

CIRCLE OF THE CRONE



a sourcebook for:
Vampire
THE REQUIEM

TAKE

BY GREG STOLZE

I SHOULD HAVE INSISTED ON DRIVING THOUGH, CRAP, THE GUY BESIDE ME MIGHT HAVE POPPED THE SPRINGS IN MY INFINITI. HE'S GIANT, A MONSTER, JUST IMPOSSIBLY HUGE. HIS NAME'S EARTH BAINES, HE'S HONKY LIKE LOOP GRIDLOCK AND I SUSPECT EVERY NIGHT HE PRAYS TO GOD THAT THE NEXT TIME HE WAKES UP, HE'LL BE JAY-Z.

FAT CHANCE OF GOD ANSWERING THAT ONE. NOT ONLY IS EARTH A MURDEROUS VAMPIRE, GOD DOESN'T EXIST. AT LEAST NOT ONE BAINES WOULD PRAY TO.

"YOU BETTAH NEVAH LEMME GIT CHA ALONE!" CYPRESS HILL IS BLARING FROM THE STEREO AND HE'S RAPPING RIGHT ALONG. "Y' MIGHT DIE INNA VALLEY A' CHROME!"

FOR A MOMENT I THINK HE SAID "CRONE" AND IT MAKES ME NERVOUS, BUT I SHOULDN'T BE. THE CRONE'S ON MY SIDE RIGHT? THAT WOULD BE A LOT MORE SOOTHING IF SHE WASN'T KNOWN FOR TEACHING BEST THROUGH PAIN.

IT'S TWO AM AND BAINES AND I ARE GOING TO GO KILL A VAMPIRE I CALL DICKHOLE #1.

I HEARD ABOUT THE CRONE FROM BELLA DRAVNZIE, BUT I LEARNED ABOUT HER FROM MOYRA. BELLA TALKS A GOOD GAME, BUT IN THE END SHE'S ALL GAMES AND TALK. MOYRA SHOWED ME WHAT'S REAL.

MOYRA'S A VAMPIRE. SO'S BELLA. SO AM I, BUT I DIDN'T REALLY GET IT, DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT THAT MEANT UNTIL MOYRA TOOK ME UNDER THE KNIFE AND THE MOON, RINSED MY EYES WITH BLOOD AND LET ME FEEL IT. BELLA MADE ME A PART OF THE CIRCLE OF THE CRONE BUT MOYRA IT A PART OF ME.

SHE PUSHES ME, MOYRA DOES. TELLS ME I NEEDED TO GO DEEPER, LOOK IN THE DARK PLACES AND SEE WHAT I REALLY AM. SHE PUSHED ME TO JOIN, PUSHED ME TO LEAVE THE CHORUS, PUSHED ME TO OPEN UP MY BLOOD TO THE WORLD AND MAKE CHANGES.

MOYRA PUSHES ME, BUT I DON'T MIND IT. IT'S ODD, NOW THAT I THINK OF IT. ALL MY LIFE, ANYONE WHO PUSHED ME - TEACHERS, MY PARENTS, MY SOCIAL WORKER, MY PAROLE OFFICER - DIDN'T MATTER WHO, I RESISTED. I'M NOT PROUD OF THAT ANYMORE. HALF THE TIME THEY WERE TALKING SENSE WHILE I TOLD THEM TO GO SCREW. MAYBE IF I'D LISTENED, I WOULDN'T BE LIKE THIS. OR MAYBE I WOULD. VAMPIRES ARE PRACTICALLY MY FAMILY OF ORIGIN, TURNS OUT.

BESIDES, LOOK AT BAINES. HE GREW UP ON A FARM, WHOLESOME AS WHOLE-GRAIN BREAD, AND HE'S AN ASS-KICKER, BLOOD-LICKER, STAKE-STICKER JUST LIKE ME.

"YOU'RE A STANK-ASS HO," HE SINGS AS HE PARKS HIS ESCALADE. MAYBE NOT EXACTLY LIKE ME. "CAUSE YOU GOT NO SOUL... YO, THIS IS IT, RIGHT?"

"THIS IS IT."

MOYRA WAS THE SECOND ONE TO CALL ME "LOKI."

THERE WERE FOUR OF THEM. DICKHOLES *3 AND *4 HELD MY ARMS WHILE DICKHOLE *2 KICKED ME. LEGS AND GROIN, MOSTLY - I WAS ALREADY GASPING FROM A KIDNEY PUNCH AND HE WAS PROBABLY WORRIED I'D PUKE ON HIS LEATHERS IF HE WORKED THE TORSO TOO HARD. I WAS STILL LIVING, THEN.

"THAT'S ENOUGH," DICKHOLE *1 HAD SAID. HE WAS THE BOSS, IT WAS OBVIOUS, HIS JACKET WAS THE COOLEST. "YOU'RE JAKE FISCHER'S BOY, AIN'T CHA?"

I DIDN'T SAY. PARTLY I WAS STUBBORN. PARTLY, I WAS HYPERVENTILATING AND IN SERIOUS PAIN. I'D LIKE TO THINK I WAS WORRIED ABOUT AMY, TOO. AS I REMEMBER IT, I WAS WORRIED SICK, WONDERING WHY SHE DIDN'T RUN. HE'D TOLD HER TO STAY PUT AND SHE STAYED. I FIGURED SHE WAS TOO TERRIFIED TO BOLT. NOW I KNOW BETTER.

"YOU LOOK LIKE A SCRAWNY PUNK-ROCK VERSION OF HIM," HE SAID. "I'MA DO YOU A FAVOR - HELP YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR OL' MAN A LITTLE, SEE WHERE HE'S COMING FROM. YOU TELL HIM I DID THIS FOR YOU, RIGHT?"

THEN HE BIT ME. I WENT LIMP, AND EVERYTHING I'D NEVER WANTED TO BELIEVE ABOUT GOD AND SIN AND REDEMPTION - FINALLY, I COULD SAY WITH CONFIDENCE THAT IT WAS ALL A CROCK. EVERYTHING REAL WAS FALSE NEXT TO THAT FEELING. IT'S CALLED THE KISS, ALL VAMPIRES CAN DO IT AND MOST DON'T EVEN THINK IT'S A BIG DEAL. IT IS THOUGH.

DICKHOLE *1'S HAVEN ISN'T MUCH. IT'S THE BASEMENT APARTMENT OF A THREE-FLAT, AND THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE ABOVE HIM (THEY'RE PEOPLE, I CHECKED) ARE AT A BALL GAME TONIGHT. THEY "WON" SOX TICKETS, I HAD TO SPEND SERIOUS COIN BUT NO ONE IS TURNING DOWN A SKYBOX AFTER THE BIG WIN IN '05.

"WHAT'S THE PLAN, YO?"

"ME IN FRONT, YOU IN BACK. USUAL THING. I'LL GET IN HIS FACE, YOU JUST MAKE SURE HE DOESN'T GET AWAY."

"I'M YOUR BACK DOOR MAN." BAINES SAYS IT BEFORE HE CAN REALIZE HE'S QUOTING THE DOORS INSTEAD OF PUBLIC ENEMY. I GUESS YOU CAN'T ESCAPE YOUR HERITAGE, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT'S CLASSIC-ROCK MIDWEST RADIO WASTELAND. OR THE KINDRED MORAL WASTELAND, I SUPPOSE.

HE'S TAKING IT WELL THOUGH. I BLACKMAILED HIM INTO MAKING DICKHOLE *1 TAKE IT, SO LETTING HIM DRIVE IS THE LEAST I COULD DO.

(BAINES GOT REALLY HIGH AND LET IT SLIP THAT HE'D BEEN SHELTERING A FUGITIVE FROM PRINCE MAXWELL'S JUSTICE. HE DIDN'T SAY IT BUT I FIGURED IT OUT AND, ONCE I'D DONE THAT, IT WASN'T HARD TO GET PROOF. BAINES IS THE BEATER, WHERE I'M MORE OF A SPY. WE MAKE AN OKAY TEAM, WHICH IS WHY WE WORK AS LAW ENFORCEMENT FOR PRINCE MAXWELL, WHICH MAKES BAINES' BETRAYAL OF PRINCIPLE DOUBLY STUPID. IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHO PRINCE MAXWELL IS, I'LL JUST SAY THAT IF MAYOR DALEY MASTURBATES, HE PROBABLY FANTASIZES ABOUT THE KIND OF TOTAL POLITICAL CONTROL MAXWELL'S GOT.)

WE SLIDE OVER TO THE SIDE OF THE HOUSE AND I KNEEL DOWN, BITING MY OWN WRIST. BITING MYSELF UNTIL I BLED USED TO BE CREEPY. NOW IT'S BUSINESS AS USUAL, I WASH MY HANDS WITH BLOOD, LIKE IT'S WATER AND I JUST PEE. (I GET NOSTALGIC FOR PEEING. IS THAT WEIRD?)

LEFT HAND TO THE WALL, RIGHT HAND TO MY RIGHT EYE AND I MUTTER AN INVOCATION TO THE PYTHIAN ORACLE. THEN I PUT MY EYE TO THE HANDPRINT AND SEE RIGHT THROUGH IT.

OR AT LEAST, I'M SUPPOSED TO. WHAT I ACTUALLY SEE IS BLOODSTAINED BRICK. DAMMIT. CRUAC IS HARD.

I OPEN MY OTHER SENSES INSTEAD AND THROUGH THE BRICK I CAN HEAR, VERY SOFTLY, A TELEVISION SET. SOUNDS LIKE THE THEME TO GREEN ACRES.

"YOU SEE 'IM?" BAINES LOOKS UNCOMFORTABLE - NOT AT THE BLOOD, HE DIDN'T EVEN REGISTER WHEN I DID THAT, BUT THE IDEA OF SORCERY MAKES HIM JUMPY. SHOULD I LIE TO HIM? NAH, REAL CAUTION KICKS FALSE CONFIDENCE IN THE ASS.

"I DON'T SEE HIM BUT THE TV'S ON. STICK WITH THE PLAN."

"YOU'RE THE BOSS."

I'VE GOT A SHORT-HANDLED TEN-POUND MAUL. IF I CAN BREAK A FEW LEG BONES HE WON'T RUN, UNTIL HE USES BLOOD TO HEAL, WHICH WILL LEAVE HIM LESS TO FIGHT WITH... BUT I SHOULDN'T BE ANTICIPATING THIS, YOU NEVER CAN. THE SLEDGE-HAMMER GETS ME THROUGH THE DOOR.

I'VE SPENT THE LAST YEAR CHASING THIS GUY, CHIPPING AWAY AT HIS FINANCES, ALIENATING HIM FROM HIS ALLIES, BUSTING UP HIS FEED HERDS. I'M THE PRINCE'S MAN, HE'S A LOWLY UNBOUND AND NOW IT'S PAYBACK TIME.

"I THINK IF I COULD UNDERSTAND THE KISS, I'D UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING." THAT WAS THE FIRST THING I EVER SAID TO THE LEADER OF MY COVENANT, THE FIRST TIME WE MET. I WAS STILL IN CHORUS AND MOYRA WAS TRYING TO CONVINCE ROWEN, THE BIG BAD HIEROPHANT, THAT I WAS WORTH SOMETHING.

MOYRA INTRODUCED US AND ROWEN SAID, "TELL ME SOMETHING WISE."

THE THING TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT ROWEN IS, SHE CAN SAY STUFF LIKE THAT. I DIDN'T EVEN THINK OF BEING A SMARTASS. PART OF IT WAS, WE WERE IN A SACRED GROVE, UNDER THE MOONLIGHT, AND IT WAS VERY ATMOSPHERIC. PARTLY, I'D HEARD

THIS WOMAN COULD TURN INTO A BEAR, SEE THE FUTURE, SING DEAD GODS OUT OF THE UNDERWORLD. MORE THOUGH, SHE'S JUST THAT WAY. SHE SUCKS THE DUMB JOES RIGHT OUT OF YOUR BRAIN.

ROWEN WAS THE FIRST ONE TO CALL ME "LOKI" AND TEACH ME THE MYTHS, ABOUT HOW LOKI DEFENDED THE GODS THROUGH CUNNING BUT DOOMED THEM AS WELL. SHE ENCOURAGED ME TO GET IN WITH THE COURT, WHICH SURPRISED EVERYONE, I THINK.

"I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE PLANNING AND IT'S TOO SOON," SHE TOLD ME. THAT TIME, SHE TOLD ME. "YOU HAVE A GIFT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. YOU ARE A CHILD IN THIS NIGHT, AND AFTER CHILDHOOD'S END YOU CAN'T BE INNOCENT AGAIN."

"I'M NOT PLANNING ANYTHING," I SAID, AND I WAS THINKING THAT BEING A 'BABY VAMPIRE' ISN'T A GIFT, IT'S SUCK, YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING RIGHT, YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING, YOU'RE SCARED OF EVERYONE ELSE BUT MOST AFRAID OF YOURSELF.

"YOU'RE PLANNING TO TAKE A LIFE." THAT GOT MY ATTENTION, BECAUSE I WAS. I'D TRACKED DOWN DICKHOLE *3, A MORTAL MAN. I PLANNED ON USING HIM TO FIND THE REST OF THAT BUNCH, THEN DO HIM. NOTHING I COULD HAVE EVEN THOUGHT ABOUT SERIOUSLY WHEN I WAS ALIVE, BUT ONCE THE BLACK THIRST IS INSTALLED THAT KIND OF PLAN COMES PRETTY EASY. "IT'S A THRESHOLD. ONCE YOU WALK THROUGH THAT DOOR IT LOCKS BEHIND YOU. KILLING A MAN, OR A VAMPIRE, OR ANY BEAST, IS A BOON TO THOSE WHO ARE READY, AND A TRAGEDY FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT."

"HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM?"

"I'LL TELL YOU," SHE SAID, AND THERE WAS NOT ONE EYEBLINK, ONE TWITCH, ONE ANYTHING TO SHOW THAT SHE WAS NOT 100% SERIOUS.

I DID IT ANYWAY, OF COURSE, I KILLED DICKHOLE *3 AND *4 TOO. I JUST MISSED DICKHOLE *2, WHO WAS A VAMPIRE, BUT I CHASED HIM OUT OF TOWN AND THAT'S PROBABLY A DEATH SENTENCE. PROBABLY.

I KILLED DICKHOLE *3 BEFORE I WAS EVEN A HOUND, AND I COVERED IT UP REAL WELL, I THOUGHT. ROWEN KNEW RIGHT AWAY. "YOU HAVE SQUANDERED YOUR ONE CHANCE TO UNDERSTAND INNOCENCE," SHE TOLD ME. "YOU HAVE RUSHED INTO A STAGE TOO QUICKLY. LET US HOPE YOU SPEND YOUR TIME AS AN OUTSIDER MORE WISELY."

THAT WAS THE NIGHT SHE CALLED ME LOKI.

I'M THROUGH THE DOOR TO DICKHOLE *1'S APARTMENT AND HE TWITCHES TO HIS FEET AS I THROW THE HAMMER RIGHT AT THE CENTER OF HIS CHEST. IF THAT KNOCKS HIM DOWN WHILE I DRAW THE KNIFE...

BUT NO, HE'S TOO DAMN FAST AND THEN HE'S HOLDING SOMETHING, LIKE A BOOK OR A LUNCHBOX, HE SWINGS IT ON THE END OF A CABLE AND I REALIZE IT'S A POWER SANDER RIGHT BEFORE IT SLAMS INTO THE SIDE OF MY HEAD. I FUMBLE OUT MY BLADE BUT HE SWINGS INTO MY HAND, THE CORD TANGLES AND THEN KNIFE AND TOOL BOTH SKITTER AWAY AS HE JUMPS ON MY CHEST.

NEXT THING I HEAR IS A HIGH-PITCHED BUZZ AND I HAVE TIME TO SEE FAST-MOVING SANDPAPER BEFORE IT GOES INTO THE SIDE OF MY FACE. THIS IS NOT HOW THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO GO DOWN. HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE BEGGING FOR MERCY AND SQUEALING, NOT ABRADING MY CHEEKBONE AT SIXTY THOUSAND RPMS. I'VE GOT MY HANDS ON HIS WRISTS PUSHING THEM BACK BUT HE'S AS STRONG AS ME AND ON TOP.

"YO MUTHAFUCKA!" I HAVE NEVER BEEN SO GLAD TO HEAR THOSE WORDS. BAINES IS RUSHING UP BEHIND HIM, AND I GET THE THING OFF MY FACE AS DICKHOLE *1 TURNS TO SWARL AT HIM. I FEEL HIS BODY TENSE AND BAINES STOPS LIKE HE'S BEEN SANDBAGGED.

OH NO. NO NO. THE PREDATOR'S TAINT, I DIDN'T THINK THIS GUY WAS OLD ENOUGH — BAINES IS SO TOUGH YOU FORGET HE'S YOUNG — DICKHOLE *1 GLARES AND EARTH RUNS OFF.

THE GOOD NEWS IS, THE HACKLES OF THE BEAST WORK BOTH WAYS. FOR JUST A MOMENT, THE OLDER VAMPIRE HAS TO FIGHT HIS INSTINCT TO CHASE BAINES, LIKE A DOG ON A CAT, AND WHILE HE'S DISTRACTED I SQUIRM OUT, WE'RE BOTH STANDING AND I'M SCRAMBLING BACK WHILE DRAWING A GUN. I'D HOPED TO DO THIS WITHOUT GUNSHOTS WAKING THE NEIGHBORS, BUT I'D ALSO HOPED TO TAUNT HIM LIKE A BOND VILLAIN — AND TO HAVE A FACE TO DO IT WITH. SO, FALL BACK TEN AND PUNT TO PLAN B.

I SHOOT HIM, AND IT DOESN'T HURT HIM SO MUCH THAT HE FREAKS, BUT I THINK HE'S DECIDED TO CUT AND RUN INSTEAD OF FINISHING ME OFF. I GET ANOTHER SHOT AS HE HEADS TOWARDS THE BACK DOOR, BUT I MISS. I'M RESIGNING MYSELF TO A RAIN DELAY AND NO CLOSURE TONIGHT WHEN I HEAR A MEATY THUD AND SOME SWEAR WORDS.

"YO BLEEDY, HOW 'BOUT SOME HELP HERE?" I RUSH TO THE KITCHEN AND BAINES IS LYING ON TOP OF HIM. THEY'RE THRASHING AROUND BUT THE BIG VAMPIRE HAS DICKHOLE *1 IN A FULL NELSON.

"I THOUGHT YOU FREAKED!" I SAY, PULLING A JAGGED SLAT OF WOOD OUT OF MY SLEEVE. HE GIVES ME A LOOK. "FAKED IT. DAG, WHAT KINDA PUNK YOU TAKE ME FOR?"

I DON'T GET THE CIRCLE OF THE CRONE. I'M A MEMBER OF IT, BUT I DON'T GET IT. HALF THE TIME I SUSPECT THAT EVEN ROWEN DOESN'T GET IT, THAT SHE'S AS IGNORANT AS ME BUT ON A FAR LARGER SCALE.

MOYRA IS ALWAYS PUSHING ME FORWARD, TELLING ME I NEEDED TO GO DEEPER INTO THE MYSTERIES. BUT ROWEN WAS ALWAYS TELLING ME TO HOLD BACK, UNDERSTAND EACH STAGE FIRMLY BEFORE BUILDING ON IT TO THE NEXT.

"WE ARE ETERNAL," SHE TOLD ME. "WE HAVE NO EXCUSE FOR IMPATIENCE."

THAT WAS WHY IT WAS SUCH A SHOCK WHEN SHE TOLD ME TO TAKE A BABY.

"FIRST THING I WANT TO KNOW," I TELL DICKHOLE *1 AS I PULL THE STAKE FROM HIS CHEST. "FIRST THING, I... Y'KNOW I'LL START WITH AN EASY QUESTION. WHAT'S WITH THE POWER TOOLS?"

HE STARES AT ME SULLENLY. I OPEN A BOX OF WOODEN KITCHEN MATCHES. WE'RE IN A DAMP CONCRETE BASEMENT AND HE'S CHAINED UP LIKE HARRY Houdini. I STRIKE ONE AND TOSS IT BY HIS FEET. HE SIGHS. HE DOESN'T FLINCH, HE'S TOO COOL TO CARE AFTER ONE LITTLE SPARK, BUT WE BOTH KNOW THAT I CAN CRACK HIM WITH ENOUGH OF THIS.

"I'M A JEANS ARTISAN," HE SAYS.

"EXCUSE ME?"

"DISTRESSED BLUE JEANS? YOU KNOW, THE \$300 JEANS THAT HAVE ALL THE SCUFFS AND DETAILS ON THEM? THAT'S DONE BY HAND. AT LEAST THE HIGH END ONES."

"YOU DO THAT?"

"THE MONEY'S GOOD AND I CAN WORK ON MY OWN SCHEDULE."

"SEEMS LIKE A PRETTY CRAPPY WAY TO SPEND ETERNITY."

"IT'S A THING I DO, IT'S NOT WHAT I DO."

I SUPPOSE HE'S GOT A POINT, AND I SUPPOSE HIS OBSCURE JOB IS BESIDE THE POINT.

"WHERE'S AMY?"

"I DON'T KNOW." I STEP FORWARD AND HE SAYS, "REALLY, I DON'T KNOW. SHE BAILED ON ME AFTER I TURNED HER, OKAY? TYPICAL CHILD-SIRE REBELLION, AND THEN YOU AND YOUR FUCKPOLE INVICTUS BUDDIES SQUEEZED EVERYTHING I DID SO HARD I DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO CHASE HER. YOU HAPPY?"

"ACTUALLY, YES."

"SO HOW'S YOUR OLD MAN?"

"I'M ASKING THE QUESTIONS."

"YEAH YEAH. WELL WHAT ELSE DO YOU WANT TO KNOW? WHY I DID IT? TO GET A HOOK IN YOU, YOU MUST KNOW THAT ALREADY. THEN YOU'D GIVE ME A HOOK IN YOUR POP, WHO MIGHT BE USEFUL THE NEXT TIME MAXWELL DECIDES IT'S TIME TO CRACK DOWN ON THE RIFF-RAFF."

"EXPLOITATION AT THREE REMOVES IS PRETTY COMPLICATED. WEREN'T YOU WORRIED ONE LINK WOULD BREAK?"

HE SHRUGS, AS MUCH AS HE'S ABLE WITH HIS HANDS CHAINED DOWN. "SHE WAS CUTE. BAIT'S ALWAYS A GOOD INVESTMENT. ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE GETTING ON IN YEARS, CAN'T SPEAK THE YOUTH LINGO SO GOOD. CAN'T PASS FOR ALIVE." HE'S GETTING IMPATIENT. "LOOK MAN, YOU AND I BOTH KNOW YOU INVICTUS TYPES ARE ALL BEHIND THE PRINCE'S TRANQUILITY, AND THAT WHILE YOU PROBABLY THINK THE LAW SHOULDN'T APPLY TO YOU, IF HE ORDERS THE TRUTH YOU'RE GOING TO SERVE IT WITH A GARNISH OF HUMILITY. YOU'VE GOT WAY MORE TO LOSE FROM KILLING ME THAN THE SATISFACTION IT WOULD NET YOU. NOT LEAST THAT I MIGHT BE YOUR PATH TO AMY. SO HOW 'BOUT YOU CUT ME LOOSE OR HAND ME OVER TO AN IMPARTIAL OBSERVER, OKAY?"

"WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

"RICHARD HOLDEN."

"YOU'RE KIDDING."

"WHY'S THAT FUNNY?"

"BECAUSE I'M NOT INVICTUS. I'M IN THE CIRCLE."

RICHARD CAN'T GET MUCH PALER, BUT HE WOULD IF HE COULD. NICE. HE'S HEARD OF US.

"ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THE MYTH OF LOKI? NORSE GOD, TRICKSTER TYPE. NOTE-WORTHY FOR GAINING THE STRENGTH TO DEFEAT ODIN AND THOR BY CONSUMING THE HEART OF SOMEONE MORE POWERFUL."

"NO MAN, YOU... SHIT, YOU CAN'T..."

THE RUMOR IS THAT THE ELDERS OF THE CIRCLE ALL COMMIT DIABLERIE, THAT THEY NOT ONLY KILL OTHER VAMPIRES BUT DEVOUR THEIR SOULS, THEIR VERY ESSENCES. IT CAN'T BE TRUE BECAUSE KINDRED LIKE ME CAN SEE IT. THEN AGAIN, THE RUMOR USUALLY SAYS THERE'S WAYS AROUND THAT, IF YOU MAKE THE PROPER OFFERINGS, KNOW THE PROPER RITES, CAST THE PROPER SPELLS.

IT'S NOT A RUMOR THAT SOUL-STEALING IS POSSIBLE. IT IS, AND IT WORKS, AND IT MAKES YOU STRONGER. ROWEN TOLD ME ALL ABOUT IT.

"IT'S NOT FOR YOU," SHE SAID. "NOT YET. PERHAPS NOT EVER. THE QUICK PATH IS THE SLIPPERY ONE."

"I THOUGHT LOKI WAS A SLIPPERY GOD?"

"YOU ARE BARELY A KILLER. YOU LACK THE EXPERIENCE TO EVEN FORESEE A DECADE, BUT YOU WOULD TAKE AN ETERNAL ACTION?"

"I WANT..."

"I KNOW. IN TIME YOU WILL. IN TIME WE ALL GAIN THE POWER WE DESIRE, AND IT IS ALWAYS ENOUGH TO PUNISH US. THE PUNISHMENT IS ALWAYS ENOUGH TO TEACH US TO DESIRE MORE POWER."

FOR THE FIRST TIME, I SEE HER SMILE.

"BEFORE YOU TAKE A SOUL," SHE SAYS, "TAKE AN INFANT."

THE NIGHT AFTER TAKING DOWN DICKHOLE #1 - RICHARD HOLDEN, IT'S STUPID, IT'S A FREAK COINCIDENCE, ONLY MOYRA SAYS COINCIDENCE IS JUST A HIGHER SPIRIT'S WAY OF TALKING TO YOU - I'M IN THE MATERNITY WARD. IT'S HELLISHLY BRIGHT, EVERYTHING IS BEIGE OR PINK OR BABY BLUE, EVERYTHING IS CLEAN. I SHOULDN'T BE ABLE TO GET IN HERE. ROWEN FIXED IT, SHE SET ME UP WITH A COUPLE HELPERS TO DO EVERYTHING.

THE NICU, THE NEWBORN INTENSIVE CARE UNIT, HAS GLASS WALLS, I CAN SEE THROUGH THEM AND THE SICK BABIES, THE PREMATURES AND THE ONES BORN ADDICTED, THEY'RE THERE UNDER HEAT LAMPS LIKE FRIES AT MCDONALD'S. I'LL TAKE ONE OF THEM, IF I TAKE ONE. IF I CAN EVEN DO THIS. I CAN'T. I DON'T WANT TO.

I TALKED TO MY DAD EARLIER TONIGHT. IT'S BAD. HE'S A GHOUL, WHICH MEANS HE'S SOMEBODY'S SLAVE, WHICH MEANS I'LL ALWAYS SUCKLE HIM D TIT. CHRIST, WHY DID I THINK UP THAT METAPHOR? SHIT, WHY DID I JUST INVOKE CHRIST?

DAD'S AN ADDICT AND TO HIM I NOW BLEED JUNK, WHICH MEANS HE'S A LOT MORE ATTENTIVE THAN HE WAS WHEN I WAS EIGHTEEN, OR WHEN MOM BAILED OUT ON US. HE DOESN'T EVEN REMEMBER AMY, BUT HE SAT UP AND PAID ATTENTION WHEN I MENTIONED SHE WAS A VAMPIRE. JUST LIKE EVERY JUNKIE, HE'S ALWAYS INTERESTED IN SCORING.

DAD THINKS BAINES SET ME UP, LET ME AND RICHARD TUSSELE AND WOULD HAVE MADE SOME KIND OF DEAL IF HOLDEN HAD KILLED ME. I'D HATE TO BELIEVE IT, BUT ALL THE FACTS FIT. I'D HATE TO THINK EARTH IS THAT COLD. OR THAT HE COULD OUTSMART ME.

ROWEN SENT ME HERE WITH TWO GUYS, FRITZ AND EMMANUEL. EMMANUEL'S PUTTING THE FORGETTING EYE ON THE STAFF WHILE FRITZ JIMMIES LOCKS AND DISABLES THE CAMERAS AND STUFF. THIS JOINT HAS LOADS OF SECURITY, WHICH IS REASSURING, I GUESS. THE CHILDREN ARE THE FUTURE.

FRITZ POKES HIS HEAD AROUND THE CORNER AND NODS. I CAN'T MOVE. HE GIVES ME A LOOK, A VERY "WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR" LOOK, THEN GLANCES AT HIS WATCH AND I START WALKING. I'M NOT SURE I CAN DO THIS BUT, HELL, I GUESS I CAN'T LET FRITZ DOWN.

I LOOK AT THE BABIES. PICK OUT A SWARTHY LITTLE ONE. HE'S KICKED OFF HIS BLANKETS. NO, SHE, HER LITTLE CAP AND BOOTIES ARE PINK, HER NAME'S "IMMACULA." HER LEGS ARE CURVED LIKE HORSESHOES, ARE THEY SUPPOSED TO BE LIKE THAT? I COME CLOSER AND SUDDENLY THIS FEELS ABSOLUTELY RIGHT.

"IMMACULA MONDINO," I SAY, "YOU ARE MY OWN."

I DIDN'T KILL RICHARD, I FORCED HIM TO DRINK MY BLOOD. LAST NIGHT AND TONIGHT I DID IT, SOON HE'LL BE ENSLAVED JUST LIKE MY FATHER IS. WHEN I DID IT, I OPENED MY WRIST WITH MY TEETH AGAIN AND NOW I DO IT IN THE NICU, STANDING OVER IMMACULA MONDINO. I WET MY THUMB AND TRACE BLOOD ON HER HEAD AND JUST LIKE ROWEN TOLD ME, I KNOW WHAT SYMBOL TO MAKE. I'VE NEVER LEARNED IT, NEVER SEEN IT, BUT IT COMES.

"I CLAIM YOU FOR THE CIRCLE OF THE CRONE," I SAY.

JUST LIKE ROWEN SAID OVER ME IN MY CRIB.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRELUDE	1
INTRODUCTION	12
CHAPTER ONE: A HISTORY OF THE CIRCLE OF THE CRONE	16
CHAPTER TWO: UNLIFE IN THE CIRCLE OF THE CRONE	28
CHAPTER THREE: CIRCLE OF THE CRONE AND THE DANSE MACABRE	88
CHAPTER FOUR: FACTIONS AND BLOODLINES	122
CHAPTER FIVE: RULES AND SYSTEMS	184
APPENDIX:	212

INTRODUCTION

"Hundred years, hundred more/someday we may see a/woman king,
sword in hand/swing at some evil and bleed."

— Iron & Wine, "Woman King"

The old gods are not dead. They sleep in the earth like ancient vampires. To wake them, members of the Circle of the Crone dance on the graves of the gods and sing their names into the night.

While the rest of vampire society faces inward, the Circle walks the perimeter. Acolytes in every city are praying, bleeding, feeding and screwing where the lights of vampire society give way to the woods and the mountains and the ruins of the societies that came before. Acolytes dig up the shards of the old ways and the bones of dead gods and bring them back to life as the Acolytes themselves have been brought back from death. This is the covenant with a thousand faces.

The Circle of the Crone celebrates the holy marvel of earthly creation, which is itself an imitative worship of godhood. The Circle's members revel in the pains and triumphs of earthly existence, which every vampire is blessed to suffer and rejoice through despite his death. To these monsters, the Requiem demonstrates that we do not have to die — neither gods nor mortals.

The Kindred of the Circle of the Crone are not feminist tyrants, but pagan witches and warlocks with a genuine belief that humankind's ancient religions had insight that has since been lost to both Kindred and kine. In contrast to the Lancea Sanctum's belief in Kindred Damnation, this covenant believes that the vampiric condition was built into the world in its first nights and is therefore a natural part of earthly existence, even if it is entangled with supernatural power.

The vast array of possible wisdoms to be gleaned, and the difficulty of understanding truth with an earthly mind, means that the Circle of the Crone as a covenant has no central dogma to give its cults and coteries a single direction or a unifying philosophy. Rather, Acolytes hope to excel at their own religious and philosophical practices, to take their Requiems as far as they can go and to test their own limits while other Acolytes in other cults in other cities try out other tests and pursue other beliefs.

In the long run of an immortal Requiem, all vampires may benefit from the insights uncovered by the

multitude of Acolyte cults, even if they seem errant or wrong-headed or foolish tonight. Acolytes may squabble and bicker and mock each other, but they see their polytheism as an appreciation of the world's great and terrible variety — or at least as a reasonable practice of open-mindedness.

ACOLYTE CONCEPTS

As an unknowably diverse religion of secret cults and hidden temples, the Circle of the Crone is difficult to summarize or even profile. No statement can be made about the Circle or its members that isn't contradicted by some self-described Acolyte somewhere, or so it seems. Still, some things can be said with confidence about the covenant:

- Some Acolytes are philosophers more than priests, participating in rites that are religious to others but secular expressions for them. Mythology is valuable for the clarity and wisdom belief in myth creates through metaphor. The Minotaur is a beast borne of a lustful union between human and god, held prisoner in an earthly labyrinth — a labyrinth navigable by woman. The Beast is borne of a lustful union between the Man and the Crone, held prisoner in a labyrinth of veins and flesh — a labyrinth borne of woman.

- Acolytes have different notions of natural and supernatural. They explore those differences, rather than assuming they're true. Some believe that vampires are a natural part of the cosmos because they were created by the same powers that created the rest of the World of Darkness. Others believe the Kindred are supernatural in origin but can become a harmonious part of the natural world over time as they interact with and are assimilated into it (as they've been assimilated into human society — secret, but integrated).

- Acolyte cults differ from one another a great deal, but a handful of covenant rituals and beliefs are common and have become adopted by many cults over the centuries. Remember how much of Kindred culture is spread by word of mouth and hearsay. No Acolyte college exists to train priests, and there's no pagan vampire Vatican to

impose covenant practices. We have no reason to assume that the majority of Acolytes have master's degrees in comparative religion or ancient history. So, individual cults latch onto their own favorite specializations and make them the cults' focus. This means that Acolytes may base their practices on favorite myths and religions while ignoring other ideas out of personal bias or outright ignorance. This gives us the freedom to invent new vampiric spins on certain myths, but it can also give you the freedom to make the mistake of treating Acolytes as comedic fools. Don't do that. Some cults are certainly way off, but think how scary it is when members in those cults realize that their Hierophant doesn't know what he's talking about, that the gruesome powers of Crúac are in the hands of monsters that don't truly understand its meaning.

- Not all Circle of the Crone cults see themselves as such. The label of "Acolyte" gets applied by outside forces almost as often as it gets adopted voluntarily. Eventually, the reputation and power of the covenant makes it useful for many cults to go ahead and accept the mantle of the Circle of the Crone, but not all such Acolyte groups in all domains begin that way. Some cults are formed by individuals who want to start their own sect of Acolytes (think of lone Kindred striking out to a new city or a new corner of their own city); others are formed naturally by devout vampires who eventually become recognized by the other powers in the domain and so eventually get the Acolyte label. The evolution of Acolyte cults is often organic.

- Remember that the covenant reveres creation (which is why the Circle reveres female symbolism) and perseverance through tribulation, not destruction. Diablerie is still a terrible crime in the covenant's eyes — in most domains. Even in lands where diablerie isn't a crime in the covenant's eyes, it is still a terrible sin inside the soul.

- In some domains, a Maiden is a Kindred who has never killed, in others, she's a Kindred who has never created a ghoul or childe. In some, a Mother is a sire or regnant, in others, a killer. In this domain, a Crone is one who practices Crúac. In that domain, a Crone is one who has endured at least one long torpor. In some domains, a Maiden is one who does not feed from kine primarily, a Mother is one who does and a Crone is one who feeds from Kindred (and is easily confused with one who performs diablerie). This all leads to confusion and culture clashes within the covenant.

NOT ABSOLUTELY

Don't think in absolutes. When Acolytes happen to share an opinion, it is not because Acolytes all think alike or because they decided on a party line at the National Pagan Convention. Acolytes all across the World of Darkness are drawing from the same core myths

— the same ancient religions — and looking at them through the same two tenets of the covenant: Creation is Power and Tribulation Brings Enlightenment. These philosophies can be paired with the available sources of mythic inspiration in a million ways, and plenty of Acolyte cults and domains have wandered far from what might be considered common for the covenant, but just as humans keep circling back to the same motifs, the same symbols and the same ideas over the centuries, so do vampires.

Except with vampires, change happens even more slowly. Those Kindred who broke off from a New Amsterdam cult and headed south to Virginia only changed their traditional rites and holidays a little from those they were taught by their sires and mentors. The next generation, which carried the litany of the Crone into the fire-lit infant cities of the Great Plains all those decades later, changed the rites a little bit more, but the roots of their faith still stretch back to the same rituals handed down centuries before in New Amsterdam. And those customs came over from the Old World, only gradually changed from antiquity.

So there isn't any central body dictating that covenant holidays get observed according to the instructions in their unholy constitution. The Acolytes have no need of one. The slow transformation of their ways isn't something they're afraid of, and it's not something they resist. They have no shortage of old or tradition-minded vampires to uphold the customs of the old ways.

REMEMBER, REMEMBER

Every couple of pages, remind yourself of this: the common practices and beliefs of the covenant aren't features the Acolytes designed into their global image. The beliefs and practices are quirks of happenstance. This is just how things worked out over the millennia since the first Crone-worshipping vampires.

If you think about it, it's not so surprising. It's not as if the people of the ancient world got together and said, "Listen, these are the common threads we want people to find when they look back on us in a thousand years. This is how we want to appear." Think of this book as a report on what we've found while looking at Acolyte cults throughout the world.

This isn't the manual the Acolytes used when they designed their cults. No vampire has read this book. So you know more about the covenant than many (most?) Acolytes do.

The factions in Chapter Four aren't the most common. They aren't standards that should appear in every domain. Most domains are probably home to only one to three Acolyte factions, and those factions are likely to be little more than a single coterie. What we're doing here is sketching out some of the extreme positions of

the covenant — the places where the fence posts might be. These are descriptive, not restrictive.

The vampires of the Circle of the Crone did not plan their image. They did not mandate what would be catholic for the covenant. But they have an image nonetheless, and certain trends and practices appear common when you look at enough domains.

We can see repeating motifs in the old ways, but they weren't built in. It's a handsome, mystifying pattern of belief that unfolded in its time. Naturally.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Paganism reaches out into the modern night from the shadows beyond history, while neo-paganism spreads across the breadth of the world through the minds and hearts of countless devotees. Suffice it to say, there are lots of books on these subjects. No list of titles that we can present here can hope to satisfy all the practicing pagans who feel their facet of faith has been neglected in this book. The best we can do is offer a few good places to start reading if you want to delve deeper than a game book has the space or the business to do so.

The Once and Future Goddess, by Elinor W. Gadon. This book, subtitled "A Sweeping Visual Chronicle of the Sacred Female and Her Reemergence in the Cultural Mythology of Our Time," is an excellent primer on female roles in world mythology from the ancient world to the modern. Whether you've got a casual interest or a scholar's thirst for this stuff, Gadon can make ancient cultures feel lively and modern art feel mythic.

The Feminist Companion to Mythology, edited by Carolynne Larrington. With essays covering everything from Celtic legendry (often the focus of armchair mythic feminists) to Eskimo mythology, this volume of myths is sometimes dry, sometimes visceral but almost always populated with insightful political interpretations that go further than the vengeful crackpot tripe that sometimes masquerades as feminism. In here, you'll find myths examined in context and interpreted anew by learned experts to get at both what the original creators may have intended and what the myths can be seen to mean to tonight's readers.

Fearless Girls, Wise Women, and Beloved Sisters, by Kathleen Ragan. Though simplistic, this one makes up for its depth with its breadth. Ragan doesn't seem interested in digging too deeply into the folktales she's found, but she tells them well and has collected them from a terrifically wide assortment of sources.

Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary, by Robert E. Bell. Yes, Bell editorializes more than a "dictionary" probably ought to, but that's what makes this a readable book rather than only a

reference. Take a look in here for a real understanding of how the same core stories can be altered, adapted and revised over thousands of years without utterly losing their common ground. There are 2,600 entries in this book, but they're not exactly describing 2,600 different mythic women.

SPIRITS AND THE CROSSOVER QUESTION

The Circle of the Crone is a mystical covenant. They make it their business to poke around ancient ruins, meddle with spirits (which they sometimes mistake for ghosts or gods) and interact with mages and werewolves and other, weirder things. By the default standards of the World of Darkness, though, we can't assume that you're reading or playing Werewolf: The Forsaken, Mage: The Awakening or Promethean: The Created. So this book was written with the assumption that you're not using the spirit rules described in Werewolf or Mage.

This shouldn't be a problem for you. Some people will tell you that when vampires have dealings with spirits, they're "crossing over" into some intellectual territory that belongs exclusively to Werewolf or Mage. Don't believe it. Spirits are an inherent part of the World of Darkness, of which Vampire and the other games are each just one part.

Depending on the kind of chronicle you want to play, you might strictly use the spirit rules found in Werewolf: The Forsaken and routinely pit Acolytes against monstrous horrors from books like Predators and World of Darkness: Skinchangers. Or you might not sweat the details and simply adapt the rules for ghosts in the World of Darkness Rulebook to model the spirits in play. You might even skip mechanics altogether and use spirits as simply storytelling devices — unknowable horrors that threaten not to share Crúac gifts (p. 195) or to destroy those close to the coterie unless their demands are met (that is, unless the players successfully resolve that session's story).

Remember: Spirits are narrative tools, not just monsters to be fought.

So, when mixing your World of Darkness games together, do it the way you want. Use spirits to whatever end you like. Here are some ideas for you to play with:

- Acolytes are Wrong. Werewolves have the whole, true skinny on the spirit world. Not only does it all work just like it's described in Werewolf: The Forsaken, but Acolytes actively believe and practice spiritual philosophies that are just plain inaccurate. (If you want this kind of two-layered style, take a look at p. 201.) For the Circle of the Crone, it's about their own faith, not animistic authenticity, so most Acolytes don't even care if werewolves call them fools.

- Acolytes are Misinformed. As above, Acolytes are mostly wrong about how spirits operate and which of their “gods” are actually just mountain spirits or possessed animals. However, some Acolytes conspire or coordinate with werewolves or mages in an effort to blend their religious beliefs with nuts-and-bolts cosmological stuff. Great for games in which Vampire players mix it up with Werewolf and Mage players.

- Acolytes are Right. The being that the local vampire cult says is Isis really is Isis, or some aspect of her. This implies that faith reveals or creates a dimension of the spiritual world that can’t simply be appreciated through werewolf mysticism or Atlantean magic. This is also good for crossover games, with the added benefit of preserving a degree of frightening mystery to the cosmos of the divine realm. Sure, a werewolf might feel he can beat up that spiritual incarnation of Shiva over there, but that creature is just a tip of godly power poking through the skein of the universe into the earthly realm. Great heroes have been battling gods for thousands of years, but all heroes eventually get put in their place.

- Nobody’s Right. Vampires, werewolves and mages are all wrong. The truth about spiritual and divine power is no more knowable in the World of Darkness than it is in the real world. The spiritual ecology of the Shadow Realm isn’t representative of any higher powers — spirits are simply occasional pawns of the gods, just like any other creatures. From this uncertainty comes fear. Piercing scantily into this mystery is the illumination of faith. Drama matters more than game mechanics.

CRÚAC ERRATA

Second printings of *Vampire: The Requiem* incorporate a few minor tweaks and fixes to the rules for casting Crúac rituals. Where possible, those clarifications have been incorporated into the Crúac Overview on p. 203 of this book. To correct the rituals in your first-printing copy of *Vampire*, however, remember this: Crúac rituals should not use contested actions to determine the quality of their activation.

For example, take a look at rituals like *Blood Price* (••••, *Vampire: The Requiem* p. 144-145) and *Blood Blight* (•••••, same page). Instead of requiring contested rolls against the subject’s resistance Attribute + Blood Potency, the activation rolls for these rituals should be extended actions penalized by the relevant resistance Attribute (Resolve, Stamina or Composure). Whenever you find a Crúac ritual that uses a contested action to determine its activation successes, replace that with an extended action penalized by the same resistance Attribute mentioned in the contested action.

Yes, this means that the only reliable way to protect one’s self from a blood sorcerer is to stop her from completing her ritual. Or getting the hell out of there.

(Note: To find out what printing your *Vampire* book is, turn to the credits on p. 10 and look at the bottom of the red box in the right-hand corner. If your book is a second printing, you’ll see it says “Second printing” right there. If no printing is specified, you’ve got a first printing.)





CHAPTER ONE: THE HISTORY OF THE CIRCLE OF THE CRONE

“Our history is a bushel of myths,
plucked from the guts of a million devoted revelers,
just like you.

The ones we like here, we call legends.

The ones they like over there?

We call those lies.”

*What is all Knowledge too but recorded Experience, and a product of History;
of which, therefore, Reasoning and Belief,
no less than Action and Passion, are essential materials?*

— Thomas Carlyle

HISTORY OF THE COVENANT

To a great extent, there is no history of the Circle of the Crone. Many histories of particular pagan cults exist, or of the Acolytes in a particular city, but on the whole these do not tie together into a grand narrative of the covenant.

A number of grand narratives of the history of the covenant *do* circulate, but these are best thought of as legends — they are mutually contradictory, and regularly disagree with facts that are as well established as facts about Kindred history can be. Even within the Circle, many Acolytes do not see the need for such legends.

In fact, a number of vampires see no point in investigating the history of the covenant at all. They say that the Circle is merely an umbrella term for all the pagan groups among the Kindred. The history of particular cults is of greater importance to the members of those cults, but these vampires see little reason to worry about the muddled history of the covenant as a whole.

Is any Acolyte really a member of a covenant larger than the city in which she hunts? Is any Acolyte really faithful to the distant gods of faraway cults? No. Other Acolytes in other cities have their faiths and their gods and their parts of the covenant to tend. The Acolytes *here* in *this* city do things their own way — and, overall, the covenant enjoys marvelous diversity. Other cults of the covenant have their own rituals, their own futures and their own histories.

There is, however, one question that must be answered. Why do so many pagan vampires revere a goddess who exalts tribulation and creation? Where are the pagan cults following male deities who delight in destroying your enemies while living a life of luxury? (Some Acolytes may say that's the Invictus, but that's a mocking answer that doesn't really answer the question.)

ALL?

Are there really *no* groups of pagan vampires worshipping gods of pleasant tyranny? That seems

very unlikely, and indeed small cults answering that description do exist in cities across the globe. However, they remain small cults, often harried out of existence by the Lancea Sanctum or eventually absorbed by the Circle of the Crone. At the covenant's most basic levels of belief, the Circle of the Crone does not abhor or exclude cults surrounding male gods. The Circle's philosophy is not anti-men; it is pro-creation. And since the earliest nights of mortal existence, the uniquely feminine act of birth has been the supreme symbol of human creation.

But not the *only* symbol of creation. Zeus begat Athena from his thigh or, some say, his skull. Male deities are revered by many Acolytes with the same fervor and ferocity as female deities. Male gods are simply not as universally iconic of the covenant's reverence for the power of creation.

THE TRIUMPH OF THE CRONE

Writing the history of the Kindred is even more difficult than writing human history. The first well-attested reference to the Circle of the Crone by that name (in Latin translation) is found in a document from early 12th-century Croatia. If lines of connection are followed back from that reference, it becomes clear that the organization has existed, under other names, since at least the seventh century, when existence of the covenant is recorded in Spain. The individual pagan cults within the seventh-century covenant can, in turn, be traced back further — much further. A vampire cult of Isis existed in the Middle Kingdom of ancient Egypt, for example.

Working from the other direction, the last reliable mention of a substantial group of pagan vampires primarily honoring a god is found in English records of the ninth century. Disputed, but probably sound, evidence suggests that there was a priest of a god who was a master of Crúac active in the nights of the fifth century. Records of conflicts between the Kindred of Syracuse demonstrate that the pagan Kindred were not part of a single covenant in the first century before Christ, and that both sides of the conflict had access to Crúac.

This much is solidly attested; few Kindred historians dispute that the Circle came into existence by drawing

together older cults, that this happened some time during the first centuries of the Christian era and that the covenant had essentially taken control of paganism among the Damned and of Crúac before the birth of Islam.

The outline of the process is also a matter of general consensus. After the fall of Rome and the Camarilla, the rising alliance between the Invictus and the Lancea Sanctum put a great deal of pressure on the various groups of pagan Kindred. Many were simply destroyed, and those that were not realized that they must cooperate in order to survive. A number of covenants formed, but the covenant devoted to the Crone proved strongest, wiping out the competition and turning Crúac into the Circle's exclusive preserve. There is little dispute over why the Circle would want to do this; Crúac is an important edge in political disputes, far stronger if held in a monopoly, and resisting the Sanctified left little space for internal disputes.

THE BLINDED QUEEN

Much more disputed is the tale of the Blinded Queen. On the one hand, this has many features of legend; the name she called her goddess varies from one cult to the next, the reason for her name is given variously and even the site of her Requiem is not subject to consensus. However, the broad outline is found in the tales of many cults, and even in local traditions held by members of other covenants.

The Blinded Queen was high priestess of a powerful goddess of blood and death. While many of her contemporaries saw the advance of the Sanctified, and of the Christian church among the kine, as a sign that the Kindred had failed their deities, she saw the Sanctified as a test designed to make the true servants even stronger. She traveled from city to city, spreading her message among the Kindred who would listen, leaving behind the core of her teaching and a few rituals of Crúac. (Some legends claim that she was the first Kindred to know Crúac, but if that is so she learned it several centuries before she founded the covenant.) She taught the importance of struggle and the importance of creation, and then moved on.

A few decades later, she came back, blind. She visited every city, and either destroyed her followers, or taught them more Crúac rituals and put them in contact with other members of the new covenant. The grounds for her judgment vary so much from legend to legend that they are impossible to recover; only the fact that she destroyed some followers for failing, in some way, is constant. A few decades after that, a command from the Blinded Queen was passed from one city to the next: all practitioners of Crúac outside the covenant must be destroyed. The command was carried out, and the covenant's existence assured.

Most Kindred historians think that the Blinded Queen actually existed, and effectively founded the Circle of



the Crone from many disparate pagan groups. Every Kindred historian has his own theory as to who and what she was, and the debates over this show no sign of ending. A few Kindred have actually claimed to be the Blinded Queen. In two cases, the claim was backed up by power, knowledge of Crúac and knowledge of the covenant that made the claim highly plausible. One of the Kindred was a tall, blond Mekhet from Norway, the other a short, dark Daeva from Cyprus. Their active times have overlapped briefly, in 1814, when one was in New York and the other in Vienna. Nevertheless, there are a few historians who claim that the two were actually the same vampire, and really were the Blinded Queen. While many of the candidates have gained great authority over the local Acolytes, none have been able to take control of the whole covenant, and none of the strongest candidates have even tried.

PERSISTENCE

Ironically, the continuing existence of the Circle as a single covenant is probably due to the Lancea Sanctum. The Sanctified persecution of pagans meant that only those pagan vampires with an edge, and backing from a large organization, survived. That meant the members of the Circle. They had Crúac as the prize for recruitment, and Acolytes fleeing persecution in one city could find some degree of refuge with the Acolytes in another. Other groups of pagans lacked both of these advantages, and disappeared under persecution.

The Ordo Dracul is the exception that proves the rule. The Coils of the Dragon provide an alternative to Crúac, and the covenant's organization allowed its members to maintain themselves in the face of suspicion. An interesting question is whether the Circle will remain unified in the future. The power of the Sanctified is waning in modern nights, making the need for unity less pressing. Some outside observers feel that the Circle is likely to fragment back into many local cults in the near future.

CULTS OF THE CRONE

There is no way to give the history of every cult within the Circle in a book of reasonable length. The factions and bloodlines described elsewhere in this book serve as examples, and a few briefer ones are given here. More useful are the patterns of history that are seen repeatedly. Cults are born, maintain themselves and die. The patterns of struggle at each of these stages are repeated many times across the covenant.

BIRTH

For all the rhetoric of unimaginably ancient roots, and despite the truth behind that rhetoric, almost all of the current cults and factions within the Circle of the Crone were founded within the last five centuries, and according to one of a handful of patterns. Cults continue

to be born in current nights, as might be expected from a covenant that exalts creation.

INSPIRATION

Something speaks to a vampire, imparting knowledge of an effective way to worship the Crone, and often leaving some evidence of the validity of the vision. This is the classic mode of cult foundation, and one that almost all claim to trace themselves back to, even if indirectly.

Inspiration can come at any time, but normally when the vampire is in some abnormal mental state. The most common time is torpor, when goddesses speak to Kindred in their dreams. Hag cults often form in this way. A Kindred's daily sleep is another possible time for inspiration; the Sand of the Stone Mother is a small cult in the Rockies founded when its high priestess dreamed repeatedly that the mountains were talking to her. Finally, some Kindred find inspiration while in the throes of frenzy. The type of cult created is appropriate to the type of frenzy, which could indicate either that the inspiration comes from the Kindred herself, or that the goddesses choose those in an appropriate frame of mind as prophets. Such cults do tend to be more extreme than most.

Inspired Kindred often feel the need to follow their inspiration regardless of the political climate, and so this is the most likely origin for cults founded in a hostile city. Cults founded in this way thus cause trouble in the Danse Macabre rather more often than others do.

SECESSION

Some cults are formed by secession from an existing cult. A small group of Kindred decide that the cult's teachings are not wholly appropriate, and so split off to follow their own version. Both the seceding group and the group left behind normally claim to be the true heirs of the original cult.

Secession is normally hostile, with the two resulting cults moving politically or physically against one another. It is thus not uncommon for one group to be driven out of one city, and forced to carve out territory elsewhere. Unless one group wants to leave, this is normally preceded by nights of covert struggle, and the arrival of a coterie of new Kindred often provokes further struggle in their new home.

The pace of change of modern mortal society seems to have increased the rate of secession. Neonates these nights often believe that the elders are out of touch, and that the rites need to be updated to reflect reality. The neonates may even be right, but the elders are rarely sympathetic. In these cases, almost invariably the neonates have to flee to a new city.

REVIVAL

As noted below, cults within the Circle of the Crone die out. There are many possible reasons for this, but most often

traces are left behind, even if only in the records of heresy kept by the Lancea Sanctum. There is a long tradition of young members of the Circle reviving such destroyed cults.

Revival allows the new cult to claim the history of the old, without having to deal with the presence of elders. Revival has thus always been a popular option with politically ambitious neonates and ancillae. The link to politics is so well established, in fact, that Kindred of the Circle instinctively look for the political angle when confronted with such a new cult. In some cases, this leads them to join, as they see a way to advance their agenda without being the figurehead.

Cults are also often revived when the power of the Sanctified wanes in a domain. Acolytes take advantage of the newfound freedom to reclaim their history, which often results in a sudden profusion of re-founded groups springing up throughout the city, vastly complicating the Danse Macabre.

RECONSTRUCTION

Reconstruction is an altogether more scholarly undertaking than revival. The founding vampire works from the scholarship of mortal historians and archaeologists, reconstructing pagan worship that had vanished entirely and creating a new cult honoring the old gods.

Because the creator is not bound by the actual practices of any previous cult, reconstructed cults tend to be very well suited to the nights in which they are created. A number of cults with strong Christian influences were reconstructed during the Middle Ages, of which the Cult of the Magdalene, which takes Mary Magdalene to be an avatar of the sacred whore, is the strongest in the present day. With the rapid growth in antiquarian studies during the 17th and 18th centuries, reconstruction became even more common. The cults founded then tended to imbibe ideas of democracy and rights from the intellectual atmosphere, and thus found themselves most often in alliance with the Carthians.

While revived cults often have political aims, reconstructed cults are more idealistic. That does not make them 'nicer'; Kindred ideals include such ideas as ruling over submissive herds of mortals and feeding at will. It does mean that the reconstructed cults tend to respond less to immediate conditions in the Danse Macabre, and more to the long-term goals of their founders. These cults are less likely to have a political impact, but more likely to effect large changes if they succeed.

PURE CREATION

Some cults are not so much cut from whole cloth as woven from threads spun by the founder from sheep she raised herself. It is not uncommon for the founder to claim spirit inspiration, but such deceit is ultimately a poor foundation for a religion. The more successful cults are quite open about their origins.

The attitude of the Circle as a whole to such cults is ambivalent. On the one hand, creation is good. On the other, the arrogance involved in designing your own religion strikes even most Kindred as unconscionable. As a result, most such cults wither and die quite quickly.

The exceptions are those founded by powerful elders with a deep mastery of Crúac. These may involve worship of the elder, and if the vampire is powerful enough, this can seem a sensible option to many neonates. In other cases, the elder might have simply made the goddess up, but it is plausible that she now exists. Indeed, some elders claim to know a Crúac ritual that creates a deity. The existence of the ritual (or rituals) is beyond dispute, but the nature of its effect, if any, is much more controversial.

SURVIVAL

Simple survival is an issue for most cults of the Crone. This is not so much the risk of dying out as the risk of being destroyed. In past centuries, the Sanctified often actively sought to destroy Acolytes, and this is far from unheard-of, even tonight. A number of standard tactics are found in the history of many cults, and most old groups have used more than one.

SECRECY

Secrecy is the most common survival strategy. If the crusaders do not know you exist, they cannot hunt you down. This tactic takes two main forms.

In the first, the Kindred are known to be in the city, and deal with the Prince in the normal way. However, their affiliation to the Circle of the Crone is kept secret. They may be unaligned, or on the fringes of one of the other covenants, most often the Invictus. Some cults, such as the Cult of the Magdalene, were comfortable feigning loose attachment to the Lancea Sanctum, but this was rare in the past and is even rarer tonight. This form of secrecy is becoming less common as the power of the Sanctified wanes. It is hard to keep up, and there are many Kindred for whom the necessary hypocrisy is a strain. More importantly, it takes long enough to fulfill the obligations of an Acolyte, without adding the need to dance attendance on an Invictus lord.

The biggest advantage of this approach is that it is not brittle. That is, a small amount of evidence suggesting pagan links need not be fatal to the hiding Kindred, as they can use their political connections to cover it up, discredit it or explain it away as a misunderstanding. Most of the cults that survived centuries of persecution did so this way.

The second approach is to hide completely, keeping even the existence of the members of the cult secret. Such absolute secrecy makes communication with other members of the covenant difficult, and the cult tends to drift away from the Circle, becoming more isolated.

In addition, the Kindred need only be spotted once to be hunted down. No Prince can tolerate vampires who ignore his authority, whatever their religious affiliation; discovering hidden pagans merely tended to make the pogrom more vicious. As a result, the Circle believes that most cults that tried this method were destroyed, although a few have emerged from hiding as the political climate has become more favorable.

Of course, the essence of this approach is that, if it succeeds, other vampires do not know you exist. Every few years, a small pagan cult appears in a city somewhere, claiming ancient history and years of hiding. The cult's confrontation with contemporary Kindred society is often violent.

DOMAINS

Another technique practiced by the stronger cults was to carve out a domain within a city. This never worked for mortal pagans, as the state was able to muster overwhelming numbers to destroy them. Kindred are scarcer, and harder to muster, than mortals, so the strategy is more viable in the *Danse Macabre*.

The cult claims a geographical area of a city, generally one that is not highly desirable. If any other Kindred enter that area, they are hunted down and killed. (Certain *Crúac* rituals can help with this, making it much

harder to enter the domain undetected.) The leader of the cult then offers certain kinds of service and tribute to the Prince, on the understanding that they would be withdrawn if hostilities started.

The goal, which was achieved with some frequency, was to make it not worth the Prince's while to try to wipe out the pagans. Obviously, this worked much better with Invictus Princes; Sanctified Bishops had a tendency to overlook immediate advantage in favor of ideological purity. The cities where this was most successful were those in which there was more suspicion than usual between the Invictus and the *Lancea Sanctum*, a state that the Circle tried to maintain.

In a few cases, this arrangement has persisted to modern nights, with the Hierarch of a city controlling an area and allowing no non-Circle Kindred within it. The most notable example is Copenhagen, where a cult devoted to Hel maintains absolute control of almost a third of the city. On the other hand, Acolytes showing their faces in the rest of the city are marked for destruction. In most cases, however, the more accepting political climate has led to the domain being somewhat opened up, as the Acolytes maneuver for more power at the heart of politics, rather than being confined to the edge.



ALLIANCES

Alliances tie the Circle fully into the Danse Macabre of a city. They were extremely rare in the past, but are now perhaps the most common survival strategy. Alliances can be with other covenants, or be far more personal.

In the past, personal alliances were the most common. A coterie of Acolytes provided supernatural advice and backing to the Prince, and in return he protected them from the attentions of the Sanctified. As no Prince can rule forever, these alliances were unstable, and most collapsed. In a few cases, the Acolytes were able to form the alliance with the Prince's successor; the Five Hags of Madrid were able to do so for centuries, and remain an important element in the city's political landscape tonight.

In more recent nights, alliances between covenants have spread. The Carthians and the Ordo Dracul both make natural allies for the Circle, although alliances with the Invictus against the Lancea Sanctum are not unheard of. Alliances between the Circle of the Crone and the Lancea Sanctum are the stuff of legend; no trusted reports exist. Of course, simply reporting such an alliance makes a report rather incredible.

Successful alliances move the Circle into the mainstream of Kindred politics without any major events. As a result, alliances have become increasingly common, and groups that followed other strategies have started to seek allies in the Danse Macabre, hoping to join the mainstream.

WANDERING

The final common response to persecution is running away. The highly local nature of Kindred society makes this a very effective response; few vampires care so much about the existence of pagans that the Kindred are willing to pursue them beyond the bounds of the city.

On the other hand, running away is very dangerous. Kindred do not survive well in rural areas, for a large number of reasons, and gaining acceptance in a new city is even harder than establishing yourself at the site of your Embrace. These dangers applied harsh Darwinian selection to the cults that tried this approach, so that the survivors are highly skilled and highly dangerous.

Wandering, similar to secrecy, comes in two varieties. The first is the adoption of a purely nomadic lifestyle. This is very rare, but extremely effective for the groups that managed to pull it off. The second is to try to maintain absolute secrecy, and to move to a new city once discovered. The second method is the more common, and most of the absolutely secret cults that survive to the present night made use of it. Some still do, and their arrival in a new city often triggers a wave of mysterious events. This sometimes compromises the cults' secrecy, but centuries of experience mean that, more often, the causes of the suspicious Final Deaths are never established.

IDENTITY

Physical survival is not the only problem facing a cult within the Circle of the Crone. Unlike the Lancea Sanctum, which has a relatively centralized doctrine, the Circle covers a very wide range of cults. For a particular cult to survive within the Circle, the cult must maintain its own identity as separate from, and at least as appealing as, the other options. Again, cults have used varying strategies to this end.

RITEs

The communal rites of a cult are very important in producing a sense of group identity. In some cases, this is their main, and explicit, purpose, but more often group identity is a side effect of rites that ostensibly aim at something else.

If any strategy is universal, it is this one. Cults without group rites rarely survive more than a few decades, and many Acolytes feel that something is not really a cult unless it has rites. The most secretive cults hold their rites masked, so that no cultist knows the identities of the others, but even these cults have their rituals.

The importance of rites means that they are often used to declare historical affiliations. A revived cult, for example, almost always has ritual continuities with the original version, even if other doctrines have been altered. Similarly, seceding groups generally mark their departure by a change in one or more of the rites, although the cults may label the change as a return to original practice.

INITIATIONS

Initiations are almost as common as rites. In the ancient world, these were a standard feature of mystery religions, in which the initiates knew secrets hidden from outsiders. In modern nights, many Acolyte cults adopt the same structure. Initiations typically involve suffering before secrets are revealed, and thus mesh tightly with Circle philosophy.

Persecuted cults tend to set truly dangerous initiations. Simply joining risks Final Death, so the cult has an interest in weeding out applicants who are not truly loyal before revealing any secrets. In addition, the shared bond of having survived the same peril can be very strong, reinforcing group loyalty.

Cults in power often have more nominal initiations, with advancement linked to political power. Sometimes, these are ritualizations of initiations that were originally truly dangerous. A cult of Artemis based in Maine requires its initiates to travel, alone, to a certain forest clearing outside the city. Years ago, the location was kept secret and the forest infested by werewolves, so only the canniest and most powerful survived. These days, there is a road to the clearing, and most initiates drive.

MUTUAL SUPPORT

Members of cults generally support other members of that cult. This is true even when the cult does not form a single coterie; Kindred in such a situation can buy other members of the cult as Allies. Mutual assistance is a powerful way to reinforce loyalty and group identity. The problem is that Kindred find it very difficult to sustain; selfishness and the Beast tend to weaken this bond over time.

CREATION AND APPROVAL

While the Circle approves of Acolytes creating new rituals, this runs the risk of pulling a cult apart, as different vampires' visions branch out in different directions. Most cults respond to this by giving the leader responsibility for approving or rejecting proposed new rites. In many cases, the leader simply takes this power, but creating rituals is far more effective if the other members support this wholeheartedly.

When wielded well, this power is extremely effective. Kindred who have created some of the group's rites feel a strong connection to it, and the constant evolution makes the cult seem more relevant to modern nights. If the contributions of neonates are accepted, they do not feel alienated from the cult's leadership.

The power of this approach is well-known in the covenant, and, as a result, the creation of new rituals is widely practiced. Thus, even the most ancient cult often has central rites that were designed within the last few years. Members of other covenants who expect the Circle to be full of reactionary primitives are often surprised.

DEATH

Nothing is forever, not individual Kindred, and not individual cults. The causes of death are many and varied, but, as with birth, a number of patterns are common. The death of a cult is not necessarily forever, of course. It might be revived by later Kindred, or even by a member who spent centuries in torpor before awakening to spread the word once more.

PERSECUTION

Historically, the most common cause of the end of a cult has been persecution. While many cults have survived the centuries, many more cults have not, being destroyed by the paladins of the Sanctified, or by other forces.

This tends to be the most thorough form of destruction, as the hunters make an effort to find every adherent of the cult and all of its texts, and destroy them all. Even so, some evidence normally remains, and occasionally even individual Kindred are overlooked. When there are Kindred survivors, they often seek revenge, and are willing to wait centuries to have it.

Cults can also be destroyed almost by accident. Constant pressure on pagan Kindred can draw off potential recruits, and when a cult consists of only half a dozen individuals (a very typical size), only a little bad luck is needed to render the cult completely nonviable. In these cases, individual members might be destroyed for heresy, but there is no concerted attempt to wipe out the cult. This often leaves extensive, if well-concealed, remains. A cult of Inanna that was wiped out in late antiquity left an underground temple, complete with ritual texts, implements and robes. The temple's rediscovery in the late 19th century was the spur for the foundation of an entirely new cult.

Historically, most cults have perished this way, at the hands of their enemies. In recent nights, however, this has become rarer.

SEDITION

Many cults also fall to the enemies within. Acolytes are no more immune to rivalries and feuds than other Kindred, and these have brought many cults low. Sometimes a cult splits into two or more groups that all claim to continue the original tradition, but which cannot really be described as the same. In those cases, the records of the original cult often remain intact, and it may be revived at a later date. Such revivals almost invariably come into conflict with the continuing cults that claim to be the heirs.

Other cults fall to simple factionalism. Groups of Kindred with no real theological differences battle for control of the cult, and the losses of the war render the whole organization impotent. This would rarely be enough to destroy a cult by itself, but in an environment of persecution, such impotence often leaves a cult very vulnerable to the Sanctified.

One other distinctive ending is common enough to be worth noting. Often, a powerful high priestess goes into torpor, leaving management of the cult to trusted aides. Sometimes these aides take the cult along different paths; sometimes the aides do not, but the memory of the high priestess is warped by the visions of torpor, and she thinks they have. Either way, the elder awakens from torpor, is horrified by what has become of her cult and launches a campaign to destroy it.

These struggles erupt completely unpredictably, and can utterly reshape the political geography of cities.

OSSIFICATION

The last cause of death has been rare in the past, because this cause could best be described as 'natural death.' Most pagan cults in the past have perished under the swords of persecutors. As things have changed, however, ossification has become more common.

This happens when elders have too firm a grip on the cult, and do not allow neonates enough power, or at

least not enough hope of power. The Invictus have spent centuries perfecting this balance; most members of the Circle cannot hope to match the First Estate's skill. As a result, neonates tend not to join the cult, and the elders find themselves alone. When the elders are destroyed or pass into torpor, the cult vanishes with a whimper.

These cults often leave records and proud histories, so they are prime candidates for revival; the disappearance of the elders removes the problem that the cults had.

A variation on this problem occurs when elders refuse to adapt the cult to the modern world. In most cases, a cult can survive as an archaic relic, but some cannot. A few cults, for example, stop celebrating their central rites when the main holy site is destroyed, and without the unity provided by such continuing activity, the cult fragments and vanishes.

RESURRECTION

As noted in the section on birth, cults are often reborn when younger vampires choose to revive them. This is a common pattern in the history of the covenant; while many cults can claim roots that go back into prehistory, very few can convincingly claim a continuous tradition that goes back that far.

ACOLYTES IN THE CITY

The history of the Circle of the Crone in a particular city is more than the history of the individual cults found in that city, although those histories are an important part of the history of the covenant. Every city's history is different, but there are common stages found in those histories, and certain transitions are more common than others.

SINGLE CULT

The most common single pattern is that in which all Acolytes in a city are members of a single cult. Other Kindred in the city tend to think that all members of the covenant have those beliefs, and even some of the Chorus may think so. Any Kindred with Covenant Status in the Circle knows of the existence of other cults elsewhere, however.

