

# *Erebus*

## *City of Shadows*



**A World of Blazing Action & Dark Intrigue**

Written by  
the Reverend Bayn

Loath Your Fellow Man  
[www.Bayn.org](http://www.Bayn.org)

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# *A Visitor's Guide to the City of Shadows*

The world of Erebus is built on two themes: Blazing Action and Dark Intrigue. The first is reflected in Erebus' 1920's, pulp flavor and high-flying, anime style. Street predators, gunslingers, and vigilanti wage private wars on the streets, while skinwalkers and commoners fight for their very survival. Violence is a way of life.

Dark Intrigue comes from the Byzantine politics and subtle magic of the City of Shadows. The wealthy rule via an elite Council, forging and enforcing laws based solely on their own interests. Cults and conspiracies incite the populace and spread their influence along the bottom rungs of society. It is a world of mystery, adventure, and danger where appearances are *a/ways* deceiving!

This setting guide was written to support role-playing games and collaborative writing. It focuses heavily on characters: their gifts, their goals, and the ties that bind them. No space is wasted on generic rules. It should be easy to run Erebus with your favorite system. I recommend Wushu, the Ancient Art of Action Role-Playing...

**[www.Bayn.org/wushu](http://www.Bayn.org/wushu)**

I've also taken the legal hassles out of collaborative writing by placing this book under a Creative Commons License. It grants you the right to create derivative works, and to use them as you see fit, so long as you give me some credit and grant others the same rights I've granted you. See the Creative Commons Copyright Notice at the end of this book for more details than you can stand.

Finally, the Erebus website provides support for both role-players and writers. You'll find original fiction, new cults and conspiracies, in-character articles, and anything else Erebus fans want to contribute at...

**[www.Bayn.org/erebus](http://www.Bayn.org/erebus)**

The rest of this primer is a crash course in all things Erebus. Everything else will make a lot more sense if you read it first. You can also show it to players who want to know a little bit about the setting before they create characters, without letting them know too much...

# The World

In the primordial past, tectonic drift caused the World's three largest land masses to collide, raising mountain ranges, flooding wetlands, and casting rain shadows over most of the continental interior. When humans arose, they entrenched themselves along the temperate coasts and banished most predators to the wasteland's desert. Driven by their own fierce competition, and unhealthy doses of an element called "philosopher's stone," these creatures soon became truly dangerous, and the humans found themselves on the defensive.

Centuries of separation has led to the evolution of three radically different civilizations. Between the western coast and Upland mountain range huddles the Crown Empire, a monotheistic kingdom possessing advanced alchemical technology. Across the wastelands, on the eastern coast, stands the Order of the Moth, a nation-cult that maintains power through total control of information. Finally, an alliance of ocean navigating anarchists inhabits the islands far south of the mainland. They are known as the Wayfarers' Concord. Erebus occupies a jungle peninsula between these three super powers; it's the only safe harbor along their trade routes.



**Erebus** - The City of Shadows began as a simple fishing village, but when sailing barges from the Concord began landing in their harbor, the natives did not hesitate to exploit their ownership of the land. The Naga (a race of serpentine shapeshifters) took control of the port and moved to establish trade routes with the Crown Empire and Order of the Moth. They forced the natives to build the monolithic, black towers that compose the Old City. Their mastery of Ereban politics and trade continues, virtually unchallenged, to the present.

The location of the original village has become Inner Erebus, a walled fortress for the city's rulers. Its oval confines hold the Council Chambers and the homes of all but one Counselor. It is the only part of Erebus not open to the general public; one must have a "writ of invitation" from a Counselor to get through the gates. It is a dark, forbidding place that conceals well the lavish accommodations within.

The Old City, which surrounds the Inner, is what most travelers think of when they think of Erebus. It contains the city's wharfs and docks, inns and taverns, and wealthiest residences. The architecture is gothic and monolithic, composed primarily of marble and granite. The shadows are deep here, even for Erebus.

Arching around the canals and warehouses of Old Erebus are the wooden shops and modest lodgings of the New City. The jungle encroaches more heavily here, and the buildings are less impressive in their design. However, the multitude of labyrinthine alleys and catwalks that twist and writhe through this area make it every bit as foreboding as the Old and Inner districts. This is where Ereban artisans and merchants live and conduct their business. New Erebus also stretches across the River Styx, which forms Inner Erebus' southern border, by means of rope-guided ferries. There are docks on both banks that cater to riverboats and traders from the interior.

Finally, those who cannot afford to live any better make their homes, if homes they can be called, in Outer Erebus. More jungle than city, Outer Erebus is a permanent shantytown on the fringes of the New City. Immigrants, thieves, and things best avoided lurk beneath the rain forest canopy. Ironically, much of Erebus's business is conducted here, because much of Erebus's business involves immigrants, thieves, and things best avoided.

**The Crown Empire** - The Crown is held together by its religion. The Church (that is its only name) preaches a strong doctrine of righteous living, civil responsibility, and

rule by divine right. Such teachings have their largest following in the northern regions, near the capitol city of Throne. The southern areas, far from the monarchy and its Church, are aptly referred to as the Wildlands. The Crown currently holds a monopoly on alchemical technologies (its chief export) and the secrets of Natural Philosophy that make such devices possible.

**Order of the Moth** - The Moths are a hereditary order of mystics (some would say a race of humanoid monsters) who can project their wills outside of their physical bodies. Ages ago, they used their powers to subjugate and enslave the humans of the East. At first, the Order provided safety in the form of the Barrier: a gigantic wall erected to protect the Eastern lands from the creatures of the Inland Waste. After it was complete, however, the humans found themselves building palaces for the Moths. They had purchased their security with their freedom. In the present day, the Order maintains its power through iron-fisted control of the information their subjects receive about the outside world. Only one city, a fortified harbor called Serenity, is open to foreigners.

**Wayfarers' Concord** - This anarchy occupies a string of volcanic islands to the south of Erebus. The absolute freedom of the individual is the only law. To

ensure that no citizen exploits another, thereby taking away their freedom, an order of nomadic warrior-monks called vigilanti wander the islands, defending those who cannot defend themselves. More at home on the high seas than on dry land, these ocean-navigating nomads opened the first trade routes between the Crown and the Moth, and they still play an important role in modern trade through Erebus.

**The Inland Wastes** - Before the rise of Alchemy, no one ventured into the Wastes. Riding out into that desert, even with a wagon full of provisions and an armed escort, was tantamount to suicide. If the heat and lack of water didn't kill you, the mutant predators and poisonous plants would. However, the Inland Waste is also the only reliable source of Philosophers Stone, an alchemical substance far more valuable than gold. (For one thing, it can be used to *make* gold!) Now, prospecting expeditions from Erebus and the Crown Empire ride into the desert every day. About half of them return, but never without suffering high casualties. For those brave enough to accept the risk, it is a staggeringly profitable enterprise.

# The Council

Erebus is "governed" by a Council of its six most wealthy people. Its purpose is to keep a veneer of civility over its members' economic warfare. This Machiavellian system has maintained the outward appearance of peace for the last quarter of a century. The Council makes laws only to protect its own interests, and its members enforce them when and how they choose. There is no city guard in Erebus, no courts, no justice system of any kind.

The Council Chamber is located in the center of Inner Erebus, with five estates surrounding it. Each Councilor is responsible for the security of their estate's portion of the wall. (This allows them to circumvent that security whenever they wish.) Entrance usually requires a "writ of invitation" from one of the Councilors.

**The Naga** - Hss'vai has coiled on the Council since its formation, his position secured by the Naga's drug trade monopoly. He is the leader of his race and the high priest of their Cult. Very little is known about him; he only ventures outside his estate to attend Council meetings. Lesser Naga always speak of him in awed tones.

**Society of Bliss** - These hedonists have made their name synonymous with entertainment. Anyone looking for

amusement in Erebus has only to enter the nearest Temple of Bliss. The Society's leader is a larger-than-life deva named Euphoria. Her place in the cult (and on the Council) is hereditary, but conditional on the Society's continued profitability. Were those profits to fall, others may stand a chance of wresting control away from her. Fortunately, few Blissites have the ambition (or attention span) needed to hatch such a plot.

**Sir Erik of Knightlund** - This westerner was among the first Crown subjects to trade alchemical technology for silk and herbs from the East. This is still his primary source of wealth, though he has also managed to carve out small pieces of many related markets. Some of his former competitors claim that agents of the Crown Ministry of Intelligence sabotaged their businesses, and few would put it past Sir Erik. There are even rumors that he is a member of the Cult of Thal, God of Murder.

**Magician's Guild** - The Guild is the only professional association the Council allows to exist in Erebus. However, even the Guild is not as strong as it could be; it's primarily an employment broker for stage mages. The creator and administrator of this service is a charismatic woman known as Mirage. Though she charges relatively small commissions, the income is

enough to buy her a seat on the Council. She uses her power to protect the interests of Guild members, and the free practice of magic in general. She is the only Councilor who lives in the New City.

**The Purifiers** - Golan Para has held sway in his cult for a remarkably long time, especially considering that his own people are constantly trying to overthrow him. The purifiers take it upon themselves to weed out the weak from their ranks, as well as from the general population. Consequently, they have holdings in virtually every market and industry in Erebus. The closest thing Para has to an ally is Jonathan Steel, the metalurgical virtuoso from whom most Purifiers purchase their weapons.

**Jonathan Steel** - The steelwork of this enigmatic easterner is beyond compare. His weapons have perfect balance and razor-sharp edges, armors are light and fit like a second skin, and his jewelry pieces are masterful works of art. He heads no organization, but the prices he can demand for his work have bought him his own seat on the Council. The Purifiers admire him and have even converted a wing of their Inner City estate into a forge for him, where he lives. It has since become a popular hang-out for Erebus' power players and cultural elite.

Okay, that's enough politics...

## Kewl Powerz

**Magic** - Magicians in Erebus practice a combination of three skills. Legerdemain involves the conjuring and vanishing of objects, using optical illusions to make things appear other than they are, and otherwise clouding observers' perceptions of reality. Mesmerism uses hypnosis and con games to influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others... with nothing more than words. Augury is the art of discerning facts about the past, present, and future by analyzing the patterns in seemingly chaotic events, like the order of shuffled cards or the motion of heavenly bodies. None of these techniques can affect physical reality, but the ability to manipulate *people* is far more powerful...

**Psionetics** - The magic of the Moths is based on astral projection. All Moths have the ability to "leave" their material bodies and move about as ephemeral distortions in the ether. This astral body can travel at incredible speeds, pass through solid barriers, defy gravity, and perform a host of other supernatural feats. Through study, the Moths can grant their "shadows" even more powerful abilities, not the least of which is telekinesis. A Moth with such powers is an unstoppable killing machine. No place



is beyond his reach, and no defense is possible.

**Natural Philosophy** - Using a catalyst called the Philosopher's Stone, alchemists of the Crown Empire have learned to manipulate the ether that is the basis of all forms of matter. They can change one substance into another, create entirely new substances, propel ships without wind, and build terrifying weapons that can throw lightning or boil blood.

**And more...** The mountains and jungles around Erebus, the barren expanses of the Inland Waste, and the myriad islands of the Wayfarer's Concord harbor even more mysterious forms of magic. The tribal humans who inhabit the rain forest around Erebus employ shamanic arts that summon sentient creatures from the ether. Deranged anatomists huddle in secret laboratories, applying alchemical principles to the study of death. Many suspect that the lightning reflexes and extraordinary combat prowess of the Vigilanti are magical in nature. Certain easterners, it is whispered, have been altered by their Moth masters, given supernatural powers of their own. Other mysteries may yet lurk in the shadows...

## Skinwalkers

Skinwalkers are men and women who share their bodies with the souls of animals. As the balance of power between the two souls changes, so does the skinwalker's body. Two breeds of skinwalkers are common in Erebus, if not always welcome, while the others are known only from rumor and mythology.

**Naga** are reptilian in form, their features most closely resembling snakes. Venomous fangs are favored weapons, though many prefer constricting opponents with their coils. Their scaly skin provides natural armor. Their sense of smell is inhumanly acute and secondary "eyes" see heat instead of light. The Naga are the most cohesive of the breeds; their Cult of the Serpent gives them unmatched unity of purpose (& a seat on the Council).

**Werewolves** first appeared in the forests of the West, but xenophobic Crown humans have since forced them into the mountains. These ferocious creatures live in packs and are renowned for their hunting skills. Werewolves have formidable natural weapons (fangs and claws), acute senses (smell, hearing, night vision), and an infamous talent for planning and executing ambushes.

**Mer** dwell in the shallow seas of the Wayfarers' Concord. Of all the skinwalkers, they are the most diverse breed. Some are possessed by dolphin spirits, while others shift into sharks or squids (called "kraken"). However, Mer are reportedly intelligent and highly social beings who play as large a role in Concord politics as their human cousins.

**Guar** are thought to stalk the dark jungles around Erebus. By all accounts, they are the most feral of the breeds, preferring animal form to human. Through their keen hunter's instincts and mastery of shamanic magic, they control many of the human tribes who share their habitat. Their human agents have even infiltrated Erebus via a dreaded cult known as the leopard-men.

**Tengu** are known only from rumor and legend. In fact, there is really no agreement on what form(s) they take. Part of the problem is the fact that Tengu live within the Order of the Moth, where no foreigner may travel. Exiles tell stories of trickster beings who can change into many forms, usually with some exaggerated or comical feature that gives them away to the wary. They are said to delight in interfering with the Moths' rule, and viciously guard their sovereign territory.

## Life in the Shadows

The Wildlands have nothing on Erebus. The Council keeps most of the populace in a state of perpetual disorder that provides excellent cover for their own activities, as well as a vast pool of easily recruited pawns. The laws of the Council are enforced only to protect the interests of the Council, so mere citizens can do whatever they want to each other. Only those who know how to defend themselves stay long in the Shadows.

Erebus has the best, and the worst, of what the World has to offer. A vast array of goods and services are bought and sold on its streets and plazas every hour of every day. Nowhere else can one see as many sights, or meet as many people, as in the City of Shadows. Anything that can be imagined can be found; you have but to look.

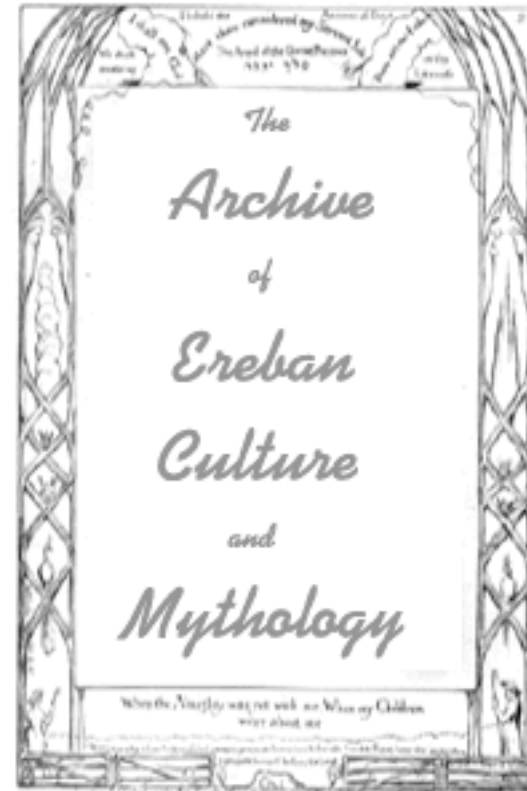
With the exception of magicians, Erebusans have no professional or philanthropic groups to rally around. The Council does not allow it. Instead, most citizens belong to a cult, a "pack," or both. The Council allows lesser cults to exist because they fracture the population and keep the people divided. Packs are small teams of mercenaries, thieves, or artisans that work together for mutual benefit. Such groups are often hired for contract jobs by the

Councilors, lesser cults, and businessmen.

Such harsh social conditions have bred a unique strain of Ereban warrior called a Street Predator. These urban terrors foster fiersome appearances and ruthless reputations, but adhere to a strict code of honor. They are not to be confused with Blood Dancers, who battle each other for the applause of spectators. Arguably more dangerous than either group are the silver-tongues who prey on immigrants, tourists, and anyone else too naive to see through their lies.

Because of all this, the three great civilizations use Erebus as a covert battleground. The Crown's Ministry of Intelligence is often accused of sending covert agents to meddle in affairs of business and politics. Rebel clans from the Order of the Moth use the city of shadows to gather recruits and equipment for their fight against tyranny. Shapeshifters of many breeds prowl the streets, hunting those foolish enough to cross their paths. Wayfarers from the Concord, though they hide behind a practiced mask of neutrality, play all sides against the middle for their own profit. And amidst them all, the ashen-skinned natives bide their time, waiting for the foreigners to grow complacent...

Welcome to the shadows, fresh blood.



# Crucible of the World

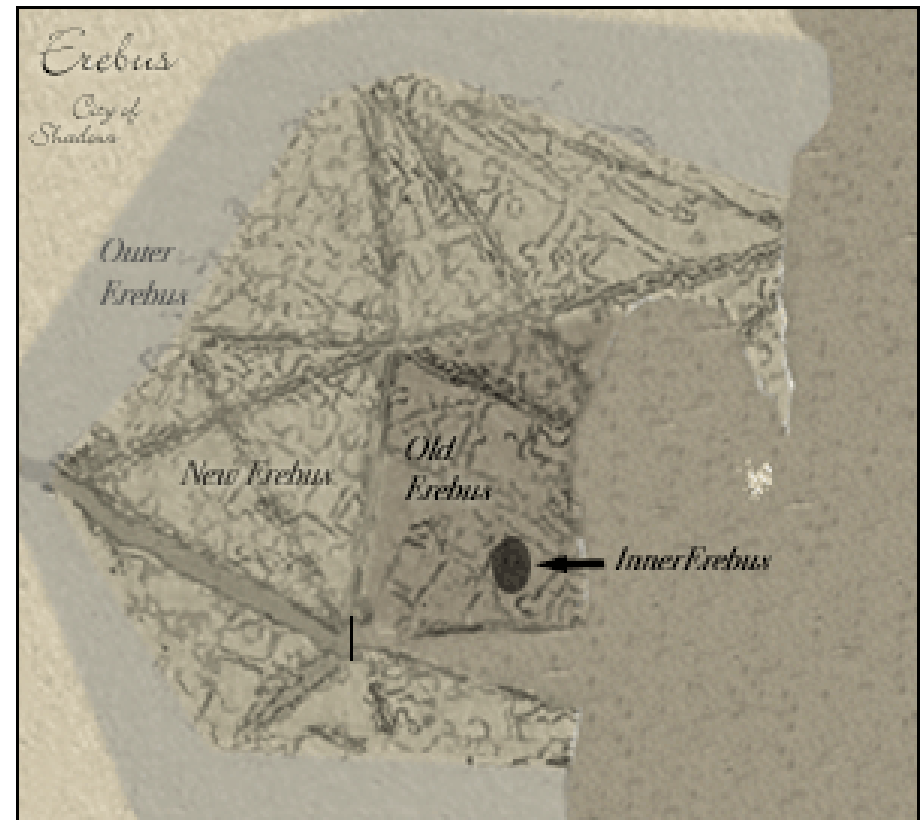
*(Editor's Note: The following account of Erebus' districts, politics, and criminal underworld was taken from an intelligence report written by Sir Erik of Knightlund for His Royal Majesty. The geographical information it contains is trustworthy, but most of its other claims are impossible to verify. It is entirely possible that Sir Erik orchestrated its release to the public as a misinformation tactic. It should be read with healthy skepticism.)*

Your Majesty,

Greetings from the balmy shores of the savage frontier. At the behest of your ministers, I have compiled the following report on Erebus, its geography, and our political interests therein. It is my sincerest hope that it meets with your approval. We shall begin with a brief overview, and then cover each district in turn.

