have I laughed so hard, before or since. A part of the humor of the Laughing Masks is their subtle mocking of the stiff and rigid ways of many courts, particularly the Quincunx, which does not earn them the admiration of the ancestors of the August Courts. Some mutter that their mockery smacks of *akuma*, but that in itself is part of the joke: ancestors moved to such anger by a group of clowns.

Of late, the Laughing Masks have taken their performance to wider venues, visiting cities in the West. They may simply be drawn to the diverse audience offered by places like San Francisco or New Orleans — places I have heard the call of myself. Or

it may be true what they say, that the Laughing Masks ultimately serve the will of the Courts of the Middle Kingdom by carrying the Great Leap Outward with them, gathering information and striking at the Kin-jin in most unexpected ways. The unexpected, after all, is their stock in trade.

### THE GNASHING DRAGON

The Gnashing Dragon wu is a lesson in tragedy for us all, particularly followers of my path. Inauspicious from the very start, the wu formed from a group of seven Kueijin in the August Courts, including two Hollow Reeds. The Hollow Reeds took it upon themselves to help balance their wu but did not understand the subtleties of balance even within themselves. They quickly began to disagree with the Resplendent Crane, Far Lau, on how best to govern the wu, so they chained him and buried him in the earth. Then, to conceal their crime and compound their error, the two turned to the Yama Kings for aid, which the lords of Yomi Wan were only too pleased to grant. Before the ancestors in Beijing discovered the truth and the akuma Hollow Reeds were executed, they had already delivered the souls of the rest of their wu into the hands of the Yama Kings. The example of the Gnashing Dragon is a lesson to us all in the dangers of arrogance and the need for humility in the face of imbalance.

### ON THE COURTS OF THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

In my time since taking the Second Breath, I have traveled far from the place where I died to see the many lands of the Middle Kingdom, and I have visited the many courts, seeing wonders and horrors I could not have imagined in my first life. I have worn mortal masks in other lands as well, gaining an appreciation for the people of those places that I lacked in life. Finally, I have learned from others and my own experience how those of my Dharma fare throughout the Middle Kingdom and what things we have to be wary of in the courts. followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers, wise in the secret ways and roads between the courts.

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The Blood Court also holds a great many Wise Centipede ritualists who together maintain a vast body of ancient lore and knowledge of rituals passed down from the Age of Legends. A number of *wu* in the court specialize in ritual and study of ancient lore, like the Hundred Shadows *wu*, led by a revered Hollow Reed ancestor of the Exalted Jade Masks. Only the Bone Court has more Hollow Reed sorcerers among its numbers. These *wu* are truly devoted to gaining knowledge, perhaps too devoted according to some, who wonder about the source of some of their lore. I saw no signs of *akuma* among the Wise Centipedes of the Blood Court, but any agent of the Yama Kings would have to be well concealed indeed to walk there.

The Flesh Court of Shanghai is not a place that welcomes gaki such as myself, given its recently history. Shanghai was embroiled in a battle between the largely Chinese Kuei-jin of the Flesh Court and Nipponese akuma who invaded the city along with the Nipponese army in 1937. Nipponese Kuei-jin show their faces in Shanghai only if they are willing to risk death at the hands of Flesh Court warriors more inclined to attack first and question later. Still, the Flesh Court is home to some Wise Centipedes, particularly those with skill in hunting down akuma, and the Ministry of the Scarlet Vessel draws the attention of the Dancing Peacocks. Hollow Reeds of the east direction are skilled in moving through mortal society to acquire the "lost" mortals the Ministry uses to replenish its stocks of Chi.

The Flame Court of Hong Kong is likewise embattled, but the struggles is not between Kuei-jin (at least, not that the ancestors would admit), but between Kuei-jin and the gaijin Kin-jin for control of the city. Wu loyal to the Five August Courts struggle with Kin-jin and their allies among the Righteous Devils of Kowloon, as well as the city's hengeyokai, who seek to control Hong Kong's remaining dragon nests. Hong Kong is a place of great activity, with more in the future as the Great Leap Outward extends our reach into the lands of the West. Hollow Reeds of my acquaintance consider Hong Kong quite interesting — in the sense of the old Chinese curse. The Heaven and Earth wu, made up entirely of Wise Centipedes, one from each direction, works in Hong Kong to bring the Righteous Devils back into the fold of the courts and, rumor has it, use their mortal masks to subtly influence the Kin-jin and the city. The Bone Court of Chongqing is a place of learning and study, drawing the attention of all Hollow Reeds, not just those of the western direction (although the Exalted Jade Masks are most in evidence here). I journeyed to Chongqing years ago study among the scholars there, many of them followers of the Song of the Shadow Dharma. I found their scholarship masterful and learned a great deal in the isolation of their temples. However I found the Bone Court too insular for my tastes.

### THE FIVE AUGUST COURTS OF THE QUINCUNX

Many would not expect to find us in the traditional and somewhat rigid Blood Court of Beijing, but followers of my Dharma are well known there as judges, mediators and keepers of ancient ritual and lore. Hollow Reeds of the north direction are found in Beijing serving on the Revered Tribunal of the August Personage, helping settle disputes between Kuei-jin throughout the Middle Kingdom. Their wisdom in the ways of making and wearing many masks also aids the court in screening itself from the mortal authorities, particularly since the rise of Communism in China. Many of the envoys sent out by the Blood Court to the farthest corners of the Middle Kingdom are The followers of my own Dharma there, while wise in ancient lore and ritual, did not always devote much time to their mortal masks or lived lives of contemplation and solitude, hardly what I would call changing greatly from one breath to the next.

Finally, the Jade Court of Changan. This is the August Court most closely associated with Hollow Reeds because it serves much the same role as Kuei-jin of the center direction, working to balance the other courts while serving as a place of learning about ancient traditions. It is home to the Sages of the Fivefold Way, bodhisattvas that study the teachings of Grand Arhat Xue, seeking further insight into his wisdom. The Sages and other great Kuei-jin teachers make the Jade Court a place where even mandarins and ancestors come to seek advice.

There are also many in the Jade Court — certain Hollow Reeds in particular — devoted to the ideal of maintaining, of *enforcing*, balance throughout the courts and the Middle Kingdom. Wu like the Tears of Heaven and the Righteous Balance Society take it upon themselves to follow Xue's tenets regarding equilibrium, aiding other Kuei-jin in attaining it, or ensuring that those things that cannot be balanced are destroyed and not allowed to lead to further imbalance. Their devotion to this task approaches the fanatical.

### THE Uji OF NiPPON

The gaki of Nippon I know well, of course, and the Thousand Whispers Dharma has long been strong here among the uji. The Bunraku, Hollow Reeds of the north direction, are prominent in Nippon, and it is from here that they take their name. Hakari, the former Ancestor of Tokyo, is of their number, as are others of the elder gaki of House Bishamon. Their stern judgement and devotion to balance led to the purge of House Genji during the Year of Black Kites. The Bishamon languished in exile during the rule of House Genji and the Court of the Azure Dragon, but this permitted the Rootless Trees of the house to assume a number of mortal masks. Concealing themselves under the very noses of their new overlords, they gathered information for the other members of their house. This intelligence was the undoing of the Genji when the Bishamon returned. In Nippon, as elsewhere in the Middle Kingdom, the struggle is between the old ways and the new, Westerninfluenced ways that have come to the land. The struggle is particularly pronounced in Nippon, as the resurgent House Genji and the zaibatsu strengthen the hold that new ideas and new ways have on the young, even on the gaki who have taken the Second Breath in recent years. The Genji ally themselves with the Kin-jin, which only further angers the traditionalists among the Bishamon. In the midst of the conflict, Wise Centipedes find themselves confronted with a choice: Seek new masks among the every-changing mortal society or withdraw from it, ignoring the tenets of the path by limiting our experiences. The Bunraku cast a jaundiced eye on those of us

who partake of the modern world too much, thinking us Genji sympathizers, when, in fact, we only follow the teachings of our way.

### THE GREEN COURTS

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In my travels, I have visited the Green Courts of Korea and found them to be a place welcoming to followers of the Thousand Whispers, if not a place where I wished to abide for long. The independence of the Green Courts and their strong interest in accumulating and working jade, attracts some Hollow Reeds, particularly artisans and sorcerers interested in the secrets of the Yin World. Some of the Green Court's greatest jade workers, such as Soon Pak, are followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers, as are master sorcerers such as Cho Sen Ho of the Splendid Fire *wu*. The Parallel Path the court uses to quietly hide away any Kuei-jin (or Kin-jin, for that matter) with the ability to pay is tended by Hollow Reeds wearing any number of mortal masks, allowing them to move unseen through mortal society.

Still, the Green Courts are strongly dominated by the followers of the Song of the Shadow Dharma and strongly aligned with the Yin World, which keeps them from being truly balanced. Their secrecy and shadows do not allow them to experience life as we do, but give them the quiet and solitude they need to study the secrets of the dead. Sorcerers in the Green Courts are often master necromancers, and it is little wonder that the Hollow Reeds of the western direction, the Exalted Jade Masks, are often found in this court. They seek to redress ancient imbalances through the guidance of the spirits and work to keep the Green Courts a neutral place in the Middle Kingdom, believing it vital to the courts' continued well-being. They walk side by side with Bone Flower necromancers, each eyeing the other, ready for battle. One of the balances most gravely threatened within the Green Courts is the peace they have enjoyed thus far with the hengeyokai and the other shen of their land. The courts' increasing need for jade, the source of their power and influence, has led to the sacking of more dragon nests guarded by the beast-folk, who grow angry over the actions of the Kuei-jin. Emissaries of peace and negotiation sent by the ancestors have been met with cold disdain at best. Others never return but give the answer of the Beast Courts clearly nonetheless. Calls from among the Exalted Jade Masks to limit the mining of jade have been ignored. I believe it is only a matter of time before this unbalanced behavior leads to war among the shen of Korea.

### THE GOLDEN COURTS

In contrast to the shadows and silence of the Green Courts, the Golden Courts are places of riotous colors, energy, activity and plentiful amounts of blood. As strong in Yang as the Green Courts are in Yin, the Golden Courts are dominated by female Kuei-jin, mostly of the Thrashing Dragon and Devil-Tiger Dharmas, mistresses of Flesh and Jade Shintai. Hollow Reeds tend to be rare in the

carnival atmosphere and savage wilderness of the jungle courts, but my Dharma is known here as it is throughout the Middle Kingdom. Wise Centipedes often come to the Golden Courts as emissaries of the other courts, particularly the August Courts of the Quincunx. We also visit the Golden Courts as travelers, seeking new places to establish lives, and the dazzling variety of the region offers a tantalizing menu of choices indeed.

The Golden Courts have their native Kuei-jin following the Path of a Thousand Whispers as well. As I have mentioned, the Dancing Peacocks, Hollow Reeds of the eastern direction, are most often given the duty of shepherding the mortal herds in the lands of the *penangallan*, the queens of the Golden Courts. Their devotion to balance and to the needs of their mortal charges help to temper some of the wild excesses of the other Kuei-jin of the courts. This dedication also permits them to keep watch for signs of *akuma* in the jungles, whom the *penangallan* root out with ruthless efficiency. The Peacocks are particularly influential in Thailand, where they often use various nightclubs and flesh-pots as Scarlet Screens to serve the needs of their *wu* and the courts.

### THE INFINITE THUNDERS COURT

Often called the Court of Infinite Tears in the Golden Courts, the Infinite Thunders Court of Sri Lanka is a place of both great sadness and great opportunity for followers of my Dharma. Opportunity because it, more than any other court in the Middle Kingdom, is strongly tied to mortal life and an understanding of it. Hollow Reeds there find means of exploring their masks in new ways and gaining new understanding. Sadness because the court's love for life leads to obsession and an inability to sever ties when the time comes to move on. It is little wonder that the heretical Flame of the Rising Phoenix Dharma is among the strongest here; Indian Kuei-jin cling to the lives they once led, trying to restore them to balance, without understanding the need to walk forward along the path without looking back. My sensei spoke of the Infinite Thunders Court in disdainful terms, saying it was a place where Wise Centipedes and followers of other Dharmas could easily lose their way and be drawn into a web of hopes and dreams as dangerous as any spider's. Having walked the dusty streets of Colombo and having spoken to the Kuei-jin living in that land, I can agree on the danger, but I must also say that I found the experience educational.

from Yomi Wan after starving to death because he failed to provide for his family. He convinced his relations that he was not truly dead, only in a coma, and he devoted himself to helping his family in unlife. We discussed and compared our paths, and Prachak asked me about the Broken Mask Technique.

"You speak of experiencing all that each life has to offer," he said, "but what of your first life, before the Second Breath? Wasn't it by definition cut short, denying you fulfillment, driving you to fight your way out of Hell to return to it? You did not experience all that you could from that life, and yet you have discarded it in favor of lives that are not yours." I tried to explain to him the necessity of leaving masks behind, even the mask we wore in our first life. I think there may be something to be learned from resolving one's karma, but I cannot see how clinging to the past can lead to enlightenment.

### THE GREAT LEAP OUTWARD

Change is the way of things. Perhaps the greatest change to come to the Middle Kingdom in many years is the Great Leap Outward. It is the plan of the courts to punish the Kin-jin for years of Western oppression in our own lands, as if merely being one of the Western demons was not punishment enough for such crimes. There are Hollow Reeds that believe in the ancestors' plan and support the Great Leap, if only to have the opportunity to see other lands and places. Certainly, our knowledge of masks and how to blend in with mortal society has been useful in the endeavor, allowing Kuei-jin to spread farther and faster than the Kin-jin know or suspect. I do not know that the punishments the ancestors would visit upon the Kin-jin will have the desired effect, but I do know that the Great Leap represents an opportunity to me. That is why my next life will be far from here, my love. This place is too filled with memories for me, even after I embrace the Dark Jade Lover and allow her touch to take them from me. That is why I will go to the West and see for myself how the mortals there live. I will see the Kin-jin in their homeland and find out if they are as barbaric as I have heard and seen in the Middle Kingdom. I will live my next life far from these islands, and I may not see them again for many years. If nothing else, this writing has shown me how little I truly know and how much more there is to learn. I will touch these papers to the flame and set my spirit free to embrace death once more.

I recall a conversation with Prachak, a follower of the Flame of the Rising Phoenix who fought his way back Farewell.



When you are deluded and full of doubt, even a thousand words of scripture are not enough.

When you have realized understanding, even one word is too much.

- Fen-Yang



The followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers are some of the most unusual characters in Kindred of the East. They adopt different lives and different viewpoints, then abandon them, all while maintaining their balance and detachment. This can be a real juggling act for a player, but it can also be very effective and rewarding when it's done right.

Fortunately, players in a storytelling game have something of an advantage in understanding the Whispers. After all, we take on different roles ourselves, keep our fantasy lives separate from our real lives and still occasionally learn a thing or two from those fantasy experiences. Hollow Reeds carry roleplaying to a level even the most skilled method actor can scarcely imagine. They immerse themselves totally in their artificial lives, until they become entirely real to them. "Wear the mask until it becomes your face," the elders of the Dharma say. The more real the experience, the more the Kuei-jin can learn from it. So, how do you play a character like that?

#### DISCRIMINATE BETWEEN HIGH AND LOW

Hollow Reeds have what they refer to as "greater" and "lesser" masks they wear. A greater mask is a fully realized

false life, a true alter-ego. This mask has a job, a home, friends, perhaps even a family, all of which the vampire must dedicate time and effort to. The mask has a complete history associated with it, and the longer the Kuei-jin wears it, the more significant emotions also become associated with it. A greater mask takes a great deal of time and effort to wear, so Hollow Reeds usually only have one at a time. Many spend the majority of their time wearing the mask, living a false life, and occasionally slip out of the mask to feed, attend to other matters in the shadow world of the Kuei-jin or adopt a lesser mask for a short while.

Lesser masks are simpler false identities Rootless Trees put on for a while and taken off just as easily. They're more akin to disguises and usually quite different from the greater mask, allowing the vampire to experience some contrast. For example, a Hollow Reed who normally wears the greater mask of a businesswoman in Hong Kong might maintain lesser masks as a high-priced prostitute, a homeless person and a teenaged schoolgirl. From time to time, she can slip away for a night and experience another facet of life in the city before returning to her greater mask. Lesser masks sometimes serve a political purpose, such as spying or influence within a Scarlet Screen, but they exist primarily to provide diverse experiences.