Single-cult cities are most common under two somewhat opposed conditions. The first is when the Circle is vigorously persecuted in a city. In that case, most cults are wiped out, and rarely does more than one survive. Isolated Acolytes stand no chance of surviving long enough to found their own cults, so the monopoly is maintained. These cults are generally friendly to other variants of Acolyte belief, and would often welcome those Acolytes to the city, if they were willing to come. However, the cults' internal loyalty is what enables them to survive.

The other situation is when there is very little persecution of the Circle, but it is still excluded from politics.

In that case, the single cult is gathering strength to force recognition and make persecution impossible. The cult actively recruits, and takes steps to stop other cults from taking hold and diluting its strength.

The Circle is also often represented by a single cult when a regime of heavy persecution has just ended. In this case, the single cult is made up of the first Acolytes to move into the city when it became safe to do so. The attitude of this cult to other newcomers can be anything; some cults welcome additional allies, others want to be the only mistresses of Crúac in the domain.

This situation very often evolves into the Single Line of Descent situation as pressures of persecution are lifted, and can evolve into the State Religion situation if a single cult succeeds in gaining significant political power in a city. Almost any situation can lead to this one if persecution increases.

SINGLE LINE OF DESCENT

In this case, all the cults in a city are derived from the same cult, or just from the same founding vampire. This does not mean that the groups are on friendly terms; the opposite tends to be the case. This may be due to hostility left over from the split, or may be due to real philosophical differences.

This situation does not tend to persist under conditions of heavy persecution, as the Acolytes cannot then afford the losses from internal conflicts. On the other hand, this situation is very common when a cult has survived a period of persecution, and that persecution ends. Differences that were put aside in the face of a common enemy are suddenly impossible to ignore, and the Acolytes split.

The city tends to move toward either multiple cults, or a state religion. In the former case, the various related cults are unable to band together to keep other Acolytes out, so the religious landscape becomes even more varied. In the latter case, they are able to find enough common ground to present a show of unity, often as a prelude to seeking even more power for the covenant.

MULTIPLE CULTS

In the past, this was a very rare state of affairs. In recent nights, multiple cults have become increasingly common. The Circle in a single city is represented by multiple cults, which may have almost nothing in common. The Sipán and the Amanotsukai dominate Lima, for example.

Multiple cults almost never flourish when the Acolytes are persecuted. Similarly, this is rare when a single cult has survived persecution, as that cult tends to maintain control. If a single cult has fractured, however, this may open the way for new arrivals, and if the Acolytes were almost completely purged, multiple cults may arrive once persecution finishes. In a few cases, more

than one cult has survived persecution in secrecy, and all make their existence public at around the same time, often in response to the appearance of the others.

Relations among the various cults vary a great deal. Hostility is probably the most common, as it is very difficult for widely disparate groups to agree on a single Hierarch. This weakens the covenant in that city, but the individual cults care more for their own identity than for the covenant as a whole.

Cooperation, or at least peaceful coexistence, is not, however, rare. Many Acolytes still feel the need to band together against the Sanctified, and all members of the covenant have a great deal in common, despite their differences. The Liman Kindred, for example, are united in their rejection of Judeo-Christian culture, although they differ over modern technology, and a solid truce exists between the two factions. If the Sipán manage to drive the Sanctified out, that might change.

When the groups are in conflict, the city often becomes a single cult city as one group wins and drives the losers out, or destroys them. If the cults live in peace, this often develops into a state religion, as the Acolytes design rites to affirm their unity.

STATE RELIGION

A state religion develops when there are many different cults in a city, but they have agreed on a number of basic rites that they all celebrate in common. The differences are, officially at least, regarded as unimportant variations, and, in theory, transferring from one cult to another is easy.

This is most common when the Circle is very strong in a city, and is the case in almost every domain where the Circle holds praxis. There is a very practical reason for this: gathering the strength necessary to bid for praxis is extremely hard for a single cult, and almost impossible for a loose alliance of many cults, which must muster the necessary unity. As a result, this is also a very common situation in cities where the Circle is bidding for praxis.

For many Kindred, this is the paradigmatic image of the covenant, not because it is the most common, but because a state religion is what most Acolytes would like to be the most common. Ambassadors to other covenants, in particular, tend to put this forward as the model of the way that the Circle works. This is really no different from the image of unified doctrine put forward by the Sanctified, or the image of an effective hierarchy put forward by the Invictus. The Circle cannot, and does not want to, deny the diversity of cults within the covenant's ranks, but does want to present itself as at least as strong and unified as the other covenants. The rhetoric appears to be taking hold, as cities with a state religion are becoming increasingly common.

BRISTOL

Bristol is a city on the west coast of England where the Circle has always been strong; the city's history is a good example of how things develop. (Or are said to develop — this history of Bristol does not quite match the accounts of the local Invictus.) It's possible that no other city follows precisely this pattern, but many are similar.

Two thousand years ago, in the last nights of the Camarilla, two Kindred cults were particularly powerful; one followed Sulis, a Celtic deity of the waters, and the other followed Ceres, the Roman deity. As the Roman Empire faltered and fell, the cults came into conflict with each other, and with the rising Sanctified. The arrival of Anglo-Saxon invaders and Irish raiders complicated matters, and the Sanctified took advantage of the disunity to purge as many pagan Kindred as the Lancea Sanctum could. By 600 AD, this process was all but complete. The only survivors were members of the cult of Sulis, and they hid completely, pretending that they were not even in the town.

From the year 1000 AD, Bristol began to flourish as a port. The mortal population increased, as did the Kindred population. The members of the cult of Sulis moved into the open, loosely affiliating themselves with the Invictus, and claiming to have immigrated to the city along with the kine. The Sulis followers still kept their pagan practices secret, but worked to drive a wedge between the Invictus and the Lancea Sanctum.

The cult members were extremely successful, to the extent that, in 1317, the cultists were able to reveal their affiliation openly. Their connection to the Invictus Prince was so strong that the Lancea Sanctum was unable to move against them. As news of this situation spread, Acolytes from across the west of Britain started to move to Bristol, in the hope of greater tolerance. The Sulis cult was not willing to share power, however, and hunted the other Acolytes down with vigor.

This, in turn, weakened the cult's position, and a Sanctified counterattack in the mid-15th century overthrew the Prince and, apparently, wiped the cult out. In fact, three members survived, and once again were forced to hide their very existence.

The Lancea Sanctum ruled until the middle of the 16th century, when religious chaos in England weakened the grip of the Church among mortals, and undermined the Sanctified in turn. The Invictus took advantage of this weakening to seize power, once again subtly supported by the cult of Sulis. Around the same time, antiquarians discovered more details of the cult of Ceres, and young Kindred revived that cult. This time, the cult of Sulis was more welcoming of the newcomers, bearing in mind the lessons of its previous mistakes.



In the 17th and 18th centuries, Bristol became an important center of the slave trade, and African cults found their way to the city. Again, the resident Circle welcomed them, and the cults were able to forge a common set of rites, marking the covenant out.

The Acolytes then made a bold move, claiming territory in the growing suburbs. The Sanctified pushed for a pogrom, but the Invictus Prince owed the Circle some debts, which made his support half-hearted. The Sanctified attacks were beaten off, inflicting great losses on the Circle, and significantly shifting the balance of power in the town.

Bristol continued to grow, and in the 20th century, the Circle made a bid for praxis. The Invictus Prince was toppled, but the First Estate found another strong leader, who negotiated a deal with the leaders of the cult of Sulis. Members of the Circle currently serve as spiritual advisers to the Prince, in the role filled by members of the Lancea Sanctum in many domains, but the positions of power are dominated by the cult of Sulis. The other cults within the covenant are becoming restive, and rumors suggest that they will make another bid for praxis soon.



CHAPTER TWO: UNLIFE IN THE CIRCLE OF THE CRONE

“Come here and kneel, son.
Drink thrice of my blood and know true devotion.
The feelings we arouse
through the essence of the Requiem
are not echoes of life, but a new kind of love.
Unearthly, but genuine.
Inhuman but not unnatural.”

The chamber of sickness is the chapel of devotion.

— Proverb

THE CIRCLE OF UNLIFE

The existence of vampires may seem a contravention of the natural order. They are creatures caught in the middle of a process: the progression of life to death. The sun burns them. They animate their cadaverous muscles with blood stolen and consumed. Each is capable of possessing magic both fey and brutal. It is therefore easy to assume that vampires are unnatural. Those who know of the Kindred, including the Kindred themselves, tend to accept the vampires as an aberration.

Similar to cancer, they represent an abnormal growth that — in a healthy world — would not or could not exist. Their anomalous existence seemingly extends to all spheres. Physically, vampires are biological oddities. Socially, they cannot share space with the rest of the living world and are hence kept to its shadowy edges. Spiritually, the Sanctified suggest that vampires are the result of a curse levied against a Roman centurion for a callous — and yes, *aberrant* — act. It becomes easy to assume that vampires are creatures who were not meant to be. They will never belong to the world, for they are ineluctably Damned.

The Acolytes of the Circle of the Crone do not share in that easy assumption. Quite the opposite, actually. The Circle generally accepts that vampires are natural and as much a part of the world as trees, wolves and people. The Kindred are not “Damned” — such a term implies judgment. To the contrary, the Kindred simply *are*. They exist, and that is proof enough that they belong to this world.

TABOO

Many religions proscribe that which shall be prohibited. Every culture labels varying items and practices as taboo. Eating pork, practicing homosexuality or bearing twins as children are all examples of things considered taboo in one society or another.

Acolytes, on the other hand, believe themselves free of most taboos. Most religions ascribe a number of taboos as spiritually significant — the

Acolytes do this as well, but the only individuals prohibited from certain practices are those who *aren't* Acolytes. Those within the covenant have free reign to do as they wish. Of course, pragmatism may stop them from gratuitously engaging in practices that break the mores of the majority Kindred — but that doesn't mean that, inside the Acolytes' dark hearts, the Acolytes don't consider themselves free of such restrictive burdens.

THESE DARK PLACES

Acolytes typically have little problem accepting the idea that the Kindred have been around since the very beginning. Other covenants seem hell-bent on concocting origin stories for vampirism, often ascribing the condition's beginnings with some kind of curse or castigation. In these stories, the Kindred are often an affront to God or some other power, and through sin, they are born. The Acolytes, however, refuse to be saddled with such a half-baked assessment. They take exception to that idea and claim that vampires have *always* existed. God was not offended, because “God” doesn't really exist. Nobody committed grievous sins — *sins* don't exist, either. For the Circle, the Kindred have been around as long as humanity, if not longer.

The Acolytes don't use biology to explain this, though. While some Acolytes are certainly capable of being scientific (the covenant's various worldviews sometimes lend credence to the need for ecological balance, after all), science is only a tool. Science is not the proof. The proof lies in mythology. For the cults of the Crone, mythology is just as good as — if not better than — history. While some might offer that mythology is clearly “just” a pattern of metaphorical stories that cannot be true, the Acolytes point to the fact that *vampires* would, to an enlightened skeptic, be metaphorical creatures that cannot be real. Disbelief doesn't make something false (and alternately, belief *can* make something real). And so, the Acolytes accept that mythology is just as real, or at least just as important, as history.

Mythology across many cultures is clear on a number of significant points. The Acolytes point to various creation



myths (those *before* the advent of the Judeo-Christian mindset). In many such myths, the world begins out of darkness and chaos. In the Hindu scripture, “darkness was hidden by darkness,” and there existed no life or death. In countless mythologies (Greek, Norse, Zoroastrian), the world begins first out of a sunless abyss. In the chaos of the abyss, only eternity reigns. Among Polynesian genesis stories, the myths note that “things of darkness gave birth to things of darkness” while “things of light gave birth to those of light.”

Many creation myths also involve the spilling of blood: Greek myth speaks of painful birth and bloody castration. Stories from the Sioux Indians suggest that Great Spirit sat on a ledge before humans were created, drinking buffaloes dry of their blood (and the spill-off is what helps create humankind). In Japanese myth, the first thing that the two gods Izanagi and Izanami create is the blood-sucking *leech*.

To the Acolytes, this all demonstrates clearly that vampires have been around since the beginning. No sun? Spilled blood? Darkness, chaos, monsters and leeches? The cultists don’t understand how others *don’t* see the connection. Are they daft? How hard it must be to ignore the fundamental truths when they are laid out so plainly!

Moreover, mythology continues to support the existence of vampires through the countless millennia. The Under-

world — sometimes called the “Land of Night” — is populated with monsters, many of whom are hungry for blood and flesh. Wise gods and goddesses often require sacrifices: Kali, Cailleach, Morrigan, Moloch, even Artemis (who had a crescent emblazoned upon her forehead). Vampire myths in particular are present in nearly every culture the world around. From Africa to Romania, from India to Mesoamerica — vampires have been present in stories since time immemorial. How other Kindred suggest that their kind is somehow a phenomenon dating after Christ is unfathomable to most Acolytes.

ONE VIEW: TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

One East Coast cult uses mythology to justify close to everything the cult does. This cult of Acolytes believes that the blood of the slain giant Ymir is what made the oceans and rivers. Therefore, the vampires stick to the shorelines, with their havens being a series of connected houseboats out beyond the docks. These cultists also believe that the End Times are coming — certainly not the Last Days posited in the Christian Apocalypse, but those of the Norse Ragnarok. As followers of Nordic myth, this group believes that signs of the impending war of the gods have begun. Climate change will lead to hard winters. Natural disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis) have increased in frequency. Loki has freed



himself from his chains and is causing this chaos. Soon, the werewolves will see the escape of their own progenitor. The vampires believe themselves the children of the Great Serpent Jormungandr, the snake that bites its own tail to maintain infinity.

The Acolytes know the stories, and they recognize that they will perish alongside all the rest of the world. That is regrettable, but must be accepted because there is nowhere to flee. They'll play their part and spit venom at all those who oppose them in the final war.

PREDATOR AND PREY

It is human nature to believe that unpleasant things are also unnatural things. Humans balk at a wolf tearing out the underbelly of a young fawn. Humans shudder at the thought of disease, and wonder what kind of universe would allow such a biological deviation to occur. Famine is abhorrent. Global disasters are vicious. Except in reality, none of these things are abnormal. Such events do not go against nature — these events *are* nature. The Acolytes, unlike others, accept that they play a part in nature however repellent they may seem.

Most break it down into the predator-prey dichotomy. All things consume other things. Humans are not chided for eating the vegetables that grow in the ground or the livestock that they raise. Why

should the Kindred be open to scorn? They are simply continuing the food chain. Drinking blood and gaining both sustenance and power from it isn't strange — the act is merely an extension of nature. Some Acolytes believe that the function they perform isn't so much predatory. Instead, they accept that they are parasites and humanity is the host. The Kindred are simply more advanced versions of the world's parasites: leeches, mosquitoes, viruses, bacteria.

Again, this isn't all purely biological. Few Acolytes cling to a solely scientific view. No, all of this is informed by a vast mythological underpinning. The gods have created this balance. They are the ones that created the world from blood and darkness. They themselves operate in a kind of food chain — some gods are always above other gods. Gods murder gods. They eat parts from one another and gain wisdom from doing so. They establish hierarchies and great chains of existence. Vampires are a part of that chain. (Some cults see themselves as the servitors of these gods, others see themselves as the natural heirs of divine power.)

ONE VIEW: THE HUNGER OF TANTALUS

Even the Circle of the Crone has its heresies, and the philosophy called the Hunger of Tantalus is one of them. In

the Greek myth, King Tantalus was a child of both divine and mortal parentage. He was a wicked glutton, and, as a favorite of the gods, was allowed to dine on all the sweet treats of Olympus. He gorged himself time and again on nectar and ambrosia. But Tantalus could not contain his hungers. He invited the gods to dinner at his home, but decided that he did not have enough food. To ameliorate the situation, he murdered his own son and cooked him in a stew, thinking the gods would believe it to be goat's meat. One cannot fool the gods, however, and they punished Tantalus. They threw him to the Underworld, where he sits beneath a fruit tree and by a pool of the sweetest waters. When he reaches for fruit, it moves out of reach. When he bends to take a drink, the waters recede. The punishment is eternal.

One philosophy that has spread through some Acolyte cults claims that vampires are (metaphorically or literally) the heirs of Tantalus. They feast as gluttons but can never be full. Because of their insatiable thirst (leading sometimes to diablerie), all Kindred are punished. This goes against much of what the covenant believes regarding sin and castigation. That is why most Acolytes will not teach these heretics Crúac. It is also why most of the believers of this philosophy share membership with other covenants. Followers of these ideas are quite unpopular amidst most Crone devotees.

INNATE PROPERTIES

Vampires possess a number of inbuilt abilities above and beyond what mortals possess. Many assume these abilities to be “supernatural,” that is to say, above and beyond the normal. The Acolytes don't agree. Because a wolf can run faster than a human, does that make the wolf supernatural? Because a human can use tools and the wolf can't, is *that* supernatural? For the Kindred of the Circle, it's all a matter of perspective.

DISCIPLINES

A creature is a fool to ignore the tools it has been given. The hero Siegfried, when he lets his foe's blood drip down his blade and fall upon his lips, becomes capable of many strange things. He can speak to animals, walk through flames unharmed and split beasts in twain with his magic sword. Would he have accomplished all that he did — slaying dragons, raising sleeping maidens, rising from the dead — without his unusual abilities? Would the Morrigan, that goddess of war, have turned the tides of many a battle if she had not sent her ravens to cast curses upon those below? If she had not consumed the heart's blood of her enemies, would her power be the same?

For most Acolytes, the answers are simple. They are gifted with godly powers, and so they must use them. Disciplines are tools, and abstaining from their use would offend the gods. The Acolytes teach that Disciplines are simply another aspect of a vampire's existence, as

natural as a mortal's breath and heartbeat. The Circle urges its members to use their Disciplines as regularly as they care to do so. Flexing one of those god-given powers is as normal as drinking blood, whispering a prayer or resting during the day.

CRÚAC

One curious item sticks out amidst the Acolytes' naturalist worldview of vampires and their powers: many cultists do not believe that the Circle's own blood magic is natural. It may still serve the organic whole — Crúac involves much of what fuels the cycles of life and death in this world, particularly the elements of blood and sacrifice. And yet, possessing and understanding Crúac remains potentially unnatural. Why?

The first point is that not all Kindred are capable of using blood magic. Crúac, in the eyes of its servitors, is not merely the fulfillment of an occult recipe. Blood magic requires genuine belief. One cannot perform blood magic without a true veneration of the old gods, of blood or of vampires themselves. (Whether this is actually true or just what most Acolytes hope their comrades will believe is forever unclear.)

Acolytes who work the sorcery recognize that it is not exactly natural. The other Disciplines come relatively easy — expend a portion of one's will and blood, and the innate magic comes. It requires small sacrifice and no devotion. Crúac, on the other hand, is complicated. Blood magic cannot be brought to bear with a hand wave and a sprinkling of blood. No, blood must be poured and flesh cut. The more the practitioner understands of this magic, the more of his soul he must give to it. As his powers grow, the Beast within grows, too. The ritualist becomes more easily debased. Madness creeps in at the edges and begins to slowly subsume the Acolyte's rationality.

Essentially, Crúac helps to eradicate balance inside the vampire. Many Acolytes are devoted to balance — this idea, after all, is what helps to include them in the natural order. All things must be balanced: human and Beast, life and death, creation and destruction, suffering and reward. The dark rituals of the Circle exist, in a way, *outside* the cycle. They allow the vampire to violate the natural ways and to disrupt the balance. And, as she does so, her own internal balances are similarly disordered.

Is this a bad thing? Some cults say yes — and this is why they treat Crúac with the proper fear and respect. One may practice the rituals and do what one must with the dire powers, but to become slave to it is anathema. Blood magic is a gift from the gods, to be sure, but one should not overuse such a potent endowment for fear of insulting the powers that be. Some cults, however rare, eschew Crúac completely. Perhaps they were once practitioners, but found that the chains it placed upon their souls (or the chains it removed from the monsters within) were unwelcome.

Other cults, also rare, give into Crúac with mad abandon. They practice blood magic constantly, practically addicted to the power Crúac promises. Such Acolytes become wildly imbalanced and dangerous creatures, ending up as the subjects of many a bogeyman tale. They spill blood as if it was water. They give into their basest urges: rending infants into pieces like split pomegranates, consuming the souls of their Kindred brothers and Embracing mortals unreservedly. All of this done in the name of the hungry magic that nurses at a vampire's soul.

THEBAN SORCERY AND THE COILS OF THE DRAGON

The other covenant-specific powers represent a trifling conundrum to the Acolytes. If Disciplines are natural, then the intrinsic abilities of the Lancea Sanctum and the Ordo Dracul must be natural as well, right? Not necessarily. Whether out of basic jealousy or an honest disregard and distrust of such powers, the Acolytes generally consider both Theban Sorcery and the Coils to be aberrant developments. Many Acolytes subscribe to one of the following three views regarding these covenant powers:

- The others stole Crúac. Much as many of the old ways were stolen throughout the millennia by bullying patriarchs and Judeo-Christian butchers, the two covenants are simply using modified versions of the Circle's own blood magic. Those who accept this theory feel so violently toward the other covenants and their magic that their feelings can easily disrupt relations between the groups. (This can also lead to some Acolytes attempting to steal the sorcery of the others, as those Acolytes assume that they have the proprietary right to do so.)

- The other covenants have actually developed their own rituals and sorcery. While the development is legitimate, such magic represents a breach of the natural order. But since the Acolytes accept that Crúac is not only older, but also more powerful, who cares? Most Acolytes accepting this theory dismiss the enchantments of the other groups. Such powers are surely weak and certainly trivial.

- The others' magic is not real. Their magic is nothing more than a deceptive pastiche of parlor tricks, fancy illusions and well-perpetuated rumor. The covenants want to pretend that they have all the power and secrets. The Acolytes represent the ideal that the other covenants try to match. They cannot, of course, but the rest of the Kindred don't know that. Most of the poor souls have been snowed by their respective covenants. Acolytes who believe this theory tend to work counterpropaganda (often as attention-getting agitprop) against the other covenants in the attempt to strengthen the Acolytes' own position and power.

CREATING GHOULS

Many Circle cults expect their Acolytes to create ghouls. Ghouls — often called “votaries” of the Circle — represent a unique opportunity for many Acolytes. Ghouls may represent a link to the living, for one. Vampires are largely kept separate from the mortal world, and while some accept this, others say that such separation leads to an imbalance in a Kindred's soul. Ghouls can help mitigate this balance.

Also, ghouls allow for a form of creation deemed “legal” by other Kindred. While technically a breach of the Masquerade, ghoule creation is generally allowed in most cities (although it's not always as unregulated as the Circle might like).

Finally, votaries represent the power of faith. The dark gods demand things, be they prayer, blood or some other sacrifice. Votaries can, just as their Acolyte masters, help to deliver on the covenant's promises to the dire powers. While certainly no votary is allowed to even glimpse the nature of Crúac, votaries are expected to take part in other basic rituals. They are even encouraged to serve the gods (and the vampires) by using the votaries' own limited Disciplines through the Vitae that has been given to them.

All of this leads to the fact that, in most cults, ghouls are not only a natural part of the process, but practically a requirement for Acolytes of impressive status.

BLOOD BEASTS AND DEATH VINES

The Acolytes often make ghouls of animals and plants (called *mandragora*), probably more than the Kindred of any other covenant. Animal ghouls may represent elements of creation, physical representations of totemic entities, or just favored pets. “Ghoulish” plants find use in many rituals and ceremonies, but many Acolytes also include them in their durable (and weird) gardens.

(If you want them, more information and game mechanics for *mandragora* and animal ghouls can be found in the **Ghouls** supplement for **Vampire**.)

THE EMBRACE

The birth of a new vampire — and that is how many Acolytes see it, as a kind of “second nativity” — represents an obvious quandary for all Damned. On one hand, the Embrace is a violation of the Masquerade, a deviation from the Traditions that bind Kindred society and keep it safe and sacred. On the other hand, one merely has to visit Elysium to see that vampires not only continue to exist, but new ones continue to show up over time as neonates. The very presence of neonates — those sad embodiments of broken rules and poor judgment — shows that the

laws against the Embrace are only as strong as the chains shackling a vampire's Beast.

Regardless of how often the Traditions are flouted, in the Danse Macabre most accept that the Embrace is not natural. Vampires are abnormalities, and so it goes that their method of procreation must be as well. Yet again, few Acolytes agree.

The Embrace represents many possible things to the members of the Circle. The Embrace may represent veneration of the gods. If the vampires are children of the gods or even small gods themselves, then it is only proper to have children who can carry on worship and perhaps later even become gods themselves. On a simpler note, the Embrace represents just one of many divinely given rights. The Carthians think they have cornered the market on freedom, but the Acolytes believe that *they* are the true arbiters of autonomy. (By serving the gods, the Acolytes know that they become free.) By denying the Embrace, one denies the power of the gods and their blood that transubstantiates inside the crucible of an Acolyte's body.

Of course, this is tricky. The Embrace remains a violation, and so the Acolytes cannot go around wantonly siring neonates. Ultimately, the Embrace tends to balance. Most cultists accept the Embrace as a natural but sacred. When siring a vampire, one is choosing a child to carry on the ways of worship, blood magic and the sire's own expectations. This is not done lightly. And so, when the time finally comes to Embrace, it is a rare enough event that it can often occur with minimal punishment (provided of course that the Acolytes have not offended the ruling body of vampires).

Much as the creation of ghouls is expected, so, too, is the Embrace. Most cults expect their adherents to — at some point in their long Requiem — Embrace a mortal and bring her into the fold. While pragmatism sometimes stops this from being a reality, the cults' acceptance of the Embrace still represents a vocal difference between this covenant and the others.

CONDITIONS OF THE SOUL

Vampires, throughout their Requiems, experience a number of unusual conditions that may seem strange, awful or otherwise anomalous. For the most part, the Acolytes consider all parts of the equation to be normal — or, in some cases, downright expected. Other vampires may frown at some of these conditions, or gaze at them in wonder. While the Acolytes have no dearth of wonder to give, by and large they look at most of these conditions as part of the organic whole — as common as a mortal's breath.

BLOODLINES

The refinement of one's blood into a potent new lineage is, for the most part, a sacred gift given to the Acolytes. The creation of a bloodline is either a powerful

reward handed down by the old gods or the way that a vampire can finally *become* one of those gods.

For many, bloodlines represent more than just a social division. Forming a new lineage is literally a moment in which a vampire changes her soul (for the Acolytes have little problem believing that they, despite their deaths, still maintain living souls). This "soul-crafting" often exemplifies exactly what the vampire believes about the old gods and their effect on the cosmos. A Kindred who believes in the powers of the Underworld may gain powers over darkness and death, but suffer a weakness that deepens his sensitivity to the light or sleeping above ground. (Weakness is an accepted part of this soul-crafting process. Reward comes only through sacrifice, remember.) An Acolyte who worships one of the many mad sky gods may be able to draw down the weather against her foes, but may also be hobbled with the need to sleep outdoors beneath the stars.

The refinement of the vampire's blood often embodies the characteristics of her faith. She may then go among others of her kind and belief, and act as the Avus to allow others to learn the gifts that she has been given from the dire powers.

Some suggest that, within the Circle, the ratio of bloodlines is abnormally high. This may be the case because the Acolytes consider creating bloodlines a proper course of action. To become a Crone — or, at least, to catch her eye and become a gifted student — changing one's soul and blood in the cauldron of faith is necessary.

DIABLERIE

The act of diablerie is a crime for most Acolytes. The covenant, by and large, does not accept the consumption of another vampire's soul to be in any way natural. Diablerie is not predation. Diablerie is not sanctioned by the gods. Diablerie is an ugly betrayal of another divine being as well as a cheat to gain power that is undeserved.

But every rule has its exception, of course. Some Acolytes feel that because sacrifice is present, the gods are appeased. It doesn't matter that the Acolyte herself isn't really sacrificing anything — the symbol of sacrificing another is enough. They equate diablerie roughly to the ritual bull-slaying or human sacrifice intrinsic to many old ceremonies.

(What these Acolytes don't understand is that, in many of those rituals, the sacrificed animal is not eaten — the creature is meant to be the food of the gods, not food for the servants. One should not take a bite from an apple before handing it to the goddess.)

If the Circle discovers such criminals, the covenant usually punishes them in due course. Generally speaking, though, the covenant will not offer up a diablerist to the city powers. The Acolytes prefer to handle the punishment of their children. It rarely ends in the diablerist's

Final Death, but that doesn't mean the criminal will not suffer. The vampires do what they must to show the gods that they are sorry for the offense. If that means the diablerist loses his tongue and must become bound to the Hierophant, so be it. If the diablerist is sent to torpor and laid in a tub squirming with ghouléd maggots — then that is what the dire gods demand.

Love-Lies-Bleeding

The Amaranth, or *Amaranthus*, is a beautiful flower with rich crimson petals. This word is also a term for the act of diablerie — an ironic term because the flower was one sacred to the goddess Artemis, representing a symbol of “unwithering immortality.” One of the flower's nicknames is “Love-Lies-Bleeding,” because the way its flowers droop almost like blood dripping to the ground.

Most Kindred, Acolytes included, consider diablerie an unforgivable crime. Some, however, secretly hold the act in high esteem. One sect of Acolytes in particular — a secret society of sorts, whose membership is kept hidden from even those in their own cults — believes that the Amaranth is a beautiful and necessary thing. This sect, calling itself the Lovers of Artemis, believes that the act of diablerie is the truest form of love and protection one can offer another Kindred. By consuming the soul, the soul lives on separate from the Beast. The soul becomes healed. And so, once a year, the members of this sect go out and commit diablerie on those closest to them.

Somehow, they've concocted a Crúac ritual to keep the black veins from showing in their auras. Some say this ritual was taken from Aztec vampires long ago, and it requires a mixture of blood, honey and the actual *Amaranthus* flower. (Others say that the ritual requires far worse things, including the sacrifice of mortal children.) Whatever the case, to see the black veins in the diablerists' auras, a vampire must gain an exceptional success on his Aura Reading roll. The Lovers of Artemis also seem to cultivate high Composure scores to help keep up the perceptions of their innocence.

THE VINCULUM

For most covenant members, the Vinculum represents simply one more essential facet of vampiric existence. The Acolytes do more than tolerate the Vinculum — they accept it as yet another part of the Requiem. That said, few believe the Vinculum holds any greater spiritual meaning and is more a tool of pragmatism, not a sacred bond.

Some are willing to ascribe the Vinculum particular meaning, however. Acolytes, unlike members of other covenants, seem to hold a candle for the concept of “true love.” Perhaps it's a mystery left over from mythology or simply one possibility of creation (or tribulation) that other vampires ignore. Regardless of the reasoning, some in the Circle value love, even though it often rings hollow and ends up far worse than it started.

This interest in love often leads two or more Acolytes to bond together — first as a pair of lovers or in a coterie, but later through a Vinculum. Some accept the Vow of Marriage (p. 67), though in doing so, one must concede to a certain permanence as divorce and Final Death are one and the same. The Vinculum is a tool in this marriage (though some others eschew the actual vows and simply bond one another under the moon somewhere, so that the gods may bear witness). The ritual handfasting (often with a blood-soaked ribbon or cord) is symbolic. The Vinculum takes that symbol and makes it quite real.

TORPOR

Most Acolytes accept torpor as an unfortunate stage of undeath, but not necessarily unnatural. In certain cults, torpor takes on special meaning.



To some, torpor is a period of death and rebirth. Many gods die and become reborn — Cernunnos, Tammuz, Persephone. The dark sleep for vampires becomes a kind of journey to the Underworld. While slumbering, a vampire may experience strange visions or odd memories. These are not to be rejected, but remembered and examined. Some believe that in these visions are hidden secrets that can be drawn free from the metaphor like a draught of blood from a hard-to-reach vein. Others suggest that these visions are not metaphors at all, and that the Acolyte has *literally* glimpsed a place beyond this realm. Perhaps the vampire gazed into the actual Underworld, or was granted scenes from the birth or demise of the world. The torpid creature may even have received a visit from one of the gods, and was given instructions to pass along to the cult.

One sect holds elaborate rituals when one of the sect's own enters torpor (and at times, the cult inflicts torpor purposefully upon members). They gather up the slumbering vampire and let her rest upon a sacred altar. The participants in the ritual (called *musteriai*) surround the torpid Acolyte during the first night of her rest. They fill her with pomegranate seeds (sometimes even cutting her open and placing them within her dead flesh) and sacrifice a number of piglets over her supine body. Once that is done, they shout vicious obscenities — a game to appease Demeter the Mother — and dance.

The goal of this ritual (sometimes called “Abduction to the Underworld” or “The Appeasement of Demeter”) is twofold. First, the rite supposedly halves the time in which a vampire sleeps (as determined by her Humanity on p. 175 of **Vampire: The Requiem**). Second, the ritual allows her to recall more prominently the strange visions experienced during slumber. With a successful Intelligence + Composure roll (adding in a +3 bonus for the ritual), the waking vampire can recall the dreams and memories from her torpor. This also allows her to sort through any trouble in differentiating *real* memories from false ones. To the vampires of this particular sect, torpor is not only natural, but an eventual necessity.

GOLCONDA

Acolytes tend to fall into one of two camps when it comes to considering Golconda. The first camp — arguably the majority — feels that Golconda is a foolish story of wish fulfillment. Those who follow the endless trail of breadcrumbs are as unwise as the human who wants to become a bird or a god that wants to become a human. Why transcend? The Acolytes may not always like what they are, but they *accept* it. Vampires are a part of the world. Believing in some wild salvation in which an Acolyte ceases to be what she is is desperation, madness or hubris.

Transcendence is supposed to defeat the Beast and mitigate a Kindred's hungers, but the Acolytes don't believe that such things are necessary. Yes, many search

for balance, but that doesn't mean questing to eradicate those things altogether. Thus, to these cultists, Golconda represents an idiot's fairy tale. Let the unenlightened chase their tails; the Acolytes are better for their acceptance.

The second camp believes that Golconda is very much real — it's just not what a lot of the stories make it out to be. To them, transcendence is about becoming something bigger, better, more powerful. Frankly, transcendence is about becoming a Crone. A *real* Crone, not a devotee. Vampires subscribing to this idea think that they can literally become gods, throwing off the shackles of the Requiem and walking the earth as a truly divine power. What the Kindred possess now is a taste, nothing more. True power is a thousand times that.

This view on Golconda differs significantly with what other vampires may assert. For one, this view doesn't defeat or pacify the Beast: instead, the Beast merges seamlessly with the vampire's soul. Two, this view doesn't defeat the hunger for other vampires; no, this view simply makes eating other Kindred easier by dismissing the costs associated with such an act.

The road to transcendence is also unique according to these Acolytes. Aspiring to be paragons of humanity is a fool's errand. No, becoming a god means acting like one. Moreover, the road itself is marked with a number of unique mythological signposts and trials (each different depending on which vampire one talks to, or which story one believes). Some posit that the vampire must again die and be reborn. Some infer a kind of shamanic journey, finding a way to the spirit world and crossing various bridges made of blood, razors, slivers of moonlight and other unusual materials.

The stories vary wildly. Does judgment come from some deity of the Underworld? Must a vampire be able to stand in the sun and survive the encounter? Should he search the world for one of the hidden Crones who may be sleeping in a mountain cave or at the bottom of a fast-moving river? Quests for transcendence are mad adventures of pain and enlightenment. A few Acolytes have tried to commit to such adventures. Many return having lost their sanity. Others never return, which may be a testament to their success — or a sign of ultimate failure.

Rumors of Transcendence

A favorite game among many cultists seems to be to tell tales of Golconda and how to reach it. While some elders in the covenant frown upon such storytelling, it seems a persistent hobby nevertheless. Below are a few rumors that may make it into such tales. Have they been distorted so much, à la the “Whisper Down the Lane Game?” Or are there nuggets of truth contained within?

- One Crone has reached transcendence and now walks the forests of North America. She can become any creature big or small. A cult of Lupine zealots attends to her needs, believing her to be a powerful spirit queen from beyond the veil.

•To achieve Golconda, one must invite a god or a spirit to dwell inside one's body. Once the Beast has merged with this ephemeral being, the vampire can then begin her quest for true enlightenment and power.

•Vampires cannot gain transcendence on their own. They must bond with two other vampires and approach the quest as a coterie of three. Three is a sacred number.

•To become a Crone, one must eat a Crone — soul and all.

•The secrets of Golconda were hidden in a secret vault in the Library of Alexandria before it burned down. Further legend suggests that a Nosferatu Acolyte (an adherent of Isis) was able to abscond with some of those secrets. If he can be found, those materials can be purchased.

•Only a neonate is innocent and balanced enough to begin the quest for transcendence.

ONE VIEW: THE NATURE OF MONSTERS

In mythology, monsters often represent the guardians of secrets and wisdom. They often serve the gods and stand as a test between those who want knowledge and the knowledge itself.

A few cults and coterie within the covenant embody this idea. They accept that they are the servants — even the *pets* — of the gods. The gods chose them because they are literal monsters. Their job is to stand as sentinels protecting hidden power and truth (Crúac is only one possibility) and make others sacrifice to achieve these gifts.

What this often amounts to is, by believing themselves monsters, the Acolytes act as monsters. Their connection to any kind of human side burns away quickly. They accept that all parts of a vampiric existence are natural and normal, and they refuse to moderate any of the powers common to the Kindred. They flagrantly use Disciplines, Embrace wildly, even attempt to rile the Beast within and provoke it to frenzy. They are mad vampires, anathema to the rest of Damned society (even to other Acolytes) — except these vampires *know* it.

HAVENS OF THE ACOLYTES

Pragmatism is likely the foremost concern for any haven. Even Acolytes are forced first to consider the practical elements of any haven. Is it secure? Secret? Does it keep out the cruel rays of the sun during the day? In this way, Acolyte havens are often no different from those of other vampires. The haven is a place to lay one's head during the day, with or without comfort — and with or without religious significance.

That said, some Acolytes do bring unique elements to their havens. Some of these elements are discussed below.

SHARED HAVENS

Communal havens (that is, those constructed by pooling Merit dots) are common among Acolytes. While

some certainly stick to very individual styles of worship, most tend to share their beliefs with others. Dwelling together in a collective location is only natural for these vampires (who may even be bound together in a circular Vinculum). Not only does this allow the vampires to venerate the gods together in relative isolation, but it also helps to assure that the secrets of the covenant (Crúac in particular) can remain in a single location, presided over by a number of local cultists.

Sharing a haven is not without its downside. Vampires can be cruel, provocative and certainly unpredictable. While Acolytes may share a kind of kinship, the Beast cares little for such community. Several Kindred dwelling in close quarters can go on for years without concern — but in a single night, that solace and unity can be shattered by a single frenzied Kindred. It is not entirely impossible for one Acolyte to destroy her brethren and be left, weeping into the blood and ash of her lost companions.

One unusual side effect (that has been deemed by many as pure myth) is that communal Kindred tend to share more than just living space. They seem capable of sharing head space as well. Some find that reading one another's minds (such as through the Auspex power of Telepathy) becomes eerily easy. Others say that mental conditions can be contagious in such tight quarters. If one of the Acolytes develops madness temporary or permanent, the *others* may begin to exhibit the same madness regardless of their experiences.

MYSTERIOUS PLACES

At times, Acolytes choose unusual sites to be havens. When considering a site suitable for a cultist's haven, consider the following possibilities:

Isolated: Some Acolytes do not keep their religion quiet. Worship may be clamorous. They may need to bring in animals — or *other* creatures — for sacrifice. Having neighbors capable of peering in a window (or breaking through it) and witnessing a bloody ritual is unacceptable. Thus, many Acolytes choose out-of-the-way locations for their havens. To keep on the periphery of both vampire and human society, an Acolyte might choose an abandoned building, a fire-gutted housing project, a water tower, even an old derelict church.

Subterranean: A significant portion of the covenant lends credence, if not full-blown worship, to the various divinities of the Underworld. It is the place of death in myth, and many Acolytes perceive the Underworld to be the land in which they walk. Therefore, many choose havens underground to represent this chthonic connection. This may mean sewer tunnels, cave systems, basement apartments, tombs or mine tunnels. Some — particularly Nosferatu Acolytes — even build their own catacombs.

Nature: Many cultists prefer to be close to nature, as many recognize it as a connection to the Crone or other



goddesses. Many vampires dwell in cities, and residing near nature is difficult. Some manage to live in or near large city parks. A few Acolytes are wealthy enough to manage and grow large indoor gardens (or greenhouses atop buildings). Most, though, must live outside the cities, often the suburbs or other rural burghs. This isn't altogether horrible, though, for living in the suburbs allows an Acolyte to remain remote.

Weird: The Acolyte worldview accepts the mysterious as a part of nature. In fact, weird occurrences and places may be connectors to the old gods. Covenant members may seek havens in unusual locations: haunted houses, graveyards, gravity hills, places where strange beasts or entities have been sighted, odd ruins, boggling rock formations, even abandoned asylums. To the Acolytes, these places represent a coalescing of dark energies — energies assumed to come from (or go to) the gods and spirits. Building a haven (or, see below, a temple) on such a place is considered good fortune. That is, provided such a place doesn't draw the attention of *other* characters, as well.

HOUSE ALTARS

The Circle of the Crone is, obviously, a religious covenant. Unlike the Sanctified, however, an Acolyte's worship is not necessarily public. Moreover, it needn't be contained to a church or temple (though some cults *do* contain it in this way), or necessarily require some kind of priest to translate and mediate one's veneration.

One of the unique features of some Acolyte havens is the inclusion of a pagan altar. The vampire likely prays at the altar and performs any minor rituals (not necessarily Crúac) demanded by her faith. Of course, the altar may be purely cosmetic, intended to impress upon visitors the illusion of reverence. Regardless of the altar's purpose, an altar may have many features. Feel free to look at the elements below and “build” a character's altar from these pieces:

Deity Representation: If the Acolyte believes in a god or goddess (or even a whole pantheon of deities), those divine figures likely have representation upon the altar. Feel free to choose appropriate imagery to represent individual deities. Cernunnos the Antlered One (of Celtic myth) might be represented by an elk skull. The Acolyte might represent Artemis the Greek huntress with arrows, arrowheads or simply a clay idol representing her. Some traditional pagans represent a generic “god” with a silver candle, and the “goddess” with a gold one.

Elemental Representation: The four elements are significant to many cults within the covenant. Water may appear in a bowl or chalice, or may instead be in the form of wine or blood. Earth often shows up as clay statues, clumps of dirt or salt. For Air, an Acolyte might light incense, or instead include a white-handled athame — a dagger used in cutting herbs or other ritual

reagents. Fire, finally, is represented by burning candles or incense, though some Acolytes use wands to represent the dynamic nature of flame (the “Red Fear” does little good during times of veneration).

Sacrifice: The concepts of pain and surrender are key to many Acolyte beliefs, and the altar likely offers some representation of this. Some Acolytes prefer simple, small sacrifices such as locks of hair, fingernails, even teeth. Blood is an obvious sacrificial symbol, and ties closely in with the covenant’s magic. Some Acolytes also have elements of other sacrifices not entirely their own: bones (animal or human), strips of dried skin, valuable goods stolen (such as necklaces or rings) stolen from victims.

Ritual Tools: As mentioned, daggers or athames are common ritual tools. Acolytes use white-handled daggers to cut herbs or other ingredients. Black-handled athames are used for cutting flesh and drawing blood. Many Acolytes also possess antique phlebotomy (bloodletting) tools to help them during sacrifices. Other tools might include mortar and pestles, vials, jars or boxes.

Ritual Reagents: The vampire likely keeps various ceremonial ingredients handy. She may have herbs to mix or burn (such as sage). She may possess phials of biological fluids (blood, tears, semen, amniotic fluid, vomit). Some use various crystals, gems and non-precious stones.

Miscellaneous: An Acolyte can include just about anything she wants upon her altar. She may want to include symbols (pentagrams, astrological symbols, icons of fertility) or simple decoration (red altar cloths, decorative swords, mirrors). Some Acolytes prefer to lay out personal objects (an old locket, a diary, a photograph), whereas others decorate with the downright bizarre (jars of fetal pigs or humans, weird taxidermy, pornography).

NEW MERIT: ALTAR (• OR ••)

Having an altar present in one’s haven and possessing the Altar Merit are not *necessarily* the same thing. An Acolyte can have an altar with various reagents, personal effects and idols, but that altar does not grant her any kind of mechanical bonuses. It is a vehicle for her faith, to be sure, and the vampire surely believes that the altar is necessary to fuel her belief and her powers. The altar offers no bonuses to rolls, however.

An Acolyte can possess an altar that helps her perform Crúac rituals specifically. This altar likely contains instruments that allow her to spill her blood, as well as a place to spill the blood and even dispose of it — a bronze sink or well may grant her a place to empty her Vitae, as could a series of ritual cruets to contain the spilled blood.

The points taken in this Merit grant the vampire one or two bonus dice to all Crúac activation rolls made using the altar. The number of bonus dice is equal to the Merit’s rating (• or ••). Note

that *some* Crúac rituals (such as Cheval, p. 143 of **Vampire: The Requiem**) require the target of the sorcery to be in sight. If the target cannot be dragged before the altar, the Merit points do not grant any bonus at all. A ritual such as The Hydra’s Vitae (see p. 143, **Vampire: The Requiem**), on the other hand, is ideal for casting at an altar.

DARK TEMPLES

While worship of the dire gods can be individual, most Acolytes prefer to perform their rituals and ceremonies together. In most cases, having an altar or a communal haven is enough, but in cities where the Acolytes are in power or simply exist in larger than normal numbers, worship may necessitate a temple. No single template exists when attempting to picture one of the covenant’s pagan temples — for every splinter belief and variant pantheon exists yet another departure from the normal temple design. That said, some elements may remain constant, and by asking the proper questions, one can easily design the foundation for an interesting Circle temple.

THIS DIVINE LANDSCAPE

Most cultists believe that the land is very much populated with primeval powers: spirits, ghosts, fey wisps and minor gods. These beings rule the landscape, and so every square inch is, in its own way, sacred. Still, many Acolytes note that some spots are perhaps more sacred than others, because in these spots the most powerful gods reside. Most cults within the covenant aim to place their temples upon these locations. The question remains: how do they find these supposedly divine dwellings?

Generally, such discovery is imprecise and instinctual. The Acolytes know whom they worship, and look for a spot that suits the deity. Celtic gods thrived in the wild, and the druids built the majority of their sacred places out in the open (often in groves or upon hills). The Greeks and Romans believed that their deities lived inside buildings and objects — would Hephaestus thrive inside a burnt-out factory? Two-faced Janus might live in a place with many doors, or perhaps a place of wild dichotomies (a greenhouse whose plants live off buried corpses, for example). Mesopotamian ziggurats often were a nexus point between the Earth and the Underworld, and so demanded access to both above ground and below; a museum with a collapsed floor leading into a hidden sub-basement might make for a place to serve the old Sumerian gods, then.

Discovering such sacred places isn’t always instinctual. Sometimes, a cult will seek out places that seem to possess unusual, even supernatural, qualities. Examples might include a place where animals of all kinds seem to go and die; locations haunted by ghosts or other mad spirits; an old house where the clocks run backward, milk curdles instantly and electronic devices fail as

often as they work and even an old Christian church whose icons and statues bleed and wail, or spontaneously manifest pagan or occult symbols. Such locations represent uncontained celestial power. To put a temple there is to help control and harness the madness of the place, appeasing the powers that dwell there.

Some Acolytes claim unique ways in divining the proper location for a temple. By using “The Spirit’s Touch” (Auspex •••), a vampire can touch the walls, trees or floors to see if any of the images gleaned suggest the presence of primordial powers. Others claim to feel a kind of “Blood Sympathy” with a location — a seemingly impossible thing, yet some Acolytes swear by it (see sidebar, below).



BLOOD OF THE GODS

Acolytes can sometimes *feel* where the gods presumably reside (or, at least, would like to reside). This requires concerted effort by the vampire; rarely does it happen spontaneously.

The player rolls Wits + Occult. Dramatic failure results in a painful headache and a –1 penalty to all rolls for the rest of the night. Failure yields no intuition. Success, however, reveals flashes of insight inside the vampire’s mind. Quick visions might show a momentary image of the god’s face upon the wall or reveal a floor thick with rotting blood and flies. Images gleaned should reflect the cult’s own style of worship. Of course, success only grants these visions if the Storyteller deems the place suitable for the gods. The Morrigan would not care for a bank or a nursing home — she would only be pleased with the fields of war (or, perhaps, the ground beneath an old veterans’ hospital).

Provided the location is suitable, an exceptional success not only grants the appropriate visions, but also fills the vampire with a sense of elation — and possibly the refreshment of a spent Willpower point.



DIVINITY IN THE DETAILS

In reality, Acolytes don’t have a lot of leeway when designing a temple. If all were perfect, they could build a grand sanctuary in the middle of the city, as dark and magnificent as the gods themselves. The light of the moon would shine upon pillars of black marble laced with fire-red carnelian. Alas, such a thing is rare. Not only do Acolytes rarely possess the resources (including the real estate wherewithal) to make that happen, but constructing a rather unorthodox pagan temple where mortals can see it is an invitation to disaster. (Even though such a disaster might very well please those old deities.)

A cult makes do with what it can find. If the gods demand a temple upon the spot of an old apartment building, so be it. The Acolytes cannot raze the building to the ground — though resourceful Kindred might be able to ensure that the city inspectors note the structure

isn’t up to code and must be abandoned. Whether the temple’s location is a water tower, an elementary school or a gutter maze of sewer tunnels, the vampires must adapt to what is available.

In giving a temple depth and character, consider the following questions:

- *Is it secret?* Do only the cultists know of it, or is it open to public worship? Perhaps the Acolytes make the temple accessible only to those willing to follow a chain of mythic riddles and suffer an arduous journey. Also, are mortals allowed? Some cults share worship with mortals (though never below humans in stature), and some parts of the temple might be accessible to these humans. Alternately, if the cult masquerades as some kind of self-help group or new age phenomenon, then the temple might be open to *all* the public.

- *How does it revere the gods?* A temple’s dominant function is to venerate the gods. If the cult worships a storm god (Jupiter, Teshub or pre-netherworld Nergal), perhaps the temple is in the penthouse of a tall apartment building or hotel, with lightning rods encircling the perimeter of the suite so that the storms seem drawn to the place of worship.

Alternately, giving faith to the powers of the Underworld necessitates a chthonic temple: deep in the sewers, in a burial mound, in abandoned mine tunnels or at the bottom of a dark canyon. What if the cult worships a vampire? Then the location should reflect the whims and pleasures of that creature. If the Kindred “god” is given to opulence, then perhaps the temple is in a lavish mansion. If the venerated vampire is a Gangrel “of the earth,” then the temple is likely outdoors, or at least in an isolated structure (a deserted ranger station, perhaps) in the middle of sacred nature.

- *How does it represent ritual worship?* Most temples have some kind of ritual space. The temple may offer a traditional altar upon which small sacrifices and rituals are performed. The cult may not require an altar, however. Maybe the temple has a platform upon which bulls or other creatures are killed (with requisite space below so that the Kindred may stand beneath the shower of blood). Perhaps the temple provides a contained space allowing for a kind of sweat lodge or massive sensory deprivation. Anything is possible, provided it adheres to the goals and themes of the cult: libraries full of occult knowledge, rooms for torture, gardens to illustrate the glory of the natural goddess, even a sulfurous bath for ceremonial cleansing.

- *What vampiric elements are present?* These temples are unique because they are the holy places of vampires, and thus often offer unusual benefits specific to the Kindred. Are there tombs for safely keeping torpid Acolytes? Do the gardens offer mandragora (ghoul plants) that can be milked for hallucinogenic *lacrima*? Are there living quarters for ghouls or other humans (herd members,



cultists, prisoners)? A covenant temple can — provided it's secret — provide a number of elements that would normally break the Masquerade. Perhaps the vampires store freezers of blood, or have ritual rooms in which the Acolytes may feed wantonly upon drugged mortals. Anything Kindred may desire in a closed and secret space may find its way into a Circle sanctuary.

NEW MERIT: TEMPLE (• TO •••••; SPECIAL)

Effect: An Acolyte temple is similar to a vampire's haven. (This Merit may, in fact, *replace* the Haven Merit, if this is somewhere that the cultists reside as well. If not, then each must be bought separately.) Similar to the Haven Merit, a Circle temple is represented by three component Traits: Location, Size and Security. All three are bought separately, and provide the exact same functions and mechanics listed under the Haven Merit (see pp. 100–101, **Vampire: The Requiem**).

That said, players have the option of purchasing a fourth element to this Merit: Temple Library. This Trait allows the cult to maintain a library devoted to the subjects dearest to the cult. For every dot purchased in the Library facet, the coterie enjoys a +1 equipment bonus to any Intelligence + Occult rolls made for research purposes. This may not lead to a cumulative bonus larger than +5. The Library Trait does not necessarily represent books. Depending on the contributing vampire's Resources, a temple's archives may contain relics, vases, old scrolls or other artifacts that don't necessarily contain literal texts but rather inspiring or enlightening artistic or historical details.

Special: Similar to Haven, characters can share this Merit. The same rules apply. If a character leaves the cult or suffers Final Death, her contributed points are removed — perhaps she takes her books with her, damages vases or relics on her way out or the gods visit some seemingly coincidental catastrophe on the collection.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF SPILT BLOOD

(••• Crúac Ritual)

This ritual helps sanctify a temple with a blood sacrifice. In this rite, the vampire spills her own blood upon the floors or walls of the temple, specifically pouring her own Vitae once for each direction (north, south, east, west). She must also sacrifice a living creature within the temple, as close to the center of the ritual space as possible. By doing this, those vampires present inside the temple gain two particular benefits. First, they gain bonus dice to rolls to resist frenzy. Second, they gain the same number of bonus dice against attempts to manipulate them with Dominate, Majesty and Nightmare. All bonus dice are only available when the vampires are physically within the temple.

Provided the activation roll is a success, the creature sacrificed determines the number of bonus dice, which may not exceed the casting sorcerer's dots in Crúac. If an Acolyte with three dots in Crúac sacrifices an adult human in the performance of this ritual, only three bonus are achieved despite the nature of the sacrifice.

Creature	Bonus
Small (rat, snake, cat)	+1
Medium (dog, lamb, pig)	+2
Large (bull, camel, oxen)	+3
Human Adult	+4
Human virgin	+5

It does not matter how the creature is sacrificed, provided it dies on the temple grounds while the activation roll is made. The creature's throat may be slit, the creature might be burned as an offering or the Acolytes may find a more creative way of ending the thing's life.

The effects of this ritual last for one month. At the anniversary of the ritual's inception, the ritual may be performed anew to renew its effects, or it may be allowed to lapse.

SAMPLE TEMPLE: THE APULUM OF LIBER PATER

An Acolyte, Alexandru Miklos, went on a lonely pilgrimage to the Roman ruins of Colonia Aurelia Apulensis, a city in Transylvania. While there, he explored and worshipped at the temples of Liber Pater (also known as Bacchus, or Dionysius). He returned to the States a year later, claiming that the god entered his body during this pilgrimage. Alexandru certainly possessed an aura of unusual puissance, and was capable of many new and unseen things. His fellow Acolytes believed he was the real deal, and decided that he was himself worthy of the veneration once given to Liber Pater, because he *was* Liber Pater. They attacked him and put him into torpor.

Over the last 10 years, they have built a temple in his honor. This is no stark domain, no sanctuary of cold floors and sharp edges. It is a lush temple full of thick carpets and plush pillows. It is kept very warm — hot, even — by the presence of burning braziers (these Acolytes do not shun the Red Fear, believing it to be a tribulation one must surmount).

The temple itself is built inside of an old, burned-out Episcopalian church downtown. The pews have been removed, and the pulpit and altar turned into a sacrificial slab. Where the crucifix once hung, the Acolytes placed the now desiccated corpse of the slumbering Alexandru. He hangs draped in ivy. In the church's basement, the vampires dug out ceremonial pits (called *favissae*) where mortals are occasionally kept and bled. Beyond that is a small, locked room where various draughts of blood and bottled *lacrima* are kept (all stored in sacred clay jars, or *dollum*). The entire temple is decorated with lewd friezes and pornographic stained



glass windows, all meant to contribute to Liber Pater's inclinations toward ecstasy and debauchery.

The outside of the temple still looks like a burned-out church. This maintains the neighborhood's ignorance of what really goes on inside the building's walls.

ROLES IN THE COVENANT

The Circle of the Crone is a syncretism of various old religions. Many of these ancient ways — from Celtic Druidism to Mesoamerican Shamanism — maintained similar practices and roles. These roles represent certain archetypes, be it the diviner, the singer or the high priest. However, while each role may thematically be analogous among different Acolyte cults, that doesn't mean that the positions (or the associated tasks) are precisely the same.

Of course, the covenant has no central leadership. The Circle follows no concrete dogma and maintains few prescribed laws. The covenant's gods are many, its rituals limitless. The covenant is little more than a broadly branching tree whose boughs offer umbrage to various sects. Therefore, despite any commonality among roles and duties, the Circle offers very few officially recognized positions. In fact, only two roles are widespread enough to be considered "sanctioned." The rest are unique from city to city, cult to cult.

FORMAL DUTIES

Below are the roles common to most Acolytes. One is likely to find these vampires in any city with a moderate number of Acolytes (five or more).

HIEROPHANT (•••••+)

The role of Hierophant is used nearly across the board when it comes to the Circle of the Crone. Democracy is of little interest to *most* Acolytes, for the gods and goddesses do not grant all Kindred an equal vote by dint of them being vampires. For this covenant, power lies in the hands of the capable, the faithful and the blessed. The Hierophant, acting as both spiritual and political leader within most domains where Acolytes are present, is considered to be all three of those things. She must be capable, for without ability another would take her place (much as a beta wolf can depose a weak alpha). She must appear to be faithful, for the powers and sorceries of the Circle demand reverence. And, in some fashion, she must be blessed.

Some interpret a "blessing" as nothing more than natural ability, whereas others see a "blessing" as a literal, even superstitious "approval" by the gods or spirits. Such divine consent may come in the form of ravens alighting upon her shoulders, or maybe on the night of the Acolyte's Embrace, the city featured an abnormally high occurrence of miscarriages and suicides. Every cult will interpret omens and portents differently from the next.

The Hierophant, above all, is a spiritual leader. She invokes ritual. She determines which holy days are appropriate, and which are to be disavowed (or even labeled "blasphemous"). She helps set the precedent for what counts as proper worship in the domain. Her job is *not*, however, to make all the city's Acolytes happy.

Certainly, some Hierophants attempt to do that, but doing so is at odds with genuine belief. If the Hierophant believes unequivocally that one must worship Cailleach the Crone with ceremonies of starvation, but a smaller cult within the city offers worship to Xipe Totec (an Aztec god of rebirth), then she is shortchanging her *own* goddess in letting these others throw their reverence toward this alternate entity.

Of course, therein lurks imbalance. The Hierophant is also a political leader. She helps set the course of what the Acolytes will try to accomplish within the mad waltz of the Danse Macabre. She determines whether they will seek power by covert or overt means, or whether they will eschew temporal power in favor of divine puissance. She helps to decide which other covenants will make strong allies and which must remain adversaries. Can members of the Invictus also offer worship to the Crone? The Hierophant decides such things.

How is the balance struck between spiritual and political spheres? In the above example of Cailleach versus Xipe Totec, the Hierophant must make a choice. If she errs on the religious side, then it is possible to estrange those adherents of Xipe Totec. The Circle of the Crone is already a loose federation of cults, and such a tenuous partnership can breed weakness. By shunning other Acolytes or forcing them into that which they do not believe, the Hierophant risks thinning an already ephemeral powerbase.

The other side of the coin is choosing the purely political route: let the zealots of Xipe Totec have their belief. As long as they're willing to provide mutual benefit to the Hierophant and her own Cailleach cultists, then all is safe. So what if the magic of the followers of Xipe Totec is weakened by reliance upon a lesser god? The Hierophant can remain confident in her own belief, can she not? What if the Crone is angered by letting Xipe Totec into the city?

Some Hierophants struggle to find compromise. In the above case, perhaps the other Acolytes can continue to worship their Aztec "god" provided they still show up to the Cailleach rituals sanctioned by the Hierophant. Unfortunately, when it comes to bloodstained faith mixed with volatile vampire politics, rarely does such compromise come easily. For this reason, the Hierophant's job is not an envious one. It comes with a great deal of power. Yes, she can determine who worships what, who may learn Crúac and who belongs in the covenant in the first place. But maintaining that balance between religion and politics is like walking a razor-wire tightrope.

The term Hierophant comes from the Greek. *Hieros* means "holy" and *phantes* means "one who shows." The role is also known as *La Hiera* ("the holy"), High Priest, Hotar or Magus.

THE CHORUS

While the term "Chorus" isn't exactly official throughout the covenant, nearly every domain contains some

equivalent of this word. Whether its members are referred to as novitiates, neophytes, jacklegs, harlequins, novices or *novicus*, the position means the same thing everywhere: that the vampire is untrained and untested in the ways of the covenant.

In most cases, it doesn't matter if the vampire coming to the covenant is a neonate or an elder, for all are novices when they first enter the Circle. This is for the benefit of the cult, but also for the benefit of the convert. This trial period not only shows the Acolytes if the novice is worth his mettle but also gives him ample opportunity to back out and return to his Requiem. Worship of the dire gods is insidious, and few cults allow a vampire to go halfway. It is all or nothing.

Once one commits beyond the period of the Chorus, he may gain all the benefits that the covenant allows, both real and perceived. He may gain favor of the gods. He can learn the blood rituals. He can count himself among an extended family unlike that which is seen (or is believed to be seen, at least) among other covenants.

Once committed, he cannot leave. He cannot give up his faith and walk among the Sanctified — at least, not easily. Most times, the Acolytes will ensure that the vampire is bound to them. Only a more powerful patron outside the covenant can even begin to allow a traitor to escape the Circle.

That is the primary function of the Chorus: to allow both parties to ensure their willingness to commit to one another. The Chorus a hard time and a difficult role, for the Acolytes do not generally make entrance into their mysteries very easy. It is often painful on par with nothing else, a wholly unique brand of tribulation. But the Chorus helps represent one of those key tenets supported by the covenant as a whole: through pain, one may find enlightenment. Persevere through the trials, and belong to the Circle.

Members of the Chorus are sometimes called jacklegs or harlequins.

UNUSUAL HIERARCHIES

Every cult is different. The hierarchies contained within an individual cult or sect may vary from city to city. One might make use of some unusual alternatives when deciding how the Acolytes in a given region label their hierarchies:

- Tarot (Hierophant, High Priestess, Fool, the Hanged Man, the Emperor, etc.)
- Wolfpack (Alpha, Beta, Omega)
- Infernal (Baal, Duke, Duchess, Lightbringer, Imps, etc.)
- Greek (Gods, Demigods, Titans, Fates, Erinyes, Muses, etc.)

UNCOMMON ROLES

In every domain, the Circle wears a different face. Acolytes and their beliefs are different from city to city — and, if the city's vampire population is large enough, their beliefs likely vary even within a single domain. Each cult demands that its adherents wear particular masks. Below is an exploration of some of these masks — i.e., roles — found within various covenant sects.

SKALD (•)

Mythology is the hook upon which the covenant hangs most of its beliefs. Without its central faith in the stories of the old gods, the Circle of the Crone would not be as wise as it thinks itself, or, ostensibly, have access to the blood sorcery unique to the Circle's members.

Of course, following the stories means *knowing* the stories, but not every member can be expected to possess the library of Joseph Campbell or hold doctorates in theology and anthropology. Many within the covenant simply do not have a full grasp of the gods and their tales, and in many cases, that's acceptable. This is kept acceptable by the presence of a *reminding* figure, the Skald.

The Skald is a poet and storyteller. He holds little true power within a cult, and generally knows only piddling Crúac. His primary function is to infuse the unlives of his fellow Acolytes with the tales of their gods and spirits. He isn't a priest; his tales are not told so much with attention to reverence. No, his stories (often embellished) are meant to either entertain or give some mythic meaning to an otherwise normal act. An arrogant or prideful Acolyte might earn a story about the African trickster god, the spider known as Anansi. Should the Skald see a coterie-mate poised to be brought before the Invictus court for sentencing, the Skald might tell her stories of how various gods descended to the Underworld — and triumphed over the gods of death.

The Skald often serves other minor functions, as well. For one, he is expected to be honest, even brutally so. When another Kindred seems poised for a fall, the Skald may compose a cruel satire to be read at Elysium (many Skalds delight in Elysium, even ending up as the Masters of it). The Skald has a great deal of freedom within his own covenant, though that freedom doesn't translate to those outside the Circle — his impudence may bring him pain.

The covenant also uses Skalds as messengers, sending them as liaisons to other coteries, covenants or even creatures. (Skalds meet often with Lupines, for instance).

Skalds are also called the Awenyddion, Bards or Rhapsodes.

ADHVARYU (•)

Often, an Acolyte within the Chorus establishes herself above her fellow novitiates. Perhaps she seems

stoic in the face of pain or appears preternaturally blessed by the powers that be. (Alternately, perhaps the Hierophant favors the Acolyte for more selfish reasons.) Whatever her supposed qualifications, the covenant considers her worthy for a special position by the side of the Hierophant.

As Adhvaryu, the vampire leaves the Chorus (often without trial and before the others) and attends to the ritual needs of the Hierophant. The Adhvaryu becomes his arbiter of sacrifice. During any ritual, she is the one who handles the actual act of sacrifice according to the Hierophant's desires. She is the one who crushes grain, slits the goat's throat or clips the fingers from the struggling child.

The role is meant only in a ritual capacity — the Adhvaryu is supposed to only serve the Hierophant's needs during times of ceremony. Many Hierophants abuse this, however, and claim that as ritual figures, *all* they do is somehow sacred and needs the attention of the Adhvaryu. A Hierophant might bind the young vampire to him, and force her to perform any manner of scutwork or debauchery. Those who struggle in the role of Adhvaryu are often threatened. They can cease to be the handler of the sacrifice and can instead *become* the sacrifice.

These vampires are sometimes referred to as an Abjurant, Apprentice or Victimarius.

VALKYRJA (••)

The battlefield is, to some Acolytes, a ritual ground. Upon it, they wade into the fray and destroy their enemies, who then become sacrifices to the dire gods. Blood — the most sacred element — is spilled in the name of the covenant and its ways.

Because of this view, many Circle cults have ritual warriors within the ranks. Those called Valkyrja are not merely capable combatants, but vampires mad with a lust for war. Such Kindred care little for the subtle weave and weft of the Danse Macabre and prefer direct confrontation — with sword, claw or shotgun — to solve problems. Many claim parts from their victims: heads are favored in particular (though vampire skulls are difficult to claim as they tend to burn to ash without the proper ritual preparations).

The term "Valkyrie" connotes a feminine implication, as they were the Norse warrior-women who rode in on wolves to obliterate the enemy. These "choosers of the slain" were blood-painted witches, deft with axe and insane with fury. The feminine connotation still holds in some cults, and in such cases only women are allowed to truly be the warriors of the Circle. Most cults, however, accept men and women despite the name. In large domains where the Acolytes swell in number, whole coteries might be devoted to the ways of the Valkyrja.

These warriors were also known as Berserkers, Hounds or the Labrys.

HARUSPEX (•••)

Divination is a form of magic revered by some covenant cults. The act of prophesying allows a vampire to either become the mouthpiece of the gods or force answers from a subservient spirit. Some Acolytes elevate one or several vampires to the role of Haruspex, a seer within the covenant.

Many misconstrue the nature of the Haruspex, however. The Haruspex, by and large, is not a random prophet detailing the far-flung future. No, the Haruspex is meant to obtain the approval of the gods for that which is happening *now*. The Hierophant may make a change in ritual or may do something that could spurn one god but favor another. The Haruspex divines the ramifications of such actions. She interprets the will and the whim of the gods and spirits, helping the other Acolytes decide on the proper courses of action. In this way, the diviner has a great deal of power. She can, with subtle manipulations, move the cult in a direction that even the Hierophant cannot. Should the others learn of such exploitation, however, the Haruspex's head will be quick to the chopping block.

The nature of how the Haruspex “reads” the intentions of the gods is, frankly, up to her. She likely utilizes many forms of divination. The Acolyte might reach into an animal's bowels and withdraw its entrails — the subsequent spillage of bile and the way the guts fall upon the altar may give her subtle hints as to the gods' sentiments. She may look to the sky and read the patterns of sparrows, or blow smoke across a mirror and see what mystic shapes form. Signs can be found anywhere: bones, runes, playing cards, clouds, even in the delicate traces of a fly's wing or spider's web.

Haruspices often know a lot of basic Crúac, including many small-scale rituals bent toward divinatory purposes.

Also called Augurs, Cassandra, Ovates, Seers or Sibyls.

VALA (••••)

In domains where a large number of Acolytes reside, the covenant sometimes prefers to make use of a “low priest.” The low priest, just below the Hierophant in the hierarchy, attends only to the religious leadership necessary within the cult. The Hierophant maintains *overall* leadership, dealing not only with ritual but also with politics as well as the structure of local Circle society. The Vala isn't supposed to concern herself with politics (though some certainly do); her sole task is to be a powerful ritualist. She leads rituals when the Hierophant cannot. The Vala learns as much Crúac as her soul can stomach, and similarly goes on whatever perilous quest is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of blood magic.

The nature of the Vala differs from city to city. In particularly large Acolyte populations, the Hierophant may not meet with many covenant members face-to-face. His grasp of the local personalities within the cult may be slim. In this case, the Vala must pick up the slack. She represents the leadership “in the trenches” and thus is able to counsel other Acolytes one-to-one. Of course, this isn't always the case — sometimes the Vala has her head buried in old books or her fingers damp with forbidden blood and makes no time for the other Acolytes except during ritual. Her time, in these cases, is devoted only to the dire powers.