The same geographical features that make Erebus a thriving port city also make it a hotbed of imperial politics. Situated on the eastern edge of the peninsula, it is the only safe harbor of consequential size between the Wildlands of our own nation and Serenity, the only open

city in the Forbidden Kingdom. As such, all trade in silks, spices, and alchemical goods must flow through Erebus.



The weather here is abysmal, as any of our noble sons who holiday here can attest. In the spring, dry winds blow from the west, depositing their moisture over the jungle long before reaching the city. The River Styx, which flows from the jungle's interior into the harbor, is our only source of water. In the fall, or monsoon season, we are beset by torrential rains that would wash away most western cities. Only for a few short weeks between these extremes does the city approximate a habitable climate.

Piracy is a perennial concern, as the sea is home to many vagrants and criminals (not just the notorious Wayfarers). However, the combined efforts of our intelligence operatives here and your generously donated naval resources have lowered the rates of lost cargo drastically over the last five years. It appears that many, if not most, of the pirate crews who elude the patrols eventually set anchor in Erebus to spend their ill-gotten wealth. My agents identify them in the bars and brothels, track them to their ships, and send word to the navy. The next time they set sail, a battery of canons welcomes them back to the high seas.

The natives here are another constant irritant, if a somewhat less pressing one. Rebellion stirs in their grimy, uneducated ranks from time to time and must be

put out like a sputtering flame. Fortunately, my men are well-versed in the art of infiltration and we have been able to stop most of these uprisings before they start. Even so, the city sees one or two riots every year.

## Inner Erebus

In the heart of Erebus stands a walled city within the city. It is home to all but one of the Council's members, who maintain their own estates around the central Chamber. Originally a temple to some now-forgotten god, the Chamber was converted into a conference room just two decades ago, thanks in no small part to your most generous donations. When there's a meeting, one of the Councilors rings an ancient gong; the tone is audible throughout the city, a constant reminder of our power.

Each estate is responsible for handling security along its own section of the Inner City's wall. Access requires a special "Writ of Invitation," stamped with the seal of one of the Councilors. In reality, there is a great deal of covert traffic over, under, and through the walls at all hours of the day and night. The real reason each estate handles its own security is so that we can circumvent it whenever we please. This facilitates business for all.

### **Knightlund Keep**

My own estate is a sharp splinter of traditional, western architecture in the city's otherwise bleak skyline. It serves as a constant reminder of whose interests I represent here. Visiting nobles from the Crown flow through my many guest rooms like a river of wealth and influence, which makes us a juicy target for blackmailers, spies, and assassins. We use such attempts as a channel for our counter-intelligence efforts, feeding would-be spies convenient lies and luring them into traps.

### **The House of Bliss**

Euphoria's mansion is a den of earthly delights that puts even her society's best Temples of Bliss to shame. Of course, only her personal guests and high-ranking members of the Society are allowed to partake, but performers and servants carry tales of extravagant debauchery beyond its walls every night. We attend these soirees any time an important business deal or political meeting is likely to take place. It is surprising how many otherwise circumspect individuals will let sensitive information slip when their wits have been dulled by wine, music, and carnality.

### **Shrine of the Serpent**

The headquarters of Erebus' most secretive organization is also the city's most tightly secured location. Only naga are allowed to enter, and even they must have a Writ of Invitation. No one knows what its interior looks like, but the popular wisdom is that the whole facility is built for snakes: rooms are connected to each other via tiny shafts, poles and hooks are used for furniture, and furnaces keep the place sweltering all year 'round. The only thing we know for certain is that the shrine has no doors that a human can use, only small holes cut into its outer walls.

### **The Museum**

The Purifiers' estate contains masterworks from every conceivable craft and art form. Paintings and sculptures line the walls, exotic weapons fill a vast armory, and there's even a sailing ship suspended from cables in one of the larger rotundas. Golan Para, the cult's leader, lives in the museum, along with his family, an army of curators, some guards, and a few servants. However, most of the Purifiers' actual business is conducted in the city's streets, boardrooms, and brothels.

## The Forge

Jonathan Steel has recently converted one wing of the Purifiers' museum into his forge, where he lives and works. It's the only place in the city where one can purchase his famous weapons, armor, and jewelry. (Items of such value rarely turn up in pawn shops.) Oddly, the place has also turned into a favorite hang-out for Erebus' power players, who come to see and be seen. We still have not unearthed Steel's origins or political goals. However, his appearance suggests eastern ancestry and I believe he may be on the run from the Order of the Moth.

## The Old City

This granite jungle of skyscrapers and flying buttresses is Erebus' most famous landmark. The streets are paved with black cobblestones and the buildings are adorned with bizarre sculptures of long-forgotten gods. Since it contains most of the city's docks, Old Erebus' taverns and hotels cater to sailors, merchants, and tourists. Gold and silk flow through its offices and warehouses in torrential currents of wealth.

Canals link the harbor to nearby warehouses and markets, making it easy to transport goods from ship to

shop. They also provide a convenient means of covert travel for criminals and spies. Rumors abound of submerged tunnels connecting the canals to each other, as well as to the cellars of various Old City buildings. Due to the abysmal clarity of the water, my efforts to prove these rumors have not met with any success. I fear that the Naga might be more at home in wet environments, and the thought of those vile creatures having such access to the offices and warehouses of your subjects fills me with both rage and, I am not ashamed to admit, fear.

Nearly every haven for westerners of breeding can be found in the Old City's few residential areas. They are populated mostly by the second sons of noble houses, sent to Erebus to manage their family's holdings and "see the world." (In my experience, they spend most of their time either pretending they are still living in the west, or slumming in New City brothels.) Tourists sometimes gravitate to these areas when they get homesick, attracted by the western style restaurants and architecture.

Merchants from the Order of the Moth congregate here, as well. In fact, there are many hotels that specialize in eastern-style accommodations, providing outcasts with a home-away-from-home. (The Order of the Moth labels merchants as "outcasts" because they've been "tainted" by

contact with foreigners and are not allowed free access to the Empire's interior.) Though merchants rarely turn down coin, westerners and Wayfarers are not welcome in these havens, and are usually subjected to stares, surveillance, and sometimes even physical expulsion.

Most neighborhoods are patrolled by Purifier street gangs, who do a passable job of keeping undesirables out of sight and criminal activity under control. Most are managed by businessmen, also Purifiers, who have built legitimate businesses around these protection rackets. Notable exceptions include the Old City's Easterners, who prefer to police themselves, and the many locations controlled by the Naga.

### **The Ivory Tower**

This hotel's exterior was refinished in gleaming ivory a few years ago, in striking contrast to the otherwise black cityscape. No expense was spared on its interior, either, and it is now a favorite destination for visiting nobles. I have arranged for covert surveillance of many of the tower's more expensive rooms, and have uncovered evidence of a criminal conspiracy involving affluent Crown merchants and a number of noble houses.

Five guests have disappeared from the Tower in

the last year, without a trace of foul play. However, my sources have uncovered a connection: Each was involved in illicit arms sales to an unknown cult, possibly the traitorous Fallen Legacy or the upstart revolutionaries known as the Brotherhood of Ash. I suspect that the Tower's lower levels may connect to the canals, and that the conspirators may be using them to quietly dispose of financial backers who displease them. If so, it would mean that the Tower's staff has been heavily infiltrated by the perpetrators. Our investigation is on-going.

### **The Hub**

Merchants and sailors meet in this monolithic rotunda on the Old City's south side to trade commodities and arrange for the shipment of goods. I am proud to report that Crown companies represent the majority of active traders. Even so, my operatives have caught more than one pirate attempting to launder stolen goods through the hub. I continue to keep a close eye on all business conducted there.



### **Fannigan's Tavern**

Strategically positioned near the edge of the New City, this hole in the wall establishment sells itself as a dangerous Ereban dive in order to attract our thrill-seeking noble sons. I have heard that the proprietors stage fights as part of this deception, and I suspect they may employ mesmerists as well. Though profit is certainly the most likely motive for these theatrics, I cannot help but contemplate the other goals such a manipulative entity could pursue. (I say "entity" because the bar's owners have gone to great lengths to conceal their identities.) There are many ways they could place young men under their influence, from blackmail to cult brainwashing, and then send them home to the Crown as sleeper agents.

### **Northhaven**

Your Majesty may have heard about House Harrington's recent tragedy; a ship carrying three of Lord Harrington's children sank shortly after leaving the harbor.. under a clear sky and with such swiftness that the lifeboats could not be launched in time. The few sailors who survived claimed that "ill omens" had plagued the ship before departure.

What is less well-known is that the Harringtons were supervising the construction of a sprawling family estate on the north side of Old Erebus. It seems that nine of their servants had perished in their sleep just that week, and the nobles feared they would be next. The true story went with them to their watery graves, but rumors and conjecture abound. The most often recited tale is that the eldest son, Caspian, had forced his affections upon a native Ereban girl whose mother was a witch and worshipper of the mythical Guar skinwalkers. She placed a curse on him and all who dwelt in his house. That night, the first of their servants died.

The estate still stands vacant, as most consider it infested with black magic. My agents tell me that the native woman responsible for the "curse" has had business dealings with the Cult of the Serpent, who are infamous for their mastery of poisons most foul. I find it far more likely that the Naga poisoned the Harrington's servants and sabotaged their vessel, but that would be a perilous accusation to level against the Naga without incontrovertible proof.

# The New City

The heart and soul of Erebus is the New City. The jungle encroaches more heavily here than in Old Erebus, allowing the locals to build their homes and offices in the trees and under the hills, as well as on the ground. The vast majority of the city's permanent residents live and work here, and its dirt roads are usually choked with merchants, artisans, performers, thieves, and thugs. New Erebus surrounds Old Erebus on all sides, includes a small set of docks on the north side of the harbor, and crosses the River Styx to the south.

The locals tend to congregate in and around a large plaza called the Six Points, so named for the six major thoroughfares that converge there. It is packed with merchant carts and booths from dawn 'till dusk. Merchants and farmers from the jungle dock their rafts along the river, forming an ad hoc marketplace along both banks. Most New City residents find themselves in the area at least once a day, shopping for groceries.

Each of the three Empires boasts dozens of havens all over New Erebus. Wayfarer havens are renown for their strong family ties, communal approach to property, and lawless atmospheres... even by Ereban standards. Most

are protected by the enigmatic vigilanti, formidable street fighters who we are steadfastly researching. They are generally open to outsiders, and some include so many non-Wayfarer residents that they barely qualify as havens.

Immigrants from the Wildlands settle in the New City almost without exception. Their havens are just as lawless as those of the Wayfarers, but without the stabilizing influence of the vigilanti. They are major channels for the sale of alchemical goods, especially the special ammunitions favored by gunslingers and various black market goods. Bars and taverns attract tourists from the Old City, but few stay long after witnessing their first real brawl or shoot-out.

Far more secretive are the havens of exiles from the Order of the Moth. More than any other group, easterners tend to stick to themselves. Many of their restaurants and hotels are open to outsiders, but only so long as they're willing to pay inflated prices for the privilege. Erebus is the only place, anywhere, that foreigners can catch a glimpse of life in the forbidden kingdom. A surprising number of these exiles are actively involved in conspiracies devoted to overthrowing the Order of the Moth, a fact which occasionally turns their homes and businesses into battlefields.

The protection rackets of New Erebus are far less dominated by the Purifers than those of Old Erebus. From one neighborhood to the next, security could be handled by a posse of gunsligers, a pack of street predators, a company run by enterprising westerners, or even a volunteer militia. These groups spend as much time fighting over territory as they do investigating crimes, and some are so corrupt that they allow criminals to operate under their noses, in return for a cut of their profits, or even operate their own criminal activities outright!

### **The Ferry**

Unless you own a boat of your own, the only way to cross the River Styx is on the Ferry, a local landmark and one notorious cult's claim to fame. The Ferrymen pull rafts from one side of the river to the other, along thick ropes that they keep strung between its banks like the strands of some gigantic web. They also run a protection racket in the river markets, keeping the peace for trappers, farmers, and fisherman from the peninsula's interior. They are notorious for aggressively defending both of these operations, meeting their would-be competitors with crushing displays of violence.

Even more frustrating, however, are their recruit-

ment practices. The Ferrymen claim to know a way to wipe personal memories from someone's mind, and they do this to everyone who joins their cult. Furthermore, the entire group then acts to protect its members from those who would seek justice for crimes they committed in their forgotten pasts. At least three traitors to my own organization have disappeared under the Ferrymen's shield, and all efforts to extract them thus far have failed.

### **Mirage's Estate**

The founder of the Magicians' Guild is the only member of the Council who chooses not to take up residence in the Inner City. Instead, Mirage operates out of a bizarre estate in New Erebus. Its exterior is as stately as anything in the Old City, but the interior has been likened by many to a carnival fun house. Mirrors and maze-like hallways make it impossible to navigate without a guide, and it is widely believed in criminal circles that the place is riddled with deadly traps.

Mirage herself is no less enigmatic. She changes her appearance with alarming frequency and has even been spotted in distant locations simultaneously, no doubt via the use of impersonators and illusions. Those who wish to hire a magician (often for purposes shadier

than mere entertainment) need only go to the public door in the west wing of the mansion and speak to whomever is claiming to be Mirage that day. Magicians looking for work are invited to do the same, though Mirage does not force magi to join her guild.

### **The Herald**

This sprawling complex contains offices for the Herald's army of reporters, a state of the art printing press, and a full service tavern where patrons can buy a cup of coffee to sip while they read the news of the day. Back issues are kept in a warehouse-like wing and preserved by curators versed in Natural Philosophy.

No one knows who owns and operates the Herald, but they seem to do it for reasons other than profit. As far as my analysts can tell, every penny earned from subscriptions and tavern patrons is funnelled directly back into printing, maintenance, and salaries for the reporters. I doubt such shy and wealthy people are motivated by altruism and, though no bias has ever been noted in what the Herald publishes, I count the paper as the only intelligence organization in the city that rivals my own.

However, that does not mean I view it as a competitor. The Herald serves a vital purpose in Erebus.

Not only does it disseminate information, it helps keep the cults in check. One of the paper's most popular features is a registry of every cult and conspiracy its reporters can sniff out. It provides a convenient way to keep track of who's who, what their areas of expertise are, and what goals they are known to pursue.

### **The Reformatory**

On the north edge of New Erebus, where the Outer City encroaches like a rising tide, the Church of Flesh and Spirit operates a hospice for the criminally insane. Only the most violent of madmen are admitted as patients. As with their hospitals, however, the menders operate this "charity" as a way to harvest subjects for their heretical experiments.

My sources believe that the Reformatory's director is trying to find a way to separate the soul from the body. He believes that madness is caused by the flesh binding too tightly to the spirit, corrupting it. His alchemical treatments have already killed five subjects, with many more trapped in various states of batshit crazy, if you will pardon the expression.

Rumors of an "avenging demon" in the New City have been linked to this facility by one of my agents, who

has gone missing since filing his report. It seems that someone with inhuman strength and vitality, capable of shrugging off mortal injuries, has been hunting down violent criminals all over the city. My agent believed the victims were connected to a man who checked himself into the Reformatory over a year ago.

He speculated that the menders' strange treatments have given the man's spirit increased power over the flesh, driving it onward when mortal bodies would succumb to the inevitable. In his words, the man "is powered by pure vengeance." If true, such a killing machine would make an excellent tool, and if we could uncover the method by which he was produced, we could equip an entire army with his powers.

## Outer Erebus

A permanent shanty town outside the New City has come to be known as Outer Erebus. It is home to a surprisingly large population of derelicts, fugitives, and others who cannot, for one reason or another, live in the city proper. Most move their homes frequently, making the area difficult to navigate. There are plenty of street urchins and vagrants who will gladly sell their services as guides,

but the unwary have as good a chance of getting their throats cut as of reaching their destinations.

Compounding the danger are the many predatory and poisonous species of flora and fauna that infest the Ereban jungle. Though the New City has its share of jungle environs, it's nothing like living among the snakes, tigers, and insects. A small community of huntsmen, botanists, and animal experts live in Outer Erebus, but sell their services as exterminators to residents of the other districts. The others just invest in mosquito netting.

Despite the danger, or perhaps because of it, much of Erebus' black market commerce is conducted here. My men have located rebel weapons depots, markets for stolen goods, and even one fence who specializes in human organs. Those who would traffic in such commodities have nowhere else to conduct their business, as not even the most disreputable New City market square would tolerate their presence.

It's not *all* smugglers, con men, and killers for hire; just about anyone in Erebus can find themselves in need of a good hiding place from time to time. Incautious idealists often raise the ire of the major cults by speaking out against their self-centered politics... and find prices on their heads. My agents have had to hunt more than one

enemy of the Crown through this tangled mess. To date, not a single one has eluded us successfully.

### **The Refuge**

A large pack of werewolves has established a wandering haven in the Outer City, where not even the most foolish of wolf hunters dare to venture. Members come and go constantly; our best estimates place the pack at 75-90 lycanthropes. Such a concentration of the beasts is, to my knowledge, unprecedented in the west. Though they seem interested only in their own safety, they could become a serious problem for anyone who crosses them... or a powerful tool for anyone cunning enough to manipulate them.