### START SIMPLE

When choosing identities for your character, keep in mind that Hollow Reeds rarely have more than three, maybe four different masks at a time, and most of those are lesser masks rather than fully realized false lives. It's important not to go crazy, creating a dozen or more false lives for the Whisper character at once. Such a flurry of experiences only makes your playing experience more taxing and distracts the vampire from real opportunities to learn. Hollow Reed elders often have to deal with Running Monkeys who go overboard at first, trying to sample everything like a starving man at an all-you-caneat buffet. They end up stuffed and ill (Dharmically speaking) when they should be sampling a few dishes and savoring the experience before moving on. Trying to wear too many masks at once can constitute an act of blindness for a Wise Centipede; she's simply too scattered to focus on her path.

This is a good thing, since focusing too much on the Whisper's many and varied lives can begin to wear on the Storyteller and the other players. A character's masks should serve to add to the story rather than detract from it. They don't exist to put the Rootless Tree center stage to act out a life that has nothing to do with the rest of the *wu*. That's suitable material for a one-on-one game, but not the makings of an exciting **Kindred of the East** story.

### MAKING THE MASKS

It used to be creating a false identity was a fairly simple matter of a new appearance and some forged documents, along with moving to a new area. In the modern world, however, the Thousand Whispers face greater challenges in establishing false lives for themselves. Consider the following in-game factors when creating a new mask for a Hollow Reed character (or more properly, when she creates one for herself): • Appearance: Hollow Reeds usually take the term "mask" literally and change their appearance from one life to the next. This may be through the use of disguise and mundane applications of makeup and wigs, or it may involve the use of Disciplines like Flesh Shintai or rites like Assume the Greater Mask (see p. 55). Generally, Whispers start out with simple techniques of disguise (acting and makeup) and progress to more sophisticated ones, allowing them to take on very diverse lives. Documentation: The modern world is largely driven by paperwork, so any mask that has to interact with the modern world (rather than living in an isolated place like a monastery) needs certain documents to make it "real." Abilities like Computer, Streetwise and Subterfuge are useful in forging records and acquiring false documents. Backgrounds like Allies, Influence and Resources also help grease the wheels of the modern information machine. Several Hollow Reeds maintain Scarlet Screens dedicated to creating new false identities, so the Storyteller can make the process of acquiring new documentation as easy or as difficult as the story requires. Using the services of the such a screen entails become indebted to its master, of course.

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• Sunlight: They may wear many masks, but Wise Centipedes still have to deal with the limitations of their unliving form, notably their vulnerability to sunlight and the condition of their corpse. Whispers choose masks that can be active only by night (or sheltered indoors from sunlight during the day) without arousing suspicion. They may work the night shift or pretend to work from home during the day (allowing them to go out at night). Identities lacking sufficient reason for being active only at night tend to be relegated to lesser masks, since they aren't often worn for more than one night.

• The Blush of Life: While wearing a mortal mask, vampires animate their body using Yang Chi to maintain the appearance of life. Whispers use Yin Chi when they know they are unlikely to interact with mortals for long periods, when dealing with fellow Kuei-jin or when they wish to feign a serious illness. Since Yang Chi burns through the body so quickly by comparison, Whispers maintaining their mask in public for extended periods of time must feed more often, potentially endangering their mortal identity. For this reason, Hollow Reeds try and balance their interaction with the mortal world with solitude and time spent among their own kind.

### BREAKING OLD TIES

Hollow Reeds sever the ties of their former masks, setting them aside so they can continue on the path. This means most experienced Whispers aren't plagued by endless loose ends from half-finished and abandoned lives. Storytellers can certainly introduce elements of a Wise Centipede's previous masks to provide conflict and drama in a story, but there's generally no need to worry about them cropping up at random. Hollow Reeds are very focused on the present and avoid being encumbered by the past, since it only holds them back. The Storyteller can get some drama out of the Hollow Reed having to sever the ties of his present live in order to undergo the rites of Embracing the Dark Jade Lover, especially if some of those ties have been built up in play. Once a mask has been set aside, players should focus on their characters' current masks rather than clinging to one that's finished.

### MAINTAINING TIES

On the other hand, players running Rootless Trees should keep other characters and the chronicle in mind when they choose their characters' lives. Work with the Storyteller to create a mask that's well suited to the story and won't just be a distraction from it. For example, in a chronicle set in Hong Kong, a Whisper following the life of a police officer is perfectly suitable and offers plenty of potential story hooks. Likewise, a fisherman, rickshaw driver, business executive and even a street thug integrate

well into the setting. However, a Rootless Tree who wants to experience life as a rice farmer isn't going to find many places to do so in Hong Kong, and the Storyteller is perfectly within her rights to suggest that the player come up with another idea.

The Hollow Reed character also generally maintains the ties established in her unlife, including connections to her *wu* (and fellow characters). One of the duties of the path is keeping things in balance, so Rootless Trees should not be too quick to ignore the rest of the world. Only truly advanced followers of the Dharma break all ties with Kuei-jin society to become hermits. The enlightenment needed to embark on such a solitary journey takes a long time to achieve, and the character must be able to perform the rite of the Way of the Lone Walker. Since it's up to the player when this happens, it shouldn't cause a problem in the chronicle, and it provides a graceful means for an experienced Thousand Whispers character to leave a chronicle, if desired.

### SETTING ASIDE THE MASK

An important issue for Hollow Reed characters is knowing when to end a particular mask and undergo the appropriate rite of the Dark Jade Lover to begin anew. Their Dharma admonishes Hollow Reeds to live each life fully, a process that takes years at least, if not an entire

mortal lifetime. A Hollow Reed character should go through fairly few masks over the course of a chronicle, unless the chronicle covers a *very* long period of time (decades or even centuries) — in which case changing masks can be handled mainly "off stage" between stories.

There's no game system for deciding when a life is complete. The player and the Storyteller should collaborate to decide on the right time. As a general rule of thumb, the end of a life is heralded by an auspicious occasion related solely to that mask (rather than to the Kuei-jin's unlife). This is the particular wisdom the character is supposed to learn from that life. Some lives don't have an auspicious occasion; Whispers live many lifetimes without experiencing a moment of satori through their masks. Or the moment of satori may only come later, when the Kuei-jin has ended that life and looks back on it in meditation. Circumstances, such as the threat of exposure, may also force a Hollow Reed to end a mask prematurely. This can provide roleplaying opportunities as the vampire deals with his failure.

You may wish to start Wise Centipede characters out near the end of one of their current masks, giving them the opportunity to undergo the ritual of shedding a mask at least once during the chronicle. This gives the character a few established lives to start with that can be built up, experienced during the chronicle, then ended.

47



Storytellers should take the opportunity to work the Whisper's rites of the Dark Jade Lover into the chronicle, either as a sub-plot in a larger story or as a solo story for the Hollow Reed's player.

### MAINTAINING BALANCE

The Path of a Thousand Whispers emphasizes balance as its greatest virtue, and Hollow Reeds are expected to maintain a state of balance. Part of this is achieved by keeping the character's virtues in relative equilibrium (see "Direction and Chi Balance," p. 49), but it is also a matter of behavior. This can be a tricky roleplaying challenge compared to following the relative extremes of the other Dharmas. The key is not to become too obsessed with maintaining an *exact* balance. Like many things about Dharmas, it is easier to explain what "balance" is not in terms of the Thousand Whispers.

It is not avoiding all extremes of behavior in favor of Zen-like calm and detachment (which is more the ideal espoused by the heretical Tempest of Inward Focus Dharma). On the contrary, Hollow Reeds are expected to experience widely divergent emotions and to go to extremes. But they do so in all directions, not just cultivating a single virtue like righteousness or deviltry, and they always return to the center afterward.

So, a Rootless Tree might indulge in a period of wild, sybaritic indulgence and cruelty, only to then turn around and devote herself to an ascetic time of service and kindness. It's this sort of behavior that gives the Whisperstheir reputation for odd and unpredictable behavior. To the outsider (particularly another Kuei-jin devoted to a Dharma focused on a single virtue), their behavior makes no sense. But there is a method behind the apparent madness. Maintaining their balance does not require a Hollow Reed to ignore all other considerations. Your Thousand Whispers character doesn't have to do things that are going to upset the balance of the wu or the other characters (remember, maintain balance on all levels). Try and keep your character's devotion to balance interesting without disrupting the flow of the game; don't simply go off and do something random and explain it as "balance." It's also not necessary to micro-manage a Whisper's equilibrium. Every single act doesn't have to provoke an immediate counter-reaction. Some Rootless Trees engage in a particular type of behavior for years, even an entire mortal lifetime, before the pendulum swings back the other way and they spend another lifetime seeking to balance out the first. It's best if the Hollow Reed's "mood swings" are kept under control, otherwise you may find wu-mates unwilling to tolerate your character for very long.

# HOLLOWING THE REED: CHARACTER CREATION TIPS

Thousand Whispers characters follow the same rules as other Kuei-jin but have some particular considerations during character creation.

### CONCEPTS

The Thousand Whispers Dharma is suited to a wide range of character concepts. Give some thought to what events (and failings) in the character's life led her to choose the Thousand Whispers as her Dharma. All Kueijin have some reason their souls were cast into Hell and some strong reason that led them to fight their way out and take the Second Breath. These things can be strong motivators when it comes to choosing a Dharma.

It may be that the Kuei-jin was extremely focused on one thing in her mortal lifetime, neglecting other duties and concerns. Now the Second Breath has opened her eyes to a wider world and an opportunity to experience new things. Or perhaps the vampire was scattered and unfocused on her mortal life. She still wishes to follow her interest in diverse things, but tempered by the discipline and deeper understanding — and the ability to leave things behind — that comes with the Broken Mask Technique.

The character concept has to take into account the Rootless Tree's former (mortal) life, his unlife among the Kuei-jin and the current masks he wears. For example, a Rootless Tree may have been a criminal in his mortal lifetime, committing terrible sins against humanity. Following the Second Breath, he sees the opportunity to atone for his crimes and balance the karmic scales, so he takes on the mask of a charity worker, giving aid to the homeless and unfortunate. But he also maintains lesser masks as both a dealer at a high-priced casino and a gardener at a Buddhist temple. The variety offered by the Path of a Thousand Whispers makes it a good choice for players interested in trying a lot of different things. Can't settle on one character concept? Try putting them together as different masks of a single Hollow Reed character, and see what you come up with. In their time, the Wise Centipedes can be as ruthless as the Devil-Tigers and as virtuous as the Resplendent Cranes. They partake of a little of everything from the other Dharmas while seeking to keep everything balanced within.

### SAMPLE CHARACTER CONCEPTS

Hollow Reeds can take on nearly any mask, live nearly any life in their thousand lifetimes. But they are often drawn to masks that allow them a great deal of personal freedom, opportunities for travel and the chance to balance their shadow lives against the mask they wear. The following are some concepts common to the Thousand Whispers.

#### MARTIAL ARTIST

"Know your enemy as you know yourself and you will always be victorious," said Sun Tzu. Hollow Reeds embrace this philosophy as no others, and their skill as warriors comes from this understanding of human (and Kuei-jin) nature and their ability to do whatever needs to be done. Many Wise Centipedes follow lives of conflict, seeking to master a particular fighting form, which serves as a metaphor for other wisdom gleaned from such a life. Such Kuei-jin often find work as mercenaries, and lived as ronin and wandering warriors in days past. Now they more often fight in the jungles of Southeast Asia for one cause or another.

#### PERFORMER

Life is definitely a stage for Hollow Reeds, and what better way to express that than by taking on the mask of a performer? The Whispers' training and experience in wearing masks makes them skilled actors, dancers, singers and other types of performance artists. These personas often work nights without raising suspicion, as well. Some Hollow Reeds follow traditional forms of expression like Noh or kabuki theater, while others try to experience life as a superstars of action films or the rockand-roll stage. Such masks often come to tragic ends, leaving their fans to build up legends around them and their mysterious demises.

#### TEACHER

With their desire to help others find balance and understand what is at the heart of their beliefs, Wise Centipedes often find themselves in the roles of teachers and mentors. They find newly returned Kuei-jin and help them to overcome their Demons and understand their new state of unlife. They also adopt mortal masks that permit them to teach, from sensei of martial arts dojos to university professors. Hollow Reeds pop up in places of learning throughout the Middle Kingdom, and the truly wise never forget that the teacher is also the student.

#### TAKING & NEW NAME

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Many Kuei-jin, particularly on the Path of a Thousand Whispers, choose to take a new name after the Second Breath, making a clear break between their first life and their existence as one of the Hungry Dead. This is traditionally done when the vampire becomes a disciple, through the rite to Embrace the Spirit's Change (see **Kindred of the East**, p. 130). As the Kuei-jin advances along his Dharmic path, he may adopt other names to represent changes in personality, temperament and status in Kuei-jin society. Hollow Reeds tend to name themselves after particularly auspicious objects or omens rather than taking on mortal names (which are reserved for the masks they wear). Thus, there are renowned Wise Centipedes named True Jade and Marble Gong.

and focuses on the factions associated with the cardinal points (see pp. 27-31), but a Whispers character doesn't have to be part of the specific sub-culture associated with his direction. Those views are likely to shape his own, however, especially during his early training and *kôa* stage. A Hollow Reed's direction also influences the sort of masks he is likely to take on and, to some degree, the character's relationship with Kuei-jin society.

Balance between the various virtues is another important factor to Rootless Trees. Most of them seek balance between their Yin and Yang virtues, but not all of them achieve it. Hollow Reeds of the east are often balanced toward Yang, while those of the west are often balanced toward Yin. Even then, they take care not to become permanently imbalanced toward either (Kindred of the East, p. 139). Similarly, balance between Hun and P'o is the ideal, but differences often crop up as the character pursues masks that emphasize one virtue over the other. Hollow Reeds take care not to attain true soul imbalance, however (see Kindred of the East, p. 149). Permanent Chi or soul imbalance constitutes an act of blindness for Hollow Reeds.

### WANDERER

The nature of their path often draws Whispers to the fringes of mortal society, where social roles and mores break down and even mortal masks crack around the edges. The personas of drifters, homeless people and nameless wanderers are all useful to them. These are invisible people, ignored by the rest of society, allowing Kuei-jin a unique vantage point to watch and learn from. They also offer a ready source of Chi. After all, who's likely to notice one more or less homeless person in an alley?

### DIRECTION AND CHI BALANCE

Direction has a strong influence on Hollow Reeds because it colors their views on the equilibrium at the core of their path and how best to achieve and maintain it. The "Becoming Nobody" chapter offers insights into the different directions from a Thousand Whispers point of view

### NATURE AND DEMEANOR

A Hollow Reed's Nature is much like any other character's. It is the core of the character's personality, the part that stays with her from one mask to the next. Nature, like direction, subtly colors the kinds of masks the vampire chooses to wear and even her reason for following the Dharma.

For example, a Wise Centipede with the Architect Nature may want to build something lasting, seeing his multiple lives as the slow process of creating a path toward enlightenment. A Rebel Nature, on the other hand, may indicate a Hollow Reed who challenges conventions and loves to debate Dharmic philosophy with others to balance their views.

#### THOUSAND WHISPERS

Demeanor can change where Rootless Trees are concerned. Each mask the character wears should have its own Demeanor, and ideally, no two active masks should have the same one, allowing the vampire to experience the widest possible range of behavior. While wearing a mask, the character should act in accordance with its Demeanor, as colored by the character's true Nature.

If the player portrays the Demeanor well and acts in accordance with it, the Storyteller may choose to allow the Hollow Reed character to regain Willpower by following the Demeanor like others do for following their Natures. So a Hollow Reed wearing a mask with a Judge Demeanor could regain Willpower by using discerning judgement in a difficult situation, representing a minor Dharmic lesson learned by the character.

#### ATTRIBUTES, ABILITIES AND BACKGROUNDS

Hollow Reeds come from all walks of life before taking the Second Breath, but Kuei-jin who choose to follow this Dharma tend to have certain points in common. All Thousand Whispers *hin* are also taught certain things they need to know in their unlives, if they are to successfully follow their path.

Wise Centipedes tend to have strong Social Attributes, particularly Manipulation, since it enables them to more easily slip into new masks and to make those roles convincing. Perception and Wits are also fairly important Attributes. Perception allows a Hollow Reed to notice small details and pick up on the subtleties that make a persona more real, as well as the little lessons that life has to offer them. They develop Wits by thinking on their feet and adapting to the sudden changes often demanded by living a false life. Whispers have a reputation for being able to come up with amazingly convincing lies on the spot. They consider it a survival skill. Other Kuei-jin find it an unworthy characteristic, but even they admit that it is often useful. In terms of Abilities, the Performance skill is nearly universal among followers of the Thousand Whispers Dharma, since it allows them to create and take on their different masks. Some Whispers choose to put their skill to work in other ways, by becoming actors or performers as one of their masks. The player of a Thousand Whispers character mat portray a character pretending to be an actor, playing a role - performances within performances. Other social Abilities are common for Hollow Reeds, such as Etiquette, Expression, Streetwise and Subterfuge. Experienced Hollow Reeds are social chameleons, able to blend into nearly any setting with ease and grace. Followers of the Dharma also tend to pick up a fair number of Knowledges over time, as they experience different masks. Older and more experienced Whispers seem to know something about everything. Occult and Enigmas are particular common Knowledges for them.