Also known as Apex, Low Priest, Witch or Warlock.

REX NEMORENSIS (•••••)

The position of “Rex Nemorensis” — translated, “King of the Grove” — has fallen into disuse. Few Acolytes even know of the role, though some may know an oft-repeated legend or three about those powerful eremite elders said to keep vigilant eye over the Circle.

The King of the Grove is generally an elder Acolyte who is the keeper of much forbidden knowledge. He knows not only those rituals considered anathema by those in-the-know, but he also tends to maintain a bevy of secrets regarding many of the vampires in a given domain. The King is capable of counsel both mad and sage, and is often capable of subtly steering covenant activities from afar by planting a thought or a seeding a secret amidst the cultists. In this way, Rex Nemorensis has a great deal of power — though, as a hermit figure, this power is only rarely flexed.

In times past, the power of the role was coveted. Some Acolytes simply wanted the power over their cohorts, whereas others sought to escape the lunatic's parade of the Danse Macabre. Plus, the King of the Grove was in many domains said to be unusually close with the gods, if not a god himself. Becoming Rex Nemorensis, however, is only possible through a single means: destroying the old King of the Grove. (In some areas, this destruction *must* be through diablerie, so that the souls of all the old Grove Kings become contained in a single vampiric vessel.) The King of the Grove knows this and he — supposedly — accepts challengers to his reign.

Reality was not always so clear. Some did not uphold their mythic stoicism and avoided challenges so as not to be deposed. Others maintained their “come one, come all” attitudes, but the challengers played unfairly, ganging up upon the Grove King or sending others from different covenants to do the job. And so, the position has fallen largely into antiquity. Some say, however, that a few old Grove Kings exist out in the deep woods or dark mountains, still watching over the cults in their domains.

No other common terms exist for this position.

CISTA MYSTICA

Pragmatism is not always the Circle's strong suit: playing around with dark gods and blood magic is not precisely sensible. Still, sometimes the Acolytes are forced into a measure of self-preservation, and lunatic elders sometime enter into that equation.

Some elders don't end up well. Their memories are unreliable, their proximity to the Beast is too close for comfort and their powers are deeper than what many younger Kindred can comprehend. In such a case, balance becomes necessary. The covenant names elders of this type *Cista Mystica*, a term used long ago for a basket of sacred snakes opened during initiations into various mystery cults. This term is, in a way, a name of respect: the elders are sacred and significant, but a container of serpents can be unpredictable. Elders labeled as *Cista Mystica* are shut out from gaining power. They are not allowed to learn more Crúac, and they can't mentor new Acolytes.

This can be sensitive. Elders don't always appreciate being sent out to pasture. If the cult is smart, its Acolytes put elements in place before drawing away the elder's power. These elements allow the Acolytes to take control of the elder more easily — and if that means having a contingent of warriors nearby with stakes and axes, so be it. Many elders of the *Cista Mystica* end up as torpid idols, silent and venerated.

ROLES IN THE PHILOSOPHY

Religious ceremony rests on symbolism, in which small things that can be grasped stand for big things that can't be seized in the hand. The Christian reveres the bread and wine as stand-ins for suffering and redemption. The individual is only the microcosm, but reflected in him is the macrocosm. This is a key to Crúac. Acolytes who bury its unspeakable principles in their hearts become able to blend their consciousness into the world around them, not just imaginatively or philosophically, but *in fact*.

This blending goes both ways, of course. The universe puts its print on the individual, far more than the individual marks the universe. Great and amorphous shapes flow invisibly through the human experience, giving name and form to our acts. One may not realize, at first, that one is following the footsteps of historical and mystical archetypes. Yet the feet fall in the right steps, even when the dancer cannot hear the tune.

This is where the Circle's wisdom becomes important. The Acolytes have the knowledge and experience to perceive the patterns, and to educate individuals in the shapes their Requiems are taking. The Circle's advice can help neonates find their place in the cosmos, a place that was always there, but only visible after initiation.

ROLES AND RELIGION

The great question among those who perceive these eight roles and trust their power is, how do they relate to religion? There are two schools of thought, each one passionate about its approach, with no reconciliation in sight.

First, there are those who believe that the archetypes shape the gods as much as they shape mortals. The archetypes might as well be gods, to these philosophers, since they arise from the same human duties, choices and behaviors. In every culture, a patriarchal Father god exists because the male parent is universal to humanity. Therefore, worshipping Zeus as the patriarch is little different from worshipping the Great Spirit. The details vary, but the overlap is far more significant.

The other camp is far more partisan to their particular god, to whom the believers assign primacy of the archetypal role. From their perspective, all the Virgin goddesses are differentiated, and the differences matter more than the parallels. This philosophy appeals to some religious chauvinists, asserting that Hel is the true death-delving Maiden, with Hine-titama and Qivittoq as either (1) imperfect attendants to Hel, (2) imperfect perceptions of Hel, wrongly worshipped as separate entities or (3) simple imposters. More tolerant partisans defend their personal interest in a single deity as a matter of simple choice. Instead of saying "Odin is the supreme Hermit god," they say, "I prefer the Hermit god Odin."

THE MAIDEN

The Maiden (or Virgin) is a figure of purity and innocence, which leads many to expect goodness and charity. That expectation is sentimental Christian baggage. Real innocence means ignorance, particularly ignorance of good and evil. All animals are innocent of malice, lacking the will to develop a grudge or enjoy cruelty for its own sake. That's little consolation when a grizzly bear bites your face off.

To the Kindred of the Circle, a female vampire is a Virgin before she has killed. This doesn't mean disposing of animals, of course — they're animals, their place is to die for their betters. Humans are there for that reason as well (though there are many additional places for mortals in the cosmos), but Virgin Kindred may not have yet realized that. The most successful Maidens, of course, are vampires who *do* accept that it would be right and proper for them to kill humans, as their every instinct cries for them to do, but who restrain themselves to hone their inner strength and grow by self-imposed tribulation.

Maidens deny themselves some experiences to intensify other experiences. For example, they deny themselves murder to improve their willpower. This is the

essential act of the Virgin: setting boundaries to purify issues. This power of denial gives Virgins the power of purity. Because they are staunchly on one side of an issue, and refuse to even learn about the other, their opinions, beliefs and emotions on that issue remain completely unchanged, untouched and uncorrupted. They have clarity. Though it is, as any undead killer could tell you, a fragile clarity.

MYTHOLOGICAL EXAMPLES

Diana the huntress is a good Maiden from Greek mythology. Being a goddess for humans, Diana's primary concern was to defend herself against sexual knowledge, to the extent of killing those men who would despoil her — often quite cruelly and often through the agency of innocent beasts. In her guise of Hecate, the moon goddess, she also held the keys that unlocked the secrets of the occult. This connection to the forbidden is common to another Greek goddess, Persephone. An innocent daughter of spring, she was seized by Hades and taken to the Underworld as his queen. Persephone becomes a despoiled Maiden when she eats the food of the dead, dooming her to cross between the realms of life and death forever.

This is a common theme to many Virgin stories. The Maori Hine-titama was another despoiled Maiden who went to the Underworld, though in her case she fled

there, not because of something she consumed, but because she learned that her husband was also her father. Appalled by this incest, she chose to flee into death, and to eventually call all her soiled children (meaning, all of humanity) there as well.

EXPECTATIONS

The role of the Maiden is to advise and represent the Circle, when Maidenly advice and representation are appropriate. She symbolically possesses an unsullied perspective, and this is often true in fact as well. Since she has not experienced the kill, talking to her can remind more experienced Kindred what that time before killing was like. Because she is closer to humanity, her words may renew those whose spirits are wearied from contending with the Beast.

Proximity to her human origins cuts both ways for the covenant. The Virgin is unlikely to be thrown into the depths of intra-covenant realpolitik. Indeed, the Circle typically protects her from that sort of depraved self-interest. But when the Circle needs a fair face to speak with humans, one who can remember what it was like to breathe and laugh under the sun, a Maiden is often called upon.

Many neonates qualify as Virgins, though (as with mortals) it's usually just a matter of time. At Status 0 to •, a Maiden is much like any other neonate in the



Circle, someone to be taught and tested, though perhaps the newcomer may find (to her puzzlement) that older Kindred occasionally stop by for conversations that seem aimless and embarrassingly personal by turns. Only later, after she's left the Maiden stage, does she understand their interest in her opinions.

At Status •• to •••, a Virgin probably has some insight into her position, and the Circle's point of view on it. This is the range at which one stops being a Maiden by default and starts being one intentionally. There are some Acolytes who emphasize politics and clout above mystic insight and who gain this degree of status without paying much attention the discussions of what purity means to vampires. Indeed, many Maidens who pursue mortal contacts as an avenue of power strive to retain their Maiden status, not out of any religious imperative, but because it's easier to cope with mortals when they aren't disposable. But far more often, a Status 3 Maiden has accepted the role and is struggling to maintain it.

No one gets to Status •••• or ••••• as a Virgin without labor. The temptation to kill, the opportunities to get away with it and the times when it would just be so much *simpler* — there have just been far too many to resist without conscious effort, and lots of it. These Virgins are regarded not only with respect, but nearly awe for their accomplishment, and there are few whose condemnation for careless, Masquerade-threatening callousness sticks as much as someone who has walked the walk for 50 or 100 years.

THE FOOL

The male counterpart to the Maiden is the Fool, the bringer of chaos. Often known as the Trickster, his position is to stand outside the mainstream of Kindred society and critique it through action. This critique has a "foolish" flavor when it's done ignorantly and a "tricky" tone when done on purpose, but often the end result is the same: disorder, contention, disagreement and, just possibly, progress at the end of it.

William Blake said fools who persist in their foolishness become wise, and as with the Maiden, the Fool is often valued because he comes to problems with fresh eyes and a perspective that lacks the cynicism that decades and murders engender. He can see hope in situations where it evades the more experienced, not because he has a clearer view of the world as it is, but because he has a brighter view of what the world might be. Granted, the cynical Scarlet Woman or long-suffering Hermit is probably right 80• of the time. But neither of them is going to perceive the surprising good outcome that a Fool may bumble across 20• of the time.

A different perspective comes from George Bernard Shaw. To paraphrase, he said, "Reasonable men conform

themselves to the world, while unreasonable ones expect the world to change to suit them. That is why all progress is made by unreasonable men." Some are Fools by default, and their boldness and unconventional approaches soon stagnate into the more typical Kindred caution and self-interest. But those who attain experience without losing hope become something greater than just an agent of chaos who makes good luck possible. Those who insist that the depressing Kindred perspective ("We kill, they die") is actually the *narrow* view and that those who dare to think wider can make a better Requiem — they become the Tricksters.

The role of the Fool is to enter a situation and agitate it, redirecting the course of events onto strange and unexpected courses. He is a big dose of randomness. By knocking things out of anyone's control, he brings greater extremes of luck into play, and while this can mean that things turn out much worse, it has an equal possibility of unsought good fortune.

The Trickster is more potent and useful because he crafts his chaos consciously and has the experience to seize initiative when everyone else is stunned by upheaval. Being the only one with no expectations, he's the only one responding to the disorder he's wrought, while everyone else is still trying to reassemble the shards of their plots and schemes.

MYTHOLOGICAL EXAMPLES

The Norse god Loki overcomes through cunning and guile, triumphing over giants and gods alike. Loki is half-giant, and many Acolytes see this lineage as a symbol, rather than literal truth. Giants represent chaos and the unraveling of the world, so even when he's on the side of the gods, Loki has a wild and unreliable edge. Ultimately, Loki eats the heart of Gullveig the dark sorceress, and this wickedness pushes him out of an ambiguous relationship with the gods into direct opposition. The parallels to Amaranth are not lost on the Circle, but the meaning is fiercely debated. Some hold that this demonstrates the evil of diablerie, showing how inexorably corrupting it is. Others say that of course it's corrupting, and that's a *good thing* because vampires are meant to debase and sicken everything around them. Loki was right to give himself to chaos. That was his destiny.

A more sympathetic trickster deity is the Coyote of the central North American plains. Often a slave to gluttony and lust, he is nonetheless a catalyst for change who frequently brings benefit with the right hand, along with tribulation in the left. Given the Circle's appreciation for both change (particularly creative change, which generates something new) and suffering (which gives wisdom to those with the focus to recognize it), it's easy to see why this role is more than tolerated — it's celebrated.

EXPECTATIONS

There are two situations in which the Circle deliberately deploys a Fool. If circumstances are such that the Circle can't exert a lot of influence, the Acolytes may put a Fool in place simply to derail the control of others. This is particularly true when playing at kingmaker: for example, when tensions are high between the Ordo Dracul and the Carthians, the behavior of an experienced Acolyte would be seen as meddling or worse, sabotage. Sometimes a Fool goes forth and things fall apart. The bad outcome (for the two groups intruded upon) can't really be traced back to machinations of the Circle because there were none. Instead of scheming and plotting, the Acolytes observed a situation with a low margin of error and sent in someone who is Error incarnate.

These sorts of missions, in which the Fool is a spoiler and an ignorant pawn, are most common for Fools of Status 0 to •. If they do well, their status may rise within the Circle, but success or failure is very likely to earn them enemies outside the covenant.

On the other hand, Fools can also be used to advantage when circumstances are desperate, and the Circle has nowhere else to turn. The notion that Fools bring hope when there otherwise is none rarely pans out, but if VII has eliminated all the other covenants in your city, using a Fool only has to pan out once. These riskier involvements are best suited for more experienced or well-regarded Fools (say, Status •• to •••) because, while they're still innocents, they at least know enough to survive a little longer.

Not that Fools are *expected* to survive either type of mission. If they weren't disposable, they wouldn't be called Fools. But whether they survive or get destroyed, they're the last arrow in the quiver when the Circle has nothing else to lose.

Tricksters are held in higher regard, as experienced Maidens are. Being innocent of murder because you've never been in a tempting situation is one thing. Remaining pure because you've chosen it, at cost, again and again — that's different. That demands respect (Status ••• to •••• is typical, or as much as ••••• with great age or accomplishment) and gives one a far more versatile role than "misrule's hand grenade."

Tricksters are sent in to negotiate, infiltrate and discombobulate, as the Fool is, but where a Fool works like a flamethrower, the Trickster is a scalpel. Both create chaos, but the Trickster immediately sets about bringing a new order, his order, out of it.

The most critical role for Tricksters is to interface with entities or situations in which the Circle is simply at a loss. When the Acolytes encounter something known to their lore and that has an obvious position in their spiritual structure (mages, werewolves, ghosts), the

Circle sends Crones and Hermits to negotiate. If the Circle finds people stitched together into grotesque but physically powerful amalgams that function in defiance of biological law — then the Acolytes send the Trickster. After all, he's the one most used to dealing with the unexpected. He's the one who can weave positive results out of stark ignorance.

THE SCARLET WOMAN

When a living woman steps outside her social role, she risks being called a whore. It doesn't have to be a literal sex-for-money transaction: many feminist Acolytes consider that the *most* expected feminine role. Women can be called whores when they get jobs expected of men, or when they wear clothes that the elders consider improper or when they speak to a man as an equal.

A Scarlet Woman is not necessarily a prostitute, though some Scarlet Women are. (Indeed, some Acolytes prefer the title "Whore" for this archetype.) If she is a whore, it's a small matter to the Circle. Kindred are concerned with a different currency than mere dollars, and for vampires, 'scarlet' is hardly the color of shame.

Scarlet Women of the Circle have contempt for constraint and rebel against the ties that bind them. Many who are technically Scarlet Women ignore the title or let no one know of their status. (After all, killing someone is usually a highly private matter, even for predatory Kindred.) Other Scarlet Women, however, flaunt their independence and make a point of questioning all rules and all expectations. They may eventually accept a punishment handed down, or a rule imposed by all, but it won't be accepted meekly. The defining attribute of the true Whore, after all, is not that she transgressed, but that she feels no shame in transgression.

Rebellion is what people expect, and it's typical of the newest and most shallow women in this role. But a knee-jerk resistance to authority often makes them only slightly less malleable than instinctive submission to authority. As they age and mature, those Scarlet Women who eschew the role of Mother achieve true independence, instead of merely being contrary. They learn that the Scarlet Woman is not the one who resists the will of others, but the one who is unswayed by it, who cleaves to her own clear judgment. The true Whore may be a harlot or a moral paragon, she may resist bitterly or accept wholeheartedly, but when she does it is because it is *her* decision. It is never a choice made for her.

MYTHOLOGICAL EXAMPLES

The Egyptian goddesses Bast and Sekhmet are opposite sides of the same Scarlet Woman coin. Both are aspects of Hathor (herself a complex figure), and both are cat goddesses. That said, they are very different. Bast is sensuous and calm and mysterious — traits one typically ascribes to the domesticated cats that purr beneath a

stroking palm but still won't come when called. Sekhmet is ravenous, and bloodthirsty.

The most common myth about her details how she was unleashed to punish a deserving humankind, but was so vicious that the gods had to call her off by dyeing 7,000 vats of beer red, so that she'd mistake it for blood, lap it up and fall down drunk. Sekhmet is a beast, showing the attributes of a hunting desert lioness, and it has not escaped her Acolyte worshippers' notice that she both is drawn to blood and passes into a torpid sleep.

Ishtar is another strikingly dual figure, both a patroness of sexual love and "the lady of battles." Her most famous exploit is harrowing the Underworld, an event in which she had to pass through seven gates, divesting herself of both a garment and its associated measure of power each time. By the time she reaches the center, she is naked — a quest commemorated with the dance of the seven veils, a performance that (in turn) has been cheapened into mere lascivious display.

Then again, there's a French sect of Ishtar Acolytes who insist that this is entirely the point. When the Whore gives up purity and dignity, it's the trial that leads to the greatest wisdom. This wisdom (those Ishtar cultists insist) is that no one can face death alone, and that only cooperation and the aid of loved ones can provide freedom from death (which they associate with the Beast). When Tammuz agrees to take Ishtar's place in the Underworld, she can no longer be just the lone, self-interested Whore. Then it's time for her to assume a greater, communal role. To the French sect, this realization is typical of Scarlet Women who are ready to bring a companion into eternity. They are ready, in a word, to become Mothers.

EXPECTATIONS

What expectations are placed on someone whose defining attribute is "she cannot be tamed"? Whores do what they want because they want to do it. Unlike Crones, who are almost all old, and Virgins, most of whom are young, Scarlet Women are a broad demographic. "Women who have not sired, who have killed and who thrive on human blood" form a large percentage of the Circle, so generalizations are more difficult for this group than for others. In most cases, Scarlet Women behave as Carthians or unaligned of similar age. If Scarlet Women approve of your project, they help you accomplish it. If they disapprove, they resist it — or, at the very least, won't join in just because their sire said it was a good idea. They are free agents, and some of them are powerful free agents, but they need to be persuaded instead of commanded.

Some are more willing to compromise than others, and generally the younger a Whore is, the more she can be talked around (or bullied). Some Scarlet Women consider it kosher to their role to sacrifice a small mat-

ter in order to get aid with a large matter, or even just to drift from their principles (even the principle of total selfishness, if that's what they've chosen) simply to avoid a hassle. Others are in it, with sincerity, 100%. If they don't actively believe in a cause, no bribe or blackmail is going to make them pursue it.

Of all the roles, Scarlet Women are the least likely to agree to do something "because it's good for the covenant." From their perspective, the covenant is something that does things for *them*, not the other way around. This doesn't mean they won't aid the Circle in times of need. It's a poor craftsman who neglects his tools, after all. But it does mean their aid is calculated and not sentimental.

At lower levels of Status (0 to ••), they're accorded whatever respect is due their age and abilities, but many in the Circle treat Scarlet Women only slightly better than if they were in a different covenant. They are allies of common interest, less than convenience. At Status ••• to •••••, they're more likely to recruit others to their banner than to be recruited themselves, and for many, the idea of liberty of interest does *not* cut both ways. Many high Status Whores find it perfectly reasonable to refuse any request that does not benefit them, but woe to the neonate who resists a Scarlet Woman's command. Ideological resistance might earn grudging respect, or it might earn vicious punishment, depending on the Scarlet Woman in question. Whores are always individuals, after all.

THE HERO

The word "hero" has a lot of associations with moral uprightness and helping the weak and upholding justice and truth. This is a product of modern romanticizing. The original meaning of "hero" is "one born of the blood of gods." One could be a hero and do great evil as well as great good. Indeed, the farther back one looks at myth, the more dark and bloody the heroes become. Succeeding ages layered on glosses of virtue and decency, making the stories toothless instructional fables for children instead of profound moral puzzles for adults.

Strip away the years of people editing myths to make a point, and you'll find something violent and confusing. The Hercules of myth slew his best friend in a rage that is chillingly familiar to any Kindred who's entered anger frenzy. That's a long way from the figure adorning toys and T-shirts.

In the Circle, a Kindred becomes a Hero when he enters into a fuller realization of what he is, what he has become. This initiation happens when he kills. No longer the Fool who lacks the most direct experience of the Requiem's core, no longer a Trickster dodging his own Beast like a caped matador, the Hero has blood on his hands and can never go back to what he was.

Another name sometimes given to a Circle Hero is "Outsider," which carries far fewer connotations of de-

cency and warmth. What both names have in common is the essence, however. Both clearly show someone who is outside the norm, who is beyond ordinary, who is set apart forever. The Hero in myth is thrust away from his society, travels and endures terrible dangers, often enters the realm of death in order to return with knowledge that makes his culture stronger. When the Outsider returns and saves his people, he is no longer an exile, and becomes a leader.

The Circle finds that many Kindred follow this road-map exactly, without needing a single word of instruction. The journey begins with the Embrace, as thorough an expulsion from normal humanity as one could desire. With murder, the Hero is truly set apart and comes face to face with the Beast that rides him.

In stories, this creature is externalized as the brute Minotaur or the cunning Sphinx, but Acolytes know the secret, that the enemy is within. The mythic Hero faces death and returns, just as Kindred walk the living realm despite their own corpse-nature. Finally, the Hero returns to society, bettered by his learning and able to lead. For Acolytes, the Hero Embraces and becomes a Father (see p. 54). He does not stop wandering to lead the people from which he came, but to partake in leading Kindred society.

MYTHOLOGICAL EXAMPLES

Greek myth is particularly rich with descendents of gods who represent governing virtues, whether cunning

(Oedipus, who out-thinks the Sphinx before returning to govern Thebes), popularity (Theseus becoming beloved by slaying the bandits on the perilous road to Athens before becoming its king) or brute strength (Hercules destroying the Nemean Lion before bodily traveling to heaven as a full god).

On the Celtic side, Finn fills the shoes of the Hero admirably, both from the human and the Kindred perspectives. He lives outside civilized society, but because of his divorce from the mundane he is a seer and poet, able to touch deeper truths. From the Kindred perspective, he has a close association with animals, even to the point of having two of his nephews as hunting hounds. Furthermore, in some versions of the myth, his greatest foe is called Aodh, meaning “fire” — an enemy all the undead can fear and appreciate.

EXPECTATIONS

Heroes go on quests. Everyone knows that. At the same time, the Outsider’s motivations are never expected to be purely virtuous. Knowledge, power and freedom from a curse are the most common motivations for mythic hero quests, and it doesn’t take much to see them operating among Acolytes of the modern nights.

A Hero of the Circle in Provençal might agree to murder a local Gangrel in return for Crúac lore, or a cash bounty or simply because the Hero’s sexually hungry for the woman who makes the request. He might agree to break into a werewolf’s lair under cover of darkness and



steal the monster's magic stones in return for instruction in how they're used. He might step in to defend someone's mortal cousin from an abusive boyfriend in return for a kind word in the Prince's ear about the Hero's indiscrete feeding.

The *quid pro quo* approach is accepted not only because it fits the myth, but because it works. The higher the Hero's Status, the more he asks in payment and the more resources he brings to bear. That could mean he knows other Acolytes who owe him favors, or it could mean that in typical epic fashion, he's about to rip someone's leg off.

THE MOTHER

What does "motherhood" mean to a vampire? To mortals, mother stands for comfort, for unconditional love: she's the one who always puts the best face on your actions and decisions. She gives birth from great toil, is one with you when you're weakest, gives nourishment when hungry and sympathy in sickness.

For Kindred, it is the same but different. A vampire's sire creates progeny with great toil and sacrifice, but seldom offers the kind of adoration typical to the living. She nurtures and protects, but typically by instructing the neonate in skills that mock human social order. Some of the darkest Acolyte Mothers even feed their progeny from their own bodies in a travesty of infant nursing. Not only does it nourish but, as with a suckling newborn, it creates a tight emotional bond.

Mothering is an exquisitely social role, the core of a society of influence. The word of the Mother is transitory and may lack the power of a written law, but a Mother's word is powerful because it is narrow, temporary and specific. Mother addresses *you* and *your* problem, not general principles and abstracts ideals. It's entirely practical and if you ignore her advice, there's no punishment. Unless she was right, of course, and you've ignored the counsel that would serve you best.

Mothers don't command, they suggest, they connect people of complementary interests. This is a role that does things unofficially, and therefore directly, with less fuss. In this, Mothers are similar to Harpies at a court, and overlap is common. Similar to their mortal counterparts, Mothers are at the center of their "family" — meaning, their Circle. They see themselves as the day-to-day maintainers of their religion, and they perform (or more often, parcel out) "chores" in order to keep things running smoothly. Of course, for vampires, a chore may be far more involved and distasteful than running down to the grocery store for a quart of milk. A chore could mean putting rivals outside the covenant in political check, or giving them so much other trouble that they can't rally against the Circle or killing them. A chore could mean finding a victim for a struggling Fool, or several for a festival or an entirely new source of them. A chore could mean patching some holes in a Chorus member's roof, or finding her a whole new

haven or making sure there are no complications from mortals when a new ritual garden is getting planted.

MYTHOLOGICAL EXAMPLES

The Greek Hera is a mother close to the Circle mold, in many ways. Rarely does Hera act directly. Instead, she meddles. While Circle Mothers might take exception to the word 'meddle,' it's a pretty fair term for applying unofficial power and purely emotional pressure. The patroness of only one great quest, Hera certainly did a great deal to push the Argonauts to success. More often, she appears as an antagonist to Hercules the Outsider, and antagonism between the Mother who tends the collective and the Hero who makes his own way in the wilderness is a drama that plays nightly in Circle domains worldwide.

In Eastern myth, Kalikamata is the Dark Earth Mother of the Hindus. A bloody goddess of both birth and death, her worshippers in the Circle pursue creation and tribulation with such terrifying intensity that they often see no difference at all between the two sides.

EXPECTATIONS

Mothers arrange without dictating. There is almost an inverse relationship between how much actual power or authority a Mother has, and how much indirect influence she wields. Mothers can be comforting, even as they manipulate those who seek advice from them. Often Mothers do this with good advice, since that's the kind that keeps people coming back for more.

Mothers operate by consensus, giving in to it often but, through their contribution, having input. When everyone but one Mother agrees that negotiating with the Lancea Sanctum is a waste of time, that Mother most likely withdraws her objections and goes along. But if the Lancea Sanctum situation changes, everyone remembers that it was Mother Neldon who had a different view, and if change is thrust upon them, Mother Neldon is the midwife of that change.

Mothers often have close relationships to Maidens and Fools, who are the Kindred most likely to benefit from maternal advice and who are, in turn, the ones most likely to restore the Mother's balance between wanting what's best for the Circle and wanting to maintain at least some level of human-like moral function. Mothers remind the young that they are monsters. The young remind the Mothers of their human side. It's a good exchange.

Scarlet Women and Outsiders, on the other hand, are expected by role to resist being shaped and molded by maternity. Often the act of murder that brings the Whore or Hero title is seen as a defiance of motherly nurture (even if the motherly nurture in the Circle is murderous). The Mother may manipulate free-spirited Acolytes, but often by using this expectation of resistance.

On the other hand, just because Mavra is a Mother and Jean is a Scarlet Woman, there's no rule that they

can't get along, work together and share a coterie. For most Acolytes, personal interaction as individuals trumps the expectations of archetypal roles. Nevertheless, the expectations are always exerting their constant pressure in the background, even if Jean and Mavra say and even believe that they're friends and equals.

All the above is mainly true for Mothers of mid-to-high Covenant Status — say the •• to ••••• range. Low Status Mothers may, just as unwed or unfit mothers in the mortal world, be regarded with suspicion, pity or contempt. A vampire who sires outside the Circle and then joins it late in her Requiem had better exhibit humility about her previous behavior, because the Circle believes it has a monopoly on the right reasons and ways to Embrace. A neonate or Chorus member who passes on the curse is seen as acting above her station or putting on airs: she's trying to artificially force a social relationship into existence instead of organically growing the Circle when the time is right. Rushing into Motherhood is as despised among vampires as among mortals.

THE FATHER

Lawgiver, punisher, authority figure — the Father, or Patriarch, is all these things. He is experienced, he's been there first, he knows how the world works and he has developed a set of bedrock principles for dealing with it. He made you. He can break you.

Father gods often create the universe, as Odin did from the body of the murdered giant Ymir, or Marduk did from the slain monster Ti'amat. Acolyte Patriarchs note well that these founders built upon corpses.

Where the Mother accepts you as you are and puts the best interpretation on everything you do, the Father challenges you and demands that you live up to your potential. Kindred sires of both genders tend to resemble the paternal stereotype more than the maternal one, of course. For every vampire who sires out of sentiment, there are five whose plan is to create a useful and eternal servant, aide or companion. Rarest of all are those Kindred who meld the two drives, those who Embrace from a powerful emotional need *and* from a solid estimation of ability and accomplishment.

The stereotypical Mother gives the Embrace to her mortal son or sister or spouse, because she loves them and wants to spend eternity with them (even if it means selfishly damning them to half-death). The stereotypical Father picks an elite achiever with skills, position or abilities that complement the Father's needs. He wants someone to make his Requiem easier, or, even better, someone who can enhance his own power.

Only rarely does someone with such desirable attributes happen to be someone the Father loves. More often, the love of the Father blinds him to flaws and weaknesses, so that he is eternally disappointed that his childe doesn't live up to expectations.

Dispassionate structuring is at the core of this role, and because of this, Fathers gravitate to formal positions of authority, both within the covenant and within larger Kindred society. Where an Outsider might get wholehearted support from his fellow Acolytes as a Hound, they instinctively turn to a Father when seeking a Sheriff.

Fathers set formal guidelines for behavior, expecting all to meet them without exception. The letter of the law is most rigid for Fathers themselves, as is its spirit. It's tolerable for a Hero to play by his own rules, or for a Mother to decide that minor violations are best hushed up, and warping the intent of strictures is what Fools and Tricksters do best, but there's no wiggle room for the Patriarch. The standard he sets is strictest for him.

MYTHOLOGICAL EXAMPLES

Father gods are often sky gods, and those Acolytes who believe that human worship is almost entirely metaphor (though metaphor with genuine power behind it) point out that a child in his crib looks up and sees his father as a bearded face far above him. Thus the various Fathers of the world are bearded faces in the sky, taking advantage of their high perspective to bring order to the world below. Adad, the Akkadian Lord of Abundance, is one such sky-father, standing above the world and bringing life-giving rain so that the earth can flower and fruit. But Adad is not universally forgiving or benevolent: his myth cycle tells of him creating a great and destructive flood to punish humanity (a narrative common to many Middle Eastern religions).

Baal is a darker father god from the region. Similar to Adad, Baal embodies masculine fertility, but his myths also include the sacrifice of children to him in a fiery furnace. Some Acolytes call the sacrifice a Christian slander, but many more pursue it as a legitimate sign of fealty. Sometimes symbolic, the sacrifice is more often literal. Furthermore, Baal-worshipping Kindred are far more likely to regard their own childer as devices expressly created for the good of the sire (and, by extension, the covenant and clan). These hardcore servants of Baal regard Western secular notions of individual rights, freedom and dignity as impractical liberal fantasies.

EXPECTATIONS

Patriarchs make the rules and set the laws in place over themselves and others. Patriarchs are both legislators and executives, most often recognized through some formal structure that may be elected and democratic, or acceptance through mystic ritual or simple despotism by power.

Fathers declare what is expected and often are the formal face of the Circle to other covenants. The higher the Father's Status, the more authority he possesses and the more discretion he has to judge and punish those who

violate covenant law. Status 0 to • Fathers are, just as Mothers, seen as pushy and untrustworthy: before they've even got their own house in order (by properly understanding the faith of the Circle) they're giving a corrupt Embrace to others and, most likely, mis-educating them about what it means to be dark spirits of the night.

With Status •• to •••, a Father is respected. The law-giving authority of the covenant (whatever form it takes in a particular domain) seeks out his input on matters that touch upon his expertise, and if he volunteers an opinion on any point of law, it's listened to with respect.

By Status •••• to •••••, the Patriarch is truly guiding the covenant. Not only is his voice heard on subjects of stricture and formal law, his opinion is expected. Governing the Acolytes and interpreting local rules take up a formidable amount of his time, and balancing grievances almost certainly takes up much of his nights.

Regardless of Status, fairness is expected of Patriarchs. Unlike the selfish Hero and Fool, Fathers are expected to look to the interests of the Circle first, even sacrificing their own perquisites if needed. The higher the Father's Status, the more icy impartiality is expected.

THE CRONE

The covenant's namesake is a rare and potent role, one regarded with proper fear and awe. The Mother and Father create and build, the Maiden purifies and the Fool agitates. The Hero defends, often unwillingly or unwittingly. The Scarlet Woman is independent and, in that, is perhaps the Circle's most profound reason to exist.

The Crone ends.

At the end of all roads, the Crone awaits, her shears sharpened to sever the ties to life. When your time has come, the Crone takes your hand, closes your eyes and, if need be, slits your throat. The Crone is decay, the final transition, the keeper of the ultimate door, the guardian at the crossroads where life meets death.

The technical definition of "Crone" in many domains is any female Acolyte whose blood is so potent that she can no longer feed off mortals and must, instead, prey on the undead. In this, she is seen as having finally cut her own ties to breathing humanity. She is now purely a creature of death.

This sounds grim, and it is, but death is not quite as feared by many pantheons, and vampires in particular regard it as something less than a permanent cessation. Gods enter the realm of death and are challenged, but they can emerge again, stronger. The Crone often serves as that challenge, determining who is worthy of further operating on the living, and who deserves to fall into final stillness.

The judgment and destruction often happens on an individual basis, but Crones also root out heresy (sometimes

even religions approved by Fathers), Crones act against the enemies of the covenant and Crones strike against those they perceive as traitors to the Circle. Not all treachery is intentional: Crones prune the garden of the well-meaning but incompetent as well as the truly motivated backstabbers. Crones care little for intention: their view is the perspective of centuries.

MYTHOLOGICAL EXAMPLES

Ammit, the Egyptian Devourer of the Dead, serves as a particularly bestial Crone figure. In the myth, the souls of the dead are weighed against a feather and those that are unworthy are sent to Ammit for utter consumption. The uncomfortable resemblance to diablerie is left unstated in most Circle litanies and theological treatises, but very few who understand anything about Amaranth miss the connection that the eater of the dead performs the very action that pushes a Kindred beyond mortal provender.

The eldest of the Greek Fates is a good fit as well. The Fates are lovely young Clotho (who spins the thread from which a human's experience is made) older Lachesis (who determines how long each given thread should be) and ancient Atropos (who severs the thread when it's done). Parallels for the younger Fates are a matter of some debate among Acolytes inclined to follow Greek mystery cults. Some Acolytes liken Clotho to the Maiden, because she's young and because her purpose is to refine. Others link her to the Mother because the Mother is the great creator and originators. On the other hand, the Mother is a good fit for Lachesis, not just from the physical description but because the role of determiner of action fits a matriarchal role. Then again, a Scarlet Woman is typically older than a Maiden, and it's not uncommon for a Scarlet Woman to seize control of a life, or pick a time for it to end. Atropos is definitely the Crone though, as she not only determines the end but executes it.

EXPECTATIONS

People expect Crones to be scary as hell, which can be a good thing when one is keeping the other covenants in line. It's less comforting when a given Crone has very particular ideas about which god is the One True and is murderously intolerant of divergence. That's atypical of the Circle, but sometimes happens. When such a disagreement comes, these cult wars typically end with internal schism. On one side are Mothers and Fathers who seek ecumenical tolerance because it's the core of the covenant. On the other side lie the arrogant Crone, any who follow her intolerant creed and any who obey her because she's a terrifying elder. In between, there are typically an array of Whores and Heroes to tip the balance, along with Fools and Maidens to be trampled or despoiled.

Crones who tear the covenant asunder through cult wars are fortunately rare. Most Crones isolate themselves



(when they don't need to feed), taking their tithe and confining any rampages, sprees and pogroms to targets outside the Circle. As with every role, Status plays a large part in determining a given Crone's function in her domain.

Status 0 to • Crones are unheard-of. One simply does not get that old and powerful within the Circle without developing Status. Hypothetically, a Status 0 Crone would be one who had spent most of her Requiem in another covenant and who was a known diablerist. After conversion, she would have low Status simply because everyone would be terrified, suspicious and evasive.

Status •• to ••• Crones aren't common either. Typically, they're the ones who hold themselves aloof from the Danse Macabre and don't pay much attention to Circle politics, either. They're on their own path, pursuing Golconda or union with Baphomet or some form of dark apotheosis. This leaves them little time to worry about petty strictures, either from their co-congregants or from some civil vampire authority. These Crones interact to feed, either seizing what they want by force, exacting tithes with the threat of reprisal or by offering something in exchange. Usually they trade in knowledge of Crúac, Disciplines, Devotions or other occult esoterica. Then again, they might be willing to murder out tough opponents in return for a blood payment.

Status •••• to ••••• Crones are not only feared, but respected. Their word of caution can balk even the most ardent Acolyte's action, and a gesture of favor can mobilize all but the most slothful. Commands are hardly ever needed.

The most powerful Crones tend to exert influence subtly and over long spans of time. They prefer to pluck the sprout, rather than saw down the oak. If they've been in place a long time, their cities are gardens arranged for the Crone's delight, a natural-seeming structure whose gently grown patterns are invisible to any who don't take the long, long view. Of course, even the most carefully tended plot can suffer an unexpected illness or infestation of pests. That's when the gardener must be a bit more active. But when a Crone becomes active to protect her crop, the crop fights alongside her.

THE HERMIT

The female Acolyte elder who has gotten too potent to feed from humans is a Crone, charged with seeking out and terminating anyone whose further existence threatens the covenant. A male Acolyte of the same potency takes a far different role: he becomes the Hermit, the guardian of wisdom, aloof and alone save for those who seek his instruction.

The expectation is that Hermits feed themselves from voluntary offerings. That is, when an Acolyte wants to learn an esoteric Devotion or some mostly forgotten

Crúac ritual, he makes a pilgrimage to a Hermit and begs for instruction. In return, the Hermit demands a blood sacrifice, the student's own precious Vitae, often over a long time and in great quantities. Most often this is done with Blood Price but some Hermits feed directly, relying on the power of their blood to keep them from the Vinculum. As with Crones, some Hermits may feel that the development of a Vinculum is a sign directing them toward deeper involvement with the covenant. (It must be said that even those who accept a degree of blood slavery as a meaningful trial rarely allow it to progress past its mildest and most temporary form.)

A little math, of course, shows that relying solely on Discipline and ritual instruction is going to leave a Hermit dangerously starved. After all, there are many Crúac rites, many Devotions, and a neonate or ancilla is only going to indebt himself to a Hermit for those he can get no other way.

There are two ways Hermits handle this. Some simply content themselves to long periods of torpor until a student wakes them with blood and a petition. Less tranquil Hermits extend their knowledge from the esoteric to the practical.

Their means vary by inclination. Some blanket their cities with enthralled animals and tease out the secrets hidden to all but a rat's-eye view. Some Hermits query knowledgeable mortals (ghouls, private eyes, cops and journalists — or all of the above) and some Hermits speak with those innocent of the Kindred demimonde. Some Hermits question their mortals subtly, and some with brutal directness. Other Hermits ignore living individuals and use their age and experience to liaison with enchanters, spirits and the other strange creatures of the world's occult diversity.

The most common creatures for the Hermits' dialogues are, of course, other Hermits. In days past, Disciplines and Devotions were the reliable methods of instantly communicating between cities. Now it's more likely to be a telephone call. Whatever the method, many Hermits communicate with one another. They keep this fact secret, of course. Their knowledge of distant cities is more impressive when its source is concealed, and they've got a mystique of isolation to maintain.

MYTHOLOGICAL EXAMPLES

Odin, god of war and wisdom, impaled himself on the World Tree to gain knowledge of magical runes used for divination. He often wandered the world, apart from the company of the other gods, in order to seek out a ground's-eye view of the mortal realm. Furthermore, his two crows Hugin and Munin served as his spies from the air, reporting deeds of virtue and wickedness.

The Kindred parallels are clear, even if their exact meaning is open to much debate. For instance, vampires who've been staked into torpor can give a sympathetic

shudder at the thought of enduring wooden torment voluntarily. But by the same token, many believe nothing of value can come from staking's attendant nightmares. As for the crows, any Ventrue or Gangrel can easily relate to the use of animal familiars, while possessing the knowledge to view the future or distant places sounds a bit like the arts of the Mekhet. Most importantly, Odin was a blood god, prayed to with sacrifice. That alone endears him to the Acolytes.

The Hittite disappearing god Telepinu is another anchorite from ancient religion. Once a fertility god, he becomes wearied by the world and leaves his duties, choosing instead to sleep in the earth. This causes the first winter. The Acolytes parallel this with an elder who, too potent to feed from mere mortals, divorces himself from the living world and passes into torpor. Telepinu is awakened by the mother goddess Hannahanna — doing what Mothers do, she is attempting to alter events for the good of the community. She sends a bee to find Telepinu, and the bee stings the slumbering god awake. Enraged by the pain of being awakened, Telepinu runs amok and slaughters men and livestock alike. His worshippers (who are few) point out that after slumber, elder Kindred can often feed on lesser beings again, and claim that they can do this because of their emulation of Telepinu. His worshippers also point out that this story teaches a valuable lesson about awakening old vampires.

EXPECTATIONS

Hermits are expected to be there, know things and not give that knowledge away cheap. Unpacking that a bit, there's an expectation that these elders will be dignified and somewhat static: Hermits aren't known for roaming around and pursuing their agendas through direct action. (That's the Hero's task, and there's a longstanding tradition of Heroes getting bound or tricked into carrying out a Hermit's master plan.) Similar to a library, a Hermit is expected to be available to those who travel to his location. Also similar to a library, a Hermit is not expected to be summoned by someone.

The knowledge the Hermit possesses determines his Status with the covenant. There are few Status 0 to • Hermits simply because it is very hard to reach the high Blood Potency the role requires without learning something — without, in fact, learning a hell of a lot. Those whose knowledge is rarified, specialized and irrelevant to most Acolytes — say, an apiary expert, or a student of Franco-Asian political history or a master of origami and flower arranging — have Status ••. Status ••• represents mundane or occult knowledge that is highly sought. This is the Status for masters of Fighting Styles, Disciplines and powerful Crúac.

Status •••• and ••••• are reserved for those who not only know the skills of power, but who can also tell you which stocks to buy, or who's going to win the Super Bowl

(or the next Senate race) or exactly why that werewolf pack gets so antsy whenever anybody comes close to the decommissioned Air Force base. Low Status Hermits know what you don't care about. Medium Status Hermits can teach you what you want. High Status Hermits know information vital to the covenant.

That said, the Hermit is not a charitable archetype. (If it was, it would hold little appeal for many vampires.) The supplicant's need for information or instruction matters far less to the Hermit than price. If you can't afford it, you can't have it because you don't really deserve it. (Depending on the commodity, of course, the Hermit may not even be open to dealing with followers of other covenants. By the same token, they may not be aware he exists). Fortunately, most Acolytes can get mortal blood far more easily than a Hermit can get Kindred blood. Thus, the wisdom is passed on at a price that ensures that the wisdom remains precious and treasured.

THE SPIRIT WORLD

For many Acolytes, the spirit world represents a place of hidden power. Some believe the spirit world lies in an Other World — i.e., a place (as in Celtic myth) that lies quite literally away from this world, and where the gods and spirits reside. Many Acolytes accept instead that the spirit world is a place overlaid upon our own reality. In that view, tangible beings co-exist with the non-corporeal powers, be they gods, spirits, fey beings or ghosts. Few Acolytes dismiss the spirits and their realm outright. Below is an exploration of how the Acolytes might view spirits, and what that means for specific cults.

PERCEPTIONS

How an Acolyte views spirits helps define her worship. Are spirits weak and obsequious? Strong and dominant? Are spirits gods, or are gods just spirits? What follows are various explorations of spirits and the myriad perspectives available to Acolytes.

ANIMISM VERSUS PANTHEISM

Many Acolytes assume an animistic worldview. Animism accepts that the world is alive with spirits. Most, if not all, things have souls: trees, chairs, clouds, dogs, *anything*. Some vampires accept a limited animism, where only certain things have souls — or, at least, only some souls are worth interest. These Acolytes might look to the celestial bodies and infuse them with personality and accept that the heavenly items are spirits watching down. Other Acolytes might limit their beliefs to things of nature: a tree has a soul, an airplane does not. Some within the covenant refuse to limit their animistic perceptions, thus accepting that all things in heaven and earth are mirrored by or filled with spirits. (The majority of cultists tend to fall somewhere in the middle — they accept that most natural things have spirits, as do items

that have been infused with merit and meaning by owners. Lesser things are not worthy of notice. A video game, for instance, does not possess a spirit.)

A similar but separate perspective is a pantheistic worldview. In this outlook, all things possess *one* spirit. This spirit is universal. It may be identified as Mother Nature or the God of All Things, or may be more specific (“All things possess a splinter of Inanna’s soul”). This view doesn’t leave room for various spirits or souls. The world has one soul split into many parts. Few Acolytes accept a pantheistic paradigm, but it does happen.

GODS BIG AND SMALL

How does an Acolyte place herself in the Great Chain of Being? Above spirits, or below them? Some believe spirits are small, trifling creatures. In whatever cosmic hierarchy exists, spirits are therefore lesser beings. Acolytes might perceive them as unintelligent and ephemeral automatons, or may feel that spirits possess only baser emotions (vanity, cruelty, brutality). They are essentially “small gods” — the spirit of a chair or even a mountain may have some power, but pales in comparison to a true god, or even the vampire herself.

Not all cults feel that way. Many believe themselves subservient to spirits, or at least further down the totem pole. To these cults, spirits are more powerful and not to be played with. They are dangerous, nearly on par with gods, if not gods themselves. Drawing the attention of the spirits may be necessary to complete a ritual or receive their favor, but it can also be a terrible bane.

The spirits, in this mindset, act according to a tangle of byzantine and therefore unknowable laws. Entering into their game without understanding the rules is a way toward madness — though for some, it is a way toward power, as well. Stories persist of Acolytes kidnapped by spirits or possessed by them. When the Acolytes return to the natural world (or more importantly, *if* they return), they are often capable of bizarre new talents — and also end up hosting a handful of derangements inside their broken minds.

While it’s true that most Acolytes either believe in the old gods or end up “becoming” deities themselves, some Acolytes eschew the concept of gods altogether. The Acolytes who do tend to believe only in spirits. “God” becomes an irrelevant term, when “spirit” as a categorization suffices.

Those Acolytes who maintain this view tend to have reverence for all things, not just those that fit in the purview of a specific pantheon. These Acolytes make offers and sacrifices not to old gods but to everyday objects — to make a car move faster, the Acolyte might drizzle her Vitae upon the searing hot engine. She may speak to trees, asking for their respect. All things, from a blade of grass to a hurricane, have souls and must be treated properly to maintain balance. For these Acolytes, gods are meaningless.

ASK VERSUS DEMAND

The Circle of the Crone expressly accepts magic. Magic does not equate to parlor tricks or prestidigitation, but instead amounts to controlling the world and all that lies within it. To the Acolytes, all vampires should believe in magic (though many don't call it that, and this galls most Acolytes). The question for cultists inside the covenant is, how does one truly practice magic?

The question is ultimately related, again, to where the Acolyte puts herself in relation to spirits. Some Acolytes believe that magic (be it Crúac or simple superstitious rituals such as throwing salt over one's shoulder) comes from controlling spirits. Rituals work because they force the spirits to act in accordance with the vampire's wishes. The Acolyte demands, and the spirit acts.

The other view is that one must *implore* the spirits for their favor. Forcing the issue, or demanding from them, is a path to ruin. The spirits curse those who arrogantly think to command them. Ask, and ye shall receive. Acolytes who accept this notion tend to be gentler and more obsequious when dealing with spirits or gods. These Acolytes may leave out bowls of blood for fey entities. The Acolytes might also treat their beloved pets (animal or human) as well as they can, accepting that even lesser beings are lorded over by an invisible pantheon. Why risk upsetting the hidden spirits?

SHALLOW DEPTHS

Very few Acolytes understand the truth about spirits, no matter what the Kindred's opinions are. Acolytes likely know more than members of other covenants, yes, but that doesn't make the Acolytes an authoritative resource. Even the werewolves and mages don't know the full story, and the Acolytes only know a fraction of what those other creatures do. These Kindred do not have a full picture of the spirit world — it's as if they're peering through a keyhole and trying to describe the room beyond. They may think themselves experts. They are usually wrong.

Thematically, this is appropriate. Spirits are living beings with fickle souls. Vampires, while eternal, are ultimately dead. They are hence barred from dealing too closely with spirits because of the Kindred's own perceived soullessness. The only way they can truly deal with spirits is through blood. A vampire's Vitae is the one thing that contains both an honest spark of life and the essence of magic. Both are elements for which most spirits hunger.

TOTEMISM

Sometimes, a cult or coterie will identify itself with a particular animal or thing. This thing is symbolic; it is a

totem with which the group identifies. Some accept that this is *only* symbolic. A cult that claims the coyote as its totem does so because its members are clever scavengers, hard to see and harder to catch. But the comparison ends there — the Acolytes do not literally believe themselves spiritually tied to the animal. It is an association in name and image, nothing more.

Some cults, however, take this to the next step and assume that their totems are literally spirits that have infused the Acolytes with their natures. The Acolytes above would believe that Coyote — i.e., the presiding spirit or the metaphysical ideal of the animal — has literally blessed them with his qualities. Most of their worship would go toward him, as a powerful spirit. They perform blood magic in his name. Unusual occurrences and coincidences are given greater meaning by assuming Coyote is responsible. The shamanic Acolytes begin to further exemplify the traits of their totem animal: wiliness, trickery, stealth.

Is this because they are truly given to a spirit animal? Most of the time, no. The cult certainly thinks so, and cult members can point to any amount of so-called evidence to prove it. ("A coyote ran out in front of the car on the highway, and up ahead was an ambush. We have been blessed yet again by our totem.")

From time to time, however, a coterie or cult does possess a totem animal, though the reality is that the spirit possesses *the cult members*. This is rarely a symbiotic relationship. Vampires who give themselves to a totem spirit act as though under heavy Vinculum, bound to the invisible entity, addicted to its rare presence. Those under the totem's sway seem confused, broken, often gaining at least one severe derangement. This relationship is not without benefit — the Acolytes gain unusual and unexpected abilities and can seemingly modify their physical forms in ways to mirror that of the totem spirit's nature — but many would suggest that the reward does not match the cost.

THE POSSESSED

The Acolytes have seen them: mortals wandering in the darkness, mumbling in tongues and holding arms outstretched and asking for worship. Sometimes they look like everybody else (though often filthy and disheveled). Other times they truly look — *different*. One's mouth might be a nest of dog's teeth. Another might have a third eye on the back of his neck or fingernails made of brittle shale. These are the possessed: people whose souls have been subsumed by primeval spirits.

Few Acolytes recognize that reality, of course. Many Acolytes dismiss the possessed as mad monsters, lost to the darkness. Not all Acolytes are content with that easy answer, and have attempted communication. What comes from those conversations is clear: these are people possessed by *something*. Sometimes the spirit knows what it

is and what it wants. Other times it cannot pry itself from the tangle of the human's thoughts and remains perplexed as to the spirit's nature and design.

Those who have encountered the spirit-possessed tend to fall into one of three opinions regarding them:

They are emissaries from the spirit world. They have secrets to teach and lessons to impart. They should be treated well (for some, even worshipped) because they bear the touch of the spirits and the gods. Wise Acolytes approach the possessed with caution. Not all Acolytes are wise.

They are emissaries from enemy gods or are themselves adversaries to the gods. They have crossed over unnaturally and are on par with dangerous tumors. Acolytes who feel this way tend to do their own gods and spirits favor by seeking out such beings and destroying them.

They are madmen with foolish spirits trapped inside. They can be dismissed, destroyed, toyed with or set loose upon one's enemies. The possessed don't matter. They're an amusement and curiosity (albeit dangerous). Some Acolytes whittle away the hours of their Requiems by playing cruel games upon these lost souls.

One New York cult, however, has a practice of enthralling the spirit-possessed. The Acolytes capture these creatures (culled from the ever-burgeoning homeless population) and enslave them with the power of blood and will. In some cases, it doesn't always work (the beings seem sometimes incapable of being bound in this way), but when it does, it guarantees that the vampires have a small army of spirit-possessed madmen at the cult's beck and call. With this, the cult plans to make a move for greater power in a city where the cult members have often been treated poorly.

SPIRIT CULTS

Below are a few cults within the Circle of the Crone that maintain interest and worship in both spirits and the spirit world. These groups can be dropped into a game as flavor or as full-fledged entities.

The Raw Gums Gang

American Indian myth is full of cannibal spirits, and Raw Gums is one of them. Raw Gums, in Arapaho legend, is a cannibal infant. His family and tribe found him every morning with scraps of skin and meat between his teeth, because at night he would crawl forth from his cradle and eat men from nearby villages. The family and village packed up while Raw Gums was sleeping and moved away, leaving him alone.

The Raw Gums Gang — a mean cadre of vampire truckers who prowl the disconnected straits of old Route 66 — venerate this infant spirit. They believe that, as vampires, they are children of Raw Gums. They feed on human flesh at night, and the village (i.e., the rest of humanity) has left them behind because of it. They



don't attempt to improve the nature of their souls: they are cannibals and they accept it. They offer Raw Gums bits of those they kill, and perform unprecedented blood rituals in his name.

Sometimes, they claim, he comes to them while they sleep during the day, and he eats a small part of their hearts. When their hearts are all eaten up, they will be truly indestructible.

The Asura Bhutas

One philosophy left its original land of India and has, over the centuries, bled into the beliefs of many Circle coteries. This belief — independent of faith in particular gods — says that spirits were the progenitors of the vampire “race.” Once upon a time, a man was on the verge of death and he was possessed by a spirit of hunger, and vampires were born. Any time the man would bite another and drink his soul, the man would replace part of that soul with a new spirit. Followers of this philosophy accept that all vampires are half-human, half-spirit.

One can guess at the spirit's provenance — a lean man with sharp cheekbones and a cruel wit may purportedly be possessed by the spirit of a razor. A woman of round, white flesh and limitless wisdom might be half a spirit of the moon, or perhaps an owl. The Acolytes who follow this system of belief have no concretized way of determine what spirit resides in whom — each vampire is given to his own ideas on the subject, and is free to act in accordance with his supposed spirit.

The name of the philosophy comes from an amalgamation of two Hindu terms: *asuras*, which are the evil spirits that tested the gods, and *bhutas*, which were the ghosts of those who died unnatural deaths.

The Shadowed Ones

From the shadows, they struck. The Acolytes of Colorado Springs, numbering 13, no longer wished to be the lashed to the whipping post by the ruling Kindred. The cultists had for a long time considered themselves healers, wise men and wise women, but these positions had earned them nothing but scorn and scraps. And so, they adapted their views and welcomed a new deity into their worship: Scathach, the Shadowy One.

They began to receive messages and whispers from the darkness, a susurrus breathing secrets about their true power. Scathach gave them the right to do as they wish. She told them that the world was full of spirits, alive with souls, and that it was *their* proper due to lord over these spirits. That destiny elevated them above all the other Kindred, who were blind in their Damnation. The Shadowed Ones burned animals and sacred objects in sacrifice to the old witch, commanding the spirits freed from their physical vessels to serve the Acolytes in the darkness.

One year ago, the Acolytes of this city swept through it like a fire. Their mastery of the spirits (revealed as strange,

almost alien Crúac rituals) allowed the Acolytes to easily storm the halls of power. Those who bowed could take their places alongside the invisible spirits — as servants. Those who refused obeisance were cast into the darkness of torpor — or given Final Death.

TIMES OF REMEMBRANCE

Kindred have a long span in which to remember, but recollections cruelly twisted or truncated by their very nature. It's one more cruel irony of the Requiem: they remember so much, and recall so little.

The Circle of the Crone, as the oldest covenant, looks back more than any other. Sometimes this recollection takes the form of artifacts, scrolls or artwork dating back to the ancient world. Far more often, recollection is in the form of oral history and repeated ritual. The most common rituals are tied to yearly dates, the better to ensure their retention.

HOLY NIGHTS OF THE COVENANT

For a covenant known for individuality, even to the point of idiosyncrasy, the Circle of the Crone has more observed holidays than any other, except possibly the Lancea Sanctum. Indeed, both the spiritual covenants can, with little stretching, find a night sacred (or profane) to some Kindred saint, angel, goddess or devil, or some event significant to church or sect history, for all 365 nights of the year plus Leap Day Eve. Most of these are minor festivals, observed only by the fearfully devout or by those dedicated to one particular sub-sub-cult. There are, however, some festivals that almost every Acolyte observes, whether the central deity in her pantheon is Odin, Palden Lhamo or the Acolyte herself.

THE WINTER SOLSTICE

Winter is cold and dark, and attended by the slumber — the seeming death — of all nature. This is the perfect time for Kindred.

Nights are long and none longer than the Winter Solstice, late December, when the earth and all undead upon it are farthest from their oldest foe, the sun. It is traditionally a time of triumph for the elders of the Circle, those who have slept through the most assaults of ever-angry day, the wizened and wise who can no longer feed on the blood of mere mortals, those reputed to dine on viands darker than even Vitae. The Solstice is the night of the Crone.

It's no coincidence that the Winnowing happens in such close proximity to the Winter Solstice. The confrontation with wisdom and the urge to cast aside all that is false, base and illusory is a perfect compliment to a celebration of those who have survived the longest and who are usually, almost by necessity, the most alienated from human mores. In some domains, the Winnowing occurs before the Solstice.

Often the elders of those areas declare that the Vitae of the young is all the sweeter when it is closer to the heart, closest to the last precious dram held in their veins. In other areas, the Winnowing is always after the Solstice, serving as a personal conclusion to a season that moves the Acolyte's attention from the community of his fellow Acolytes into his own failures and triumphs.

While there are many flavors of the veneration offered, some common threads are nearly universal. (Indeed, the repeated elements are so nearly attuned that many give credence to the notion that Crones in torpor contact a patron figure who instructs them in her proper celebration.)

First, there's a ritualized performance that depicts the progress of the seasons as a metaphor for the progress of an Acolyte. The performance begins with two figures flirting in a bower of spring blossoms. (In these modern nights of hothouses, fresh flowers are easily bought. In the past, substitutes included everything from paintings and tapestries to silk and paper flowers to blooms of skin crafted from live creatures with a virtuoso mix of speed and artistry. Some domains stick to the old traditions.) The Maiden wears white garments and a mask of unlined, smiling innocence. The Fool wears green, has bells on his shoes and a feather in his cap, and his mask's grin is blank to the point of idiocy. He pursues her clumsily, and she's tempted, but a woman in black with a deeply wrinkled mask of frowns warns her away, and a man with similar features and garb frightens off the Fool.

The second act begins with a brutal sun rising in the sky (typically a cauldron of fire, sometimes one designed to slosh alarmingly over cast and audience alike). From one wing of the stage stalks the Hero, his mask handsome but stern, often clad in armor and bearing a sword. A pair or trio of armed and unmasked mortals rush forth and do battle. (Sometimes they're Dominated, but more often it's just been made very clear to them that their only hope of survival is to kill the Hero. In some very rare cases, they do, in which case they're typically released and placed under the perpetual protection of those elders being honored. Still, it's a bad omen for the Hero to die.) Meanwhile, on the other side of the stage, the Scarlet Woman steps forth, long hair untied, wearing a mask of seductive beauty and clad in scarlet (if she wears anything). A mortal is enticed into her arms (usually with Majesty, but in domains where no actresses possess that power a mortal can be Dominated or simply conditioned through vitae addiction and Vinculum) and devoured (sometimes after or during coitus, sometimes instead of it). When both the Hero and Scarlet Woman have completed their feasts, they fall upon one another. Both intercourse and blood tasting are enacted: one or the other may be simulated, or neither or both.

The third act is autumn, when the Mother steps forth clad in a robe of brilliant reds and golds, greatly pregnant and bearing a mask with a serene smile of contentment.

The stern-visaged Father in gray or blue meets her mid-stage and clasps her hands. Her mask changes (often through showy stage-craft) into a face contorted with agony, and with an explosion of blood from beneath her skirt, out swarms a legion of vermin — snakes, rats, spiders, bats, multitudes of crawling and flying insects. (This is often considered the climax of the play, and is greeted with wild applause.)

The final act opens with the dark clad elder figures from the first scene sitting on icy thrones. They sit, motionless and silent, for anywhere from 10 minutes to a full hour. (Anyone in the audience who moves during this time is guilty of a tremendous breach of etiquette.) At last, the figures stand and walk slowly to one side of the stage, where a Fool woos a Maiden. The Crone advises her while the Hermit frightens him, and the cycle ends where it started.

When the performance is complete, there are blood offerings to the great ones. Almost always, the oldest male and female vampires in the Circle play the roles of the Crone and Hermit, and they go directly from their performance to officiating at this next segment.

For the spirits, there is an animal or (more rarely) human sacrifice. Typically, every Kindred who can still feed from mortals offers a drink to each elder of the covenant who no longer has that opportunity. In this one night, a truly ancient vampire could gain enough Vitae to last a month, or even longer if the domain has a huge Circle. (Usually, these elders protect themselves with the Willful Vitae ritual. Then again, some don't, feeling that a string of minor Vinculums is the perfect way to keep themselves relevant and involved in the covenant.)

All this, including the drama, is conducted with a minimum of speech. In some domains, there is music (either instrumental or choral), but the offering of blood to the elder Kindred is universally performed in absolute silence.

When it is done, all leave. None speak. What is there to say?

THE SPRING EQUINOX

In the spring, life bursts forth and the world is renewed. At the Vernal (or Spring) Equinox, days and nights are in balance, and the Kindred of the Circle celebrate their members who best balance Humanity and the Beast.

The female version of this figure is the Maiden, pure and innocent, a creature of unsullied potential. The male is the Fool, whose innocence takes on a somewhat different cast. While the Maiden is unblemished by experience, the Fool is someone who prefers his own counsel to the lessons of experience. Both are ignorant, but those who have yet to experience the full depths of the Kindred curse are often envied their ignorance.

On the Equinox, then, Acolytes attempt to reconnect to their lost humanity. This is overtly the focus of the

Equinox ceremony, which is held in a garden or a meadow or some other green place open to the sky. White drape is traditional, along with white flowers, and tall mirrors are often arrayed in a circle facing inward.

Kindred often shy away from reflections, but at this ceremony, all in attendance are expected to maintain their images, and to present their most lifelike appearance as well. (Those visibly disfigured often wear hoods or masks.) Mortal members of the Circle are included in the crowd, and the Spring Equinox is one of the rare ceremonies in which they are treated as equal to the Kindred.

Once the congregants are assembled, the oldest Maiden in the domain begins an invocation to the gods and goddesses of beauty and purity, whichever are honored in that place. A sacrifice of white roses and lilies is burned while praise-songs resound, and a flawless white heifer is ritually sanctified. Although never overtly stated, the songs and presentation are all calculated to remind those in attendance of their lost humanity. After the ceremony ends, the cow is led away for the delectation of the elders.

Spring Sanctification (• Crúac Ritual)

This rite is only performed by Maiden Acolytes, and can only be properly invoked on the night of the Spring Equinox. This rite works only on a flawless white heifer.

When the rite is successful, any Kindred who drinks the cow's blood may take nourishment from it, so long as the drinking does not kill the cow. Regardless of the drinker's Blood Potency, the Vitae is not only useful, but almost human in its flavor. The cow only retains this quality until dawn.

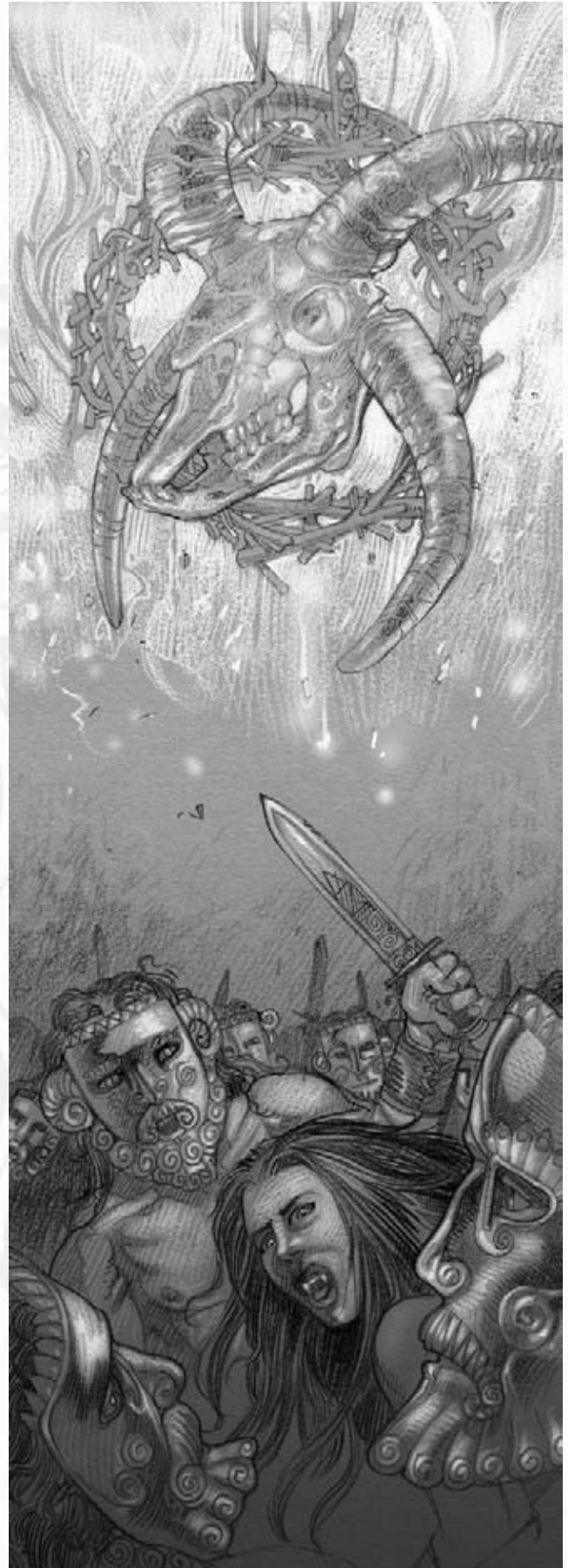
No individual can cast Spring Sanctification more than once per night.

THE SUMMER SOLSTICE

Summer might not lead one's thoughts to vampires. Summer is fun and tans and bikinis on the beach; it's sweat and picnics and baseball games. While Kindred have to eat just as much as at any other time, it's often a season when they lay low, almost instinctively taking it easy during the short nights and long hot days.

It is fitting that this least venerable of seasons holds the festival of the Acolytes' outsider roles, for the Summer Solstice is when the Scarlet Woman and the Hero have their chance to shine. The Summer Solstice is a festival, a bash, a dance, a party, a spectacle and an opportunity to get noticed.

This celebration on the informal end of the Acolyte ritual spectrum. In many domains, there's no overt religious element, not even an invocation to start things off. Instead, a place is selected, Acolytes show up some time after full dark and at some point music starts (anything from one guy with a boom box to a full orchestra, depending on who's footing the bill). This festival rarely



very organized, and often there's competing music from different parts of the house, forest or graveyard where the Summer Solstice is celebrated.

There are a number of hours of dancing and mingling, and this is when the feeding happens, too. (It's pretty much a BYO affair, though Heroes and Scarlet Women with large herds often flaunt them by bringing any members who'd be willing to give it up for complete strangers. Furthermore, given the preponderance of blood dolls and mortal Acolytes who attend, any Hunting rolls get a +3 bonus.) All of this drinking and dancing and jubilation are, in themselves, pretty worthwhile if you like that sort of thing. But from a larger perspective, it's all prelude to Declaration.

Declaration starts around one or two in the morning — right about the time that the excitement goes from unsullied enthusiasm and starts to take on a tinge of hysteria or desperation. The music stops, and Acolytes present stand up on a raised platform and begin to declare.

Declarations take the form of boasts about what the Acolytes intend to accomplish in the following year. Sometimes these boasts are carefully calculated displays of power and ambition, along the lines of "For the last hundred years, the Sheriff's been Invictus, but *this year* it's going to be an Acolyte. It's going to be me!" or "This year, I will succeed at a takeover of WLTL radio!" Other times, the brags are more along the lines of personal goals, everything from the profoundly shallow ("I promise, I'm going to seduce a married woman every week for a year!") to the deeply spiritual ("I'm going to go without feeding every Monday and Tuesday to demonstrate my devotion to Omecihuatl").

Similar to the dancing and frolicking, these displays are well and good and, depending on how they're handled, can result in gains and losses in reputation (and possibly the Status Merit). But they're still not what the festival is really about.

What the older guests (along with those Fathers, Mothers, Hermits and Crones who consider all this bravado inappropriate to their dignified positions) are watching for are spontaneous declarations — "I'm going to get closure with my mom while she's still alive!" or "I'm going to show those uppity Dragon shitbirds they can't mess with me!" Those promises, blurted out and ill-considered, are regarded as more significant, more honest and more meaningful because they came from somewhere deep and unreasoned, closer to the heart of the Man.