### **The Chosen**

The Purifier religion is vague on what, exactly, will happen when their demon-god returns and harvests his chosen ones, presumably destroying the rest of humanity. One secret society within the cult's ranks believes that the chosen will be made immortal and granted dominion over the Earth. An appealing, if unfounded, delusion.

However, one can only be chosen if the Reaper returns within one's lifetime. So, these purifiers meet

every month in a dark grove, deep in the Outer City, to perform arcane rituals of their own design. Their singular goal is bringing about the Reaper's return to Earth. Their abhorrent practices include blood rites, orgies, and human sacrifice. So far, they have limited their predations to the lower classes, but should they ever turn their eyes upon a westerner, none shall escape our fury.

### **The Depot**

As your Majesty is aware, the iconoclasts who fled here after you defeated their attempts at insurrection now make a business of arming rebels and outlaws of all stripes. Persistent, if unconfirmed, reports suggest that they maintain a network of hidden, underground bunkers on the fringe of Outer Erebus. My agents hear these things from rebels who claim to have bought weapons from them, as well as thieves who claim to have raided them. However, inspection of the indicated sites has yet to yield so much as a deserted hole in the ground. If such warehouses exist, they are either migrated regularly or extraordinarily well camouflaged. Knowing the group's skill at espionage first hand, I rather expect both are the case.

## **The Necropolis**

According to the few reports I have, this “city of the dead” lies almost too deep in the jungle to be considered a part of Erebus at all. An unidentified party from the Crown has built a private fiefdom amidst the native villages and vast stretches of unexplored wilderness. The odd thing is that no one seems to know it exists.

Whoever its lord is, he must either be a classically trained alchemist or have one on his payroll. Surgically altered creatures, far too grotesque to describe in print, have been spotted in the areas around his estate. The surrounding villages are filled with stories of loved ones returning from the dead, but without the spark of sentience behind their eyes. Some of these “zombies” are both tireless and servile; they are usually put to work in the village’s fields. Most, however, are little more than rabid beasts and must be dealt with as such.

These same villagers also whisper things about the lord of the manor. They say he is beyond death and sustains himself on the vitality of the living. They say he displays the powers of a skinwalker, or of a magician, or even of a vigilanti. I must consider these the tales of intimidated savages, at least until one of my men can gain access to the mansion's interior, but I also wonder what

dark miracles our natural philosophy may be capable of, if driven by a mind brilliant enough to fathom its secrets and obsessed enough to challenge death itself...

## **The Black Sands**

Along the River Styx, there is a beach made of black sand where no native will drop anchor. A few hours further into the jungle lies a village whose inhabitants are rarely seen by outsiders. Strange charms and idols adorn the trees for miles around, carrying curses for those who trespass in their territory. Two groups of researchers, both seeking a glimpse of the legendary Guar, have vanished into the jungle’s depths in the last four years.

I have recently been notified that Lord Ahl is planning a third expedition. I am attempting to recruit a security team that is equal to the challenge, but I have no idea what they will encounter. Unless the House of Ahl is in need of new leadership, I believe it would be best to dissuade the lord from this foolhardy enterprise.

Yours in service,

-- Sir Erik of Knightlund

# *Excerpts from* *the Journal of Natural Philosophy*

A note from the editor:

The Journal is the Crown Empire's most prestigious publication for scientific research. In recent years, a large number of articles have concerned Ereban topics, from alchemy to magic to sociology. It is our sincere hope that these excerpts will dispel much of the hearsay that surrounds the so-called City of Shadows.

A note from the author:

*The articles below were written in-character to give you a better feel for how the people of Erebus understand things like magic and alchemy; it is not the same way that you or your players will understand them out-of-character. For rules and advice on running these kewl powerz in role-playing games, see the "Running the Game" section.*





# Ereban Magic:

## A Philosophical Explanation

Trade vessels returning from Erebus have always carried with them tales of "magic" and "sorcery." These tales have spread like wildfire through the empire, from the highest royal courts to the lowliest Wildlands villages. The superstitious believe them to be everything from cases of divine intervention to proof of demonic plots to subvert the faithful. To men of scholarship, such speculation is nothing more than the raving of irrational peasants.

Yet, there must be some grain of truth that inspired these fictions. What visitor to Erebus has not seen a "stage mage" conjure objects from the ether, or a hypnotist rewrite someone's identity with a few whispered words? Surely, there must be *something* more to it than just smoke and mirrors. After all, many lords and ladies have taken to consulting astrologers before deciding important matters of state. Such cultured people would not be so easily taken in by parlor tricks. This paper proposes a more reasonable, *philosophical* explanation.

## Hypothesis

The cornerstone of the Creator's infinite genius has long been known to philosophers of the Crown. The Law of Intropy states that all things tend towards a state of order; this is why Creation sustains itself and evolves constantly towards perfection. This is also how alchemists manipulate materials; they increase the chaos in one substance (via heat and philosopher's stone) until it is indistinguishable from the desired substance, then guide its collapse back into a state of order.

It is our belief that Ereban magicians manipulate the thoughts and perceptions of others in much the same way. They increase the chaos in a situation until the truth is so obscured by ambiguity and misdirection that it can easily pass for something else. Then, they use clever speech and sleight of hand to trick observers into believing that it *is* something else. Whether or not this constitutes a real manipulation of reality is open to debate.

Our observations have revealed three distinct techniques in the stage mage's repertoire. It is our hope that categorization will help facilitate productive discourse.

## Legerdemain

(aka. Illusion, Sleight of Hand, Prestidigitation)

This is perhaps the best-known type of Ereban magic. The skill of concealing objects in one's hands or clothes is used to create the appearance of conjuration (when, in fact, the object was merely *hidden* before it was "conjured"), and vanishing (when the object is once again hidden from view). Optical illusions and tricks of lighting are used to confuse audiences, to make them believe that an object to be something it is not, or to be in a location it is not. These "sorcerers" do not control *what* we see so much as *how* and *when* we see it.

## Mesmerism

(aka. Hypnotism, Enchantment, Mentalism.)

The second school of Ereban magic is far more subtle in both effect and application. Mentalists combine the age-old techniques of con artists (logical fallacies,

emotional manipulation, and misdirection) with the much newer art of hypnosis (making people highly suggestible by placing them in a trance-like state). Using only their voices, these enchanters can mold a person's thoughts and emotions, their very *identity*, in virtually any way they choose. However, it is quite difficult to make a person do something they truly do not want to do. Reports of murder and suicide committed by hypnotized "zombies" are the dreams of sensationalist journalists and miscreants desperate to excuse their own criminal behavior.

## Augury

(aka. Soothsaying, Divination, Clairvoyance, The Sight.)

This final "magical" discipline has already spread beyond Erebus to the royal holdings of the Crown. Diviners analyze the patterns by which chaotic systems collapse into order and use those patterns to predict future events. Common methods include Tarot cards (shuffling the deck creates a chaotic system), rune stones (tossing the runes creates chaos), and astrology (analyzing the "chaotic" motion of heavenly bodies). We have seen startlingly specific and accurate predictions, as well as vague "prophecies" that never came to pass. This

could mean that successful soothsayers are merely lucky, that augury is a demanding skill that takes years to master, or that people tend to hear what they want to hear.

## A Note on Witchcraft

A student of the topic may notice that this theory does not address the so-called “black magic” practiced by some native Erebeans. These “witches” cast long shadows over many Outer City neighborhoods by threatening to put curses on anyone who crosses them. The natives take such threats quite seriously, and it is our opinion that this is exactly what makes witchcraft work.

Rather than manipulating perception in the manner of true Ereban magicians, witches capitalize on fear and superstition. A key feature of black magic is that victims are always either cursed in public or have some kind of calling card left at their homes. In other words, witches are very careful to make sure their victims *know* they’ve been cursed. The fear that such knowledge inspires is what really causes people to get sick, suffer misfortunes, and so forth. It is a trick of the mind, to be sure, but not nearly as subtle as those practiced by true magicians.

## Further Study

The shadowed lands around Erebus whisper to us of secrets yet unexplored that would make even these infamous art forms seem pedestrian. The legendary powers of the Moths, in particular, demand intense scrutiny. In fact, a considerable percentage of our time here has been spent trying to find transportation into the Forbidden Kingdom. Its reputation as a fortress-state is well deserved!

Many of the cults that choke Erebus’ streets claim to wield miraculous powers of their own. No doubt most of these claims are pure propaganda, and others are certainly trade secrets that anyone could learn. However, the sheer number of claims raises the possibility that *some* of them may contain a grain of truth.

Finally, the natives tell of skinwalkers in the jungle who can summon spirits and create life from inanimate matter. They are supposedly the masters of the Ereban witches, though we see little magic in their “powers.” There are, however, a few stories that cannot be explained by superstitious fear alone. We are, as always, dedicated to revealing the Divine Truths behind these mysteries.

# *Natural Philosophy, Demystified for the Layperson*

It has been brought to my attention, through the kindly efforts of a number of the Journal's readers, that many of my beleaguered colleagues are beset by their less erudite friends and relatives, all wanting to know what, exactly, this noble pursuit of ours encompasses. Ever your humble servant, I have taken it upon myself to draft this overview of our field, framed in the simplest language of which I am capable. If they still miscomprehend after purusing the following, merely tell them you collect rare coins. If they persist in staring blankly, wipe the spittle from their chins and send them off to bed with a compassionate pat on the head. I wish you luck.

## **The Divine Mandate**

The Universe was originally brought into existence by a being of such infinite power that we know Him only as The Creator. He set the world in motion, according to a set of immutable laws, and retreated into the Heavens to

watch his Creation unfold. As the inheritors of His divinity, it is our duty to study His universe and its laws. For, in knowing His Creation, we come to know Him.

## **The Law of Intropy**

The first and most important of His laws is the Law of Intropy. In its most basic sense, this law states that all things tend towards a state of order. In other words, chaos is always a temporary condition, which eventually "settles" back into organization. For instance, water will freeze unless heated, whether by Man or by the sun.

A corollary to this law is the principle that, as materials are made more chaotic, they become more similar. Stone and steel are very different substances, but both become dust when finely ground. Wood and flesh become the same ash when they burn. This principle has important implications...

# Alchemy

The key to turning all of this theory into practice was the discovery of the Philosopher's Stone. This wonderous substance, found only in the tractless Inland Wastes, acts as a catalyst, increasing the chaos in a substance and allowing Philosophers to influence the manner in which it returns to a state of order. Lead can be transformed into gold by mixing it with Philosopher's Stone until it resembles both lead and gold, then shaping it into gold as it returns to a state of order. Almost anything can be made into almost anything else through this process, and entirely new substances can be created, as if pulled directly from the brilliant minds of their inventors.

The body also obeys the Law of Intropy, and Philosophers have achieved incredible advances in the field of medicine. Chances are that you or a loved one have already benefited from an alchemical ointment that accelerated healing, or perhaps you had your humors balanced to treat an illness. As these studies progress, many Philosophers anticipate a cure for aging itself!

The burgeoning field of mechany is changing the way we live and work. Perhaps you have seen a horseless carriage touring the streets of your town, powered by one

of the new water engines. These miraculous devices boil water without heat by injecting tiny amounts of Philosopher's Stone into a tank. The steam rises, pushing a turbine that, in turn, pushes the carriage's wheels. The steam is then collected and allowed to turn back into water, starting the process over again. The same system is used to run printing presses, flour mills, and countless other machines.

Finally, Philosophers are helping Her Majesty's armies push back the twin threats of war and invasion by fashioning new weapons and armors that far outclass anything else in the world. Handcannons have brought artillery to the footsoldier, making melee combat virtually obsolete. Suits of Impervium armor turn away hostile blades and claws with equal ease. Thanks to Natural Philosophy, we are closer than ever to our Creator's dream of a unified, peaceful world.

More importantly, these studies are bringing us ever closer to understanding our Creator's perfect mind. When we can truly think as He does, nothing will be beyond our reach.

# *The Vigilanti: Knights of Anarchy*

Much interest has been displayed in the warrior-monks who preside over Wayfarer havens in Erebus. Accounts of their supernatural senses and deadly combat skills are too numerous to pass off as mere folklore and urban myth, but who are they and how do they accomplish their feats? I tracked down one of these mysterious guardians and asked him those very questions...

## **Sweeping Wind, A Case Study**

The Wayfarer who calls himself Sweeping Wind resides in a particularly squalid haven in the New City, south of the River Styx. He lives off the charity of those he protects; they feed him, give him places to sleep, and even mend his clothing. Never staying more than a few nights in any one place, he makes himself as little of a burden on these poor wretches as he can.

However, the Wayfarers consider their charity fair payment for the services he provides: conflict resolution, protection from thieves and street predators, moral and spiritual guidance, and so forth. He is a strange combina-

tion of soldier, priest, and judge.

Though I was never able to observe Sweeping Wind in action ("a vigilantus only fights out of necessity," he told me), a few of the locals were happy to relate their own experiences. One young woman said he saved her from a drunken street predator who held a knife to her throat; the vigilantus stuck his sword point into the ruffian's knife hand and yanked it out to a safe distance before knocking him out with one punch. Others told of a seemingly epic battle between Sweeping Wind and four (or six, or a dozen, depending on who tells the tale) purifier swordsmen, where he used his own body to trap and entangle his enemies' weapons. As tales of vigilanti heroics go, these are fairly tame.

## **Arts of War & Vigilance**

Sweeping Wind told me this about the source of his perceptive and martial powers: "All vigilanti must master two Arts, one of Vigilance and one of War. These are not magic, they are personal truths. Ways of looking at the

world, of experiencing it. We do not learn to do things that no one else can, we learn to *not* do the things that prevent others from realizing their potential.

"Through the Art of Vigilance, we learn to live in the present moment and pay heed to all of our senses. Most people exist in their own internal worlds of memory and imagination. They see the present as a nearly imperceptible border between what may be and what has already been. Though their eyes see everything before them, and their ears hear everything around them, their minds are closed to it all.

"By letting go of the past, and not looking to the future, vigilanti open themselves to the full experience of the present. Footfalls always announce an enemy's approach; we hear them. All liars give themselves away with subtle clues; we take note of them. The world is a beautiful, endless expanse of moments, each melting eternally into the next. Though you live in this beauty, you are blind to it.

"The Art of War can be explained in one word: selflessness." At this point, Sweeping Wind paused for nearly a minute. (Perhaps he thought the concept was fully explained!) I prompted him to elaborate. "In combat, concern for one's own safety causes hesitation and limits

a warrior's options. Vigilanti care nothing for themselves, only for those under our protection. This allows us to act first, to seize every opportunity and exploit every advantage. We do what must be done, nothing more."

That was all I could get out of him on the matter. My guess is that aspiring street fighters hound him constantly to teach them his secrets. Whether he simply doesn't want to reveal it, and made up this "selflessness" explanation as a smoke screen, or if there really is no secret, I cannot say with any conviction.

## The Wayfarers' Concord

One fact that lends credence to Sweeping Wind's explanation for the Art of War is the vigilanti's function within Wayfarer society. The Concord after which their "nation" is named is a centuries old agreement between all the people of the Wayfarer islands; it outlines the philosophy behind their anarchist government and establishes the relationship between the vigilanti and those they protect.

The Wayfarers like to say, "Those who seek power cannot be trusted to wield it." They reject all forms of popular or centralized government because they believe

that anyone placed in a position of power will inevitably become corrupted by it and use that power for personal gain. Hence, the only people they trust to adjudicate their disputes are warrior-monks who live solely off the charity of others. They have nothing to gain and nothing to lose.

The vigilanti are sworn to protect anyone who seeks their help *and* abides by the concord. In other words, you have to embrace anarchy, show charity to vigilanti, and accept their judgment in all matters before they will fight for you. This simple system has been the cornerstone of their culture for generations, and now they've brought it with them to Erebus. It's important to note that a vigilantus is not obligated to protect non-Wayfarers, but most will intervene on behalf of any "obviously innocent person," as Sweeping Wind puts it.

## Failed Vigilanti

Not everyone who studies the vigilanti's Arts achieves enlightenment. Many of these failed vigilanti become Sentinels, masters of the Art of Vigilance. They possess the heightened senses of a vigilantus, but not the selflessness or combat ability. Found in abundance in the Concord, they act as ad hoc judges, using their ability

to see through lies to resolve conflicts. However, since they are not above temptation, their judgments can always be over-ruled by a vigilantus.

Far more dangerous are those students who master the Art of War, but cannot quite grasp the Art of Vigilance. Though still selfless, they often allow their judgment to be clouded by fears for the future and pains from the past. Without the ability to pierce deception, they can be tricked into misusing their martial prowess, like unwitting sell swords. Sweeping Wind was not forthcoming with details, but I gather that those Lost vigilanti who cannot be brought back into the fold are hunted down and killed. I can only image the havoc one of these errant knights could wreak on a disorganized populace, but execution seems like an odd practice for a supposedly egalitarian culture.

## Yoking Their Strength

More than a few nobles have tried to hire vigilanti as thugs or assassins, but they cannot be bought. Even more thugs and assassins have tried to learn their, but none have successful. I fear the vigilanti's strength shall forever remain the sole domain of these warrior-priests.



# *Skinwalking: A Treatise on the Soul & Human Transmorphism*

The Crown Empire has long been aware of the phenomenon known in Erebus as "skinwalking." Our own shores have been infested with a plague of lupine shapeshifters for centuries. However, it wasn't until the explosion of trans-continental trade that the true breadth of the matter was made apparent. To date, alchemists and naturalists have documented no fewer than four, and possibly as many as six, species of skinwalkers.

However, little effort has been devoted to developing a comprehensive understanding of how skinwalkers perform their transformations... until recently. This report seeks to summarize the preliminary findings of a privately-funded research expedition that has been studying skinwalkers in and around Erebus for the last three years. Theories are presented, along with experimental and anecdotal support, where available. Our investigations are on-going, but we felt it would be a disservice to our colleagues in the motherland if we waited any longer to publish a report.

## **Skinwalker Populations**

We have had direct access to four physiologically distinct groups of skinwalkers, with second-hand reports of two more. For the sake of completeness, all six are described in brief below:

**Werewolves** - These wolf-men originated in the Crown Empire, but have since been pushed into the mountains and jungles around Erebus. They are known for fits of violent behavior and a preference for savage, heathen lifestyles.

**Naga** - Erebus has been ruled by a cult of half-snake skinwalkers for decades. They are intensely secretive and nearly all living Naga are members of the Cult of the Serpent. It is believed that they venerate their reptilian aspects above their humanity.

**Mer** - The Mer are a collection of aquatic shapeshifters who dwell in the shallow seas of the Wayfarer's Concord. They are believed to take a variety of forms, from

dolphin to shark to squid. By all accounts, they are completely benign, even participating in the Wayfarers' government (if so it can be called).