Whispers choose their next lives during the Embrace of the Dark Jade Lover (allowing the Storyteller to insert subtle hints to guide the character along the right path). They also learn and master a variety of rites to balance the flow of Chi (both through the land and through their own bodies), to contact and speak with spirits and to enhance their various masks, even allowing them to take on entirely new forms and identities (see pp. 53-60, for more on these new rites). Obviously, the Rites Background is common for such characters.

### MERITS AND FLAWS

Some Merits and Flaws are particularly appropriate (or inappropriate) for followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers. In some cases, particular Merits or Flaws may be tied to a mortal mask rather than the Kuei-jin, where they represent important lessons about that mask.

#### CHANGING SOCIAL BACKGROUNDS, MERITS AND FLAWS

Backgrounds tied to mortal society — like Allies, Contacts, Influence and Resources - may apply to the Kuei-jin's mortal mask rather than his unlife, in which case these Backgrounds apply only to that life and do not necessarily carry over to the character's next mask. The Storyteller may allow Wise Centipedes with these Backgrounds to translate them into their next mask or to re-distribute the points into new social Backgrounds suited to the new persona. For example, a character giving up an alter-ego as a businessman in Hong Kong, with Resources, Influence and Contacts (in the business community), might take up a new life as a mercenary, developing Allies and Contacts in the mercenary business and Influence in a troubled region. On some occasions, the Storyteller can rule that Background points do not translate from one mask to another. They are simply lost, part of the sacrifice the Hollow Reed must make to move on to the next life. Sometimes, social Backgrounds apply to the Kueijin himself rather than the mask. Followers of the Thousand Whispers Dharma commonly have access to Resources tucked away to make the transition between masks easier, for example. Hollow Reeds also often have Merits and Flaws relating specifically to their masks. Like similar Backgrounds, these ties rarely pass from one mask to another and the Storyteller may allow the player to redistribute the points involved or simply drop the Merits and Flaws altogether. Storytellers should watch out for players taking social Flaws, then seeking to eliminate them by changing masks while keeping the bonus freebie points. In these cases, karma requires the new mask have additional Flaws of the same value (although not necessarily the same nature).

Lastly, Wise Centipedes are often skilled in Portents and Rituals. Divination rites are commonly used to help

For example, a Whisper's mask may have an enemy to overcome or a lover to protect (and then leave in order to continue on the path). Such resolved Merits and Flaws no longer affect the Kuei-jin when that mask is put to rest, although the Storyteller may allow new Merits and Flaws to be acquired for a new mask.

#### MERITS

• True Love: In the case of a mortal love, this Merit is actually a challenge for a Wise Centipede, since such ties inevitably have to be broken for the Kuei-jin to continue along the path. Storytellers should arrange something suitably tragic for characters with this Merit. Even if the Merit relates to another Kuei-jin, it should be tinged with sadness, since the Hollow Reed will inevitably move on. The final steps along the Path of a Thousand Whispers must be completed alone.

#### FLAWS

• Amnesia: As a result of the rites of the Dark Jade Lover, Hollow Reeds often experience a degree of amnesia in relation to their mortal masks; they retain the lessons they learned from that life but not the emotional ties or specific memories related to them. However, this does not constitute enough of disadvantage to be considered a Flaw. Indeed, Hollow Reeds consider it an advantage. Whispers with this Flaw have no recollection of their life before taking the Second Breath or of their unlife since. Such Whispers may have become completely caught up in one of their masks, leading them to believe they really are who they pretend to be and that their vampiric abilities are the result of some curse or special nature. Fellow Wise Centipedes take in upon themselves to aid the character in understanding her true nature (or, if that is not possible, grant her a Final Death). · Different Body: Kuei-jin with this Flaw often choose to follow the Path of a Thousand Whispers because they feel they have broken with their former life altogether. They may go so far as to perform the rite to Honor the Second Breath (p. 56) to complete the process, starting their unlife with a clean slate. Nightmares: In addition to their terrible memories of Yomi, Wise Centipedes may pick up this Flaw from traumatic memories of previous masks they have not been able to let go of. Such nightmares are a clear indication of an obstacle in the vampire's path, something the Storyteller can build a subplot around as the character seeks to deal with these bad memories.

places to perform the rites of the Dark Jade Lover (see p. 57), the ritual death they undergo between lives. A suitably hidden and well-guarded tomb helps make the transition between lives easier.

#### TENACIOUS SPIRIT (7-PT. MERIT)

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Your soul is strongly connected to its duty in the Middle Kingdom. The first time you suffer True Death after becoming Kuei-jin, your soul is cast into Yomi but returns anew rather than being consigned to oblivion. You become Yulan-jin, a wandering spirit forced to inhabit different bodies, as you attempt to fulfill your karma. You follow all the normal rules for Yulan-jin (see the Kindred of the East Companion for details). If you meet Truth Death a second time, this Merit does not protect you; you are truly destroyed.

### WANDERING SPIRIT (1-PT. FLAW)

Your spirit is strongly drawn to the spirit worlds. When you undergo the Little Death or the any of the rites of the Dark Jade Lover, your spirit takes twice as long as normal to return to your physical body. Recovering from the Little Death takes a number of nights equal to twice your permanent Yin, for example.

### Disciplines

Rootless Trees are known for their mastery of the diverse Disciplines of the Kuei-jin, although the Whispers themselves often play-down their own abilities. They refer to Disciplines as *siddhis*, great powers but often distractions from the true way. Such powers are, to them, a byproduct of greater enlightenment, a means to an end rather than an end in and of themselves. Therefore, the Thousand Whispers take a utilitarian view of their gifts. They learn those they believe most aid them in attaining the Hundred Clouds without hindering their progress.

### NEW MERITS AND FLAWS TOMB (2-PT. MERIT)

You have a permanent resting place for your body, either provided when you died or acquired after you took the Second Breath. Those given proper tombs for burial rarely rise again as vampires, so there must be a strong reason in your life why you became Kuei-jin if your family provided your tomb. Rootless Trees use their tombs as

#### EQUILIBRIUM

Ancestors and mandarins of the Thousand Whispers consider at least basic training in this Chi Art essential for disciples, since it teaches students how to balance their own Chi and that of others, avoiding dangerous imbalances. Rootless Trees nearly always use this art to restore Chi balance in themselves and others, rather than deliberately causing dangerous imbalances. A carefully regulated Chi balance is an essential first step along the path. Whispers who don't bother learning at least the first dot or two of Equilibrium during their *kôa* risk being considered reckless by other members of their Dharma.

#### JADE SHINTAI

As the shintai of the Earth element, Jade Shintai is associated with the Rootless Trees. It focuses the learning of Equilibrium outward, to tap and influence the Chi flow outside the body. Wise Centipedes use this art to travel easily and quickly through the most difficult of terrain, including high mountains.

THOUSAND WHISPERS

They often use Placate the Earth Dragon (Jade Shintai •••) as a means of entombment while undergoing the rites of the Dark Jade Lover (see p. 57). Such Kuei-jin are difficult to find and protected from the Eye of Heaven and other hazards.

#### CHI'JU MUH

That the Thousand Whispers study and master the techniques of the Dragon Tears often comes as a surprise to Kuei-jin who associate it with those aligned with Hun or P'o. The Rootless Trees seek to walk the border between the two extremes, and Chi'iu Muh is a useful tool toward that end. The art gives the Kuei-jin an awareness of the Great Cycle and the energies of Chi.

In particular, it gives the Kuei-jin the awesome power to heal and devour souls. Wise Centipedes use both in their quest for enlightenment. They heal souls dangerously out of balance; those too far gone to heal, they devour. This allows the Kuei-jin to take on the imbalanced life through the rite of Gathering the Broken Mask rite (p. 56), restoring it to the center where the original owner of the soul could not. A Whisper who does this does not suffer loss of Dharma from eating the soul, since she remains true to her path. Spirit-Eating is considered a serious responsibility, taking on another's karma, so Hollow Reeds only do so in the most extreme circumstances, where they feel that not even death and rebirth will corrects a soul's flaws.

#### *<b>JNTERNALj***ZE**

Skilled ritualists seeking balance, the Wise Centipedes are natural masters of this Discipline. Training in Internalize gives the Whispers much of their reputation for iron will and unshakable calm. The techniques of No Mind and Blood Yoga (Internalize • and • •) help cleanse the mind and spirit, rendering them blank pages for the Kuei-jin to write upon. The more advanced techniques of the art help place the Kuei-jin in harmony with the Great Cycle, allowing him to achieve astounding feats of will and determination.

• Mibasham: Legend has it that the Kuei-jin who brought this Discipline into the Middle Kingdom was actually a follower of the Path of a Thousand Whispers. That bodhisattva's followers see it as a way of looking past the illusions of life to see the fundamental lessons hidden beneath them, much like how they sort through the memories and experiences of their lives to find the grains of wisdom hidden within. Masters of this Discipline are among some of the most inscrutable of an inscrutable lot, asking impossible riddles and challenging others' most deeply held beliefs.

#### PRELUDES

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Like all Kuei-jin, Hollow Reeds take the Second Breath because they have some karmic debt that remains unpaid, something that draws them back to the world of the living from the depths of Hell. The circumstances of the character's prelude lead to her choice of Dharma, so they are important in setting the stage for the type of Kuei-jin the character is to become. The following are some themes commonly found in the preludes of Wise Centipedes:

• Acceptance of Death: Through death, the Second Breath and training as a *hin*, you come to accept that you are dead and your old life is behind you. More than that, you come to understand that life itself is only an illusion covering the Void that lies behind and within all things. By accepting the existence of the Void, you find the center of peace, quiet and balance within you that is essential in following the path.

• Embracing Life: Although life is an illusion, it is a useful one. Hollow Reeds are often people who never really experienced life when they had a chance. Now that you've taken the Second Breath, life has a whole new meaning. You've been given a second chance to experience all the things you never did in life and to learn the vital lessons you were given unlife to learn. Then, when you have drunk deeply of all life has to offer, you must die again to begin the process anew, until you truly appreciate both life and death for what they are. • A Balanced View: In life, Wise Centipedes were often wildly unbalanced, tending toward sin or virtue or toward the qualities of Yin or Yang. The Second Breath is karma's way of pointing out your flaws and giving you the opportunity to achieve the balance you never attained in life. You may have been without empathy, understanding or compassion in your life. The tenets of the path and the Broken Mask Technique also force you to look beyond the narrow confines of your life, to literally put yourself in someone else's place and see life through their eyes. · Breaking Old Ties: The path teaches you to sever and let go of ties that bind you to your old life. You may have many things that are difficult for you to leave behind, a beloved, family, friends, a career, material wealth. You must sacrifice them all to set yourself on the path to enlightenment. Or perhaps you have taken

#### OTHER AUSPICIOUS DISCIPLINES

• Feng Shui: Many Rootless Trees know the windwater art, given their study of both internal and external Chi. It is one of the many skills that makes them welcome in courts throughout the Middle Kingdom, so long as their Feng Shui is used only to aid the Kuei-jin of the court and not to cause trouble. Wandering Centipedes often find employment as *fang shih*, both among mortals and vampires.

• Flesh Shintai: The Hollow Reeds' interest in this art tends to be limited to reshaping the body into different forms, so they can more easily take on new masks or understand life from the perspective of a mouse or a sparrow. Since they often use different rituals to achieve these effects, fairly few Rootless Trees actually achieve the mastery of Flesh Shintai that they seek.

up the path because the circumstances of your death severed all your former ties, leading you to believe that the Path of a Thousand Whispers was destined for you. Your death might have been a shameful thing that brought disgrace to your loved ones, something you must atone for. Or it might have been a tragedy where you died alongside those you loved, but only you returned, to continue on without them.

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• Forming New Ties: Rootless Trees often take on the responsibility of capturing and training *chih-mei*, making it likely that the Kuei-jin who found and helped you was of your Dharma. Did this influence your choice to follow the path? Compared to training at the hands of brutal Devil-Tigers, your experience was easier (at least, in a physical sense). Are you grateful for this, or do you wonder if you missed out on something? How did you feel about your teachers, and what happened when you realized you had to leave them behind when you embarked on the path?

• Riddles and Puzzles: The training of a Hollow Reed is a difficult thing — not because it is torturous like that of a Devil-Tiger, but because it challenges everything you believed to be true through riddles, koans and puzzles intended to let you break away from your old life, from your old ways of thinking, and be born anew into your unlife. Like the Second Breath remakes your body, the training of the path seeks to remake your mind and soul. What sort of things did your teachers do to awaken you to the path? What riddles have they offered that you are still struggling with? What insights did your training leave you with?

### OUTSIDE RELATIONSHIPS AND THE WU

typically quite involved in their *wu*, working to help maintain balance within the group and within its individual members. They provide challenges and try to help their *wu*-mates along their own paths. A Wise Centipede may be the closest thing another Kuei-jin can find to an understanding family member who is not of her own Dharma, because he tries to understand all points of view. Hollow Reeds often take parental roles in *wu* because of their dedication to keeping things in balance, which sometimes requires harsh measures. On the other hand, it is just as possible for them to take "child" roles (inquisitive, questioning and often rebellious children, to be sure) or that of equal siblings in *wu*.

In dealing with characters beyond the *wu*, Rootless Trees tend to be somewhat detached. They can become as emotional as any Kuei-jin, but they cannot become too involved with others, particularly mortals, without violating the tenets of their Dharma. That is not to say that Whispers can't get involved, only that they can't get *too* involved. Relationships with others — both in unlife and through their masks — are part of the Path of a Thousand Whispers. But those relationships have a pre-ordained end to them. Sooner or later, the Hollow Reed must walk alone. This means letting go, not just of loving relationships, but also rivalries, sadness and hatred as well.

### A THOUSAND WHISPERING RITES

The Path of a Thousand Whispers is strongly associated with sorcery, and many Hollow Reeds study the rites of the Kuei-jin and seek to master them. In addition to the rites described in Kindred of the East, the Wise Centipedes have a number of others they use.

Breaking old ties and not becoming dependent on new ones are key tenets of the Path of a Thousand Whispers. Taken to extremes, these beliefs can become disruptive in a chronicle, since a Rootless Tree character never forms the kind of interpersonal relationships that lead to drama and conflict in the story. Or worse yet, the character never forms the bonds with other characters that are vital to involving them in the story in the first place. Fortunately, careful handling of these tenets allows for plenty of interpersonal contact and drama without becoming an annoyance for the players or the Storyteller.

First of all, keep in mind that Hollow Reeds (particularly disciples) rely on their *wu* for the same things that other Kuei-jin do. The *wu* serves as the vampire's surrogate family in unlife, providing support, companionship and social contact, things even the independent Whispers find useful in following their path. For the Hollow Reeds, the *wu* provides a measure of continuity to their unlives, a connection they can hold on to while they experience different masks.

Players might assume that Rootless Trees should be loners within their wu, but that isn't true. Whispers are Any of the rites from Kindred of the East are suited to the Hollow Reeds. Individual rites are common for them. Hollow Reeds use the Way of the Lone Walker when they choose to leave Kuei-jin society behind and become *heimin* further on in their journeys. They commonly perform Restoring the Dharmic Balance for others who have fallen from the path. Wise Centipedes use Embrace the Spirit's Change to adopt a new name after becoming a disciple, to indicate a break between their mortal and vampiric existence, and often after undergoing a new rite of the Dark Jade Lover.

#### LEARNING RITES

Because rites often provide substantial game benefits, Storytellers should ensure that players pay for them in one fashion or another. The standard way is to require characters to seek out teachers, ancient texts and other sources of wisdom to learn new rites. Finding a source for a particular rite can be a hook for a new story or even series of stories (for particularly legendary rites). The character must also spend time studying and learning the rite. A study time of one week per level of the rite is appropriate,



may also wish to assign an experience point cost to rites. vampire wishes to travel to) and makes a Wits + Medi-One experience point for each level of the rite is a good rule of thumb, given the guidelines above. Storytellers who waive things like study times and the need to find teachers or texts may want to increase the cost to two or three times the level of the rite.

although Storytellers can vary it as needed. Storytellers point of Yin or Yang Chi (depending on which world the tation roll (difficulty 6). If the rite is performed before a spirit gate identified with the level two rite Behold the Spirits' Doorway (see Kindred of the East, p. 127), the difficulty is only 5. If successful, the Kuei-jin's spirit enters the Mirror Lands and can travel on to the appropriate spirit world. A failure means the Kuei-jin cannot achieve the proper state of meditation. A botch results in the Kuei-jin's spirit becoming trapped in the spirit world for a number of days equal to her permanent Yin. The body remains in a deathlike state, and Kuei-jin usually sustain themselves on Yin Chi during this time, making the body seem cold and lifeless. At the Storyteller's discretion, a failure or botch may instead anger guardian spirits at the dragon nest.