But most of all, the experienced watchers are hoping to see inspired declarations. Not "inspired" in the sense of "someone having a really good idea." "Inspired" in its old meaning. Inspired meaning that a spirit is speaking. At the Summer Solstice, the point is to lose yourself. Some become so thoroughly lost that something Other can find them.

It is a great honor to catch a spirit at the Summer Solstice, and many within the Circle are eager to help such a host in hopes of improving their own communications with the invisible world. Some good actors have feigned possession in order to manipulate their fellow Acolytes into supporting their mundane ambitions. Indeed, that may be more common than genuine contact. It's unheard-of for more than two spirits to take hosts at a Summer Solstice, and far more often none are able to take hosts at all.

The missions of these spirits range from the assassination of one particular mortal to the preservation and recovery of particular artifacts to alterations of the physical landscape at scales ranging from the vast to the negligible. (One possessed Acolyte convinced the local covenant to help him hound an entire Dragon coterie out of town, citing the will of the spirit world. In fact, all his rider wanted him to do was remove a metal door from a local synagogue and have it replaced with green-painted wood.)

Some of the spirits' tasks are dangerous, some trivial and most are inscrutable. But mounts who succeed are more likely to be contacted again, while those who fail almost never are.

Trance Possession

There are two ways to enter a state of trance possession during the Summer Solstice. The trance can be voluntary, or it can be against the vampire's will.

If the vampire is unwilling to become possessed, and a spirit wants to seize his body anyway, the Kindred rolls Resolve + Composure to resist. A single success keeps his mind free and his conscience in control. A vampire who wants to host a spirit at the Summer Solstice can roll Manipulation + Occult in an attempt to lure one in.

Whether the possession is desired or not, the weak spirits interested in this ritual can only truly control the vampire's corpse-body long enough to make a single pronouncement of intention. After that, the core personality returns, but the spirit is still tied to its new pawn and aware what happens to him. When the vampire is pursuing the spirit's goals, the spirit can offer one free Willpower point per session, and it can be added after the dice have hit the table. Only the Storyteller decides when the Willpower bonus kicks in, if ever. (The smarter spirits help out to save the skins of their proxies in the physical realm, of course.)

On the other hand, vampires with such a spirit who resist the spirit's call must make a Resolve + Composure roll to act directly against the mission. If the roll fails, the vampire loses a point of Willpower. If the vampire has no Willpower left, he is unable to carry out their act of sabotage.

Kindred carrying Solstice-called spirits are still in command of themselves to a very large degree and can pursue their own goals and ambitions without interference.

These Kindred are just expected to do the spirit's task in addition. Those who look at the auras of these "spirit mounts" see a double exposure of overlapping emotions — often with the vivid second set scribbled outside the outlines of the vampire's physical body.

THE AUTUMNAL EQUINOX

The Autumnal Equinox is sacred to the Mother and the Father, and just as the Spring Equinox, the Autumnal Equinox is regarded as a time of balance. But from the more experienced perspective of the parental archetypes, that doesn't make it a strong day for a vampire's ever-beleaguered humane spark. Instead, the balance of light and darkness makes the Autumn Equinox a time of transition, when bargains between the sides can be struck and when the walls between Day and Night, Right and Wrong, Life and Death are at their thinnest.

The Autumn Equinox occurs in three phases, broken up by what can only be termed intermissions. During these gaps in the ceremony, people often leave and show up, and this is expected. Not every element of the ritual is right for every Acolyte.

Equinox rites are conducted outdoors, but usually under some kind of shade. A clearing in a dense forest is ideal. The Equinox rite begins with the Dusk Serenade, led by the local Hierophant. It begins *at dusk*, meaning the moment the sun has gone down. Being in place to sing about mingled rebellion and resignation to the setting sun is a severe challenge.

Most Kindred who plan to attend make some form of temporary haven at the ceremonial grove, with the most trusted mortals and ghouls nearby to make sure nothing goes wrong. The serenade itself is haunting (even when not augmented by Majesty, which it usually is), a paean to the hated power of the sun, then a defiance of it in its absence and finally a recognition of the balance between sunlight and shadow.

After the Dusk Serenade, the Acolytes relax and recover. Despite the best efforts, a few may rise too early or have inadequate protection from solar fire. Even more rarely, some Kindred deliberately expose themselves, be as penance, or a show of bravado or simply in the Acolyte spirit of tribulation.

Several hours after dusk, about nine o'clock, the second phase begins. This is the Equinox Feast, a time of both celebration and judgment, of both misery and satisfaction. The Fathers of the covenant preside over it, setting the stage with a long table covered in autumn produce. Grain, fruits and vegetables are spread out, elaborately plated, a vast (though vegetarian) feast. Mortal members of the covenant are invited first to sit and dine, while the Kindred stand behind them and the Fathers invoke their patron gods. When the mortals have eaten and the prayers are complete, the youngest Father present asks, "But where is the meat?" Then the knives come out.

Both the living and the undead may be sacrificed at the Equinox Feast, but only when the Fathers, the Hermits and the Crones have all decided together that punishment by death is warranted. Some who die are taken completely by surprise, seized and flung atop the food with no warning. Far more often the condemned have been imprisoned beforehand and are wheeled out in cages, sedated or staked, then hauled limp upon the feast. Mortals are decapitated. Kindred are partially flayed. Both executions are calculated to spill the most blood and to ensure death. As the condemned convulse, the Kindred (and those mortals and ghouls who choose to partake) fall upon the blood-soaked fruits and eat. It's not polite; it's a brawl to see who can gorge deepest.

Frenzies aren't uncommon, and are regarded as simply providing more sauce for the meal. Soon, of course, the Kindred begin to heave up the solid foods. Many mortals follow suit, since the sight is a sickening one. The Kindred purge themselves as the mortals purge themselves, as the covenant itself is purged of the treacherous and incompetent.

Afterwards, the participants typically slink off into the woods, either to head back to their havens or to wait for the final phase, at midnight. The setting is not conducive to chatting.

Midnight is the Rite of the Borderlands, a ceremony celebrating and exploiting the reach potential for transformation. Called to session by the oldest Mother in the region, the Rite of the Borderlands starts with personal penances. In full sight of the assembled covenant, Kindred who feel they have done wrong pledge to make it right. They state their sin, explain why they think it was a sin (and for many Acolytes, the criteria of proper and improper action are quite removed from typical human mores) and announce how they are going to spend a year making it right. Once this pledge is made, all witnesses present have three duties towards the oath-taker.

First, they are to render all reasonable aid in the pursuit of the penance, which often takes the form of enforcing the pledge. Second, they themselves swear to no longer hold the sin against the Kindred who confessed. Third, they swear to exact punishment if the oath is broken.

A Kindred Virgin might, for example, confess that she has been deliberately feeding off prostitutes because she judged herself to be their moral superior, but that a recent discussion with some students of Hathor has convinced her she was wrong. She swears to confine her feeding to the sexually innocent for a year in penance, on penalty of torpor. The Hathor students present are expected to forgive her affront, and everyone there is to help the Virgin feed, if she needs assistance. On the other hand, if she's caught feeding from someone experienced, she can be starved or beaten into slumber.

A Hermit might have an entirely different mortal code and feel that his greatest sin has been focusing on the amassing of wealth instead of wisdom. He pledges to give away all his wealth and to not handle currency for a year, on pain of Final Death. The witnesses assembled will need to manage his finances while he focuses on less earthly concerns, and if he so much as picks up a penny, he expects them to destroy him.

When the penance pledges are complete, the next element is ritual contact with spirits. The specifics of this are dealt with in greater depth on beginning on p. 58. In this context, the assembly often breaks into smaller groups, depending on which entity they wish to contact and bargain with. Generous Storytellers may give a +1 bonus to characters rolling to contact spirits, due to the propitious date.

The climactic element of the Autumnal Equinox is the induction of new Kindred into the ranks of the Mothers and Fathers. In descending order of age, candidates come forward and perform the Embrace. Successful Embraces are lauded, with the neonate Kindred being given gifts of dappled animals on which to feed — calico cats, spotted dogs, even brindled calves. For the newly made Mother or Father, a buckthorn crown is presented.

There is no shame for those whose attempt at creating a Requiem yields only a common death. But there isn't much pity or consolation, either. When it is apparent that the Embrace failed and the candidate merely died, it is as if the vampire who tried it is invisible and inaudible, socially untouchable until the next night. These vampires are literally treated as if they were not present and had not made the attempt.

There are, of course, two classes of Embrace. Some mortals who have been blood dolls or ghouls or just fellow-worshippers in the Circle welcome and relish their release from life. Others are dragged kicking and screaming. Both attitudes, solemn joy and hysterical resistance, are honored and understood. Neither attitude is seen to reflect badly on the neonate afterwards. The Embrace, particularly on this night of transition, is seen as a new start with a clean slate.

PERSONAL TIMES OF JOY AND SORROW

Further complicating the yearly cycle of Acolyte worship, there are nights that are entirely personal and unique to each individual Kindred. While Kindred of other covenants may dismiss the celebration of personal milestones as a weak or sentimental humanism, the Acolytes see the issue in a very different light. Not only does their philosophy of individualism practically insist on revering the spiritual impact of the individual on himself, the most extreme followers of the covenant believe they themselves are as divine as Hine-titama or King Gesar. Why then, should meaningful dates of their personal mythologies be forgotten?

MARRIAGES AND WEDDING ANNIVERSARIES

Unlike any other covenant, the Circle of the Crone believes in and practices marriage between Kindred partners. The Circle perspective on the Requiem, seeing it as part and parcel of the cosmos and no less natural than anything else, inclines Acolytes to feel as entitled to a formally recognized pair bond as anyone else. (Indeed, more than many others. Most cults refuse to accept homosexual marriages.)

Though recognized, marriages among Acolytes aren't common. Covenant practice considers human wedlock to dissolve upon the Embrace. After all, the common vow says, "Until death do us part." But to commit to another creature, possibly for eternity, is not a step to take lightly. This is doubly true for a spouse cursed with hunger and the Beast.

A marriage under the Crone is a unification of body and spirit, a vow before all gods and Kindred that these two stand together, each the other's bulwark against the madness of ages, and woe to any who would sunder them. Each member of the pair is expected to minister to the other, protect and comfort the other, feed and shelter the other. Married Acolytes are primarily loyal to one another, above the calls of clan, covenant or coterie. Only their chosen gods are to be honored above the spouse.

Mixed marriages, in which a vampire marries a mortal, are nearly unheard-of. Domains where such a thing is accepted are definitely out on the fringe. Mixed marriages may happen in secret in more mainstream regions, however.

The Circle does not believe in divorce. The only way out of a Circle marriage is through Final Death. While formal requirements that the spouses live together are uncommon, there's a powerful social expectation that they will. If they don't share a haven, they can expect to explain that choice many, many times.

A Circle wedding ceremony is traditionally held out under the night sky, far from the prying eyes of mortals. Often, the Kindred announce their engagement by planting a garden together. When it has grown to fruition, they are married in it. They walk down an aisle, through the middle of a crowd of well-wishers. If possible, each is escorted to the altar by his or her sire. At the altar, the pair clasp hands and, in the witness of their priest and peers, they pledge their troth.

In many ways, it's like a mortal wedding. In others, it is drastically different.

First, there's the question of traditional wedding colors. For the Circle of the Crone, everyone (especially the bride) should be arrayed in black. Funeral accoutrements are extremely common, and sending a funeral wreath to a Circle wedding isn't considered a joke: it's entirely ap-



appropriate. The two are not making a life together. They are making an endless, mutual death.

Secondly, the vows tend to resemble but differ from mortal vows. There is almost never any kind of reference to obedience on the part of either partner. Some Acolytes consider themselves elevated creatures (or diabolical spirits), and disdain mortal gender roles, even if they consider them perfectly appropriate for living women and men. But even for mainstream Acolytes who believe that each sex possesses unique qualities and energies, those energies are considered equal. Placing man or woman in the role of sole controller mean acting wrongly at least half the time. Most Acolytes write their own vows, but there is a common set used by the hidebound (and often looked to as a guideline by the creative).

VOW OF MARRIAGE

I, _____, hereby take _____ into my Requiem forever. We swear before all that is holy and all that is unholy that we, tonight, seal our fates by bonds of dedication and honor. When my partner sleeps, I will watch and bear witness upon waking. When my partner is afraid, I will give comfort, and when my partner is wronged, I will have vengeance. This I swear on the blood, and the flame and the spirit.

After both have spoken the words of the oath, they put their words into action. First, they feed from the same vessel. This is traditionally done to the death, and the sacrifice chosen is someone who is particularly meaningful to the couple. For example, if they are both pursuing the path of the Maiden, they might feed on a virginal human girl, perhaps one who is not yet physically mature. They might choose someone relevant to their goals or interests.

For example, a couple dedicated to keeping the wild places of Brazil free might dedicate a farmer to Tezcatlipoca and kill him as their wedding feast. Killing one's mortal spouse or someone else intimately connected to mortal life is seen as a particularly auspicious sacrifice, though it's understood that few wish to show that level of dedication.

After they feed together, they feed from one another. The sharing of Vitae is seen as an essential element of the wedding. After all, even mortals can say they're dedicated to one another. The Kindred have recourse to stronger displays.

Once they're under mutual Vinculum (presumably, though perhaps not in fact if one was harboring a bond beforehand), the pair clasps hands and looks into one another's eyes as the priest says, "What we join here tonight, let nothing break apart." He then holds fire under their hands. Something as simple as a quick pass with a

candle is acceptable, though a larger fire, or a lengthier span spent in it, is considered more meaningful.

Finally, the priest invokes whatever spirit the pair has chosen as a patron and, in its name, declares them husband and wife. They kiss and exchange rings. Traditionally, the rings are made of human bone encased in silver.

Afterwards there is music and dancing and at least the pretense of a feast. Most couples cannot manage to procure food to sate every Kindred guest present, unless they have extravagant herds or choose a small ceremony. It's acceptable to present a cauldron of cold human blood, or a selection of live animals, and the guests partake even if they're not interested or can gain no sustenance thereby. It's just good manners.

Wedding anniversaries are usually private. Often the couple feeds deeply the evening before and stays in their haven all night, remembering their Requiem together and making plans for the future. Sometimes they deepen, or renew their mutual Vinculum, but if they do or don't, it's a deeply personal matter.

In areas where Acolyte weddings are practiced, the bond between partners is sacred. More, it's defended fiercely. Any attempt to put a married Acolyte under a Vinculum that surpasses the spousal bond is often seen as an insult to the entire covenant. One Prince in Belgium who attempted to put a married Acolyte Maiden under Vinculum (ostensibly as a punishment, but she was gorgeous and he was Daeva) was shocked by the resistance he encountered, even from Acolytes who didn't particularly like the Maiden in question. Unwilling to back down, he did it anyway. Now he's ash. There were other factors involved in his undoing, but his callous willingness to trample the wedding bond was the excuse that riled his enemies' followers.

EMBRACE ANNIVERSARY

The anniversary of one's Embrace is a meaningful date for many Kindred, and in the Circle particularly, a series of traditions have grown up around it. One's "deathnight" is seen as the opposite of a birthday, and is celebrated as such. It's always a noteworthy achievement to survive a year undead, but entry into the Requiem is not an occasion for joy the way entering life is.

Much deathnight tradition is a deliberate inversion or perversion of human birthdays, intended to reinforce to Kindred that they are not human or living any longer. They are something different, perhaps something greater, something to respect, but not something to rejoice in.

Most Acolytes fast through their deathnight, in the typical spirit of tribulation. Some kick off an entire week of starvation and contemplation (usually isolated away from temptation, and from any rivals who might attempt to take advantage of the Acolyte's blood-deficient state). Before going off into the wilderness, however, there's often the deathnight party.

With a birthday party, everyone comes and brings gifts. On a deathnight, everyone comes and takes something away. The celebrant looks through her possessions, contemplating meaningful things to give up — items or even titles, duties and prerogatives that she is using as a crutch instead of a tool. If she can identify things that are holding back her spiritual growth, she invites her friends to come take them, if they wish.

This divestment of earthly possessions isn't always (or even all that often) a major thing. Kindred aren't known for largesse, and the things that enable a dissolute or selfish Requiem are often the last things a vampire would give up. Guests at a deathnight party are more likely to get some sentimental memento from the host's mortal life, or some trinket recognizing an accomplishment that now embarrasses her.

That said, there are occasions when an Acolyte undergoes some major crisis of faith and decides that, if giving it up doesn't hurt, it's not really a worth sacrifice. (This most often happens right before, or sometimes immediately after, going torpid.) In those cases, favored guests might be given cash, havens, mortal slaves, homunculi or even odder bequests. Most accept these presents eagerly, though a few question just how good a friend someone is when he gives you the things that are impeding his progress.

THE SOLITARY PATH

Many vampires wander through the nights of their Requiem, unable to reconcile themselves with the facile pragmatism of the political covenants and equally ill-equipped to accept the dogma of the Lancea Sanctum. These Kindred seek meaning in a profound sense, delving into their own thoughts and instincts and studying the ways of the sensual world, hoping to come to a satisfactory understanding. Inevitably, they dwell on a number of important questions: Why do Kindred exist? What is a vampire's purpose? How must she carry herself in the grim nights of the modern world, and what, if anything, can she learn from the others around her?

These curious Kindred rise from their comfortable places in the covenants of their sires, invariably drifting into the fringes of the unaligned while searching for answers. Those lucky enough to exist in proximity to the Circle of the Crone are recognized almost immediately as "maiden seekers" and protected, whether they ask for it or not.

Experienced Acolytes will not directly interfere with a solitary quest, knowing that the vampire in question will never be satisfied with answers provided by others. Instead, the Acolytes encourage the search, offering aid or relief if required. With or without the protection of the Circle, leaving one's covenant to begin a solitary search for meaning is difficult, at best, and may actually involve a risk of Final Death in extreme cases.

To outsider Kindred, the questing vampire is flirting with insanity: rejecting the trappings of normal society and choosing to doubt established truths rather than uphold them. A maiden seeker must often sever ties with her close blood relations before she can expect to freely embark on her journey of discovery. A painful period of loneliness and despair is natural, and some Kindred are unable to endure it — either returning quickly to the family they so recently rejected or ending their Requiem in a suicidal blaze of frustration.

But those who survive may begin to see an inkling of the answers they so desperately hunger for. In feeding the curiosity of the spirit, they gravitate towards an existence unparalleled in the world of Kindred: satisfaction, harmony, and confidence await them in the devout explorations of the solitary pilgrim.

And, in the overwhelming majority of cases, that seeker eventually finds her way to the Circle of the Crone, coming to understand that the covenant represents her best opportunity to find support and tolerance in her ongoing quest to find herself and fulfill her purpose as part of the natural world.

MODERN PILGRIMAGE AS TRIBULATION

Can there be a tribulation more worthy to an Acolyte of the Circle than a solitary quest in defiance of social

convention? Every night, a true pilgrim must endure the disapproval of his fellow Kindred (more often than not, devoted members of outsider covenants) and the constant turmoil of his own guilt and doubt. From the moment a maiden seeker rejects his docile Requiem, choosing instead to establish a new way for himself, he enters into a world of confusion and hostility. His allies withdraw, his sire first attempts to negotiate for his return and eventually declares him a bitter enemy and even his haven no longer seems a welcome retreat.

Some Kindred choose to leave the domain of their Embrace, becoming literal pilgrims as well as spiritual ones. For these dedicated vampires, the dangers and isolation of the journey encourage intense self-scrutiny while every step brings them closer to severing all ties with their Requiems up to this point. Many do not survive the journey, succumbing to the scorching rays of the sun or a roving pack of hostile mortals. Other Kindred find themselves perpetually without a home, turned away from domain after domain by paranoid or prejudiced Kindred therein.

But there on the road, the blistered and famished seeker may find true strength and enlightened understanding. There, she may experience a vision of the Crone in all her splendor, or she might find herself uplifted by an unexpected moment of absolute harmony with the



living world, proving her natural place and eliminating all doubts.

Others choose to remain in their homes, enduring the enmity of their contemporaries and finding their truths in their new outlook. The scales fall from their eyes, and suddenly the familiar features of the landscape are redrawn, shining forth with the full glory of the undimmed majesty of the natural world. There, under the baleful gaze of the outsiders, hounded and beaten, excluded and ridiculed, they find a satisfaction and simple sense of accomplishment that can never be taken from them, no matter what happens to their material being.

Then, once that calm takes hold in the spirit, the pilgrim truly becomes an Acolyte of the Circle of the Crone, whether or not there are fellow members of the covenant to welcome him. If there are none, he continues his meditations on his own, learning from his explorations and forming his mystic bonds with the world around him. Crúac sometimes comes naturally to these vampires, allowing them to practice the magicks of the covenant on their own.

If there are observant Acolytes in the vicinity, they will welcome a true pilgrim seeker to their ranks, providing safe company for her to express her liberated vision and allowing her to continue her explorations under their political umbrella. Her truth will mingle with those of her fellow Acolytes, and strength will come from the sharing. She may take on students, passing her understanding of the workings of the natural world to younger Kindred, or she may become a student herself, choosing to benefit from the accumulated wisdom of her elders and contemporaries.

There are three distinct paths that most maiden seekers follow. While some are known to find more independent, occasionally bizarre approaches to the hunger of the spirit, the majority will settle into one of the long-trodden roads. To many in the covenant, these paths are referred to by some variation on these terms: the Dharma of the Predator, the Nun in Shadows or the Inward Hunter. These terms may or may not be colloquial to Acolytes of the Circle; in some domains, the paths are referred to almost the way one might ask where a graduate student took his undergrad degree. In others, they are intensely private information, and in some, they simply remain unnamed.

The Dharma of the Predator

This is a violent and hard-walked path, often beginning with an explosive frenzy of frustration precipitated by the unreasonable demands of the modern Requiem and its pressures to remain "human." Vampires who completely deny their urge to violence occasionally stumble onto this path, giving themselves over to an intense and all-consuming frustration as their attempts at self-control collapse. The Beast erupts within the hapless Kindred, unleashing a sudden and brutal force within her that

reflects the depth of her suffering. The Beast's voice grows louder and stronger than in most, shaking the vampire's carefully constructed structures of self-control and making continued denial impossible.

Most vampires respond to this manifestation by imposing crippling feelings of guilt upon themselves. If not assisted, many fall further and further into a cycle of repression and explosion, eventually becoming a clear menace to both Kindred and mortals in their domain.

A rare few, however, come to understand that the violence within themselves is caused by fundamental dissonant urges: the urge to remain an upstanding member of an artificial, aberrant society and the natural predatory leanings of the vampire. Instead of taking on the guilt of their contemporaries, they choose to acknowledge their so-called monstrous urges and explore them in earnest.

A vampire who follows the Dharma of the Predator will ordinarily abandon the material trappings of modern Kindred society, embarking on a pilgrimage (whether literal or internal) as a true creature of the night and stalking the herd with full and frank dedication. She accepts the shedding of her humanity as part of the natural progress of a healthy vampire, reveling in the satisfaction that the hunt brings her. She claims victim after victim, indulging her most basic instincts and developing more and more sophisticated natural hunting techniques. She learns how to conceal her activity from both Kindred and mortal observers, operating with a natural stealth that is denied to those who impose human limits on their activities.

But the journey does not end there. Eventually, assuming she survives the inevitable disapproval of her "more civilized" peers, she must face the prospect of her dwindling humanity and again become dissatisfied. If she fails to acknowledge her descent, she loses herself to the Beast, never to achieve the understanding she so deeply craves.

But if she can find a way to allow the pendulum of spirit to swing within her, to bring herself to appreciate the preciousness of the last vestiges of her humanity, she is granted clarity of vision unparalleled in the Kindred world. Her fear of her own monstrous predatory urges mingles with her disgust at the temptation to mimic humanity, and together, the two make it obvious that there is more to vampire existence than either alone. Having survived the spiritual ravages of both, she perches on the edge of a new understanding, balanced between both warring halves of her self.

There, in that moment, a vision of the inner workings of her world is fixed in her consciousness. She experiences the glorious calm and peace of the maiden seeker, finally stepping onto the path of the Crone. Observing Acolytes never approach a vampire who selects the Dharma of the Predator (and those who do rarely do so consciously) until they are ready to experience this

second epiphany. Up to that point, the maiden seeker must be allowed to descend to the absolute depths of Beast-driven madness, from which she must claw her way back to sanity.

Otherwise, she will never develop an understanding of her own inner strength, believing instead that she was “saved” by the Circle. She will be crippled in her development from then on, placing too much emphasis on the participation of her new friends and her involvement with their paths, not her own.

A maiden seeker who survives this tribulation is often difficult to integrate into the established mythology of an existing Circle unless she encounters a teacher who shares her experience. Without such a shared spirit, the maiden seeker is likely to develop a style of worship tailored to her personal understanding.

HOW FAR IS TOO FAR?

Characters who become maiden seekers on this path are guaranteed to lose some humanity before they arrive at the realization that readies them for the Circle of the Crone. That makes it a long and dangerous road, and Storytellers may worry that the characters will go too far before they begin play as Acolytes, hampering their ability to deal with the story as caring, feeling Kindred.

It's a good rule of thumb to make sure that the so-called second epiphany happens by the time the character falls to 4 or 5 Humanity. At that stage, the characters are still capable of humane behavior (without too much difficulty), and yet will likely to be flirting with madness. Any fears of descending further would be justified, but total collapse isn't inevitable yet.

Note that a good number of characters who follow this seeking are sure to develop derangements along the way. While the achievement of the epiphany at the end of the path is likely to involve the reclamation of one's sanity, it isn't a full requirement. The plain truth is that some of the Acolytes of the Circle are thoroughly mad by human standards.

Of course, the real drama of this path is the partial redemption (or at least diversion from disaster) that the character undergoes. As a Storyteller, if you believe that the character involved is hardy enough to come back from the very edge of catastrophe, then you may allow the character to slip further down the scale before granting her the vision of the “middle path” she's searching for.

The Nun in Shadows

This path is a contradiction. While outward signs are initially subtle, the maiden seeker plunges rapidly towards a terrible internal confrontation resulting in a complete redefinition of the self. This path begins more slowly than the Dharma of the Predator, and there is

no obvious outburst to trigger it. Instead, the vampire in question simply begins to doubt his own identity, wondering at the choices he has made.

It becomes clear that the personality he presents is a conscious option, carefully assembled from pieces of his mortal being and the instruction of his sire, and that option begins to seem incomplete or unnecessarily convoluted. Every word the vampire speaks begins to feel like a lie. Every emotion he feels seems stifled, wrapped within the strictures of Kindred social interaction and the bonds of the Danse Macabre.

Over time, these small doubts grow in intensity, eventually threatening to paralyze the vampire where he stands. He frets, analyzing his every word and deed, becoming caught up in the mechanics of interaction instead of just letting himself feel and speak without too much thought. He is overwhelmed by strange urges to act inappropriately, suppressing a bark of laughter at a solemn Elysium rite or welling up with blood tears at a slapstick display.

In most cases, the vampire will first attempt to respond to these pressures by actively socializing, proving to himself that the construct of his personality is useful and appreciated. He will be garrulous and outgoing in public, retiring to a whirl of confusion and doubt in his private moments. The emotions he experiences become extremely, uncontrollably intense, at times to the point of actual physical pain, and he often finds himself flipping between active pursuit of sensation and urges to complete isolation and silence.

In the terminology of the Circle of the Crone, he becomes a “nun in shadows,” minimizing sensory input when alone to balance the awesome power of sensation in the outside world.

In these silent meditations, the vampire inevitably begins to deconstruct his personality, coming to terms with his mannerisms and choices. He arrives at an understanding of his true motives and the layers of deception he places over them. Inevitably, he also begins to understand that every thinking creature he encounters must also shroud itself in these layers, and he begins to sympathize with them. Over time, he broadens his definition of “thinking creatures” and may become positively animistic in his outlook. When this occurs to him, he suddenly relaxes, slipping into a natural persona stripped of artifice.

Until these truths are realized, though, the vampire's outward facade will begin to show cracks. His responses will seem mechanical and insincere, no matter how hard he tries. He will inevitably offend or alienate most of his friends. Most believe that he is betraying them or otherwise playing false — and there lies the greatest danger of this path.

Many a maiden seeker who searches for the truth as a nun in shadows becomes the target of paranoid attacks,

and some are drawn into frustrating attempts to reconcile without the capacity for natural, sincere expression. Some maiden seekers suffer Final Death at the hands of their incensed allies or lovers, never getting the chance to “break through” to the harmonious realization that awaits them.

Acolytes of the Circle of the Crone are well advised to keep an eye out for maiden seekers on this path at all times. They are exceedingly difficult to spot (especially since they may be mistaken for mundane liars), but the promise of a favorable outcome when they are located and properly protected is high. The seeker is bound to appreciate the attentions of the Circle as he works through his tribulation and will often readily accept the established mythology of teachers within the covenant, easily mapping the mythology onto his own epiphany.

THE BROKEN FACE

To reflect the development of a maiden seeker on this path, Storytellers should make use of powerful descriptive terms in emotional situations, helping the player to understand and illustrate the character’s outsize response. The way the moonlight reflects off a puddle in the sidewalk may provoke a profound sadness, causing a steady flow of tears for the next few minutes. An advertising billboard displaying a sunny tropical scene could inspire a near-paralyzing happiness. Everything becomes an emotional trigger, and every emotion that follows is powerfully amplified. Spending the time to illustrate just a couple of these triggers can go a long way toward setting the tone for the character’s journey.

Attaching a negative social modifier to the character’s public interactions while the tribulation progresses, reflecting the apparent inability of the vampire to appear sincere until he comes to his epiphany, might also help. The modifier can grow over time, from an initial –1 to an eventual –4 or –5 just before the character’s breakthrough, when the penalty vanishes completely.

The Inward Hunter

Tribulation can arise in the most unexpected ways. Some Kindred actually dream their way to epiphany, finding themselves in a world of intense inner exploration that is neither sought nor anticipated. Some simply begin to dream in their sleeping days, residing in a surreal second Requiem during the hours of repose. Others come to the Inward Hunt in the long years of torpor, wandering through the surreal labyrinth of their own minds without awareness of the world beyond.

Each and every Inward Hunt is unique to the vampire experiencing it. Some embark on a strange voyage of discovery and trial, culminating in an encounter with the gods of old. Others relive a pivotal period in the Requiem of

their ancestors, facing the same challenges and accomplishments in a bizarre recapitulation of blood memory. Some vampires seem to dream a mundane Requiem as a fictional “other,” sometimes even experiencing the tribulation as a vampire of another clan or gender. The journey is deeply personal and, most disturbing to the Kindred who endures it, absolutely true to life.

Inward Hunters who interrupt their tribulation with bouts of consciousness sometimes confuse their waking and sleeping moments, losing the capacity to separate the two. But the experience is genuine. It is a mystic journey, honestly no less “real” than the waking Requiem. Maiden seekers on an Inward Hunt often bear the physical scars of injuries sustained during their “dreams,” and some exhibit skills and disciplines that they claim to have learned from instructors in the visions.

Every vampire who dwells in the second Requiem of the Inward Hunt approaches some kind of climactic truth at the end of the tribulation, in which they learn a great secret about themselves, the spirits of their ancestry or the hidden workings of the gods. Most emerge from the Inward Hunt utterly changed, integrating the lessons learned into their waking ways. Many who begin as members of outsider covenants abandon their organizations, finding that their revelations mesh more comfortably with the ways of the Circle of the Crone.

Only telepathic Acolytes of the Circle can say for sure if a vampire is truly undergoing the tribulation of the Inward Hunt. There may be some hints in the waking behavior of some Kindred, but most Inward Hunters will take pains to conceal the initial effects of their dreams, fearing persecution.

WHAT IS THE HUNT?

Nobody really knows. As the Storyteller, it’s up to you — the features of an Inward Hunt are unlimited in scope. You can get as cosmic or as personal as you like. The only real limit on the Hunt is that it’s usually a solitary experience. Only the interference of telepathy can allow others to witness or participate in a dream tribulation.

The Inward Hunt provides the chance for a Storyteller to layer a character’s story with a second narrative. If you do, be sure that the “dream thread” has a definite end planned, so that it can be folded back into the waking Requiem of the character involved.

Maiden seekers on the path of the Inward Hunter are prized by the Circle of the Crone, and are eagerly accepted by most Acolytes. The truths maiden seekers espouse are often merged with the teachings of a local Circle, making integration less a question of how ready the seeker is to accept the words of a Hierophant and more one of how well the two will join together.

WORSHIP IN THE CIRCLE

Not every Acolyte comes to the Circle of the Crone through a solitary crisis. Some are lucky enough to be members of the covenant through their first tribulations, surrounded by like-minded Kindred who are ready and able to support them. While these vampires may not begin their career in the Circle with a glamorous calamity, they do tend to form the steady backbone of the covenant. Through them, ritual worship is realized. In them, the foundation of the covenant's social structure is built and upheld. Eventually, every Acolyte, no matter how extreme his arrival to the Circle, must participate in group ritual if he wishes to grow more powerful and more secure in his Requiem.

The trappings of group ritual are unique to each domain, but there are common elements at the base of every one. The system of call-and-response between the Hierophant and her Circle is nearly omnipresent, as is the repetition of key phrases from their locally assembled litany. Most cults engage in regularly scheduled sacrifice and maintenance of some sort of temple or sacred space. The group veneration of significant plants or animals is common, as is the act of co-operative dedicated creation (i.e., works of art) in the name of the Crone.

It's important to note that ritual worship in the Circle of one's fellow Acolytes is the way of unlife for the members of the covenant; it's *what they do*. Isolated weekly visits to the ritual gathering aren't enough for the spiritual thirst of the Acolyte. She must spend the time between each ritual preparing herself, exploring her self and arranging the materials of her devotion. The elaborate groundwork behind and before each gathering of the Circle is crucial to her development, as is the emotional liberation of the ritual itself and the reinforcement of her fellow Kindred as they participate in the same cycle of build and release.

Each member of the Circle empowers the others by his participation in ritual, and each undeniably feels the contributions of the others. Certain rituals may require that the individual Acolytes prepare separate ritual ingredients, bringing them all together in a symbolic merging at the climax of worship. Other rituals involve the creation of identical works (or at least differing works interpreting the same subject) to demonstrate the unification of the Circle in single purpose. The more active the participation of each and every member, the more powerfully the ritual will be felt and the more intense the actual tangible results will be.

of a ritual performed by a unified group. Some claim that the most potent Crúac rituals are only really possible to complete with the support of a Chorus, and that the result is rarely favorable in solitary practice. There are a multitude of theories attempting to explain this co-operative effect, but none can be considered universal.

Storytellers wishing to reinforce this aspect of ritual worship may wish to set a "neutral" number of worshippers, maintaining it as the middle ground and applying bonuses or penalties to a Crúac roll for a larger or smaller number of worshippers.

For Example: *The Storyteller decides that two worshippers is the neutral number for Crúac rituals in his game. If two Acolytes gather to perform a ritual, the player whose character is leading the ritual would roll with no modifier. If one Acolyte were to attempt the ritual alone, the Storyteller would apply a -1 penalty to the roll for being under the neutral number of worshippers. On the other hand, if four Acolytes were cooperating, the player whose character is leading the ritual would roll with a +2 bonus.*

Many Kindred develop close ties with their fellow Acolytes, forged in the heat of shared exertion and ritual trance. The ceremonies of the Circle of the Crone can be quite intimate, revealing hidden fears and urges that most outsiders never see. Vampires, in exposing themselves to contemporaries who are similarly open, achieve a trust that is only approximated by the artificial connection of the blood bond — but is entirely natural.

These close ties of familiarity and trust can, in turn, feed the power of a ritual by invoking the sincere and absolute support members lend to one another. Some Hierophants encourage the formation of these ties by actively demanding ritual confession and shared tribulation from their Acolytes.

The larger rituals of the Circle tend to take on an aspect of celebration, and Kindred who are not familiar with the true purpose of the gathering may become involved, even finding themselves joining in the worship (in the form of song or dance) without realizing the significance of their contribution. These gatherings can be wild, orgiastic affairs or simple, solemn rites, but are often popular with both the Acolytes of the Circle and more social outsider vampires.

No two cults worship exactly the same way. The varied religious outlooks of the covenant and the realities of geographical isolation lead to a divergence in method and belief. Some Kindred twist the practices of a Circle to their own ends, while others simply lose touch with the traditions of their elders thanks to the attrition of the centuries. Regardless of surface discrepancies, though, most cults perform certain key rites that preserve and maintain their basic functions around the world.

THE POWER OF A CHORUS

A vast majority of Acolytes in the Circle of the Crone will readily testify to the increased power

For example, nearly every established Circle practices a rite of initiation, promoting chosen initiates from the relatively uneducated ranks of the Chorus to the status of a full Acolyte. Once the Acolytes have endured the rite, they are permitted to take a more active role in the direction of covenant policy within a domain and are allowed to partake in the secret knowledge of the Circle: practical form and function of Crúac rituals, the full disclosure of the litany and other valuable information. The variations on this initiation rite are so wide as to render them almost completely alien from one another — except that they all fulfill the same need.

This initiation rite, no matter how it is practiced, always seems to involve three distinct stages. First, an initiate is separated from the rest of the Chorus, marking the initiate as chosen for tribulation and advancement. Next, she crosses some kind of symbolic constructed threshold, enduring some difficult or painful test of will and proving her faith. Last, she is reintegrated with the community as a newly declared Acolyte, and may take part in some sort of declaration or celebration to mark the occasion.

Following are six initiation rites, taken from widely differing cults all around the world, as a means of illustration:

The Midwinter Sacrifice

In one of the urban centers of Germany, the Circle of the Crone practices a modern initiation rite that traces its origins back to a Kindred variation on the traditional Norse “blót” ceremonies of old. Each year, the Hierophant of the Circle selects those members of the Chorus who are ready to graduate to full-status Acolytes of the covenant by the end of October, allowing them at least six weeks to make their preparations for the initiation ritual, which always takes place on the night of the Winter Solstice.

In the region, all rituals are performed in an actual circle, stratified into an inner ring of Acolytes and an outer one for the Chorus. Those Kindred named for the honor of initiation are allowed to step between the two rings for all rituals after their selection, indicating their current transition in passage to the inner round.

On the night before the Midwinter Sacrifice, the chosen Kindred are stripped bare and painted with a runic inscription of deep significance, bearing symbols of power and prosperity as chosen by the Hierophant. This marking takes at least three hours, during which the vampire is expected to meditate on his dedication to the Circle and his future service to the gods of old. A bare grave is dug for him in a secure location and is blessed by the Hierophant herself with a sprinkling of herbs and pure water. The chosen member of the Chorus lays himself in the open grave, slipping into a day's slumber as the rest of the Circle sings of his devotion and implores the gods for a blessing.

At the arrival of Midwinter's dusk, the vampire rises from the open grave, naked and ritually marked, as if

awakening from death all over again. He is alone and without guidance. Knowing well what is expected of him, he steps out into the chill night, seeking a mortal victim for sacrifice. He will ritually stalk the victim, spending at least an hour in pursuit before closing in and capturing the mortal alive.

Thence, he carries his captive back to the ritual gathering place of the Circle, where he presents the victim to the Hierophant and collected Acolytes. The Hierophant accepts the offer, and the victim is ritually slain in an elaborate ceremony of prayer. The blood of the mortal is sprinkled on all participants, none of whom may drink of it — it is sacred, and remains for the gods alone.

Once all chosen Kindred have returned and made their sacrifices, giving up the fruits of their hunt for the favor of the gods, a feast is arranged by the Hierophant. Her Acolytes bring out mugs filled with warm, fresh mortal blood, and all Kindred present participate in a prayer of devotion, honoring the results of the hunt and the favorable accomplishment of the chosen one(s).

These initiates (and they alone) continue to drink from the glass, which is continually refilled, throughout the prayer. The Hierophant reads a significant passage from the local litany (most often one of the hidden stories of Hel, the goddess of the shadowy Underworld and — according to this Circle's beliefs — the mother of all vampires). All sing a prayer song, and the chosen hunter is led to the center of the ritual space.

There, in ecstatic trance brought on by the song and glutting on blood, the initiate is branded with the runic marks that were chosen for him and given the black robes of a full Acolyte. From this night forward, he is a true member of the Circle, granted access to the secrets of Crúac and allowed to take his place in the inner round at all rituals.

The Long Jump

One city in the American Pacific Northwest boasts a modernized initiation ritual that seems to combine the elements of the Brazilian Vanuatu and a more contemporary gang member's proof of courage. A relatively uncomplicated, almost low-key rite, it nevertheless follows the same basic path as every initiation process in the covenant.

Candidates for the Long Jump are chosen on a night of the full moon, named in a ritual call at the end of the night. Those chosen are cheered on by the rest of the Circle, and instructed to select a tall building on the city's skyline. Many see this choice as an opportunity for competitive display, opting for the tallest one they see. Some, however, pick buildings that are somehow significant to them (either from their mortal life or their current Requiem), and so long as the building is higher than 10 stories, no criticism is issued.

At the next new moon, the chosen vampire leads a march to the building, climbing the stairs to the rhythm

of a slow, whispered chant conducted by her fellow Kindred. During the climb, she prepares herself by forcing Vitae into her body to toughen up for the ceremony to come. She allows herself to slip into a meditative trance as she climbs, picturing herself as a conduit of indestructible will. She is also invited to consider herself and the path she is choosing, cementing it in her mind as the right and true beginning to a transcendent journey.

On the roof of the tower, she is invited to step to the edge. The Hierophant delivers a short speech, taken from the litany of the Circle, in which the transcendent power of Kindred Vitae is illustrated. While the speech is conducted, two Acolytes bring an elasticized rope forward. One attaches the rope to the building, while the other fastens it to the initiate's ankle. At the climax of the rite, she is called upon to declare her belief in the power of her own Vitae, screaming it to the winds. When the Hierophant is satisfied with the candidate's readiness, he instructs the candidate to leap from the edge, and she does without hesitation.

The fall that follows is an indescribable experience. Most Kindred who have completed the ritual make vague allusions to a sensation of complete peace or a notion that their doubts and fears are stripped away in the few seconds it takes, shed like old skin.

Inevitably, the fall is cut short by the cord, and the vampire slams into the side of the building. Some smash

through a window, others bounce off concrete or glass. Most barely feel the impact, having spent so much Vitae on their stamina in preparation for the jump. Many are scraped back up the side of the building in the bounce that follows.

There are members of the Circle who have taken to performing divinations based on the result of the jump: how many times the candidate strikes the building, whether or not she breaks anything (in herself or the structure) on impact, and how many times she bounces back before coming to rest. These divinations are highly valued by the chosen candidate, and often form the basis for a number of significant decisions, which she is likely to consider during the climb.

The candidate is then hauled back up by her compatriots, and presented with a ritual victim for sating her hunger. She feeds, taking as much or as little as she desires, and the Hierophant declares her a full Acolyte of the Circle. Thereafter, she is invited to participate in other rituals and allowed to learn the hidden powers of Crúac.

The Wedding in Fire

The initiation ritual of one particular Japanese cult of Acolytes is worth examination for the cult's integration of several involved sub-rites into one greater whole. The entire ritual, taken from start to finish, not only demonstrates a new Acolyte's dedication to the covenant, but creates a shared experience of directed torment that will forever tie the vampire to her fellow sufferers.



In an unusual departure from the norm for most local gatherings of Acolytes, the initiate is not selected by the Hierophant. Instead, a member of the Chorus who believes she is ready to accept full status as an Acolyte steps forward at one of the regular ritual meetings of the covenant and humbly presents herself as a hopeful candidate for initiation.

In a detailed, choreographed statement, she abases himself before her contemporaries as an unworthy, unfaithful creature of great shame, declaring that she can only bear to continue her existence if she will be allowed to wed the great Amaterasu-o-mi-kami, the sun-goddess of Shinto whom she has foolishly hidden from in her Kindred Requiem.

The candidate is then approached by the Hierophant, who solemnly accepts her proposal on behalf of the goddess. Thereafter, the candidate must seclude herself from all Kindred or mortal contact for three full days and nights and refrain from speaking, opening her eyes or lying down. She is to meditate calmly before an unseen mirror, clearing her mind of clutter and steeling herself for the tribulation that is to come.

As she does so, the other members of her Circle perform a ceremonial dance meant to symbolize their willingness to accept a new Acolyte in their ranks. The dance is incomplete, purposely missing a required participant.

On the fourth night, the initiate rises and bathes herself in flower-scented waters and dons a ceremonial black kimono. Emerging from the room, she finds the full complement of her Acolyte compatriots (not the Chorus) waiting for her, and she leads a procession to a specially prepared marriage sanctum. This is an empty room, unfurnished and without decoration. There is an opening in the east wall, just large enough for the vampire's arm.

As the dawn approaches, the Hierophant recites a ceremonial prayer of unification, calling to Amaterasu and begging her to come forth. The candidate pulls her robe back, exposing her left arm and putting it through the opening in the wall, asking the goddess to join hands with her. The collected Acolytes will echo her plea.

As the sun rises, the candidate is badly burned. She must hold her hand in the light, enduring the agony of exposure until the recitation of the Hierophant is completed. If the candidate collapses, the Hierophant's retainers will pull her from the wall and quickly cover the hole, but the Hierophant is likely to suffer a burn in the meantime (and will wear it as a mark of the candidate's "imperfect" performance). Ideally, the recitation is finished quickly enough and the candidate may remove her arm of her own volition. If she is unable to overcome the Beast and put her hand through the hole in the first place (frenzying before the sun touches her or succumbing to simple cowardice), the ritual is ended and the disgraced vampire is returned to the Chorus.

If she is successful, the candidate is carried away to her meditation chamber, where a pot of blood is provided for her feeding. Over the next two weeks, she convalesces, slowly healing the damage done in the ceremony. As soon as she is able, she places a band of gold on her ring finger over the burns that still remain. When her healing is nearly complete, she expends the will to retain the scars under this band, allowing the rest to vanish.

Each night, while she remains in the chamber, the Acolytes of her Circle gather and chant for one hour at sundown and one hour at midnight. The chant is complex and carefully memorized, detailing a pledge of support from each participant and honoring the initiate for taking part in this tribulation.

When next the vampire emerges from the meditation chamber, she is considered a full Acolyte of the Circle and a dutiful bride (or husband, as the case may be) of the goddess. The Acolyte is expected to fulfill her duties as a loyal spouse through the learning and practice of the arts of the Circle, including the rituals of Mahou (the intensely regimented local flavor of Crúac), regular sacrifices to the kami gods and dedication to the empowerment of her fellow worshippers.

Dropping the Cloak

Not all initiation rites are so physically demanding. A relatively small gathering of Acolytes in Central America takes part in a collaborative celebration of a member's transition from Chorus to full membership with an air of pleasant celebration. The taint of Kindred existence is momentarily forgotten, masked beneath a garment of great emotional significance.

When the Hierophant believes a vampire is ready for initiation, he is called forth and asked to accept the welcome of the covenant in song. The candidate responds with a few sung lines, gratefully kneeling before the Hierophant and the image of Mama Cocha, the mother of Inti and the goddess of the sea. The rest of the congregation raises their voices in praise, honoring the new candidate and the will of the gods and goddesses.

That night, the candidate returns to his haven and arranges for the creation of a handmade cloak of wool. When he receives the cloak, he spills a few drops of his blood onto it, reciting a short prayer in thanks. The next week, he is joined by another member of the covenant, who bleeds a few drops of her blood onto the cloak and recites her prayer together with him. Each week, another member arrives to add to the staining of the cloak, and all those who have participated thus far recite the prayers together with the newest contributor.

At each visitation, the candidate must provide sustenance for every member of the congregation present. Once all of the members of the congregation have contributed, the Hierophant leads them in a grand ritual. At the climax of the ritual, the blood is magically absorbed into the cloak, vanishing.

The candidate then dons the cloak, wrapping it around himself, hiding completely within its folds. As the Hierophant recites a long passage from the litany describing the birth of the gods and foretelling the scouring of their enemies from the earth. At the conclusion of the telling, the candidate declares that he is ready to be cleansed by the Circle of the Crone and emerge as a true childe of the gods.

With the Hierophant's approval, each member of the congregation steps forward in turn and names a sin that the candidate has committed. The candidate responds to each declaration with acceptance and reiterates his wish to be cleansed. If he responds in any other way, naming of the sin is repeated and the candidate is given another chance to answer it. Once all of the members of the congregation have stepped forward, the candidate turns to the Hierophant and begs, once again, to be cleansed.

The Hierophant then performs a solemn, difficult ritual, supported by the chanting of the Acolytes, imploring the sins of the candidate to retreat from his body and into the cloak he wears. Over the course of the next few hours, as the Hierophant leads the participants through song, dance and prayer, the fabric turns a deep, matte black and grows heavier and heavier upon the shoulders of the candidate.

When the transformation is completed, the candidate is assigned a new name and called upon to discard the robe, leaving behind his old sins and old name and emerging as a new Acolyte of the Circle of the Crone. He does so with great joy and relief. The vampire who emerges from this ritual is never again referred to by his old name in gatherings of the covenant.

A celebration follows, in which the congregation dance, sing and feast upon available sources (invariably prepared and provided by the Hierophant) for the remainder of the night. The candidate is then and forever more a full Acolyte of the Circle of the Crone, a true servant of the gods and channel for the wisdom and power of the spirits.

Baptism on the Steppes

There are territories in Russia where the Acolytes of the Circle are practitioners of an ancient nomadic tradition. They are adherents to an extremely ascetic faith, and exist in a state of self-imposed poverty beyond the comprehension of their counterparts in other covenants. Participating in long, dangerous pilgrimages are a matter of worship for these Acolytes, and all of their major rites are performed in the wilderness, without shelter or furnishings.

When a member of the Chorus is considered ready for initiation, she is separated from her compatriots and lifted upon the shoulders (or backs) of full Acolytes and carried to a flat, open space somewhere in the steppes. The Chorus remains behind, restricted from witnessing the ritual that follows. As the travelers walk to their destination, the Hierophant leads the initiate in a pe-

culiar interrogative song, verifying her intent to discard the trappings of first her mortal life, then her fears and wants and finally even her name. She responds in the affirmative to each question. The entirety of this song can take upwards of three hours as each item of personal baggage to be discarded is listed individually.

At the ritual spot, the initiate is laid upon the ground. She does not move as the Acolytes cut her clothes away, leaving her exposed to the elements of the open wilderness. There, the Hierophant calls upon the wisdom and power of the Crone, asking that she allow her initiate to emerge from the world of mortal desire and greed into the unencumbered faith of a true worshipper. When his prayer is ended, the Acolytes of the Circle tear themselves open with tooth and claw, spattering the initiate with their Vitae. They kneel around her, touching their foreheads to the ground and singing their praise of the Crone and the dedication of her good servants.

The initiate must not drink any of the Vitae that strikes her, and must not move during the entire ritual. At the end of the presentation, as the crimson spots all over her body slowly dry, the Hierophant tells the initiate she has failed to please the Crone in her existence to date. He explains that she is going to be left for the sun, and that her only choice is to accept her fate with the dignity that befits a true believer. Here the truly painful tribulation begins: no amount of protest or pleading will affect the Hierophant in the least. His only response will be to reiterate the initiate's sole option. Her Requiem is coming to an end.

If the initiate tries to flee, the Acolytes will let her go. This Circle will never again accept her. Only if she remains, willing herself to die the Final Death rather than displease the goddess, will her fellow Acolytes return to her. Moments before the rising of the sun, they fling a thick, heavy cloak over her body and wrap her in it, carrying her to safety. As she drifts into sleep, they tell her that a new Requiem will begin now, as a pure and true follower of the faith.

The next night, as they awake, the Hierophant declares that the initiate has truly proven her worth and passed the final test of the Circle. He chooses a new name for her and welcomes her as the newest Acolyte of the covenant. She is then called upon to lead the Circle back to the awaiting members of the Chorus.

For all intents and purposes, the new Acolyte's existence to date is wiped clean. Anything she wishes to forget is forgotten. All that remains for her is the promise of a long and fruitful Requiem in devoted service to the great Wandering Crone.

Rising into the Circle

One Circle on the East Coast of Canada practices an unusually focused faith, based entirely around their founder and eldest member, whom they believe to be an earthly prophet of the Crone's wisdom. All rituals are led by this

Hierophant, and all Acolytes surrender themselves not to the notional goddess, but to her vampiric messenger in their midst. None question her divinity, for the goddess herself bestows it upon her. None oppose her words, for they carry the wisdom and the power of the goddess in them. The Circle shuns those Acolytes who dwell in the domain outside this messiah's influence.

When a member of the Chorus is ready for initiation, the Hierophant approaches him immediately upon completing the regular weekly rites of the circle and favors him with a touch on the forehead. He is escorted from the ritual site by two Acolytes, who spend the rest of the night guiding him through an elaborate purification ritual involving a series of scented baths punctuated by ardent prayers of thanks, the creation of a large bundle of hand-pressed incense sticks and the fitting of a white silk prayer robe.

The next night, before a gathering of the entire Circle, the initiate is brought forward and made to kneel upon the floor of the ritual space. He wears his new robe and is surrounded by the incense he prepared, which smolders throughout the early stages of the ritual. The Hierophant is seated before him, watching him carefully as he recites first a prayer of thanks, then a selected portion of the Circle's litany and then a prayer of devotion to the goddess and her prophet. The initiate swears to serve both in every way he can, acknowledging that they are one and the same, and that to sin against one is to sin against the other.

To prove his devotion, the initiate presents a curved blade and places it on the floor in front of him. He waits for the Hierophant to speak — she may address him immediately, or she may wait as long as she likes. When she makes her decision, she commands him to mark himself with the blade. Some initiates are just asked to make a couple of light cuts across their body, while others are commanded to remove a finger, a tooth or an ear. Some are directed to carve an elaborate pattern of cuts and jabs all over their bodies.

Whatever the demand, the initiate must obey without hesitation. If he fails to complete the cut, the Hierophant repeats her command. If he fails three times to follow the order of the Hierophant, the initiation is considered a failure and the would-be Acolyte, exposed as insincere in his devotion, is beaten into torpor and left out for the sun.

Those who prove their faith are guided through another prayer of thanks, this time speaking in tandem with the Hierophant, who blesses them with a proud smile. As the prayer begins, the rest of the Circle approaches the initiate, surrounding him. When it is completed, the Hierophant invites the newest Acolyte to stand, and the others lift him upon their shoulders, calling their congratulations out with grateful joy.

Although it is never expressly required of them, many Acolytes of this Circle choose to keep the scars of their

initiation as a means of displaying their ardent loyalty to the goddess and her prophet on earth.

THE ECSTASY OF WORSHIP

The Acolytes of the Circle of the Crone are creatures with purpose. Every act, every decision, is informed by their awareness of their place in the natural world and the demands of their faith. Because of this, their personal appearance and the activities they engage in are heavily influenced by their beliefs, and are often selected on the basis of compatibility with those beliefs above any other consideration. Everything is an act of reverence to a true member of the covenant, and her style and activity will always reflect that truth.

Veneration in Costume

Because of the wide variation in the details of religion among the Acolytes of the world, their aesthetics are often utterly dissimilar from domain to domain. One Circle may demand strict asceticism from its members, allowing them only to dress in bland robes. Another may dictate a flamboyant display of intricate jewelry and devices, while still another requires a gruesome display of trophies torn from the bodies of enemies to the covenant — and all three might exist within 100-mile circle.

What is common to every Acolyte is the influence of religious belief on their choices. Blood-spattered skins bespeak a primal, predatory faith, while a taboo against bright colors might indicate the belief in a goddess of darkness or humility. The tools and charms of a faithful existence are often worked into the outfits of the Acolytes, in some cases displayed openly, in others hidden within hems and folds. Very few cults do not express some sort of spiritual taboo or requirement with regards to dress, as dictated by the details of their beliefs.

It is worth noting that fashionable integration with mortal society or the prevailing Kindred trend of a domain is rarely a motive for Acolytes of the Circle. As a result, many fail to fit in and suffer the trials of a visible outsider.

Certain special outfits are occasionally worn, especially at the various ceremonies and holiday rites of the covenant, and these may be as elaborate as anything assembled by the Invictus — although these outfits are almost always hand-made by Acolytes. Into these dresses and cloaks, the tailors of the covenant pour all of their devotional effort, working hard to create a wearable prayer. But clothing is usually the least of the covenant's material means to divine worship.

Veneration in Color and Shape

Icons, paintings and drawings of the manifestations of the Crone are common in the culture of the Circle, as are sculptures and other representative visual arts. Modern Acolytes are known to work in newer media as well: photography, film, even digital art. There are two

schools of thought in the creation and display of Acolyte artworks: naturalist and representational.

The Naturalist school of Acolyte art focuses on realistic depictions of natural beauty, exalting the Crone's multifaceted creation and expressing the love and admiration of her followers by careful study and duplication. The Crone was the first and greatest sculptor and painter, say many Acolytes, and aspiring to create a perfect replica of any one of her majestic works (and to understand the genius of its design) is to worship faithfully. Solitary vampires are known to spend decades or centuries creating works with a single, natural focus.

It's not uncommon to find an Acolyte's haven filled with dozens of sculptures or paintings interpreting and reinterpreting the same subject: a rock formation, perhaps, or a certain species of owl. This is more than satisfying; it's an approach to divinity. To stray from the designs of the Crone is to do her work a disservice, say Naturalist Acolytes, but to reach a full understanding of any one structure is to know a small fraction of her vast truth.

Those Kindred who seriously follow the Naturalist school will most often shore up their work with physical, psychological and academic study of their chosen subjects. Some will learn Animalism so as to better understand the world of animal beauty that they observe (or simply to get a closer look without disturbing their subjects). Others will become expert botanists, cataloging thousands of species themselves and learning to fully understand the workings of their environment, so as to more accurately recreate it in their dedicated works.

There is a Circle in North Africa that assigns each Acolyte a sacred animal spirit and encourages him to carve images of the spirit again and again as a means to meditate on its place in the natural world and the wisdom it displays in life. The ritual space of the Circle is littered with these icons, and some are literally filled with hundreds of them, from tiny ivory figurines to life-size clay sculptures. Each sculpture bears the blessing of the spirit creature, they say, and each one guards the ritual altar with the full faith and ferocity of the vampire who sculpted it.

On the other hand, the Representational school of Acolyte art encourages the making of allegorical works, depicting not just the outward form of Creation but the intense emotions and the implied divinity within. The work of the Crone extends well beyond the simple structure of the natural world, and to restrict one's worship to a shallow emulation of her design is to ignore its deeper structure.

There is bloodlust in a shark, they say, and placid calm in an undisturbed lake. Why not find a way to represent those qualities in a visual work, inspiring a strong response in the viewer? To Representational Acolyte artists, the best creations of Naturalists are admired for

their precision, nothing more. A great work of veneration in art should move the viewer to tears or laughter, not just inspire respect for a steady hand.

Representational Acolyte artists tend to be much less literal-minded than their counterparts, and often prefer to romanticize their subjects rather than learn the nuts-and-bolts physical truth of their forms. Artists of the Representational school will imbue a subject with personal significance and emotion, hoping to communicate their own awe to the viewer.

In Japan, some Acolytes become brush painters beyond compare, capturing the powerful emotional base of a subject in just a few short strokes. Tales are told of the Hierophant in one southern domain who once painted an image of the ocean waves at the nearby shore. The Invictus Prince, upon catching his first glimpse of the image in Elysium, was so overcome by its depiction of untainted serenity that he thereupon renounced his covenant and position, choosing instead to spend the rest of his Requiem in peaceful repose at the edge of the Pacific.

While both sides disagree on aesthetic points, both agree on this: the process of creating a visual work is a manner of worship, and not to be diminished for anything. A vampire who spends less than a day and little conscious effort painting a perfect image of a sparrow is considered a poor Acolyte, while one who works for painstaking months, adding brushstroke after brushstroke to an aesthetically inferior image or meditating for a whole season on the work before putting pencil to paper will be more highly respected. Many a neonate is initially annoyed and confused by this assessment, but they soon come to appreciate and acknowledge the true purpose of Acolyte works.

As a way of thanking the Crone for the opportunity to create their works, many Acolyte artists engage in the practice of mixing their own Vitae in with the media of their art. Literally putting a bit of their life in the image, this infusion is a significant statement of sacrifice, honor and dedication.



QUALITY OF WORK

If an Acolyte's artwork is judged on its surface merits, it can be represented by a simple Intelligence + Crafts roll, just as any other piece might be. But in the society of the Circle of the Crone, the "quality of worship" is just as important (if not more so) than the "quality of work." In point of fact, the only way to read that quality is to examine the amount of work involved in creating the art. Because of this, Acolyte characters may gain a bonus when showing work that they've spent more time on to covenant-mates. A good rule of thumb is to say that every month the character spends beyond the normal creation time for the artwork affords the character a +1 bonus (up to a maximum of +5)

on the Intelligence + Crafts roll for the purpose of Acolyte examination alone.

Example: *Clara, a young Acolyte, is painting an image of flowers in a field. The Storyteller determines that the painting would normally take Clara about two weeks to complete, but Clara's player decides that she will spend an additional three months on the work, carefully going over and over each brushstroke and layering in detail. She rolls Intelligence + Crafts first, gaining a total of three successes. It's a very good painting, but it's not a work of genius. However, she next rolls three bonus dice for her extra effort, gaining two more successes. If a mortal were to see the painting, he would think it was pretty good (three successes). If a fellow Acolyte examined it, though, the devotion in the painting would be clear to him, and he would deem it exquisite (five successes).*

Veneration in Sound and Motion

If the Kindred of the Circle of the Crone have one perfect outlet for their creative urges, this is it. In epic prose and poetry, in song and dance, in powerful oratory and expressive drama, their demonstrations of praise for the whole of creation and the great sufferings of the Crone are so varied and so ubiquitous as to astonish even the coldest of observers. There can be no single, all-encompassing statement to describe the style or subject matter of these works, as they are no less diverse than the many Kindred who compose them.

A majority of these pieces are designed specifically for integration into ritual practice: the epic tellings and interpretations of the litanies of the Crone, for example, are artfully constructed and read so as to maximize impact on every Acolyte who hears them. Elaborate musical pieces may underscore the observance of holiday rites and aid in amplifying or directing the powerful emotions involved in the rituals of Crúac. Wild, spiritual dances are often employed in bringing Acolytes to ecstatic trance so as to better aid in magickal workings.

Not every work is constructed for the sole enjoyment of the covenant, though. Acolytes who love to create also love to display their creations, and are encouraged to do so with pride. Many an Elysium site plays host to the orchestrations of the Circle for the benefit of all attendees. Plays and readings are common in Kindred gathering as well, and many a Prince provides for the protection of certain Acolytes simply because of her appreciation for their passionate contributions to the local arts.

From soothing classic melodies to frenzied, atonal arias, the composers of the Circle of the Crone venerate the miracle of sound with stunning originality and effectiveness. Many outsiders are surprised by the apparent lack of creative proscription in such a religious covenant, and some make no effort to conceal their fascination with Acolyte song.

In fact, there is one domain in Europe where the musicians of the Circle meet in friendly opposition, once a year, with those of the Invictus. The Prince of the domain, a member of the First Estate, is a notorious lover of the symphony, and he encourages the annual event so as to allow the composers of both covenants to display their finest and most recent works. Despite the best efforts of the Invictus' musicians, they concede defeat again and again, honoring the works of the Acolytes with the respectful declarations of their artisans. Those who have never witnessed these competitions often lean toward skepticism, wondering if allowing the Circle to claim victory allows the Prince some political gain. When they first attend, however, it is almost universally admitted: the music of the Circle there is grandly, exhilaratingly, devastatingly superior.

The poetry of the Circle, often preserved and passed on exclusively in oral recitation, is beyond compare. No other covenant makes a point of encouraging the lyrical development of legend and law the way the Circle does, and no other covenant is willing to accept the inevitable variance of personal interpretation that the Acolytes allow for in their litanies.

To the Acolyte writers, musicians and actors, the debate between naturalist and representational technique is not as fierce as with the visual artists of the covenant. Most are content to concern themselves with pure sound or rhythm and evocative speech without imposing the limits of one view or another. To them, the full beauty of creation may not be duplicated in sound alone, but it can be certainly be illuminated by it.

Contrary to expectation, the works of Acolyte composers and writers are not restricted to primitive imagery and technique. The stereotype of dark pagan worship is often applied to the Circle of the Crone, but the stereotype just can't stand up to the occasional display of modernist and postmodernist technique from its artists. All of creation is to be exalted in art, say the Acolytes, and there is no conceivable subject or method of performance that is excluded from creation, hence there can be no taboos in the Circle's world of art.

THE SONG OF THE CRONE

Some Acolyte myths claim that the Crone actually sang the universe into existence, shaping the energies of the void with her voice alone. The legend claims that every creature, object and concept in the universe is associated with a melody. Furthermore, they claim that this melody can be learned and duplicated to incredibly powerful effect, but will destroy all but the most dedicated and sincere worshippers who attempt the melody.

Most Kindred are cynical, regarding this tale as little more than a primitive myth. However, some scholars of the Ordo Dracul have noticed a

correlation between the claims of these musical Acolytes and the suggestions of quantum string theory, with its assertion that the building blocks of reality are composed of hyperdimensional strings, each vibrating with specific pitch and frequency.

Veneration in Life

To better find harmony with the living world and help preserve a sense of peace and belonging, many Acolytes of the covenant engage in a concerted effort to support and protect living beings. Plants, pets, mortal charges and even a few ghouls are carefully guarded and groomed as a means to demonstrate a vampire's devotion to the beauty and potential of life.

The gardeners of the Circle take great pride in the attention they pay to their "verdant prayer," regardless of the actual size of their plots. Most cultivate amazing displays of controlled wilderness, encouraging the abundant growth of wildflowers, weeds and trees within their chosen territory. To wander in the gardens of the Acolyte growers is to know the wide and varied possibilities of nature in one's domain. For the true natural worshipper, every bud and leaf is a sacred surprise, a player in the never-ending flux of regeneration and decay that reflects the whole of the world around it.

The appearance of the gardens may be wild, but not for a lack of attention. The fact is that each individual growth is meticulously cared for, but never interfered with. The goal is to recognize and honor the features of creation's many facets, not to impose aesthetic choices.

A garden is more than an accumulation of plants. A whole ecology of insects, birds and rodents are bound take up residence in a natural growth, allowing the vampire to observe and interact with a miniature replica of the living world. Some Kindred feed on these visitors, while others place them under their protection.

Many Kindred, including outsiders, have had occasion to comment on the profound psychological impact that an expertly maintained garden can have on those who walk within its growth. Most accuse the Acolyte keepers of imbuing their gardens with some magickal effect, but the truth is that visitors are simply experiencing nature in all its beauty, loved and maintained by a faithful devotee — an extremely unusual circumstance for vampires.

THE PROFUNDITY OF NATURE

A vampire may actually experience a concrete change in mood or temper when entering one of the maintained gardens of the Circle of the Crone (or, for that matter, any wild floral display that is extremely well cared-for), but the nature of the effect differs depending on the observer. In some cases, the Beast seems to be calmed temporarily, providing a brief respite for the Kindred viewer. In others, the Beast is excited by the natural

surroundings, tempting the vampire to more animalist behavior.

The deciding factor in these cases is actually the Humanity of the vampire involved. Not surprisingly, the more human he is, the more beneficial his reaction to the burst of thriving greenery. Some Acolytes actually learn to understand this distinction, and use their gardens as a means to gauge the strength of the Beast within a vampire. It's common for new Acolytes to be tested and observed in one of these gardens so that the Hierophant can best determine how to school him.

At the Storyteller's option, an remarkably well-maintained garden (either Intelligence + Science or Intelligence + Crafts with more than 25 accumulated successes, each roll representing at least 40 hours of non-consecutive work) may alter a vampire's tendency to frenzy when she engages in meditative exercise — restful sitting, contemplative walks, or the act of gardening itself — within its boundaries. Those Kindred with more than 5 Humanity will gain a +1 to rolls resisting frenzy while the activity continues. Those with less than 5 actually suffer a -1 penalty on those rolls. Exceptionally large gardens may confer a higher bonus or penalty, if appropriate.

The Acolyte's urge to maintain natural projects doesn't begin and end with plant life. Many dedicated worshippers care for living animal pets or companions, venerating them as representatives of the natural world or real manifestations of totemic spirits. These Kindred will make use of whatever talents and powers they possess to quell the instinctive discomfort animals feel around the undead so as to better ease relations, but will avoid feeding their Vitae to the creatures because of the awareness of the supernatural change it will incur.

Some will populate their temples and sacred spaces with their animal charges. Single creatures might become the adopted pet of an entire Circle, or every member of a specific species might be protected by the Acolytes. The litany of one Southeast Asian domain highlights bats as the "holy messengers of the Crone," and all the covenant's ritual spaces in the area are home to hundreds of the winged creatures. In one Eastern European domain, all domestic cats are considered charges of the Circle, and anyone who harms one risks incurring the wrath of the covenant.

Acolytes often accept strays, feeding and caring for them when they approach, but refuse to restrain the creature or otherwise impose unnatural rules upon them. If an animal chooses to return again and again to a certain vampire's house, she may accept it as a pet (and even revere it), but she will never claim to "own" it.

Of course, not every Acolyte is so freewheeling or interprets "reverence" the same way. Some do keep and train beasts, breeding them for the development of preferred features. Often, training is excused by Kindred who claim

to know the divine origin of these creatures and seek to return them to their natural state. Household pets are taught to shed their pampered lives and stalk the city as fierce hunters, bred for size and speed.