**Guar** - Though we have not yet seen any of these creatures, the natives of Erebus consider their existence an undeniable fact. Deep in the jungle, a race of cat-like skinwalkers are said to rule over human villages and wield strange, primal magic. Their name is never uttered without a fearful glance over one's shoulder.

**Tengu** - Finally, we have heard scattered stories about bird- or fox-like shapeshifters who live like recluses in the remote areas of the East. They are usually depicted as tricksters who resent the rest of humanity.

Though these populations are startlingly dissimilar in terms of culture and physiology, it should be apparent by the transformational power they share that they are merely different manifestations of the same phenomenon.

## Modern Theories of the Soul

It is generally accepted among Crown alchemists that all things are composed of etheric regions of force. Some of these are very tightly bundled and only interact with other areas of force at close proximity. Most material substances fall into this category. Others do not fold inward at all, but spread out to fill all available space within a certain range. Most metals fall into this category, as demonstrated by the phenomenon of magnetism.

Some have theorized that the soul is also a pattern of the second type, though magnitudes more complex than any magnetic field. A soul (sometimes referred to in the literature as an "animus" or "animating spirit") binds material substances that enter its borders into the systems of tissues and organs so well known to naturalists and physicians. This explains the processes of digestion, growth, and regeneration.

Such theories may also explain skinwalking. Those native to the Ereban peninsula consider shapeshifters to be possessed by the souls of animals. They believe that the animal spirit strives to emerge from its confinement at every opportunity and, whenever the human soul grows weak, it remakes the body in its own image. The nature of

this struggle, and the circumstances that trigger the change, depend on the nature of the two souls and their relationship to each other. In this instance, folk wisdom may have it right.

Putting this into more scientific terms provides a few key insights. If skinwalkers do possess two distinct souls, one human and one animal, we would expect the body's composite materials to be constantly pulled towards two different configurations, one humanoid and one feral. Upon close inspection, this does appear to be the case: a skinwalker's human form almost always includes feral aspects, while its animal form usually retains a few human characteristics (like intelligence). Furthermore, the total mass of the body never changes, implying that its tissues are moved during transformation, rather than replaced entirely.

Of course, it is not yet possible to observe a soul objectively, so we cannot directly test our hypothesis. Still, it puts a remarkably useful framework around a number of different observations, so we consider it a valid tool for thinking about the phenomenon. Keeping this theory of the soul in mind, let's examine the specifics.

## Mechanisms of Human Transmorphism

It has been well established that etheric patterns tend to be attracted to similar patterns, and respond to environmental stimuli closely related to them. This is called "resonance." Bells vibrate in time to chimes of the same pitch, similar metals can combine to make alloys, etc. Resonance may also underlie the mechanism that determines when a skinwalker shifts shapes.

This mechanism has long eluded scientific study due to the fact that each shapeshifter appears to transform at different times and for different reasons. We believe that the one common denominator has simply been overlooked: environmental stimuli. When exposed to conditions that "resonate" with one soul or the other, a skinwalker's body is pulled further into that soul's configuration. It's like adding one magnet to another to increase the force of their attraction on a piece of metal. At some point, the balance of power crosses a threshold and the body is transformed.

The reason each skinwalker resonates with a unique set of conditions is because each soul is the result of a unique past. Things from the animal spirit's former life will resonate with it, strengthen it, and cause

transformation into the animal form. The full moon is a well-known resonance for werewolves, while submersion in sea water is quite common for the Mer. Things that remind the skinwalker of its humanity will resonate with the human soul, strengthen it, and trigger a shift to human form. The presence of family and friends, being addressed by their human name, or even just being inside an urban environment can serve as human triggers. Our experiments suggest it may be possible to control a skinwalker's changes by researching its past life and using important people and objects against it.

## The Lycanthropic "Curse"

The traditional image of werewolves are corrupt, tormented humans who are cursed to relinquish their self-control when their bodies succumb to the beast within. Though this is certainly true of some skinwalkers, it is far from the typical case. Most retain their awareness, memory, and volition while in animal form, and few outside the Crown are any more corrupt or tormented than the general population. This should come as no surprise, but the details lie in the relationship between the human soul and its bestial counterpart.

Most bestial animi think and behave just like normal animals, they only kill when hungry and are fearful of humans. However, the majority of skinwalkers retain the better part of their human minds when in animal form, so their motivations can be as complex, and corrupt, as any human's. It is only because most skinwalkers' animal forms are predatory that they tend to engage in more violent behavior when transformed. It's a simple matter of the right tools for the right job.

In some cases, the animal soul is diseased, or twisted by its imprisonment in a human body. When in control, these beings will tend to lash out at humans and/or attempt to flee into the wilderness. The human mind has comparatively little control in this case and must fight the animal at every turn. They often cannot remember what they do when bestial; whether this is due to a lack of consciousness or willful repression of memories remains to be seen. Among the skinwalkers themselves, these unfortunate beings are known as "The Cursed."

The implications of their duality are not lost on the skinwalkers. Entire religions have grown out of their attempts to resolve the conflict between Man and Beast. For example, Erebus' infamous Cult of the Serpent is based on the Naga's belief that the serpent needs only a

human intellect to achieve a state of perfection. Therefore, they seek to sublimate all of their other human aspects into the cold-bloodedness of the snake. The Mer strive for a balance between the two, mirroring the balance between the land, the sea, and the sky.

## Contagion

How does a body acquire a second animus in the first place? Since the processes by which a soul normally inhabits and abandons a body are not yet understood, it is not possible to answer this question on an alchemical level. What we *can* do is examine the events that precede a person's first transformation and draw some preliminary conclusions.

The most well-known method of contagion is through intimate contact: bites, blood, carnal knowledge, and so on. This is not an infallible method; many people who survive attack by a skinwalker never exhibit any transformative powers of any kind. Reasoning from our theory, we believe that the unexamined factor may be the death of the attacking skinwalker. When such a creature dies, its animal soul may "jump" to a new body with which it resonates... because some of its tissues are already

inside it. After all, the animal soul *must* be capable of such a feat to have infested a human body in the first place. Given time, this should be an easy hypothesis to test.

We have also heard reports of more esoteric methods of becoming a skinwalker. In the Wildlands, it is commonly thought that drinking fresh rain water from a wolf's paw print can turn one into a werewolf. This may also be a case of resonance; if the wolf left any blood, hair, or other bodily material in the print, that material could be carried into the body along with the water. Similarly, Ereban folklore includes tales of magi who can skinwalk by wearing the pelt of an animal. More investigation is needed to determine the veracity of these stories and whether or not such magi are true skinwalkers.

## Implications for Future Research

Our findings could have broad theological ramifications. Knowing that souls can move from one body to another not only challenges traditional views of the soul, it makes effective immortality a scientific possibility. Clearly, this is a topic that deserves the full attention of our best minds, and the financial backing of the nobility.

# On Ereban Demographics & Social Organization

*(Editor's Note: Though he never mentions it himself, the author of this article is a lesser noble of the Crown Empire. He make his personal biases readily apparent, however. I urge the reader to keep this in mind when sorting fact from opinion.)*

Erebus is populated by four, five, or six distinct racial groups, depending on who one asks. The largest single demographic is the ashen-skinned jungle natives, usually called Ereban. The next most populous are westerners from the Crown Empire, though most rightly consider them two separate groups. Wayfarers from the southern islands and exiled subjects of the Order of the Moth round out the rest of the mainstream population. Finally, there are two groups of shapeshifters who lair in the shadows: Werewolves and Naga.

Each of these groups tend to congregate in homogenous neighborhoods called Havens. Residents try to make their havens as self-sufficient as possible,

even recruiting new members for their craft skills alone. They have their own taverns, their own shops, their own offices, their own security, and usually a community space of some kind for meetings and celebrations.

## Erebans

Although the other inhabitants of the city have co-opted the name, "Ereban" applies most correctly to those descended from the jungle peninsula's natives. They are a tall and gaunt race, with skin the color of ash. Upon meeting one, it is quite natural to suppose them a spectre, born from nightmares. Rather, they are the working class foundation up which the city of shadows is built.

You will find them in the city's New and Outer districts, though many work as waiters, servants, and laborers in Old City establishments that would not otherwise tolerate their presence. Small, informal family groups are the norm, usually three generations per household.

Decision-making is a fairly democratic activity, with male adults having the most authority, of course.

Natives, as they're also called, are simple folk. They work hard, marry, raise children, recreate, and live generally quiet lives. As with any primitive culture, violence is a daily occurrence. Most of the so-called "street predators" are Ereban. There are even a few native-only cults, like the notorious leopard-men and the Brotherhood of Ash. The chance of revolution is remote, however, given the docility of the breed.

## Wayfarers

The phrase "A Wayfarer's Luck" has already found its way into the lexicon of the west. It originates from the belief that the ocean people are blessed in a way that makes them difficult to restrain or imprison. Supposedly, ropes used to bind them will fray or unknot, and the locks of a jail will malfunction if a Wayfarer is placed inside. It is most likely that, being sailors and thieves, the Wayfarers are simply adept with rope and lock picks, but the belief in magic is quite common here.

These nomads are well known for their skill as sailors, and long years spent in the southern sun have left

their skins a deep brown color. Hair is usually bleached blonde and worn in large, ropey braids. Their clothing is always functional, owing nothing at all to fashion, and there is no difference between male and female dress.

Wayfarer havens are truly bizarre places, populated by those too young or old to live on the open ocean. There are no leaders and no laws; each person is free to do as they wish in all respects save one: they may not infringe upon the freedom of another. The only authorities they acknowledge are their Vigilanti protectors, whose job it is to arbitrate disputes and administer justice as they see fit. It is a political system ripe for gridlock and corruption.

## Easterners

There are two sorts of easterners one might encounter in Erebus, but only one is a true resident of the shadows. The Outcasts are merchants and dignitaries who have chosen to "corrupt" themselves by having contact with foreigners. They will never again be allowed to live in their homeland, but they do not live in Erebus.

Those who have been banished from the Forbidden Kingdom completely, or who have fled of their own volition, call themselves Exiles. They are a secretive,

insular people; very few live or work outside of their own havens. Social relationships are rigidly structured and based on familial clans.

Though they represent a small percentage of the population, exiles exert a tremendous force on Ereban culture. Their unique martial arts have spread through the city like a plague, as have their clothing, weapons, and culinary styles. They are easy to identify by their striking coloration: olive skin with jet black hair and eyes.

## Westerners

Anyone whose geneology has roots in the Crown Empire is commonly referred to as a "westerner." However, this group is actually two demographics. Those who hail from the cultured Northern Provinces are called "nobles," even though many are not of the aristocracy. Those from the Wildlands are called either "wilder" or "gunsligers," though the latter term is properly used only for wilder mercenaries.

Most of the nobles in Erebus are young males, the second sons of noble houses who have been sent here to manage their family's holdings. After a few years, they usually return to the motherland and take up positions as

ministers, sheriffs, advisors, and so forth. They are prone to flagrant displays of wealth, but such is the norm in the high class hotels and nightclubs of the Old City.

By virtue of their lawless and immoral lifestyles, the wilder are concentrated in the New City, where lawlessness and immorality run rampant. Their havens have nearly as many bars as houses, and rarely a single Church of the Crown (though heathen cults are popular). Prostitutes and gangs walk the streets openly. In other words, they are like the Wildlands in every respect.

It is worth noting that there are many men among both classes who call themselves Natural Philosophers. Noblemen tend to dabble in the field, with what little time they have to spare from business and social matters. Wilder philosophers are the professionals, simply because they have no other means of income. Research papers, like the one you are reading at present, are produced in equal quantity by both groups.

## Skinwalkers

Because they are at least tangentially descended from the above races, the shapeshifting skinwalkers are not often listed as their own demographics. In the case of



werewolves, this is more or less apt, as the vast majority look and act like wilder or natives. A few have lived, and bred, in their own packs for so long that they have developed their own cultures, but these are usually just random collections of wilder and wolf traits. They are merely wolves who walk like men, or men who act like wolves.

The Naga, however, are a phenomenon all their own. In the distant past, they were Ereban natives, but only a slight physical resemblance remains to testify to that fact. They all belong to the Cult of the Serpent, an extremely secretive and ritualized social order. It is run by an ancient serpent named Hss'vai and all other Naga are subservient to him.

There are only a few hundred Naga in the entire world, but they wield tremendous political power in Erebus; they founded and built Erebus, and they still own large swaths of real estate in the Old City. They guard their economic empire jealously and tolerate absolutely no dissent within their ranks.

## Inter-Breeding

As one would expect, there is blessedly little mingling between these groups, but some cross-over is bound to occur. I have personally verified the existence of two Western-Wayfarer half breeds, four east-west half breeds, and over a dozen western-native half breeds. As one might expect, the results of such unions exhibit mixed characteristics from both sides of their ancestry.

However, the matter of skinwalker half-breeds is far less clear. Most of the werewolves I've questioned began life as humans, and then were infected with lycanthropy. Some had werewolf parents, but were born human and only developed their shapeshifting abilities later in life. I've also heard of feral werewolf packs that breed litters of lupine cubs who may or may not become skinwalkers. It could be that lycanthropy truly is a disease, or a curse, and that the form their offspring take depends entirely upon the form of the mother during childbirth.

# Strength in Numbers

The Herald, Erebus' premier newspaper, keeps a registry of the cults and secret societies that infest the City of Shadows. For many Erebeans, this is the Herald's most useful feature, as knowing one's way around the city's Byzantine power games is just as important as knowing one's way around its labyrinthine streets.

In all honesty, most Erebeans are members of at least one organization listed in the registry. More than a few are members of two or three, whether or not those organizations are aware of the fact. For these individuals, the registry is a tool for keeping tabs on their adversaries and allies. The Herald's reports are renown for their investigative and counter-espionage skills. There is no better intelligence network available to anyone whose name is not Sir Erik.

This section contains registry entries for some of Erebus' most influential cults and conspiracies, as both an introduction to politics in the shadows and as a helpful resource for character ideas.

Each entry is organized into the following sections...

## *Cult Name*

A short overview of the cult.

### **Faith**

Core teachings and/or driving goals.

### **Boons**

- **Expertise** - Most cults excel in a particular field.
- **Other** - Cultists may possess other special "powers" or benefits of membership.

### **Anathema**

This section describes those things a cult's members are forbidden to do, under pain of expulsion, torture, or death.

### **History**

The origins of many cults are obscured by propaganda.

### **Allies**

Groups the cult is known to cooperate with.

### **Enemies**

Groups with conflicting beliefs or goals.

# Cult of the Serpent

All members of the Cult of the Serpent are Naga, and all Naga are members of the Cult of the Serpent. Unlike other skinwalkers, the Naga maintain tight control over their ranks, making them an efficient and secretive organization. Their wealth comes from control of the chemical trade in Erebus, while their political clout is rooted in a near monopoly on Old City real-estate. They have dominated the city of shadows for decades, and show no sign of relinquishing their power.

## Faith

The Naga believe that snakes are the most highly evolved forms of life in existence. They hold the serpentine form as their ideal, both physically and spiritually. Naga seek to embody all aspects of the snake: cunning, patience, ruthlessness, etc.

As an article of faith, the Naga have decreed that no snakes shall be harmed on any property owned by the Cult of the Serpent. As a result, most Naga buildings, and much of the Old City, are infested with them.

## Boons

- **Expertise** - Venom. Even if a Naga isn't involved in harvesting or prepring drugs, it's involved in their sale or application. They can use them to kill, heal, sedate, ease pain, cause intense hallucinations, and more.
- **Resources** - When on a mission for the cult, Naga can call upon vast networks of wealth and information. Those who rent property from the cult are also easily to pressed into service... with a little persuasion.
- **Brother Serpent** - No serpentine creature will harm a member of the cult, even under coercion.

## Anathema

Naga who repeatedly display traits opposed to the Serpentine Ideals soon find themselves in poor standing with their kin and without access to the cult's resources. Such traits include cowardice, impatience, and mercy.

Nor may a Naga ever betray the cult. Anyone who does so is afflicted with ghastly wounds that open of their own accord and leave scars that brand them a traitor forever... or so the cultists are lead to believe. There has never been a confirmed account of this curse being used.

Such is the solidarity of the Naga.

Finally, no Naga may harm a snake or allow a snake to come to harm.

## History

The Naga were the driving force behind the creation of Erebus nearly a century ago, when they turned the natives to slaves and built the Old City. Since then, they have remained one of its most powerful organizations, not to mention land lord to most of Old Erebus. Their control over the chemical trade has never been seriously challenged, only partially thanks to a law that legitimizes it. Their Machiavellian beliefs form the foundation of the Council system and have trickled down into every facet of Ereban life. They are happy to rule from the shadows.

## Allies

The Naga have a long-standing alliance of convenience with the Society of Bliss, whose members purchase fully half of the psychoactive chemicals the cult sells. The Naga deal with other Councilors, organizations, and lesser cults on a daily basis, but do not form perm-

anent allegiances. They prefer to keep their options open.

## Enemies

The Cult of the Serpent is almost universally feared in Erebus. No one trusts such a close-knit and secretive group, and there are few who do not fear their power. Many groups openly oppose them, but the Naga rarely wage war against those who are "below their notice."



# The Purifiers

The Purifiers hold their position on the Council by virtue of the fact that they dominate nearly every trade, market, and academic field in Erebus. They are known for their relentless pursuit of self-improvement and general scorn for those they consider inferior.

Their holy symbol is called the Cross of Purity. The vertical line represents the spectrum of natural qualities, with the horizontal line separating the highest qualities from the rest. The glowing point at the top represents Perfection, that state to which all Purifiers aspire.

## Faith

The Purifiers believe that the World was created by The Reaper: a primal, feral god who set it in motion and then fell into a deep slumber. When this god awakens, he will ravage the world and drive all imperfect beings into the sea. Only the Paragons, beings who have achieved some kind of perfection, will be spared.

The Cult of Purification teaches its members to find the one thing they are best at and develop that skill, talent, or ability to its peak. Only by perfecting such facilities can

one hope to survive The Purge. (Assuming it occurs in one's lifetime...) They consider self-improvement and competition to be the noblest of human endeavors.

## Boons

- **Expertise** - Everything... and nothing. Each member of the cult chooses their own field of expertise, though the Ereban fighting styles are remarkably common.
- **Prodigy** - Whatever the field, there's a purifier who's an expert in it. This gives every purifier access to a vast pool of talent (at discounted rates).
- **Purity** - Strict (some might say paranoid) health regimens make purifiers highly resistant to "corrupting" influences like disease and poison.