### CHI RITES WALK THE SPIRIT PATH (LEVEL TWO RITE)

This rite allows a Kuei-jin to send her spirit into the worlds beyond the Wall, leaving her corpse behind in the Middle Kingdom. The body lies in a state of death, while the spirit wanders. If the spirit travels too long, the body may wither from lack of Chi.

This rite must be performed in a dragon nest. The seeker prepares a resting place for her body, inscribed around with ideograms, then lights incense to prepare the way for the spirit. The traveler lies down and sinks into a trance, her spirit separating from the body to enter the Mirror Lands. From there, she can travel on to the Yin or Yang Worlds.

System: The preparations take a hour, although they can be reduced to as little as 10 minutes by increasing the difficulty of the rite by +2. The player spends a

### LOOSE THE WANDERING SPIRIT (LEVEL SIX RITE)

Sometimes Hollow Reeds find their attachment to their corpse a hindrance in following their path. They seek to attain the freedom possessed by the Yulan-jin soul jumpers, able to inhabit a succession of bodies, making them into masks. This rite allows a Wise Centipede to do just that. Many other Kuei-jin look on this as foolishness

at best, an attempt to cheat karma at worst. It is only taught and performed by followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers and usually then only in secret.

The ceremony is similar to the rites of the Dark Jade Lover, conducted at the end of a mortal mask. The supplicant places any affairs in order, then prepares a complete funeral rite, including a suitable tomb for his corpse. He then undergoes the Little Death, forcefully separating spirit from body.

System: When the vampire undergoes the Little Death, the player rolls Willpower (difficulty 9). If successful, the subject's spirit is separated from its body and becomes Yulan-jin, with all of their normal abilities and limitations (see Kindred of the East Companion). A failure results only in the Little Death, which the vampire must recover from normally (see Kindred of the East, p. 144), although the shadow soul roll on recovering is at +2 difficulty for the Hun. A botch results in the vampire's soul becoming trapped in the Yomi World, unable to escape without outside aid. If the soul is freed, it becomes Yulan-jin but loses one point of Dharma and permanent Will-power in the process.

#### INDIVIDUAL RITES THE FOLDING LOTUS (LEVEL TWO RITE)

The Path of a Thousand Whispers teaches that sometimes the only way to restore something to balance is to destroy it. Hollow Reeds use this rite to break the bonds they have formed with the members of their wu. Most Whispers do this as a final means of protesting what they see as unbalanced behavior on the part of their wu-mates. Unlike the Way of the Lone Walker (see Kindred of the East, p. 129), this rite does not separate the Wise Centipede from Kuei-jin society; she is free to join a new wu if she so wishes or the ancestors order it. The rite simply breaks the guanxi with an existing wu without any harm to those involved. The Kuei-jin issues invitations to the members of her wu and to at least one elder, usually a mandarin of the court the wu belongs to or the elder responsible for establishing the wu, if he is available. If the wu has a nushi, the rite can only be performed with its permission. The Kuei-jin gather at an appointed time and place, and the Wise Centipede reads a poem explaining her reasons for leaving the wu, usually highlighting the root of the imbalance. If the members of the wu choose to be rebuked and correct their behavior, then the wu continues and no shame comes upon any of them. If they refuse to be moved, the performer of the rite draws a blade and passes it between her and each member of the wu, symbolically severing their connection. If the rite fails to sever the ties, it is taken as an indication of the will of Heaven, and the Wise Centipede seeks to continue to work within the corpse family.

although the Storyteller may have the player of the Thousand Whispers character make a Manipulation + Expression roll against a difficulty of the audience's average Willpower to see how moving the plea is. Severing the guanxi requires the player to spend a point of Chi and roll Charisma + Rituals against the guanxi rating. If all the ties are successfully severed, the character is no longer a member of the *wu*. If the character fails to sever even a single tie, the ritual fails, and the *wu* remains whole. In this case, any guanxi bond that was severed is restored, but its rating is reduced by two points. A botch on any of the severing rolls does one health level of aggravated damage to the ritualist and the concerned *wu*-mate.

#### Assume the Greater Mask (Level Three Rite)

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In order to follow their Dharma, Hollow Reeds need the ability to live a thousand different lives. Even in ancient times, however, it was often difficult for Kuei-jin to do so without changing their appearance; in the modern world, it's all the more difficult. This rite allows a Wise Centipede to create a new form with her new life, an alternate shape that she can assume in order to live a mortal life without suspicion.

The Wise Centipede must carefully craft an actual mask for her new persona and prepare it through meditation and purification with incense, taking a total of five nights. If the mask is properly prepared, it allows the Kueijin to take on a new appearance while it is worn. A Hollow Reed can only have one such greater mask at any given time. When the Kuei-jin ends that mortal life, she shatters the mask as the final part of the Ritual of a Thousand Cuts.

System: Whether or not the members of the wu choose to reform their behavior is a matter of roleplaying,

The character can then perform this rite again and create a new greater mask, if desired.

System: The player makes a Dexterity + Crafts roll (difficulty 6) for the vampire to create and ritually prepare the mask. Failure results in a mask that is unsuitable. After undergoing a rite of the Dark Jade Lover and rising from her resting place, the Kuei-jin takes up the mask, declaring her intent to take on a new life, and places it on her face. The mask vanishes, and the Kuei-jin gains the ability to switch between her true form and the mask form at will. The subject can choose to remove the mask, ending the ability to use it, at any time.

The new form can be different from the Kuei-jin's normal form in terms of hair and eye color, race, age and even gender. The new form's Appearance Attribute can be higher than that of the Kuei-jin, one point per two successes on the Dexterity + Crafts roll. It can also be lower by any amount desired. The mask cannot be made to look like an actual person, except if the Rootless Tree has used Gather the Broken Mask to take on an unbalanced soul (see p. 56). In that case, the difficulty of the Dexterity + Crafts roll is 8, but even a single success makes a perfect replica of the victim — and grants the vampire his Appearance Attribute rating. The Kuei-jin can assume her mask form for a day simply by expending a point of Yang Chi (this Chi does not count toward animating the Kuei-jin). She can return to her normal form at no cost whenever desired. While in mortal form, the Kuei-jin appears as a living person in all regards, including appearing to (but not needing to) breathe; she still suffers all the normal vulnerabilities of unlife such as sunlight, however.

Other *shen* can recognize a Kuei-jin wearing a greater mask if their players (or the Storyteller) make a successful Perception + Awareness roll (difficulty 9). At the Storyteller's discretion, especially sensitive mortals can also see through the mask (with the same roll), although they will only realize that something is "off" about the person, not that she is a vampire. Otherwise, the disguise is perfect.

#### WEAR THE LESSER MASK (LEVEL THREE RITE)

The Wise Centipedes are masters of disguise and often supplement their mundane skills with Disciplines like Bone and Flesh Shintai and rites such as this one. Wear the Lesser Mask allows a Kuei-jin to change his appearance to that of another person. The Kuei-jin must make a mask resembling the desired form, then perform an hourlong ritual, meditating and focusing on the disguise. The Hollow Reed puts on clothes suited to the new form and dons the mask. He then shifts shape to appear as the desired subject, either an existing person or a completely new appearance crafted by the character.

System: Crafting the mask of the desired appearance requires one night and a Dexterity + Crafts roll (difficulty 5 for a generic disguise, 7 if trying to copy a specific person from memory, 5 from a photograph). A failed roll results in a useless mask. Unlike in Assume the Greater Mask, the vampire must actually wear the Lesser Mask. Removing it ends the disguise. Activating the mask for one night requires a point of Yang Chi. The Kuei-jin can change age, race or even gender using this rite. Appearance can be increased by one dot per two successes on the Dexterity + Crafts roll or lowered by any amount desired. The vampire retains all of his normal abilities and weaknesses. Others can penetrate the vampire's disguise if they pick up on slight imperfections. Players of other shen make a Perception + Awareness roll (difficulty 6) upon first seeing the disguised vampire; failure means they believe he is exactly what he appears to be. Players of mortal characters face a difficulty of 9.

walk their path unencumbered. This rebirth occurs well after the actual Second Breath, once the Kuei-jin is enlightened enough to know that his mortal memories are holding him back. Sometimes the character is only a *hin*, but most candidates are disciples.

(氣)

The Kuei-jin desiring to undergo the rite petitions the mandarins of his court for permission. The Kuei-jin chooses a new name to represent the new unlife he is entering. He dresses in a plain white robe and appears before the ritualist, who performs the rite. The supplicant sheds his robe and steps into water — a pool, river or even the sea — where the rite is completed.

When the Kuei-jin emerges from the water, all memories of his mortal existence are gone, washed away. He retains all his abilities and his knowledge of them but has no recollection of how or where he learned them. As far as the character is concerned, his memories begin with his time in Yomi. The ritualist greets the Kuei-jin by his new name, and he is known by that name henceforth. Referring to the mortal life of a Kuei-jin who has undergone this rite is a serious breech of etiquette.

System: The subject's player must spend a point of Yin Chi to kill the old life and a point of Yang Chi to link his new name to his spirit. The ritualist (who cannot be the subject of the rite) need not expend any Chi. His player must roll Intelligence + Rituals, however, against a difficulty of 5. Failure indicates that the memories remain, while a botch jumbles the subjects recollections in an unpredictable manner; the specifics are at the Storyteller's discretion.

#### GATHER THE BROKEN MASK

#### HONOR THE SECOND BREATH (LEVEL FOUR RITE)

For the Kuei-jin, the Second Breath is a rebirth, freeing their soul from Hell to continue on in the world of the living and fulfill its karmic debts. Some Hollow Reeds use this rite to make the Second Breath even more profound and leave behind all traces of their former lives, cutting all ties with the people they once were so they can

#### (LEVEL FIVE RITE)

Rootless Trees believe it is their duty to restore imbalances, including in some mortal lives, but sometimes, it is just not possible to rectify a truly unbalanced life. Normally, a Wise Centipede would destroy that mortal in order to protect the balance of things. However, the Discipline of Chi'iu Muh offers another option. The Kueijin devours the soul of the unbalanced mortal, taking it out of the Wheel of Rebirth. The Kuei-jin then takes on that mortal's life and seeks to redress the balance directly. This is considered a serious responsibility among the Hollow Reeds, not undertaken lightly.

The Kuei-jin undergoes a ritual similar to one of rifes of the Dark Jade Lover. After devouring the victim's soul with the Chi'iu Muh ability of Spirit-Eating, the character enters a deep meditative trance to assimilate the mortal's memories, taking the life as her own. If successful, the Hollow Reed gains knowledge of the mortal's life, enough to impersonate him and correct the imbalances he has caused. The Kuei-jin does not take on the mortal's physical appearance, although she can use Assume the Greater Mask to do so (see p. 55).

System: The Kuei-jin devours the victim's soul with Chi'uh Muh and then enters a deep trance. The Kuei-jin's

player makes a Willpower roll with the mortal's Willpower as the difficulty. At least three successes are required for the rite to succeed. Otherwise, the Kuei-jin awakens immediately and must check for shadow soul.

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If the Willpower roll is successful, the player must spend experience points to purchase a special Lore skill in the subject's life. Successfully completing the rite requires at least enough experience to buy the Lore skill up to 3 dots. Any less represents insufficient knowledge for the vampire to take on the life of the mortal. The character may buy as many levels in the Lore skill as he has successes on the Willpower roll.

/ The meditative trance lasts for one day for every experience point spent, as the Kuei-jin assimilates the mortal's memories (buying the Lore skill). After that time, the character awakens with knowledge of the mortal's life as if it were his own. The Hollow Reed must then take on the mortal's life as his primary mortal identity (called his greater mask). Failing to do so, or ending a previous life early in order to do so, constitutes an act of blindness (Kindred of the East, p. 53).

### RITES OF THE DARK JADE LOVER

The rites of the Dark Jade Lover are rituals the followers of the Path of a Thousand Whispers use when passing from one greater mortal life to another. They recreate the experience of death for the Kuei-jin, and the most sophisticated rites come as close as one of the Wan Kuei can come to the Final Death without being utterly destroyed. These rites require the vampire have a suitable resting place for his body during them, either a prepared tomb or some other isolated place where he can lay undisturbed. Hollow Reeds usually engage assistance from members of their wu or other followers of their Dharma to guard their bodies while they undergo these rites. The Kuei-jin performs the Ritual of a Thousand Cuts and the Ashes of the Phoenix (see below) each time she ends a major mortal persona. These two rites set the stage for a third death rite in which the Rootless Tree transitions to her next persona. The nature of that final rite varies from occasion to occasion. Disciples engage in the relatively simple Gentle Repose (see below), whereas true arhats use Embracing the True Death (p. 59). It is up to an individual Rootless Tree to decide which rite they are ready for, although it is traditional for them to master a simpler death rite before attempting a more complex one. The rites of the Dark Jade Lover always end with Center the Demon, which restores the reborn Kuei-jin to the peace of wave soul.

sand Whispers Dharma believe focuses the student on understanding the lessons that life has to offer. Hollow Reeds perform the Ritual of a Thousand Cuts to begin the process of bringing a mortal mask to its conclusion.

The Hollow Reed must definitively break any and all ties her mask may have with mortal society: quitting her job, breaking off relationships, selling her home, giving away or destroying possessions and so forth. There is no set time for this, but it is considered appropriate to take as long as a year to complete the process. Any longer may be an indication of an inauspicious attachment to that life.

The Kuei-jin must avoid any unwanted attention during this time, as well-meaning friends and loved ones often try to intervene. Once all ties have been broken, leaving the Kuei-jin with nothing but the clothes he is wearing, the Wise Centipede removes the clothing and discards it, signifying his shedding of the old life like a snake sheds its skin.

System: The process of the Ritual of a Thousand Cuts is exclusively a matter of roleplaying. The Kuei-jin cuts himself off from those he loves and hates in his mortal mask and from all other mortal bonds. The Storyteller can ask for a variety of rolls if she so wishes, depending on the situation.

#### THE ASHES OF THE PHOENIX (LEVEL ONE RITE)

Contemplation of life's lessons is an important part of the Path of a Thousand Whispers and is at the core of the second preparatory rite of the Dark Jade Lover. Wise Centipedes take time at the end of a mask to put what they have experienced and learned into writing (or to express them through painting, calligraphy or other forms of art). This usually takes several days of work. When the work is complete, the Kuei-jin burns it, signifying how the mask is consumed but the experience she has gained from it remains. System: Make a Perception + Expression roll (difficulty 7) to represent what the Kuei-jin has learned and how well she expresses it. When the artistic work is destroyed, each success on the roll gives the Kuei-jin one point of experience, representing insights gained from that mask. Some Kuei-jin practice a variation on this rite called the Scales of the Snake, in which the text is not destroyed. Instead, it is given to a scribe or other aid to be preserved in imitation of the bodhisattva Song Zhen, whose letters form the great text The Journey of a Thousand Steps (see p. 60).

# THE RITUAL OF A THOUSAND CUTS (LEVEL ONE RITE)

The first preparatory rite of the Dark Jade Lover involves severing the ties of the life which is ending. Ending a life in an orderly and proper manner takes considerable time and effort, which masters of the Thou-

#### THE GENTLE REPOSE (LEVEL ONE RITE)

The Gentle Repose is the simplest of the death rites, a relatively straightforward meditative trance. The Kueijin, having completed the Ritual of a Thousand Cuts and the Ashes of the Phoenix rite, lies down in a tomb or other secret place as if in death. The Hollow Reed meditates on the experiences and memories of the mortal mask, seeing what lessons there are to be learned from it and letting go of any remaining connections to that life, so only the wisdom and experience remain.

Hollow Reeds may experience visions and premonitions while in the Gentle Repose, and they may be visited by spirits that carry messages or knowledge for them. When the meditation is complete, the vampire rises up as in the Second Breath.

System: The Gentle Repose meditation requires one night for every point of permanent Yin the vampire possesses. The time of meditation is often used to spend experience points and purchase new Abilities related to the wisdom the character has gained; players may wish to save up some of their earned experience for this purpose. Make an Intelligence + Meditation roll (difficulty 9). Every success subtracts one from the cost of any trait the character purchases while meditating, so long as the trait is in some way related to lessons learned from the character's previous masks (with a minimum experience cost of 1).

Once the vampire enters the Gentle Repose, it is very difficult for him to wake before the designated time. He only

does so after suffering a level of lethal or aggravated damage, and the player must still spend a point of Willpower. No lesser stimulus will disturb the character's slumber.