TRANSFORMATION CULTS

Many of the domains led by Gangrel Hierophants tend to emphasize the connection between Kindred and the animal world. These vampires may conduct rituals in animal form via the use of Shape of the Beast (Protean ••••) or Subsume the Lesser Spirit (Animalism ••••), or they may demand that all Acolytes learn the power to take the shape of local wildlife. Some even claim that the immortal bodies they now possess are temporary shells hosting the spirits of animals.

Regardless of claims to the contrary, very few of these Hierophants are madmen or torpor-addled wretches. They have a very clear understanding of their mortal human lives, but are also powerfully aware that their Humanity is dwindling and they must do whatever they can to stave off total psychological collapse. If believing that they are “truly” cats or alligators or hawks helps to keep the Beast at bay in some fashion, then the function is served.

A Storyteller must determine whether taking the physical form of an animal helps compartmentalize the Beast (and thus keep it from overwhelming the Man) or whether it actually makes things worse for the vampire who attempts this. Belief does not always lead to truth, no matter how fervently adhered to.

In some domains, the litany of the Crone may call for the worship of mortals bearing specific divine features (or even of specific mortals, born of a chosen line). The duty of the Acolytes is to protect and care for these humans, whether they know of their benefactors or not. Through these humans, the Acolytes show their concern and dedication to the welfare of the Crone and her many progeny.

Occasionally, a Hierophant will assign Acolytes to a random mortal, teaching them to love creation in any form (even, perhaps, a particularly ugly, poorly mannered one or an enemy from the Acolyte’s days as a mortal). The prosperity of the mortal in question becomes a measure of the faith and commitment of the Kindred under instruction. Pity the mortal who becomes this living prayer, as she will rarely have an inkling of what’s happening to her, and many are incapable of understanding or accepting their sudden shift in fortune. A number of Acolytes make the mistake of giving the mortal too much, too quickly, and can do nothing but watch in horror as their charges spiral out of control. Other Acolytes interpret the positive influence of tribulation too intensely, and grind their mortal wards down under torments that may seem in-

surmountable. Worse, outsider Kindred may discover a human prayer’s significance to the Circle without grasping the reason and may seek to do damage to the covenant by harming her.

Some humans are bred and trained as a mortal Chorus, supporting the Acolytes of the Circle in a given domain. Fully faithful members of the organization, these mortals become servants of the covenant without the benefit of Kindred Vitae — an arrangement that is worrisome to outsiders, to say the least. These allies are privy to the secrets of the litany without necessarily realizing the nature of their superiors. Secret tribal societies arise in the middle of urban developments, peopled by mortals seeking a spiritual alternative to the modern way of life. They may participate in Crúac rituals, if the local system allows it, and candidates for Embrace are often picked from their number.

In opposition to common practice, some Acolytes advocate a ban on “friendly relations” with humans and animals. Vampires are predators, these Acolytes argue, and were created to be predators. It is not for them to coddle prey, or to venerate it. To them, the only way to worship the natural world is to acknowledge their place as hunters in it, and fulfill their natural purpose. These stern cults rarely last long, though, since their members tend to slip into the snarling embrace of the Beast with relatively little delay.

When certain mortals prove their worth to the covenant, whether through faithful attendance, ardent belief or some more esoteric process of selection, they may be gifted with vampire Vitae, transforming them into the ghoulish votaries of the Circle. There the veneration ends, though, and the hapless (or fortunate?) mortal embarks on a journey of her own, for she has passed from the natural world of her former life into the supernatural milieu of the Kindred.

SACRIFICING A FRIEND

Not every mortal who joins the Chorus of the Circle of the Crone benefits from the arrangement. In several domains, there is the practice of inviting a hapless living human into the ranks of the Circle, allowing the human access to the litany and even gifting him with the benefits of several Crúac rituals. As the human becomes intrinsically tied to the local Acolytes, so he seals his fate. The closer he grows to the vampires of the covenant, the more valuable he becomes to them — and the more powerful a sacrifice he represents. Offered up at the most sacred rites (or to fuel the most potent magicks), he is transformed from trusted friend into a painstakingly manufactured loss for the entire Circle.

The destruction of a mortal who befriends the Acolytes in this manner, unawares, is of course a heinous sin against Humanity. Storytellers may actually wish to rate it lower on the hierarchy than

the standard 3 for planned murder, considering the lies and ultimate betrayal that are intrinsic to the rite.

THE POWER OF UNCONSCIOUSNESS

Most Acolytes admit and understand the power of ecstasy in their practice: the ability to lose awareness of the self, to focus on nothing but one's will. Eventually, with experience, many argue that they are no longer channeling their own will, but that of the Crone directly. The loss of conscious attentiveness in worship is a sacred state of being, a moment of cosmic assurance as the vampire continues to function uncluttered by the petty, noisy doubts of the self-aware.

Different cults have different ways of describing this ideal meditative state. Certain Eastern Acolytes claim that they are shedding the layers of illusion implicit in the natural world, becoming nothing more than the impulse of the Crone in pure form, even if only for a moment. One particular cult in France claims that an instant of thoughtlessness is an instant of actual physical contact with the Crone herself, leading to a brief annihilation of ego in her immense, incomprehensible being. This is exactly akin, they say, to being a drop of water that is allowed a fleeting immersion in the whole of the ocean and then withdrawn again.

The ideal state of unconsciousness will be sought either in preparation for ritual worship or as part of the worship itself. Many Hierophants teach their cults to recognize seven distinct avenues to this state: five natural and two unique to Kindred. Some Hierophants create elaborate systems of instruction, leading their Acolytes through all seven in a long and difficult divinity quest that confronts the worst parts of their being in sequence and illustrates the means to conquer the self provided by the gods. Other Hierophants focus on a single avenue, believing that it is the most spiritual, the most effective or just the most simple.

THE FIVE NATURAL AVENUES

The first of the natural avenues is considered by many to be the only one completely free of implied desire, and thus the ideal. It is achieved by simple **physical exertion** — often a repetitive series of moves or dances that are pounded through, again and again, until the Acolyte is simply incapable of thought. The monotony of the exercise is key to achieving the ideal state of mind, much to the dismay of the most inexperienced members of a Circle. Being told that one has to repeat a single dance step for seven nights straight before being allowed to take part in an important ritual can be quite a shock for

young Acolytes, especially if they're still operating on a modern, impatiently goal-oriented mortal perspective.

Truth to tell, the form this exercise takes is less important than the state of mind the exercise creates. Running in place will do the job just as effectively as dancing an elaborately choreographed, 100-step tribal routine. Some cults engage in the practice of burdening — placing a dense weight on the backs of their members and demanding that they stand at attention throughout a long process of preparation for ritual. Some swim or sprint to an isolated sacred space. Some chant endlessly circular mantras constantly, refusing refreshment and pausing only to sleep through the days. The endurance of ritually administered pain is also considered simple physical exertion for the Acolytes of the covenant, as is maintaining immobility for extended periods.

Kindred don't get tired, *per se*, so the exercises of the Acolytes can be mind-boggling in their length. Tales are told of Kindred worshippers who start dancing and never stop, allowing themselves to become an embodied prayer in motion. Whispering worshippers, always chanting, are known to have emerged in certain cults, ignoring the inevitable accusations of madness as they engage in a monolithic, decades-long recitation in honor of the Crone's eternal majesty.

The second natural avenue is **battle**. Tainted by desire in its common form and most commonly associated with the Vices of Envy and Wrath, battle is acknowledged as both a dangerous and staggeringly effective means to achieving the state of consciousness most conducive to ritual. There are experienced Acolytes who claim that it is possible, with enough practice, to arrive at a state of aimless violence — an unconscious endeavor stripped of all polluting thought and transforming the Acolyte into an engine of devotional sacrifice.

Some cults demand preparation in battle before entering into ritual (or as one of the stages of the ritual itself). There are those cults that make a dueling circle of their sacred space, encouraging Acolytes to face off against one another in appallingly brutal exercise. Most of the Kindred who participate in these ritual duels testify to a sensation of exhilarated mindlessness that overtakes them under the right conditions. Other, more dangerous cults require that their members do battle with outsiders before they can attempt contact with the gods. These cults construct a state of perpetual war for themselves, always seeking out enemies and victims on which to hone their bloody state of unconscious veneration.

It can be astonishing to see a warring Acolyte operating in the state of mind considered ideal for worship. The effect is nothing like frenzy — in fact, it's very nearly the opposite of the animalist red tide of rage or hunger that overtakes all Kindred. The experienced practitioner of the Circle's thoughtless combat is rather a creature of pure martial understanding, machinelike in her precision and completely without mercy or doubt.



Sex is the third of the avenues to mindlessness. Equally tainted by conscious desire, sex is associated with the Vices of Lust and Gluttony. In many cults, sexual practice is ritualized in itself, leading to an altered state of consciousness in participating Acolytes and clearing them for the intense energies of Crúac. Some actually integrate sex with the central ritual itself, achieving the effect at the moment of ego loss that arrives at the height of pleasure.

But sex within the Circle is not what some Acolytes expect. The experience can be very pleasurable, but ritual practice seeks an ideal of virtuous desirelessness and so avoids the choices an inexperienced initiate is most likely to gravitate toward. If there is a member of the Circle he finds especially attractive, he is discouraged from partnering with her in the sacred space. If there is a practice he finds particularly disgusting or disturbing, he is likewise restricted from participating. The ideal approach, as instructed by many a Hierophant, is a state of detached openness.

To achieve this admittedly difficult attitude, younger Kindred often resort to techniques or conditions created to assist in damping desire. Simple restriction of the senses is applied in some domains — worship in darkness or in opaque muffling masks. In others, mantras and elaborately ritualized movements are practiced. Older vampires, while no less moved by desire, often admit that sexual practice without its taint seems easier for them, simply because of their dimming memories. The pleasurable sensations of copulation are all tied with living function, and the cold bodies of the Kindred can

only simulate the experience with a significant expenditure of Vitae. If they don't bother to warm themselves, sex for vampires can become no less mechanical than running in place.

The fourth avenue to unconscious worship is an extremely popular one among Acolytes of the Circle, since this path is well supported by both of the basic tenets of the covenant. This avenue is realized in the **construction** of devotional materials, and is most commonly linked to artistic practices. It is also a potential spiritual trap, according to some Hierophants, and is associated with the Vices of Pride and Greed. Just as each of the other avenues, construction must be approached with due reverence and engaged in with pure intentions.

Construction as exertion requires more than the technique of an artisan. The Acolyte who chooses to worship in this manner must throw the whole of her self into the creation of her works. A sculptor must pound at the chisel unto the limits of endurance. A painter must labor without pause, constantly laying pigment onto the canvas regardless of time spent or personal desire. A poet will scream his verses into the sky even as they occur to him, rending his own throat with their force. Only in this manner can the vampire achieve a state of pure devotion and mindless servitude to the will of the Crone.

Many cults employ additional tactics to aid the Acolyte in separating herself from her works, ensuring that their creation is a purely worshipful act. Some insist that the Acolytes gather to destroy each piece at the conclusion of their rituals, so that nothing remains of

them (and thus, there is nothing to be proud of). Other Acolytes decree that the works are to be constructed of perishable materials, which will proceed to rot naturally after presentation. One Circle in Southeast Asia has adopted the peculiar practice of denying responsibility for their creations, choosing instead a notional spirit manifestation and crediting it with the work.

The fifth and final natural avenue is **the hunt**. Predation is a function of the living world, and those Kindred who learn to lose themselves in the activity without giving themselves over to the Beast find a new and potent means to achieving the uncorrupted essence of worship. In Kindred existence, many cults associate the hunt with the Vice of Sloth, because the hunt tempts the rational Man to slumber when it is most needed: in controlling the irrational demands of the Beast, and in the lethargy associated with both extreme hunger and the satiation that follows feeding.

Those who choose to worship in the hunt are likely to engage in starvation practices to heighten the urgency of their need and ensure that the activity satisfies only the natural requirement to feed, not the lust of the Beast. They ration their Vitae, subsisting on less than most Kindred. Periods of careful idleness are punctuated by an extremely aggressive hunt, allowing the vampire to slip between the extremes of near-comatose hunger and near-lunatic fervor. Never at either extreme is the Acolyte to succumb to the temptations that await: torpor in periods of inactivity and frenzy in the act of the hunt.

A number of cults around the world integrate the hunt into their rituals and rites, performing their acts of sorcery and veneration in the midst of stalking prey. The energies that arise from this practice are said to be terrifying, even to those who call them forth. The spiritual vibration maintained between desperation and madness is too much for many Kindred, who collapse in one direction or the other. But those who can maintain a balance often find that they can employ the resultant state of energized, abnormal calm to devastating effect.

ACHIEVING NATURAL MINDLESSNESS

Running the characters through the attempt to achieve unconscious function is a great way to add color to a particularly important ritual in a story. This can become the focus of a chapter as a tribulation on its own, or can be one of a series of requirements to complete a major working. Storytellers who wish to do so may wish to use this optional mechanic to help model the process and enhance roleplay.

When a character is attempting to reach this meditation-in-action, call for an extended Composure + Wits roll, with the number of required successes equaling 30 Humanity (so a character with 6 Humanity would need 24 successes). The length of time each roll represents is variable: for

some avenues (most likely sex and battle), you might make one roll per round. In others, one roll might represent an hour or a night. The resulting meditative state, once achieved, has the same duration. In general, the Storyteller should set a maximum on the number of rolls the player can make in one attempt — most often bounded by time constraints in the story.

There are two factors that may modify the roll. The first is the Merit “Meditative Mind,” which should add a bonus +1 to every attempt. The second depends on previous performance. If a character successfully achieves the unconscious state in activity, he gains a +1 bonus on his next attempt to do so. If he fails (giving up before achieving the state), he suffers a -1 penalty on his next attempt.

Example: Julius the Daeva is attempting to find the state of unconscious activity in dance during a ritual, as instructed by his Hierophant. He has a Humanity of 7, so he needs $30 - 7 = 23$ successes to get to the proper frame of mind. However, the last time he tried this, he didn't get there before the ritual was done, and so will suffer a -1 penalty on all his rolls. The Storyteller decides that each roll will represent 10 minutes of dancing, and that the ritual takes one hour. If Julius succeeds, he will enjoy 10 uninterrupted minutes of pure, unconscious function and perform the ritual to the Hierophant's satisfaction. Julius' Composure + Wits totals five dice, so (with the penalty figured in), his player has 6 four-dice rolls to try and get 23 successes. Note that how well Julius dances is not represented here (that would require a Dexterity + Expression roll), and is not relevant to this exercise.

THE UNNATURAL AVENUES

The sixth avenue to unconscious worship is the first of two unnatural paths: **frenzy**. Flirting with the most dangerous aspects of vampire nature, some Acolytes approach meditation through subsuming themselves in the mindless paroxysms of the Beast. These Acolytes argue that the every aspect of the creation of the Crone is fraught with meaning and purpose, and the frenzied tendencies of the Kindred are no exception. Viewing their outbursts as no less sacred than an earthquake or hurricane, these Acolytes choose to explore the possibilities of fueling their ritual workings in the dark depths of Wassail and Röttschreck.

Even among Acolytes who worship in frenzy, there are degrees. Some cults carefully prepare their sacred space for a storm of mindless abandon, restraining their members with heavy chain to ensure that the ritual chamber itself is not disrupted. Other cults believe that no concessions should be allowed: the vampires involved are encouraged to throw themselves into the storm of unconscious mania without limit.

Frenzy is associated, by those who care to discuss the state in intellectual terms, with all Vices. Frenzy is consid-

ered by all but the most depraved cults to be the full and final expression of the worst part of any vampire. The loss of conscious ego under frenzy's influence is irrefutable and easily demonstrated, so it is still considered an avenue to achieving the meditative worship sought after by many.

DEVOTION OR DEPRAVITY

As a Storyteller, you should be careful with letting characters justify their actions by claiming frenzy as an avenue to proper worship. Every Acolyte, no matter how deeply sincere and noble she is in her intent, must still come to terms with the consequences of her actions while under the influence of the Beast. Furthermore, a vampire who frenzies a lot and makes little or no effort to contextualize his outbursts with ritual activity will be quickly spotted and confronted by a capable Hierophant.

The normal meditation-in-action roll doesn't apply to a frenzying Acolyte; he is automatically in a mindless state. The usefulness of the character's attempt and the ability to frame it in an appropriate context are where difficulty presents itself.

To reflect the ritual base surrounding a "proper" frenzy, the Storyteller may require a player to make a meditation (Composure + Wits) or occult practice (Intelligence + Occult) roll. If the roll fails, the character does not restrain herself to the planned choreography of the rite, somehow disrupting it (by entering frenzy too early or failing to come out of it in time).

The second unnatural avenue, and the final of the seven avenues, is the practice of ritual **torpor**. Rarely attempted by younger or less experienced Acolytes, it involves the willful collapse into the sleep of ages, allowing one's self to drift aimlessly in the unconscious haze therein. The vampire loses all contact with the natural world and his own body, abandoning himself to the dreams chosen for him by the Crone. Ideally, a vampire learns to achieve a meditative state within this unconscious world, witnessing and accepting the visions that are presented to him therein. Just going to sleep isn't enough — one must learn to relax into the current of torpor's dreams, "traveling" calmly and attentively under their influence.

Most Acolytes who engage in this practice become the center of certain sacred rites in their cults. A schedule of sleep is set for these Acolytes, complete with a ritual celebrating the commencement of their slumber and another ceremony for waking. Often, the schedule is set by a calendar of natural events (phases or eclipses of the moon, certain dates and the passage of seasons are all common) or unpredictable occurrences (the next time it snows, the next occurrence of a meteor shower). The slumbering vampire is usually said to be "in prayer,"

and her oft-confused first words upon waking are generally treated as oracular proclamations. Some cults go so far as to reserve important decisions for these ritual awakenings, choosing to read and interpret the waking statements of the Kindred sleepers for guidance.

Ritual torpor is a fearsome journey for many Acolytes. It is well documented that those with violent Requiems may be subjected to a seemingly endless progression of torturous, guilt-ridden dreams. Those who emerge from a sacred sleep invariably find themselves diminished in power, and occasionally seem diminished in capacity. Some go irretrievably mad. Some arise with shattered memories, never quite understanding who they were before the sleep. But all who engage in a ritual torpor are holy, somehow touched by what gods or goddesses the Kindred of the Circle revere. Whatever happens to these vampires is in keeping with the wishes of the Crone, and any Acolyte who willingly enters the sacred sleep is generally considered a visionary of the finest caliber.

Some experienced Acolytes with a history of successes on one or more of these avenues claim that they eventually achieve a state of constant prayer-in-action, in which meditation is integrated into every waking and sleeping moment of being. These Kindred claim that the Requiems that follow for them become harmonious, natural affairs. These Acolytes move smoothly through the nights, honoring the Crone and her natural creation in everything they see and do, never failing to find their place in worship. This is not Golconda, say the Acolytes, because this is not an attempt to escape the truth of Kindred existence. The enlightened vampire still feeds and frenzies — but that feeding and that frenzy are serene elements of an operative whole. This state may be centuries in coming, but the promise of achieving this state is something that keeps many a young Acolyte in faithful practice from night to night.

Most Acolytes who have attained this state recommend that a vampire seek the unconscious Requiem through all seven avenues, each in sequence or all at once. There are some Hierophants who create a rigid program of progression, taking their Acolytes through a series of arduous exercises meant to illustrate each path. The cult of one domain in the Middle East encourages all of its members to follow a complicated course of training and tribulation to find their meditation in every avenue, each of which is split into six sublevels. Their course is modeled on a notional internal structure, the "Palace in Vitae," that the Acolyte must build over time, taking decades to complete each of the 42 stages. It is said that those who achieve the completion of even two or three stages are clearly and demonstrably more comfortable and capable than average, unschooled Kindred, and that the magics of Crúac come much more easily to them.

Whether the claims of the Acolytes are true or not, it cannot be denied that the exercise of meditative prayer-

in-action lends them purpose. No vampire who seriously seeks the completion of these paths is ever idle, and that fact alone may aid in understanding the value of the covenant. Formerly aimless Kindred who feel that they are fulfilling a spiritual quest are lent a sureness of self and a means of satisfaction unavailable to those who are too cynical or otherwise unwilling to participate.

DESIGN OR ACCIDENT

As in the case of ritual frenzy, torpor is not something that is automatically considered a sacred journey. It's rarely enough for a vampire to slip into unconsciousness outside of the ritual space of the Circle and then rise, claiming that she has been granted a great vision. Her fellow Acolytes are a lot more likely to take her seriously if she engaged in the ceremonial preparations before torpor, slept for the prescribed length of time and was awakened in a properly conducted rite of return. Anybody can sleep, but very few Kindred are willing to undergo the planned, ritual sleep of the questing Acolyte.

Those vampires who are willing to take this risk are likely to be treated with real respect, so Storytellers may wish to tie Status requirements and rewards to the practice. For example, Acolytes with less than Covenant Status •• may not be allowed to perform the slumbering meditation, while those who have successfully performed it in the past might be guaranteed elevation to no less than Covenant Status ••• when they awake.

THE CIRCLE AND HOMOSEXUALITY

For many Kindred, Acolyte or not, sexual issues don't matter. Some Kindred didn't care much about sex before dying, and more lost interest after their first feed. Ingrained beliefs (bigotry or tolerance) usually carry on into the Requiem: without strong incentive to change, Kindred stagnation wins by default.

That said, there is a segment of the Circle, that cares about homosexuality. These Acolytes don't care about

it as a lifestyle choice (since they don't have lives) but rather as a philosophical and mystical issue. Among those with an opinion, the split is almost perfectly even between those who tolerate and even celebrate alternative sexuality, and those who despise and condemn it.

The intolerant faction adheres to what they call "the principle of Natural Life." They believe in an ordered cosmos in which everything has a place and a purpose. Transgressing that order is not just wrong, it's dangerous. Similar to fundamentalist Christianity and Islam, Natural Life Acolytes argue that living men have penises so they can impregnate living women, full stop. Unlike those mortal religions, Natural Life Acolytes cite direct experience of the supernatural as proof of cosmic order. Creation is good, and fertility is to be praised. Stagnant lustful rutting is, at best, a waste and a symptom of a greater malaise. At worst, it's an affront to nature itself (although only the most fanatical fraction of the faction considers the damage anything but minor).

On the other side of the fence sit the Transgressionists, who think it's pretty rich that a blood-drinking animate corpse would dare lecture anyone about "Life" or what's "Natural." Sure, standard vanilla man-woman sex creates babies and serves that function in the normal course of things.

But the normal is not the numinous, by definition. Those who reach for what's beyond staid norms are expanding themselves, growing stronger, widening their perspectives. It doesn't matter if the transgression is kicking apart a crucifix, going down on your sorority sister or telling some Jim Crow cracker that you are not going to sit in the back of the fucking bus. Denying the common wisdom is the only source of uncommon wisdom, and defying accepted tradition is the sole source of social change. Those who dare to step out of gender roles, be it from defiance or mental illness or simply because it is their preference, have matched their will against the masses. In this, intentionally or not, these Acolytes have pursued growth through tribulation. For that they deserve praise.



CHAPTER THREE: THE CIRCLE OF THE CRONE AND THE DANSE MACABRE

“That one still doubts.
That secular revolutionary
nonsense is in his blood.
In his bones.
Let’s open his eyes.
Go get them and bring them to me.”

*We are oft to blame in this,
'Tis too much proved, that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er The devil himself.*

— Shakespeare, Hamlet

JOINING THE COVENANT

The Circle of the Crone is not one unified covenant. It has no universal holy book, no laws or writs that bind all members. Therefore, the Circle fails to lay bare any canonical rules regarding how new members come into the covenant. Acolytes belong to various cults founded upon nearly limitless mythological traditions and religious syncretisms. Because of this, each cult does things differently from the next. And yet, one can find various themes and actions running common through many of the cults and the way they bring new members into their particular brands of belief.

At first, this might seem to be because the cults have certain “tent-pole” beliefs: the concepts of creation and sacrifice, the disavowal of the Judeo-Christian mold and an adherence to pagan ideals. Up to a point, this is true. What truly binds all cults of the Crone, however, is their insidious blood magic, Crúac. For some, Crúac does not serve the covenant. Quite the opposite: Acolytes serve Crúac. For others, Crúac is a dangerous tool, but one made like any tool or weapon. Blood sorcery is either a remnant of the old gods, providing a connection to them from beyond the veil, or allows a vampire to *become* one of these gods.

No matter what one's opinion of what Crúac is or is not, it remains clear that this blood magic does not belong in the hands of the unworthy. Those who are unwilling to commit to the ways and precepts of the cults are undeserving of the secret powers of the Bloody Crescent. As such, the covenant does what it must to protect its secrets. Yes, it wants new members; surely the sects of the Crone will be exiled or crushed if the Circle's adherents dwindle in number. But Crúac makes joining the covenant a dangerous proposition, both for the new vampire and the local cult.

For the new vampire, it means he must prove himself beyond the shadow of a doubt. If he wants to truly be a part of the Crone and learn her rituals, he must show the Acolytes over and over again that he is worthy and will not betray them. His trials will be bloody, and once upon that road, he may not turn back without potentially ending his Requiem.

For the Acolytes, new adherents represent a dizzying conundrum. Yes, the Circle needs new blood, but will the new convert betrays the covenant? Is his belief worthy, or does he simply want to taste the power of the old gods without truly giving them their due? The Acolytes must test him again and again to ensure his devotion — but are the tests too severe? For Crúac and the old gods, *can* any test be too severe?

THE UNTRIED CHORUS

To alleviate these concerns and to allow a period of testing and trust-building, most Crone cults allow new members to join the Chorus. Most Acolytes find that this is the best way to keep old secrets out of new hands — at least, until those initiates have proven their readiness and devotion. It's worth noting that while most cults use the Chorus in some form or another, cults don't always refer to the group of new members as such. Some cults call new members “harlequins” or “jacklegs” to make clear an initiate's low position as an untrained fool.

Vampires in the covenant's Chorus are never privy to the secrets of the cult. This is meant to predominantly protect Crúac, though blood magic is not the only secret that a cult may possess. It likely wants to keep all its rituals and practices secret and thus sacred. Many sects are already subject to persecution; it is foolish to offer up their vulnerabilities on a silver platter for the others to exploit.

Entering the covenant as a member of the Chorus is the most common way for most Acolytes to join the Circle. It can be a long and hard road, with night after night of one's Requiem being downright punishing. The question remains, how does one become a member of the Chorus in the first place?

The Chorus and Crúac

Smart cults avoid teaching their jacklegs about blood magic. Such an act is on par with handing a toddler a straight razor — somebody is going to get cut.

Just because it is unwise, however, doesn't mean it cannot happen. The covenant has no ruling council. Nobody will come down from on high and punish the Acolytes for such an indiscretion. Those who begin teaching Crúac immediately do so for various reasons

— perhaps they feel overly mistreated or under attack and feel that dark magic can give them an edge. Or, maybe the cult is small enough that it misjudges a new member and trusts her prematurely. Sometimes, this is fine. Often, though, such a misjudgment ends in spilled blood, lost secrets and much misery.

CRAVING AND CONVERSION

Few cults proselytize or recruit. In general, Acolytes do not feel they are building an army or a powerbase. Leave that, they say, to the First and Second Estate. The Sanctified in particular are often willing to open their doors to the barely faithful: laypeople who may have a well-worn copy of the catechism and might show up at Midnight Mass once a year but with no greater faith than that. Most Acolytes come to their belief on their own.

The gaze of the old gods and one's mastery of Crúac do not come with limp devotion and toothless faith. Recruiting tends to bring onboard the lowest common denominator. Recruiting is, some say, like skimming the top of the water for gold, when the true treasures lie deep.

Often enough, Acolytes suspiciously regard those who come seeking enlightenment. Is the vampire the pawn (aware or not) of the cult's enemies? Does he only wish for power without the faith, looking to steal fire from the gods without paying the cost? The most common concern is that the vampire is simply unready.

Many harlequins find their dedication to the primeval powers is not nearly as zealous as they had imagined, and it burns out hot and fast and leaves them a haggard wreck. Few are truly prepared for what a Circle cult demands of its faithful.

Usually, determining this initial worth before the vampire is allowed into the Chorus is difficult, but the Acolytes have likely gone through it before. Sometimes, it comes down to a simple question-and-answer period, one that may take many nights to complete. Has the Damned had dreams that led him to the covenant? Has he renounced his faith in other things, removing the fetters that bind him to other Kindred and their ways?

The Acolytes may ask about the vampire's mortal life, going as far back as the individual's childhood. The Acolytes often look for crucial signs or portentous triggers in the subject's life and Requiem, things that illustrate the vampire's willingness to sacrifice and her understanding of the cycles of life and death, creation and destruction. It's far better for an initiate to already have a grasp of these larger ideas than to be utterly ignorant of the world around her. (Some Acolytes liberally use the Auspex Discipline to help them gauge a subject's personality, both through examining auras and capturing surface thoughts.)

Some Acolytes cannot get a proper "read" through this method, and resort to scrutinizing the vampire's behavior from afar. By spying on the Kindred — whether for a few nights or a whole year — the Acolytes gain a better

grasp of the subject through her actions. If they see her duck into Midnight Mass, that becomes worrisome. If she goes out of her way to avoid trouble and persecution, or exhibits weakness, then perhaps her blood does not belong with the old gods.

Other cults prefer more extreme methods when asking a vampire to prove his initial worth. Worse, they don't always make clear the ways to obtain this proof. Ultimately, the Acolytes either expect creativity from the aspirants, or hope that they will somehow discover how other vampires have come to the cult before them. Creativity should be expressed through immediate sacrifice: perhaps the vampire severs his own hand and gifts it to the Hierophant.

Alternately, maybe the vampire offers herself as a sacrifice, meaning that she subjects herself to one or all the steps of the Vinculum. Surrender is key to this proof. If the vampire murders a loved one (possibly the last remnant of her mortal attachments) or instead Embraces him, then that might reveal the mad spark the cult seeks. Every cult will seek different things. An eager aspirant must know how to appease them, even if such appeasement seems alien or otherwise unknowable.

Not all Acolytes come groveling to the covenant. On rare occasions, the cult will extend an invitation to a singular Kindred. This is different from open proselytizing: the cult does not present broad propaganda in the hopes of catching many fish with a single net. No, an invitation is precise. The Acolytes extend the hand of brotherhood only to those they feel are truly worth it, and moreover to those whom the Acolytes expect to actually join. Extending the invite and receiving a snub in return can be humiliating. Such embarrassment has repercussions in and out of Elysium.

Different cults have different criteria in regards to who deserves specific solicitation. Some Acolytes look for fortuitous omens and events surrounding particular vampires. If the old gods have chosen someone, they will let the cult know in subtle yet observable ways.

While tattoos, jewelry and other symbolic adornments may give small hints, Acolytes seek more superstitious elements woven into a vampire's Requiem. Did he find a snake sneaking into his haven? Does his flesh feature unusual birthmarks? Who are his victims, and have they said or done anything odd when under the spell of the Kiss? No handbook of symbology guides an Acolyte when looking for such curious portents. She must rely solely upon her dry gut and dead heart to convince her.

Those Damned brought to the cult in this manner, sponsored by an Acolyte already out of the Chorus, tend to have an easier time getting into the Chorus. They still have to jump through some requisite hoops, of course — the cultists must be certain that this individual truly belongs in the Circle. They will watch him, testing him in little ways (less *painful* ways). They may push him to

complete small tasks — fetching fake reagents, mumbling an offhand and socially damaging comment to a local Bishop or Invictus crony, perhaps extending the blood and the will to make a bloody crescent tattoo visible and permanent. The vampire will not only have an easier time getting into the Chorus, but he is likely to spend less time as a harshly tested jackleg. If he is invited to join, it was for a reason, and the cult doesn't wish for such an individual to languish in ignorance.

One important note is that within most cults, a vampire's age does not matter when joining the covenant. Whether the Kindred was Embraced three days or 300 years ago, a new initiate is a new initiate. All must go through some steps to prove their worth to the Circle, whether neonate, ancilla or elder.

Yes, some Acolytes will offer leniency toward an elder out of respect. Other Acolytes, however, will do quite the opposite. An elder learning the coveted blood magic and then turning treacherous is infinitely worse than a neonate doing the same. Elders can be duplicitous, even mad. Their worth must be estimated and proven more than any other.

BORN INTO BLOOD

Some vampires receive automatic — even involuntary — entrance into the covenant's Chorus via the Embrace. If an Acolyte chooses to drag a mortal into this existence, for the most part it is because the Acolyte wishes for him to join the Circle. (Admittedly, some Embrace in the throes of passion, madness or vengeance. Those who do are still encouraged to find a place for their new childe among the other cultists.) The neonate generally receives little or none of the testing waged against other Kindred; he was likely tested pre-Embrace. His reception into the Chorus is done without question, whether he likes it or not. As a member of the Chorus, the initiate remains incapable of learning the covenant's rituals and cult secrets.

Should the neonate wish to leave the cult, he may find his exit difficult. Admittedly, some Acolytes won't hold their childer to a forced belief. Some Acolytes feel that the old gods cannot be satisfied by compulsory reverence (false worship may even anger the gods). Alternately, many Acolytes feel that belief and faith are secondary to rote compliance and sacrifice. The gods care little about faith, some say. It doesn't matter if the vampire sacrificing his blood and whispering prayer truly *believes* — it only matters that the god receives his gift and gets his due.

A neonate looking to escape the covenant therefore diminishes the sacrifices made to the powers that be, and, by leaving, further insults the gods. Since the childe's blood is that of the sire, it is then a kind of a twofold insult, an insult that the sire will not easily allow. If the sire forces the neonate to stay, then that is what must be done. Acolytes accept that they are slaves to something: the old gods, blood, even Crúac. Slavery is not abhorrent.

Some neonates are able to escape through the aid of other Kindred. If the childe is able to get word to vampires outside the Circle, one might intervene on the neonate's behalf. The Sanctified in particular are often more than willing to lead another Kindred out of the darkness and into the purported light of Heaven. Stealing a childe from the heathens and showing her God can be advantageous and pleasurable. Of course, many neonates who think they're escaping the Circle find that they have only traded masters instead of securing freedom. At least the Acolytes tend to treat their childer with a modicum of love and respect (however false or hollow). Other masters may be less gracious and doubly cruel.

The Embrace is an important part of covenant teachings. For some cults, the Embrace embodies the act of ultimate creation for a vampire. No other act of will is as significant as granting a mortal endless life by placing him beneath the gaze of the old gods.

Others see the Embrace not as the ultimate act of creation, but the pinnacle of tribulation. The Requiem is hard and painful, requiring night after night of sacrifice. Whether the cult teaches that the Embrace is blessed conception or a sacred object lesson, it still stands that the act itself is critical. Most cults support the Embrace, despite how it is viewed by other covenants. That's not to say that all cults openly Embrace, only that they contend to do so is a vampire's right.

If an Acolyte finally does Embrace, she does not undertake the action lightly. She does not pick the chosen mortal out of a crowd — unless, of course, the Acolyte relies upon portents from the gods, in which case she might see a red blouse, green eyes and a crow pendant and feel that the Morrigan have chosen a childe for her. An Acolyte generally watches the target for a significant period of time: months, if not years.

Every cult, and each Acolyte within the cult, looks for something different. Does the vampire seek an artist? Does her Hierophant entreat her to find a human with a great deal to lose, so that the mortal may humbly learn the power of sacrifice and rise consequently from the ashes of a self-destroyed life? Should the mortal already possess pagan leanings, or would the gods prefer one who can be dragged to the well and made to drink?

Choosing a childe — one who will be both childe of blood and brother in faith — is a long and arduous process. For this reason, many Acolytes prefer to make a potential childe a ghoul first (called a "votary" in the Circle). In this way, the subject can be examined from every angle, and put through many of the same rigorous trials through which new Kindred converts suffer.

THE LONELIEST NUMBER

Because the Embrace is infrequent among Acolytes and they do not actively proselytize to gain new members, the Chorus can comprise a

single vampire. Woe to the Kindred who exists as the lone member of a cult's Chorus, for much attention falls upon him. Yes, the rewards are all his, but so are the miseries.

The Circle recognizes that this is not always . . . easy . . . on the Damned in question, and so many cults endeavor to perfect their timing when accepting new members. Some cults aim to have a specific period of the year in which they invite initiates or allow Kindred into their ranks. Other cults make sure that one Acolyte does not Embrace alone. If the Acolytes are going to perform this act — already a contravention of supposed Kindred law — they might as well compound their flouting of the law with several Embraces, not just one. Small cults might even plan it so that when one Acolyte Embraces, *all* Embrace. In this way, a full and active Chorus is created.

PROOF IN PAIN

For a few cults, entrance is as easy as asking. These cults tend to be small, somewhat relaxed and ultimately lenient. (They also tend to have little or no understanding of Crúac.) The Acolytes are simply happy to have allies accompanying them through the limitless nights of the Requiem. These lax cults are few and far between. More importantly, bigger and more powerful cults tend to dismiss such naïveté as little more than posturing. Some powerful cults seek to “teach” such lesser cults greater lessons. Some powerful cults simply ignore such lax cults.

Most cults, however, demand sacrifice of those seeking to enter the Chorus, as well as those Chorus members hoping to become full members of the covenant. Therefore, Kindred put their prospective Acolytes through various rituals and practices whose primary purpose is to see how far the vampires will go in service of the Circle.

These rites may have secondary benefits, as well. Not only might these rituals teach the Chorus about the ways of the covenant (and how the power of creation must come *after* the enlightenment gleaned through tribulation), but the subjects of the rituals may reveal a great deal about themselves through these often awful acts.

Below are a number of ritual types that Acolytes might put their Chorus (or potential Chorus members) through to test them. Because the Circle of the Crone comprises many cults with many core doctrines, these rituals are by no means complete or universal. They are only a handful of options out of the infinite yield of misery that Acolytes can offer its initiates.

Mortification

Rituals of mortification — wherein the flesh is mutilated, marked or altogether destroyed — serve different purposes within different Circle cults. One cult, following a bloody syncretism of various Native American gods and legends, might teach that mortification proves that one's body is one's own.

The gods have gifted a vampire with a body that can endure great suffering. By bringing suffering upon the body,

the suffering frees the body and proves to the sufferer that his flesh is his own and he should do with it as he wishes.

An Underworld cult, however, which worships death and a pantheon of lawyerly “judge” gods, might use bodily mutilation to teach that flesh is just meat, nothing more. Meat is useless in this physical world, *or*, instead, belongs to the gods of judgment and mortality. The final purpose — one generally intended by most cults that employ these painful rituals — is that mutilation reveals a potential's mettle. If she cries out too soon for comfort, then she is not strong enough to serve the gods and master the dangerous blood sorceries of the covenant.

The “Moon Dance” is one such ritual, undertaken by several covenant cults in the American West. This ritual, borrowed from various Sioux tribes (Lakota, Oglala, Teton), is a modification of the “Sun Dance.” In this rite, Acolytes fasten hooks to chains and ropes. The hooks vary in size from meat hooks to fish hooks. Some Acolytes prepare the hooks with chemicals that foster pain or itching (some even use secret Crúac rituals to prepare their own blood to smear on the hooks). They then suspend the hooks from a tree, light pole, gallows or some other tall object. The Acolytes hang the neophyte, piercing his flesh with the barbs and let him dangle all night under a full or new moon. (One Circle cult outside of Denver prefers to let the hooks pierce only the head and face. One meat hook in particular goes in through the mouth and pierces downward, coming out through the soft part beneath the lower jaw.)

The Acolytes gather and pray over the hanging vampire. The goal is that, during this time, the vampire will lose enough blood and endure just enough pain so that his mind will go blank. During that state of *tabula rasa*, the initiate should discover who his patron god or spirit will be, for that entity will come to him and claim him as a mount.

Other cults, such as some with Norse leanings, utilize a similar ritual with an entirely different purpose. The ritual, called the “Search for Wisdom,” involves suspending the harlequin upside down from a tree. While he is hanging, other Acolytes come and mortify his flesh. Some stick him with skewers, others cut away bits of skin and snip off extremities (fingers, nose, genitals). One must always thrust a spear into him — preferably *through* him, and into the tree behind. An eye may be taken. Hungry ravens, often ghouls, may come to pick at his flesh to draw his dead blood.

That is only the first night. On the second night, the vampire is brought back to the tree and made to hang by his neck (right-side up). Vampires nesting in the trees pour tainted blood into his mouth and make him drink. (The blood is from mortals sickened or killed by some kind of poison: bug-killer, rat poison, plant or animal toxins.)

This two-night ritual is meant to teach an important lesson about wisdom — and, by proxy, Crúac. The first night symbolizes Odin's sacrifice for wisdom. The All-



Father hung upside down from the World Tree to gain insight into magic. For his suffering, he was rewarded. The second night, on the other hand, is the flip-side of this, and represents the eternal punishment of the trickster, Loki. Loki wanted wisdom but did not want to sacrifice. He overextended himself and went too far, and he paid the price for his selfishness. Crúac is this way. If one gives of oneself, then one may take from the gods in the form of blood magic. If one learns the magic without sacrifice — then the gods will *make* one the sacrifice, perhaps forever.

Altered States

Sometimes, it is not the body that needs to be broken, but the mind. What the covenant asks an initiate to believe seems easy on the surface. The Chorus member can nod and smile all he likes; even the smart ones can, in depth, explain their revelations regardless of what they truly believe. That isn't enough by covenant standards.

Many cults prefer some kind of proof that the doors of the mind have been kicked open — this isn't done with permission from the vampire, one cannot *choose* enlightenment or what form it will take. It must be brought to bear against an individual, crashing down upon him like a violent wave. This can be done by forcing the victim into an altered state of consciousness.

The predominant method by which Acolytes achieve this is through drugs and toxins. Some cults keep close a number of drugs that they consider quite sacred. Most of these are natural psychoactives: psilocybin, mescaline, peyote and ayahuasca. The term “magic mushrooms” is no joke — some cults literally revere them as akin to something magical. The Acolytes believe that these drugs don't merely cause hallucinations, but actually give the user a glimpse into the many worlds of the many gods. Proof of this is in the fact that a Kindred can ingest the drugs and still benefit from their effects, even though he is dead and should be able to do no such thing.

Decades ago, the barrio cults of California and Texas brought with them one such ritual. Brazilian Kindred, mystics and criminals from the *favelas*, came to America and hid within the slums of the cities (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, Houston). They brought with them a reverence for the *ayahuasca* vine, also known as the “vine of the dead.” These Acolytes initiated new gang members by forcing upon them a potent draught of the crushed vine. This ritual, called the *purgatorio*, is meant to “hollow out” the initiate and fill him with the magic of the gods. During this period of altered consciousness (lasting six to eight hours), the initiate experiences wild visions. He often suffers glossolalia, babbling in some made-up language.

Stranger still, the victim receives odd visitations by strange beings. He may see women who are half-jaguar, or he might instead witness any number of “little people” — all of whom are purportedly the emissaries of the old gods. Of course, only he can see them, but the other

Acolytes do not believe that this implies such things are mere hallucinations.

No, it only suggests that the initiate is glimpsing the invisible landscape of the spirits and gods — the magic vine has granted the dead man a vision beyond that of life or death. Only from there may he be allowed into the gang. (Curiously, some initiates experience a greater understanding of their own Disciplines after the fact. They may gain a dot in a Discipline such as Auspex, Obfuscate or Nightmare.) The *purgatorio* ritual is no longer unique to the barrio gangs — it has since bled into other covenant cults and has begun to see wider use.

Another ritual is somewhat less religious despite its name (“Food of the Gods”). This ritual, popular among less-faithful Acolytes, is meant to “shock the system” of a harlequin. In this ritual, he is given a concoction of various psychoactive toxins. These poisons needn’t be natural, and the brew is often a mixture of various awful chemicals — anything from LSD to drain cleaner might find its way into the cup. The Acolytes force the drink upon him. If the initiate is unwilling to absorb it, then they will first run the grotesque infusion through a mortal and then force the victim’s blood into the vampire’s mouth.

The results are rarely kind. The initiate often suffers physical effects (damage to her insides, vomiting up Vitae, stumbling dizzily about) as well as mental trauma (derangements both temporary and permanent, monstrous hallucinations, total confusion). The effects are only heightened when the gathered Acolytes assault the initiate with Disciplines. Assailing the vampire’s senses with Majesty, Nightmare or the shapeshifting strangeness of Protean can all compound the deleterious effects upon the Chorus member’s psyche.

It is uncommon for the vampire to emerge from this ritual without some manner of emotional scarring. Particularly religious Acolytes frown upon this brutal ritual as being crude and purposeless. The resultant cultists tend to be too broken to be useful. Though, some Acolytes must admit that those who *do* come out of the experience without shattered psyches tend to be very powerful ritualists.

Withdrawal

For vampires — creatures who are already dead in many ways — blood represents a taste of life. Without blood, a vampire is as good as completely dead. Acolytes often accept that vampires never truly die, and thus never obtain a full picture of the cosmic circle that informs their very purpose. The interplay between the living and the dying can be alien to a vampire, who is effectively taken out of the cycle.

Many Acolytes thus seek to instill an understanding of death in their initiates. Avoiding death and mistaking the Requiem as death are anathema — errors that must be corrected. Vampires are children of life and death. As mortals, they have already lived, but as vampires, they cannot die. Giving them a taste of death is therefore critical.

Withdrawal from Vitae is one way to invoke a kind of death in a potential Acolyte. Temporarily withdrawal certainly brings a vampire closer to death, but that is rarely enough. Far better to deny a Kindred that which moves his bones and muscles and which sates his hungers. The dead cannot move. The dead cannot feed their hungers. Hence, total withdrawal is key. Two rituals in particular achieve this.

The first is the Rite of Winter’s Embrace. In this Rite, the harlequin is not given the choice to abstain from Vitae. In fact, Acolytes often surprise the Chorus member by ambushing him and driving a stake through his chest. From there, the victim is literally frozen. Sometimes the cult puts him in some kind of water-bearing container (a claw-foot bathtub does the trick) and refrigerates the water in an industrial freezer (or outside in a dark, cold place) so that the water turns to solid ice. Other Acolytes prefer nature to be involved, sometimes going so far as to sink the vampire in a deep, nearly frozen lake — where, of course, the rays of the sun cannot touch him.

During this time, torpor is expected. The vampire cannot move, and his blood burns off. He is left to contemplate hunger and misery. Some return from this sudden exile quite mad, but hopefully not so broken that they cannot still serve the Circle in some capacity. Others attain a kind of enlightenment about death, blood and life. (This ritual usually takes place on one of the winter observances — Samhain perhaps, or the Solstice.)

The second ritual is sometimes called “Rite of the Dead Womb” or simply, “The Tomb.” This one is less about enlightenment and more about the vampire’s willingness to sacrifice. The subject is made to enter a dark and isolated place. This is often literally a crypt or a gravesite, though sometimes it must be a place (like a cellar) that represents the tomb. The vampire isn’t sealed away or prevented from leaving — in fact, the option of ending the ritual prematurely is crucial to her success or failure. (One variation is that the vampire is handcuffed to something. She is given the key, or made to swallow the key.) She must then stay in the tomb for an unmentioned amount of time, withdrawing from blood and human contact. She must come close to death, sacrificing her own desires for the desires of the cult. This ritual requires no set amount of time.

Every cult has different watermarks for what it considers fair sacrifice, representative of devotion. Some cults hope for a week. Other cults aim to see that the vampire will get to the point of frenzy and either resist it and sink into torpor — or will give in to frenzy, and seek that which the old gods provide (blood and life).

TRUE ENLIGHTENMENT

Many of the aforementioned rituals take a vampire to the brink physically, mentally and emotionally. His body is run ragged, and with it, his soul and mind are left in disarray.

Through these painful rites, the covenant seeks to demonstrate that enlightenment comes predominantly through suffering. Typically, the victim of the ritual comes to some kind of personal revelation about the nature of life and death or how all things are connected and presided over by the old gods. On very rare occasions, however, a ritual such as this one leads to more overt and literal enlightenment: a new Crúac ritual.

The methods and results of the ritual are often given to the vampire at the pinnacle of his pain. Enlightenment comes as a vision, or as a whisper, or simply as something he now “knows.” Delivery in this way is considered particularly blessed, and can grant the Acolyte a great surge in his status within the cult.

BLOODY ENTICEMENT

A novitiate's first days joining the Circle are often sublimely difficult. Few cults make joining easy, and as noted above, incur a great deal of pain upon potential Acolytes. While this level of difficulty isn't universal — not all Crone cults are so interested in breaking down neophytes — it is common. So what keeps a neonate from escaping the process?

Well, many *do* escape, and the Circle accepts that. If a vampire isn't ready for sacrifice, she doesn't belong. If the neophyte is somehow prized or the Acolytes want her reverence as much as she wants to give it, then they may make the trials easier on her than they would others (though some cults refuse to diminish the tests demanded by faith).

What keeps a Kindred and steadfast through the pain is adherence to the exact idea that fuels the trials in the first place: enlightenment through suffering. If the vampire is willing to suffer, he will receive enlightenment as his reward. He will then have access to gifts both real and imagined. He will gain access to the covenant's magic. He will be part of the “truth” about the dire gods. He will have a set of allies unlike any other and be privy to secrets that the Kindred of other covenants are not. Ultimately, the Acolytes point to a light at the end of the tunnel. If he is willing to traverse the long darkness, he will one day find that bright and shining light.

Of course, some rewards are immediate. After passing the trials and leaving the Chorus, the cult likely fetes any new Acolytes with a celebration that might last a night or a week. The group hunts together, they shower the new Acolyte with blood and gifts and they likely even teach him his first ritual. The cult usually makes quite clear that, once the novitiate leaves the Chorus, they are his allies in faith. The gods have allowed them to be together, and for that the vampire deserves unending reward.

TRIBULATION IN THE HALLS OF POWER

Very, very few Kindred live in a political vacuum. No matter how preferable it might seem to be, no vampire can expect that every one of his neighbors are all members of the same covenant, operating with a single shared purpose and a unified faith. When different viewpoints come together in shared territory, politicking is both inevitable and necessary. All too often, even when forced to confront this truism, the temptation for the Acolytes of the Circle is to distance themselves from matters of domain government.

The naturalist, dedicated faith of the covenant provides little time and inspires little urge to involve one's self in secular affairs of state. Effort is better directed to the pursuits of creation and tribulation, to bettering one's self and highlighting the glory of the natural world. Government is best left to those who concern themselves with mundane affairs, seeking material power instead of coming to terms with the truth and glory of the Crone and her creation.

This temptation marks the path to unmitigated disaster. In Kindred society, power goes to the one who claims it, and everyone else is forced to accept the terms dictated to him or her. Withdrawing from the decision-making authority of a domain means claiming a marginal position of weakness, wherein a vampire is incapable of making the deals and issuing the public declarations that solidify alliances and earn the respect of outsider Kindred.

Marginalized vampires are restricted to inferior feeding grounds, subject to the whims of the officials of the city and, worst of all, completely unprotected from the occasionally violent agenda of their better-connected counterparts. Marginalized vampires have little capacity to affect the tides of opinion in Elysium, and no warning when those tides turn against them. Such vampires are, in short, utterly at the mercy of their neighbors.

To best serve the Circle, some Acolytes must step into the halls of power and make their presence known. To defend the practice of their fellow adherents, some Kindred must lessen their worship and spend time at the tables of debate, making sure that the covenant is well represented. Subjecting themselves to the souring pettiness of the Danse Macabre, they sacrifice of themselves so that others may be safe and free. They are soldiers of the Crone, facing enemies on a battlefield more insidious and riskier than any of the back-alley warfare of modern nights: the Elysium salon.

Many Hierophants realize the threat presented by political lassitude and make an effort to incorporate public work into the requirements of Acolyte training. They will encourage the members of their Circle to make appearances at domain gatherings to demonstrate their

fierce loyalty and their willingness to involve themselves in the affairs of fellow Kindred, if necessary. Persecution and prejudice are especially to be met with a fearless public presence, if possible.

The Kindred of the Circle of the Crone don't shy away from conflict, social or otherwise, and must be willing to subject themselves to the trying circumstances of officious Elysium gatherings just as readily as any spiritual quest. In some domains, spiritualism and politics are deeply intertwined. Whether by careful design or a more organic evolution, modern participation in these cults marries ritual and public achievement in a functional syncretism. One cult in Eastern Europe will not allow members to be initiated as full Acolytes until they fill official positions in the city's government, demonstrating their ability to protect the ongoing operation of the covenant alongside their capacity for sincere worship.

Inevitably, serious Acolytes will clash with outsider viewpoints in the Elysium forum, especially if discussions turn toward faith and virtue. Fear and prejudice are a rule among the outsiders, and Kindred of the Circle must understand that they will be targeted whether or not their activities are aggressive.

The formation of law may be influenced (or, in some systems, entirely constructed) by the strength of argument presented on both sides in these cases. Acolytes of the Circle should be prepared to defend their views before the decision-makers of Kindred society at any given moment if the Acolytes wish to remain free of unnecessary, and occasionally unendurable, official stricture.

Those Acolytes who are politically inclined face potential conflict on more than one front, though. While fighting to preserve the rights and needs of their fellow Kindred, they must also struggle to maintain an image of humble loyalty in the Circle. The covenant's more isolationist members may interpret any compromise offered to outsiders as treasonous weakness. The Hierophant may become concerned that the politician is spending too much time at Elysium, no matter how real the need for attendance, and not enough at ritual.

One's own practice of worship may interfere with political necessities, forcing a difficult choice: to fight for others' right to practice while sacrificing one's own or vice-versa. What's worse, many outsiders are very much aware of the Circle's time-consuming demands, and will often plan long, drawn-out sessions of discussion and debate precisely because they know that a faithful Acolyte cannot attend without giving up precious time in sacred pursuits.

Once enmeshed in politics, Kindred of the Circle are among the most tenacious spokespeople in vampire society. If there's a single word that best encapsulates the public tactics of the covenant, that word is "defiance." Acolytes will openly challenge prejudice in most cases, and rarely hesitate to point out presumptive or otherwise

ill-informed rulings. Acolytes often earn a reputation for shameless partisanship, but at least that's a sincere, open approach — something many officials come to appreciate, if not admire. It's rare for an Acolyte to attempt an underhanded approach to lawmaking *if he's already in public view*, because everybody knows he's only really there to support and defend his covenant's needs.

The best among the Acolyte politicians don't allow themselves to be blinded by the necessity of protecting their own, though, and will consistently act on principles. This is how a skillful vampire will tend to shatter the stereotype of the uncivilized pagan and earn the respect of a Prince or Sheriff. Dedication to honor, duty and the preservation of the natural world are the finest attributes of a good politician in the Circle. Kowtowing and toadying might earn the temporary favor of a vain elder, but such activities won't go far toward keeping the covenant in a powerful position.

The benefits of weak servitude are not only flimsy: the very act of abandoning one's ideology in order to secure a position of relative safety is anathema to the philosophy of the covenant. When faced with a problematic superior in city government, one must accept the tribulation she represents with a strong will and a keen mind.

It's true that maintaining a stand on principle can cause trouble for Acolyte politicians. A corrupt superior will consider an honorable vampire to be a threat. An ambitious rival will enjoy relative tactical freedom in any conflict, since he is not restricted to ethical choices. It's no surprise that the Circle suffers in many domains, falling behind (or, in many cases, completely out of) the line of power-brokers and policymakers who dominate Elysium. But when the staunch determination of the Acolyte pays off, it does so with a great dividend.

A principled victory over unethical foes strengthens the covenant in the eyes of all observers. A determined stance earns the awe and esteem of outsiders, many of whom learn to shed their prejudices and some of whom may even convert to the Circle's cause.

The one belief that most often marks the position of the Circle in domain politics involves the clash between "natural law" and "government law." The former, considered sacred and implicit in the operation of the natural world by the Acolytes of the covenant, is always obeyed as interpreted in the teachings of the litany and the translations of the Hierophant. Government law, determined by the conscious manipulations of a Prince, is to be obeyed only insofar as it does not contradict the former, no matter how vehemently that Prince attempts to enforce it. Acolytes simply will not obey a decree that contravenes their observation of the natural law of the living world, even unto Final Death.

The ideal politicians of the covenant are just as determined to adhere to this principle as every other member, even though they're on the front lines, often

standing directly in the physical presence of the Prince on a regular basis.

This, more than any other operation of the covenant, is what leads to the pogroms and turf wars that it suffers in domains around the world. But how could it be otherwise? To ignore the clear wishes of the Crone and the rules of her creation would be to discard everything the Acolytes hold dear. One vampire's decree is the expression of a single voice, powerful or not, in the midst of a chorus of millions. The Circle is concerned with the whole of the song, regardless of circumstance.

Total war among covenants has broken out again and again because of adherence to this guiding principle. One domain in the Caribbean saw the near extermination of the Circle when the Sanctified Prince placed restrictions on hunting mortal children. The local Hierophant had long taught his Acolytes that the blood of children was sacred to the Crone, and that each mortal was to be "blessed" by the taking of a small amount on the anniversary of the date of her birth, from the first onwards.

The ritual feeding was performed as an honest prayer, and the Acolytes believed that a child who gave none of her blood would lose her place in the natural world and grow sickly. The adamant refusal to halt feeding on these young mortals led to a series of violent clashes with the Lancea Sanctum, and attempts to explain the need to continue the practice fell on deaf ears. All but two of the Acolytes of the Circle met with Final Death in the months that followed, and those who remained were forced into torpor, from which they have yet to emerge.

Acolyte politicians who buckle under the pressures of domain policymakers and suggest contravention of natural law must be aware that they will utterly disappoint their Circle. A loss of status is likely, and actual physical conflict with one's own covenant is a possibility. A few political activists in the covenant have found the support of their compatriots withdrawn after making what seemed to be a prudent decision. Here, the clash between religion and diplomacy shows itself with the most adamant seriousness. But if a vampire is not willing to hold absolutely to the ways of the Crone and her creation in the operation of night-to-night affairs, publicly or not, how can he consider himself a respectful representative of the Circle?

The priority is clear: defend the covenant with concession and diplomacy when necessary. Maintain loyalty to the truth of the Crone under all circumstances. When the two become mutually exclusive, an honest Acolyte always gives precedence to the latter choice.

Even dishonest Acolytes stand to benefit from the traditional stubbornness of the covenant, assuming they know where to expend their energies. Defying the rule of an outsider Prince will win the adulation of any persecuted vampire, whether within the covenant or without. Furthermore, those Kindred who create difficult situations for

themselves and then pointedly endure them are often seen as crusaders of faith, enduring the tribulation of discrimination on behalf of their fellows.

Careful application of manipulative techniques can ensure that a Prince will make a declaration antithetical to the Circle, laying the groundwork for a heroic stance among the covenant's representation. It's easy to lose control of even the most carefully scripted conflict, though, and a fair number of Acolytes looking to make a name for themselves end up ashes on the hands of their Prince.

The Pressures of Politics

Because the ideal of Acolyte worship involves most or all of a vampire's waking Requiem, politicking can be difficult to integrate without losing valuable time in spiritual pursuit. A Storyteller running characters through a political story from the point of view of the Circle of the Crone might want to highlight the conflict by making it clear that time is of the essence. Meetings should be scheduled to overlap with Circle ritual. A number of crucial debates could be held in the same week that a character has committed to creating a major work of art in honor of the Crone.

There are two ways a Storyteller can underscore these time constraints mechanically. First, she could impose a limit on all extended rolls undertaken during the period, basing the limit on a calculation of the amount of actual time each activity represents. Second, she could place a stacking penalty on each project the character takes on at once, making the rolls on every project more difficult.

This isn't to say that Storytellers should punish Acolyte characters simply because they choose to take part in politics. Some domains don't put much of a strain on their politically active Kindred, and some vampires in the Circle do manage to figure out how to juggle their responsibilities. If a player is especially clever in her approach or if the environment allows for it, a Storyteller may wish to forgo these penalties.

Example: *Dario, a new Acolyte, has spread himself too thin. He's agreed to represent the Circle at Elysium in his Carthian-ruled domain, not realizing that discussions of policy are held every night for at least two hours. In addition, he's committed to sculpting an image for the Circle's sacred space, he's trying to practice meditative techniques assigned by his Hierophant and he has to hunt every so often. The Storyteller decides that Dario could perform any two of these actions on a regular basis without difficulty, but four is just too many. She imposes a -2 penalty (because of the two extra actions) on every roll representing his work until he decides to give something up. In addition, she decides that so much of his time is taken up by other pursuits that no more than two rolls a week can be made on the extended action of creating the sculpture, when normally she would allow three.*

DYING FOR THE CAUSE

Much to the puzzlement and dismay of outsider Kindred, some Acolytes seem to enter into politics with more than an awareness that their religious stubbornness will interfere with diplomacy: they count on it. There is a real thread of martyrdom in domain politics for the Circle, and members of the covenant are known to enter the world of delicate Elysium negotiations just so that they can prove their devotion in the face of Final Death.

There are some domains that ritualize suicide in public, creating "death by defiance" scenarios and feeding them with those Acolytes who commit a serious crime against the covenant or otherwise fail to uphold the natural law of the Crone. Knowing that they have made an enemy of their own faith, they are given the choice: redeem themselves in Final Death or face expulsion and suffer the bloody vengeance of the Circle (or worse, watch friends and loved ones suffer in their stead).

An Acolyte so assigned will desperately seek to aggravate the Prince and his allies, taking every opportunity to aggressively demonstrate the clash between official policy and the superior values of the Circle of the Crone. The suicidal adherence to covenant morality serves a threefold purpose: eliminating the guilty Acolyte, striking fear in the hearts of confused unbelievers and fostering an atmosphere of dangerous tribulation for the remaining members of the Circle.

POLITICS AND PAIN

With all of these contradictory urges and influences in play, it's amazing that any Acolyte can put together a coherent political agenda, much less achieve it. The truth of the matter is that it's only possible when a particular vampire sets a goal for himself and keeps his eye on the prize, no matter what happens. Typically, the trial-hardened Kindred of the Circle actually manage to get their way sooner or later, provided that they're steadfast enough to survive the journey.

Elysium is one more harsh environment for the Acolytes to weather — it just doesn't look like it. The intricacies of the Dance Macabre are played out in its halls, and only those with a clear and unwavering vision of themselves and their intentions are able to emerge free of distortion.

It is interesting to note that certain Acolytes have made a connection between the method of social and legal sparring and the mystical procedures of ritual. These Kindred point out that the formulation of intent, direction of will and necessity for sacrifice are equivalent in both, and that Elysium maneuvers may just be another form of hidden magick. The glory of creation reveals itself in all things, vampires included. For these members of the Circle, a journey in the halls of power is no less spiritual than any other quest, and requires the same level of concentration, preparation and confidence.

And politics is not all pain and loss. Those Acolytes who learn to balance their needs, to avoid the distractions of petty squabbling and resist the temptation of martyrhood may find themselves actually achieving the goals they set out for themselves. The spoils of victory, when they come, are undeniably magnificent. Justification, empowerment and freedom await the successful politician. The conditions for spiritual advancement, not just for one's self, but for all vampires in a domain, become achievable. The will of the Crone can be channeled through the Acolyte, for the betterment of all.

In the best of all possible cases, the Acolyte politician may win exclusive territory for the Circle of the Crone, allowing for unimpeded worship within and severely curtailing the powers of the enemies of the covenant. Populous areas can fall entirely under the purview of the Circle, allowing for the imposition of natural law and the realization of a litany's prophecies and requirements. In extreme cases, the politician may seize control of an entire domain, turning the rule of its Kindred and mortal populations over to the Hierophant in a great victory for the covenant. The conditions for recruitment of outsiders vastly improve in this circumstance, and the Acolytes are free to set the limits of their own tribulation.

In recent nights, several domains have fallen back into the hands of the Hierophants of the Circle through the favor of the Crone's fortune and the efforts of her dedicated servants. Tales are told of sporadic elevations of the covenant around the globe: long-time Princes stepping aside or collapsing before the fierce faith of the Circle, making way for an Acolyte replacement. Outsider Kindred are being taken utterly by surprise, watching with amazement and dread as their "primitive" brethren seize the reins of power with a level of skill and guile to match that of their most entrenched, civilized opponents.

When the Acolytes do take control of a domain, placing the mantle of Prince on one of their own, the limits on their practice are lifted completely. Left to dictate the rule of territory, members of the Circle must choose whether to purge opposing elements (often in response to their own attempts to purge the Circle of the Crone) from a city or show a magnanimous tolerance that may or may not be returned by the outsiders. An Acolyte Prince must decide whether her domain will officially mix government with religion or operate on the undeclared principles of her faith, allowing outsiders to function as officials without requiring their indoctrination.

In ruling a domain, an Acolyte Prince enjoys the opportunity to display the enlightened harmonies of the Circle to the entire Kindred population. Insightful efficiency, mystic ecstasies and tranquil gatherings reflect the best that the covenant has to offer outsiders in Elysium. The progressive rule of a Prince inspired and directed by the will of the Crone is truly something to be admired. In a city dominated by the Circle of the Crone, art and beauty

flourish. Life is sacred and upheld in its varied forms with surpassing regard. The natural frustrations of a vampire are given outlet in officially organized events. The mortal population is fairly portioned to the Kindred, and disputes are settled with wisdom and finality. Divergent beliefs are tolerated, and open discussion is encouraged.

In ruling a domain, the Circle may also bring its darkest and most fearsome attributes to bear, crushing and terrifying opposition without exception. Predatory power, horrifying sorcery and undimmed emotion are facets of the covenant that exist in no smaller proportion than those more pleasant, and are no less likely to appear. In the searing grip of a righteous Acolyte Prince, whipped into fury by the demanding force of the Crone, modern freedoms vanish. Natural law comes into precedence in all its bloody, unforgiving glory. The rapacious needs of the vampire are satisfied or denied at the whim of the divine Prince. No creature escapes the influence of the Circle's magicks, and none can deny the voice of creation as spoken through the Acolytes. Opposition to the natural will of the Crone is eliminated.

Can one be deemed preferential over the other? Not without the blessing of the Crone — and to find that, the Acolytes must look to their faith. If ascension to the seat of power presents itself to the Circle of the Crone, its members must seek guidance from the divinities they so ardently worship, begging an omen of intent. If a peaceful, verdant paradise is dictated, so be it. If a bloodstained ruin is demanded, the Acolytes must be no less eager to satisfy the need of creation.

The Blood Coup

One story of Acolyte ascension has become something of an urban legend among the Kindred. Everyone seems to know someone who met a nomad with a firsthand account, but nobody can verify the actual time or location of the events discussed. As the story goes: one domain powerfully maintained in the grip of the Lancea Sanctum was recently overthrown in a shocking reversal of power, falling to a dark and violent cult of the Circle.

They say that a small cult of near-outlaw Acolytes, banished to the periphery of their domain, somehow managed to unearth an insidious ritual that allowed them to physically manipulate the Vitae in the bodies of their victims. Slowly, over a course of years, they exerted periodic control, testing and prodding the outsiders. Meanwhile, the Acolytes made every attempt to appear willing to deal peacefully with their Kindred counterparts. Perhaps the ritual required proximity, or perhaps the Acolytes simply wanted to secure a vantage point from which to observe their victims. Some say that the cryptic, bizarre negotiations the Acolytes engaged in were actually incantations crucial to their sorcery. Whatever the reason for the apparent attempts at diplomacy, one terrible night put an end to it.

No one is sure how it began. All they know is that one night at Elysium, every member of the Lancea Sanctum

went utterly mad. Some broke into frenzy without cause while others screamed obscene insults against their own God and the Kindred around them with equal abandon. One vampire, completely calm, simply grabbed the throat of his own childe, tearing it out with his teeth in the plain view of the others. In the total collapse of order, other outside Kindred were drawn into conflict by slight, injury or presentation of opportunity. The Prince fell before the envious claws of a Carthian Gangrel, and that Gangrel fell in turn to the blade of an Acolyte of the Circle. At the passing of the storm of violence, only the Circle of the Crone stood unharmed. The Acolytes quietly seized power, unopposed, and have ruled ever since. None dare defy them there ever again. Some who survive still claim that they were mere puppets on that night, watching in horror as their own bodies betrayed them and committed acts of brutal violence beyond belief.

DOMAIN POLITICS

The Circle of the Crone maintains a tenuous position in the domains of the modern world. The outlook of the covenant is foreign to many Kindred, and outright offensive to some. Communications are rarely easy to maintain, and the outsiders are often eager to spotlight the unusual outlook of the Acolytes, isolating them from the rest of the domain wherever possible. Mockery and derision are the tools of the outsiders in Elysium, and while most of the members of the Circle would be content to ignore them and focus on their faith, it falls to the Hierophant and her Acolyte politicians to minimize their impact.

Contrary to the ill-informed expectation of most outsiders, the political technique of the Circle tends to be refined and contemporary. The instructions of the Acolytes' faith may be primal, but the Acolytes are Embraced from modern human stock and are no less willing or capable to engage in complicated tactics of inter-covenant relations than their secular counterparts. The operation of any politically active Circle is a four-pronged one, attacking the problem of Elysium opposition from several angles at once.

UNDERMINING THE ENEMY

The Circle's primary avenue of attack in most domains, when dealing with outsider covenants, is a passive one. Most Acolytes believe that the outsiders are mistaken in their faith (or worse, faithlessness), and thus conclude that the best way to play politics with them is to gently allow them to blunder into the poor decisions of the uninformed. Disconnected from the world around them, they cannot help but miss the cues so readily apparent to the Circle, and will often undermine and destroy themselves without much help from the Kindred of the covenant.

Some Acolytes take this view further, though, and pay close attention to both their enemies and the oft-ignored features of the landscape, figuring out where the outsiders' faults lie and then ensuring that their own behavior will



help trigger those faults. The Acolytes never directly attack or influence the enemy, just help create the conditions that lead to a vampire's mental or political disintegration. Many an Invictus Prince too proud to understand that he is teetering on the edge of rebellion has encountered an outspoken Acolyte who folds in the Prince's mighty presence, convincing him that none can dare to oppose him.