## Anathema

No Purifier may use artificial means to enhance their performance, in mind or in body. This includes alchemy, drugs, magic, firearms, and many other staples of Ereban life. (Bladed weapons are fine, but they cannot have any mechanical parts.) Purifiers who use such things only weakens themselves in the long run.

## History

The Cult of Purification was the third major religion to arise in Erebus, and the last one to earn a seat on the Council. By its very nature, the cult holds positions of power in every niche in the city, though it *controls* none of them. Gangs of purifier mercenaries are a force to be reckoned with on the streets, especially in the Old City where they dominate the protection rackets.

Many purifier historians claim that the Reaper myth is native to the Ereban peninsula and can be traced back to the beginning of recorded history. However, evidence for this is spotty, at best, and such theories are not well-respected in the philosophical community. Regardless of its origins, the purifier mythos, with its promise of a path to perfection, holds a powerful appeal for many Ereban.

## Allies

The Purifiers have no real allies. If they cannot do something on their own, it's not worth doing. Besides, they're already the best at everything, so what could an outsider have to offer?

## Enemies

Everyone, even themselves. With such a self-centered faith, Purifiers are bound to step on a lot of toes. The cult is built on internal competition, so rivalries on the inside can be far more volatile than those on the outside.



# *The Society of Bliss*

Blissites believe that the only objective morality is physical pleasure, and they pursue it with incredible vigor. Their Temples of Bliss have become Erebus' primary entertainment venues, and the Society has a virtual monopoly on the industries that entails. Their wealth and popularity have earned them a seat on the Council, though they rarely take a strong interest in politics.

## Faith

The Blissites believe in no gods, no prophecies, no afterlife. They believe only that which their senses tell them: Pain is Bad, Pleasure is Good. They see earthly delight as humanity's most noble pursuit, and the only one to which we can aspire with any hope of success. Hedonism is a simple and tempting philosophy.

Generally speaking, their aversion to pain tends to turn Blissites into pacifists. However, there are enough adrenaline junkies among them that assuming any given Blissite can't fight is a good way to get stabbed. There are always hired guns at the Temples of Bliss, too.

## Boons

- **Expertise** - Sensation. Blissites can stimulate any kind of physical or emotional sensation. The only tools they require are music, dance, drugs, or sex. This is not Mesmerism, though it can be used to manipulate the weak-willed with ease. They make great performers!
- **Sanctuary** - There are Temples of Bliss in every corner of Erebus, and all of them will provide safe haven for any blissite in need.
- **Allure** - Blissites have a hard-earned reputation for friendliness and sensuality. They always make good first impressions and can befriend anyone who does not already have a reason to hate or mistrust them.

## Anathema

Self-denial. Blissites never make a habit of putting off pleasurable experiences, working hard, or denying themselves anything they desire. The demands of daily life require a little of this kind of behavior, but Blissites who engage in it too often will quickly lose the respect of their fellows, not to mention their membership boons.

## History

It is believed that the Society of Bliss originated with a group of Wayfarers who were lured to Erebus by the availability of luxury goods and services. However, as the Blissites are horrible at keeping records, this theory cannot be validated. What we do know is that many Wayfarers harbor a special loathing for Blissites.

The Society grew into its roll as Erebus' major entertainment source quite naturally. Visitors gravitated towards their friendly faces and warm personalities, as well as to their lavish buffets and exotic parties. Few have the total devotion to the flesh that the Society demands of its members, but everyone wishes they did. Blissites are by far the most popular people in the shadows.

## Allies

Early on, the Society of Bliss formed an alliance of convenience with the Naga. The Blissites desired mood-enhancing chemicals and the Naga provided them... in great quantity. This economic relationship blossomed into a strong political alliance with the formation of the Council, and continues unchallenged to the present.

## Enemies

None of consequence. A few groups, like the Church of Flesh & Spirit, view the hedonists as corruptors, but they just avoid the Temples of Bliss and get on with their bland, boring lives.





# The Ferryman

As their name might indicate, this gang of ruffians operates the ferry that connects the northern and southern banks of the River Styx. They're a motley collection of men and women from all parts of the city, each driven to desperation by some trauma or tragedy. The Ferryman erase their memories, free them from their pasts, in return for willing participation in their brutally enforced monopoly.

## Faith

The Ferryman operate more like a street gang than a religious cult, but they do espouse a philosophy of sorts. Devoid of past identities, the Ferryman have nothing in this world but each other. They are unconditionally loyal to the group and its business, and no member is held accountable for the sins of their former life, no matter how grievous. Any outsiders who try to seek revenge for such sins must go through the entire group first. Should they succeed, the Ferryman will seek vengeance in kind.

## Boons

- **Expertise** - The fearsome reputation of the Ferryman pervades the city of shadows. Anyone who invokes their name while trying to intimidate others gets instant cooperation. Of course, anyone who invokes their name *falsely* will soon find themselves on the Ferryman's hit list.
- **Redemption** - Ferryman are protected from the consequences of their past sins. However, this boon does not protect them from new enemies they make *after* they become Ferryman.
- **Ferry** - Ferryman are known to traverse the River Styx with unusual speed. They will often show up near the river, on either bank, just minutes after being seen miles away. They foster the impression that this is magic, but others have speculated about a network of hidden boats that stretches all along the river. They never allow outsiders to travel with them.

## Anathema

Because their boons are derived directly from the support of their fellow Ferryman, those boons are lost if

they ever betray the group. Specifically, it is forbidden to reveal the secrets of their ability to induce amnesia or to travel the river so quickly. It is also anathema to hold the sins of a brother's past life against him, or to fail to defend a brother against enemies from his past.

## History

Back in the city's younger days, the only way to cross the River Styx was to hire a boat to take you. A few of these boats were owned by natives who decided to stay in town and make ferry service a full time job. Persistent rumors suggest that these men were shamans of some jungle religion, but this has proven impossible to confirm.

In time, they expanded their operation by building a permanent rope ferry and recruiting the first Ferrymen from among the refugees that crowded Erebus' shanty towns. They offered these men and women absolution for past sins, lucrative employment, and a family of sorts. This was the beginning of the Ferrymen as they are known today.

No one outside the cult is allowed to ferry people across the river for money, period. Transporting family and friends for free is fine, but only the Ferrymen are allowed to profit by it. Cargo ships are also allowed to operate freely.

Anyone who infringes on their business will quickly find their boats burned, their fingers broken, or their families taken hostage. It's just good business.

## Allies

Many Purifiers respect the Ferrymen's accomplishments, but no formal alliance exists between the two cults. Most people try to stay on their good side as a simple matter of convenience; the Ferrymen are not above denying service to people who piss them off.

## Enemies

Every so often, someone tries to challenge the Ferrymen's monopoly and either starts their own ferry service or tries to take over the existing ferry. These "river wars" always make headlines, but so far no one has been able to unseat the reigning champ.

# Fallen Legacy

This group of Crown expatriates has established itself in the underground world of professional rebellion, supporting other insurgent groups with money, weapons, and political influence. Their primary goal is to end the rule of the Crown Empire's royal family and establish a democratic government. Their symbol, a jeweled crown broken into three pieces, is a reference to this dream.

## Faith

At their best, iconoclasts embody the democratic virtues of individual rights, self-determination, equality, and so on. They treat everyone as equals and never seek to force their will upon others. At their worst, iconoclasts are disaffected noble wannabes who conceal their greed and jealousy behind a mask of idealism. If given half a chance, they'd cash those ideals in for a slice of the monarchy pie. Most iconoclasts occupy the vast gray space between these extremes.

## Boons

**Expertise** - Fallen Legacy has been forced to excel in all aspects of espionage and counter-intelligence. If an iconoclast doesn't want to be found, they aren't found. Plain and simple. Their facility for covert communication allows them to send secret messages throughout the city in a matter of mere hours, even if they don't know the recipient's exact whereabouts.

**Contacts** - If nothing else, Fallen Legacy is a social club for western dissidents. If a member needs a favor from someone in a position of power (and the position is not connected to nobility, see below), there's usually an iconoclast in or near said position, ready to lend a hand.

**Goodies** - The iconoclasts have weapons depots and smuggling ships all over the city of shadows. They specialize in alchemical weapons and armor.

## Anathema

Iconoclasts are strictly forbidden to have servants, derive wealth or station from the monarchy, marry into noble blood, or associate with nobility of any kind. (Of course, this last vow is waved for those assigned to

undercover work.) This means that most iconoclasts live in Wildland or Wayfarer havens, far away from the western "high society" of Old Erebus. They also lose out on many business deals because of their inability to work with noble money, goods, or partners.

## History

Fallen Legacy began as a conspiracy to topple the monarchy of the Crown Empire. Its members included many deposed nobles, illegitimate sons, wealthy (but "common") merchants, and political radicals. After a failed attempt to start an uprising in the capital city of Throne, many fled to Erebus in hopes of living to fight another day.

Instead, the iconoclasts have carved out a niche for themselves by supporting *other* insurgent groups in their military endeavors. Specifically, they use their contacts within the Crown to stockpile alchemical weapons, armor, and medical supplies, then sell them off to anyone who can 1) prove their cause is just, and 2) afford to pay. They also launder money for a number of rebel groups, utilizing a complex network of phony businesses and charities.

To be fair, Fallen Legacy does more than most cults to support legitimate charities. Their members have

been known to use their political connections on behalf of democratic movements that have nothing to do with the monarchy. They also make donations to orphanages, clinics, and soup kitchens in the New City.

Beyond all of this, most members still foresee a day when Fallen Legacy will return to the Crown and topple the monarchy forever. Whether or not this goal is still shared by the group's leadership is debatable.

## Allies

The legion of insurgent groups supported by Fallen Legacy's services is certainly a political resource, but these groups are more like business clients than true allies. They cannot be counted on for any assistance that might threaten their own goals or security.

## Enemies

The Crown monarchy and all the noble houses whose wealth and power are derived from it. This includes Sir Erik of Knightlund... a fact that can make life in Erebus remarkably difficult for iconoclasts.

# Church of Flesh & Spirit

These heretics from the Crown Empire are famous for two things: charity and moral decency, both of which border on the ludicrous. They operate many hospitals in New Erebus and never turn away a patient. On the other hand, one never knows what kind of side-effects may result from their experimental, alchemical treatments. Most “menders” are little more than amateur philosophers with an obsessive aversion to anything fun.

## Faith

Menders believe in a sharp divide between the spirit, which is a holy spark of the Creator's own essence, and the flesh, which is made from the Earth and therefore impure. The body, in essence, is a prison for the soul.

They strive to bring their flesh to a state of divinity through a dizzying array of alchemical processes. Ultimately, they hope to elevate their bodies to the same divine state of perfection as their spirits, uniting their flesh with their souls... and their god. The catch is that they're

not even close to unlocking the secret of that transformation and, in their zeal for experimentation, they have turned hundreds of sick men and women into unspeakable abominations.

## Boons

- **Expertise** - Alchemical medicine. All menders are required to spend time tending the sick, and their techniques are on the bleeding edge of research into pharmacology, biology, and anatomy.
- **Divinity** - Clean living (and alchemical meddling) has gifted most menders with an increased resistance to disease and injury.
- **Forthright** - Menders have a reputation for honesty and reliability. This makes them popular among criminal types in need of accountants and back alley surgeons.

## Anathema

Just as they strive to purify the flesh, menders also steadfastly avoid corrupting the spirit. Worldly things like wealth, sex, and frivolous entertainment are of the flesh and, therefore, impure. Most go so far as to avoid brightly

colored clothes, loud music, and dancing. You will *never* see a mender inside a Temple of Bliss!

In addition to that laundry list of taboos, menders are forbidden to deny medical help to anyone in need. This makes their hospitals excellent places for thieves and vagrants to get their wounds tended. Violating these rules will get a mender excommunicated and, without their alchemical treatments, many die agonizing deaths.

## History

The Crown Church fully embraces Natural Philosophy and the alchemical sciences that have sprung from it. However, it could not tolerate the sheer fanaticism with which the menders embraced human experimentation. Their severe attitude toward sin alienated them from the rest of western society early on, so when one of their experiments turned a nobleman's daughter into a gibbering cannibal, the backlash was severe.

The menders fled to Erebus, where they set up shop in the New City. To date, they have constructed over a dozen hospitals there, each with its own mender haven.

Though the frequency of "monsterism" resulting from their experimental treatments has declined in

recent years, freaks still turn up from time to time. By and large, the menders take excellent care of their mistakes, caring for them in isolated hospital wards. None have escaped into the general population or, if they have, none have done enough damage to get noticed... yet.

## Allies

Like easterners, menders tend to keep to themselves. They are generally well regarded, due to their charity and forthrightness, but most people only interact with them when they need medical attention. Many street predators refuse to take jobs that target menders or mender havens, out of appreciation for their services.

## Enemies

The menders are among the few people in Erebus who actively hate the Society of Bliss. They never set foot in the Temples of Bliss and avoid dealing with blissites whenever all possible. Quite simply, they think the hedonists are evil personified.

# The Leapord-Men

From the primitive villiages of the forest primeval, these dangerous natives have come to Erebus for reasons unknown. They are believed to worship the Guar, feline skinwalkers that no civilized eyes have ever seen. The witches among them command strange, dark magics that they use to curse their enemies, and their soldiers maul victims with the claw-like weapons that are their calling card. (Normal animal attacks are often mistaken for the work of the Leapord-Men, which only adds to their fearsome reputation.)

## Faith

The leapord-men have no true religion, they simply obey the will of their masters. Whether those masters are truly skinwalkers, or just native con men who have created a wildly successful scam, no one knows. To the victims of the leapord-men's violence, and to the targets of their witchcraft, there is precious little difference.

## Boons

- **Expertise** - Witchcraft. The leapord-men's witches claim to command Guar spirits. Their "curses" are codified instructions for these spirits. Sometimes, the victim will receive a note with arcane script, or be publically cursed. It is likely that the true power of these curses is in the fear they inspire in the superstitious.
- **Way of the Claw** - The cult's warriors practice a fighting style unique to them, without any connection to the styles of the east. It focuses on ambush tactics and the use of their wooden claw weapons.
- **Reputation** - The leapord-men's presence is felt most acutely in the Outer City. There, anyone who hears that a witch has cursed them either flees or seeks help from an occultist of their own.

## Anathema

Failing or betraying the Guar will get a leapord-man more than expelled from the cult, it will get him hunted by his former comrades. This is a major part of the reason why inside information is so hard to come by.

## History

If the Ereban natives are to be believed, the Guar have ruled over much of the jungle's western territory for untold centuries. These remote areas have yet to feel the footfalls of western explorers, so such claims are impossible to verify. Nor has the existence of the Guar themselves been proved. Should their be truth to these tales, it would presage grave danger for the loggers and settlers who are working to open up the jungle's interior.

The leapord-men first showed up in Erebus twenty years ago, when the city's size became too great for the nearby farming villages to support. Sir Erik sent an envoy into the jungle to recruit more native merchants. Though the envoy never returned, boats full of fish, produce, and fur began to course down the River Styx like a flood. It is doubtful that *all* of these newcomers were sent by the Guar, but they certainly brought the Guar's cult with them.

The leapord-men set up shop at the jungle-infested edges of the city, which helped drive the development of Outer Erebus. Those who followed them quickly learned to fear the mark of their claw weapons. They do not seem to desire political power, they just ruthlessly punish anyone who displeases them.

## Allies

It should come as no surprise by this point that the leapord-men's allegiances are not well known. By most indicators, they are remarkably self-sufficient. However, some of their recent actions have supported the interests of a nationalist movement called the Brotherhood of Ash. It is odd to think the nationalists would ally with those who serve the Guar, as their goal is Ereban independence, not servitude to a mysterious race of skinwalkers. This signals either extraordinary desperation on the part of the nationalists or an unsolicited show of support from the leapord-men. Or perhaps it is only a coincidence.

## Enemies

Everyone who operates a protection racket in the New and Outer Cities. There have been rumblings of trouble between the leapord-men and the Ferryman over control of the river markets, where all those merchants from the interior sell their goods. There are also many self-righteous cultists who would be happy to wipe the leapord-men's witches off the face of the earth, or plunder their secrets for themselves.



# Brotherhood of Ash

This conspiracy of natives wants nothing less than total control over the City of Shadows and the Ereban jungle, and they are willing to push everyone else into the sea to get it. They have been spreading roots throughout the Ereban underworld for years, building the foundation of a populist revolt.

## Faith

The Brothers are dedicated to attaining sovereignty and self-government for the Ereban peninsula. They believe that the Naga and the foreigners have taken by violence what rightfully belongs to them. Thus, they will use violence to gain their restitution.

If they value anything, it is loyalty to one's brothers. Theirs is a war of race: Ereban natives versus everyone else. Division within the ranks cannot be tolerated. This can make them vulnerable to betrayal and blind to potential allies.

## Boons

- **Expertise** - Guerilla warfare. As opposed to other forms of warfare, guerilla wars are fought in the streets and villages of a rebellious population, rather than on a neutral battlefield. Soldiers hide among civilians and depend on them for support.
- **Connections** - The Brotherhood has established safe houses all over New Erebus and the Outer City.
- **Nobody** - Brothers are also adept at vanishing into the crowds that clog Erebus. In Outer Erebus and the river markets, they can vanish almost at will.

## Anathema

As mentioned above, disloyalty to one's fellow natives is unimaginable to many Brothers. Anyone who betrays their cause had better flee the continent immediately if they wish to see another sunrise. Even the suspicion of disloyalty can get one blocked from the Brotherhood's safehouses.

## History

The spirit of the Brotherhood of Ash was born the day a mob of Naga took over a small fishing village and named it "Erebus." They pressed the natives into service, building many of the obsidian towers that still make up the Old City. Then, they claimed ownership for themselves, leaving the true builders of Erebus with nothing.

The arrival of westerners from the Crown Empire only continued the trend. They sent logging companies into the jungle and offered displaced natives nothing in return, save "employment" as laborers and servants. Their missionaries opened houses of charity to aid the impoverished natives, but only if they abandoned their own cultures and embraced the Crown Church.

The organization spawned in reaction to these forces has only been recognized for less than a decade. No single founder has ever been named. Instead, it would appear that the Brotherhood is exactly that, an egalitarian society of equals who share a singular purpose. Their command structure remains diffuse, consisting of many small cells that can operate independently for prolonged periods of time. This make them difficult to eradicate, as their foreign enemies may soon discover.