Once the Gentle Repose ends, the character rises in shadow soul (no roll is permitted) and remains in that state for a scene. The Demon runs amok, usually seeking out food and indulging in its dark pleasures.

#### CENTER THE DEMON (LEVEL ONE RITE)

The death rites of the Dark Jade Lover all end with the Demon coming to the fore and the vampire entering shadow soul. While such a surrender of control might be inauspicious in other circumstances, Hollow Reeds see it as a necessary balance to the calm meditations of the death rites. Just as the Hun must integrate the lessons of the completed life in contemplation, the P'o must do so in action.

Once that period of shadow soul is complete, the vampire performs a brief rite to accept the actions undertaken by the Demon and learn from them. Most often this is quiet meditation, but it can take the form of prayer or even pranas, depending on the vampire's training.



System: Once the vampire emerges from shadow soul after a death rite, the player rolls Perception + Meditation (difficulty of 4 + P'o rating). Even a single success means that the actions of the Demon are understood in a Dharmic context, so that they do not constitute an act of blindness. Failure means a rejection of the P'o's actions, and the player must test for an act of blindness. If the character does not know this rite, he cannot accept the Demon's actions and loses a point of Dharma automatically.

This rite can only be used after shadow soul associated with a rite of the Dark Jade Lover. Handle other instances normally.

#### THE EARTH'S EMBRACE (LEVEL THREE RITE)

The next most advanced death rite brings the Kueijin a step closer to the experience of ritual death through actual burial in the earth, where the Hollow Reed lies as if dead while meditating on the experiences and memories of life. Whispers undergo this rite to advance from disciple to jina, the achievement of *ling*.

The ritual includes funeral rites for the "deceased" and actual burial in the ground. Some Kuei-jin use Placate the Earth Dragon (Jade Shintai •••) to sink into the earth and remain there throughout the rite. Others are simply buried. The embrace of the earth is intended to be soothing and calming, helping the Kuei-jin achieve personal balance.

System: This rite functions like the Gentle Repose, save that the difficulty for the Intelligence + Meditation roll is 7. The player may spend experience as in the Gentle Repose, and the vampire remains in a similar trance for the same amount of time. Like the Gentle Repose, the Earth's mune with the spirits and other *shen* that dwell there. They may lead her on a quest through the spirit worlds that relates to her mortal mask in order to enlighten her about the lessons she must learn. Such visions may prove to be auspicious occasions for a Hollow Reed if they are particularly fruitful (Kindred of the East, p. 52).

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System: The character suffers the effects of the Little Death and must recover normally (see Kindred of the East, p. 144). Wise Centipedes usually arrange for fresh sources of Chi to be nearby for when they awaken. Some choose to have mortals from their previous mask present, allowing the Hollow Reed to complete the Ritual of a Thousand Cuts, severing all ties with the previous mask while sating her need for Chi.

The player makes an Intelligence + Meditation roll (difficulty 5) while the character is in the throes of the Little Death. Every success subtracts one from the cost of any trait the character purchases while meditating, so long as the trait is in some way related to lessons learned from the character's previous masks (with a minimum experience cost of 1).

The Storyteller may chose to run encounters with spirits and other *shen* in the Mirror Lands while the Kueijin's spirit is there, perhaps even running a short solo story where spirit guides offer instruction to the vampire. The character may also receive visions or premonitions related to future stories in the chronicle.

The character automatically awakens from the Little Death in shadow soul. The Demon remain in charge, sating itself, for an entire night.

#### EMBRACING THE TRUE DEATH

Embrace ends with the vampire in shadow soul for a scene.

# EMBRACING THE LITTLE DEATH (LEVEL FIVE RITE)

Hollow Reeds undertake this advanced death rite when they progress to the rank of mandarin. They must face the actual death of the body and the separation of the spirit. The vampire willingly suffers the Little Death (see **Kindred of the East**, p. 144) and takes the time while restoring her body to contemplate death and the experiences of the life she is leaving behind. This rite is terrifying even for experienced Kuei-jin, since True Death looms so close at hand. Masters of the Path of a Thousand Whispers believe facing death in such a fashion helps the student pierce the illusion of existence and overcome all fear.

The character chooses a method of demise that will lead to the Little Death. Basically, the player reduces the Kuei-jin's health to below Incapacitated while ensuring that the vampire has Chi in her body. Elaborate death rituals are common, particularly among Japanese Kuei-jin. The vampire may perform the rite alone or in the presence of members of her *wu* and others, as desired. After the death rite, the vampire's body is interred in a tomb.

The spirit separates from the body to haunt the surrounding Mirror Lands, allowing the Kuei-jin to com-

#### (LEVEL SEVEN RITE)

The ultimate death rite of the Dark Jade Lover is practically a legend among the followers of the Thousand Whispers, undertaken only by those ready to become bodhisattvas. It involves the complete destruction of the body, freeing the soul to wander in the spirit worlds rather than being cast into oblivion — to look death in the eye and to embrace it like an ally, a lover, to welcome it and let go of everything else. Only the most enlightened Kuei-jin can perform this rite successfully; it is very rare in the Fifth Age.

The vampire chooses a place and time for the rite and usually invites fellow *wu* members and local mandarins to attend. The Kuei-jin faces Final Death in whatever manner he desires, usually by Facing the Eye of Heaven, although self-immolation is popular, particularly among the Kuei-jin of the Golden Courts, and *seppuku* is common for the *gaki* of Nippon. After meeting Final Death, the vampire's body turns to dust and scatters on the wind. If the rite is successful, the Kuei-jin's soul enters the spirit worlds and travels there. If not, the vampire is truly dead and gone forever.

There is no way of knowing how long the Kuei-jin's spirit will travel in the spirit worlds — years at least, often

a mortal lifetime or more. During that time, the Kuei-jin communes with the *shen* of the spirit worlds, gaining wisdom and instruction. The Kuei-jin is not aware of the years passing in the Middle Kingdom, but when the spirit is ready, he returns to the physical plane. The dust that made up his body swirls up on the wind, and the Kuei-jin reappears, reborn out of nothingness.

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System: Roll the character's Dharma rating against a difficulty of 9. Failure means the character suffers Final Death and is destroyed. Success allows the enlightened spirit to pass on into the spirit worlds. The time and place of the bodhisattva's resurrection is entirely up to the Storyteller.

The Wise Centipede automatically gains one point in his Dharma from the experience and appears completely healed of any damage, with full Chi scores of all types. If desired, the character can re-allocate his permanent Yin and Yang to balance those virtues, if they are not already. The vampire returns in shadow soul and remains there for a full night.

### LEGACY OF THE ANCIENTS

Over the Ages, Wise Centipedes have accumulated a great deal of wisdom but relatively few material things. Bodhisattvas of the Thousand Whispers have written down their experiences in works passed down across the centuries and used to educate new students in the path.

#### SACRED TEXTS THE HOLLOW REED

The central text of the Path of a Thousand Whis-

mortal lives and prepared to move on to the next, compiled over the course of centuries. Song Zhen passed the collection of documents on to a scribe in the Jade Court before departing on a journey. She never returned, and to this day, no one knows what became of her, although there are many rumors and legends saying she reached the Hundred Clouds and achieved enlightenment.

Her letters were carefully preserved and eventually bound together into a book, which was copied and read by other followers of the path. The text inspired other Hollow Reeds to take up the ritual of putting down their mortal lives in writing as a means of reflection and eventually took the form of the Ashes of the Phoenix, one of the rites of the Dark Jade Lover. That rite (or a variation of it) has nearly become a ninth tenet of the Dharma for some, although there is still some dispute over whether or not it aids in the process of understanding and whether or not such work is meant to be shared. Legend has it that Song Zhen asked the scribe to destroy her work if she did not return but that he was so moved by her words that he could not bring himself to do so. Other Hollow Reeds likewise maintain that such writings should be destroyed because they represent a tie to that should be broken.

The complete original letters of Song Zhen remain under guard at the Jade Court. Rumors persist that some letters were lost before the collection was bound together, however, and some Rootless Trees spend lifetimes searching for such lost passages.

#### THE WISDOM OF THE CENTIPEDE

The Wisdom of the Centipede is a key text of the Path of a Thousand Whispers. Written by a student of Grand Arhat Xue himself, it tells of Xue's experiences in seeking enlightenment with a focus on his meditation on the movements of a centipede that brought him an understanding of balance and complimentarity, of many things working together to produce harmony. The text lays out the central tenets of the Dharma as a path to enlightenment. A number of passages of The Wisdom of the Centipede are obscure and couched in riddles, but surprisingly little dispute has arisen over them in the entire history of the Dharma. In fact, most of the arguments over the meaning of passages from the text come from scholars of other Dharmas, who seek to understand/what seems to be a confusing and contradictory path, while the Thousand Whispers simply continue to walk it. Ironically, The Wisdom of the Centipede is not considered as balanced a text as the Ki Chuan, penned by Xue's student Ki, which looks at all the teachings of the Grand Arhat and the Dharmas that grow from them. The Wisdom of the Centipede focuses solely on the Path of a Thousand Whispers. Some Hollow Reed scholars argue it is a further refinement of Xue and Ki's work and that their Dharma is more advanced than others, but most dismiss such claims as absurd.

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pers, The Hollow Reed was written long ago by the bodhisattva Hai Feng, a student of the teachings of Xue who embraced the Path of a Thousand Whispers wholeheartedly and wrote a long series of sutras praising the insights it led him to.

Most of the text is written in the form of questions and riddles, and teachers of the path often quote from it when posing koans for their students to ponder. Some of the greatest masters of the path have grappled with Hai Feng's insights through hundreds of lifetimes, seeking wisdom and understanding in his words. Some Running Monkeys, frustrated with its obtuse wisdom, ponder whether or not *The Hollow Reed* is actually some colossal practical joke played on followers of their Dharma across the ages. On the other hand, they wonder, perhaps that's that point.

Copies of *The Hollow Reed* exist throughout the Middle Kingdom, but the original text is lost to the ages. The most complete reproduction is believed to be that on display in the Jade Court of Changan.

#### THE JOURNEY OF & THOUSAND STEPS

The Journey of a Thousand Steps chronicles the many lives of the Thousand Whispers bodhisattva Song Zhen in her quest for enlightenment. It consists of a series of letters, written by Song Zhen as she ended each of her

Copies of The Wisdom of the Centipede are common in Rootless Tree circles, as befits its central importance to the Dharma. No original text exists, however, although some believe it rests on Mount Meru.

### ARTIFACTS THE PALE JADE MASK

#### Level Four Artifact

This exquisite mask is carved from the finest palegreen jade with the delicate and beautiful features of a peaceful, sleeping face. A fine black ribbon is tied through holes on either side of the mask at about the ear level, allowing it to be worn. Although the mask has no eyeholes, it does not inhibit the wearer's vision in any way. In fact, it allows the wearer to use the Yin ability of Ghostsight without expending any Chi (see Kindred of the East, p. 88, for details)

The wearer of the mask can also expend a point of Yin Chi to assume the appearance of any mortal for a scene. Make a Wits + Etiquette roll (difficulty 7) to determine the effectiveness of the disguise. Only *shen* can penetrate the mask's disguise, using abilities such as Ghostsight. Make a Perception + Awareness roll (difficulty 7). The onlooker must score more successes than the Wits + Etiquette roll to penetrate the disguise.

### THE BLACK MIRROR

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#### Level Five Artifact

This artifact is a mirror of finely polished obsidian set in a silver frame in the shape of coiling dragons, the whole of it six feet tall and three feet wide. The mirror serves as a gateway into the spirit worlds. With a successful Wits + Rituals roll (with a difficulty equal to the local Wall rating), the mirror shows whatever is behind it in the Mirror Lands, like looking through a window. The owner can use this to see and communicate with spirits effortlessly. With another Wits + Rituals roll (same difficulty), the owner can open a passage through the Wall to step through into the Mirror Lands or allow a spirit to enter the physical world, if desired. The only limitation is the traveler must return to his world back through the mirror, which is generally not difficult unless the traveler becomes lost or the mirror is disturbed in his absence.



### ADAPTIONS FOR MIND'S EXE THEATRE

What follow are adaptations for some of the Disciplines, rites, artifacts and Merits and Flaws for Thousand Whispers. The Storyteller has final say on what is permissible in game.

# THE HOLLOW REEDS

It's easier to say "This is my appearance and behavior" in a tabletop session than to actually play it out in live-action games. Players and Storytellers must work together in MET games to make the lesser and greater masks come to life.

MET chronicles are not primarily costume pageants. Players shouldn't feel compelled to work out head-to-toe disguises. Props and prop cards can and should fill in the gaps in what a player is capable of and comfortable with presenting directly. Likewise, one piece of a costume, such as a distinctive hat or coat, can suggest the rest. Behavioral cues do at least as much as clothing to suggest personality: Identify some distinctive mannerisms for each mask, and be sure to use them, and suspension of disbelief will come more easily. Where necessary, the player and Storytellers can provide out-of-character reminders to others about how the character appears at the moment.

For really elaborate transformations, the player

You can even create the appearance of multiple personas, each knowing a different mix of facts and holding different opinions. All this helps to distinguish different masks.

### NEW MERITS AND FLAWS TOMB (2 TRAIT MERIT)

You have a permanent resting place for your body, whether acquired before death or afterward. If your family provided the tomb, you must have some particularly strong reason for having drawn the Second Breath, as proper funeral rites lay to rest nearly everyone who would otherwise return as a vampire. Rootless Trees often perform the rites of the Dark Jade Lover at their tombs, as it makes the transition between lives easier.

#### TENACIOUS SPIRIT (7 TRAIT MERIT)

The first time you suffer True Death after becoming Kuei-jin, you become Yulan-jin. See the rules for Yulan-jin on pages 66-67. If you meet True Death a second time, this Merit does not protect you, and you are truly destroyed.

### WANDERING SPIRIT ( 1 TRAIT FLAW)

You are strongly drawn to the spirit world. It takes twice as long as usual for you to return to your physical body after undergoing the Little Death or the rites of the Dark Jade Lover.

may wish to recruit an ally. Brief a fellow player on what this particular mask is up to, and let the other player act out the part for a scene, with the Thousand Whispers' player observing out-of-character or from concealment. The first few times this sort of thing happens in a game, it catches everyone by surprise, and if it's done well, players look forward to the opportunity to help out with it. Nothing suggests another identity so much as actually having another body handy.

As always with MET play, players should give a little thought to how bystanders may see things. Meticulous cross-dressing, for instance, looks just fine in a theater or other closed play space but could create problems for the player going to and from games. This is another advantage to minimalist changes in costuming.

There's no standard or universally correct level of between-game interaction for chronicles. Some troupes make extensive use of personal visits, phone calls, e-mail and other forums to exchange information; some don't. If your troupe does, you can build up many supporting details for masks between sessions.

### CHI RITES WALK THE SPIRIT PATH (BASIC RITE)

This rite allows the Kuei-jin's spirit to enter the spirit world while his corpse remains behind in the Middle Kingdom. The ritualist must perform this rite in a dragon nest, where he prepares a resting place for his body and surrounds it with protective ideograms. His spirit can enter either the Yin or Yang Worlds.

System: Spend one hour preparing for the rite, and spend a point of Yin Chi to enter the Yin World or Yang Chi to enter the Yang World. Make a Static Mental Challenge against six Traits (eight Traits if the character spends less than an hour preparing, down to a bare minimum of 10 minutes). If the vampire has first performed *Behold the Spirit's Doorway*, the challenge is against five Traits. If successful, the character enters the Mirror Lands and can go on to his destination. If the challenge fails, make two Simple Tests; if both fail, the character is trapped in the spirit world for one day per point of Permanent Yin. The body remains in a deathlike state while the spirit wanders, and most Kuei-jin sustain it with Yin Chi.

# LOOSE THE WANDERING SPIRIT (EXPERT RITE)

This rite allows the ritualist to lay the subject's body to rest and allow the subject to deliberately undergo the Little Death, gaining freedom for her spirit.

System: Perform complete funeral rites. When the subject undergoes the Little Death, make a Static Willpower Challenge (using permanent Willpower rating) against nine Traits. If it succeeds, the subject becomes Yulan-jin. If it fails, the subject undergoes Little Death and must recover as usual, with a two-Trait penalty on the Hun challenge. In addition, if the rite fails, the subject's player must make two Simple Tests. If both fail, the subject's spirit becomes trapped in the Yomi World and must be freed through outside effort. Once loose, it becomes Yulan-jin, but loses one Dharma Trait and one permanent Willpower Trait in the process as if he had made a normal body-jump.