This tactic of passive attack is a surprisingly effective one. Vampires tend to be vice-ridden creatures, so encouraging their collapse is relatively easy, if one is observant enough. The Circle of the Crone is stereotyped in most domains as a primitive, inward-gazing culture, and the Acolytes know that they can use this misconception to their advantage. Those who fail to hide behind the apparent intellectual absorption of their faith can play up their so-called outmoded beliefs, making themselves seem incapable of complex political warfare. Meanwhile, they carefully sculpt themselves and script their actions, ensuring that the enemy is led down a tempting and ultimately devastating road.

Even those Kindred who catch an Acolyte out and accuse her of subtle manipulation can be undermined with passive tactics. One need only behave in a manner that encourages the enemy to make a statement that seems to demonstrate an ingrained prejudice against the Circle of the Crone, and an accusation can easily be reversed. The words of the accuser are twisted, making him seem irrational, while the "peaceful primitive" of the Circle transmutes herself from alleged criminal to obvious victim.

The greatest weakness of this tactic becomes obvious when it is applied against too many Kindred all at once. If the intended targets of passive manipulation are allowed to confer and corroborate their suspicions, they will band together and force the conflict with the Circle into open warfare. Once the attack on an outsider begins, it is best to carry it through until the enemy either destroys himself or is forced to leave the domain. Otherwise, he remains to assist any other who might become the target of Acolyte attentions.

There is another passive weapon available to the Circle of the Crone, and it is one that requires neither a specific target nor any real strenuous activity, for the most part. It is simply this: most Acolytes who are free to practice their faith and commune with their domain are genuinely satisfied creatures. They tend to find a sort of harmony with their surroundings, dwelling in relative peace and managing a Requiem relatively free of doubt and shame. Whenever possible, a good Acolyte will seek equilibrium in his environment, creating the conditions for just such a fulfilling existence.

This is, of course, painfully intolerable to many outsider Kindred, and a source of envy for the rest. When presented with a perfectly satisfied Acolyte, some observers will eventually explode into a rage, and the rest will rise to the defense of the faithful one, creating and closing a conflict that never directly involves the Circle of the Crone at all. Simply by residing peacefully and, if possible, blissfully in the milieu of nature and the truth of the Crone, Acolytes can tear a domain of outsiders to pieces.

Furthermore, the true satisfaction of the faithful Acolyte will attract the curiosity of those Kindred (young or old) who come to understand that spiritless material wealth or crushing, anti-natural dogma are failing to make them happy. Outsider Kindred will seek first to expose the “truth” behind an Acolyte’s happiness, and when they inevitably discover that it’s genuine, they look to befriend one of the Crone’s faithful, hoping to learn the “secret.” In that moment, the outsiders open themselves to the potential of conversion, drawing power away from their own covenants and giving it freely to the Circle of the Crone.

This powerful political weapon can only be maintained if the Acolytes in a domain withdraw from all conflict, involving themselves only in peaceful matters and creating a sheltered calm to dwell within. Only then can they achieve the blissful tranquility that so disturbs outsiders, and only then can they ensure that their display of satisfaction and harmonious confidence is genuine. The tactic (if it is a tactic at all) fails utterly if the Acolyte is not truly happy, because their good cheer collapses under scrutiny and the observer is left reassured in his own current state of being, no matter how wretched it is.

When conflict is unavoidable and passive assault is too unreliable or too slow, the Acolytes of the Circle are capable of warfare that is both fierce and subtle, taking their enemies by surprise and misdirecting their attentions all at once.

Outsiders tend to take rumors of the dark powers of the Circle of the Crone more or less seriously depending on type, but many outsiders will quickly succumb to fear and superstition when targeted by strategically applied terror tactics. Many ritual accoutrements, real or manufactured, will badly frighten a vampire who believes that he has become the target of the Acolytes’ bloody sorcery. Sacrifices and trinkets are often left on or in the haven or vehicle of an enemy of the covenant, demonstrating the weakness of his defenses and presenting evidence of magical attack all at once.

Meanwhile, the strategic application of Crúac can go far toward beating a foe into submission. Rituals that disrupt one’s sense of calm or self-control are relatively basic and often applied by less experienced Acolytes in support of an attack. Those that do more direct harm are timed to coincide with physical assault and ensure a swift victory.

Open conflict with the Circle tends to be short and ugly. Experienced Acolytes will plan carefully to ensure that the full force of their powers and ritual magicks can be brought to bear all at once, utterly destroying the confidence and actual combat effectiveness of an enemy in one sudden strike. Not only does this strategy allow the Acolytes to conduct battle on their own terms, but it serves to enhance their reputation as Kindred better left alone.

In the rare circumstances that an attack completely surprises the Circle, well-led Acolytes will quickly withdraw and find a time and place to meet, where they can reschedule the

battle. Ritual time is crucial to their efforts, so it’s never good to face an enemy without adequate preparation.

Drawing Out the Vice

Discovering the vice of an enemy is simple enough, so long as one is willing to observe her carefully enough and long enough to discern patterns in her behavior. Most Kindred cannot resist satisfying their worse parts for long, and even the most refined vampire will find a secret outlet for her dark urges. If a cautious Acolyte follows a simple two-stage system, he can often expose and exacerbate an enemy’s vice with relatively little effort. While the process is best played out in full, some stories may get bogged down by the details of long-term observation. In order to keep the pace of a game up, a Storyteller may choose to make use of this optional mechanic to represent this process of discovery and manipulation.

First, the Acolyte must examine the actions and expressions of the target over a period of weeks (or months), learning to understand her base motivations through the veneer of civilized behavior. An extended Intelligence + Empathy (+ Auspex, if active) roll is required, subtracting the target’s Composure (+ Obfuscate, if active) each time. Each roll represents a week of casual observation, and the occasions of observation should be documented or role-played as appropriate. A bonus or penalty may be applied based on how overt the target is about satisfying herself. When the observer reaches 20 successes, he can discern the true nature of his target’s Vice.

During that time, the target may notice her observer. Each time an observation roll is made, the target’s player makes an awareness roll: Wits + Composure (+ Auspex, if active) subtracting the observer’s Composure (+ Obfuscate, if active) each time. If the target accumulates 15 successes before the observer breaks off, the target will be aware that she is being spied on, and may change her behavior or try to set a trap for the spy. Even if the target realizes that she’s being watched, she may not necessarily realize who is watching her unless she can catch him in the act.

Once an enemy’s Vice is uncovered, it must be drawn out. To do so in an apparently passive manner, a vampire must make arrange a situation in which she (or a well-chosen provocateur) is witnessed by the target. The player rolls Manipulation + Expression against the target’s Resolve + Composure. A success indicates that the target feels some temptation related to the provocateur, and may or may not act on it.

This is a very dangerous game to play with any vampire. If applied correctly, the effect may be devastating. If the game is miscalculated, one may expose oneself to the powerful depravity of the victim’s Beast, resulting in violence, trauma or even Final Death.

The Effect of Happiness

Certain Kindred will be more vulnerable to the potentially devastating effect of encountering a truly contented

vampire. Any with the Vice of Envy will be particularly susceptible to the influence of the happy Acolyte, but anyone who is low in confidence is likely to be affected. On the other hand, those with the Virtue of Fortitude are likely to be resistant, as are those who are feeling generally high in confidence. If the Storyteller wishes to represent the passive influence of the Acolyte, the Storyteller may wish to make use of this optional mechanic.

When first encountering evidence of the Acolyte's satisfying Requiem, an unhappy vampire must resist being affected adversely. A Resolve + Composure roll is made, with the following cumulative modifiers applied:

Condition	Modifier
Vice is Envy:	-2
Virtue is Fortitude:	+2
Current Willpower is less than half of maximum:	-1
Current Willpower is zero:	-1
Current Willpower is more than half of maximum:	+1
Current Willpower is maximum:	+1

Failure on the roll indicates that the character is truly disturbed by the Acolyte's state of being, and will dwell on it at length. Success means that the character may or may not be bothered (depending on the character's personality), but he won't be significantly affected in the long term.

Example: *Balthazar, a particularly morose Nosferatu, has just witnessed a perfectly happy Acolyte at work in her garden. He's been watching her for some time, and has begun to realize that her contentment is sincere. Balthazar's Vice is Envy, and his Willpower is down to 2, of a maximum of 5. The Storyteller asks the Nosferatu's player to make a Resolve + Composure roll with a -2 modifier for the Vice and an additional -1 for the low Willpower. That leaves him with two dice. He rolls and achieves one success. So, for now, Balthazar is disturbed but not shaken.*

EMPOWERING THE ALLY

There are two sides to the political arrangement of any Kindred domain. While the enemies of the covenant are to be tempted, subverted and ultimately destroyed, no Circle can survive without allies. The politics of the Acolytes includes strategy for dealing with allies and empowering them wherever possible, demonstrating that friendship with the Circle of the Crone is eminently preferable to the alternative.

If there is a crucial night-to-night tactic most often neglected by the Acolytes of the Circle, it is this encouragement and maintenance of friendly relations with powerful outsiders. Many Acolytes will tend to become absorbed in their worship, to the exclusion of all else. Rather than build a relatively simple system to cushion the prejudices of the other covenants, the Acolytes remain

isolated. Arguably, they are only fulfilling their priority: demonstrating devotion to the Crone and behaving as appropriate for their place in the natural world. However, failing to engender friendly relations with outsiders leaves a Circle vulnerable. The enemies of the covenant will be all too eager to befriend the same powers and encourage a purge of the sorcerers at the first opportunity.

First and foremost, the Acolytes of the Circle are able to bring the power of Kindred superstition to bear. The same powers and trappings that inspire fear within the hearts of the enemy can encourage confidence in one's allies. Acolytes often craft fetishes and assorted ornaments for their friends, going to great length to describe the beneficial magickal effects of their gifts. Whether they are empowered with real Crúac rituals or not, these trinkets tend to please credulous vampires, acting as a valuable demonstration of friendship for relatively little effort. Sometimes it's enough to let an outsider know that the favor of the Acolytes is with him; he will feel indebted for any good luck he experiences, and will bear a reminder of who he can depend on when times are rough.

THE PLACEBO EFFECT

Blood and the blessings of the Scarlet Goddess may provide the fuel of magic, but the belief of a trusting target may give a mystic working more credit than it deserves. When constructing gift charms for outsider Kindred, a crafty Acolyte will work to maximize the recipient's willingness to believe in the effectiveness of his sorcery.

If an Acolyte engages in some kind of mystic show for his Kindred ally, whether in the creation or presentation of the charm, the Storyteller may allow a Manipulation + Expression roll, subtracting the target's Resolve to represent the Acolyte's attempt to convince him of the legitimacy of the item.

If the roll is a success, that vampire may be willing to attribute his future successes to the presence of the charm, even if the charm has no actual mystical properties. The character's credulousness may be represented by a Resolve + Composure roll, contesting the number of successes achieved on the earlier manipulation roll. If the subject succeeds, he attributes the success primarily to himself. If he fails, he attaches inflated value to the charm and may suffer a confidence penalty of -1 on similar rolls in the future if he loses it.

The directed application of Crúac sorcery can be brought to bear in support of a political ally, though the Acolytes should be careful with how freely they make themselves available for this sort of work. For one thing, these magicks are costly and time-consuming, and may not always be accessible on short notice. More importantly, though, an Acolyte must not allow mundane political gain to overtake his faithful worship. The rites

of Crúac are not simple currency; they are powerful conduits of Vitae and devotion, drawn down to enforce the will of the natural world. Safety and power should never be more important than the veneration of the Crone in all her varied forms. Better to make subtler use of sorcery, to supplement advice and enforce promises to an ally. The Circle of the Crone has much to offer in the way of wisdom without having to resort to the covenant's most sacred rites in open court.

The creative tendencies of the covenant are also unique in Kindred society, and can be brought to bear in support of an ally. Many an Elysium site is decorated with Acolyte works designed to aggrandize friends of the Circle and intimidate enemies. Sculptures, paintings, gardens and music are common contributions, and their timely donation can win all the friendship the covenant needs. While some Acolytes argue that to place their works in the hands of an outsider or allow them to add to the pomp of Kindred politicking is no less demeaning than the public performance of a Crúac ritual, other Acolytes believe that there's relatively little harm in the creation of art to beautify an Elysium site. Most of the members of the covenant are creative artists of one kind or another (or eventually become so), and are happy to display their talent in public whether doing so "cheapens" their art or not.

Some Acolytes prefer to spend their time at tasks that enrich the Kindred community, weaving their worship into meticulous practice. Performing certain official duties, serving as a humble advisor or stoic guard, even constructing and maintaining the structures of Elysium — all are potential occupations for meditative Acolytes. Dedicated service can earn the respect and goodwill of fellow vampires and make the members of the covenant indispensable to a domain. Some Hierophants understand this, and assign community-building duties as tribulation for most of their Acolytes, ensuring the positive visibility of the Circle and preventing isolationist tendencies from taking root.

A further advantage arises from this commitment to community building. In some domains, the creative talents and devoted work of the Circle have so impressed the Kindred that Acolytes are essentially given the run of Elysium sites. With years (or even decades) of careful, subtle work, a public Elysium can be transformed into a veritable temple of the natural world, providing Acolytes with a great opportunity to display their reverence of the Crone and exposing the Kindred community to the beauty and majesty of her works. Creating a calming and elegant environment will please the power elite in any domain, and those Kindred who feel the benefits of their surroundings will be more open to allowing the Acolytes to worship in the Kindred's territories. This may even lead to the conversion of some vampires, adding to the ranks of the covenant and further strengthening its allies.

PROMOTING THE VALUES OF THE CIRCLE

Subversion and tactical support are both important and demanding facets of political work in a domain, but they are both supported by a directed and unyielding commitment to the virtues of the Circle of the Crone. The covenant is, after all, a religious organization, and its adherents must exemplify it in every public appearance: both to inspire the friends of the organization and to cast doubts upon its enemies.

First and foremost, politicians among the Acolytes exist, night-to-night, as diplomats for their faith. As such, they should make every effort to make their best qualities, and the best qualities of the covenant, visible at all times. The virtues of faithful practice, including inspired creativity, confidence in one's self and fellow worshippers, and a harmonious interface with the living features of the domain are paramount in public representation. The close ties of a practicing Circle translate well to Elysium appearance, as the Acolytes present a sincerely unified, familial front to the often-fractionous outsiders. A genuine appreciation for the infinite details of the living world creates an air of positive outlook that is rarely demonstrated by other Kindred organizations.

An astute Hierophant will take pains to understand the psychological dynamic of the outsider Kindred in a city as well, making sure to observe their virtues and ensure that her own Acolytes demonstrate their own devotion to the same values. A charitable Prince will understand and appreciate a cult that makes an effort to encourage generosity in its members. A Bishop who concerns himself with matters of justice cannot help but respect an Acolyte who dedicates himself to the same cause.

In highlighting the merits of the covenant, Acolytes not only build a sound tactical foundation for domain politics, they also improve their own worship. The open demonstration of virtue may lead to behavior that some consider sanctimonious or transparently manipulative — but if the actions are sincere, an adverse reaction paints the observer in unfavorable tones, not the Acolytes.

Second, Acolytes are survivors. Many domains force the Circle of the Crone into untenable positions by virtue of competitive politics. Time and again, when presented with a choice between the tenets of their faith and a materially advantageous policy, Acolyte politicians will take the spiritual path. The manipulation of negotiations to force a choice like this is well practiced by outsiders, and the results are suffered time and again by the Acolytes. Still, the Circle abides. The pillars of belief buttress the structure of the covenant in conditions that would lead to the assured collapse of most others.

At first, to outsiders, this quiet endurance of hardship seems to be a great weakness. Acolytes are mocked for their apparent willingness to undercut themselves and

allow favor to fall upon their enemies. But time passes, and as it does, the Acolytes survive. The longer they remain strong, the fainter the deriding voices become, falling away into a silence that first indicates worry, and eventually awe. Outsiders realize, sooner or later, that devotion to the Crone and her creation lends a strength to the Kindred that cannot be found elsewhere. Vampires who continue in their Requiem, undaunted by the worst conditions, undimmed in their practice of their faith, are creatures of admirable tenacity and power. If they can live on under oppressive circumstances, observers know that such Kindred would flourish in environments most Kindred consider ordinary.

It is an observable fact: the domains in which the Circle has endured a long period of hardship and retains all of its members throughout boast the highest rates of recruitment from outsider covenants. Kindred of all sorts are inspired by the capacity of the Acolytes to hold their personal beliefs in higher regard than material gains, and by the clear and repeated evidence of their everlasting stamina that those beliefs provide. Enemies are frustrated and cowed by the stubborn refusal of the Acolytes to surrender or die.

There is one more tactic the Circle of the Crone employs in the political arena, and it's a surprisingly effective one. Acolyte politicians around the world have a tendency to aggressively encourage mystical or religious beliefs in other Kindred, regardless of the nature of those beliefs.

These politicians don't really care what a vampire believes in, so long as it's something greater than her self.

When a vampire is awakened to her faith, she is likely to find an understanding of the Circle that she lacked before, even if her beliefs are different from, even antithetical to those of the Acolytes. She'll understand their language, in effect, and their motives. As the Acolytes demonstrate their willingness to tolerate the vampire's faith, whether they agree with it or not, she comes to appreciate their attitude, and may learn to tolerate them in return. She may begin to see similarities between her own beliefs and those espoused by the Circle and choose to open a dialog with the Acolytes that leads to her induction in the covenant.

Those Kindred who don't join the covenant can be encouraged to adopt unpopular or unlawful beliefs are sure to experience the oppressive wrath of their fellow vampires — wrath that may have been directed at the Circle otherwise. The new targets of prejudice come to understand the social burden that the Acolytes bear and will often throw in with the Circle out of sympathy, if not necessity.

Many Acolytes feel a strong distaste for the practice of encouraging outsider faiths for their strategic value. These Acolytes argue that worship of the Crone and her creation is sacred in all its forms, and that no vampire should encourage that worship for purely tactical reasons. To awaken Kindred to the ecstasy of faith just so that



they can serve a political purpose is a profane abuse, these Acolytes argue, and it demonstrates a failure of principle in the practitioner. Recruiting new Acolytes is a good cause. Creating new ones and failing to provide the support of the Circle is a crime.

The Breaking Point

A story in which Acolyte characters are subjected to prolonged unfavorable conditions can be difficult to run and difficult to participate in. Players can become discouraged if their characters seem to be forced into humiliating or painful circumstances without an apparent escape option. Storytellers can be caught between the urge to maintain suspense and the integrity of the story and the urge to keep the players' spirits up. The following tips can help mitigate these problems:

- Make sure the characters have a support structure in place. Sympathetic outsider Kindred, devoted Retainers and friendly mortal allies can bolster a character's mood and provide a player with a moment of relief whenever it seems appropriate.

- Let the characters sense a rough timeline. Even if they don't know exactly when circumstances will improve for them, a prolonged strain can seem conquerable if it's clearly not going to last too long. Characters may know that they will only have to impress the powers that be for a month or two, for example, or they may hear that a wager has been placed in Elysium predicting that they will last no longer than six weeks.

- Storytellers: One of the tenets of the Circle of the Crone is that *Tribulation Brings Enlightenment*. Take a moment, every so often, to make it clear that the Storyteller characters that seem to have it easy are actually suffering in other ways. Let the players know that their Acolytes are actually doing the right thing.

- Storytellers: Make sure that the distinction between pressuring the *characters* and pressuring the *players* is very clearly drawn. The spiteful Lancea Sanctum Sheriff can tell the Acolytes that they're doomed fools as much as he likes, but never let the players believe that you're voicing your personal opinion of their choices through the Sheriff.

- Players: Make sure the distinction between *character* complaints and *player* concerns is equally clearly drawn. Your Acolytes can go on and on about how awful they feel, but make sure the Storyteller understands when you're not having fun.

None of these suggestions ought to make the story itself any easier — the characters involved will still have to resist the pressures of adherence to principle — but these suggestions should help make it more entertaining to play through it.

BARING THE FANGS OF THE CRONE

Rarely does any Kindred domain remain perpetually at peace. Even the most capable politicians must admit that

diplomacy has a breaking point, and must be prepared to recognize its approach. The Circle of the Crone is not exempt from inter-covenant conflict, and the Circle's policymakers often find themselves undergoing an unwilling metamorphosis from ambassadors to generals. Subtle inspiration and passive entrapment give way to the tactics of open warfare. The Circle needs its negotiators just as badly as every other covenant, though, and Acolyte politicians are absolutely crucial in times of war. Unfortunately, Acolyte politicians must often sever themselves from the continued function of their cults in order to perform their required tasks.

In most modern domains, the Circle of the Crone represents an ideological minority, and the Circle's members tend to form a relatively small unit. As a result, the tendency in times of violent dispute is to withdraw from public relations and pull into a tight, isolated, easily defended group. The Hierophant issues decrees restricting the Acolytes' contact with outsider Kindred, and the mortal followers and assistants of the Circle are drawn inwards, falling into protective patterns of behavior. The sacred space of the Circle is integrated into a haven, which is shared for additional security and facilitation of long rituals. More often than not, the covenant strategy simply involves weathering the violence — especially when the Circle is not a primary participant in the conflict. There is no allowance in this tactic for individual Elysium appearances, though, and the Acolytes must rely upon outsiders to communicate the Acolytes' will to the Kindred of a domain, if contact is maintained at all.

The virtues of the covenant remain on display under the conditions of war. The resilience of the Acolytes and their dogged refusal to deny their beliefs or disrupt their worship continue undimmed even in the face of direct aggression. The Acolytes display a unified front when the soldiers and ambassadors of the outsider covenants come to them, and the Acolytes fight, pray, endure and die together. Some Kindred fail to understand this operating strategy, pointing out that pulling together into a single unit provides the enemies of the covenant with a single, convenient target and makes wiping the whole group out in one assault easier. These onlookers fail to understand the purpose of the Circle of the Crone, assuming that the survival of individual vampires is more important than the fulfillment of their purpose in the Crone's creation. If it is their place to die, then the Acolytes of the Circle die with dignity. They know that their ideals will live on even if they are exterminated, for the Requiem of a truly faithful vampire is an inspiration to all Kindred.

But the needs of the Crone do not always allow for defensive unity or stationary defiance. Sometimes, the Acolytes themselves act as aggressors, and sometimes the focus of worship involves the active destruction of enemies of the covenant. Warriors of the Circle can be just as vicious as the outsiders, and those Acolytes empowered by the rituals of Crúac are a truly fearsome

force. Stalking the city streets, armed with the primal magicks of the Circle and the bloody energies of their faith, these Acolytes spring upon their foes with terrifying, fanatic abandon.

Warriors of the Circle of the Crone have perfected guerrilla warfare in the urban setting, applying their ancient instincts and the furious power of creation to modern hit-and-run deployment and lone gun assassination techniques. Often willing to suffer Final Death for their cause, Acolyte soldiers will engage in tactics that no other vampire would consider: raiding an opponent's haven moments before dawn, dragging an enemy into a burning building or carrying powerful explosives directly into Elysium. The resilient Gangrel of the covenant are particularly fearsome, taking the same punishment they deal to their foes, knowing full well that the Acolytes will survive when the enemy falls. If a soldier's role in creation is not yet fulfilled, she will survive. If she suffers Final Death while eliminating the adversary, the Hierophant will praise the soldier for realizing her destiny.

Politically speaking, the tactics of guerrilla warfare are a magnificent tool. An Acolyte representative at Elysium can play the suicidal tactics of the warriors for full effect, making it clear that enemies of the covenant are facing a foe that is willing to take the battle to extremes that many may not be willing to participate in. There is no possibility of threat of escalation to a representative of the Circle of the Crone: if war is declared, the warriors of the covenant will treat it as a final war. In addition, the guerilla tactics of the Circle allow the Acolyte representatives to serve as a bottleneck for terrifyingly obscure information: where and when the forces of the covenant may choose to strike next, and how many of them remain. Until the outsiders know for sure, they are forced to operate on the assumption that conflict is not over, and must be ready to expect further attacks upon any or all of their Kindred. Often, the politicians are not privy to this information themselves, but they do know how to contact the Circle and convey the pledges and proposals of the outsiders in exchange for warnings of impending strike or promises of truce.

Surprisingly, the territories of the Circle tend to grow in times of conflict. Because of the staggering success of individual Acolytes in frightening uninformed outsiders, a single vampire can encourage the withdrawal of several Kindred from a normally well-defended feeding ground, allowing the Circle to expand into the vacuum. Since the Acolytes rarely attack in formation, figuring out how many of them are occupying a space at once is often difficult, as well as understanding how secure their newly claimed territories are. An outsider scout who meets his Final Death provides little information to fearful Kindred on the retreat, so the soldiers of the Circle make an extra effort to locate and destroy their enemy's spies. Acolyte politicians will almost always claim that territory abandoned by the

outsiders is ceded to the covenant, using this as leverage in further negotiations. Even when the conflict is called to an end, surviving Acolytes will maintain a claim to these grounds, even if they remain empty.

The Immortal Prayer

Some cults achieve a power in destruction that none of the cult's members could ever inspire in their nights on earth. There is a story told of a small cult of Acolytes who spent their nights at the periphery of a domain on the Italian Riviera for quite some time, quietly avoiding contact with their Kindred counterparts whenever possible. Late in the 18th century, a Sanctified Archbishop took control of the territory and declared the Circle anathema, ordering its destruction.

Instead of fleeing the domain, as most Kindred expected, the Acolytes of the Circle drew together in their sacred temple and continued their worship. Ignoring the warnings of an ally, they initiated a long, complicated rite honoring the creation of the world and the glory of their goddess. The blood-fueled fists of the Sanctified Crusaders shattered the doors of the Acolytes' temple, but they sang unperturbed. They say that each member continued in his song even as the others fell into Final Death. The Hierophant faced her enemies without breaking in her prayer. Bathed in the ashes of her fellow believers, she held her head high and sang loud before the advancing blades. They say that her voice echoed throughout the temple for hours after her Final Death — a strange effect of the magicks of the Circle, perhaps, or a simple trick of acoustics.

Witnesses say that the Sanctified Crusader who struck the killing blow was moved to tears by the defiant faith of the Hierophant, and that the Crusader's dreaming days presented the image to him again and again. He spoke often of the audacity of his fallen foes, defying a ban imposed by the Prince and risking the Crusader's own future to relate the last moments of the Circle. His story was picked up by Carthian Kindred in the domain, and was empowered in the retelling by a talented orator, who used it often in speeches condemning the tyrannous rule of the Archbishop.

The simple tale grew into a legend. Several Carthian Kindred began to adopt the fashions of the fallen Circle as a demonstration of defiance, and some went so far as to unearth and read from the mystic litanies of the vanquished Hierophant. A Carthian uprising eventually deposed the Archbishop, and the Circle is now reformed, composed largely of rebellious vampires eager to display their opposition to the Sanctified rule. The ranks of the Circle swell in modern nights, and the teachings of the Hierophant live on.

PHILOSOPHY IN ACTION

The Crone herself gained wisdom through adversity, and used that wisdom to create beautiful things. This myth, central to the covenant, inspires the two central

pillars of its philosophy: *Creation Is Power* and *Tribulation Brings Enlightenment*. Any chronicle involving Acolyte characters should draw on these two themes, and they should inform the way that an Acolyte is roleplayed.

This section deals with a number of different ways to involve the philosophy of the Crone in actual play. First is a general discussion of how the two points of the philosophy might influence the way an Acolyte is roleplayed during the course of typical stories. The bulk of the section, however, is concerned with specific types of creation that are both popular within the covenant and suitable for playing out as one or more stories.

TRIBULATION BRINGS ENLIGHTENMENT

This principle is easy to include in a chronicle. Most stories involve difficulties for the characters, tribulation, and at the end they get experience points, enlightenment. Thus, cosmetic changes in presentation are enough to tie this to the philosophy of the Acolytes.

First, an Acolyte should look at events slightly differently from other Kindred. Other Kindred might see obstacles that should be overcome with as little effort as possible, maybe by sending in minions, so that the Kindred can get the prize. Acolytes see value in struggling to overcome the obstacles, and sometimes see more value in that than in the prize.

This can be valuable in a chronicle, as Acolytes should often be willing to go along on the dangerous journey that interests one of their allies precisely because it is dangerous; even if the final prize cannot be shared, the Acolyte expects to reap rewards by facing tribulation.

Similarly, an Acolyte will often choose to attempt something in a difficult way, in order to face the hazards. This might create opportunities for stories, or create additional tension when the Acolyte refuses to use a ritual that would solve things quickly so that she can learn more by investigating through mundane means.

Fundamentally, an Acolyte should not look to avoid troubles or difficulties but to face them and overcome them. This is a matter of attitude more than anything else.

On the other side, Storytellers can infuse mystic symbolism and mythological parallels into their stories. At a superficial level, an opponent who is a member of the *Ordo Dracul* is a Dragon to be overcome. With more planning, the structure of a story can be made to mirror a mythological tale. Maybe the tasks set by an elder mimic the labors of Hercules, or the search for a treasure takes on aspects of a Grail quest.

Alternatively, Storytellers can devise stories in which the main rewards are the things that the characters learn by overcoming the obstacles. These rewards should be more concrete than experience points: maybe the characters learn the weakness of a bloodline with significant presence in the city, or perhaps they learn an important truth about

werewolves. There is no, or very little, concrete reward at the end, but the characters have become significantly more wise. This may disappoint some players, however, so Storytellers need to know their groups.

Finally, stories can simply be quests for enlightenment on the part of Acolyte characters, deliberately facing particular perils in search of a particular kind of wisdom. This is a very literal rendering of the philosophy, and therefore a good thing to do at least occasionally.

CREATION IS POWER

Many things that an Acolyte might create are discussed in detail in “The Ecstasy of Worship,” elsewhere in this book. The question of how to use this creation in stories remains, however. An Acolyte who spends her time on watercolor painting is unlikely to be drawn into thrilling events when she runs out of green, after all. This is, however, a central part of Acolyte philosophy, and so should not be neglected.

Players can consider using creation as background color to help define their characters. An Acolyte who sculpts in marble is rather different from one who tends a garden, and different again from one who writes free software. On the simplest level, one player can just tell the others what his character does, as part of the initial “what you know about me” introduction. However, it is more effective if worked into play.

First, creation is something that the character can be doing when contacted by another character. An Acolyte who always wants to wash out her paint brushes before an urgent meeting has a memorable character tic, but one that does not interfere with play. (Of course, the character shouldn’t *always* be creating when contacted.)

Second, the Acolyte might want to show her creations off, at least to her coterie. The way that the other coterie members react helps to define them, and the relationships within the coterie, in a pure roleplaying environment.

Third, someone who paints is almost always interested in paintings. A painter might look at the paintings hung in a room, even when it is a murder site. Occasionally, this might yield useful information, but normally it is just a reminder of the characters’ interests.

A player who effectively works his Acolyte’s creative endeavors into the background of a story probably deserves a roleplaying experience point at the end of the chapter.

If creation is established as part of a character’s background, the Storyteller can then use creation to enhance or introduce stories. A fight set in the Acolyte’s atelier, with dozens of vulnerable marble statues scattered around the place, has more impact than one in a warehouse somewhere. Similarly, if the Acolyte risks hunger frenzy near the animals she has been carefully breeding for decades, she has a strong reason not to feed on them, even if the alternative is killing a human being. The choices made in such situations have resonance, and seem more real if the statues or animals have figured as color in previous stories.

Similarly, the character's creations can be the reason for meeting someone who becomes important later. This might be a mortal painter who turns out to have high-level military connections, or a reclusive elder who collects pedigree dogs (best not to ask what for). In this case, it can even be helpful that the creation has not come out of the background, as the new character can then be introduced as someone the Acolyte has known for some time, but who has not yet been important to a story. The realities of being a Storyteller mean that it isn't always possible to introduce an important acquaintance in advance of the story in which he figures.

The character might also have ambitions for her art, ambitions that can be used to drive a story, or as a reward. Thus, a Harpy might convince an Acolyte to undertake a dangerous task by offering to stage and praise an exhibition of her prints in some part of the Elysium. On the darker side, a threat to the Acolyte's creations might be just the lever needed to control her.

PROCESS AND PRODUCT

The process of creation and the things produced are both important to Acolytes, but the relative weight varies among individuals. The main benefit of creation is the effect that it has on the Acolyte, and thus derives as much from the process as from the product. An Acolyte who is creating cannot fall into the trap of believing that there is nothing left but destruction.

On the other hand, creation is only successful if something is created, and endures for at least a little time. Repeatedly failing to create is not what the Circle endorses. Thus, the threat to utterly annihilate an Acolyte's works, maybe even using Disciplines to erase the memories of those who saw them, would have weight with almost all Acolytes.

Some Acolytes become obsessed with their productions, determined to preserve them for eternity, at any cost. As a derangement, this fits well with the covenant's philosophy, as the vampire relies heavily on the products of her creation to prove that she is not a blot on existence, despite her actions. If the derangement became serious, the vampire might become so obsessed with preserving what she has already made that she stops creating anything new.

THE CRUCIBLE

While some Acolytes content themselves with painting night scenes (or sunrises, in a few disturbing cases), others believe that the best way to emulate the Crone is to combine creation and tribulation. This has led to a strong tradition within the covenant that crosses city, faction and clan lines. All Acolytes know about it, even if they themselves have never participated. Most do at some point in their Requiem, however.

This tradition is the Crucible.

The basic concept is simple. The Acolyte chooses a target, and puts him through hell so that he can learn

from the experience. Hence the name: metal is put through a furnace to refine it. The practice is rather more complex than that, however.

The Acolyte must create something of artistic worth that results in struggle, and potential enlightenment, for one or more individuals caught up in it. This means that simply chasing a mortal around using Nightmare does not count. Using Disciplines, research, acting and props to create an elaborate scenario in which a corporate executive is harassed by personifications of every environmental disaster his company has caused, on the other hand, would certainly count. Some Acolytes spend years crafting the ultimate test for an individual who seems, and may well be, completely inconsequential. In these days of cheap video cameras, Acolytes often make some effort to record the results.

The second vital point is that the aim is to provide an opportunity for enlightenment. The subject is never simply killed. Often, the trials are so dangerous that death is a likely result, but the Acolyte always intends the subject to have a chance to survive. Sometimes the Acolytes misjudge, of course, and a few low-Humanity Acolytes slip over the line into simply producing elaborate, hopeless torments. In addition, some Acolyte elders regard such activities as blasphemous, and hunt their perpetrators down.

INNOCENT BYSTANDERS

One question that Acolytes must answer for themselves is how they treat people other than their subject when setting up the Crucible. The covenant as a whole has no view on this.

One position is that mortals are kine, and what happens to them is unimportant. If the best way to test and temper a subject is to make him watch the mutilation and murder of his wife, then that's what you should do. Kindred with this attitude often commit murder and worse in pursuit of their creations, and find themselves falling to the Beast.

The other position is that innocent bystanders should not be harmed, or at least not harmed significantly, by the trials posed for the subject. If close ties, such as those within many families, make treating a subject in isolation impossible, then either each member of the family should be treated as a subject or that person should be left alone. In particular, other people should not be harmed purely to pose problems for the subject. Any harm suffered by others must be incidental, and the Acolyte should take steps to minimize it.

This position is based on the belief that everyone else has the same rights as the subject, and that if the subject deserves a personally crafted Crucible, then everyone else does, as well. Torturing a man to torment his wife neglects the man's potential to learn from tribulation.

Acolytes who adhere to the latter view gain a significant benefit. Nothing that they do during the course of the Crucible requires a roll for degeneration if the vampire's Humanity has already fallen to 5. Any injury inflicted on others is accidental, and thus not a serious

sin, and the injuries inflicted on the subject are for his own good, in the long term.

Upholding such standards naturally makes it harder to test the subject. Acolytes welcome that; the difficulties create tribulations for them, and that raises the possibility of enlightenment.

IN THE CRUCIBLE

The subjects of an Acolyte's attentions never enjoy the experience. That is, after all, the point: the subject must suffer in order to grow. Indeed, most likely die, proving unable to overcome the challenges that are posed to them. Someone chosen as the subject of a Crucible finds that horrible things happen to him, repeatedly, for no apparent reason. What is worse, the events form into a pattern, which may make mortals fear for their sanity. Such a fear could well be a planned part of the Crucible, of course.

Those mortals who have survived a Crucible almost invariably come out stronger; if the subject breaks under the strain, the Acolyte crafts another obstacle, and the broken wreck of humanity dies before it. Rumors suggest that some of the most determined and dangerous vampire-hunters are the survivors of a Crucible. Tales told to frighten Acolytes warn that some mortals Awaken as mages in the face of the trials, and destroy their tormentors.

Mortals are not the only possible subjects for a Crucible. Other vampires are popular choices, and in certain cities the Acolyte elders deliberately put the neonates and ancillae through Crucibles to see whether they are worthy of advancement. Kindred are much more likely to survive a Crucible than mortals, but many vampires still face Final Death. The Circle in such places tends to be small, but feared. Some Kindred choose werewolves, mages or stranger supernatural creatures as subjects. In these cases, it is almost as common for the Acolyte to be destroyed as for the subject to die.

Occasionally, a mortal is Embraced as part of his Crucible, so that the Requiem becomes part of his trial. An Acolyte-controlled city in Central Europe only permits the Embrace under such circumstances.

STORYTELLER CRUCIBLES

While Crucibles are presented primarily as things that player character Acolytes might create in order to put their philosophy into practice, other Acolytes also believe in and pursue them.

The story potential in subjecting an Acolyte to a Crucible designed by another Kindred should not be overlooked.

THE LABYRINTH

The Labyrinth is the most typical Crucible. That is not to say that it is the most common; a Labyrinth requires a great deal of effort from an Acolyte, or a whole coterie of

Acolytes. A Labyrinth is, however, what most Acolytes think of immediately when the Crucible is mentioned.

The subject of a Labyrinth is made into the central character in a tale of hardship, struggle and, just possibly, triumph. The possibility of triumph is central to the Crucible. Normally, however, the story becomes a tale of horror, pain and death.

Stories in which the subject is the victim of a hunting vampire are surprisingly rare. In such a case, victory for the subject would normally mean Final Death for the vampire, and few Acolytes want to take that risk. In addition, a subject who survived the Crucible would know something about the Kindred, and thus be a threat. There is also a feeling that this story is too easy for an Acolyte to engineer — the Acolyte should have to work harder to create the Crucible.

Some Acolytes take pride in crafting Crucibles that seem entirely mundane. An apparently chance encounter throws the subject in with organized crime, and the thugs harass him, placing him in ever-more difficult situations until he must commit terrible crimes or face death himself. A subject who has a secret, such as an affair or a cocaine habit, has that secret revealed, and his life unravels around him. A remorseless assassin stalks the subject, out of nothing more than twisted boredom.

Others prefer stories with an element of the supernatural, although, as noted above, this element is rarely provided by the Acolyte herself. The subject might buy a farmhouse, and be plagued by mysterious wolf attacks, guided by some evil intelligence. A dream apartment turns out to be haunted. A place haunts the subject's dreams until he goes to investigate it, at which point the horror begins.

The most difficult part of designing a Labyrinth is devising the plot. This is a favorite topic of complaint among Acolytes who create them Labyrinths: the play must have a good narrative structure, while still allowing for the free choices of the subject at the heart of it. Acolytes who were into roleplaying games as mortals find the resemblance to writing a scenario uncanny, and they are right. Thus, extensive advice on this aspect is provided elsewhere, and need not be repeated here.

Unlike a Storyteller, however, an Acolyte cannot simply decide that a group of thugs with guns bursts into the room. She must find the thugs, make sure they have guns and organize them to burst into the room at an appropriate moment. Things are even more difficult if she needs a ghost.

Acolytes creating Labyrinths thus draw on all their resources and abilities to set the Labyrinths up. This includes asking allies and contacts for favors, using Disciplines to push actors into their roles and even dressing up and playing certain parts themselves. Generalizing about methods is impossible, as no two Acolytes are the same, and no two Labyrinths, even by the same Acolyte, require identical preparation. The preparations are, however, almost all playable as part of a **Vampire** game session.

In this case, the plot for a story is determined by one player, who decides on the Labyrinth his Acolyte wants to create. The Acolyte needs to convince the other members of his coterie to help, and the player needs to convince the other players that a story centered on his character will be fun. In this context, it is very important that the Acolyte's player make sure that the other player characters have plenty to do in setting up the Labyrinth.

The players make their plans, and then tell the Storyteller what they want to do. Ideally, the Storyteller needs a bit of notice, so that she can prepare the necessary antagonists, although experienced Storytellers may be able to make it up as they go. In some cases, the tasks may be difficult enough without adding complications; Acolytes should really be choosing tasks that test them. If not, the Storyteller adds the necessary tribulation, making things that bit harder.

The subject of the Labyrinth needs to be fully detailed, in as much detail as any player character. The subject's emotional reactions are as important to the work that the Acolyte is crafting as the subject's practical responses.

The only real difference between a Labyrinth story and a normal story is that, in a Labyrinth, the initiative is entirely with the player characters. Things happen because the Acolyte wants them to; he is not reacting to anything outside. This gives the Storyteller a bit of a break, as she only needs to react to the players' schemes, rather than set up plots herself. Also, as the Labyrinth is deliberately self-contained, the Storyteller can get away with not worrying about the implications for the wider world, at least unless things get completely out of control.

Acolytes setting up a Labyrinth often have to use people other than the subject to set it up. If the Acolyte is attempting to avoid harm to innocent bystanders, there is an extra condition on this. The other people involved must either agree to play their part, or be pushed into doing the sort of thing that they normally do.

Agreement need not be fully informed (people certainly need not be told that they are part of a Labyrinth, for example), and may be obtained by bribery, but agreement must not be obtained by coercion. The Acolyte should also keep any deals made.

If a person normally does something, Disciplines and similar powers may be used to make him do something specific without violating the requirement not to harm innocents. For example, using Dominate to make a habitual burglar burglar a particular house is fine. Using Dominate to make a law-abiding person commit burglary is not. This is not limited to criminal acts; convincing an IRS inspector to audit a particular individual also falls within this exemption.

Kindred helping the Acolyte do not get the Humanity safety net, unless they are also Acolytes. That benefit is a product of Circle philosophy, and thus limited to those who subscribe to it.






LABYRINTHS AND HUMANS

A Labyrinth makes a good introduction to the World of Darkness for human characters. The story can start mundane, then drop hints of the supernatural and end in a revelation. If the subjects keep digging, they find yet another supernatural power behind it all, pulling the strings.

An Acolyte might choose to target a group of characters with little in common, seeing the strained relations among them as they struggle with the Crucible as part of the tribulation, so any group can be pushed together this way. In addition, the Acolyte wants the subjects to have a chance to survive, which is vital in a Storytelling game.



TREASURE HUNT

The Treasure Hunt is a form of Crucible popular with ancillae and older vampires, in part because it continues to work even while the Kindred who created it is in torpor. The Acolyte creates a series of clues and tests leading to some great prize, and then waits for people to try to follow the clues.

The simplest Treasure Hunts have a literal treasure at the end: piles of gold and jewels, typically, as they do not rot or lose their value if governments fall. While money is not really enlightenment, most Acolytes feel that money constitutes a worthwhile prize, and that the lessons learned along the way can count as enlightenment.

More creative Acolytes try to make the prize a form of enlightenment itself. Thus, a Treasure Hunt might end at a place and time where spirits can freely enter the material world, and so grant those who follow the Treasure Hunt insight into the nature of reality, as well as a difficult final challenge. Sometimes, the goal brings the seeker into the presence of the Kindred who designed the Crucible, there to be Embraced and face the truth of the night.

A Treasure Hunt may be contained in a single book. Cryptic comments and marginal notes create a trail of clues that can be followed through the book itself to reveal the truth of some mystery. However, putting the necessary tribulation in is very hard unless something outside the book is required.

Most Treasure Hunts involve traveling to unravel the true meaning of various clues. At each site, another potentially deadly puzzle waits, and each puzzle provides a bit more truth and the route to the next puzzle. While Kindred are normally reluctant to travel, Acolytes building Treasure Hunts often feel that the difficulties involved in setting up a puzzle in a remote location are an important part of the Acolytes' own tribulation.

As with Labyrinths, Treasure Hunts vary immensely depending on the Acolyte involved. Treasure Hunts also involve stories in setting them up, and these stories can involve the whole coterie.

There is an important choice to be made about the way that the content of the Treasure Hunt will be handled in the game. It is possible to be vague about the details, and still get enjoyable stories. The player characters are not following the clues or solving the puzzles, so there is no need to specify exactly what they are. On the other hand, the players might get a lot of fun out of designing the details, and the details can certainly lead to good ideas for stories surrounding the construction.

The broad outline of the puzzle, at least, must be fixed, and the Acolyte needs to decide what, and where, the clues will be. Stories then involve getting access to locations (which may be difficult if they are in the wilderness, in werewolf territory), collecting the necessary materials and maybe dealing with curious individuals who have seen the vampires constructing the final piece of the puzzle, and thus might be able to skip all the earlier stages.

Acolytes who wish to avoid hurting innocents have an easier time with Treasure Hunts than with Labyrinths. Anyone making a deliberate effort to unravel the mystery is a subject, so the troubles the subject faces are part of a Crucible. The Acolytes thus simply need to make it almost impossible to stumble on the dangerous parts of the Treasure Hunt by accident. Since part of the point is to make people follow the clues, this requires no extra effort.


The creator of a Treasure Hunt does need to give some thought as to how people should be made aware of the existence of the treasure, and of the first clues. Getting this information out into the world without breaking the Masquerade or having it completely ignored can be a story in itself.



TREASURE HUNTS AND HUMANS

As with Labyrinths, a Treasure Hunt is a good way to introduce characters to the World of Darkness. The early stages of the hunt might be completely mundane, although they would show evidence of a hidden world, and secrets behind secrets. However, as the whole thing was set up by a vampire, hints of the supernatural are likely to appear, particularly if the investigator starts to wonder about why, exactly, someone would set up such an elaborate chain of mysteries.

In some cases, the final revelation opens the seekers' eyes to the supernatural, which forms a perfect springboard for later stories.



SECRET SOCIETIES

In Crucibles that take the form of secret societies, the subjects inflict the tribulations on themselves. These might be initiation rituals, or simply mortifications that must be undergone. As long as the group is not encouraged to hurt others, there is no problem with harming innocent bystanders; all members of the society are subjects of the Crucible.

The most popular form of secret society is a cult worshipping the Acolyte as a deity. This has several advantages, many of which are discussed elsewhere. As a Crucible, the secret society allows the Acolyte to monitor its development, and make adjustments easily if they become necessary.

A significant minority of Acolytes believe that the cult form makes things too easy for the creating vampire. They prefer to make societies with no overt link to themselves, and then manipulate the societies subtly as required.

The big advantage of secret societies is that, if started successfully, they become self-sustaining. New members are recruited and put through the tribulation, attaining wisdom or dying along the way. The big danger is that they might get out of control. Indeed, one Acolyte elder claims to have founded Buddhism, which then got utterly beyond him. No-one believes him, of course.

The most difficult problem with secret societies is recruitment. Why would people put themselves through misery? The standard answer is to achieve some higher reward, and that is what most Acolytes settle on. The nature of the reward varies, but is usually some sort of wisdom. A few people can be convinced to make themselves miserable to cleanse themselves of previous sins. In this case, the aim of the Crucible is for the subjects to realize that they can simply leave, having punished themselves enough.

Acolytes always put a great deal of effort into creating a society, seeking out and recruiting suitable subjects. This recruitment is typically suitable for roleplaying, and it is possible to involve the other members of the coterie. The first stage is to find people looking for something more in their lives; such people are common in the World of Darkness. The Acolyte then has to introduce the ideals of the society. If the society is to be a cult worshipping the Acolyte, this can be quite direct. On the other hand, if the Acolyte does not want to be constantly associated with the group, things need to be more subtle.

The easiest, and thus most popular, method is to arrange for the targets to find pamphlets and books detailing the rites and promises of the society. Sometimes a single individual is encouraged to set himself up as leader, and further recruits are directed to him. An alternative method is to have clues that send a number of potential recruits to the same place at the same time, allowing them to form the society when they meet. Such a meeting often has a strong psychological impact: it could not possibly be coincidence, and so suggests that there is something to the society's doctrine.

The suffering created by the society must be designed with some care by the Acolyte, but this can be glossed over in the game if desired. Typically, members must sacrifice desirable things, such as money, social contacts or types of food, and then undergo difficult trials. Some societies require their members to scourge themselves, other societies require their members to survive in the wilderness without equipment,

while others drive toward the acquisition of elite abilities, which require unforgiving training.

Once an Acolyte has created the society, stories arise when it gets out of hand, and has to be brought under control or destroyed. This is more dangerous if the society encourages its members to strive for some peak of attainment, of course. Some Acolytes also organize small Labyrinths to drive individuals into the embrace of the society, where the Crucible can continue.

SOCIETIES IN THE BACKGROUND

Well-constructed societies do become self-perpetuating, recruiting new members and subjecting them to torments that either destroy them or grant them wisdom. These societies can outlive their creators, and become a feature of a city in the World of Darkness.

In some cases, the societies turn into threats to the Kindred, as the societies discover that vampires are real and strive to destroy the monsters. In such a case, understanding and destroying the group might depend on finding the vampire who created it and learning what the group's ideology is. Of course, a vampire responsible for creating such a threat is unlikely to be keen to own up.

CHALLENGING ART

Challenging art is the simplest form of Crucible. This consists of a single work of art, such as a painting, sculpture or installation, that is intended to provoke psychological conflict in a particular individual or group. Some Acolytes specialize in producing such works, and keep them after they have served their purpose as mementos.

These Crucibles normally have three stages. First, the Acolyte researches the subject, looking for things in his past that cause him psychological trauma. Ideally, he should be avoiding facing up to them. During the course of this research, the Acolyte also tries to learn as much about the way the subject reacts to art as possible, to learn the best way to get to him. Many Acolytes ask their coterie to help with this stage.

The second step is the creation of the work of art. This is an extended Intelligence + Crafts action. The interval between rolls depends on the medium, but is typically one night. The artist never knows how many successes she needs, but just keeps working until she thinks she has enough. Typically, approximately 10 successes are required. The quality of research carried out during the first stage may modify this number, or apply a bonus or penalty to the dice pool.

Finally, the work of art must be presented to the subject. Sometimes this is as simple as mailing it to him. More often, however, the Acolyte breaks into a significant location and sets the work up there, ready to

surprise the subject. Again, the Acolyte's coterie may be asked to help with the final stage.

If the creation rolls were a success, the art work has a profound effect on the target. The Acolyte has no control over the precise nature of the effect, but such art often triggers a nervous breakdown. Suicide, homicide, confession to the police and religious conversion have also all been observed.

If the Acolyte wants to preserve the artwork, it must be recovered after it has had its effect, and that can also be played out.

Some Acolytes work on campaigns, with a whole series of artworks used to obtain a desired effect. The basic process is the same, but it is repeated many times over. The subjects might be defined as "the local police department," "the employees of that company," "everyone who uses this subway station" or "all black people in the city." Again, the purpose of the research is to find out what bothers most people in the group, and the art forces them to confront it.

The immediate effect is normally less extreme, as the issues raised are less deep and personal, but the cumulative effect can be massive. Commuters might entirely abandon a particular station, forcing the company to close it, or a company might shut down as all its staff quit. On the other hand, if people face up to and overcome the things they are shown, the company might become a great success, or the subway station cleaned up as a model for the rest of the city.

Politically canny Acolytes ensure that, whatever the result, it benefits them and hinders their enemies. Thus, if a rival hunts at the subway station, he suffers whether it closes or becomes too secure for him to use. Similarly, the art in a company could force it to look at what an Invictus coterie is forcing the company to do, so that it either closes or throws off the First Estate's control; either way, the rival group is weakened. Still, this is a side effect. The purpose, as with any other Crucible, is to make the subjects suffer, with the possibility of learning from the suffering.

A few Acolytes know Crúac rituals that allow them to create works of art that affect the psyche of anyone who views them, regardless of background. These form small Crucibles by themselves, but the Acolytes with this knowledge generally use it to make other Crucibles even more effective.

Painted Fears (•• Crúac Ritual)

The ritualist creates a work of art (see p. 58 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**), incorporating at least one Vitae into the substance of the work. This is easiest to do with paints, hence the common title of the ritual, but possible with most plastic art forms. The work of art must depict a frightening situation, or depict an object or place as frightening.

Anyone who sees the artwork must make a Composure + Blood Potency roll, with a difficulty number equal to the number of Vitae expended in creation. If the roll

fails, the viewer is struck with a minor phobia (as the derangement) of whatever the painting shows.

The power of the artwork lasts for one night for every success on the Crúac roll, but the ritualist herself can reactivate the power at any time by expending a single Vitae. Each Vitae used reactivates the power until the next sunset. Phobias inspired by the artwork last until the power lapses; an Acolyte who spent an additional Vitae every evening could keep them going for years, in principle.

The creator is not immune to her own work, but does receive a +5 bonus on the resistance roll. The artwork cannot inspire a phobia of the viewer himself; thus, a specific individual depicted in a painting is immune to its effects. A white man is vulnerable to an artwork inspiring fear of white people; he gains a phobia about all other white people.

OTHER FORMS

While the four kinds of Crucible listed above are the most common, possible forms are limited only by the imagination of the creating Acolyte. Some members of the Circle claim that items and practices ubiquitous in modern society were created as Crucibles, often when deeply frustrated in dealing with them.

While call centers are almost certainly nothing to do with the Kindred, there is some evidence that one or more Acolytes is behind the way that asylum seekers are treated in many countries. After suffering a hellish journey to escape imprisonment and torture, they are imprisoned again, and made to deal with a bureaucracy that does not speak their language (literally), requiring documents that their homeland does not issue, and would not have given them if they had, with the constant threat of sending them back to face torture and execution again. At the very least, there are many Acolytes who would like to claim credit for such exquisite, Kafkaesque torment.

There are no rules for the form a Crucible must take that are enforced across the covenant. There are some cities where the Hierarch has banned one form or another; there is a city in New Mexico where the creation of Treasure Hunts has been forbidden since the early 1950s. In addition, some Acolytes have a strong preference for one form, normally the Labyrinth, and look down on those who take other approaches. Nevertheless, an Acolyte may create Crucibles in whatever form she desires, and most other Acolytes believe that, ultimately, the Crone herself will judge whether something is acceptable.

LIVING ART

Some Acolytes believe that mortals are the finest material available for works of art, as their free will adds qualities and resonances that the Acolyte could never have imagined by herself. This kind of art generally takes the form of sculpting someone into an ideal representation of a particular striking image.

Some Acolytes take these images from their own mythology. For example, one with Greek inclinations might sculpt someone into a modern analogue of Oedipus, arranging for him to kill his father and marry his mother. Other Acolytes take their images from modern urban myth — the talented forensic scientist in charge of investigating her own serial murders, for example.

In principle, Acolytes could pick characters such as “the perfect husband and father.” In practice, Acolytes almost never do. The vampiric condition itself seems to drive them toward dark figures who inflict pain and suffering on those around them.

Kindred with very high levels of Dominate can do this by brute force, simply forcing someone to act in a certain way. This works, at least in the short term, and is no harder on the Kindred’s Humanity than doing it any other way. On the other hand, this method has disadvantages. The most notable is that a sudden change in personality draws the attention of those around the subject, and that can lead to police investigation and a very short-lived work of art. The other main disadvantage is that other Acolytes regard this method as rather crude; it will not win any plaudits from the Harpies. And, of course, this method requires a lot of Dominate.

Most Acolytes prefer to haunt their subjects, studying their actions and pushing them in the right direction rather more subtly. This might involve the use of Dominate; if someone had just decided not to hit his wife, using Dominate to make him do it anyway pushes him further down the path. However, this needs the vampire to be there and able to make eye contact, which is not always possible, or at least highly impractical.

Organizing the subject’s life in such a way as to make certain actions all but inevitable is a more common approach. This takes more effort, and more time, but time is something that the Kindred have in abundance and effort is the path to wisdom. There are some things, such as a talent for forensic science, that are all but impossible for Kindred to create. Thus, the first stage is finding a suitable canvas: a person, preferably a child, with the right talents for a given role.

Then the vampire prunes certain people from the child’s environment and adds others. Gossip, pressure on contacts, even off-stage use of Disciplines: these can all help here. The vampire might even enter the child’s world as a mentor of sorts, moving her toward the goal. A vampire with such a relationship can even use Disciplines to give the subject a nudge in the right direction. There is a small risk of exposure, but it is not that great, and many Acolytes are willing to take the risk.

As the products of this process are normally human monsters of some kind, killing and torturing behind a pleasant façade, the creating Kindred’s Humanity can drop quite low. Doing this to someone’s life is an utter perversion, and thus requires a roll with two dice to avoid

Humanity loss, no matter what the Kindred’s current Humanity. On the other hand, the Kindred only does this once per person; the roll should be made when the Storyteller believes that the process is irreversible. Any acts performed as part of corrupting the subject risk Humanity loss as normal; none of the protection granted by the ideology of the Crucible applies here.

While this process can be played out with a player character in the creative role, it is likely to be deeply disturbing. Thus, the practical application of this ideal may be best left to Storyteller characters, with player characters picking up the pieces, or even trying to save a mortal friend targeted by an older vampire.

The subject of this form of art is normally a mortal, but not always. Sometimes, Acolyte elders choose neonates to be the subjects of their creativity. In these cases, the elder normally takes the neonate under her wing, and offers advice and guidance on the course of her Requiem. The other manipulations are explained away as part of the Danse Macabre, and coterie-mates who try to pry the neonate away are discredited.

So far, so standard. However, the elder is not aiming at having a useful tool in the Danse Macabre, but at having an unliving representative of some artistic image. That image normally spells doom for the Kindred in question, whether at the hands of the werewolves she tried to ally with, or by the command of the Prince who took exception to her rabble-rousing.

BREEDING PROGRAMS

Acolytes often pursue creation through the breeding of animals. Some Acolytes believe that animals are an inferior canvas, and prefer to put their efforts into breeding people. Just as with animal breeders, these Acolytes have varied aims; one breeds for beauty, another for strength, another for obedience and suggestibility.

The main problem for this approach is that human beings generally do not like being told with whom they should breed. Thus, the Kindred involved resort to various methods. A vampire who is just starting often relies on kidnapping and rape. This does, however, rely on having at least one human who is convinced to take part, a condition that can be difficult to fulfill.

A more popular approach is to create a cult around the vampire, and have the controlled breeding as part of the cult’s doctrine. This is more successful than might be expected. Most people expect a cult that controls sexual behavior to enforce sex with the cult leader, and when the cult does not, they are more willing to believe the justifications offered. In some breeding programs, the vampire can even tell the absolute truth; some people are happy to be part of a cult aiming to create a race of warriors to serve their deity.

The biggest problem with the more blatant approaches is the long human generation time. Maintaining a cult

for the hundreds of years required is almost impossible; doing the same for an imprisoned breeding stock is probably actually impossible. This does not stop some Kindred from trying, and there is one vampire in New England who has guided a small town since the American Revolution, breeding for adaptation to the sea. He has Embraced two of the most loyal of the cult, to maintain the program while he is in torpor, and some Acolytes in nearby cities are interested to see if he will be able to pull it off.

The most successful approach to this breeding is the least visible. The vampire keeps track of all the people in his breeding program, but lets them go about their normal lives. If they mate inappropriately, which is almost inevitable, he arranges miscarriages, and pushes them into torrid affairs with appropriate partners. There are rumors of Crúac rituals that allow the vampire to take sperm from a man and transfer it to a woman without the knowledge of either party, but it seems more likely that most such breeders rely on Disciplines such as Dominate and Majesty, along with good, old-fashioned guile.

The biggest problem with this approach, particularly in the modern night, is that people move away, and the breeder must either find a way to follow them, or let them go. An Acolyte in Italy is said to have established a network of childer that covers much of Europe, all communicating with her and maintaining her program in other cities. Some say that half of all European models are descended from this program, but that the founder is still unhappy with the standard of beauty achieved.

However the breeding program is managed, the master must be on the lookout for the deleterious effects of inbreeding. Averting them requires the infusion of new blood, which means finding someone with no connection to the breed who has compatible qualities. Genetic interactions are unpredictable, and so a particular new recruit may prove to be unsuitable. As a result, breeders are constantly on the lookout for suitable candidates, and breeders can be extremely persistent in their attempts to recruit someone. They do not care whether the person is another vampire's agent, or part of a herd.

Very few breeders create ghoulish families, as the point is to create a human being with the desired characteristics. Breeders may, however, have ghoulish Retainers to help the breeders oversee the long-term process. A number of breeders, on the other hand, are trying to create the perfect human to Embrace as their childer. Some breeders may believe that they have succeeded in that aim.

Breeders generally make better antagonists than player characters, because breeders' plans are disturbing to play in detail and take place over a very long span of time. As antagonists, they are good candidates to interfere with the coterie's mortal allies in search of new blood. A player character might even be the product of such a breeding program, a background that could justify an extreme trait.

THE EMBRACE

Some Kindred regard the Embrace as the greatest act of creation possible to them. Indeed, some see the Embrace as the nearest they can come to true creation, in the way that living creatures can create further life. These Acolytes believe that the Tradition of Progeny has been misinterpreted. Vampires must not curse others with undeath. However, vampires must create, and must create other vampires. Thus, they must ensure that the eternal existence they bestow is not a curse.

Acolytes start from a strong position, in that they do not generally believe that Kindred are cursed or Damned. However, virtually all Acolytes believe that there is an important truth in the Tradition of Progeny. It is not enough that the Embrace really be for the childer's benefit; the new vampire must feel that herself.

A few interpret this as meaning that the mortal must agree to the Embrace, from a position of knowledge. Even these vampires do not believe in fully informed consent, but the mortal must know that she will be a vampire, feeding on blood, confined to the night and at least a little about the nature of the Requiem. This is, of course, a violation of the Masquerade, at least if the mortal is allowed to go free. The normal practice is to kill those who refuse the Embrace; the similarity of this to Lancea Sanctum's practice has not gone unnoticed, and is used as evidence that consent is not what is required. If it is what the Sanctified do, it must be wrong, after all.

The favored approach is to make the mortal's life such that the transition to unlife is a welcome change, even seen as a blessing. That generally means inducting mortals into pagan worship before the Embrace, introducing them to ideas that make vampirism sound attractive and cutting the mortals' links to other living humans. All this must be achieved while leaving the mortal psychologically healthy; if progeny are a vampire's greatest creation, it would not do for them to be flawed. (Some might argue that wanting to be a vampire is inconsistent with psychological health. The Circle of the Crone does not agree.)

This requires work on the part of the prospective sire. First, a suitable candidate must be found, which involves paying close attention to the personalities of mortals. Older Kindred find this stage the hardest, while neonates often have little problem. The next step is to shape the mortal's life. Here, matters are reversed; elder vampires find this much easier than neonates, and judicious application of Disciplines can help a lot.

A sire often sets the Embrace up as a grand initiation into a higher mystery. For Acolytes who believe that this is exactly what it is, this is no struggle. A great advantage of a mystery is that secrecy about the details of what will happen is positively expected, and so the Masquerade can be preserved. After the Embrace, the new childer can

expect a firm grounding in the basics of the Requiem before being presented to the city.

A few Acolytes try to arrange things so that the childe does not realize that she is a vampire until she has already accepted her new life. This is extremely difficult; no one can fail to realize that *something* stupendous happened at the moment of the Embrace, and most people quickly notice that they are feeding exclusively on blood. Still, whispered stories tell of a Acolyte in Peru who established a mortal cult of blood drinkers and Embraced the high priestess. The Traditions were already embedded in the doctrines of the cult, and the Prince and his advisers were introduced as higher masters. It is said that it was 10 years before eternal youthfulness made the vampire realize that she was no longer human.

Ideally, an Acolyte spends years preparing for the Embrace, choosing and grooming the ideal candidate, getting permission, or at least a tacit guarantee of non-interference, from the powers-that-be, and preparing a place in the society of the undead. All of these activities can be roleplayed, and many benefit from the help of a coterie.

Of course, some Acolytes are still overcome by passion, memories of mortality or simple whim, and Embrace as thoughtlessly as any other Kindred. But that is never regarded as a manifestation of the covenant's philosophy. For the creation of progeny to bring power, the creation must be done properly.

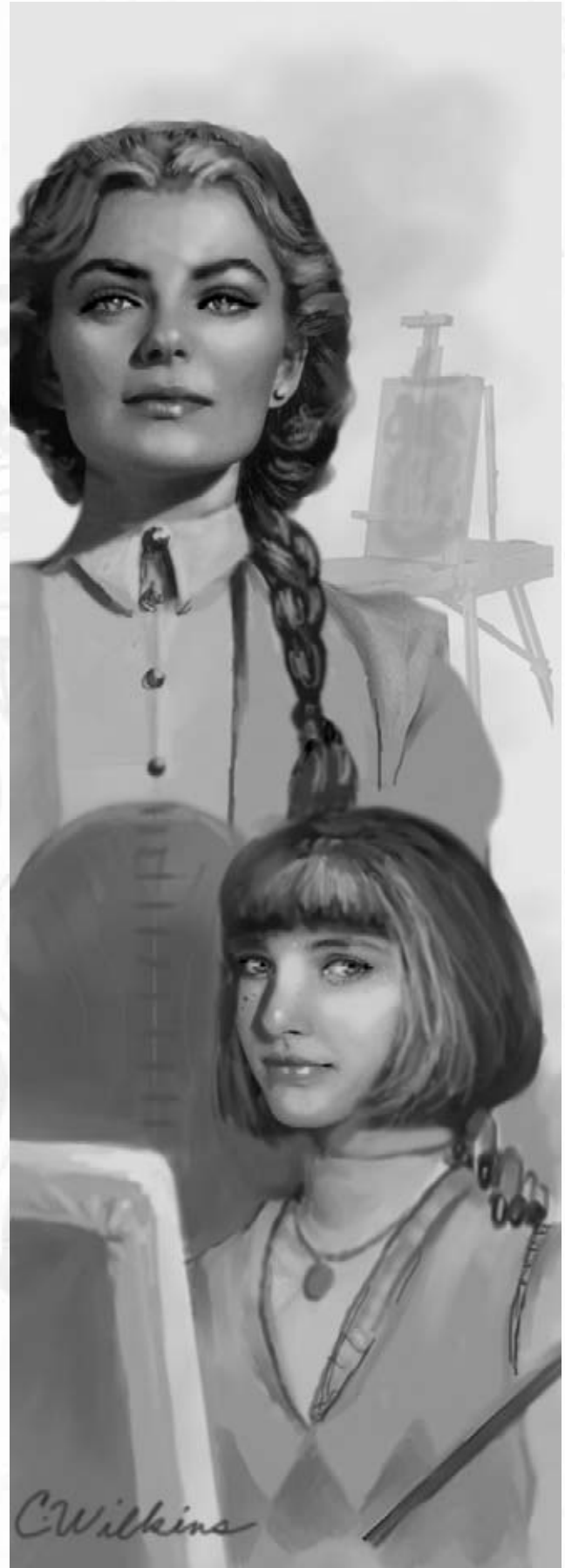
FOUNDING MOTHERS

There are few cities where Acolytes can reasonably expect to gain power and influence by climbing the political ladder in the normal way. The Invictus and Lancea Sanctum combine to shut the Circle out, leaving the Acolytes on the margins. Even when the Circle of the Crone holds praxis, most Acolytes are not primarily interested in working their way up an established hierarchy. There is, they argue, little in the way of creation or tribulation to be found there.

The inclination to political mastery is found among the Acolytes, but often takes a different form. Acolytes prefer to found things. These Kindred argue that creating a political entity is just as valid as creating a painting or dance, and that, if the entity becomes powerful, it will be valuable to other Acolytes as well. Some vampires accuse the Acolytes of rationalizing their desire for power. They prefer to say that they are sublimating it in the service of the Crone.

CREATING CULTS

Acolytes often create blood-god cults around themselves, and this is discussed elsewhere. However, the members of the cult are normally mortals, a herd, while the members of the groups discussed in this section are other Kindred.



There is nothing to stop an Acolyte from creating a religion for other Kindred, centered on herself. It is merely slightly harder to convince other Kindred of one's godlike powers. Those who manage it, however, garner a great deal of respect within the covenant; one Hierarch on the East Coast of Canada has drawn almost all of the domain's Acolytes into a cult centered on her person.

COTERIES

The smallest unit of Kindred politics is the coterie. Coterie are created and destroyed rapidly, even by mortal standards, and so founding a coterie is not, in itself, regarded as particularly challenging or creative. Founding a coterie is, however, a necessary part of almost any political creation; the coterie gathered around the founder forms the inner circle of the wider organization. Furthermore, some coterie do stand out from the rest, whether because of their dedication, longevity or achievements. Founding such a coterie does deserve respect.

For example, there is a coterie in the American Midwest that has been together for more than a century. The coterie's founder has, with the support of the rest of the coterie, held praxis in two different cities. In each case, the coterie took power with an adroit combination of politics and raw force. On taking control, the Prince encouraged various factions, subtly stoking their hostility for each other, but playing them off against one another to prevent alliances.

If things threatened to get out of hand, the sheer power of the coterie brought them back under control. The Prince, and coterie, vanished from each city while the sun was in the sky, and within a week the cities were in the throes of a vicious struggle for power. While the creation of the coterie is greatly admired, the use of that coterie as a tool for creating tribulation is almost revered. Many American Acolytes whisper that the coterie has recently arrived in their own city, and begun its machinations.

Acolytes forming a coterie in this way have more in mind than simply finding allies in the early nights of their Requiem. Some Acolytes want to create a tool that allows the creation of great Crucibles, or some other work. Some Acolytes are laying the foundations for a different political creation. Other Acolytes, however, see the coterie as an end in itself.