## Allies

The Brotherhood finds most of its allies among the common people of Erebus. Official alliances with other cults are unheard of, but there is strong evidence of a business arrangement with Fallen Legacy. Certain actions attributed to the so-called "leopard-men" seem to support the Brotherhood's interests. Since these fanatics serve a race of skinwalkers, it seems unlikely that the independent Brotherhood would seek out their help, but stranger things have happened.

## Enemies

The Cult of the Serpent is considered the Brotherhood's enemy #1. They work constantly to undermine the Naga's interests, though complete success in such a daunting task is beyond their present resources. More productive battles are fought with individual noble houses and companies from the Crown.

## Blazing Action

Violence is a way of life in Erebus. This section covers Protection Rackets, Street Predators, the Blood Dance, Ereban fighting styles, weapons, and armor.

### *Protection Rackets*

By and large, the "laws" of Erebus are economic, not social, and there is no single body tasked with enforcing them. This means that average citizens, as well as most tourists, are left to their own devices when it comes to theft, swindling, and violent crime. From the most affluent hotel districts of the Old City to the most vine-choked shanty towns of Outer Erebus, cults and street gangs have taken it upon themselves to keep their neighborhoods safe... for a price. It's called "Protection" and it comes in a wide variety of flavors.

At its best, a protection racket is a business, just like any other. Residents and shop keepers in an area pay their "wardens" a monthly fee. In return, the wardens run patrols, investigate crimes, and punish anyone who takes

advantage of one of their "wards." Everybody wins, except the criminals, but they get what they deserve.

At its worst, a protection racket is exactly that: a racket. A gang muscles into an area, declares it their territory, and extorts a monthly "fee" from the locals. They keep other gangs out of the area, but only to enforce their claim on the territory. Petty criminals are allowed to ply their trade as long as no one catches them... and they give the gang a hefty cut of their earnings.

Of course, you do get the altruistic types every once in a while, who protect their friends and neighbors in the spirit of charity, taking only what their wards can afford to give. If the wardens are skilled, and have another means of income, this can actually work. Most of the time, the amateurs only manage to get themselves killed by thieves or a gang looking to expand its territory.

A few neighborhoods take the communal approach. Residents work as a volunteer militia, patrolling their own streets and enforcing their own "community standards." Such neighborhoods make unattractive territories, as they

are more trouble than most gangs are willing to deal with. However, such minute men are rarely skilled at fighting street wars and investigating crimes. Savvy protection businesses often make it a point to demonstrate their talents to such neighborhoods, hoping to convince the locals to let professionals handle the job.

Finally, it is worth noting that Wayfarer havens almost never fall into one of the above categories. Instead, they are protected by vigilanti, warrior-monks native to the Wayfarer's Concord. These almost mythical figures act as mediators, judges, and police. They cannot be bribed or lied to, and few can beat them in a fair fight.

## *Street Predators*

Absent the rule of law, there is nothing to stop the basest elements of Ereban society from running rough shod over those who retain even a shred of moral restraint. Ambush tactics, mind-clouding mesmerists, alchemical weapons, and other kinds of foul play can lay low even the most experienced soldier before their blade even leaves its sheath. There is no safety in the shadows.

Street predators rebel against these injustices by imposing their own rules of war on the street. They are

duellists who never use firearms, magic, or deception. They don't take hostages or use excessive force, especially against those weaker than themselves. They fight with blades, fists, and skill, nothing more.

But similarly chivalrous movements have occurred in western culture, too. What makes the street predators different is the unique way in which they combine chivalry with brutality and terror. Notice how the name "street predator" bares little relation to their noble ideals, conjuring instead images out of nightmare.

## *Know Thy Self*

The sad fact of the matter is that nightmares *do* prowl the shadows. Those native to Erebus have grown up fearing them. They have been running from thugs, thieves, and monsters all their lives. Eventually, everyone tires of being afraid. Street predators defy their fear by becoming the things that scare them. They become the nightmare, tempered by a warrior's honor. It is a potent combination that spread through Erebus like wildfire.

Street predators cultivate fearsome reputations. Leather armor is a staple of the street predator wardrobe, as are metal spikes and decorative scars. No two

predators would be caught dead in *exactly* the same attire, however. Some use animal motifs, while others imitate the knights of the Crown or the "ninja" of the east. A few build their costumes around a signature color, like blood red or midnight black.

Weapons are another favorite avenue for self-expression. Though they eschew deception, most street predators have at least one "trick" weapon. Spring-loaded knives concealed in sleeves, double-bladed swords that split into twin sabers, and specialized arrow heads for cutting rope or lighting fires are common gimmicks.

## Know Thy Enemy

The street predator subculture has evolved beyond a mere reaction to the external horrors of Ereban life. It also has a well-defined internal structure, a pecking order based on fighting skill and reputation. By and large, street predators are far too independent to form a coherent cult or conspiracy; theirs is a purely social community.

Status is determined by duel, usually to first blood. If the loser wishes to continue fighting, the rule changes to submission, meaning one combatant must admit defeat or fall unconscious. Deaths are not unheard of.

Challenges can be made for any reason, but business conflicts and matters of honor are most common. Settling these disputes is the primary reason for the wild block parties that Street Predators call "frenzies."

## *The Blood-Dance*

The lives of Erebus' jungle natives are difficult ones; the threat of death looms over them at all times. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that one of their favorite past times is intimately tied to violence. Like most other parts of their culture, the blood dance has immigrated with them to the City of Shadows.

Blood Dancers are one part warrior, one part artist, and one part celebrity. Most also apply their skills towards mercenary work, but what they live for is the roar of the crowd and the adulation of their fans. Many non-natives regard them as braggarts and amateurs, but to those who attend the blood dances, they are heroes.

A certain enmity has always existed between the Blood Dancers and Street Predators. Neither is welcome at the other's gatherings, and most have a hard time even working together. Coin, of course, is a powerful motivator.

## Form Over Function

Everything about a blood dancer *must* be flashy. Men wear sashes and billowy shirts that hang open at the chest, while women wear as little as possible. Armor is almost non-existent, unless one counts gold and silver jewelry as armor. Elaborate tattoos chronicle their victories, but never obscure their famous faces.

Their fighting techniques are spectacular, if not particularly efficient. High kicks and acrobatic dodges are crowd favorites. Weapons are light and decorative, designed to attack fast and look pretty. Rapiers are easily the most popular, followed by daggers, staves, and whips. The Way of the Fox and Way of the Monkey have become signature fighting styles for a number of blood dancers.

Even more than the arts of war, these performers must be masters of "trash talk." A blood dancer without charm is doomed, whereas a charismatic dancer without fighting skill simply loses more often. Their pecking order is determined by crowd reaction: he who is loved by the people is a success, regardless of their record. (Of course, kicking a ton of ass is a great way to win fans.)

## The Blood Dance

Blood dances are major events in the New City, attracting hundreds of spectators from every demographic. They are usually sponsored by a tavern, hotel, or other establishment that supplies the arena and refreshments. Bets are taken on each fight and most spectators wager at least a coin or two on their favorite contender. For those behind the scenes, dances are profitable business.

The evening's festivities begin with a few comedic bouts, just to get the crowd warmed up. Then, the host brings the first two combatants into the arena and gives them each a minute or two to address the audience. They explain why they wish to fight their opponent, boast about their skills and victories, and generally slander their adversary. Interjections from the audience, witty and otherwise, are common.

Each duel is fought to first blood. The most popular dancers learn to drag out their fights by using blunt weapons or easily dodged attacks at first, only breaking out the blades after the crowd has been whipped into a frenzy. It is a dangerous game, but to a blood dancer, popularity is more important than life.

# *Ereban Fighting Styles* Way of the Tiger

These martial arts have reached Erebus by way of immigrants and refugees from the Order of the Moth. There, peasants are not allowed to own weapons of any kind, so they have had to invent their own methods of self-defense. For any easterner who knows them, instructing eager street predators and mercenaries in these techniques is an easy path to financial security. (For Wushu players, they are a handy source of Embellishments.)

## Way of the Viper

A focused study of human anatomy will reveal a great number of weaknesses in the body's motor and sensory systems. Often called "pressure points," these vulnerable spots can be targeted for a variety of debilitating attacks. Vipers learn how to blind, paralyze, and knock out opponents with quick, precise sequences of blows. Most effects are temporary, but last long enough to end most fights, and can be reversed at any time by someone who knows the Way of the Viper or an eastern healing art.

This brutal style favors direct, crushing attacks over any kind of defense or misdirection. The goal is to take your opponent down as fast and hard as possible. Skilled Tigers can break wood and stone with their bare hands. After that, breaking people's arms is a snap.

## Way of the Tortoise

Developed as a response to the brutality of Tiger style, the Way of the Tortoise gives combatants nearly unbeatable defensive capabilities. The focus is on blocks and throws that take incoming attacks and turn them away, leaving the defender unharmed and unmoved. Once a Tortoise digs in, nothing can dislodge them.

## Way of the Fox

Another defensive style, the Way of the Fox teaches that the best defense is distance. Foxes never stop moving during a fight, constantly weaving, leaping, and ducking in acrobatic flips and rolls. A skilled Fox is nearly impossible to hit and can escape any brawl.

## Way of the Monkey

Named after the infamous "monkey dodge," this style is a collection of techniques for turning opponents' advantages against them. When fighting a group, monkey style allows a warrior to redirect attacks from one enemy onto another through dodges and grappling. Monkeys can also grapple an enemy's weapon and turn it against them with deft twists, or throw them by using their own weight and momentum against them. Being repeatedly beaten by a skilled Monkey is a humiliating, not to mention painful, experience.

## Way of the Gun

Developed by an eastern gunslinger, this is the newest of the Ereban fighting styles. Its students learn how to exploit the limitations of human speed and coordination to make themselves harder to hit. To observers, it appears as if they can dodge bullets. They also learn how to disable guns and disarm gunmen with slieght of hand. The Way of the Gun is popular among gunslingers (who want an edge in a firefight) and street predators (who want to even the odds against gunslingers).

## Ereban Weapons

Weapons are an unfortunate necessity of life in the City of Shadows. The descriptions should be enough to let you run them in Wushu without any trouble... well, except for the trouble you *want* to start!

### Blades

**Fang** - A wicked sword favored by street predators. The end of the blade curves forward for extra chopping power. They were supposedly developed in Erebus, from harvesting tools used by the natives.

**Render** - These reserve weapons are composed of 2-3 short blades mounted on a glove or bracer. They can catch and hold an opponent's blade, as well as stab and slash like nobody's business. There are even a few mechanical versions that retract their blades into sheaths and use springs to extend them with a flick of the wrist.

**Stinger** - Similar to the Render, this is a gauntlet that has been covered in outward-facing blades. They make the weaer's arms almost impossible to grab and add a whole lot of pain to unarmed blocks.



**Deckblade** - These traditional Wayfarer swords are tools first and weapons second. Their hilts make up fully half of their total length and feature a variety of loops and hooks useful to sailors and fishermen. The blade is serrated along one edge for sawing, and features a hook-like false edge near the tip.

## Guns

**Handcannon** - The basic model is a dime a dozen on the streets of Erebus. It can only fire one bullet at a time, so new ammo must be loaded between shots, usually just by dropping it down the barrel.

**Reloader** - Bulkier and a bit more complicated, the reloader is a handcannon that carries extra ammo in a cylinder under the barrel. After a shot, a new bullet can be loaded simply by pulling down a lever under the trigger.

**Repeater** - The most complex gun on the market loads a new round into the barrel after each trigger pull by mounting a pair of clips above the barrel in a "V" shape. An internal mechanism opens a door in the bottom of one clip each time the trigger is pulled. Gravity does the rest. They fire 2-3 times faster than a reloader and can empty a whole clip in the time it takes to fire a handcannon once.

**Bolt Thrower** - These infamous weapons fire bolts of lightning instead of bullets. They use alchemical ammo (phlogiston), their barrels are lined with special mirrors, and they're encased in metal support struts to contain the force of the blast. Otherwise, they work exactly the same as a regular handcannon.

## Ammo

**Blood Burn** - Alchemical alloys cause these bullets to infuse anything they touch with chaos... also known as heat. They leave trails of flame as they pass through the air and set aflame anything they hit. You can imagine what happens when one gets buried in a man's stomach!

**Cold Lead** - Using an inverted form of the Blood Burn alloy, these slugs *absorb* chaos from anything they touch, freezing them solid. This effect can be used to make objects more breakable or to put a victim into "suspended animation." (Alchemists can thaw them out weeks later, with only minimal damage.) The bullets leave a tell-tale trail of icy fog as they pass through the air.

**Phlogiston** - Firing one of these rounds in anything but a Bolt Thrower will only destroy the gun, and most likely your hand. Each contains a mixture of Aire and Fyre

held just below its chaos threshold. When the gun's Philosopher's Stone firing pin punctures the casing, it transmutes into a bolt of lightning!

## **A**rmor

**Impervium** - This thin, light weight metal is virtually unbreakable. An impervium breastplate can stop a bullet with ease, not to mention a sword, and can be worn comfortably under a robe or cloak. It's also so expensive that only Crown nobles, their bodyguards, and other excessively rich people can afford it. (Any who manage to steal one shouldn't plan on keeping it for very long.)

**Righteous Weave** - Originally invented for winter clothing, this alchemical fabric regulates its own temperature, staying warm in the coldest tundra and cool in the most parched desert. It also negates the effects of Blood Burn and Cold Lead rounds (but not Phlogiston), rendering them like normal bullets.



# Dark Intrigue

Action might be the name of the game, but everyone needs a *reason* to fight. Complex, interesting plots come from politics, and Erebus has that in spades! This section provides a handy framework for populating conspiracies with a cast of intriguing characters and some advice for running live-action games set in the City of Shadows.

## *The Chess Metaphor*

Those who play Erebus' treacherous power games have developed a shorthand for identifying the people who play important parts in any conspiracy. This shorthand uses the terminology of chess, a game that was brought to Erebus by Sir Erik of Knightlund. Appropriately enough, he is one of its grand masters.

The chess metaphor can be used to describe anything from a single cult to a conspiracy that reaches into dozens of organizations. Very few of the people involved know who they're really working for, or even what goals their actions ultimately serve. This works both ways; those at the top are often deceived by their own underlings. Plots

within plots, wheels with wheels.

**Pawns** - The expendable freelancers and ignorant dupes who do most of Erebus' dirty deeds are called what they are: pawns. They're useless as sources of information, but you can occasionally track them back to a more informed middleman...

**Rooks** - Someone has to wrangle all those idiot pawns! Rooks are the money men. They don't want power or glory, they just wanna get paid. Consequently, you can't really trust them. Rooks know no more than they need to know. In some cases, their bosses actively *misinform* them, just in case they get tortured or hypnotised or greedy. They're not masterminds, but they have enough connections to be dangerous. The ambitious ones eventually betray their masters and try to build a little criminal empire of their own. Most just end up dead, killed by a their master's Knight or some other Rook's pawns.

**Knights** - Also known as enforcers, cleaners, hit men, and legbreakers, these are the stone cold killers of Erebus' political underworld. They are highly skilled, well-equipped, and often driven by a fanatical passion for their

cause. However, knights are just a the tools of the real power players and may not know whose interests their crusades ultimately serve. On the bright side, if someone you're investigating sends one of their knights after you, at least you know you're on the right track!

**Bishops** - A Bishop's power comes from cash. They they are moneylenders, land owners, merchants and pirates who hold a conspiracy's purse strings. They give Rooks money to hire pawns, keep Knights well-equipped for battle, and make sure none of those transactions are traceable. They protect themselves by acting through (and lying to) their Rooks and by sending their knights after anyone who's too much trouble for mere pawns to handle.

**Queens** - Despite the strategic importance of its king, the real mastermind at the center of any political web is the queen. In the most severe cases, this is the *only* person who sees the whole picture (excepting the actions of double-dealing underlings, of course). Taking out the queen will cripple a conspiracy, but not destroy it. As long as there's still one flag to rally around (i.e. the king), a new queen will eventually rise to take the reigns.

**Kings** - No conspiracy can survive without it's king, but these figureheads have no real power. They are the charismatic leaders of cults and the noble second sons of

western trading houses. Some are well-meaning dupes who have lost control of their underlings to a duplicitous queen. If you can connect an atrocity back to king, well-meaning or not, the bad press may be enough to topple their entire conspiracy.

Once in a while, you'll find a conspiracy that really *is* run by its charismatic leader. They are the most vulnerable of all. Since their king and queen are one and the same, a single blow can bring Goliath to his knees. The common wisdom is that Sir Erik is both king and queen to the Crown's intelligence machine in Erebus. However, more cautious theorists refuse to rule out the possibility that Erik is only the king, and that there is someone else, working from the deepest shadows, who really pulls the strings...

In rare instances, each of the "pieces" listed above is not just an individual, but an entire organization. The Cult of the Serpent is famous for being a queen organization. It uses the other major cults as its bishops, for funds and influence. Then it recruits lesser cults to act as rooks, hiring the street-level packs and gangs that actually get things done.

# *Live-Action Role-Playing*

Political games work much better in the live-action (LARP) format. When players are free to get up and walk around the room, they can plot and scheme in private.

If you have no idea what LARP is, you might want to skip the next three pages. This article addresses the softer side of writing and runningLARPs set in Erebus. For game mechanics, check out Flip...

**[www.Bayn.org/flip](http://www.Bayn.org/flip)**

## **The 6 Tenets of Erebus Live-Action:**

1. Always start with cults.
2. Never script out events in advance.
3. Make sure every character has at least 2-3 goals.
4. Make sure every character has at least 1 ally.
5. Make sure at least 2 characters know every secret.
6. Save your killin' for the end of the game.

The best place to start writing an Erebus LARP is with the cults. They provide ready-made goals, allies, and enemies (not to mention a few kewl powerz). You can generate conflict by setting up a legal dispute or a policy decision that needs voting on. Survival situations provide more drama than boardroom proceedings, but there's correspondingly less intrigue.

However, a political LARP should be based on its characters, not its plot. You can run a good LARP with as few as six players, but 8-12 works better and you can go even higher (though you'll need at least one GM for every ten players). Don't script anything out, especially not the ending. Trust me, you won't be able to make it happen. Just give your players conflicting goals and allow them to pursue those goals any way they see fit.

Speaking of goals, every character should have at least 2-3 different ones. This helps make sure that *one* of them pans out! Sometimes, plots just don't get picked up by the right players, and you don't want anyone standing around with nothing to do. Redundancy is your friend.

Similarly, it's important to have friends. Be sure that each and every character has at least one person they can trust: an old friend, a fellow true believer, a loyal servant, something! When you have no allies, a political game can

be a cold and lonely place.