### JNDJVJDUAL RITES THE FOLDING LOTUS (BASIC RITE)

This rite allows the ritualist to break bonds with wu-mates without harm or complication. It does not mark the ritualist's departure from Kuei-jin society, and he remains at liberty to join another wu. The rite takes place with the wu and at least one elder, usually a court mandarin, in attendance. The ritualist reads a poem explaining his reasons for dissatisfaction. If the others accept the rebuke and are prepared to address the concerns, then the rite ends without further effort. If not, the ritualist draws a blade and ceremonially cuts the space between himself and each wu-mate. A failure in the rite generally indicates Heaven's lack of agreement with the ritualist, who should then take heed and redress the grievance in some other way. System: Roleplay out the debate over the ritualist's grievance; if the Storyteller deems appropriate, the ritualist's player can make a Social Challenge against the ranking audience member to see how effective his plea is. Actually severing the guanxi requires spending one Chi Trait and making a Static Social Challenge against a number of Traits equal to the guanxi rating; this must be done for each member of the wu. If a single tie remains whole, the ritual fails and the wu remains whole. Any severed guanxi bonds are restored, but their ratings are reduced by two. If any severing challenge fails, make two Simple Tests, and if both fail, the ritualist and the target each suffer one level of aggravated damage.

# Assume the Greater Mask (INTERMEDIATE RITE)

This rite prepares a new identity for the ritualist. It takes five nights of crafting and meditating; if all goes well, the Kuei-jin takes on a new appearance when she dons the mask. Each Hollow Reed can have just one greater mask at a time; she shatters it as part of the *Ritual of a Thousand Cuts* when ending that mortal life and can then make a new one.

System: Make a Static Physical Challenge against six Traits to create and prepare the mask. The vampire performs the rites of the Dark Jade Lover, then takes up the mask and announces her intent to take on a new life. If the mask is properly made, it disappears when the Kuei-jin puts it on and she gains the ability to switch between her own appearance and the new form at will. Everything can vary: hair and eye color, age, height, even gender. The mortal form can have fewer Appearance-related Physical Traits than the vampire's own total at no additional effort, while adding Appearance Traits requires spending one Physical Trait per added Appearance-related Trait during the mask-making period. She can remove the mask and end her ability to use it at any time.

Spend one Yang Chi to assume the mortal form for a night (in addition to any Yang Chi spent to animate the vampire); it costs nothing to return to vampiric form. While in mortal form, the Kuei-jin appears to breathe, to have proper warmth and otherwise to seem alive, though she still suffers the normal penalties for unlife like vulnerability to sunlight. Other *shen* may make a Mental Challenge to recognize that the Kuei-jin is in disguise, though they can't make out her underlying form. Sensitive mortals may make the same challenge, but they will only sense that something is not right about the person, not that she is a vampire.

### WEAR THE LESSER MASK (INTERMEDIATE RITE)

This rite allows the vampire to take on another appearance temporarily and without the deep benefits from the *Greater Mask*. It requires only an hour of meditation and preparation before donning the mask, once made.

System: Make a Static Physical Challenge against five Traits for a generic disguise or to imitate a particular target with photographs handy or against seven Traits to imitate a particular target from memory. It takes one full night to make the mask. Adding Appearance-related Traits beyond the vampire's own total requires spending one Physical Trait per Trait added
during the mask-making. The vampire may change features like age, race or gender but retains his own weaknesses and abilities.

The ritualist must actually wear the Lesser Mask; removing it ends the disguise. Spend one Yang Chi to activate the mask for a night. Other *shen* may attempt to penetrate the disguise with a Mental Challenge (and get a two-Trait bonus for the challenge).

Note: Hollow Reeds must learn to make the Lesser Mask before they can learn to make the Greater Mask.

#### HONOR THE SECOND BREATH (INTERMEDIATE RITE)

This rite lets the ritualist finish the process that the Second Breath begins. The subject must secure the permission of his court's mandarins. If they approve, he dresses in a white robe before the ritualist and sheds the robe to step into water — a pool, river or ocean — to complete the rite. The subject emerges with all memories of his mortal existence gone. He retains all his abilities but not the knowledge of how or when he learned them. His first memories are of his descent into Yomi. The ritualist greets the subject with his new name, and henceforth, all other Kuei-jin with a sense of propriety use it as well.

System: The subject spends one Yin Chi Trait to end his old life and one Yang Chi Trait to link the new name to his spirit. The ritualist makes a Static Mental Challenge against the subject's Permanent Willpower. Success means the subject's memories begin with the Yomi World. If it fails, make two Simple Tests; if both fail, the subject retains the memories of his old life in a confused, jumbled mess. buy at least three levels of *Lore* in the subject's life, up to a maximum of levels equal to half the ritualist's Willpower (rounded up). The meditative trance lasts for one week per experience point; at its conclusion, the ritualist wakes up with knowledge of the mortal's life. The ritualist must then take on the mortal's life as her greater mask. Failing to do so or ending a previous life early to do so both constitute an act of blindness.

### RITES OF THE DARK JADE LOVER

These rites recreate the experience of death and require that the ritualist have a suitable resting place, either a prepared tomb or some isolated place for an spirit-less body to lie undisturbed. Wu-mates and fellow Hollow Reeds usually help protect the ritualist's body during Dark Jade Lover rites.

The rites of the Dark Jade Lover include several separate rituals. All Hollow Reeds undergoing the rites perform *The Ritual of a Thousand Cuts* and *The Ashes of the Pheonix* to end and understand a persona, followed by one of the death rites. The simplest is *The Gentle Repose* while the most advanced is *Embracing the True Death*. The rites always end with *Center the Demon*.

#### THE RITUAL OF & THOUSAND CUTS (BASIC RITE)

This rite begins the process of concluding a mortal mask. The ritualist must break off all ties the mask has to mortal society, in public and private life. Custom allows up to a year for the process without the ritualist giving the impression of unseemly attachment to the ending life. Once all ties are broken, the ritualist removes the clothing he's wearing and discards it, and the life is over. **System:** No special system required. The Storyteller may require Social Challenges and other tests where appropriate, but it is best to leave this in the domain of roleplaying.

#### GATHER THE BROKEN MASK (Advanced Rite)

This rite reflects the Thousand Whispers' view as to the last resort in helping balance the lives of the unbalanced. When all else fails, the vampire devours the mortal's soul and takes on the mortal's life to redress karmic imbalances. This is one of the greatest duties a Hollow Reed can assume and is never performed lightly.

The ritualist performs a ceremony similar to the rites of the Dark Jade Lover. She devours the victim's soul using the *Chi'iu Muh* ability of *Spirit-Eating*, then enters a trance to assimilate the mortal's memories. If the rite succeeds, the ritualist emerges with full knowledge of the mortal's life.

System: Consume the victim's soul by Spirit-Eating as normal. Make an Extended Willpower Challenge against the target mortal. The vampire must get at least three more successes than the mortal, or she awakens immediately and must check for shadow soul. If this challenge succeeds, spend enough experience points to

#### THE ASHES OF THE PHOENIX (BASIC RITE)

After performing *The Ritual of a Thousand Cuts*, the ritualist reflects on the lessons learned during the justconcluded life. Many Thousand Whispers express their insights in writing, painting, calligraphy or other art. This takes several nights' effort. The ritualist takes the finished artwork and burns it in a symbolic affirmation of the life's termination.

System: Make an Extended Static Mental Challenge against seven Traits to measure the quality of the vampire's insights and artistic expression. When the work is destroyed, the vampire gains one experience point.

#### THE GENTLE REPOSE (BASIC RITE)

This rite follows the previous two. The ritualist meditates on the experiences and memories of the mortal mask to extract any remaining lessons and let remaining connections go.

System: The vampire meditates for one night per Permanent Yin Trait. During this time, he may acquire one Ability per Permanent Yin Trait at no cost, to a maximum of four. These Abilities must be related to the previous mask's lessons; the Storyteller may deny inappropriate purchases without a really good story behind them.

A vampire in *The Gentle Repose* cannot normally be awakened before his time, although something inflicting a level of lethal or aggravated damage may disturb him; he must still spend Willpower to rise completely. Once out of *Gentle Repose* (however he's awakened), the character will be in shadow soul for a scene; no resistance attempts are permitted.

#### CENTER THE DEMON (BASIC RITE)

The death rites of the Dark Jade Lover end with the Demon coming to the fore and the vampire entering shadow soul. Normally such a surrender is fought against, but Rootless Trees see it as a necessary balance to the calm meditations of the death rites. Just as the Hun integrates the lessons of the completed life in contemplation, the P'o does so in action.

System: Once the vampire emerges from shadow soul after a death rite, the player rolls Perception + Meditation (difficulty of 4 + P'o rating). Even a single success means that the actions of the Demon are understood in a Dharmic context, so that they do not constitute acts of blindness. Failure means a rejection of the P'o's actions, and the player must test for an act of blindness. If the character does not know this rite, he cannot accept the Demon's actions and loses a point of Dharma automatically.

# EMBRACING THE LITTLE DEATH (ADVANCED RITE)

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This rite marks a Wise Centipede's advance to the rank of mandarin. The ritualist experiences the actual death of the body and the separation of the spirit. The ritualist voluntarily undergoes the Little Death and spends the time separated from his body contemplating death and the past experiences of life. Thousand Whispers tradition says that this experience helps pierce the illusions of existence and, thereby, subdue fear.

The ritualist chooses a method of demise and sets out to reduce her Health Level to below Incapacitated while retaining some Chi in her body. Many Thousand Whispers perform elaborate death rituals, either alone or in the presence of *wu*-mates and other trusted associates. Upon death, allies inter the ritualist's body in a prepared tomb, and the spirit goes to the Mirror Lands.

Spirits may lead the separated soul on a quest through the spirit worlds and often provide visions related to the last mortal mask in an effort to encourage enlightenment. Fruitful visions may become an auspicious occasion.

System: Undergo Little Death, and recover as usual. Many ritualists arrange for fresh sources of Chi to be on hand, sometimes including mortals from their previous mask so as to complete *The Ritual of a Thousand Cuts* and satisfy the need for Chi simultaneously. Make a Static Mental Challenge against six Traits while in the Little Death. If successful, reduce the cost of any *one* Trait related to lessons from previous masks by one experience point, down to a minimum of 0, plus *one* additional relevant Trait for every two Mental Traits spent. The Storyteller may run encounters with spirits and other *shen* as appropriate.

This rite can only be used after shadow soul associated with a rite of the Dark Jade Lover. Handle other instances normally.

#### THE EARTH'S EMBRACE (INTERMEDIATE RITE)

This rite plays an important part in Thousand Whispers' advance from disciple to jina status. The ritualist lies as if dead, while meditating. Comrades perform funeral rites and actually do bury the ritualist, assuming she does not use *Placate the Earth Dragon* or some other means to sink into the <u>earth herself</u>. The separation of burial soothes the ritualist, making personal balance easier to achieve.

System: This rite takes one night per Permanent Yin Trait and functions like *The Gentle Repose*. The ritualist spends Yin Chi to sustain himself during this time. Make a Static Mental Challenge against seven Traits. If successful, reduce the cost of *one* relevant Ability by one experience point (down to a minimum of 0), plus *one* Ability per two Mental Traits spent. The character awakens from the rite in shadow soul. The Demon rides the character for an entire night, and no resistance attempt is permitted, although the vampire may perform *Center the Demon* afterward.

# EMBRACING THE TRUE DEATH (EXPERT RITE)

This rite marks the Hollow Reed's passage to bodhisattva status, completely destroying the body and freeing the spirit to wander the spirit world. The ritualist courts True Death for this moment of enlightenment; few master it in the Fifth Age.

The ritualist chooses the rite's time and place and invites an audience of *wu*-mates and local mandarins. Any method of Final Death will serve: Facing the Eye of Heaven is traditional, though the Golden Courts in particular favor self-immolation and many gaki practice seppuku. Afterward, the ritualist's body crumbles



to dust. If this rite succeeds, the ritualist's soul passes into the spirit worlds. Otherwise, the spirit dies with the body, and the vampire is gone forever.

The wandering spirit spends a long time in the spirit worlds — a minimum of years and often a mortal lifetime or more. During these years, the vampire communes with spirits to learn their wisdom. When the time is right, the ritualist returns to the Middle Kingdom. His ashes swirl together, and he materializes out of nothingness.

System: Make a Static Dharma Challenge against nine Traits. Failure means Final Death. Success allows the soul to enter the spirit worlds. The time and place of the ritualist's resurrection is up to the Storyteller. The ritualist automatically gains one Dharma Trait for the experience and returns to the world healed of all damage, with Chi scores full and with the option of reallocating Permanent Yin and Yang Traits to balance those virtues. The Kuei-jin returns in shadow soul and remains there for a full night while the Demon sates itself.

# ARTIFACTS

#### THE PALE JADE MASK

Level Four Artifact

This pale-green jade mask portrays the beautiful features of a sleeping, peaceful face. A fine black ribbon tied through holes on either side of the mask allows the mask's wearer to fasten it securely. The mask has no eyeholes, yet not only does it not hinder the wearer's vision, it grants the Yin ability of *Ghostsight* without requiring Yin Chi to be spent. The wearer may also spend one Yin Chi Trait to assume the appearance of any mortal for one hour or the duration of a scene. Only other *shen*, using abilities such as *Ghostsight*, can pierce the disguise, and they must win a Mental Challenge to do so.

# LIVE-ACTION YULAN-JIN

The following material originally appeared in issue 6 of the Mind's Eye Theatre Journal. It is reprinted here for your convenience. Full background on Yulan-jin appears in the Kindred of the East Companion.

#### CHARACTER CREATION

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Yulan-jin are created identically to regular Kueijin, save that they start with one fewer Willpower Trait than normal Kuei-jin, a mark of the terrible damage done by the lacerating winds of Yomi. Yulanjin may have any Dharma, although they seldom progress very far.

#### BODY SWAPPING

A Yulan-jin is forced to leave her current body from time to time. During such times, her soul is forced to endure the torment of Yomi for days or even weeks until another suitable body has been found to host the spirit. (Storytellers are encouraged to describe such periods, if not actually roleplay them out with the player.) Once the Yulan-jin leaves the body, it immediately becomes entirely dead and decays as appropriate for a corpse of its age.

A Soul Jumper passes on whenever any of the following conditions occur:

Temporary Willpower is reduced to zero;

 Temporary Chi of either type is completely exhausted;

• She suffers the Little Death (Final Death sends

#### THE BLACK MIRROR

Level Five Artifact

This mirror is of finely polished obsidian set in a silver frame shaped to resemble coiling dragons, six feet tall and three feet wide. A successful Static Mental Challenge against the local Wall rating allows the mirror's owner to look into the Mirror Lands as if through a window. A second such challenge allows the owner to open a passage through the Wall, through which travelers can cross in both directions. The traveler must return to the physical world through the mirror, which is only a problem if something hinders the traveler or disturbs the mirror. the Yulan-jin to Yomi for good).

After settling in a body, the Soul Jumper is always disoriented and may even experience some permanent memory loss, thus sliding the vampire closer to oblivion with every leap. The Yulan-jin's player must make a Static Willpower Challenge against four Traits. Success means the character suffers some disorientation but is otherwise all right. Failure means the character suffers more severe amnesia (only the barest details remain clear) and must remove one Ability level permanently. In addition, players who fail must immediately win or tie a Simple Test. Failing this test means the character loses a permanent Willpower Trait as her soul frays even further from the stress of the change. Characters reduced to zero Willpower this way pass into Yomi for good, the soul dissipating in the winds of Hell.

Body Swapping also has the following effects:

• All guanxi previously established are also broken on assuming a new body.

• Yulan-jin lose a Dharma Trait automatically when they pass on, which makes it difficult to hold on to

enlightenment for any period of time. Yulan-jin who pass on with no Dharma Traits are blasted back to Yomi permanently. Yulan-jin who undergo the rites of the Dark Jade Lover do not lose a Dharma Trait (see p. 35)

It should be noted that while the player of the Yulan-jin must still make sure other players know of any differences in their character's appearance as they move from body to body, the vampire's soul seldom chooses a body radically different from its original. Therefore, unless the Storyteller rules otherwise, Yulanjin do not change Attributes, Attribute totals or Abilities when they shift bodies. They may look different, but it's the same soul within.

#### DETECTING YULAN-JIN

Yulan-jin are normally indistinguishable from regular Kuei-jin, unless one witnesses them pass on (watching their soul flee), or successfully uses one of the following Disciplines on them: the Cultivation Discipline of Scrutinize, the Obligation Discipline of Soul Bridge or the Chi'iu Muh power Purification. Note that the character may not know exactly what he's looking at unless he possesses a few levels of the Occult Ability. He just knows that whatever it is, it isn't a Kuei-jin.