In these cases, the coterie is supposed to grow into some artistic ideal. This can be anything from a coterie that perfectly balances the clans, or covenants, to a coterie showcasing pure worship of the Crone. The Acolyte does not always want to lead the coterie, but almost always wants credit for creating and shaping it.

Sometimes, Acolyte elders or ancillae decide to create a coterie of neonates in this way. The founder's aims may

not be immediately obvious, and the mix of Kindred in the new coterie is often rather strange. The founder offers advice or commands to the coterie, shaping it to match the image she has in mind. This is often less invasive than the instructions of an elder who creates a coterie for a particular purpose, but is almost invariably more puzzling. One elder required all members of the coterie to wear no color but scarlet, although style was left to individual discretion. Years later, when the reputation of the Red Death meant that no other Kindred in the city dared to wear anything in that color, the younger Kindred began to see what the elder was up to.

The life of such a coterie is no easier than one created to, for example, undermine an elder's rival. The founder believes that tribulation brings enlightenment for everyone, after all. However, if the coterie gets itself in trouble in appropriate ways, the founder may be willing to let the members shape their own paths to a certain extent. After all, the doctrine of the Crone requires that they be allowed to create, as well.

This may be a good origin for a player coterie. It can justify almost any combination of covenants, clans and backgrounds, and grants the characters a significant degree of freedom. They have a powerful patron who is likely to be somewhat distanced from the power structure of their city, and who occasionally issues almost incomprehensible commands. Time and investigation, however, reveal the method behind the madness, and may open a window on greater horrors in the night.

Some neonates in the Circle also aim at creating a coterie. In large part, this is pure practicality. Neonates generally need a coterie to survive, and neonates do not have the resources to aim at a larger political creation. Some try to create the coterie as a tool, others as an end in itself.

This is another possible origin for a player coterie, with the Acolyte character recruiting the other members. In this case, it is best if the Acolyte has some symbolic vision in mind for the coterie. If she were creating the coterie as a tool, the whole chronicle would be focused on her goals, which is generally unwise; a single player character should not have that much emphasis.

On the other hand, there are many advantages to creating a coterie with a vision in mind. The Acolyte must recruit like-minded Kindred, and persuade them to do things that build the image. In return, she is deeply committed to the success of the coterie as a group, and is motivated to work the goals of other members into her wider pattern. The call of tribulation means that she also pushes the coterie to test its powers and take on difficult tasks.

One of the most useful consequences of this is that the Acolyte will work hard to stop the coterie from falling apart; if it does, her creation has failed. The existence of such a character means that players can let tensions between characters build, knowing that there is a built-in mechanism to keep them together. When the Acolyte comes to talk the

Invictus out of leaving the coterie over an insult, the player has the character persuaded, although he continues to patronize the Carthian. This is important because, while intra-party sniping can be a great deal of fun to play, if the coterie actually splits, it tends to spell the end of the chronicle. The existence of the conciliatory Acolyte provides an in-game excuse to stay together, without requiring a vampire who is just interested in everyone getting along.

Of course, the Acolyte does have her own agenda for the coterie, but as she must rely on persuasion to get the other vampires to conform to her vision, this provides more opportunities for roleplaying rather than letting one character dominate the chronicle.

FACTIONS

The most common aim of Acolytes who believe in political creation is a faction. This is because a faction is large enough to be impressive, but small enough to be feasible. The field of possible factions is also extremely broad, which increases the freedom to do something new.

There are two main types of faction: covenant factions and city factions. Covenant factions are confined to the Circle of the Crone, but ideally spread across more than one city. City factions, conversely, are confined to one city, but ideally spread across more than one covenant.

A cult for Kindred is one example of a covenant faction. As noted earlier, success here is very difficult, particularly for young vampires. Convincing any other Kindred to recognize her as the voice of the Crone, or as a goddess in her own right, is difficult. However, there are other possibilities. A vampire might set out to found a faction that believes in eschewing (or embracing) modern technology, crossing many different versions of paganism within the covenant. Similarly, she could aim at alliance with the Carthians, in an attempt to counterbalance the unholy duo of Invictus and Lancea Sanctum.

City factions are rarely religiously based, because the Circle of the Crone is. A religiously based faction is little more than a recruiting ground for a covenant faction, and thus falls into the previous category. The typical city faction upholds some ideal that is in sympathy with the Circle's philosophy, but not opposed to the philosophy of most other covenants. A common philosophy is religious tolerance; such factions can hope to isolate the Lancea Sanctum and buy more freedom for the Circle. Factions interested in preserving parks or wilderness areas in and around the city, or in encouraging the creation and presentation of art in the Elysium, are also popular choices.

While Acolytes with such aims tend to throw themselves wholeheartedly into the politics, they are not primarily interested in achieving the aims of the faction. Their main aim is to create the faction, and have it survive as an important force. A single-issue faction is a good way to start, but lacks staying power; such a

faction disintegrates if it succeeds, and repeated failure makes it wither. Thus, many Acolytes try to turn their factions into something like political parties: alliances of Kindred with many views in common, using the faction to put their views to the Prince.

As a result, Acolytes with these interests often find themselves allied to the Carthians and opposed to the Invictus. Since this is a fairly normal state of affairs, it raises few eyebrows. Many such alliances fracture spectacularly when the Carthians realize that the Acolyte is more interested in the appearance and survival of the faction than in achieving any of its ends. Of course, the violent dissolution of the alliance might have been part of the Acolyte's plan from the beginning: the dissolution brings tribulation, and if the faction survives, it has carved its fame, and the importance of its founder, more deeply into the bones of the Danse Macabre.

DOMAINS

Some Acolytes aim high: they aim to found new domains, normally with themselves as Prince. This is not the same as acquiring praxis in an existing domain; this requires a city that is unclaimed by any single Prince. The Acolyte then forges a single domain from the chaos.

This would be a difficult goal even if unclaimed cities littered the landscape of the World of Darkness. In fact, they are extremely rare. A few Acolyte politicians are lucky enough to find themselves in one, but most start their Requiems in cities with a Prince. In that case, the first step is to bring the whole structure crashing down.

Destroying the structure of a domain is very difficult. Even if the Prince is weak, there are other elders waiting to take his place, or with strong interests in keeping the weak Prince as their puppet. The Acolyte must understand the politics of the city thoroughly, and then deepen divisions, eliminate unifying figures and encourage a war among the Damned.

Once the Acolyte has succeeded, things get even harder. She must reunify all of the factions she worked to create, damping down the passions and enmities she previously stirred up. Shaping the domain to her own desires adds to the complications, since the easiest way to get one faction to rejoin might involve compromising on something important to her original goal.

A few Acolytes aim to wipe out all the Kindred, other than themselves, in a city, leaving a blank slate on which they can literally create a domain in their own image. One such Acolyte, in Mexico, formed a cult of vampire-hunters around himself, directing them against the other Kindred of the city. The hunters were frighteningly effective, armed with far more knowledge than most of their kind, leading one low-ranking Acolyte who stumbled on the truth to flee to a nearby city, and seek help. The coterie sent to dispose of the threat to the Masquerade never returned, and nothing at all has been heard from

the city for several years. No one knows whether the Acolyte succeeded, or whether he was killed by his own hunters. Neighboring Kindred are unsure which possibility frightens them more.

COVENANTS

On the face of it, creating a new covenant would seem to be the ultimate expression of this philosophy. After all, the Sanctified and the Dragons revere their founders. Despite this, almost no Kindred attempt this.

There are elements within the Circle of the Crone who strongly object to the propagation of Crúac outside the covenant. If necessary, these Acolytes back their objections up with violence, and they are very good at it. The diversity of the Circle means that there are few reasons, other than a desire to be a founder, to risk this backlash.

A few Kindred believe that they can defeat the enforcers. So far as anyone knows, those Kindred have all been wrong.

AN UNDERWORLD

Kindred who live underground are not uncommon. The advantages are obvious: secrecy and very little risk of sunlight entering. The underworld also plays a very important role in many versions of the legend of the Crone, whether she is Ereshkigal or Persephone, and Acolytes often need to be secret in cities where the Prince does not recognize their beliefs. As a result, there may be slightly more Acolytes living underground than members of other covenants.

Some Acolytes take this much further than others. These Acolytes want to create an underground realm that inspires wonder, awe or fear in all who enter. In most cases, these Acolytes see themselves as the rulers of this realm, although a few are happy to share, or concede, mastery in return for seeing their vision made real. Similarly, the realm is usually the Acolyte's haven, although a few, who want to show their creation off as widely as possible, lair elsewhere.

Much of the process of creating an underworld can happen in downtime. The Kindred must create works of art as decoration, or tend a garden or whatever. However, many of the necessary steps in creating an underworld make good starting points for stories.

The most obvious point comes first. Most of the space below the surface of the Earth is solid, so the Kindred needs to find or create a hole. In many ways, creating the hole is the ideal option. The vampire can decide where to put it, and thus justify dots in Haven Location, and have complete control over the size and layout, which can justify any number of dots in Haven Size and Security.

The problem is that it is not easy. There are three things to be considered: the actual digging, disposal of

the removed earth or rock and structural integrity of the remaining earth. If the digging is to proceed at a reasonable rate, the vampire needs large numbers of workers or heavy machinery. In either case, these need to be brought to the location, and set to work. This all needs to be done without giving away the vampire's location or intentions. As a result, vampires in the modern nights prefer heavy machinery. They can learn to operate it themselves, or just control one or two operators, which is much less dangerous than trying to control a whole gang of miners. Still, obtaining the machine without rousing suspicions may mean stealing it, or at least coming up with a good cover story. Transporting the machinery secretly to the entry point to the excavation requires similar consideration, and once the equipment is there, ensuring a continuing supply of fuel can also require a story, and possible short ones later on as events threaten to disrupt it.

Once the Acolyte has her digger, it starts producing waste. Creative underworlds tend to be large, and a pile of earth and rock the size of several houses is not easily disposed of. The Acolyte needs to find a place to dump the waste, and a way of transporting it that does not draw attention. Again, both of these processes can require stories, and the route to disposing of the waste can be disrupted just as the supply of fuel can.

In general, simply digging holes in the ground and having them stand up is not possible. Enough rock needs to be left to support the weight of the earth above, or additional supports need to be brought in. If the vampire wants a large chamber, which is common, additional supports are almost bound to be necessary. Once again, the main problem is getting hold of the necessary materials, and the expertise needed to install them properly, without rousing suspicions.

If the Acolyte wants to create exits in particular places, to allow for easy hunting or to provide a secure escape route, there may well be stories involved in the moment of construction. It is all very well having an exit that is a secret door in a store cupboard in a nightclub, but much harder to keep the door secret while it is being built. Stories can be built around such plans.

Furthermore, the Acolyte is unlikely to be the only creature to ever think of creating secret subterranean chambers under her city. As the others are secret, they do not appear on plans. That raises the risk of breaking into them during excavation. (Of course, if the Acolyte does not take the trouble to get hold of plans of subways or sewage pipes, there is a risk of breaking into them, as well.) Such an encounter is bound to provoke a story, as the vampire must deal with the other inhabitant's reaction, and cover up the blow to her secrecy.

Almost anything could be encountered underground. Other Kindred, secret government installations, secret mafia installations, headquarters for vampire-hunting



cabals, nameless horrors shut away since the dawn of time: these are just the more obvious possibilities. An opening into a truly enormous cave system provides both opportunities for initial exploration, and the persistent risk that *something* will come through the system to threaten the underworld.

If the Acolyte chooses to look for an already existing hole in the ground, the stories are slightly different. The first, and most obvious, stories involve the process of looking. The vampire must gather clues without tipping any other Kindred off as to the goal of her search. Once the space is found, it is unlikely to be completely unoccupied, and the current denizens need to be defeated or brought under control. The vampire may then want to spend some time creating new exits.

A Nosferatu on the East Coast of the United States (stories differ as the exact city) is said to have created a vast labyrinth deep under the city, with spiral staircases leading up to hidden exits in all the most useful locations. He has sleeping rooms all over the maze, as well as death traps set to catch intruders. There is a spiral stair leading

from the depths of the labyrinth to the top of the highest skyscraper in the city, and the owner is currently engaged in carving a mythological frieze along its length.

UNDERWORLDS AND THE HAVEN MERIT

It is entirely reasonable to spend experience points gained in stories involved in the creation of an underworld on the Haven Merit, to represent the progress made. These havens tend to have at least four dots in Haven Size by the time they are finished, because anything smaller is insufficiently impressive. Scores in Haven Location and Haven Security are much more variable.

If the whole coterie has been working on the project, the resulting haven can be shared, which allows everyone to put points into it.

The Storyteller can also consider giving out one or two free dots in the Merit, if the story went particularly well. In extreme cases, a group that takes over a large complex might receive 15 dots at once, but future stories should make the characters work to retain control of this ideal location.



CHAPTER FOUR: FACTIONS AND BLOODLINES

“Those bloodsucking hippies up north
have made themselves a religion out of
female empowerment self-help books.
It’s totally nuts. But they’ve got that base covered, so
if there’s any divine revelations
to be had in all that, they’ll find it.
One less thing for the rest of us to worry about.
Keep your eyes on your own work.”

PEOPLE OF THE LAND

True predators hunt at night. Wise hunters sleep during the day and pursue prey under cover of darkness. Mountain lions, owls, foxes, wolves: all prefer to kill at night, going where the food is, feasting on their prey while the shadows reign. That is how it is. The strong dominate and destroy the weak, not out of cruelty but because it is how nature allows it — even *demand*s it — to be. Just as darkness is the natural foil to light, predators are the inherent antithesis to prey.

Some Acolytes accept this notion, and carry it further: vampires are the natural complement to humans. The predator-prey relationship represented by the two is not aberrant, but instead part of the organic whole. This relationship is, in fact, *essential* to the precise ecology that guides all things. Human beings overpopulate. Their numbers must be cut. The Acolytes calling themselves the People of the Land recognize that they, as vampires, cannot be the sole culler of the human herd. They accept that they are only a small part of a calculation combining disease, disaster and human brutality. These Damned are content with their small part in the Mother's design.

The People of the Land *hunt* the land. It is what they do to be part of the proper way of things. That is how they honor the Mother.

WIDE OPEN SPACES

The People of the Land are nomadic Acolytes who stick predominantly to rural towns and the surrounding wilderness. Their presence is strongest in the American West, in the broad tracts of semi-open land that constitute states such as Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming. These Acolytes not limited to this region, however, and disparate groups have been found all over, including Texas and Pennsylvania. Some whisper that the People of the Land have left the rough country of America and can be found outside it, though no evidence of that has yet been discovered.

These vampires gather in packs of five to 10 Kindred. The packs are connected by a unified belief system, but little more. Sometimes they cross paths or meet purposely, but largely, the packs' predatory orbits do not overlap. The People of the Land feed on whatever will sustain them. Humans are certainly the preferred prey, but these Acolytes make do with animals whenever

necessary. If the need arises to hunt their own kind, then that is what they do. If they are capable of it, then certainly the Mother accepts it.

HISTORY

Truthfully, the history of the People of the Land doesn't matter. They have little grasp of their own history, and rarely does one Acolyte care enough to uncover anything deeper than what barebones information is already known.

This is what the group believes and tells its childer: the People of the Land have been around for a very long time. This time is not marked in specific years. The People simply accept that their presence has been here for centuries or longer. Few or none of them are old enough to remember back that far, but that only sustains this "truth," because nobody is around to deny and disprove it. If asked about their history, one of these Acolytes may respond by asking a magpie or a black bear *its* history. The point of such absurdity is to suggest that such creatures are timeless. Much as a mockingbird has a limitless history (that the bird cares nothing about), so, too, the People of the Land have a similar disinterest and blithe acceptance in their past. Pressing the question will only ensure violence.

HISTORY MATTERS — SORT OF

This faction's history isn't interesting. They have been predators for more than 200 years. They stick to the relative wilderness. That's it.

What *is* interesting, however, are the histories of those individuals comprising packs of these Acolytes. These Damned have led troubled Requiems, and have made many an enemy along the way. Some Acolytes are Embraced directly into the People, whereas others join willingly or are dragged headlong into servitude. Point being, this is a covenant of characters. It is the history of these characters that matters — who do they know, where have they cut a swath of blood and pain, what events have driven them to this? These questions are what make the group interesting, not a textbook reiteration of dates and places.

PHILOSOPHY

The People of the Land do not often wax philosophical. Such conversations are reserved for rare occasions such as holidays or during particular rituals. According to most of the People, honoring the tenets of the People should be done through action, not discussion. Certainly these Kindred are willing to explicate their philosophies and ideas to a neonate amongst them, but all told, such dialogues are kept to a bare minimum. The philosophies are best exemplified through exploits and illustrations, not explanations.

As unspoken as their ideas are, one might suspect that these ideas are simple, few in number and generally given short shrift. That is not the case. The ideas that inform the People's ways are straightforward, but certainly not simple.

HONOR THY MOTHER

The People are pantheistic. They believe in one divine being, and they accept that she is within all things and living creatures. Her reality is pervasive. She is the swaying trees in autumn, the exhaust coughed from an automobile, the kingfisher spearing trout, the human child bouncing a ball. This female deity is sometimes referred to as the Crone, but that seems more a habit learned from other Acolytes than an idea that has grown naturally out of the faction's original beliefs. Mostly, however, the People simply refer to this figure as the Mother. (It's worth noting that some Acolytes claim that elders in the covenant are actually Crones, venerable old Damned worthy of worship. The People do not lend merit to such ideas. No vampire can ever equal the Mother Crone, and any creature who claims such power is due for a lesson in truth, however bloody that lesson may be.)

She birthed the world in a gush of pain. Everything came forth from her spilling womb, stinking of hot blood. This, the People say, is why blood is so important. Blood is what links a large part of the world's living creatures. Blood is the cosmic tie to the old Mother. The People tie this quite easily to the natural order, or as they sometimes call it, "the Way of Things." Cattle eat grass, and humans gain some benefits of the

vegetation by eating the cattle. Vampires are merely one step above that, but not outside of the equation. Humans, by eating cattle (or other creatures), also gain the benefits of blood and meat. By consuming humans, the Damned feed on the blood that has been a part of humanity, part of the animal kingdom (cattle) and part of vegetation (grass).

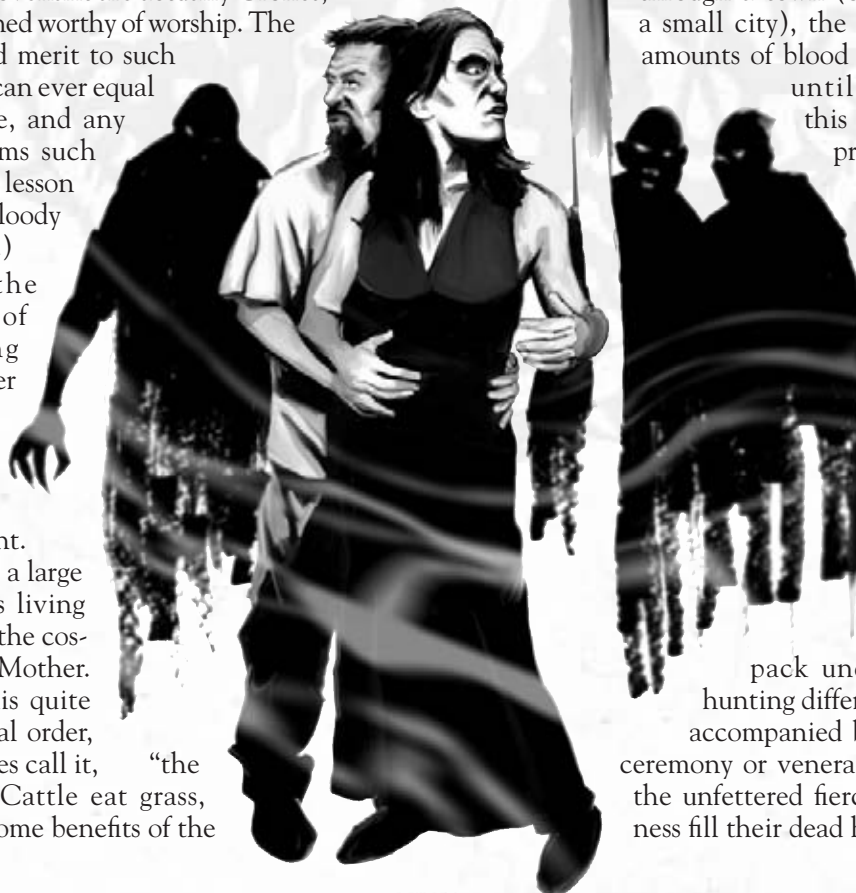
In this way, the People link themselves inextricably to the natural order. They are not outside of it because they are the natural pinnacle of the food chain. The food chain — a biological hierarchy ordained and maintained by the Mother herself — is therefore utterly sacred. To believe that the Kindred are somehow unnatural and distant from the organic order is anathema to the People. In fact, such an idea is heretical; should one of the faction utter such profanity, he will be rebuked violently.

HUNTING, GATHERING

Consumption — and by proxy, the act of hunting food for consumption — is about as pure an action as is possible, at least by the People's standards. This is one of the ways that they silently express their faith in the Mother, by acting in accordance with the food chain.

The People of the Land find and consume Vitae in two ways. The first way, which is not so much holy as it is utilitarian, is often called "grazing." If they move through a town (or, on rare occasions, a small city), the pack will take small amounts of blood from various sources until full. They equate this to milking a cow: it provides some food for little effort and does not destroy the creature. The People "graze" most often when traveling from region to region, town to town. They can reclaim lost blood before moving on once again.

Hunting, on the other hand, is sacred and nearly ritualistic. Every pack undertakes the act of hunting differently, but it is always accompanied by some modicum of ceremony or veneration. Some packs let the unfettered fierceness of the wilderness fill their dead hearts, and they hunt



violently and madly, slaking their thirst while cutting a swath of chaos. Other People take lessons from creatures such as mountain lions, wolves, even falcons.

These Acolytes hunt with stealth, preferring clean, quick kills under the cover of shadows. Some prefer to keep stocks of food, doing so by kidnapping several victims and keeping them alive for days or weeks as portable blood supplies. The People can stock several victims in a van or an RV (if the vampires are mechanically mobile; a few rare packs prefer to travel on foot) and be confident that they have food during those long nights in the middle of nowhere.

Curiously, hunting is not done without mercy — or, at least, what the People perceive to be mercy. They offer small mumbled prayers to the Mother upon completing a kill and feeding. Many packs actually involve themselves briefly in the lives of those they destroy. They may track down the families of the deceased and “honor” them in some way — perhaps by sending money, small tokens or even parts of the prey’s body (a ring finger with a wedding ring still attached, for instance).

Most importantly, the People consider torture an aberration. Torture is not part of the Mother’s plan. Animals do not torture animals. Yes, hunting and feeding may be torturous for the prey, but that is inadvertent and unintentional. Visiting needless suffering upon the food shows a grotesque misunderstanding of the natural order.

Of course, that’s not to say that some packs don’t devolve to that level. Vampires may find that the Beast within is not so sated with mere food, and may be consumed by perversion and sadism. When one pack catches wind of this kind of behavior from another, that pack is obligated to hunt the offenders and cull them from the food chain. Permanently.

WALKING ACROSS WORLDS

The People accept that they are wholly unique. Yes, all animals are in their own way distinctive, but a fox is not much different from a badger when it comes down to biology and behavior. These Acolytes claim that they are representatives of many worlds. They walk among humans because they were once humans. The Beast within, however, also makes them part animal, part monster.

This powerful pairing puts the People at the top of the food chain, and allows them the enviable position of knowing the “truth” about the Mother and her world. That, above all, makes them a little bit divine. Such divinity is expressed through the vampire’s natural abilities, such as Disciplines. (At least, the People see these things as natural. If the Kindred are natural, then why shouldn’t their given abilities be equally normal?)

In this way, these Acolytes do not see the Requiem as the curse or burden many others believe it to be. The People don’t see the Requiem as days of blood and roses, either — it is an existence fraught with peril and toil, but so are *all* existences. Theirs is merely endless.

BEASTS AND MEN

The People venerate animals. The beasts of the wild are not above the Kindred in the food chain or even the cosmic one, but animals are worthy of heightened respect. Animals are pure. They are close to the Mother, a part of her as much as a leaf is part of its parent tree. Humans have distanced themselves from the natural order (which, perhaps in their own way, is their natural order), but animals have done no such thing.

Upon joining the People, whether by hook or by crook, a vampire receives an animal designation that the pack believes best suits her. Some packs use simple beast names, telling the new vampire her animal is “Fox” or “Osprey.” In these cases, the animal is meant only as a representation, not as any kind of title. Many packs, however, actively change the name of the vampire to something related to the animal: “Vulture Picking Bones” or “Henhouse Fox.”

These titles supplant the vampire’s original name, which becomes anathema to speak from that point forward. How an animal is associated to the Acolyte is likely a reference to the way she hunts, moves and thinks. The animal name reflects what the Beast within is like, as the People believe the Beast to be unique inside every vampire. “Henhouse Fox” may sneak in under cover of stillness and silence to steal infants from a hospital nursery, much as a fox pilfers chickens. “Vulture Picking Bones,” on the other hand, is less direct, preferring instead to claim the sick and dying from the scenes of accidents, convalescent homes or areas of disease.

Many vampires receive tattoos of their “animal soul,” making such changes permanent with the expenditure of blood and will. Others wear Zuni fetishes or other jewelry made to represent their animal names.

It isn’t unusual to find animals living among these Acolytes. Many take animal companions, and train the beasts to hunt with them. Rarely do they take exotic animals — dogs and snakes are particularly popular, though some Acolytes do prefer stranger creatures (owls, spiders, lynxes).

The gifts of Animalism are, in this way, very important to the People. If a vampire doesn’t know this gift coming into the People, she *will* be taught it one way or another. Animalism allows these Kindred to perform many expressions of power, all of which bring them closer to the Mother. Whether that means riding an animal’s soul for a time, communing with a creature or stirring the Beast inside another vampire, Animalism gives the Acolyte power and harmony with the natural order. This gift allows her to be a more effective predator.

Despite the People’s endless respect for the animal world, the People will not hesitate to feed from them if given the opportunity. If a vampire is capable of gaining sustenance from a beast, then it is meant for her to drink from that creature. That is the Mother’s way.

FOLLOW THE BLOOD

The People are nomads. A pack, during the course of a year, may travel as far as a thousand miles in any given direction, though most packs keep to an area half that size in square miles. A rare pack will travel on foot, walking upon civilization's periphery — sticking to the edges of distant ranches, tracts of empty forests or strips of decommissioned highway (such as the many parts of old Route 66). Most packs travel together in a single vehicle or a caravan. RVs, vans and trucks make for good transportation. Some Acolytes grow quite attached to their conveyances, whereas others ditch them and steal new ones every few weeks.

These Acolytes move according to certain patterns. Often, a pack will establish a "hunting trail" that the Acolytes can travel during the course of a year or three. They move to where the feeding is best. If a small logging village or an oil rig only opens up for part of the year, the pack may hunt there during that time and then move on.

Tourist seasons in spring and summer make for good hunting, as well; vacationers disappear easily, and thus many packs will accommodate tourist areas into their predatory patterns. Some Acolytes eschew such patterning, preferring to live more "wild." They simply roam aimlessly, looking for the Mother's signs to guide them. Her signs, of course, are open to interpretation — a road-crushed armadillo, a herd of mule deer or a strange cloud pattern might all be construed as good omens put there by the Mother. (The Acolytes might also see bad omens, i.e., "Don't go that way," in the world: a trail of smoke in the distance, a coyote's howl or an odd smell in the air.) Packs are given easily to superstition and homespun folklore.

WAYS OF THE CIRCLE

Evidence supports that the People of the Land are truly Acolytes — likely Acolytes who, long ago, broke away from a more "traditional" locus of belief. Two of the Circle's key tenets — *Creation Is Power*, and *Tribulation Brings Enlightenment* — come up often in the philosophies and actions of the People.

These Acolytes take a straightforward approach to the ideas of creation. Vampires cannot propagate as others do, but the Kindred *can* propagate (and woe to any who claim that such reproduction is somehow false or abnormal). The Embrace is the primary, and some would say *only*, way to continue the blood. Hence, the Embrace is not shunned, and is in fact encouraged. Existing in a pack can be perilous; eternity is rarely eternal. Packs like to replenish their numbers, and the Embrace is what helps them do that. Creation, therefore, truly is power.

Frankly, the People of the Land assume a straightforward understanding of tribulation, as well. They don't shy from trouble. Their Requiems, by nature, are already

hard — they exist on the fringes of civilization, which not only limits their food sources but also forces them to stand out more plainly against an empty backdrop. That's not to say they go out of their way to step into danger, only that they will not divert their course simply because it seems fraught with some peril.

The best (and most frightening) example of the People's commitment to self-suffering is what they put recently joined vampires through before they can be truly considered "People of the Land." Any Damned seeking to become part of these Acolytes must endure a brutal rite of passage. This rite has no name, and is not the same from pack to pack.

Many packs leave a new vampire alone in the wilderness, allowing him to fend for himself while cut off from all the things a Kindred requires: easy food, shelter from the sun, protection from unknown threats. If the vampire can make do, he's in. If not, he can either endure further trials or simply be cut free from the chance of joining (though some meet Final Death outright).

Other trials include vicious gauntlets, in which a vampire must run through a channel of Acolytes who hit him, gouge him or stab him as he presses forward. If he can bring himself to the end of the line and emerge from the other side, then he belongs. To boot, he's learned something. The lesson isn't simply that tribulation brings enlightenment.

The key is to know just *what* that enlightenment means among the People. To them, enlightenment is the realization that one can survive nearly anything. The acceptance of nigh-eternal endurance can give a creature of the night an alarming sense of possibility and power.

RITUALS AND OBSERVANCES

The People of the Land maintain little interest in holidays. Those packs that celebrate do so with events unique to them. They might observe the "birthdays" (usually the day of one's Embrace) of the pack members, or might honor the first day of a season with prayers to the Mother. That said, the People do share a number of rituals across the board; though, again, *how* they enact such rituals is often left up to the individual packs.

TEMPLES OF MOTHER'S MERCY

During the course of a hunt, an Acolyte might kill another being. This may mean murdering a person or an animal, or destroying another Kindred. To show reverence for the life or spirit that has been taken, the Acolyte will take a part of the prey with him. Different vampires take different things. Some take items of interest and value such as rings, necklaces or cell phones. Others take small personal belongings: driver's licenses,

keys, mementos. Many take physical parts of the body, such as fingers, teeth or ears (this is particularly true when killing animals).

Upon taking these objects, a vampire will adorn herself with them. It is not unusual to see one of these Acolytes festooned with countless small “souvenirs:” a necklace made of foot bones, two rings on every finger, a few rodent skulls hanging by a leather cord upon a stolen belt. If the pack did the killing as a whole, the People might decorate the inside of their mode of transportation with such items. Some have been known to keep whole skeletons strung up upon the ceilings of their recreational vehicles.

THE MOTHER'S HAVEN

Some packs within this faction have developed a variation on the Protean %% power, Haven of Soil (p. 138, **Vampire: The Requiem**). The variation allows the vampire to merge her body *only* with wood — trees in particular. The additional three experience points (12 total) are not required to do this, but this power must be chosen over the normal Haven of Soil. All other effects and costs are the same, but by taking this, the vampire may *not* merge with the earth, only with wood. In this way, he communes more purely with the Mother. Vampires who do this within the sect are sometimes called “Dryads.”

WHISPERS TO THE MOTHER

All things are alive, and all living things are part of the Mother. The People of the Land believe that all souls — whether the soul of a human, vampire or oak tree — are one swatch of fabric sewn into the Mother's grand quilt. The People honor this fact by talking to everything. Many find it strange to see one of these Acolytes whispering to a rose, laughing with a bird or even giving some kind of mumbled blessing to a pick-up truck. They don't tend to hold actual conversations (though some mad or “wise” People believe they can hear responses and hence have continued dialogue with unmoving objects), but simply offer a small blessing, prayer or comment to nearby objects. They believe that the soul of the thing can hear them, and that mean the Mother can hear them.

ORGANIZATION

The People keep to simple ideas. Complexity is unnecessary; why muddy clear waters? Still, these Acolytes tend to maintain certain elements of organization across the board.

PACKS

A pack of vampires belonging to the People do not adhere to any strict organization. They do not have

ranks or echelons pertinent to leadership. Some packs *do* mimic the behavior of wolves and accept alpha and omega positions within the pack. The alpha vampire is the proven leader. Her strength is clear, and, with it, she directs the pack. An omega vampire is generally the weakest, though it's as likely that such a vampire is merely the last to have joined the People. The omega performs meager tasks (cleaning up bodies, providing distractions when hunting, putting gas in the van).

When a pack utilizes this alpha/omega structure, the positions are generally fluid. As is true in nature, the top dog does must continue to demonstrate his strength. At any time, a stronger leader may supplant him in the hierarchy and become the one to guide the pack movements.

HAVENS

The People keep their havens relatively temporary. They might use out-of-the-way caves, access tunnels or mines as common havens. If the People find a particularly valuable haven (offering full protection from the sun and from human meddling), they may return to that spot year after year. These havens are more “safe places” than they are true havens.

Ostensibly, the only true haven is if the group has a motor vehicle that they've kept for a long time. Such vehicles tend to be incredibly well protected. Windows are blacked out, the sides might be armored with strips of corrugated metal or pieces of stolen guard rails, and the People have all manner of backup supplies (spare tires, cans of gas, weapons, blood) to keep them safe if on the run.

GHOULS

The People of the Land don't have widespread ideas one way or the other about ghouls. Some packs are happy to take mortal ghouls. After all, humans assume animals as pets, why can't vampires claim humans in the same way? Most People who do take ghouls treat the ghouls with respect and keep them well fed. The People also treat their ghouls as animals — treasured animals, but animals nevertheless. Ghouls are only useful if they are well-trained and able companions.

Of course, many packs assume actual animals as ghouls, though some People suggest that twisting an animal in that way could be a perversion of the food chain, but most simply accept the theory that, “If I can do it, the Mother must will it.”

LEAVING THE PEOPLE

Choosing to leave a pack is a risky endeavor for a vampire. Some packs view leaving as an insult, as if it challenges and dismisses the Mother and her ways. If that's the case, the pack will likely do one of two things with the leaving (or escaping) vampire. The pack members will destroy him outright — as mercifully as they can manage, which may not be all that merciful — or

they will find a way to keep him regardless of his wishes. They may shackle him with bonds of metal or bonds of blood; either way, he's staying. And he will be punished, as well. A favorite mode of punishment is chaining up the offending Kindred and dragging him behind the van for a few miles, letting the road have its fill of the creature's disintegrating body.

Of course, as it is with the People, they have very few rules that carry from pack to pack. Many packs simply let an exiting vampire leave. If he has earned his pack members' respect in some way, he may go without trouble.

THE MOTHER'S MARK

Sometimes, a pack will let a vampire leave, but only with a permanent mark to remind him of the People forever.

The method of doing this is actually an alteration of Touch of the Morrigan, a level-three

Crúac ritual (p. 144 of **Vampire: The Requiem**). This ritual works almost exactly as described, except for two notable differences. First, if touching an opponent is successful, the ritualist can make the resultant mark appear as a simple image or symbol (a handprint, a star, a crude eye). The image comes across as a bruise or a field of blood blisters. The second difference is, with the expenditure of a Willpower dot, the image can be made utterly permanent. Because of this high cost, it is rare that any vampire wishes to so eternally mark another, but who said such decisions need to be rational?

Mother's Mark can only affect vampires. It cannot affect ghouls or werewolves. Per Touch of the Morrigan, the modified ritual does damage to the subject. The damage may heal. The mark is all that can be made permanent, not the damage. If bought as a new ritual, Mother's Mark is a level-three ritual, much like Touch of the Morrigan.

THE SECOND DESCENT

One passage is crucial to the Acolytes of the Second Descent. This passage, taken from the Akkadian mythological poem "The Descent of Inanna into the Underworld," is often inscribed somewhere within the Acolyte's home. The passage may hang outside her door, be written into the first page of every journal or be scrawled and scratched onto the walls of every room 100 times over.

The passage is this: *The daughter of sin is determined to go / to the dark house, dwelling of the dark god / to the house which those that enter cannot leave.* This is not precise, for translations from the original Akkadian or Babylonian can make for some variance of word and word order, but it is roughly what one will find within the home of a Second Descent vampire. These Acolytes accept that they are the children of sin, living in a house of darkness and divinity, a house that they may not leave. In accepting this belief, they find wisdom in the truths of the Second Descent.

the philosophies and ideas and make them into a society — a covenant within the covenant, so to speak — geared toward exemplifying the Second Descent in their Requiems, while similarly turning others toward the wisdom expressed in the stories of the Underworld.

This section will help describe both those vampires who only glean wisdom from the Second Descent without action, and those vampires who purposefully introduce the core concepts into their seemingly endless unives.

THE DARK HOUSE

The mythic Underworld is the key concept for all vampires of the Second Descent. To some Acolytes, the Underworld (occasionally called "the Dark House") represents only a metaphor. To others, the Underworld is a very real place — or, at the least, a very real state of being. The Underworld is *not* Hell; Hell is largely a Christian concept (and, as some will decry, a perversion of the original pagan idea of the Underworld). Similarly, the Underworld is not punishment. These Acolytes do not consider sin or impurity to be important or even measurable concepts. Humans are sinful, but sin itself has no consequence. So, what is the Underworld, then?

DICHOTOMIES

The Second Descent is, to some, only a philosophy. Acolytes follow its ideas without expressing them or converting others to the idea. Some Acolytes adhere to all of the purported truths, whereas others pick and choose those tenets that help them make it from night to night. Others embody

DESCENT

In mythology, the Underworld is a realm contrary to the rest of creation. The Underworld exists throughout various cultures as a place outside of life, where death is instead the dominant force. Some consider the Underworld to be subterranean, actually existing beneath the surface of the earth, whereas others accept the Underworld as spiritually separate regardless of its corporeal location.

Whether the Underworld is the Great Below of Mesopotamian stories, the classical Hades of Greek and Roman myth, or the Norse Niflheim, the principal ideas remain the same. In fact, a number of key images and concepts link most of these mythological Underworlds. Some are physical (rivers, bridges, mountainous barriers), and others are conceptual (wisdom, secrets, death). The crux is that the Underworld is not a place of life, but of death. The Underworld isn't a place of punishment, but instead an initiation. One does not find the known truths here, only hidden secrets.

The Acolytes of the Second Descent believe that all of this wisdom applies specifically to them. While certainly mortals have something to glean from the stories if they so choose, Kindred are the ones who personify the journey to the Underworld.

REQUIEM FOR THE GREAT ABOVE

These Acolytes accept one truth: the Requiem is the Underworld. The Kindred leave life and become death. Their wombs are barren, and they are left to feed only on blood, dust and ash. While they may seem a physical part of the world, they do not belong to it. The whorls and orbits of humanity are now inaccessible. The Kindred cannot hold human jobs, or maintain honest emotions or loving relationships. Vampires are creatures of the margins, existing on the fringes of existence. Vampires are dead beings hungry to consume life.

This, however, is not necessarily unnatural. It is troublesome, yes. It creates anguish and misery, but so do many things. The Requiem, for these Acolytes, is not a sentence. They don't see themselves as being punished. To the contrary, the Requiem is an initiation. It is only one step toward some kind of greater existence. One cannot know the Great Above without knowing the Great Below. Spring cannot come before winter. Enlightenment is impossible without tribulation.

The First Descent, according to these vampires, was the soul's descent from the ephemeral heavens to the mundane world of clay and rock. That step involves gaining life and becoming human. All mortal beings have made the First Descent.

The Second Descent — that which gives the philosophy its name — is when life enters the Underworld and becomes death. The term is taken from Inanna's descent from the heavens to the Underworld realm of her sister, Ereshkigal. Inanna must give everything up to be there, including her clothing, her fertility and her power. However, the Acolytes of the Second Descent don't focus purely on Inanna and the Mesopotamian story.

Other cultures have similar stories of beings both mortal and divine lowering themselves into the Underworld. In Greek and Roman myth, Orpheus and Aeneas both entered the Underworld to see their deceased loved ones, and both returned having drawn wisdom from death. Orpheus learned how difficult it is to truly leave the Underworld once you are a part of it. Aeneas learned his fate as the founder of a powerful empire (Rome), but he was not allowed to take what he learned away from the Underworld, for such knowledge is not meant for the living.

These Kindred accept that they have made the Second Descent. They are now tied to death and freed from life. The Second Descent *seems* terrible, and truly, it is. With uncontrollable hungers, a fear of the sun and an endless array of enemies natural and unnatural, how could the Second Descent be perceived as a promising state of being? These Acolytes do not deny the horror of what they have become. Unlike many other vampires, however, the Acolytes see these elements as tests — trials that, if passed, will take them to greater wisdom and what many call the Third Descent.

The Third Descent is, for these Kindred, divinity. It is not an *ascent*; the Third Descent does not return them to life and revoke death. That cannot happen. No, in the Third Descent, a vampire becomes



one of the gods of the Underworld. The Kindred gain access to powers, limitless and inimitable. They also become privy to the secrets of the world, and once one knows its secrets, they are not bound by it any longer.

Few can agree on whether any vampire has yet to make the Third Descent. Many suggest that a few have completed that journey. These ancient beings, once Kindred, are now creatures that sleep deep within the clay and mud. Their powers do not need consciousness or physical movement (though sometimes they partake of both) to affect the world, and they become part of the fundamental nature of all things.

Other Acolytes are not so certain that any vampires have truly taken that final fall — surely some *think* they have, choosing to claim divinity and reap the fruits of worship. Claiming something and truly *being* something are two entirely separate things, however. No, some Second Descent Acolytes perceive the Third Descent much as they do the entire philosophy: as *metaphor*. The Third Descent is simply coming to terms with one's Requiem, finding peace and power within.

WATERS OF LETHE

In Greek and Roman myth, when one leaves the Underworld for any reason, he must drink from the waters of the River Lethe (sometimes called the Water of Oblivion). A drink from this river causes the soul to forget all that had transpired in the Underworld.

This has echoes in a vampire's Requiem. When a vampire enters a long torpor, thus weakening the potency of his Vitae, he sometimes is subject to the Fog of Eternity. Truths become unclear, and wisdom may cannibalize itself, becoming confused and half-eaten. Some Acolytes, having gone through this process, claim to have supped upon the waters of a river of blood — many vampires of the Second Descent are certain that this is the River Lethe.

For this reason, these Acolytes desperately fear long periods of torpor. It is horrifying for them to consider that their initiation can be set back — or forever sabotaged — by such grotesque somnolence. They do what they must to forestall it, even though it is perhaps inevitable. Some become obsessed with writing everything down (hence why many keep hundreds, if not thousands, of journals). A few Acolytes suggest, however, that if the waters of Lethe are the proper part of exiting the Underworld, is perhaps a long torpor a signpost on the way to the Third Descent?

HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY

The backbone of the Second Descent is its mythology. Not only does it have a number of human mythologies with which it may inform its purpose and wisdom, but the Second Descent also has a number of legends outside

the mortal world. These tales (such as “Azar's Defeat of the Black Bulls” and “The Journey Beyond the Razor Bridge”) tell the stories of Kindred who have navigated a very real Underworld, having dealt with any manner of old gods from various cultures and time periods.

The tale that marks the approximate beginning of the Second Descent philosophy in modern nights is the one explaining *how* the Kindred myths surfaced in the first place.

ETHELINDE

In the late 19th century, a vampire came stumbling out of the Black Forest and into the German village of Röt-Schönegrund. The snows had piled high that winter, and were only just beginning to thaw. The vampire — a seemingly young girl in her late teens — was clothed in dirty rags, half-naked despite the snow. Her lips were crusted black, her hair stringy and muddy. Strangest was that her skin and hair held chunks of ice and frozen blood. The vampire girl held a bundle of cloth in her hands, which she set down upon the periphery of the village.

Then she fed. She did not prey on a single sleeping family — no, she swept through the village like a windblown fire, going house to house and gorging on blood as if she had forgotten the taste. Of course, the town already had a vampire — a lone predator living deep in the caves of the nearby mountains. Stirred by the screams of villagers, the Kindred came to see what had come to his territory. He found the little girl, and went to dispatch her.

It was not so simple. She was caught in the throes of frenzy, and she made surprisingly short work of him. Her strength was incomparable — the way she wrenched his arm out of the socket was, to her, as easy as plucking a dandelion. Wisely, he fled to get help.

The following night, three Kindred came from the nearby town of Freudenstadt. They found the girl sitting in the midst of a ruined village. It was empty of life, though bodies filled the snowy streets. Some of the small cottages had burned, as had the town's great hall. The girl was docile, polite and spoke clear German in an unusual accent. She said her name was Ethelinde, and that she was sorry, and she would go where they wanted her to go. They took her to Freudenstadt, where other Kindred waited.

TRUTH WRAPPED IN CLOTH

They shackled each limb in irons and kept her in a small cell. She was tractable, offering no resistance. When they asked her who she was or where she came from, she could only offer her name and a muddled account of a place beneath the ground where rivers ran with water that tasted like blood, and where “the gods of blood and death taught their lessons.” Sometimes she called these gods the *Vanir*, other times the *Annuaki*. She called the underground place many names: Nidavel-lir, Kur, the Dark House, even the Elysian Fields. The

story changed with every telling, and she seemed lost in her own mind.

The gathered Kindred discovered the cloth she left behind, and uncovered a number of scrolls and pages, all written in blood. These scrolls were the myths that would eventually spawn the philosophy. Reading them was said to overwhelm the vampires, assaulting them with visions of legend made real. The Kindred were made to see as if they were entering the Underworld themselves, much as the vampires in the stories had done.

These German Kindred became the proselytes for the Second Descent. They concealed the scrolls and only showed them to those who were truly ready. As for Ethelinde, nobody knows what happened to her. When the Kindred returned from reading the texts, she was gone, the chains broken as if bitten in twain.

The three vampires — founders of the sect — still reside in Europe, maintaining a strong Acolyte powerbase in and around both Austria and Germany.

PRECEPTS

Below are some of the precepts that the Second Descent Acolytes follow. Those who accept only the philosophies of this sect pick and choose from the ideas represented. Those who come together and form cults of Second Descent vampires tend to be stricter in their interpretations of these notions.

CHTHONIC GODS

Practitioners or participants of the Second Descent restrict their worship to only those gods that, mythologically, have been associated with the Underworld. This may mean venerating a deity of the Underworld (the Sumerian Ereshkigal, the Greek Hades, the Hindu Yama), or a being who has gone to the Underworld and returned (Ereshkigal's sister, Inanna; Demeter or her daughter, Persephone; the Norse Loki, chained in the Underworld).

Generally, an Acolyte of the Second Descent will identify herself with one specific god or goddess, limiting her prayer and sacrifice to only that deity. A dark and vengeful Kindred with (what she believes to be) a capacity for love might take Ereshkigal as her patroness. A sad and broken-hearted neonate may offer worship to Persephone — but, decades later, when her heart has hardened and she has grown wintry, she may instead come to revere Persephone's mother, Demeter.

All Acolytes of the Second Descent are encouraged to offer some manner of sacrifice to their deity. The nature of said sacrifice is up to the individual adherent, though most offer some kind of life or blood as is fitting for the entities of the Underworld. Sacrificing life is often a small affair; many lay small animals upon an altar and bleed them out, sometimes in a ritual bowl. Some vampires offer blood from a still-living mortal, or kill the human to gain the Vitae. (Infants are, according to unspoken

doctrine, to be sacrificed rarely. The offer of a young child is only for imploring the gods for a great favor.)

A vampire should never consume the blood offered. The sacrificed blood is now marked for the gods. To consume it after it has been given is like stealing fire from the gods — crass, offensive and dangerous.

THIS DEAD AND FROZEN HEART

One of the ways the Second Descent Acolytes separate themselves from *other* Circle members is that the Second Descent Acolytes reject creation. Creation may be power, but it's not power that the Damned are meant to have.

One of the key symbols associated with the Second Descent is winter. Mythically, this is appropriate. Many of the gods who descended to the Underworld gave up their lives as well as their power over the world's fertility. When ruling deities travel to the land of the dead, winter comes. Crops die. Livestock is capable only of birthing sterile or deformed litters. Trees become bare like flesh-stripped bones. These Kindred see themselves as beings of winter — dead, frozen, unyielding.

Some carry this symbology over to their dress and décor: they wear all white, keep their havens cold like meat lockers and even wear makeup to keep their skin pale as hoarfrost. Others prefer to invoke winter in their personalities — curt, icy, stubborn. Winter is significant to these Acolytes. In fact, most of the holidays and rituals unique to this philosophy take place during winter. It is the time of death, and thus should be celebrated.

Winter is emblematic of why these vampires cannot “create” anything. Winter produces nothing; it either kills life or puts it in stasis. This isn't to say that some Second Descent Acolytes don't create things in small ways. Some grow plants, raise animals or make art. Those Acolytes who do, however, are seen as a little bit foolish by the others, as if the creators are trying to touch the unreachable.

LOST HUMANITY

Creation is a mortal's game. Let the mortals play housewife, gardener or farmer. Humans are alive. Vampires are not. The two — according to the tenets of the Second Descent — are not meant to mix.

These Acolytes teach that the Kindred are in no way human. They should relinquish any ideas about *being* human. The moral laws and social mores of humanity mean nothing. This can mean a number of things to a vampire of the Second Descent.

First, no ghouls. Ghouls are seen as human, regardless of the stains of death that mar their still-living souls. Having a ghoul provides a needless link to the world of the living, and no vampire can ever find the way toward

the Third Descent by upholding such a “safety line” to humanity. Moreover, a human cannot be brought into the Underworld except through the Embrace — ghouls and thralls are creatures that have one foot in death and one in life. That is abhorrent.

Second, no mortal allies. The Acolytes of this philosophy don’t expressly *avoid* humans, but the Acolytes certainly try not to make friends with mortals. If Acolytes need humans, the vampires force the mortals or cajole them before discarding them (often violently). Humans should not be long-term allies — they certainly can’t be “friends.” People are vessels for sacred blood, that which vampires steal to gain and offer power. One should not fraternize with the sacrifices.

Third, only rare mortals are meant for the Embrace. These Acolytes Embrace very infrequently — they don’t see it as a curse or a gift; the Embrace is simply a doorway that most humans are not meant to access. Wantonly dragging a living being into death is a gross misuse (and misunderstanding) of a vampire’s power. Generally, these vampires see it one way: if a human *wants* the Embrace, he may ask for it.

This, of course, is complicated. The Second Descent Acolytes keep to the Masquerade, and so ideally no mortal should ever be able to ask to be given the Embrace.

That said, it is not impossible for a human to uncover the truth of the Kindred — if he does, he has discovered the path to the Underworld all on his own, and may be lead down that road. Of course, some Acolytes find (or make) loopholes to this rule: they purposefully *reveal* the existence of vampires to a mortal, and then let the mortal ask to be given eternal life. If he doesn’t ask, then he is mind-raped through Domination or destroyed outright. If he asks — then doesn’t that fulfill the parameters of this precept?

This may sound as if Second Descent Kindred loathe humanity. While this is true for some of these Acolytes, it isn’t for most. Humans are, in many ways, sacrosanct. Vampires look upon the living with awe. It isn’t hatred that separates these Acolytes from the mortal world, it’s an explicit understanding that the world of the living and the world of the dead do not belong together.

One of the concerns that other Kindred have about the Second Descent is how these ideas taint a practitioner’s soul. Some Humanity loss is expected. These vampires do not see themselves as out-and-out monsters; they’ve no precepts that glorify cruelty. Still, such a rejection of human ways can lead to an inevitable slide toward the Beast. Some see this slide as natural (after all, it is in its own way a descent).

Most, however, temper the dogma of the Second Descent with some pragmatism of behavior. They still grasp some of their human ways and ideals without making it expressly clear. Not all Second Descent Acolytes are the worst kind of monsters.

WORLD OF SUFFERING

These Acolytes accept that through suffering, one may find enlightenment. They don’t step out of their way to create suffering for themselves, however. The Requiem is suffering. The Underworld is anguish, emptiness and pain. Why make the Requiem harder than it needs to be?

The point here is, a Second Descent vampire sees his Requiem as a trial. It is a stage of existence in which death comes after life. Furthermore, he believes that *something* comes after death. Whether he believes that this Third Descent is a respite from hungers or a gift of divinity is his choice to make. To enter the Third Descent, he must pass through all the trials and initiations of the Second Descent.

While some are certainly content to leave the definitions of such tests vague, most following this philosophy are driven to define their tests very particularly. How they do this is a matter of some interpretation.

The Underworld myths typically have a number of common elements and images associated with them. Many such legends feature bridges, rivers, boatmen, gateways and guardians. Many Second Descent Acolytes actually ascribe these mythic icons significance from their own Requiems.

Bridge: Bridges are perilous connectors uniting two places, but the bridge itself is not a place. A bridge is often dangerous — wide as a hair, sharp as a razor, suspended over a place far below strewn with the bones of the fallen. Most Acolytes accept that the bridge represents the Danse Macabre — that nightly tightrope walk that maneuvers a vampire through his own cruel society. Some believe that a bridge is more specific: it may represent “crossing over” and making allies within another covenant, or gaining impermissible powers.

Boatmen: Whether the boatman is Urshambi leading Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh myth or Charon crossing the River Styx in Greek myth, he is a seminal figure. He represents the first of many guardians, but the only guardian who can be made an ally. In a vampire’s Requiem, the boatman could be another figure (often an elder or an enemy) who can be given favor and made a crucial partner. His costs are always high, desiring something that the Acolyte doesn’t want to relinquish (blood, a token from his old life, freedom).

Gateway: The Underworld is rife with gateways. The young Algonquin warrior must enter a cyclone’s eye to find his Spirit Bride on the shores beyond. Ishtar passed through seven gates (each requiring a new sacrifice) to meet with her sister. Second Descent Acolytes keep a vigilant eye out for opportunities to change themselves or sacrifice something. Is it possible to leave this city and make a home in another? Is a change of station within the covenant (perhaps becoming Hierophant) an option? Or has the Acolyte ruined all things and must become an anchorite away from the Danse Macabre? The vampire will not shy away from such

changes, and should instead rush toward them regardless of their value or utter lack of advantage.

Guardians: The Underworld is not without its protectors: Cerberus, Anubis, Garm. A vampire may not traverse her Requiem without encountering those who want to make sure she is worthy to do so. Many Acolytes literally identify one or several others who challenge them (physically, mentally or socially). These Acolytes accept the challenge (whether it is real or merely perceived) and attempt to “defeat” the guardians at their own games. Acolytes can spend decades or longer going round after round with self-made enemies in this way. Victory against a guardian helps the vampire move toward the Third Descent.

Rivers: Rivers separate the Underworld into many parts. In the Abyss, one finds rivers of fire, of forgetfulness, of woe. The waters of every river mark territory, except to an Acolyte, this is not *physical* territory. It is the territory of forbidden wisdom. The Underworld is the resting place for all secrets, and so the vampire must metaphorically bathe in the rivers and uncover hidden truths. She must endeavor to learn the secrets of others as well as illicit magic, no matter the cost or difficulty. Perhaps she seeks to uncover rumors about a local Sanctified Bishop, or instead goes on a journey to find forgotten Crúac rituals.



LITERALITY

Some Second Descent vampires do not ascribe metaphor to the above Underworld elements. These Acolytes quite literally seek these things in the physical world, and try to incorporate them into their Requiems. This, of course, requires the vampires to be in a place where these elements can be found — Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, London. They make their havens near the rivers (sometimes upon boats), they hold meetings and rituals upon or beneath bridges and they seek to defeat the literal monsters of the Underworld (spirits, lycanthropes, black magic practitioners).

Most think that reading the legends verbatim is foolish. Others wonder that, if vampires are real, why is everything else only metaphor?

SOCIETY AND CULTURE

In many cases, the Acolytes of the Second Descent do not properly form any kind of “society.” They dwell in mixed coteries and sometimes even belong to other covenants, believing in the core ideas of the Descent in their own ways. Others, however, take the philosophy to the next step and engage it more acutely. What follows is an exploration of the culture formed when Second Descent Acolytes bond more closely to attempt to enact philosophy into practical accomplishment.

ROLES

Within the larger covenant of the Circle of the Crone, the Second Descent Damned may seek a variety of roles. Some gravitate naturally toward the role of Hierophant. By becoming the spiritual leader of the city’s Circle, the Acolyte can steer worship toward the Second Descent. In such cities, one Underworld god or goddess is chosen as the predominant icon of belief.

That said, many practitioners care little for temporal power, and they don’t need to steer the Circle in any particular direction. The Second Descent is not a missionary philosophy; it doesn’t require bringing others to wisdom, only that an individual is capable of bringing *herself* to wisdom. Many Second Descent vampires sit on the sidelines of their own covenant, watching and waiting. Though, eventually the whirling waltz of the Danse Macabre envelops all.

ACROSS THE COVENANTS

Generally, the Acolytes of the Second Descent have little issue with vampires of other covenants. All are part of the Underworld whether they recognize it or not — why kick the hornet’s nest for no reason? The Acolyte may perceive a member of another covenant as a “guardian” who must be challenged and defeated, but the Acolyte doesn’t generally take on an entire covenant or its doctrines.

No, these Acolytes usually get along well with the members of other covenants. These Acolytes do not initially attempt to push their ways upon others — conversion isn’t necessary, because eventually another will come to recognize that the Acolyte holds wisdom that the other does not. He will come seeking it, and then he may learn of the Second Descent. (Some Acolytes *do* proselytize the philosophies, but this is often frowned upon by other practitioners.) In this way, some Second Descent vampires add “spiritual advisor” to their list of potential roles.

Vampires of other covenants sometimes consider it in vogue to have one of these Acolytes by their side, whispering wisdom in their ears at Elysium. And while most Sanctified balk at this, even they have at times been known to associate with the Kindred of the Second Descent. While the Acolytes don’t include a Christian Underworld in their teachings, if transposing the term “Underworld” with “Hell” brings a Lancea Sanctum vampire to the well of wisdom, so be it.

Some members of other covenants become Second Descent practitioners, whether or not they ever accept the ways of the Circle. While the Sanctified are rarely willing to cross over, others certainly are. Damned of the First Estate generally learn of the Second Descent because it is trendy or allows them to explore a spiritual curiosity. Carthians can be all over the place with their beliefs — the Second Descent doesn’t clash with any ideas of freedom or personal power (arguably the Second Descent supports the power of the individual Kindred),

and so many come to learn more. Vampires of the Ordo Dracul make up a small but notable portion of the philosophy, actually.

The notion of a Third Descent — i.e., a state of existence beyond the Requiem — is often what draws the Dragons to the practice. They incorporate the concepts of the Underworld into their occult practices. When the Dragons and the Acolytes find this common ground, they tend to establish a strong power bloc of knowledge and ability, if not direct authority.

TITLES AND DUTIES

The Second Descent does not have a literal hierarchy — such social strata already exist in the form of Princes, Hierophants, Harpies and so on. The roles described below are less about hierarchy and simply more about functions within the philosophy. They are not given so much as claimed. When a vampire seeks to become one of these roles, he simply fulfills the duty and calls himself that thing.

These duties are taken from the Sumerian mythic poem, “The Descent of Inanna into the Underworld.” This passage reads:

Then Ereshkigal fastend on Inanna the eye of death. She spoke against her the word of wrath She uttered against her the cry of guilt. She struck her.

Eye of Death

A vampire who claims herself the Eye of Death is a spiritual leader within the sect. Not only does she teach the philosophy to others who wish to learn it, but she also decides when and where these Acolytes worship. Many vampires in this role become the Hierophant within a given domain.

Word of Wrath

The gods of the Underworld were wrathful, judgmental creatures. The vampire who is the Word of Wrath for the Acolytes becomes both a judge and a warrior. Not only does she decide punishment for those who have betrayed her allies, but she is the one who performs the punishment. Over time, many Word of Wrath Kindred become dispassionate monsters.

Cry of Guilt

As nurse and counselor, the Cry of Guilt is favored for her guidance to those who require it. She is less a spiritual advisor, and more of a moral signpost. She helps other Kindred (in and out of the Circle) help make decisions that would otherwise be difficult for them, and she also counsels them upon the consequences of their actions.



Vampires dream while caught in torpor. These dreams range from obsessive meditations on a single thought or emotion to entire morality plays that unfold in the Kindred's mind night after night. The dreams can be peaceful, though usually not. More worrisome is that some vampires cannot easily distinguish the realities of a waking Requiem and the dreams of a torpid slumber. Both seem hyper-real; which is the true existence?

On rare occasions, however, some vampires — Acolytes in particular — experience a troublesome and often terrifying type of torpor dream. While slumbering, the vampire will be able to see her surroundings as if she is awake. If servants watch over her, she will see them. If she's trapped in a half-crushed garbage bin, she'll see that. It feels to the vampire as if she has regained consciousness. She cannot, however, move or speak. Her Disciplines, similar to her voice, are untouchable. The torpid vampire can do nothing but look around.

Before too long, the vampire will see another creature coming toward her. This creature is a hag — a frightful witch

with discolored skin, rotten teeth and dark inhuman eyes. Sometimes the hag stays in the periphery of the vampire's vision, whereas other times the witch climbs atop the unmoving Kindred and perches like a vulture upon her chest.

From that point forward, the vampire is visited by a whole host of potential horrors during the “hag visitation.” She may feel as if her Vitae is bubbling up out of her mouth, choking her. She might hear any number of awful sounds: the screech of metal on metal, a howling wind or insects chewing the membranes of her dead flesh. The vampire may believe she is sweating blood, that something is crawling around inside of her heart or that the room is filled with a gut-wrenching odor (scalded blood, burning hair, vomit, urine, corpse flesh).

One symptom seems universal: *fear*. Whether the vampire is a neonate or elder, and has been slumbering for one day or one century, the vampire likely experiences irrational fear. Some tie this fear to evil, feeling as if they are in an overwhelmingly sinister presence. Others attribute this to the reality of reverence, claiming

that *this* is what it feels like to be visited by a profoundly powerful deity.

The visitations do not end. They may cease for a time, of course, but once they begin, they recur endlessly until the vampire awakens from her torpor. The hag may come once a week, once a night, or every hour.

RUMORS

This “hag visitation” is something of a boogeyman story with which some Acolytes torture one another. Most believe it to be a spook story — good and scary, but not necessarily true. Those who do see the hag experience the visitation probably because someone told them the story — and a mind can be quite masochistic when trapped in torpor. Still, others whisper that not only are the tales true, but that they know many of the cruel secrets regarding hag sightings.

- A hag visit is the result of a curse. To curse another with hag visits, you need to steal a phial of his Vitae. Then you recite the Lord’s Prayer backwards over the phial before casting it into a burning brazier. This only works on torpid Kindred.

- Hag visits do not only happen to those in torpor. They can happen to a vampire who has simply gone to sleep for the day.

- Some say that Calling the Hag is an ancient Crúac ritual, thought to be lost through the centuries. Others say that only this lost, ancient ritual can *dispel* a hag’s visit.

- Those visited by hags cannot become addicted to another’s Vitae.

- Those visited by hags show the black veins of a diablerist’s aura, whether or not they have ever committed the heinous act.

- The hag visitation is actually a cruel illusion levied against a vampire by the sorcery of the Sanctified. That is why it happens most often to Acolytes.

These rumors are not necessarily true, of course.

HAG CULTS

Some Acolytes, when waking from a torpor in which they were visited by the wretched hag, are able to deny the power of the experience. They accept that she was just a grotesque hallucination — one of the many ugly side effects of a long sleep. Others are not so sure. Why is the experience shared? Many vampires seem to have nearly identical visitations. Is it some kind of hysteria? A primeval memory conjured up out of a Kindred’s mystic Vitae? Or are the vampires literally being visited by some kind of hag creature?

For some Acolytes, this has a profound effect. The dark nightmare and the resultant fear become as inextirpable as the Requiem itself. These Acolytes feel as if they have been touched by something from beyond, defining the

hag as anything from a possessing spirit to an actual goddess. The visitation becomes far more than mere hallucination — the vampire elevates it to a religious experience, a thing so sacred that it could only mean that the Kindred is either blessed or cursed.

From this, hag cults are born. They don’t happen overnight, of course, but the extreme feelings that come as a result of the visitations push the vampire to adapt her worship to this new “presence” in her unlife. It doesn’t matter that the hag does not visit the vampire outside of torpor: when she awakens, her Requiem feels different, as if the strange visitor has left an invisible mark.

The visitation, however, provides no solid information. The hag doesn’t speak (some have admitted to hearing her whisper things, but this *may* be a true side effect of torpor), she doesn’t guide the vampire’s hand toward new faith. The Kindred is entirely on his own when it comes to deciding what he does as a result of the hag’s presence. Because of this, hag cults are rarely similar. They’ve hung their beliefs on the hook of a singular experience, true — but what they *do* with this experience can be as different as night and day, life and death. (Though, the targets of these hag visitations are sometimes subject to other unusual “effects,” ones that may not be shared collectively.)

What follows are a handful of the hag cults that have grown out of these visitations. Note that a hag cult doesn’t *need* to arise from such an experience — “the Hag” can be synonymous with “the Crone” in mythology, and thus, many Acolytes worship the hags by dint of simple association. (Alternately, some have *heard* of the torpid hag dreams, and find this to be enough of a reason to modify their beliefs and rituals.) The groups below, however, are specifically spawned from those Damned who have suffered contact with one of these nightmarish witches.

THE TORMENTED

This cult of Acolytes, found in and around the rundown suburbs of Chicago, comprises a number of Eastern European immigrants who have long maintained connections to their mortal families’ pagan roots. These Acolytes’ worship, for a very long time, was secondary to their nightly activities — going into the city, hunting, attempting to clamber up the social food chain. Faith was rote, expressed through expected activities and rituals. They did not actually give a great deal of thought to their beliefs, barely lending it much credence in the first place.

All of that changed when the group’s “High Priest” was cast into torpor from a brutal fight with a rival group of young but violent Acolytes a few towns over. His own cult rescued his slumbering form and brought him back to the communal haven (ironically an old, burned-out Polish Catholic church). Night after night, cast against the trappings of the Catholic faith, the High Priest was

visited by a hag so twisted it looked as if her bones were knotting in upon themselves. She came once a night for the two weeks that he was torpid. When he awoke, he could not shake his fear.

He told the others that he had been visited by the *nocnitsa*, or the “night-hag” from folklore. The night-hag is also called *kriksy*, *plaksy* or *laume*. The other Acolytes had heard the whispers from other Acolytes that one could be cursed by the night-hag, but such stories were easily dismissed. The High Priest became quickly obsessed with protecting himself and his cult mates from her visits. Even during their daily rest, he convinced them all to sleep with various folkloric “protections.” They drew circles of protection around their resting places at night, and each keeps a knife or an axe upon his chest. Many also believe she fears iron, and so they adorn their resting corpses with horseshoes, fire-pokers, crowbars — any item that contains iron.

At first, the others were not so sure that the High Priest wasn't merely convinced of a reality by his own hallucinations. Over time, however, his paranoia spread to them. Even though none of them experienced a visit from the night-hag, they all began believing in her, and “seeing” her in windows and mirrors. They heard whispers before bed: mumbled promises of a visit from the *nocnitsa*. When a ritual or other endeavor failed, they blamed it upon the night-hag, claiming they were all cursed. Some in the cult even claimed that they could not always expend their mystical Vitae to gain those benefits granted to all the Damned. Whether this was true or merely a psychosomatic side effect of fear remains unclear.

Most accept her visits were an indictment against lax faith — with that in mind, they doubled their efforts to be “good” Acolytes. No longer concerned with the vanities of the Requiem, the Tormented are now obsessed with ritual and worship. They do not let a single holiday pass without diligent observation. They pray to the many gods of blood and earth that they will revoke their punishment and withdraw the night-hag. The cult sacrifices animals on rooftops, weeping blood and asking for *some* kind of sign that their appeasement has worked. So far, they've received no such sign. Their compulsive worship continues to grow maddeningly. Soon, they will become a danger to themselves and others.

THE LILIM

Hag visitations are not a new phenomenon. One particularly old Acolyte cult claims origins back many centuries, further maintaining that its members have experienced bizarre side effects from their torpid encounters that others have not. The results of this effect seem undeniable, and if it has

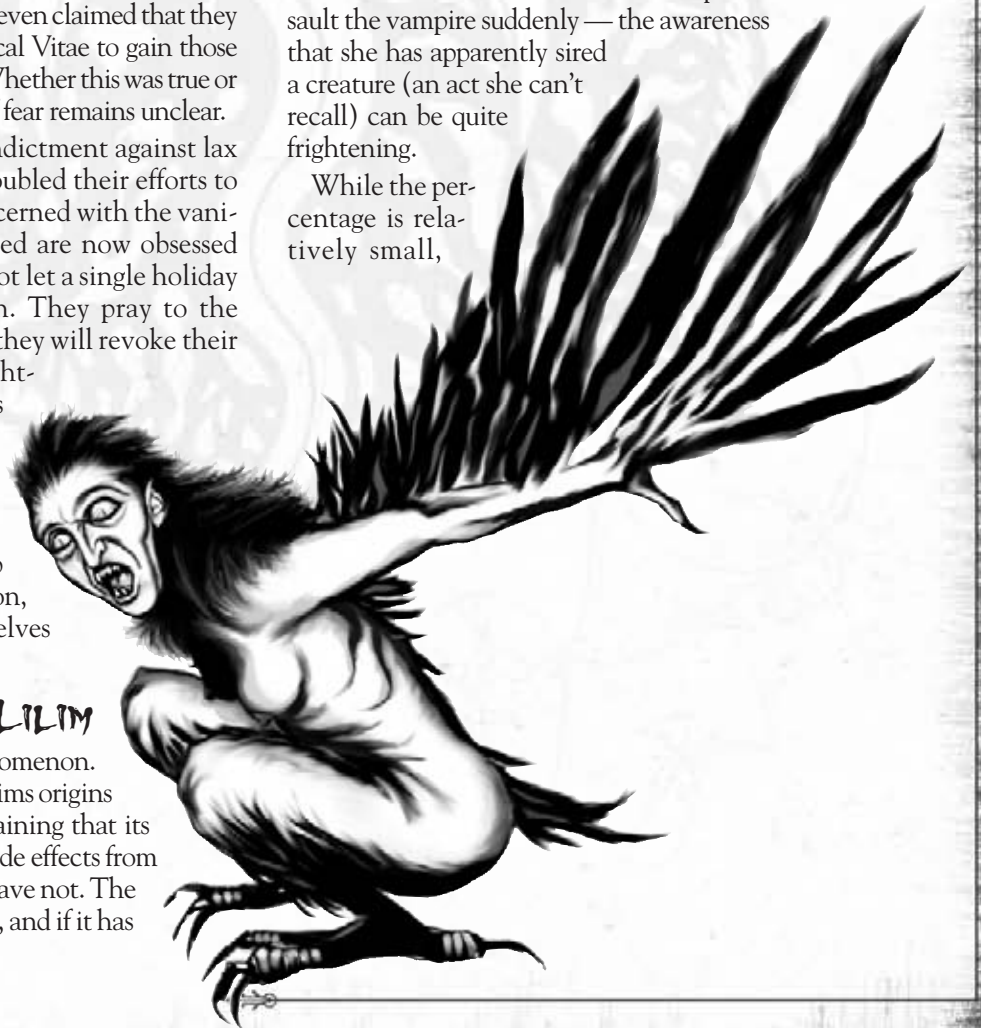
truly been happening for hundreds of years (if not longer), then this cult is certainly unique.