Protecting a secret can be a fun and challenging goal, but only if there are enough loose lips around to make it a challenge. Don't spill a character's beans to their enemies right off the bat, but make sure it's on the character sheet of at least one neutral third party. Turning that person into an ally can keep a player busy for hours!

Finally, I recommend telling your players to wait until a designated "Killin' Time" to forcibly remove anyone else from the game. That means no kidnapping and absolutely no murder. It's not fun for the one who gets the short end of the stick. You don't need in-character justification, just explain that it's for the good of the game.

I'm sure that, sooner or later, a live-action scenario or two will be finding its way onto the website. Until that glorious day, here are a few ideas to get you started...

## An Indecent Proposal

The Naga's drug trade monopoly was one of the first laws the Council ever enacted. All imports must be sold to the Naga, who then resells them on the street. The Society of Bliss supports this arrangement in return for significant discounts on recreational drugs.

However, not everyone is happy with this state of affairs. The Crown Empire, in particular, would love to take its alchemical drugs directly to the consumer. In order to repeal the law, Sir Erik needs to get the votes of two other Council members, so he has arranged a public meeting where interested parties can discuss the matter. The Naga and the Blissites will show up to defend the status quo (via threats & bribery), Sir Erik will be courting the Purifiers, and both sides will be looking for a way to win Mirage or Jonathan Steel's votes.

The Church of Flesh & Spirit may have something to say on the topic, since they resent having to pay the Naga for their alchemical medicine. The Brotherhood of Ash would like to thwart the Naga, and Fallen Legacy wants to crush Sir Erik's dreams. Fun!

## Say Ya Want a Revolution

It was only a matter of time until Erebus' various revolutionaries started some shit. In this game, players not only get to start it, they get to finish it. The game itself is the planning session. Each group will have a number of resources (weapons, soldiers, etc). When the game's over, every group will have to chose a side (or chose to

stay out of it) and the one with the most resources wins. This will change the face of Erebus forever, but it's cool. No one said your game has to be canonical!

The Brotherhood of Ash is the only die-hard war supporter. The leopard-men have a small army at the ready, but the Naga have sent an agent to bribe them with large amounts of Old City property. Fallen Legacy has tons of alchemical weapons, but the Brotherhood may be hesitant to work with westerners. In either case, Sir Erik has sent a saboteur to sow dissent within the ranks...

## Gangs of New Erebus

War is brewing between the Ferryman and the Purifiers; the latter resents the former's monopoly over the ferry business. Purifier boats and mercenaries have been appearing on the river with growing frequency in recent weeks. A few skirmishes have already taken place and members of both groups have died as a result.

Mirage, the New City's patron saint, has arranged a meeting in an attempt to stem the rising tide of blood. The Ferryman and Purifiers will both send representatives and Mirage will act as mediator. The Brotherhood of Ash will side with whoever offers them the biggest cut of the local

protection racket. Sir Erik may also send an agent to apprehend one of the ferrymen; numerous traitors to his organization have eluded capture by joining the cult.

## Never Cry Wolf

A gang of thieves has just made off with something very valuable, but they had to kill a werewolf to get away with it. Now, they're being hunted by the entire pack! They decide to hide out in an old woman's house on the edge of the New City and wait for daybreak. That's when their luck just plain runs out...

The old woman is a witch, or maybe a wacked-out alchemist from the Church of Flesh & Spirit. Her house is filled with bloodthirsty spirits, or deadly booby traps, or an army of clockwork automatons. If you let a player be the old woman, either don't give her enough power to kick the gang's ass right away, or give her some ulterior motive for letting them stay the night. (Mwahaha!)

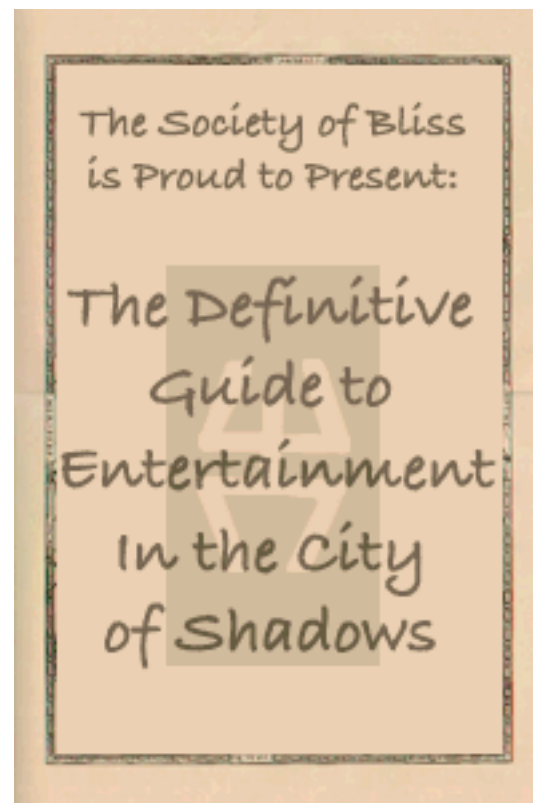
While they're busy discovering all that wierd shit, less scrupulous characters should be trying to stab their fellow thieves in the back. They could bribe the old woman to help take out the others or find a way to communicate with the werewolves and arrange to sell their friends out!

# Running the Game

Erebus is a “pure” setting book, with little space wasted on game mechanics. Everything is presented in narrative terms that should be easy to translate into any role-playing system, but it's been written for Wushu in particular. Once again, that URL is...

**[www.Bayn.org/wushu](http://www.Bayn.org/wushu)**

This section includes guidelines and advice for GMs on running Erebus' many nifty gimmicks and kewl powerz. Ereban magic can range from gritty to cartoony, parlor tricks to pulp mysticism. Skinwalkers deserve a few rules all their own, and you'll find them below. Playing a vigilantes can be tricky, so I've included some straight-forward advice on that topic, too. Finally, there's a page of rules for using Ereban cults in character creation and giving those Anathema some teeth!





# Running Ereban Magic

I've tried to leave the true nature of Ereban magic ambiguous. Do magi use the Law of Intropy to alter the patterns of reality? Or do they use simple parlor tricks to make people *think* they can? Or is the truth somewhere in-between? Hell, maybe some magi do the former and some the latter! You can run it any way you like.

To help, I've put together a few examples of how you could use each magical technique in play. They vary from the utterly mundane to the almost cartoonish, though most can be played anywhere in that spectrum. The key to running Ereban magic is that, no matter how powerful your spells get, it should always be possible to dismiss magical effects as tricks or extraordinary skills/abilities. Magic should never be able to affect the material world in an obvious, objectively verifiable way.

## Legerdemain

The art of illusion is used to alter the appearance of people, objects, or events. It can make something vanish from sight, make sounds seem to come from different directions, and make one thing look like something else

entirely. It manipulates people into perceiving reality in a specific way via misdirection, optical illusions, and sleight of hand. Showmanship is everything!

**Vanishing** - One of the most basic prestidigitations is the "vanish," making an object seem to disappear. In fact, the magician simply conceals the object behind their hand, in a pocket, or somewhere else on their person. Obviously, this is a useful trick for thieves and smugglers, but it can also be used by warriors who wish to carry concealed weapons into secured areas.

**Conjuring** - Dramatically revealing a vanished item is called "conjuring." During a game, illusionist characters can conjure any small item they might reasonably be carrying, even if they've never mentioned having it before.

**Illusions** - Illusionists are masters of light and shadow. They use forced perspective, mirrors, smoke, and ventriloquism to make people see and hear things that aren't really there. In a gritty game, these effects should be limited to theater effects like the old woman-sawed-in-half trick. More cartoonish games might let players produce realistic phantasms with a candle and shadow puppets, or change their apparent sex with nothing more than a wig and a dress. (That last one is called the Bugs Bunny Special.)

**Invisibility** - In the hands of a skilled sorcerer, simple camouflage can erase people and objects from view almost completely. In brightly lit locations with complex backgrounds, the invisibled person/object has to remain perfectly still to avoid detection. In dark or wooded environments, this isn't as much of an issue. Still, if an invisible person does something to announce their presence, like attack someone or make a loud noise, the effect is usually ruined.

## Mesmerism

Based on the techniques of hypnotism, this art uses nothing more than the human voice to manipulate people's thoughts and emotions. It also borrows from the ancient craft of con artists by using clever logic tricks and social influence tactics to shape people's behavior. Mesmerists can relieve suffering, induce trances, alter memories, ignite emotions, and compel actions.

**Suggestion** - With a combination of fast talk and hypnotic vocal tones, mentalists can cloud people's minds long enough to convince them of implausible lies or incite them to illogical actions. A common ploy is to turn a stranger into a friend in order to gain their cooperation:

getting a guard to let you pass, a shop keeper to give you a discount, a witness to move along and forget what they've seen, etc. ("These aren't the droids you're looking for.") Of course, the strong-willed are often immune.

**Hypnotism** - By getting a person to focus their attention on something, mesmerists can induce a hypnotic trance in as little as one second. Usually, this involves distracting the target with a finger snap, hand wave, swinging watch, or something shiny. While in the trance, the subject becomes highly suggestible and can perform simple tasks, answer questions, and be made to remember things that never happened or forget things that did happen. However, it is not possible to make a hypnotized person do something they truly do not want to do. They may be disinhibited, but they're not zombies.

**Sleepers** - Also known as post-hypnotic suggestions, sleepers are commands implanted in a subject's mind while they're in a trance. Upon some trigger (a code word, a specific event, a certain time), the subject simply carries out the command as if it were the most normal thing in the world. The subject can be brought to their senses by anything from a slap in the face to being addressed by name. Again, no one can be "programmed" to do something they truly do not want to do.

**Bravado** - Mastering the skills of a magician leaves little time for sword practice. Instead, enchanters have developed a few routines that *look* impressive, even if they aren't useful in combat. They can brandish a sword, do a few high kicks, and otherwise puff themselves up a few sizes. The effect is convincing enough to fool most people, but masters of the martial arts will see right through it.

## Augury

Divination is the art of predicting the future by analyzing the patterns in present events. Some look to the motion of heavenly bodies, while others use a shuffled deck of Tarot cards or a handful of thrown runestones. Whatever the method, the technique is the same: look for patterns in one set of events and apply them to another set. The accuracy and detail of their predictions determines the tone of fortune-telling in your game.

**Cold Reading** - Augurs can tell a lot about a person just from some basic information: appearance, birth date, accent, whatever. They can also dig out more detailed information by asking targeted questions. Theatrical magi just use this trick to impress people by pulling their names and ages "out of thin air." Investigators often

employ augurs to gather personal details about subjects as quickly as possible. Sir Erik is known to hire augurs to profile his enemies and predict their actions.

**Dowsing** - A more straight-forward way to make money divining is by finding lost things. It's more lucrative than you might think, especially given the high crime rates in many parts of Erebus. It's not too different from tracking by scent: the diviner starts with a picture or something, gets a general idea of the location, then goes out and narrows it down until the missing item is found. It works for finding water, too.

**Fortune Telling** - Though it's definitely the least reliable, this trick is what most people think of when they think of Augury. Using their preferred tools, the seer starts with known facts and extrapolates into the future. The more the soothsayer already knows about the subject, the more accurate their predictions will be. The results are almost always vague, but people put a lot of stock in them. Sometimes, just spreading the rumor that a diviner has foreseen an enemy's doom is enough to produce a self-fulfilling prophesy (the best kind of prophesy).

# Running Skinwalkers

When you create a skinwalking character, come up with 5 "triggers" for each of their forms. These are the conditions or events that can cause one soul or the other to gain control of the body. You can make a single trigger more powerful by taking it more than once; just note the number of slots it fills, from 1 to 5. (See below.)

Any time a trigger enters the character's vicinity, grab one die for each of the triggers currently in effect for each form. The player rolls for whichever form they *want* to be in, and the GM rolls for the other. Whichever gets the highest single result is the form the character shifts into. Ties go to the form the character is presently in.

You may notice that this means skinwalkers cannot change shapes whenever they want to. Something in the environment has to change first. This is not a fact that skinwalkers want the general population to know about. (It's a secret. Shhh!!!)

Here are a few possibilities...

## Human Triggers:

- Being addressed by name.
- It's daytime.
- Being in the city.
- Getting injured by silver.
- Confronted by religious authority.
- Splashed with holy water.
- Confronted by loved one.
- Confronted with personal object.
- Other humans are present.
- Goes to sleep / knocked unconscious.

## Animal Triggers:

- Character feels threatened.
- It's night time.
- Being in the wilderness.
- Character is angry.
- The full moon is out.
- Smells/tastes blood.
- Character is injured.
- Other animals of their species are present.
- Hears animal calls of their species (i.e. howling).
- Puts on a fetish (animal pelt, magic amulet, etc).

## The Change

Philosophers say the soul is a field of etheric force that organizes matter within the body and animates it. The soul causes healing by pulling bodily tissues back into their original shape and generates growth by pulling new material into the body through digestion.

The two souls inside a skinwalker constantly pull the body's tissues in two different directions, one towards the human form and one towards the animal. When the balance of power shifts, the newly dominant soul literally tears the body apart and rebuilds it in its own image. The process is phenomenally painful, though it causes no actual damage. It can take anywhere from a few seconds to a full, agonizing minute.

Strangely, injuries are not healed by the change, but persist between forms and must heal at the normal rate. Werewolf hunters often use this fact to identify their prey in human form via a tactic called "wound doubling." Simply put, you inflict some telltale wound on the werewolf (like a cross-pattern puncture or a severed limb) and then look for a human with the same injury.

Often, a skinwalker's two forms will bleed into each other. Werewolves in human form may have bushy

eyebrows, thick body hair, yellow eyes, pronounced canines, or exhibit lupine behavior. Naga are well known to foster serpentine features (like slitted eyes, forked tongues, scales, and fangs) when in human form. In animal form, most skinwalkers retain their human intelligence, even if it's used for inhuman purposes.

Clothes and equipment are not affected and, in some cases, actually damaged by the change. The skinwalker's body mass also does not change, so most animal forms are abnormally large. This difference isn't so significant for werewolves, but Naga make exceptionally massive snakes. Of course, this only makes them *more* dangerous.

## Blessing or Curse?

Sharing one body doesn't guarantee that two souls are going to see eye to eye. Those skinwalkers whose souls exist in harmony are called "blessed;" the personalities of their two forms are effectively the same. Those whose souls are at odds are called "cursed;" their behavior in one form is often radically different from their behavior in the other. (Most players will probably create blessed skinwalkers because they're easier to play.)

If you want to create a cursed skinwalker, make sure you describe both personalities in equal detail. You might not think there's much to detail about an animal soul, but you'll need to be able to make all the same decisions for them that you would for a human character. Are they aggressive? Clever? Fearful of humans? Does the animus resent being trapped in a human's body?

In either case, the animal form always confers a few blessings of its own. To reflect these, a skinwalker's animus should have its own Traits; they're created and rated as normal, but only apply when in animal form.

Here are a few examples...

#### **Example Werewolf Traits:**

- **Fast** - Can sprint at 30 mph & cover 120 miles/day.
- **Keen** - Can track by scent, smell prey miles away (down wind), see in darkness, & hear frequencies of sound that are inaudible to humans.
- **Hardy** - Can go weeks without eating & survive freezing temperatures as low as -60 degrees. Often wears prey down via hours of harrassment before making a kill.
- **Feral** - Has no concept of "mercy" or "compassion." Vicious when backed into a corner. Enjoys tearing out human throats.

#### **Example Naga Traits:**

- **Venom** - Her bite can blind, paralyze, kill, or render victims unconscious. (May be able to spit poison, too.)
- **Keen** - Can track by scent, see infrared light (heat vision), and feel vibrations through the ground.
- **Slither** - Can move silently over any terrain, climb trees, swim, and even burrow through the earth.
- **Scales** - Natural armor can blunt sword thrusts and deflect slow projectiles like arrows & knives.

#### **Example Guar Traits:**

- **Fast** - Can sprint up to 60 mph, over short distances.
- **Stalker** - Can track by scent & move soundlessly.
- **Agile** - Bounds through the treetops with the greatest of ease.

You *can* have Traits that apply to both forms. For example, a vigilantus who gets possessed by an animus will retain access to the Arts of War and Vigilance when in animal form. (At least, they will if they're blessed.) A mage might even retain their magic skills; they can use their knowledge to see through illusions and resist mental influence, even if they can't use those magic tricks without their human voice or opposable thumbs.

# Contagion

Killing a skinwalker is always a dicey proposition, since the animal soul can just "jump" into a new body. After all, that *is* how the skinwalker became a skinwalker. An animus spreads bits of itself to others like a contagion, usually by spreading bits of their bodily tissues. Blood, saliva, meat, or anything else that can spread disease can also spread a skinwalking soul.

When its current body dies, the animus is attracted to these bits of itself. The strength of the attraction may be influenced by proximity, time since they last had contact, the amount of tissue spread, or the type of tissue (blood is better than saliva, for example). The animus "jumps" into the body with the strongest attraction. Ironically, this is often the person who killed the creature, or a survivor of a recent attack. Either way, the hunter's victory is bittersweet.

The best way to handle this is by GM fiat: If you want a character to become a skinwalker, make it happen. In fact, you can do this to any character who has ever tangled with a skinwalker; eventually, the creature will die and its animus will jump to a new host.

It's not unheard of for people to try to become skinwalkers on purpose. The most obvious method is to

capture a skinwalker, drink its blood or eat its flesh, then kill it. However, this is also easier said than done. Others have crafted rituals based on known skinwalker triggers: the lunar cycles, wearing animal skins, imitating appropriate animal calls, and so forth. The goal is to create an animus by generating an attraction between a normal animal soul and the magus. Whether or not this technique works is left to the GM to decide.

If the new skinwalker is a player-character (and blessed), let them create triggers and Traits as described above. If they are an NPC, or a cursed PC, the GM should do the work on their own. In fact, newly cursed skinwalkers don't even have to now about their condition until their first change. Even then, they may not remember what they did. It might be interesting to send your players after a vicious werewolf only to discover that it's one of *them*!

# *Running Vigilanti*

The Vigilanti, protectors of the innocent in the Wayfarers' Concord, use two monastic arts to gain an edge over those who would exploit their brothers. These powers also make the vigilanti incorruptible; they lose weaknesses like greed and clouded thought that often lead others to abuse their power. Each should be taken as its own Trait.