# LIKE WIND AND WATER

With them the Seed of Wisdom did I sow. And with my own hand labour'd it to grow: And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd— "I came like Water, and like Wind I go." — Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

The Path of a Thousand Whispers offers endless potential for different types of characters, each following the Dharma in their own way, each wearing a thousand different masks to better understand mortal life. The templates in this section are only a sample of the possibilities available for Hollow Reed characters. Some are rootless wanderers, while others are strongly involved in a particular aspect of unlife in the Middle Kingdom.

Each template is a balanced starting character for Kindred of the East. You can uses them as inspiration for you own Wise Centipede characters, while Storytellers can use them as ready-made contacts, allies or antagonists in their stories.

#### ACTION FILM STAR

Quote: Yeah, all of those stunts were real, every one of them. That's what people want to see up on the screen, not just some great special effects. They want to see something real, so that's what I give them.

Prelude: More than anything else in the world, you wanted to be in films. Not just any films, either, you wanted to be a star of action movies like wuxia or chambara or even American movies with lots of guns and explosions. If you couldn't be an actor, then you would be a stuntman. If you were really good, you could make your career based on doing your own stunts; audiences love that.

You studied martial arts and tumbling, how to take falls and how to stage-fight. But to pull off the really spectacular stunts you needed to practice. You shouldn't have practiced alone, but how else were you going to learn? Apparently, you needed to practice more than you thought you did. When you finally got your big break, it was on a low-budget production with shady credentials, but you took it. When you broke your neck in a fall from a construction site, the producer took steps to ensure nobody ever found out about it. What he didn't count on was you coming back. But you did come back. For a soul that craved fame, being forgotten was the worst possible insult. You felt betrayed by those you trusted. They cheated you of your rightful life. You fought your way out of Hell to show them all you couldn't be ignored. After you killed a couple of people for their Chi, a wu found you, captured you and was able to restore your Hun nature to control over your body. You learned what had happened to you, and you were placed in the

care of the wu to teach you proper Kuei-jin behavior. You learned well, and you chose to follow the Thousand Whispers Dharma. In your life, you wanted to experience different things, and this drew you to the path.

For your kôa, you chose to-live out the dream you were denied before the Second Breath. You contacted the producer you once worked with, now a wealthy man in the Hong Kong film industry. If he saw through your disguise enough to notice any resemblance to the man he'd seen fall to his death years before, he didn't show it.

> In fact, he didn't have a worry in the world. When you showed off what you could do, his face split into a smile like you were a gift from Heaven; little did he know you actually came from Hell. He found out shortly after the film was finished. His spectacular death only improved the film's performance at the box office.

Concept: In recent years, you've made a name for yourself in action films. It's everything you dreamed it would be, but you're beginning to grow tired of it all. Since your producer's tragic fall from that hotel room window, you've gotten a lot of offers for different studios, including some in the United States. You're sure you can enjoy the limelight - and make your position useful to the elders of the Flame Court - for a while longer before it's time to go out in a blaze of glory and move on to the next life. Roleplaying Hints: You come off as friendly and somewhat cocky, assured of yourself and your own abilities. Fans describe you as "approachable" and "a great guy," and no one knows your real feelings unless you want them to. You play on your reputation when necessary, but the truth of the matter is that you're often better than your films make you out to be. Anyone who thinks you're "just an actor" is in for a surprise. Equipment: Leather jacket, fine clothes, sunglasses, gold cards, access to various props (including martial arts weapons) as necessary

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NAME: Action PLAYER: CHRONICLE:	FilmStar	PO NATURE: G	o The Fool Allant	BALANCE: BAJA DIRECTION: Ce WU:	
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Athletics	00000	Crafts	000000	Finance	000000
Brawl	000000	Drive		Investigation	000000
Dodge	00000	Etiquette	000000	Law	000000
Empathy	000000	Firearms		Linguistics	••00000
Expression	000000	Martial Arts		Medicine	000000
Intimidation		Melee		Occult	000000
Leadership	000000	Performance	•••000	Politics	000000
Streetwise	000000	Stealth	00000	Rituals	000000
Subterfuge		Survival	000000	Science	000000
		ADVAN	ITAGES		
Black Wind 00000			ROUNDS	RI	TES
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#### DANCING PEACOCK GUARDIAN

Quote: We need to take this slowly. Give me some more time to work on it, and I'm sure I can come up with something we can use. No, they don't suspect anything, but I can't talk for long. I'm sure to be missed. Trust me, I know how they think.

**Prelude:** Your life was ordinary, forgettable. In fact, it was something you never appreciated until it was over. You and your family were gunned down in a random act of street violence, something that shows up for a few minutes on the evening news and then is forgotten by everyone except the relatives of those who died. But you had no family left to mourn you, no one to remember you.

You weren't willing to go quietly into the Hell of Endless Night, forgotten by the world. Your sentence to Yomi was unfair, and you fought to get back what you'd lost, fought for an opportunity to get justice, to make things right where the corrupt system failed. You would have your vengeance no matter what.

Not long after you escaped from Yomi and rose from the grave, you learned there were others like you, willing to teach you and give you a chance. Over time, your desire for vengeance was tempered with a wish to prevent others from suffering as you suffered. Your teachers were impressed by your newfound devotion to duty, and you chose the Dharma that best suited your desire to seek balance, to challenge imbalance from within and to find some measure of peace in your unlife. Your teachers agreed, night world from drawing too much mortal attention. You take your work seriously, and you sincerely believe in protecting mortals from harm when and where you can. You're a social chameleon, moving effortlessly from the courts of the Kuei-jin to the streets of Hong Kong to the secret meetings of the Triads. Your ability to take on

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other roles is skillful enough to make others wonder if you have a real personality of your own at all:

Equipment: Norinco M1911 9mm pistol and badge (rarely carried), cell-phone, appropriate clothes for cover identity

72

and you stepped onto the Path of a Thousand Whispers.

Concept: In ancient times, you would be a wandering warrior or ronin, working to balance the scales wherever you traveled. In this Age, you chose the mask of an undercover police officer, creating masks within masks as you work for the mortal authorities to infiltrate criminal organizations and bring them to justice. Your position also allows you to screen Kuei-jin society from mortal notice and keep an eye on mortal society. Some might find themselves pulled in too many directions by their multiple allegiances, but you keep your purpose in mind above all else. Through your many masks, the immortal vampire beneath watches and learns.

Roleplaying Hints: Part of your duty is to keep order in mortal society and prevent events from the

	- Example in	
	-KITCHE EAST	
NAME: Dancing Peacock Guardian	NATURE: Caregiver	BALANCE: Balanced
PLAYER:	PO NATURE: The Slave	DIRECTION: EAST
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Empathy000000	Firearms••0000	Linguistics000000
Expression000000	Martial Arts • • 0 0 0 0	Medicine000000
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Leadership000000	Performance • • • 0 0 0	
Streetwise • • • 0 0 0	Stealth • • 0 0 0 0	Rituals000000
Subterfuge • • • 0 0 0	Survival000000	Science000000
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#### JADE MASK GHOST-KILLER

Quote: It's over. Your murderer is Yomi's chew-toy, and you've been avenged. Time for you to let go, one way or the other. Prelude: Life was just a game to you, one you intended to win. You took what you wanted, leaving broken hearts and shattered lives in your wake. Charm, good looks and a deep hunger for self-gratification made the world your oyster. Fast cars, easy money, men and boys, guns and toys. It was all yours and it all added up to nothing. When you spun out your bike on a wet road, death came quick, and Yomi gapped wide.

Your time in the blackness of Kakuri was filled by the lamentations of all those you had hurt. Your selfishness had sent your mother to suicide, your father to drink and your friends to many different fates, and you wished for an opportunity — any opportunity — to make it all right. The Demon gave you that chance, and the Second Breath flooded into your corpse.

Training with a Rootless Tree was hard, but he guided you to many realizations. For every wrong you had done, a right was possible. But you needed to understand the imbalances of the world before you could atone. You needed to live a thousand lives, to listen to the ghosts and set them free, before you could pay your own karmic debt. Others had left unfinished business, and it was your duty to complete it.

**Concept:** Your greater mask is an estate attorney, which allows you to find those who profit from death and misery. You search out the ghosts of the wronged and avenge them, then send the spirits on their way. You have discovered a special talent for the latter task — many ghosts refuse to move on, and you have the abilities to push them back into the Great Cycle. Your teacher, before he left you forever, granted you a warning to use your talents as tools, not crutches.

Roleplaying Hints: Your teacher's simple advice is unfolding into a complex koan. There is great balance achieved by sending the dead to their reward — and a dark pleasure at doing it is creeping into your heart. You wear mask upon mask of quiet contemplation and detachment, but your inner self smiles at the prospect of facing another spirit. Atonement for your own crimes will just have to wait.

Equipment: White clothes, jade mask, legal documentation, various weap-

74



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	ask Ghost-Riller	NATURE: Penite	19. Contract of the second	BALANCE: Yin	
PLAYER:		P'O NATURE:	Martin Martin Martin	DIRECTION: We	est
CHRONICLE:		DEMEANOR: Pa		WU:	
		ATTR	BUTES		
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Strength_		Charisma		Perception	
Dexterity		Manipulation		Intelligence	
Stamina		Appearance		Wits	
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TAL	ENTS		ILLS	KNOW	LIDGES
Alertness		Animal Ken	000000	Computer	
Athletics	000000	Crafts	000000	Finance	
Brawl	000000	Drive	_000000	Investigation	000000
Dodge		Etiquette		Law	
Empathy	000000	Firearms	000000	Linguistics	
Expression	000000	Martial Arts		Medicine	000000
Intimidation	000000	Melee		Occult	
Leadership	000000	Performance		Politics	000000
Streetwise	000000	Stealth	000000	Rituals	000000
Subterfuge		Survival	000000	Science	000000
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#### SCARLET CENTIPEDE WARRIOR

Quote: Authority must be challenged or it becomes complacent at best, a dictatorship at worst. Some say governmental power flows from the barrel of a gun. Others say it comes from the mandate of Heaven or Hell. I say give me a gun and let Heaven and Hell sort out the rest.

**Prelude:** You were a solider for the Khmer Rogue in Cambodia fighting for control of your country when you stepped on an American-made land-mine — or perhaps it was Soviet-made. It didn't really matter; after days spent suffering with septic wounds, you were just as dead. Your spirit was dragged down into Yomi, and you suffered in the jungles of the Queen of Pestilence before you escaped and fought your way back to the Middle Kingdom. You were no stranger to fighting you way out of a jungle, after all. You tore open the body bag and killed the hapless morgue worker who saw you, draining his body of Chi to satisfy your hunger. Then you vanished into the jungle once more.

It wasn't long before you became the hunted, but not by the Khmer Rouge or the mortal authorities. The hunters were like you, inhuman, but even more knowledgeable about the ways of the wilds. It did not take them long to capture you, and it was then that you learned what you had become and that there were others like you. You were taught the ways of proper behavior for Kuei-jin society, and you managed to fit in well enough to pass your fire and water tests and become a disciple of the Path of a Thousand Whispers.

**Concept:** During your *kôa*, you realized the cause you fought for was ephemeral but that the cause of revolution was one worth supporting. Kuei-jin society is ossified and rigid, unable to meet the challenges of the modern world. You're a warrior, and your war is against the enemies of the Wan Xian, whether they are the Kin-jin, the Yama Kings and their *akuma* servants or the complacency and blindness of your own kind.

What a lot of the elders need is a good kick in the ass to get them off their thrones and out into the real world again. You're sure as hell not interested in spending eternity meditating or reading ancient sutras when you could be out *doing* something. Maybe you can't keep the Sixth Age from coming, as the ancestors say, but maybe you want it to come because it will change everything.

Roleplaying Hints: Unlife has taught you a greater appreciation for life than you ever had before the Second Breath. Now you understand there are causes worth fighting and dying for, but they're few and far between. You'd rather be active, out doing something, than sitting around talking or contemplating any day. That's why you work as a mercenary; there's always a war being fought somewhere, an opportunity to further hone your skills. You do what you feel is best while maintaining your personal honor because you know that it's one of the only things that can't be taken from you.

Equipment: AK-47, combat knife, fatigues, sunglasses, assorted military trophies and trinkets

76

NAME: Scarfet Cent PLAYER:	tipede Warrior	PO NATURE: 7		BALANCE: YAN DIRECTION: SO	0
CHRONICLE:	·	DEMEANOR: JA		WU:	MILY /
		ATTR	BUTES		
PHYSIC	<b>AL</b>	50	CIAL	1-16	NTAL
Strength		Charisma		Perception	
Dexterity		Manipulation		Intelligence	0
Stamina	000000	Appearance		Wits	
		<b>Δ</b> Bjl	jTjES ———		
TALEN	rs	SK	ILLS	KNOW	LEDGES
		Animal Ken	000000	Computer	000000
Athletics		Crafts	000000	Finance	000000
Brawl		Drive		Investigation	
		Etiquette	000000	Law	
Empathy	000000	Firearms		Linguistics	000000
	000000	Martial Arts	000000	Medicine	
Intimidation		Melee		Occult	000000
Leadership		Performance		Politics	
Streetwise	••0000	Stealth		Rituals	000000
Subterfuge	000000	Survival		Science	000000
	no de la companya de La companya de la comp	- ADVAN	TAGES		
DISCIPLI	NES	BACKG	ROUNDS	RI	TES



#### SHADOW HACKER

Quote: Naturally they're going to put the good stuff behind a firewall. That just makes things interesting. Don't worry, whatever they've got, I can handle it. We'll have the data we need in no time.

Prelude: You've been interested in computers since you were old enough to sit at a keyboard. You baffled your parents and your elders with your ability to understand and use the machines, made them proud with the scholarships and awards you won and brought them shame with the illegal online activities that nearly landed you in jail. In hindsight, going to jail might not have been so bad. Turns out the charges were dropped because a certain powerful criminal organization took an interest in your skills, a very personal interest.

At first, their offer was exciting, a chance to crack some really tough systems, to hide some datatrails, to play with the bumbling authorities, who didn't know one end of a co-ax cable from another. And there was the money. Man, was there some serious money. You got to really like the good life it could buy you, telling everyone else you were making big bucks as a "freelance software engineer." It wasn't *that* far from the truth.

But somehow, the money you got was never enough. So you made the mistake of skimming off a little extra, tucking it away in a hidden offshore account where nobody would ever find it. You thought you'd covered your tracks pretty well — but not well enough. Your boss found out about the missing cash, and he was *not* happy. By the time his men were through with you, you were minus an ear and several fingers. They never found your body; you simply disappeared one day.

Your experiences in the Hell of Stinging Iron taught you some discretion and gave you an even keener understanding of pain, an understanding you wanted to share with your killers. You clung to that thought as you fought your way out of Hell and crawled back into your body, hauling it onto the shore, where you found prey to sate your hunger.

After a Thousand Whispers Kuei-jin found you and taught you, you devoted your *kôa* to settling some old debts and nicely filling out your own secret offshore accounts with enough money to keep you in hardware and software for a while. Now, you've got lots of time to work on new tech, and you always were a night person anyway.

Concept: One of the things you always admired about the 'net was the anonymity it granted. Now, you wear it like a mask. After all, who's going to question the career of an up-and-coming "freelance computer programmer"? Besides, a lot of Kuei-jin don't understand computers any more than your parents did, and plenty of them are willing to pay handsomely for someone who does. Creating new identities for other Whispers takes up some of your time, while tracking down interesting information earns you some favors on the side.

Roleplaying Hints: You're cocky and confident when it comes to knowing your business; you know you're one of the best. You're much more comfortable dealing with the online world than you are in RL (real life). You think a lot of the old ways are just so much mystical mumbo-jumbo, even though they do seem to work sometimes. You just wish gaining enlightenment was as easy as writing code.

Equipment: Customized PC laptop with high-speed cellular modem, zippered case of CD-ROMs, Norinco Tokarev 9mm, backpack (to stash everything in)

NAME: Shadow Hacker Player: Chronicle:		NATURE: ARCHITECT PO NATURE: The Deceiver DIMEANOR: Deviant		BALANCE: Balanced Direction: Center WU:	
BL	YSICAL		IBUTES	6. size	NTAL
Strength	••0000	Charisma		Perception	
Dexterity		Manipulation	0	Intelligence	
Stamina		Appearance		Wits	
		ABji	jTjES		
TALENTS		SKILLS		KNOWLEDGES	
Alertness		Animal Ken	000000	Academics	00000
Athletics	000000	Crafts	000000	Computer	
Brawl		Drive	000000	Finance	
Dodge		Etiquette	0	Investigation	
Empathy	000000	Firearms	000000	Linguistics	000000
Expression	000000	Martial Arts	000000	Medicine	000000
Intimidation	000000	Melee	000000	Occult	000000
Leadership	000000	Performance		Politics	000000
Streetwise		Stealth		Rituals	000000
Subterfuge		Technology		Science	





# APPENDIX: AUSPICIOUS WISE CENTIPEDES

What is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst? — Kahil Gibran

Variety is the watchword for the Path of a Thousand Whispers. A single Hollow Reed seeks out a greater diversity of experiences than whole *wu* and courts of Kueijin following other Dharmas. The concept of exemplars, so important in other Dharmas, is less critical to the Centipedes. No elder can directly show one the way through a thousand lives; it is a path discovered only through experience.