## The Art of Vigilance

Most people are too busy planning for the future and brooding over the past to really pay attention to the present. Time slips past them like a river while they stare into the horizon. This is a trick the mind plays on the senses. Vigilanti learn to pay attention to the senses and let them inform the mind, not the other way around.

This makes vigilanti supernaturally observant. They are never surprised, can function in total darkness, and rarely get lost. It is almost impossible to ambush them and they always know when others are lying.

Their focus on the present is so intense that vigilanti lose contact with the past and future. They never

plan ahead more than a few hours, can only recall distant memories with effort, and have a hard time with the concepts of wealth and property. This also means that they never conspire or plot against their enemies; they deal with all problems openly, directly, and immediately.

This can be taken as a Weakness, but it doesn't have to be. A player who routinely acts out-of-character should have their Trait rating reduced until they get their act together. Remember: If a vigilantus loses the Art of Vigilance, they become one of the Lost... and then their former brothers come looking for them.

## The Art of War

The secret to a vigilantus' prowess in combat isn't a unique fighting style or mystical powers, it's being able to act without consideration for their own safety. It is profound selflessness. The self-preservation instinct makes people hesitate, avoid risks, and miss the split-second opportunities that can end fights before they start. Because they think only of those they must protect, vigilanti never hesitate. They do what must be done.

Whatever their fighting style (brawler, martial artist, fencer), this Art gives vigilanti a phenomenal advantage in



combat. They strike like lightning and routinely pull off death defying stunts that leave their enemies jaws on the floor... sometimes literally.

Their selflessness also makes them the perfect guardians of order for the Concord. They never act out of self-interest or use their power for personal gain. Their only concern is for the well-being of others.

Again, a player who constantly acts out of character should have their combat Trait reduced. This isn't an out of game punishment, it's how it works in-character. Lost points only come back after the vigilantus does something truly selfless (and usually self-injurious).

## Playing a Vigilantus

The hard part about playing a vigilantus character isn't the selflessness (most people already know the Hero routine pretty well), it's the focus on the present moment. Vigilanti often appear distracted and impulsive to those who don't understand them. Encourage players to act on their instincts; vigilantanti should be constantly getting their friends into trouble! This shouldn't be a blank check to act like a bonehead, but vigilantanti aren't big on elaborate plans and careful analysis.

Also make sure to use a vigilantanti's obligations to their people in your game. If they see someone in trouble, especially a Wayfarer, they had damn well better leap to the rescue! Unlike most PCs, vigilantanti don't work for money or fame. If you're going to have one in your game, the plot had better have something to do with a Wayfarer victim or a Wayfarer haven.

## Playing a Failed Vigilantus

Losing one of the Arts has grave consequences for a vigilantus' place in Wayfarer society. If they cannot regain the Art of Vigilance, they become a Sentinel. They will have to start making their own money; no more charity for them. Old enemies might come calling once they hear that the former vigilantus has lost their legendary combat skills.

Becoming one of the Lost is far more serious. If the character starts using their combat skills for personal gain, other vigilantanti will come after them. If they cannot be redeemed, the only other possible outcome is death. Without the benefit of enhanced senses, they probably won't even see their executioner coming.

# Running Cults

The in-character benefits of cult membership are many and varied. Some Ereban join simply for survival, while others seek a grand cause to give meaning to their lives. Out-of-character, they are an easy source of narrative structures for stories and role-playing games. They also have a few in-game benefits, 'cuz everyone loves rules...

## Boons

All members of a cult automatically get a free Trait in their cult's area of Expertise. It starts with a rating of 4 and can be increased to 5 by reducing another Trait by one. Note that this makes the character a recognized expert in their cult's core field of interest. Others will seek them out as teachers and request their services in the name of the cult.

The other Boons should be used as inspiration for Embellishments, like the Ereban fighting styles. In many cases, they're special powers that just work automatically; no rules needed. If you *really* need a rule, let players flip one failed die to a success when doing something that's related to the Boon in question. Call it a bonus.

## Anathema

Nothing comes for free. All cults demand something in exchange for the Boons of membership, even if it's just loyalty to one's fellow cultists. Most also forbid certain taboo behaviors or demand ritual observances. The truly devout would never even think of violating their Anathema, but players are another matter entirely.

Few cults resort to excommunication right off the bat. Most will attempt to bring an errant cultist back into the fold through social pressure first, though a bad reputation can block a character from using certain Boons at all. You should reduce the rating of a sinner's free Trait by one point at a time, until it reaches 2 (the default value).

If the character doesn't mend their wicked ways, ostracism eventually turns to excommunication. When a character is given the boot, they immediately lose access to all of their Boons. Being branded a heretic generally screws your reputation, even among cultists who use to be their enemies. No one respects a traitor.

# Creating Characters

Finally, we get to the part that you role-players have been waiting for! You can find actual rules for character creation in your game of choice; all of the Bayn.org games use the same character stats and have ridiculously easy character creation systems. This section just provides copious amounts of inspiration and advice.

## *Narrative Structures*

One of the most important questions that any writer or game designer *must* answer about a setting is "What do the characters do?" In the City of Shadows, they can do a whole helluva lotta things! These are just a few...

### Workin' for the Herald

Erebus' leading newspaper, the Herald, employs a small army of reporters to dig up the dirt on the city's power players. These "heralds" investigate everything from cult activity and violent crime to visiting dignitaries

and political alliances. Not surprisingly, they end up running afoul of everyone from religious fanatics to street thugs to powerful businessmen. Specialties within the Herald include rumor mongering, political satire, high society, investigation, cult infiltration, and economics. They even employ mercenaries to protect less combat-oriented heralds on dangerous assignments.

While the Herald as an institution is rather light on resources, it has a wealth of street cred. Herald's carry identification papers that can get them into most places, and get them back out again if things go south. Of course, those with secrets to hide don't usually care...

### The Ol' Protection Racket

A common way for young toughs to make money in Erebus is by providing protection to powerless citizens. Entire neighborhoods will pay them monthly fees to keep thugs and thieves away. The "wardens" declare their clients' homes and businesses as their territory and

aggressively defend it from gangs, con artists, pick pockets, street predators, and pretty much anyone else who might cause trouble. They investigate crimes, track down perpetrators, and administer (brutal) justice. Some even run their own criminal activities, or allow criminals to operate for a cut of their take, just as long as their wards never catch on. This is a great structure for mission-based games. Just through a crime scene at 'em and go!

## Legbreakers

Not everyone in Erebus can afford to keep a private army. (There is a surprisingly large number of people who can, but that's neither here nor there.) Consequently, there's a great market out there for men and women who can swing a sword, throw a punch, or shoot a gun without wagging their tongues about it later. These "legbreakers" collect debts, make good on threats, maintain security, and otherwise back up other people's big mouths. Their employers include businessmen, organized crime, and many of the smaller cults. Depending on the particulars, these employers may be able to provide a substantial amount of financial backing (for ammo, bribes, medical expenses, and so forth).

## King & Country

The Crown Empire has many agents working in Erebus on a wide variety of missions. Operatives are recruited from the ranks of the noble houses, Wildlands gunslingers, philosophers, recent immigrants, and even Ereban natives. Sleeper agents infiltrate cults and political groups, spies gather intelligence on enemies of the state, and saboteurs cripple the Crown's economic competitors. Though most of these agents report to Sir Erik, there are a few noble houses who prefer to handle their own covert ops... and send agents to spy on Sir Erik himself!

## Fightin' for the Cause

From the other side of the World, exiles and rebels make Erebus a base of operations for their struggle against the Order of the Moth. Easterners are notoriously isolationist and prefer to work exclusively with other easterners whenever possible. They conduct covert ops against Moth property and trade ships, stockpile weapons and supplies, work to forge alliances with political and military organizations, and wage a constant war of counter-intelligence to stay safely hidden.

## Call of the Wild

Werewolves have built a subculture of their own in the City of Shadows, mixing elements of lupine behavior with human culture. The result is unnervingly like an organized crime gang: An alpha male rules over his pack until dethroned by death or a stronger male. They compete for mates, raise litters of children (human and lupine), and cooperate in business ventures. They also police their own to ensure that Erebus continues to tolerate their presence. On occasion, they hunt down known werewolf hunters and either kill them or run them out of town.

Skinwalkers who deny their bestial sides are not welcome among them. They usually make their homes in Outer Erebus, where they can adopt animal form without raising too many eyebrows. These territories are not safe places for regular humans to visit without an invitation.

## Doin' the Good Work

Cults make excellent narrative structures because they give characters a common link (their cult membership) and common goals (the cult's goals). A quick look through the cults listed in this book & on the Erebus

website should provide ample inspiration for characters, adventures, and stories. Whatever their individual aims, most cults have a few missions in common: recruiting new members, securing income (at least enough to pay the bills), and defending themselves from enemy cults.

## The Revenge Game

Finally, the easiest way to tie together a group of diverse characters is to give them a common enemy. It could be a pack of bloodthirsty werewolves, an evil cult out to destroy the world, a western company that's exploiting their friends and relatives, or anyone else too powerful or well-protected to take out on their own. The characters cross paths while pursuing this enemy and decide that working together benefits them all. On the other hand, any one of them could be a spy...

## *Character Templates*

The templates below can be used as sources of inspiration or taken straight off the page, if you're short on time. Just make sure everyone has a job to do.

# Gunslinger

Gunslingers are a new breed of mercenary from the Crown Empire's notorious Wildlands. They live life fast, take their reputations seriously, and don't think too highly of nobility, etiquette, or the Crown Church. Some follow the way of the gun, but most are die hard street brawlers. They are men and women of action, not words, and those actions usually involve plenty of high-velocity lead!

## **Sample Traits:**

- Shootin' (5) Use and maintenance of firearms.
- Brawlin' (4) Hitting people with bar stools, and so forth.
- Gamblin' (3) Card games, dice games, bluffing, etc.
- Manners (1) No patience for "high society."

## **Stuff:**

- Handcannon (or two, or three).
- Reloader (for special occasions).
- Bloodburn ammo.
- Righteous Weave duster.
- Wide-brimmed hat.

# Philosopher

There are a surprising number of these bookish types in Erebus, come from the Crown Empire to make their fortunes with research or invention. Most are at least familiar with street life, having belonged to the lower classes before going off to university. They know a lot about natural philosophy, and often assume that means they know a lot about everything else, too.

## **Sample Traits:**

- Alchemist (5) Knows all about Crown technology.
- Educated (4) A little art, a little history, etc.
- Scrappy (3) Self-defense, running away.
- Mystic Crap (1) It's all just hocus pocus!

## **Stuff:**

- Philosopher's kit (alchemical tools & supplies).
- Books (possibly a personal journal).
- Overalls (with lots of pockets).
- God's Wrath bolt-thrower.

## Noble Son

There are many, many of these young men (and sometimes women) in Erebus, despite its reputation for danger and debauchery. They're usually the second sons of dukes and earls, sent to the City of Shadows to keep an eye on family interests from warehouses to freight to war ships. They see a price tag on everything, including people, and approach most problems with arrogant bluster and a fist full of coins.

### Sample Traits:

- Regal (5) Speaking with authority, proper manners, etc.
- Rich (4) Money, jewels, transportation, you have it all.
- Duel (3) A gentleman must be able to defend himself!
- Dealing with Commoners (1) They're beneath him.

### Stuff:

- Coin, and lots of it!
- Rapier, and maybe a parrying dagger.
- Stylish cloak & expensive boots.
- Maybe a servant or two.

## Exile

Easterners who leave the Order of the Moth are forbidden to return. Most end up settling in Erebus, where they pretty much keep to themselves. Some earn a living teaching martial arts to the locals. A few have formed conspiracies dedicated to smuggling their relatives out of the Forbidden Kingdom, or even toppling the Order once and for all! They have difficulty trusting "outsiders," but the City of Shadows makes strange bedfellows.

### Sample Traits:

- Shadow (5) Sneaking around without getting noticed.
- Way of the Whatever (4) Pick an Ereban fighting style.
- Acupuncture (3) Heal, and kill, with tiny needles.
- Suspicious (1) Doesn't trust outsiders.

### Stuff:

- Inconspicuous weapons (kama, bo staff, sai, etc).
- Simple, functional clothes.
- Maybe a few acupuncture needles.

# Wayfarer

Power corrupts, so no Wayfarer seeks power over others... or allows others to seize power over them. If a Wayfarer follows a leader, it's out of respect, not fear. They roam the seas on ships large and small, trading and fishing for their living. Those who dwell in the shadows are often too young or old, sick or injured to sail. They fish in the harbor, run cargo up the River Styx, or settle down in a Wayfarer haven and take up a new trade (like stealing).

## **Sample Traits:**

- Sailor (5) Wayfarers are at home on the high seas.
- Bustin' Heads (4) Smackin' things 'til they bleed.
- Wayfarer's Luck (3) Slips out of restraints easily.
- Honest (1) A man's word is his bond.

## **Stuff:**

- Deckblade (a Wayfarer's best friend).
- Rugged clothing.
- Streamers & other ornaments for their hair.
- Maybe a tricked-out river boat or skiff.

# Vigilantus

The vigilanti are warrior-monks who act as the protectors, priests, and judges of Wayfarer society. In Erebus, most vigilanti have a specific community they watch out for; members of that community come to them to resolve disputes and support them with gifts of food, shelter, etc. They are famous for their extraordinary acts of selflessness and bravery. They own little property and live totally immersed in the present moment, without a thought for the past or the future.

## **Sample Traits:**

- Art of War (5) Do what must be done!
- Art of Vigilance (4) Sees all, hears all.
- Wayfarer's Luck (3) Slips out of restraints easily.
- Honest (1) A man's word is his bond.

## **Stuff:**

- Deckblade (a Wayfarer's best friend).
- Rugged clothing.
- Streamers & other ornaments for their hair.



## Street Predator

Street Predators are a native Ereban species: thugs and mercenaries who dedicate themselves to the martial arts. They foster fearsome reputations and temper their brutality with a warrior's honor. They abhor guns and most are students of at least one Ereban fighting style. They often work in protection rackets or mercenary packs, while others are freelance bodyguards or assassins.

### **Sample Traits:**

- Killin' (5) Blades, fists, and feet; no guns.
- Huntin' (4) Stealth, tracking, setting ambushes.
- Healin' (3) Herbal, alchemical, & eastern medicine.
- Social Graces (1) Not big on conversation.

### **Stuff:**

- Fang, rapier, or something more exotic.
- Render, stinger, or some other sidearm.
- Light armor (usually tied to a theme).

## Blood Dancer

Half warrior & half performer, blood dancers live for the roar of the crowd and the adoration of their fans. Some bank on their beauty, while others adorn themselves in the manner of street predators, selling themselves as the bad guy fans love to hate. Every dancer's time in the lime light is short, however, and most end up as bodyguards, thugs, or mentors to a new generation of blood dancers.

### **Sample Traits:**

- Smackdown (5) Fighting with blades and fists.
- Showmanship (4) Trash talk, workin' a crowd.
- Fame (3) Has fans all over the city.
- Dramatic (1) "Stealth? What's that?"

### **Stuff:**

- Big, flashy weapons (broad sword, spear, whip, etc).
- Shiny (or skimpy) costume armor.
- A pen (for signing autographs).

## Rage Mage

Not all of Erebus' sell swords are as scrupulous as the street predators. These warrior-magicians use sleight of hand to smuggle weapons into secure locations, mesmerism to confuse their opponents, and divination to stay one step ahead of their many enemies. They have no stereotypical weapons of choice, using guns just as often as swords or martial arts.

### **Sample Traits:**

- Combat (5) Fighting with guns, blades, and fists.
- Ledgerdemain (4) Quick draw concealed weapons.
- Augury (3) Scan enemy positions, sense danger.
- Infamy (1) Hated by street predators & gunslingers.

### **Stuff:**

- A handcannon, fang, render, or all of the above.
- Righteous Weave trench coat.
- Rune stones, tarot cards, or a scrying bowl.

## Cage Mage

Even less scrupulous are those magicians who turn their talents towards criminal applications. They use legerdemain to steal, hypnotism to swindle, and augury to avoid the long arm of the law. Some are con artists and burglars who learned some new tricks, while others are former stage mages who fell on hard times. Their name is a reference to how much time they spend in jail.

### **Sample Traits:**

- Criminal (5) Sneaking about, breaking & entering, etc.
- Mesmerism (4) "We're old buddies; I was never here."
- Augury (3) It's the easiest, safest way to case a joint!
- Feared (1) This is why people fear magic!

### **Stuff:**

- A crystal ball or astrological charts.
- Loose robes with many hidden pockets.
- Lock-picking tools.

## Stage Mage

The stage mage is the workhorse of the Ereban entertainment industry. They conjure rabbits, make young women disappear, hypnotize audience volunteers, and even tell a few jokes... all for a tidy profit. They love holding a crowd in the palm of their hand and turning the laws of nature on their ear for a few hours every night. Many are also members of the Society of Bliss, but the ones who can't make a decent living often end up cage mages.

### **Sample Traits:**

- Legerdeman (5) Card tricks, conjuring, and so forth.
- Mesmerism (4) Has a hypnotic gaze & soothing voice.
- Performer (3) Has stage presence; knows a few jokes.
- Vain (1) Always has to be the center of attention!

### **Stuff:**

- Props, lots of props.
- Flashy costume with lots of hidden pockets.

## Silver-Tongue

These swindlers don't need magic to part suckers from their money. They usually hang out in the Old City, on the prowl for tourists and immigrants. They use confidence scams to rob the former & sell the latter to sweat shops. Most are also decent in a fight, though they generally prefer to avoid them.

### **Sample Traits:**

- Liar (5) Doesn't remember what the truth sounds like.
- Charming (4) Good lookin' and/or smooth talkin'.
- Fight Dirty (3) Do whatever it takes to stay alive!
- Weasel (1) Always lookin' out for numer one!

### **Stuff:**

- Concealed weapon, usually a handcannon.
- Holy symbols from various cults (they don't belong to).
- Change of clothing (hobo rags under a fancy cloak).
- Someone else's money.

# Herald

Erebus' single most important news outlet employs a small army of reporters. From investigation to gossip, politics to cult-tracking, Heralds stick their noses into every back alley and dark shadow in the city... and they make enemies in them all. Most truly believe in what they're doing; they are crusaders for Truth in a city built on lies.

## Sample Traits:

- Nosy (5) Notices every detail.
- Dedicated (4) Hard to intimidate.
- Fisticuffs (3) Sometimes, it's the only way.
- Curious (1) Leaves no stone unturned!

## Stuff:

- Sword or staff (i.e. walking stick).
- Journal or notebook (and a pen).
- Herald identification papers.



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