Nevertheless, there are Hollow Reeds who achieve special status among their kind and the courts at large. They serve as important models because they demonstrate that the path is legitimate and rewarding. They are colleagues more than instructors.

### HAKARI, HONORED ANCESTOR OF HOUSE BISHAMON

For over 50 years, Hakari ruled as Honored Ancestor of House Bishamon in Japan (see World of Darkness: Tokyo for more details). The Bishamon ancestor was a samurai under the leadership of the great Tokugawa Ieyasu, and one of the shogun's closest advisors. When his lord died, Hakari committed *seppuku* to honor him, to fulfill his final obligation to his liege and to deny his lord's enemies the pleasure of having him executed. Although he tried to meet his death with the grace and dignity befitting a samurai, it was a bitter pill to swallow. When his soul was dragged down into Yomi Wan, Hakari was certain that he had been betrayed, cursed by Tokugawa-sama's enemies. But they sorely underestimated Hakari's spirit. He fought his way out of Hell with his bare hands, clawing his way back to the Middle Kingdom to gain revenge on those who sought to destroy him.

81

He quickly learned of the existence of the gaki and that he was one of them. In time, he returned to Edo and took a place as a gardener in the estate of Tsunayoshi, the "dog shogun." Hakari secured his position within the palace and (wearing various masks) continued to live there. He advised the great generals until the shogunate fell in 1868. Hakari quietly slipped into the background, hardly noticed by the other gaki as they fought and struggled to maintain the old ways in the face of inevitable change. He continued to live quiet mortal lives, learning how the face of Nippon was changing as he changed his own — watching and waiting for his time to come.

In the aftermath of World War II, the gaki of Nippon were in chaos. The Burnings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the devastation of many of the empire's other cities through more conventional means, left the leading factions in disarray. Although they were agreed that the ruling ancestor had failed them, they could not agree on who was to replace him. That is when Hakari saw his opportunity and seized it, stepping forward to humbly offer his aid in rebuilding Nippon and restoring the balance of the *uji*, for however long that task might take. The factions conferred, and Hakari was selected as ancestor of the Bishamon and of Tokyo, a duty he upheld for over 50 years.

Hakari performed his duty to the best of his ability. But as the years passed, he found himself more and more involved in trying to keep a tight rein on a court beset by challenges, from the presence of the *gaijin* Kindred to the resurgence of House Genji. His opinions became firm, then rooted and finally ossified, until the day came when Hakari looked into the mirror and saw a stranger looking back at him. A dark mist obscured his sight, and he could hear and feel the tortures of Yomi Wan again. He heard the mocking laughter of the Yama Kings, and his heart was filled with shame. He realized that his ambition and his relentless devotion to the old ways had drawn him away from his true path.

Hakari-sama shocked the Kuei-jin of Nippon by announcing, in late 2000, that he was stepping down as Ancestor of House Bishamon and that he had chosen his hatamoto Yoshida Ozaki to succeed him. As a follower of the Howl of the Devil-Tiger Dharma, Ozaki could "offer Nippon the strength and direction it needs to make the Great Leap Outward, to crush the enemies of our house and to lead us into the coming Age." Opposition among the uji's elders was surprisingly small, thanks to Hakari's skillful diplomacy. Ozaki took the role of ancestor of Tokyo with his mentor's blessing, and Hakari-sama disappeared into the shadows. Hakari is seen only rarely at court, and most believe he has retired for a long period of contemplation. Although Hakari does spend some time in meditation, he is far more active than anyone other than Ozaki knows. The new ancestor's favorite geisha, Keiko, is but one of the masks Hakari uses to learn about the state of affairs in Nippon and provide those insights to his successor. Hakari spends the rest of his time investigating the activities of the Kinjin and studying the poisoning of Nippon's Chi, seeking a way to correct the terrible imbalance. He has also devoted some of his time to passing on what he has learned, by teaching chih-mei in and around Tokyo. This helps keep them from the hands of House Genji.



Manipulation 4, Appearance 3, Perception 6, Intelligence 5, Wits 5 Abilities: Alertness 4, Animal Ken 3, Brawl 3, Bureau-

#### PROFILE

Nature: Traditionalist P'o Nature: The Barbarian Demeanor: Architect Balance: Balanced Direction: North Dharma: Path of a Thousand Whispers 7 Attributes: Strength 5, Dexterity 6, Stamina 5, Charisma 3, cracy 4, Crafts 4, Dodge 3, Etiquette 5, Expression 4, Intimidation 3, Leadership 4, Linguistics 4, Martial Arts 6, Meditation 4, Melee 4, Occult 4, Performance 4, Politics 4, Rituals 5, Subterfuge 4

Disciplines: Cultivation 4, Equilibrium 5, Feng Shui 2, Internalize 4, Tapestry 4, Yang Prana 2, Yin Prana 3 Backgrounds: Allies 5, Herd 2, Horoscope 2 Yin 5, Yang 4, Hun 4, P'o 3, Willpower: 9

## MARBLE GONG, REVERED ELDER OF THE HOLLOW REED

In the distant past of the Fourth Age, there was little role for women in the Middle Kingdom, except as wives and mothers. One such woman bore her husband several children, only to die in the birth of her fourth child, the son and heir he had hoped for. But her husband did not mourn her properly and quickly took a new wife into his home and bed.

As her soul fell screaming into Yomi, the woman cried out at the injustice of it. Had she not been a faithful and dutiful wife? Had she not served her husband and family well? Why was she condemned to this fate? Her righteous anger gave her strength, and her love for her family gave her purpose. She fought her way up out of the torments of

#### APPENDIX: AUSPICIOUS WISE CENTIPEDES

Hell, rent the Wall keeping her from her mortal body and took the Second Breath.

For some time, the woman kept watch over her family from a distance, her shame never allowing them to see her, while she fed off unwary travelers. Soon, rumors of bandits or some kind of plague spread through the area. In time, a stranger came and found her, told her what she was and what she could be and led her away from the only home she'd ever known. Under this master's tutelage, she set aside the life she once lived and took the name Marble Gong, stepping onto the Path of a Thousand Whispers.

Her first mortal masks offered Marble Gong a taste of the world she never experienced in life. Two of her first three lives were as men, and in her masculine guise, she saw whole new worlds open up before her. The experience was exhilarating, and she wanted more. It became easy for her to lose herself in the experiences of her new lives, pretending she was someone else and forgetting about the frail and sheltered young woman she had been. Time passed quickly as she drank life to the dregs, only to find the taste surprisingly bitter.

Wearing the mask of a Chinese officer leading troops against the invasion of the Mongols, Marble Gong came to the aid of a young soldier, but too late to save him from being grievously wounded. She asked the young man's name and was startled to learn that he was her grandson, the son of her son, the child she died in bearing. In that moment, her eyes were opened and she was enlightened. She ended her grandchild's pain, and her mortal mask was lost in that battle, never to seen again. Marble Gong found new purpose in her unlife and strove for enlightenment along her chosen path. Throughout her mortal lifetimes, Marble Gong sought balance in all things, as well as the elusive peace brought by enlightenment. She delved deeply into the secrets of the Yin and Yang Worlds, becoming known as a wise woman, skilled in ritual. She studied with the subtle ladies of the Wu-Keng and learned many secrets through her sympathy for these outcast sorceresses. Most importantly, to her, she played roles as both man and woman, learning to balance those halves of her nature and coming to understand them as few mortals ever had. She also found new purpose and meaning in her role within her wu, where she was like a gentle mother and stern father to her fellow Wan Kuei. She wrote many letters of her observations from her various lives, inspired by the works of Song Zhen. In time, she helped establish the Five-Petal Lotus, a wu formed entirely of Wise Centipedes, one facing each direction, with herself in the center, helping to guide her juniors along the path. The wu achieved many things in its time, serving as emissaries of the August Courts of the Quincunx and conducting delicate negotiations between and for the ancestors. The goals of the Five-Petal Lotus were peace, balance and harmony.



war over some contested dragon nests, the Five-Petal Lotus expressed its disagreement with the selfish ruling of the Quincunx by Embracing the True Death. The members of the wu gathered and Faced the Eye of Heaven together with great composure and respect, turning to dust and ash that was carried away on the winds. Shamed by this display, the August Courts re-opened negotiations with the Beast Courts and came to an agreement over the dragon nests. That was centuries ago, but Marble Gong may not be finished teaching the Hungry Dead just yet. Tales coming from the Jade Court suggest that the Thousand Whispers bodhisattva has returned from her long sojourn in the spirit worlds, reborn in body to help guide Kuei-jin (and the Wise Centipedes in particular) through the changes brought by the coming Sixth Age. If Marble Gong has returned, no one in the courts of the Quincunx has confirmed it. But then, the bodhisattva may travel wearing any of a thousand masks.

When negotiations between the August Courts and the Beast Courts broke down, leading to the likelihood of

## OMI, SCARLET CENTIPEDE MASTER AND RONIN OF SHANGHAI

A respected sensei and teacher of *hin* among Japanese Kuei-jin, Omi lived a humble mortal life, first as a soldier and then a farmer in a small village. He died defending his home from bandits who burned his house and killed his family. When he fought his way back through the tortures



84

of Yomi, Omi's first act as Kuei-jin was to hunt down the bandits and kill them all with his bare hands. His actions attracted the attention of his fellow Kuei-jin, who found Omi surprisingly calm and rational, his bloodlust sated by completing his vengeance. He humbly asked their assisOmi opposed the rising tide of *akuma* in Japan during the early years of the 20th century. When *akuma*-influenced gaki flooded into Shanghai in 1937, Omi and a few other Japanese Kuei-jin loyal to House Bishamon fought against the agents of the Yama Kings, some of whom were Omi's own students. The sensei felt an obligation to correct this grievous imbalance. In short order, Omi became well-known by the Silent Mandarins of the Chinese Flesh Court. Although they suspected the Scarlet Centipede *ronin* of being a spy or a traitor at first, his actions proved his worth to the besieged Flesh Court. They accorded him status as a jina of the court and came to rely on Omi's knowledge of gaki ways and customs in fighting the invasion of *akuma*.

Long after the war between Japan and China ended, the Kuei-jin continued to wage their shadow war in Shanghai, with Omi-sama as a general among the Silent Mandarins. Omi lived several mortal masks in and around Shanghai while carrying out his duties. His presence in the Flesh Court also made him valuable to the *uji* of Japan, allowing him to act as an emissary from the August Courts to the Noble Houses of his homeland.

Recently, the Silent Mandarins and their allies finally purged Shanghai of the invading *gaki*, returning the Flesh Court firmly to the control of the Quincunx. However, rather than becoming a hero to the Kuei-jin of the Flesh Court, Omi quickly became an unpleasant reminder of the foreign barbarians who had plagued them for so long. With no further need of his assistance, the mandarins of the Flesh Court have been subtly pushing Omi aside, hoping the *ronin* will simply leave and be forgotten.

Unfortunately for them, Omi is not so willing to leave his adopted home. He still feels there is much work to be done in bringing the Flesh Court back into balance, whatever the mandarins may think. He has begun teaching once more, trying to balance his long time of hunting akuma with teaching proper behavior to new Kuei-jin. Many find his foreign ways and ideas, coupled with his Dharma, strange and unusual, but he keeps his number of students low and works to remain outside the notice of the mandarins of the Flesh Court, who have far larger concerns. Still, there are those in Shanghai who would like to ensure that Omi has no place in the new order, and they may be willing to go to great lengths to ensure his departure. Because he took the Second Breath relatively late in life, Omi still looks like a dignified older Japanese man (when not wearing some disguise or mask, that is). His humble appearance and manner often lead others to underestimate the Scarlet Centipede master, who is in fact a highly skilled warrior, with a razor-sharp tactical mind. Omi is also skilled in the art of Demon Shintai, capable of assuming a terrible battle-form that has sent akuma screaming back to Yomi on many occasions.

tance in learning more about his new state of being.

Omi proved an able student in the ways of the *gaki* and quickly earned his place among them. He wished to repent for the violence of his first acts after taking the Second Breath and spent much of his *kôa* wearing mortal masks of service as a wandering priest, beggar and physician. He balanced his desire for vengeance with kindness and compassion for all living things. Then he followed the life of a soldier once more, then an artist, and many other masks since.

After a century of unlife, Omi recognized that he had a talent for teaching and devoted himself to a *wu* that sought out and helped *chih-mei* and other newly reborn Kuei-jin, either educating them about their place in unlife or destroying them to protect the Middle Kingdom. As a teacher, Omi's methods were sometimes harsh and often unorthodox, particularly when compared to the tried and true methods used by the Devil-Tigers to whip new Kueijin into shape (often literally). Still, his successes spoke for themselves, and many of Omi's students chose the Path of a Thousand Whispers as their Dharma, following in their teacher's footsteps.

#### APPENDIX: AUSPICIOUS WISE CENTIPEDES

# SHADOW PUPPET, SECRET OF THE GREEN COURTS

The Hollow Reed known as Shadow Puppet is one of the Bunraku, who follow the north direction and work to maintain the balance of Kuei-jin society behind the scenes, from the shadows. She is fairly young in her unlife, having taken the Second Breath sometime within the past 50 years. Given her association with the Green Courts of Korea, it is most likely that she — like many of the younger generation of Green Court Kuei-jin — took the Second Breath during the Korean War. That time saw the rise of many new Wan Kuei in the Green Courts, as well as the increasing presence of the Kin-jin and the influence of the West.

Shadow Puppet first made herself known as an agent of the mandarins of the Green Courts several decades ago, working to preserve the delicate political balance the courts rely upon for their continued prosperity. She acts as a messenger, spy and assassin for the ancestors, but she also appears devoted to maintaining the equilibrium of karma throughout the Green Courts and elsewhere. While many Korean Kuei-jin are motivated only by the demands of survival and profit (in the form of jade), Shadow Puppet seems to follow a higher calling. If the ancestors of the Green Courts are displeased with her actions, they show no outward sign of it. Certainly, there are many Kuei-jin — in the Green Courts and elsewhere — that fear her reputation.

This reputation is enhanced by Shadow Puppet's penchant for dressing entirely in black and her renowned ability to appear in disguise or to blend with the shadows to remain unseen. Everyone who has ever seen Shadow Puppet's unmasked face describes a subtly different appearance, some claiming she is not Korean at all but Chinese, Japanese, Malaysian or even Western. Some have noted that she speaks a number of languages fluently and knows a great deal about the Parallel Path of the Green Courts. Shadow Puppet's normal method of operation is to investigate matters of concern to the ancestors, both in various guises and by observing from the shadows. She reports her findings to the ancestors, who decide what action is warranted, if any. If she is charged with correcting an imbalance by destroying it, she leaves her calling card,



a small black cloth puppet, somewhere close to the target. This allows him the opportunity to mend his ways or, at least, put his affairs in order. After accepting an assignment, Shadow Puppet has never failed.

In truth, Shadow Puppet is not the name of an

individual at all, of a *wu* of north-facing Wise Centipedes gathered at the will of the ancestors of the Green Courts. They are all women devoted to the goal of maintaining balance throughout the Green Courts and to serving both the ancestors and the spirits of their land. Much of Shadow Puppet's reputation for disguise, knowledge and preternatural speed derives from the deception that there is only one of her. The members of the *wu* have many mortal masks between them in places of influence in Korea, allowing them to carry out their work. Only the ancestors of the Green Courts know the truth about the Shadow Puppet *wu*. Anyone else who finds out is not likely to have much time to do anything with the information.



## We live among the breathing masses, learning from our many lives like the centipede learns from its steps. Each brings us closer to the Hundred Clouds, and each is forgotten when it is over. We are an enigma but also an answer. We are all things and nothing. Can you be one of us?

End a Thousand Broken Lives Dharma Book: Thousand Whispers is the third Dharma Book for Kindred of the East. It is a complete guide to playing the enigmatic chameleons of the Middle Kingdom. The secrets of the Broken Mask Technique, in which a vampire lives mortal lives, await within, along with many new rites and powers, prominent characters and new facts about the Asian World of Darkness.

Dhakma Book: Thousand Whispers

- Includes:
- The secrets of the Broken Mask Technique, from impersonating mortals to changing lives
  - New powers and rites for the Wise Centipedes
    Conversion rules for Mind's Eye Theatre
    - live-action play