The effect is this: whilst deeply slumbering, a vampire is visited by the hag. This hag in particular has skin as black as volcanic glass, and has dark avian eyes. Her hands and feet, similarly, are like the talons of a raptor bird, and she perches upon the victim's chest, claws digging into the vampire's flesh. The hag opens her mouth (jaw dislocating silently like a snake's), and a long tubule tongue extends while the vampire lies in horrified paralysis. The tongue flicks out, and pierces the breastbone or the neck of the victim.

Those Acolytes who experience this claim with certainty that not only is she withdrawing a “draught of Vitae,” but also drinking part of the vampire's own will. The hag only visits once. Upon awakening (one day or one decade later), the vampire finds that not only is his Vitae diminished more than it perhaps should be, but his strength of will is truly lessened (in system terms, a full Willpower dot).

This singular effect does not end there. What some have found is that, upon returning to the world from torpor, they have a childe. The childe is rarely discovered immediately (if ever). If the childe is discovered, it's often the result of blood sympathy (p. 163, **Vampire: The Requiem**). Odd flashes of sensation of the childe's Requiem assault the vampire suddenly — the awareness that she has apparently sired a creature (an act she can't recall) can be quite frightening.

While the percentage is relatively small,



many Acolytes over the last five centuries or so have claimed to suffer this impossible theft of will, left with a childe who is at least as old as the Kindred's length of slumber. Some vampires simply cannot handle this reality. They believe it a trick, and either ignore their progeny or attempt to destroy them outright (a fate that may befall lost childer regardless). Other vampires accept the cruel reality and accept responsibility for the offspring that seems likely to be theirs.

Some affected Acolytes have developed a theory as to what happened to them — or, more specifically, *who* visited them. The Sumerians called her *Kiskil-lilla*, while the Akkadians knew her as *Lilitu*. Her more common name, Lilith, ties her to various mythologies and cultures — Greek legend, Jewish folklore and Christian apocrypha.

Lilith, in her earliest incarnations, was a hybrid of a woman and an owl. She was a creature of wisdom, a shepherdess of women in childbirth — but time and tales corrupted her. She became an icon of death, not of life, a demon instead of a goddess. Wisdom gave way to vengeance. Her natural fertility withered, and she could not provide succor to those in childbirth. She could only curse them to have a womb as ruined as her own.

One of the grotesque legends associated with the wrathful demoness was that, because she could not sire normal children herself, she would steal the seed from men. While they slept, she could coax their dreams and bodies; the resultant emission was hers to steal. With their seed, she could produce vicious demon children — half-human, half-goddess. Partly alive, and partly dead.

To some Acolytes, the parallels were clear. The “demons” she spawned were vampires. A Kindred in torpor who finds himself bereft of blood and will, but gifted with a childe upon awakening — Lilith's touch seems the only answer. (Moreover, the hag's physical form appears in line with the *Lilitu* strange avian features.)

Over time, those affected by Lilith found one another. Whispers and rumors connected them, even over great distances. Desperate to find others with shared experiences, they came together and stayed together. To this day, the self-proclaimed Lilim track down those who have been blessed by the demoness and bring them into the fold. The victim's interest in joining the cult is irrelevant; she has been blessed, and she must be with her brothers and sisters regardless of her own desires.

The cult looks similarly upon those childer created from the union of hag and slumbering Kindred. The childer are doubly blessed, being the fruits born from primeval wisdom and power. They are obsessively protected, treated as holy predators and given permission to do as they wish — provided, of course, that they never stray far from the cult or its members.

Tracking down other Lilim is only part of what the cult does, however. Lilith was a creature of wrath, scorned by an increasingly patriarchal society, a goddess left barren

and half-mad. So, too, are her children. The Lilim seek vengeance upon those who stand in the Lilim's way. Any who dare to dictate laws and morals to the Lilim deserve bitter reproach.

The form this reproach takes is up to the local Lilim. Many gather allies and knowledge and do their best to usurp power from their foes, leaving the fools cast out, much as Lilith once was. Others prefer more direct forms of opposition, potentially torturing or destroying those who cross them.

Some Lilim turn their wrath against entire cities of Kindred. This has not often been the case, but when it is, the cults have acted with patience and persistence. They wait in the shadows, never making their true affiliation known (for some know that the children of Lilith are troublesome fiends). They collect secrets and orchestrate betrayals, attempting to turn allies into enemies. The Lilim uncover the locations of as many havens as they can, and spy on those in power to gain clues into what could leave them most vulnerable.

In truth, this has rarely worked to the full extent that the Lilim cults would prefer. Often, they are discovered in the midst of their orchestrations and run out of the city or destroyed. (Usually, though, by then some damage is already irreversible.) On a few occasions, though, the Lilim have been able to creep through the city like a plague, dismantling the power structure Kindred by Kindred until the Lilim can put themselves as Hierophants and Princes.

It's worth noting that, despite the Lilim's defiance of the patriarchy, their immediate enemies are not necessarily the Sanctified. Lilith is a figure in Judeo-Christian lore as much as she is a fallen pagan goddess — while some in the Lancea Sanctum vilify or deny her presence, some are willing to include her as a key figure in the myth and mysticism of the sect. This alone saves them from the sword — at least, at first. No, the larger target of the Lilim's ire tends to be the vampires of the First Estate. The Lilim perceive the Kindred of the Invictus to be the true oppressors, with boot heels placed firmly upon everybody's necks — even those of the Lancea Sanctum.

CAREFUL:

It may be tempting to loose Lilith upon a torpid character. It would certainly make an intriguing plot point to have the character awaken only to discover that he has somehow sired a childe. Doing so, however, typically requires a point of Vitae and a Willpower dot — assets that a player may not want to sacrifice, especially since it will do his character more immediate harm than good.

The point is, don't force a player to expend his resources just so his character can suffer. Conflict is the fuel that keeps a good story going, but not at the cost of the group's fun. Discuss this change with the player in private before besieging him unnecessarily. Perhaps it would be possible

to fudge the rules and have the character sire progeny *without* the requisite dot of Willpower, since it is happening without his consent?

THE HAG-TOUCHE D

Anomalous aftereffects are not unknown among those visited by the hag. One cult in particular is together not out of any shared vision of the Crone or because of some unified belief system. These Acolytes are bound only by the mysteries left behind by the hag.

For these Kindred, the hag came as the stories have always told: she came to them nightly, crouching by their slumbering places or squatting upon their chests. During the visit they felt utter, inexplicable fear, heard the sound of wind through trees and felt blood well up and drip from their noses.

Upon awakening, however, the vampires discovered — *differences*. These anomalies did not become apparent at first, but over time each Kindred uncovered unusual physical changes. One found a black sliver of bone — carved into a delicate triangle — shoved under one fingernail. Another discovered three red welts upon the back of his neck that he could not heal with any expenditure of Vitae.

Two others found unusual objects in the backs of their throats: one coughed up a fat, silken spider's egg, and another loosed a small knot of still-living ivy. The hag marked each of them in different ways, but the reasoning *behind* these markings is as yet incomprehensible to the Kindred.

Over time, these Kindred also began experiencing strange nightmares while sleeping during the day. Such sleep was usually placid, literally a sleep of death. Now, however, their daily slumbers are filled with terrifying dreams, many of which seem to incorporate visions of the hag's markings. Some dream of standing atop dead trees in a wretched forest, trying to cross from one tree-top to another via bridges made of thin spider's silk or of meandering shoots of ivy.

Other dreams feature the vampires being bitten on the backs of their necks by something unseen — and they can feel blood being drawn in great amounts from three tiny holes. In every dream the vampire always sees the hag in the distance, sitting next to a skeleton formed of black and moldering bones. The skeleton always seems to be carving something with a knife or a stone. A sliver of his own bone, perhaps?

The cult has since found a few others in the city who have had similar (though never exactly the same) experiences and nightmares. These self-proclaimed Hag-Touched have made it their goal to uncover the realities of whatever happened to them. The city's Damned think them crazy, for the most part — others acknowledge that

it must be some kind of Acolyte scheme to garner attention and interest. (Others whisper that such madness — mental and physical — is the cost of messing with primeval blood sorcery.) No matter what the accusation, this cult has earned the insulting moniker, “the Hag-Tagged” from dismissive vampires.

Still, by plumbing the depths of their conditions, the vampires have become unusually knowledgeable upon the subjects of the covenant. They devote all of their time and resources toward diligent study of the Circle's shattered history, attempting to uncover traces of the hag throughout the covenant's chronicles and mythologies. Moreover, their research has led them toward discoveries of information and power that has lain dormant for a long time. This cult knows a few rituals that others have only heard of, and has learned reams of bizarre information from mad spirits summoned from across the membrane between worlds. These Acolytes, by attempting to unravel their own mysteries, have inadvertently become somewhat powerful.

Of course, the irony is, they still have not answered their own questions, only the questions of others. Does the spider's egg represent Arachne? Are the thin bridges between trees the bridges shown in shamanic journeys, or are they bridges of judgment like the Chinvat Bridge in Zoroastrian myth? Ivy represents life — are they supposed to cultivate life out of death? Alternately, the bone must surely represent death, so what does *that* mean? Worst of all, are they simply being toyed with by another Kindred, or perhaps by some *thing* from the other side of reality?

THE COVEY OF THE THREE ROADS

Nobody wants to visit — or be visited by — an Acolyte of the Three Roads. They are unpleasant creatures, singularly disturbing to look upon, but worse for what they always seem to know (which is, of course, nearly everything). These odd prophets always seem to appear at the most appropriate or inappropriate times in a vampire's Requiem. Just as he has a burning question or a maddening decision, they make their presence known. They offer their help — if it can be called that — and then leave. If he wants to follow up and ask them for their aid, so be it. He must pay the cost and be done. If he rebuffs their offer, they will never offer it again. The offer's withdrawal can be both a curse and a blessing.

Who are the vampires of this enigmatic cult? They are a cult of Acolytes long-devoted to worshipping the Crone of the Crossroads, the witch-goddess Hecate. The elder vampires in the cult (those who believe themselves gods, or Crones) claim to have been visited by Hecate while sleeping in torpor. She came to them, the hag with yellow eyes and rotten fangs, and whispered the mandate to become like her — gods who wait at the juncture between the roads, ready to help the lost find their way at whatever cost.

This juncture is, to them, metaphorical. One's Requiem is endless and filled with damning questions — making the wrong decision or moving in the improper direction can cut a vampire's unlife suddenly short. So, the Covey offers its members as guides, ready to usher other vampires toward truth. The cult members stand, ready to offer a hand to those who need it. Should a vampire humiliate the Sheriff during Elysium? What is the local Hierophant hiding in his garden? If the Kindred makes a move to become the Prince's Whip, what will happen?

The witches have ways of knowing things. Not only are these Acolytes particularly adept at spying upon and studying others (they value *Auspex* above all other Disciplines), but they are the practitioners of several Devotions that help them discern the questions in a vampire's mind before that vampire even asks them. This Devotion, called the *Hekau* (see p. 193), allows the witch to know who will best be served by her commitment. The Acolyte can sense those with difficult decisions or burning questions, and he will approach them and offer his services — or bait them into approaching him.

Again, a witch's help is not without cost. These costs are by no means concretized; it is up to the individual Acolyte to determine what would make suitable payment. This decision is the confluence of many personal factors: Does the Acolyte feel pity for the questioner, or does he perhaps feel some kind of admiration? Is there something that the questioner has that the Acolyte wants? Is the witch feeling particularly cruel tonight?

The associated cost to the questioner often ends up falling into one of two categories. The first is worship. The vampires of the Three Roads think themselves divine, and so they ask that others show them the respect they "deserve." Worship may mean that a Kindred tithes blood (his or a ghoul's) once a week to the Covey, often in a ritual bowl or cruet. (If the vampire pays with his own blood, it isn't used as food. No, the witches use Kindred blood in various secret rituals, ceremonies that remain hidden to this day.)

Alternately, perhaps the questioner must meet with the witch once a month and offer her prayer or poetry or strips of flesh from his own body. Sometimes the Acolyte asks not for worship from the questioner directly, but from one closely associated with him: a childe or other ally, perhaps. The ultimate worship comes when the witch asks for the vampire to become bound — in part or full — to her. This often doesn't happen the first time, but once a vampire gets a taste of the Acolyte's capabilities, the vampire often comes back to seek her aid again. When this happens, the cost is always higher.

The second form of recompense comes as action. The Acolyte may need something done. Perhaps an enemy stands in his way. Maybe a ghoul has managed to go rogue, and the Acolyte does not wish to expend the effort to hunt it down himself. Sometimes, these actions are

inscrutable to all but the witch who demanded them. He may ask the vampire to go to Elysium and make a fool of himself in front of the Harpies, or perhaps insult the Prince's Hound outside a local nightclub.

Some suggestions are truly bizarre: climb atop a water tower and spill blood upon those below, smear all the street signs within a two-block radius with vampiric Vitae, pretend for a single evening to be human once again. Are these ideas just whimsy meant to embarrass the vampire, or is there some kind of clandestine purpose?

All of this is, of course, contingent upon a vampire asking for the Acolyte's help (or conceding to it) in the first place. Few are comfortable with the idea. Not only is there a cost, but the witches don't make it easy with honeyed tongues and sweet smiles. These Acolytes model themselves after the hag, Hecate. They do not wash. They often smell of rotten blood (an odor disturbing to most Kindred, for it both appalls them and stirs their hungers) and stare out through stringy, filthy hair. They cover their faces with masks of blood, mud or soot. (Though, some prefer real masks: demon masks, medieval plague masks, even gas masks.) They are horrifying to behold, made ugly by their own hands. Woe to any other vampire who has experienced a hag visit during sleep or torpor, for the witch may appear the spitting image of that very being.

Still, should a vampire decide to enlist the witch's services, he gets what he pays for. The witch, already very knowledgeable about the social and political circles of the city's Kindred, can generally make highly educated guesses as to which way the wind will blow, so to speak. A witch's prediction thus looks like prophecy. During those times when things do not seem to go according to her "insight," she will do her best to *make* them go that way. (If this means tasking others to help her guide the situation, so be it. A witch often has a long list of those who owe her favors big and small.)

Can this backfire? Absolutely. The Crones are wrong often enough, and sometimes their seemingly limitless powers are not so boundless after all. On occasion, the Covey has been exiled temporarily or kept to the margins of the city's Kindred for five, maybe 10 years at a time.

It doesn't often get to that stage, however. For as many enemies as these Acolytes may earn, they have an equal or larger number of allies (or servants) who cover their tracks and clean up their messes and misses.

When something goes awry, the Acolyte generally needs to snap her fingers, and one of her adherents will take to the task like a hungry maggot. Sometimes, though, the tide simply turns against the Acolytes, and their allies turn their backs or go missing altogether. When this happens, it is fate, and (so far) never permanent. Someone will always come to them, asking for their favor. When that happens, the road is once again clear, and they may again approach the crossroads.

OUTSIDE THE COVENANT

Generally, the hag — whatever she may be — visits only Acolytes. Whether this is because she is truly some fallen goddess speaking to her children or because she is part of some kind of mass hysteria conjured from the minds of believers remains unclear. Nine times out of 10, she appears only to those who give her power and credence.

That said, Kindred from other covenants *have* experienced her visits during torpor. The visits are generally the same as what an Acolyte experiences, as described above. While the visitation itself is the same, the effects of the visit are often quite unique. For instance, when a vampire of the Lancea Sanctum finds himself suddenly awake in the middle of torpor, plagued by the presence of a vile hag, his instinct is likely to explain this in the context of his own beliefs. Is it some infernal succubus, tormenting the Kindred or testing his faith?

Perhaps, as whispers suggest, this is a ruse by the local pagans, a cruel curse levied against the vampire for his adherence to a patriarchal religion. More than one Sanctified have come out of such an experience with a newfound (or renewed) distrust of the city's Acolytes. Some Kindred take this to the next step, getting help from the local Damned to exile the blood-soaked sorcerers.

Members of other covenants don't necessarily have the religious connotations to their organizations, and hence don't ascribe any kind of greater meaning to a hag visit. Some have witnessed the hag and fled the arms of the Invictus or their Carthian allies and attempted to learn more from the Acolytes, but most ignore it or manage their fear silently. The Ordo Dracul has interest in the hag visits, or so the rumors suggest. They certainly don't admit to such an interest, but whispers persist. One hush-hush tale suggests that Dragons somewhere on the West Coast have actually managed to *capture* a hag — whether this means by shackling her spirit or by confining a very real and physical entity, nobody knows.



Strange even by the inclusive standards of the Circle of the Crone, the Disciples of Silence are an ongoing example of tradition in transition, evolving from a relatively conventional mystery cult to a controversial atheistic modern practice.

Millennia past, a certain point of view emerged within the covenant, achieving popularity in more than one domain. At the time, some Kindred believed that the Crone responsible for creating the material universe from the primordial void was actually an embodiment of the void itself. When the creation of the universe was complete, they said, the Crone allowed herself to dissolve back into nothingness so as to gift her myriad children with absolute freedom from her influence. There, in the nothingness of unbeing, she awaits the eventual return of her creation, and will one day emerge again to refashion it. Thus goes the everlasting cycle of being and unbeing: creation, dissolution and recreation.

To worship the Crone, said these Kindred, was to worship the void and vice versa. To understand the nothingness is to know her directly. Naming themselves the Disciples of Silence, these devoted vampires informed all of their practice with the notion of "Silent Void" and the primal state of being without consciousness.

Practicing behind the façade of ordinary Acolytes, the Disciples explored the limits of their minds and the

ability to act without thought, initiating themselves (and one another) in the deep secrets of being and unbeing as their studies progressed. Nature was sacred to these vampires, for the unconsciousness of flora and fauna. Humans and Kindred were sinful in their tendency to complicated thought and the urge to deny natural decay. The immortal static nature of vampires was, to them, the most unholy state of being, and could only be justified by active service to the Crone.

For the old Disciples of Silence, any attempt at permanence was a sin against the Crone. Even stones and the sea would dissolve into nothingness, they argued, so to build great works of architecture or to map the bounds of the sea were to ignore the truth of the Silent Void and fall to the vice of Pride. Construction, they said, was futile. Legacies were pointless noise. The purpose of the Kindred was to know meditative calm and silence, to aid in the slow and steady destruction of the universe that it might feed the return of the Crone and to abstain from the Embrace of new vampires.

For long centuries, it was difficult to tell where the Disciples of Silence dwelled. Stories were told of their exploits: the collapse of a great temple here, the seemingly random destruction of a neonate there. Many low-level Acolytes of the Circle served the Disciples unknowingly,

ascending to a full understanding of the faction only when their Hierophant chose to initiate them into its ranks — most often after the faithful performance of a damning task.

Despite the reputation they gained and the apparent ubiquity of the Disciples, the truth is that the faction was relatively small and unpopular in those dark nights. A number of Acolytes brought into the fold were incapable of accepting the message of their elders, and rebelled. Several cults belonging to the faction collapsed inwards, destroyed by insurrection. Many of the Acolytes who worshipped quietly and calmly were stigmatized by association with the more outrageous destructive acts of their alleged organization and pushed out of their home cities. Many did not survive.

By the late years of the 19th century, there were fewer than a dozen faithful Disciples left in the world of Kindred. A recent convert from the Carthian Movement by the name of Jerome Turner brought the philosophical writings of the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin with him, citing one particular quote to his fellow Acolytes: “Let us put our trust in the eternal spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unsearchable and eternally creative source of all life — the passion for destruction is also a creative passion!” Turner’s impassioned attempt at overlaying nihilist philosophy on the truths of Kindred existence excited the attention of the Disciples of Silence, and Turner was quickly (some now say too quickly) initiated into their ranks.

Before long, Turner brought his vision of “Nihilist Silence” to the faction and beyond, openly preaching a peculiarly materialist version of their beliefs. He adopted and integrated the writings of mortal philosophers such as Nietzsche, Stirner and Heidegger, relating them to packs of recently Embraced “new Kindred” and attracting them to the Circle. Exiled from his home domain (at the behest of his own Hierophant), Turner found his way to a new home in Morocco, where his teachings continued. Once he’d gathered a significant number of followers, he proclaimed himself Hierophant of that domain, sparking a battle with the previously entrenched Acolytes. Turner’s viciousness and the suicidal tactics of his adherents took the older vampires by surprise, and the new Disciples of Silence won the battle.

The new iteration of the Disciples of Silence taught the calm and purpose of the cult’s original adherents, but added a futility and strangely godless mysticism to the mix. To these Disciples, the universe was not founded by a creative Crone, but came to exist of its own accord, without meaning or purpose. There is no cycle of creation and destruction, they argue — only the steady decay of all sense and matter, and the hopeless mortal urge to stave it off by building illusory structures. The act of creation, absent in the workings of the older Disciples, was returned to significance — but only to demonstrate

the act’s futility. Every member of the faction was instructed to put every effort into the creation of “great works,” only to arrange the destruction of their own accomplishments as a manner of fueling ritual magicks. Meditation was eliminated from their practice as no less futile than prayer to a goddess that does not exist.

Turner encouraged his followers to travel as emulation of his tribulation on the road to Morocco, and then to preach his ways to the Acolytes of the Circle or anyone else who was willing to listen. Just before scattering, they rose up and murdered him, demonstrating the fulfillment of his lessons and their “graduation” to individual understanding.

In the nights of the 20th century, the new Disciples have spread from domain to domain, turning a surprising number of converts (as assisted by the prevailing sentiment of many Kindred in the wake of the great world wars) and spreading their godless brand of Crúac. In response, the older Disciples have attempted to denounce the new sub-faction in a bid to disown its followers. Because of the Disciples’ secretive past, they have met with little success. Many vampires believe that the Disciples were always a murderous atheist cult, and are only now growing bold enough to admit it openly.

Recently, there has been more than one attempted resurgence of the old ways of the Silent Void, but the new Disciples have carefully and mercilessly extinguished them. Where these attempts are coming from and whether they can be totally silenced is yet to be discovered.

Nickname: Nihilists

Many of the modern Disciples of Silence refer to themselves this way without hesitation. Existentialist nihilist philosophy maps very well onto the beliefs and practices of the faction, and has been fully adopted in nearly every chapter. Traditionalist elder members of the group claim that the association is erroneous and often fight to demonstrate that worship of the Silent Void is not the same as nihilism, but they seem to be losing the battle.

Covenant: The origins of the Disciples of Silence are based in the Circle of the Crone. Elder members of the faction still speak in religious terms, telling myths of the universal void and the peace of the Crone built into the Kindred of the Earth. The Disciples are essentially an exclusive unit within the covenant, revealing their secrets to worshippers as they ascend through ranks of initiation and understanding, but otherwise indistinguishable from other Acolytes.

However, the recent innovations within the faction have blurred the lines of membership somewhat. The Silent Void referred to in the practices of the Disciples is becoming much less an actual mystic place and much more an allegorical state of mind. As the teachings of the Disciples change, so do the rules about access to instruction. Most of the rigidly maintained tiers of knowledge are collapsing, and relatively inexperienced Acolytes are being allowed access to information that was once closely guarded. More to the point, Kindred who choose not to identify themselves as

members of the Circle of the Crone are beginning to accept the teachings of the Disciples, and apply them to their own Requiems. It is entirely possible to join the faction and retain membership in an outsider covenant.

Only the Lancea Sanctum expressly forbids its members to partake in the mystic and philosophical explorations of the Disciples of Silence. The Priests of the Sanctum dislike the atheistic suggestions of the modern Disciples, and they are equally unwilling to accept the mythology of the elders.

Appearance: The Disciples of Silence are understated in appearance. They tend to be well-groomed, nondescript and relatively relaxed in their dress. Because they refuse to ascribe meaning to material goods beyond basic function, they never wear trendy or luxury outfits unless actively trying to provoke a reaction.

There is a fashion among the Disciples to go beyond the relatively bland norm and actively conform, choosing a single look that is adopted by all local members. In so doing, they claim, they utterly eliminate the unnecessary trappings of material identity and so avoid distinguishing themselves. Wardrobe choices are individual statements, after all, and the Disciples would prefer to quiet them.

More traditional members of the faction often choose to wear a simple robe or cloak (or, in some domains, a neutral gray suit) and say nothing more on the subject. For them, true worship of the Silent Void is more important than worrying over what one's clothes do or don't mean.

Those Disciples who carry weapons always choose function over form. To them, a rusty pipe is no less useful than a carbon-graphite baton, and either will do. Blades are simple and often store-bought, firearms are generic and little or no personal value is attached to either.

Haven: The traditional outlook of the faction demands that a devoted follower dwell in a featureless, undecorated space: a blank room, a hole in the ground or an unused sewer tunnel would all serve. To personalize the haven is to clutter it. To add to one's possessions is to remove one's self further from the Void. Furthermore, the lack of stimulus helps engender a meditative state of "blessed silence" in a haven. Many an Acolyte spends hours a night, seated in her featureless abode, staring into

empty space and hoping to make contact with the great Silent Void behind and beyond the living world.

Those with more modern sensibilities have a tendency to gravitate toward havens that are in a clear state of decay, working as a constant reminder that even the great works of humans must eventually fall back into chaos. These Disciples make their homes in abandoned factories, dilapidated schools and hospitals and collapsed tenements. Some make a point of finding and staying in the remains of a natural disaster, reminding themselves (and their visitors) of the ever-present potential for disintegration into meaninglessness.

Even in the modernist case, the vampire is unlikely to keep any personal objects around unless they serve an immediate, necessary function. Sentimental or aesthetic decoration is conspicuously absent.

Background: Nearly every mortal who is Embraced by a modern Nihilist vampire is an intellectual in a state of hopelessness or despair. Disgruntled dreamers and frustrated philosophers are attractive targets for the faction, since they can be relied upon to take up the banner of the Disciples. Few have achieved any kind of popular success in their life's work, and those who have demonstrate a clear understanding of the hollowness of their achievements.

Religious individuals or those who otherwise devote themselves to ideologies of universal purpose are only Embraced vindictively, if at all. "Pointless nobodies, taken from their lives of drudgery and pushed into an eternally futile exercise," one modern Disciple famously remarked in response to queries about his choice of childer, "like undying hamsters in a great and useless wheel."

The nights of the elder Disciples are rapidly coming to a close, and very few mortals are Embraced according to the Disciples' standards any more. Those who are must demonstrate a capacity for egoless function, the art of precise action without the interference of intellect. Masters of meditative technique, particularly talented athletes, and certain madmen would all qualify.

Character Creation: For characters Embraced into the dwindling traditional



custom of the Disciples of Silence, Physical Attributes are primary (with a special focus on Stamina in most cases). Mental Skills such as Crafts, Medicine and Oc-cult rank highly, as do Mental Merits.

The modern Nihilists are more focused on Mental Attributes, and certain Mental Skills (most notably Academics and “hard” Sciences such as Physics or Theoretical Mathematics) are valued. Mental Merits, once again, are common.

Faction Disciplines: Auspex, Obfuscate and Dominate are all considered important to the Disciples of Silence. Each suggests a different path to understanding or demon-strating the power of the Void, and so all are encouraged. The practice of a particularly bleak variant on Crúac is traditionally taught to Acolytes of the Circle of the Crone in the faction, and has survived to modern use.

Dominate is a particularly insidious tool in the hands of the Disciples of Silence, and deserves some discussion on its own. While the modernist members of the faction discourage individual expression and the imposition of false values upon others, they do promote a purely de-structive application of this Discipline: the interruption of cognitive function that can be brought about with Mesmerism (Dominate ••), the wholesale erasure of memories with The Forgetful Mind (Dominate •••) and the absolute breakdown of personality with Condition-ing (Dominate ••••). Ritualized use of the Discipline, while uncommon, does surface in some domains with devastating result. Needless to say, Acolytes who make a habit of destroying the minds of others are not likely to be tolerated long by outsider Kindred.

Organization: The original rites and structure of the Disciples of Silence are all but lost to time. Stories are told of ritual circles as traditional and strict as any within the covenant, performing complicated obeisance before the empty Mother That Was and Will Be. Finding vampires who can verify these tales is almost impossible, though — they have been supplanted by the new iteration of their cult.

Modern Circles of the Disciples of Silence seem almost anarchic in their organization. A Hierophant is always named, but she usually seems to be little more than a dip-lomatic figurehead or rote director of ritual. The teachings of the faction are imparted by any or all members upon new recruits, and each individual member tends to perform solitary magicks and rituals as often as gathering with the group. There is no punishment for failing to attend regular rites, and there is no added regard for performing them on one’s own. Outsiders are often confused by this arrange-ment, wondering if they’re dealing with the Circle of the Crone at all, and doubly so when they discover that these Disciples don’t believe in the Crone herself as other than a reassuring myth, no more or less real than any God to a skeptic. Gatherings of the Circle are usually informal, and seem more like discussion groups than ritual workings.

What many fail to realize is that these free-form discussions often *are* the rites of the Disciples, and that the enforcement of their views (and the directed shat-tering of mystic beliefs) helps to fuel the magicks of the Acolytes. Furthermore, the reinforcement of the nihilist philosophies of the Silent Void helps to ensure that the attending Kindred don’t get caught up in the projects of outsiders both within and without the covenant.

There is only one holiday observed by the Disciples of Si-lence with regularity, and that is the Night of Ending. Each month on the first night of the new moon, the cult gathers together and each member brings a significant work of art or construction that he has built. Ideally, the presentation is one that requires great effort and demonstrates advanced craftsmanship. These gifts to the Acolytes are meant to represent the greatest achievements of humankind, and are brought forward with all the pride and hope of a veiled masterpiece, ready to be revealed. The vampire who brings the piece formally presents it to the others, placing it before them. There are no expressions of appreciation or admiration forthcoming. Instead, the vampire’s fellow Acolytes destroy the piece, demonstrating its worthlessness to themselves and its creator. None are supposed to react emotionally. To do so is not forbidden, but by avoiding such a display an Acolyte can prove his acknowledgement and acceptance of the fate of all things.

There is only one other significant ritual performed by all members of the Disciples, and it is observed alone, without schedule. It is the right of blissful silence, and it can only be performed by those Kindred who develop the power of Telepathy. When such a vampire engages in feeding, he occasionally makes psychic contact with his intended victim first. He then strikes, allowing himself to witness his own attack through his victim’s thoughts and — most importantly — experience the hazy, blank trance of the Kiss. By intimately knowing the unconsciousness of his target and overlapping it with his own blissful experience, the vampire is allowed to both witness the power of the Void and silence his own explosive emo-tions. Only this, of all the workings of the Disciples, is likely to be a surviving rite of the old cult.

Among the Disciples of Silence, there is a tradition for organized warfare as an expression of meaninglessness. The Acolytes of the modern cult can be depended on to join in any conflict against the side with the most ardent belief, supporting pragmatism and anti-spiritual-ism at every opportunity. The truth is, the Acolytes are no more pragmatic than anyone else — they just prefer the destruction of ideals as a further demonstration of meaninglessness. In warfare, the Acolytes of the Disciples create guerilla units, striking at their chosen enemy without apparent rhyme or reason, simply as a disrupt-ive strategy. Those who do battle with the Disciples of Silence are often disturbed by the combination of their apparent lack of ideology and their near-suicidal (or

completely suicidal) lack of regard for tactics. A force that depends on no underlying purpose may lack unifying power but is also nearly impossible to predict.

Concepts: blind Mekhet witch, cruel shatterer of illusions, despairing victim of multiple tragedy, disillusioned ex-Sanctified priest, enlightened, egoless elder, existentialist predator, introspective abyss-gazer, isolation-tank vampire freak, warrior without cause

Crúac: The Disciples of Silence practice an extremely stripped-down version of Crúac, maintaining the core of the rituals while eliminating nearly all of the mystic trappings from them. Almost all magicks are performed in near or total darkness, and most are silent as well. The eerie, solemn procession of Acolytes as they contribute their blood to the group rites is always a disturbing sight to those outsiders who manage to get a glimpse, assuming they can see them at all.

To aid in clearing the mind during ritual and achieving the meditative emptiness so valued by the faction, all of the Crúac rites are made up of a series of mechanical, repetitive motions that are easily learned and frequently practiced. The idea is to get the body to perform the tasks required of it without the need for unnecessary thought.

There seems to be a paradox in the workings of the cult: magick is ideally performed, in their teachings, without desire. That is to say, the ideal Crúac ritual is initiated and completed without conscious intent. But magick, according to nearly every interpretation, involves the focusing of will. How then, do the Disciples explain their works? The answer is simple (ludicrously so to most detractors): they don't. They just do them. To ask for an explanation is to attempt to attach an illusion of meaning to practice that does not need or ask for one.

Many of the tribulations of the Disciples of Silence involve sensory deprivation, and some go so far as temporary blinding or deafening of the supplicant.

Ritual Variation: Maya (Cheval, •• Crúac Ritual)

This ritual is performed in a dark chamber, with both the practitioner and the subject seated (most often on a bare floor, but a table will do). A single lit candle is placed between the two of them, and the practitioner invites the subject to relax and close her eyes. Controlling his Beast, the practitioner stares into the candle's flame, letting it grow brighter and brighter in his vision. He makes no sound, concentrating on the light and emptying his thoughts, narrowing his focus and allowing all extraneous stimuli to fall away from his perceptions.

With his fangs, the practitioner bites his own lip or tongue, allowing it to bleed freely and drip off of his chin. As each drop strikes the floor between them, the heart of the flame entrances him further, becoming abnormally large and bright in his vision. At the moment that it blinds him completely, he reaches out and snuffs the candle, thrusting himself into sudden darkness.

He invites his subject to open her eyes. When she does so, he can see as she sees and hear as she hears.

It is possible to conduct this ritual without the willing participation of the subject. To do so, she must be placed before the candle until the rite is complete, and must be blindfolded (or otherwise restricted from sight) until the moment the candle is put out.

Ritual Variation: Regression (Blood Blight, ••••• Crúac Ritual)

Powerful Acolytes of the Disciples of Silence believe they can actually obliterate a part of their enemies via the power of this ritual, returning it to the nothingness from whence it was created. To accomplish this effect, they must accomplish a difficult and exhausting meditative feat: temporary complete annihilation of the self.

Before the ritual is begun, the Acolyte dresses in a costume that is meant to approximate the appearance of the victim. Wigs, clothing and appropriate accessories are assembled in a sympathetic exercise, allowing the vampire to identify (on some level) with her victim and direct her energies correctly. When properly attired, she sits in a dark, quiet space free of distractions and empties a quantity of her blood into a bowl at her feet. A large mirror is placed before her. Any fellow Acolytes participating in the ritual seat themselves around her, facing outwards. All ritual participants close their eyes and practice the meditative techniques taught by the Disciples, achieving a trance state.

The Acolyte at the center of the circle focuses intently, delving deeper and deeper into her meditation. The layers of her personality are stripped away over time (minutes or hours — it's different for everyone and depends on meditative talent), vanishing from her consciousness until she is left with nothing at all. Merging with the Silent Void, she experiences a moment of cosmic, agonizing non-being. At that instant, the blood in the bowl before her boils away to nothing, and her eyes snap open, fixing on the reflection in front of her. The fragment of the Void that is within her is flung into the reflection, shattering the glass and leaving the practitioner free to crash back into her conscious being.

The victim, wherever he is, suffers the immediate effects of the ritual as the quantity of his blood (determined by the number of successes on the Crúac roll) vanishes, collapsing tissues and crushing him inwardly.

Those Disciples who have performed the Regression are often permanently changed, unable (no matter how much they try) to forget the brief instant of pure, untainted non-being that they managed to achieve at the climax of the rite. Some become convinced that the Regression hides within it the path to Golconda, performing it again and again. Others foolishly attempt the ritual without choosing a target, hoping to focus it on themselves and maintain the state permanently.



SIPÁN

Many of the vampire domains of South America play host to a dark and ancient sect of Kindred witches known as the Sipán. Fearful worshippers of an ancient, immense monster and merciless enemies of the adherents of modern Western religion, the Sipán wage endless war on the vampires of the Lancea Sanctum and many of their allies.

It is believed that the Sipán originated somewhere in the Lambayeque region of coastal Peru over 1600 years ago. In those nights, they were the sole Kindred of their domain, and they ruled as god-priests among the Moche culture of mortals, presiding over great sacrifices and preaching the fearful worship of an immense and terrifying sea creature known only as “the Decapitator.” By their accounts, the Decapitator was not just a myth — it physically manifested at the shores of Lambayeque, claiming hundreds of victims at a time and subsiding beneath the waves when satisfied. The Sipán occasionally fed upon the blood of this creature, and they attributed their magicks to its potency.

The culture of the mortals in service to the Sipán was a bloody one, its members participating in frequent raids on neighboring peoples so as to feed the demands of the Decapitator. Hundreds of mortals would be sacrificed in single gruesome ceremonies under the cold gaze of the Sipán Hierophants. For centuries, these seasonal ceremonies continued, and the influence of the Sipán grew. Their mortal charges warred and won territory, allowing the vampire priests to spread out and establish their worship all along the Peruvian coast. The favor of the Decapitator lent the bloody power of Crúac to the Sipán, and their enemies fell before them like maize before the farmer’s blade.

But the favor did not last. The demands of the Sipán rites pressured their mortal followers to maintain an aggressive stance, invoking the widespread animosity of the neighboring peoples. Kindred of those domains began to provide their own human charges with aid, making further raids more and more difficult. Eventually, necessity dictated that the sacrifices grow smaller and less grandiose. The Hierophants of the Sipán predicted disaster, desperately preaching to incite their people to greater acts of military devotion, but there was only so far they could go without risking total destruction at the hands of their enemies. The humans responded with renewed fervor, sending desperate raiding parties forth

to claim more victims. Unfortunately for the mortals, almost every one of these parties fell to the growing resistance, primarily led by Maya warriors. The territories of the Sipán were cut through the middle by retaliatory strikes, scattering their people and ending their reign.

In the frantic times that followed, the Sipán priests tried to continue to appease the Decapitator with the blood of victims and were forced to turn upon the mortals of the Sipán faith. The priests lost thousands of followers, even with a reduced sacrificial rate, and almost all of those who remained eventually turned on their masters, driving their worship underground. For the first time, the Sipán attempted to make peaceful contact with nearby Kindred, hoping to explain their predicament and warn of impending disaster, for the Sipán were convinced that the Decapitator would be enraged by the diminished gifts of blood and they needed to find a way to convince others to aid them in appeasing the great creature. None would listen, of course, and most reacted to the Sipán’s approach with suspicion or outright violence.

In the 16th century, the Sipán lost all that remained of their hope. The armadas of Spain invaded Peruvian territories, and wave after wave of gold-hungry conquistadors broke upon the peoples of the Sipán domains, crushing them utterly and destroying the last vestiges of their mortal support structure. After a time, Kindred began to arrive with the ships of Spain, bringing with them the word of the Lancea Sanctum and their Western ways. While the terror of the South American missionary crusade raged throughout the mortal population, the vampires experienced their own flood of Catholic proselytizers and prejudices. The Decapitator never rose to defend its people. Its worshippers were all but exterminated. Only a few Kindred priests remained, forced into pathetic retreat, often surviving humbly among the scattered tribes of the Peruvian jungle, beyond the reach of Spanish civilization.

What remained of the cult withdrew into secrecy. Those Sipán who were “discovered” by Western or Westernized Kindred denied association with the cult of the Decapitator. The Sipán allowed themselves to be integrated into the new culture of South American Elysium gatherings, quietly accepting the lessons and recommendations of the newcomers. The only teachings the Sipán refused to accept, even under duress, were any related to Judeo-Christian religion.

Quietly, they planned and plotted. Maintaining survival as their first priority, they spoke in hidden gatherings of the fall of the “interlopers” and the eventual return of the Decapitator. They swore oaths to reinstate the grand sacrifices of old and to drive the Christian conquerors from their lands. The Sipán hid themselves within the burgeoning modern society of Kindred, hate burning behind masks of calm as they kept their existence secret from all but their fellow Acolytes. A campaign of silent war was initiated upon the Lancea Sanctum, many of whom fell to the assassin’s blade in subsequent decades. Attempts by the outsiders to unearth the cult of the Sipán were occasionally successful, wiping out a small Circle here or an individual follower there, but still the faithful Acolytes endured.

Now, strangely, this fierce tradition is enjoying an unexpected resurgence. With the cause unknown and little understood by outsiders, the Sipán are becoming a popular faction in certain South American domains, and some cults have begun to openly declare their affiliation with the followers of the Decapitator, regardless of the infuriated response of the Lancea Sanctum. The Sipán claim that omens of the Decapitator’s impending return are frequent and obvious, and that the Kindred of the lands within the Decapitator’s purview are well-advised to heed the words of the Acolytes. Altars must be prepared, they say, and great sacrifices planned. To meet the eventual appearance of the great god unprepared is to risk its uncontrollable wrath and the destruction of the territories all along the Peruvian shore. Questions about the centuries-long absence of the creature are shaken off or ignored outright. The fervent faith of the Sipán defies logic and denies doubt.

Some modern Kindred believe that the Decapitator is a powerful manifestation of the Crone’s will, made real by the Vitae of her early South American followers. These Kindred see parallels in the god’s cataclysmic appearances and various Circle myths about the fury of certain spurned goddesses. Others argue (as their faith dictates) that the Crone, progenitor of all Kindred, must have a Beast of her own—and the Decapitator could well be its concrete manifestation on Earth.

The traditional Sipán are not concerned with attempting to make their beliefs more palatable to modern Kindred. The existence of the Decapitator is unquestionably true, and the eventuality of its return is assured. To them, the need to appease this god is real, and they must be allowed to do so before it causes a disaster unlike any the living world has seen in thousands of

years. Any interference endangers all vampire and mortal life on the coast, and must be regarded as an act of war.

Nickname: Headhunters

This is a thoroughly pejorative nickname, and to say that the Sipán fail to appreciate it is an understatement in the extreme. Claims to accuracy notwithstanding, only the bravest of vampires will casually refer to the Sipán this way.

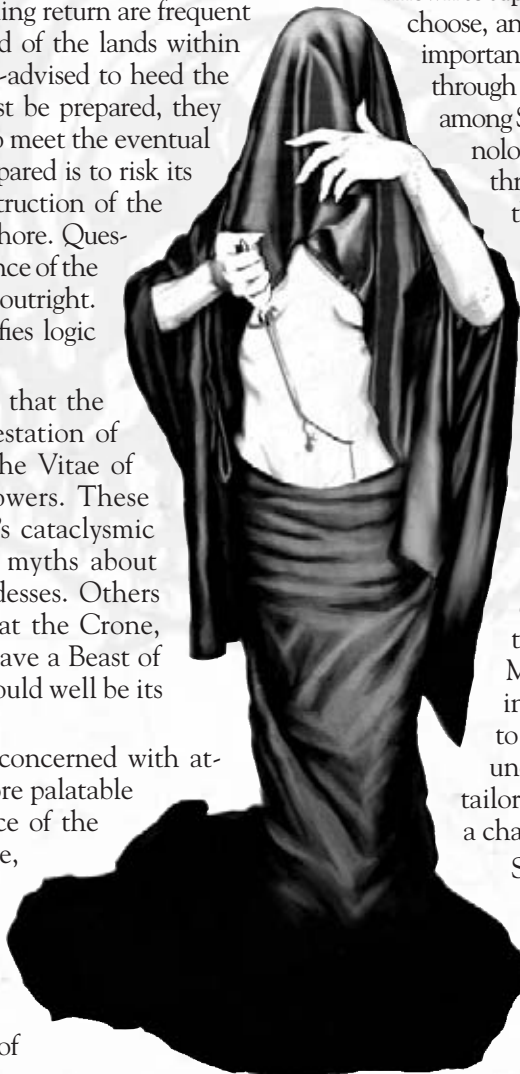
Covenant: The Sipán are exclusively members of the Circle of the Crone. Their practice predates the arrival of the “modern” covenants in South America by centuries (if not millennia). To pledge allegiance to an outsider covenant is to betray the faction, and is always punishable by Final Death. In fact, even referring to them as Acolytes of the Circle is unwelcome. The Sipán, in their opinion, have always been Sipán. To name them otherwise is to do them a disservice. Nevertheless, their practice (and the clear demonstration of a Crúac analog) fits them squarely in with the covenant.

Despite their strict rules on membership, the Sipán do actually have some outsider allies. The Carthian Movement is known to support the Sipán’s right to worship as they choose, and has sided with them in a number of important conflicts in South American domains through the last century. However, the tendency among Sipán hardliners to equate modern technology with the tools of “the interlopers” is threatening to drive a violent rift between the members of both covenants.

Even in domains that do not favor the Lancea Sanctum, both the Invictus and the Ordo Dracul tend to regard the Sipán as dangerous lunatics and would rather see them disappear.

Appearance: Contrary to expectation, the witches of the Sipán blend in very well with modern mortal society. They are not the sullen, primitive witches that certain outsiders make them out to be—instead, the Sipán take pains to keep to the Masquerade, just as their counterparts in other covenants do, and are known to be just as extravagant as any. It’s not uncommon to see a Sipán Acolyte in a tailored suit, riding around in the back of a chauffeured limousine.

Since the faction is fiercely individual, the members of the Sipán are free to dress as they choose. Even at ritual, they are a motley bunch, bringing together a mix of styles and sensibilities so diverse as to seem haphazard.



If they have one rule of dress, it is this: no member of the Sipán will ever wear a Christian cross. Their revulsion for the Catholic Church and their declared intolerance for its accoutrements are near-universal qualities among the faction. Even those less ardent Sipán Kindred will avoid the cross just to keep from agitating their fellow Acolytes.

Haven: As with their style of dress, the Sipán are fiercely individual about their homes. Normally quite well-appointed, each is decorated with the artwork of the Acolytes and their favorite mortal artists, and all are placed so as to allow the vampire a good vantage point over the local domain. Many havens are near or at the top of apartment buildings or in houses perched on the side of the mountains at the edge of Kindred territory.

One feature of every Sipán haven that remains common throughout is the position and the nature of the ritual altar. Each home will have a natural, unhewn stone placed in the corner of the home that lies nearest to the ocean. On the wall above the altar stone, some representation of the Decapitator is always placed — whether painted, carved or otherwise embodied. A bloodstained bowl of some sort rests nearby, ready to catch the drippings of a sacrifice. Any other decoration is left to the individual Acolyte to choose. Some pile jeweled offerings, feathers and carved images on and around the altar stone. Some spatter the wall with blood or pile the skulls of their victims at the altar's base, and others leave the space completely bare.

The vantage point offered by the Sipán haven has a dual purpose. While it provides a clear view of the local neighborhood (and allows access to the skies for those who would make use of certain disciplines and Crúac rituals), the haven also inevitably affords a view of a Christian church. The Sipán often meditate on these structures, focusing the fear and anger of their ancestors to help channel their magicks.

Background: Most of the mortals who are recruited by the Sipán are drawn from the South American counter-culture — rebels, criminals and mercenaries. All show a capacity for defiance and self-sufficiency, and most show open animosity to Western-style religious and political authority organizations.

In addition, every successful candidate for Embrace must show some talent in the occult arts, and usually demonstrates a fanatic zeal for the ideas of the cult — whether by proving herself in violent conflict with the agents of the interlopers or simply demonstrating her willingness to accept the teachings of the elder priests of the cult as the one truth.

Character Creation: Physical Attributes are primary among the resolute warriors of the Sipán. Their battles are fought in esoteric secrecy, and require rigorous honing of the body and training in various arts of combat. Willpower is very important to the cult, and its members

are expected to harden their Resolve and Composure with self-imposed tests of will.

Physical Skills are paramount, and various combat-related Merits are appreciated. However, the technology of firearms is taboo to the Sipán, and those who learn to use them in life are forbidden to take up the “tools of the interloper” in undeath. Most of the warriors of the cult train with the clubs, daggers, bows and spears of tradition instead.

Faction Disciplines: Obfuscate and Vigor are the Disciplines favored by the sorcerers of the Sipán, and are often integrated into the schooling of neonates in the faction, regardless of clan heritage.

Organization: The Sipán organize their Circles in a regimented, strictly hierarchical system. The Hierophant rules as the undisputed leader of the group, served and honored by all Acolytes. His wisdom is passed directly to an inner circle of elder priests, who retain power over the subordinate Chorus, which is also stratified into three circles: Students, Supplicants and Initiates. As a vampire passes upward through the circles, he is exposed to more and more of the secrets of the cult, learning the true history of the sorcerers' Circle, the prophecies of the Decapitator and the hidden powers of Crúac. An Acolyte must endure a difficult, painful tribulation in transition between each rank, and can only ascend with the elaborate blessings of the Hierophant. When the Hierophant suffers Final Death, one of the elder priests secures the position by gathering his ashes and mixing them into a brew of a decapitated mortal's blood, which she drinks at the climax of her own rite of ascendancy.

Sipán Acolytes learn that their power flows directly from the unknowable anger of the Decapitator, which rages like a flooded river. The Kindred sorcerers fuel their works by trawling at the edges of this fathomless rage, as evidenced by the tendency of their Beasts to rise unbidden in the heat of ritual. To counter this, the schooling of the Sipán focuses on strengthening the will of the Acolytes, so that they may better resist the powerful current of the great monster's wake. Tests of fire, starvation and pain are common techniques, as are ritualized duels involving a complicated escalation of taunts and insults meant to draw the opponent to frenzy. Those who know the Sipán often comment on their stony countenance, even in the face of horrors unimaginable to most outsiders.

There are few holidays celebrated by the Sipán. Seeing themselves as the burdened defenders of their domains rather than religious celebrants, the Sipán meet for regular rituals and attempt to organize scheduled sacrifices in order to appease their god, but there is little in the way of secular rhyme or reason to their timing. Most rituals are held at the behest of an Elder Priest or Hierophant after reporting a daytime dream. Some Circles hold particularly vicious rituals on the anniversary of the

conquistadors' invasion of the Sipán territories, but these furious workings are by no means ubiquitous.

Most of the structured worship of the Sipán is involved in rigidly organized recitations of the litany and the ardent prayers of the Circle. While the individual Acolytes can and do create works of art (often inspired by their horrifying dreams of the Decapitator), the collective sacred spaces of each Circle tends to be fairly sparse. Stone carvings and the flat paintings of the raging monster are usually restricted to the personal havens of the Acolytes who create them.

The greatest worship of the cult is organized around mass sacrifices, which are conducted at the behest of a Hierophant's visions. When the call is made, the Acolytes spread out in their domain, hunting down and retrieving as many living mortals as they can find. Some cults are wise enough to keep the numbers relatively low so as not to strain the Masquerade, but other cults become too wrapped up in their fear and sense of duty to worry about the earthly ramifications of discovery. The victims are all dragged to the sacred space of the Circle, where they are sacrificed, one after the other, in a bloody show of faith. The Hierophant cuts off the head and tears the heart from each body, presenting them as gifts to the Decapitator; the blood that spills from each victim stains the earth and stones around the altar. At the end of the ritual, the bodies of the sacrifices are carried away and flung into the sea, where they sink (or are dragged?) below the surface, disappearing forever.

The ritual fear of the Sipán and their organized raids on the living populace of their domains are not the only binding qualities of the cult. The strongest and most overt tie that brings together the Acolytes is their hatred of modern Western culture and religion, and the utopian notion of the "return to nature." Every Acolyte is taught that Judeo-Christian ethos, modern technology and free-market capitalism are the symptoms of a great sickness that warps and twists all of the people subjected to them.

The notion of a primal, communal life in the jungle is fetishized, serving as an ideological barrier between the Sipán and the outsider Kindred and providing the cult with a goal of sorts. The return to the jungle is mentioned often in the preaching of the Hierophants, but is held out as a state that can only be realized when the modern ways are purged from the land and the Decapitator is appeased by a sacrifice of sufficient size.

It matters little that no Sipán Acolyte has ever lived in this ideal state of harmony — it is enough for them to believe in it. Some elder Hierophants claim to remember the nights of peace and natural accord that preceded the coming of the conquistadors, but the elders' memories are muddled by the passage of centuries and the crude dreams of torpor.

Concepts: Archaeologist silenced by the Embrace, believer in ancient powers, demonic death-dealer, fanatic

warrior plucked from poverty, furious enemy of the Lancea Sanctum, iconoclastic ex-Catholic, knife-scarred occultist, mad devotee of the Decapitator, mystic criminal overseer, wise woman of the urban jungle

Crúac: The sorcery of the Sipán is a gory, primal affair. Blood sacrifice, often in shocking quantity, is central to their workings and is considered a basic necessity. Most of their rituals are conducted on elevated plateaus (or rooftops) under an open sky, within view of the ocean. Altars are constructed of stark, rough-hewn stone, and the ritual accoutrements of the Acolytes are crafted of leather and bone.

The Sipán believe that the blood spilled in their ceremonies is marked for the Decapitator, and must not be ingested or carried off by any of the practitioners. To purify themselves after a ritual (and insure no accidental removal of the great beast's property), they traditionally wash themselves in the sea. The salt crusts that dry onto their flesh afterwards are considered marks of divine approval and are scraped off into bowls and preserved for use in certain powerful rites.

To the Sipán, the powerful effects of Crúac are gifts of the Decapitator, designed to assist them in preparing its sacrifices and overseeing the mortal population. They believe that their great god (or goddess) is constantly watching their works, and that they are extensions of its will. If an Acolyte fails to complete a ritual, the practitioner must acknowledge that his personal desire has corrupted the intent of the Decapitator's faithful servants and withdraw. He must then subject himself to a difficult trial of faith before the Hierophant declares him ready to perform further magicks.

Ritual Variation: Dreaming the Other (Cheval, •• Crúac Ritual)

To prepare for this ritual, the Sipán Acolyte must sit before his open-air altar, facing outwards. After a short vocal entreaty to gain the attention of the Decapitator, a living animal sacrifice is presented and slain. The blood of the sacrifice is caught in a clay bowl. The sorcerer begins to chant a prayer to his god, standing and facing the subject of the ritual. The Acolyte opens his own veins with a stone blade, letting a quantity of his Vitae mix with the blood of the sacrifice before pouring the mixture over the altar.

In ancient nights, the ritual would be performed on a hill or mountain overlooking the assembled mortals of the village, allowing the practitioner to select his subject without her knowledge. Now, the subject must be brought into the sorcerer's view by force or guile, but is no more likely to be aware of what's happening to her.

The ritualist recites a terrible prayer to the Decapitator, begging for the power to use the enemy's eyes and ears in order to rip the truth from her and thereby empower the god's true servants. At the climax of the ritual, blood flows from the eyes and ears of the Sipán

sorcerer, brought forth by the magickal energies of the prayer. The blood dries and cakes upon his face and neck, and there remains for the duration of the ritual's effect. When the effect fades, the blood cracks and flakes, falling away from his flesh.

Ritual Variation: Heart's Curse (Blood Blight, ●●●●● Crúac Ritual)

This terrifying and powerful curse is reserved only for the most hated enemies of the Sipán. It always coincides with a direct assassination attempt, and is never initiated by a vampire who is unwilling to take full responsibility for the destruction of her victim. When the Heart's Curse is performed, the sorcerer considers herself the murderer of the subject, no matter what the actual circumstances of his death seem to be.

To begin the ritual, the Sipán presents herself at the ritual site, carrying the bowl of her salt scrapings as a means of identification before the Decapitator. She is accompanied by at least one assistant Acolyte, who must present his salt as well. An opening invocation is performed, involving the cleansing and preparation of the Circle's altar. The target of the ritual is identified in a formal recitation, with a full listing of his crimes against the Sipán, echoed and acknowledged by the assistants.

A mortal victim is brought forth and lashed to the altar. The Sipán sorcerer sprinkles her salt upon this

sacrifice's naked chest and forehead. Her assistants follow suit, one after another, while the sorcerer chants a prayer of presentation to the Decapitator. When the marking is complete, the sacrifice is stabbed three times with a stone blade. As the mortal bleeds out onto the altar, the sorcerer continues chanting, supported by her assistants, calling upon the terrible power of the Decapitator to lend aid in her quest for justice.

To demonstrate the depth of her need, the sorcerer then stabs herself in the heart, allowing her Vitae to gush forth at the base of the altar. At this moment, the chosen victim, wherever he is, is struck by the awesome power of the Sipán and suffers lethal damage equal to number of successes on the Manipulation + Occult + Crúac roll representing the ritual's effectiveness. Normally, as soon as a nearby agent of the Sipán sees the victim struck down, she will attack, chopping off his head with a stone axe or similar blade.

After the ritual is complete, the Sipán must carry the body of the mortal sacrifice down to the ocean and allow the remains to be taken by the waves. She must then bathe in the waters of the ocean for at least an hour, then emerge and let nothing touch her skin until the waters have dried. She is forbidden from participating in further rites of the Sipán until the following night.



The Amanotsukai, Japanese for “Servants of Heaven,” stand out in the Circle of the Crone for the nature of the goddess they particularly revere. These Kindred hold that they are the chosen agents of Amaterasu-o-mi-kami, the goddess of the sun.

MYTH AND LEGEND

The mortals know the story of Susano-o-no-mikoto's ascent to the plains of heaven, and how he broke the dykes around the rice paddies, trampled on the crops and broke the laws of heaven. The mortals also know that Amaterasu-o-mi-kami withdrew to a cave for a time. Mortals believe that she did so in disgust, and that she was eventually lured out by the antics of the other gods. In this, the mortals are mistaken.

Amaterasu-o-mi-kami is the ruler of the plains of heaven, and so the actions of Susano-o-no-mikoto made her impure. Disorder in the realm must, of necessity, also

disorder the ruler. While impure, she could not go out before the other gods, and so she withdrew to the cave, to purge her impurity.

At a spring in the darkness, she rinsed first her left hand, then her right. But when she rinsed her mouth, she spat out blood, which gathered itself on the ground to become the first vampire. The new vampire was confused about her place in the world, and Amaterasu-o-mi-kami sat down with her to explain her role.

She was to go among the people of earth, always hidden, purging their impurity. As she had been born from the purification of the goddess, she would purify the mortals. The vampire protested that she was too small and weak for such a role, and Amaterasu-o-mi-kami breathed on her, granting her a touch of divine power. Then she protested that she was only one, and could not purify the whole of the world, so Amaterasu-o-mi-kami granted her the ability to reproduce herself. And then the vampire was content.

When Amaterasu-o-mi-kami first emerged, the vampire remained hidden in the cave, creeping out as the gods dispersed. She descended to the earth, and began to cleanse the impure. At that time, vampires could walk in the sun without fear, because Amaterasu-o-mi-kami looked kindly upon her servants.

That did not last. Vampires fed on blood, and the blood on their lips made them impure as it had Amaterasu-o-mi-kami. She had no choice but to turn her face from them, and the light of the sun began to burn vampires with a terrible flame. After that time, most vampires forgot their purpose, some even coming to believe that they were damned, but a few remembered, and continued to fulfill the role that the goddess had set for them.

HISTORY

The Amanotsukai distinguish the history of their faction from the history of Kindred service to Amaterasu-o-mi-kami. They believe that vampires have always been her agents, but recognize that most have not recognized this, seeing the sun as an enemy. The historians of the faction claim that the truth was remembered only in Japan, until the time of Ketsueki-hime, a Dutch Kindred who found herself in the trading enclave of Deshima in the late 18th century.

She had come with one of the trading ships, and the weakness resulting from blood loss was already rousing suspicion. Accordingly, she secretly left the enclave every night, hunting in the city of Nagasaki and using her Disciplines to conceal her European features.

The native Kindred found her within a week, and took her to the shrine of the sun goddess. There, as an intruder, she was condemned to the Trial of the Sun. Staked, she faced the sunrise through the open front of the shrine. As the first rays of the rising sun burned her face, a black curtain seemed to fall in front of her, sparing her.

At sunset, the Japanese Kindred came and found her alive. In accordance with the will of the goddess, they unstaked her, and taught her of the truth of the Kindred's condition. At this time she took the name Ketsueki-hime, Blood-princess, to symbolize what she had learned. Ketsueki-hime studied in Nagasaki for years, but eventually she felt that the goddess wanted her to leave, and bring the truth to the Kindred of the rest of the world. Stowing away on ships, she made her way to the

West Coast of North America in the early 19th century.

Ketsueki-hime was charismatic and a powerful practitioner of Crúac, and she gathered a group of Kindred around herself. These vampires formed the basis of the contemporary Amanotsukai.

Soon after Japan opened to the world once more, Ketsueki-hime returned to Nagasaki to seek further teaching. She has yet to return.

THE NAGASAKI SHRINE

Ketsueki-hime is the only member of the Amanotsukai to have visited the shrine in Nagasaki. For decades, none of the other members had a sufficiently strong reason to make the hazardous journey. After the atomic bomb was dropped on the city, one vampire, Yakei, took the risk, in order to search for the founder of the group. He found no trace of Ketsueki-hime or the shrine, or, indeed, of any Japanese vampires.

PURITY

The Amanotsukai believe that vampires were created by the sun goddess to purge impurity from the world, but that they were not properly made, and thus became impure themselves. This forced the sun to turn away from them, but they retain their role, and the sympathy of the sun. If a vampire could, somehow, become pure, he could walk unharmed in the brightest sunlight.

Purity is not the same as moral virtue. Rather, purity is a measure of the clarity of someone's relationship to the world. Many sins do, in fact, cause impurity, but they are not the only possible cause. Victims of disease, accidents or natural disasters also have a tainted connection to the world, and thus are impure. Crimes render the victims impure, just as much as the perpetrators. Even simple physical dirtiness is a form of impurity.

Removing impurity, then, is nothing like absolving from a sin. Removing impurity is much more like cleaning up after a flood, or repairing a broken gutter. It restores the relationship between a person and the world to its pristine form.



Contact with blood and contact with death both cause impurity. Obviously, this puts vampires in an awkward position. Amanotsukai believe that Amaterasu-o-mi-kami made a mistake when forming them from her blood, so that they were dead and required blood to survive. In some stories, the noises from outside the cave distracted her at a crucial moment. Whatever the cause, vampires are almost always impure.

The mandate of heaven does not specify how the Kindred should remove impurity. An Amanotsukai who preys on the homeless might organize a place where they can shower and bathe free of charge, for example. However, the Amanotsukai believe that, in their impure state, they can take a mortal's impurity onto themselves by drinking some of the mortal's blood. The vampire then undergoes the traditional rites to purge his own impurity. This is by far the most common means used.

Accordingly, Amanotsukai feed on victims who are impure in some way. Almost all mortals are impure most of the time, so this is not limiting, but most Amanotsukai specialize. One might feed on criminals, another on the victims of crime, yet another on the victims of accidents and other such ill-fortune. Some feed on other vampires, who are clearly impure. Members of the faction do not interfere with each others' choices in these matters.

The Amanotsukai believe that some mortals are so impure that they can only be cleansed by draining all of their blood, thus killing them. The Amanotsukai believe that it is their sacred duty to kill such people. Opinions differ as to the point at which such extreme measures become necessary, but some cases are clear.

All Amanotsukai agree that a woman who has suffered a miscarriage is so tainted by the combination of blood, death and failed life that she can only be cleansed by being killed. Most believe that the same applies to women having abortions, but some feel that the voluntary nature of the operation, along with the sterile procedures, lessens the impurity significantly. Serial killers, the severely disabled, people who have lost their whole family in a natural disaster: these are also strong candidates for final purification.



AMARANTH

Some of the Amanotsukai believe that, in committing diablerie on another vampire, the diablerist takes on all of the impurity of the victim. This is represented by the dark stains that appear in the diablerist's aura; the time they last represents the time that it takes for the additional impurity to fade. The soul of the diablerized vampire, rendered pure, is able to stand before Amaterasu-o-mi-kami to receive its reward.

A few Kindred who believe this choose to commit suicide by being diablerized.

Most of the Amanotsukai believe that vampires are too impure to be purified even by this.



CREATION IS POWER

The faction believes strongly that Kindred should create to offset the mistake made in their creation. A few occult scholars seek ways to create less-flawed life themselves, although none have yet succeeded in producing more than a homunculus.

This energy is more commonly directed toward art. Three types are particularly common.

The first is the construction of Shinto-style shrines to Amaterasu-o-mi-kami. The main hall of the shrine faces east, and is open. Within, the goddess is represented by a mirror. In a mortal shrine, food and alcohol are offered to the deity, but the Amanotsukai offer flowers instead. Blood, of course, is impure and cannot be offered. These shrines are always constructed so that the light of the rising sun falls on the mirror; those that are underground or inside have windows facing the sunrise.

All Amanotsukai are expected to construct their own shrines quickly after joining the faction, but it is permissible for the shrine to be very small, or even portable. Portable shrines must be set up to face the sunrise every day, however. Many vampires continue working on their shrines for years.

A second popular choice is a garden, if possible surrounding the shrine. This garden is normally Japanese-style, with pine trees a particularly common motif. Japanese maple is also popular, as the vivid red of the autumn leaves is reminiscent of blood. The best of these gardens may become part of Elysium, and are customarily fine places from which to view the moon.

Finally, many Amanotsukai learn Japanese and *shodo*, Japanese calligraphy, and write haiku and *tanka* in praise of the sun goddess or reflecting on their condition. These poems may be offered in the shrine in place of, or in addition to, flowers.

It is worth noting that Amanotsukai never have their havens at their shrines. In part, this is because the location of the shrine is often general knowledge. The main reason, however, is that the vampire is impure, and the shrine should not contain impure things.

AMANOTSUKAI AND FOREIGN BARBARIANS

For all the Japanese roots and trappings, the Amanotsukai are only known to exist outside Japan. The continued existence of the group that initiated Ketsueki-hime is open to doubt, and no other word has been heard from Japan.

On the other hand, the Amanotsukai are keen to recruit Kindred of Japanese origins, offering to put them back in touch with their roots. While some small groups are a bit Japanese, most know a great deal about the land of eight million gods, and it is very common for Amanotsukai to learn Japanese if they do not already

speaking it. Those Amanotsukai who create progeny generally choose to Embrace mortals of Japanese descent.

The faction tends to regard itself as somewhat outside Kindred society. The other Kindred have forgotten their purpose, and wallow in their impurity. Even other Acolytes are lacking in a true understanding of their purpose, but they are closer than most.

Many other Kindred think that all members of the faction are insane; they worship *the sun*, for crying out loud. That does not stop other Kindred launching crusades against the Amanotsukai, and has reinforced the group's isolationist tendencies.

RITUALS

The Amanotsukai have a number of unique rituals and observances. A few of these have an associated Crúac ritual, but the rituals are practiced even by those Kindred who cannot back them up with mystical power. All Amanotsukai rituals are performed at a shrine, which is another reason most members of the faction construct their own.

MISOGI

Misogi is the simplest purification ritual, one that Amanotsukai Kindred perform before entering their shrines to perform any other rituals. In preparation for misogi, the vampire must refrain from killing for three nights, and he must not feed between sunset and performing misogi. (Thus, misogi and other rituals are normally performed early in the night.)

The vampire dresses in white, Japanese-style clothes for the ritual. Many wear a karate gi, but some have kimono, or even, in this age of Internet mail order, a full Shinto priest uniform. The vampire enters the shrine, and bows once to the mirror. Next, he washes his hands in cold water, before pouring a bucket full of cold water over his head. Finally, he bows twice more to the mirror.

This simple ritual makes the vampire sufficiently pure to perform further rituals, but there is no Crúac ritual corresponding to it.

Ritual Variation: Mononoke (Cheval, •• Crúac Ritual)

This ritual is identical in its mechanics and effects to Cheval (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 143). The ritualist need not be able to see the target when activating the ritual, but must have at least one Vitae from the target in his system.

The ritualist writes a symbolic name for the target in Vitae on a strip of paper. This may be the target's actual name, or something that strikes the ritualist as appropriate. He then prays over the paper, and hangs it beside the mirror in a shrine. The name fades over the duration of the ritual, so that when it finishes, the paper is blank. If the paper is removed from the shrine, the effect of the ritual ends immediately.

HARAI

Harai is a purification ritual performed on behalf of an impure mortal from whom the vampire has drunk. It cleanses the impurity from the Kindred's blood, and thus from the mortal.

The Kindred stands in front of the main hall of the shrine, and bows twice. He then cuts the palm of his hand with a sharp knife, and allows one Vitae to flow into a paper cup, which is set on a metal table, with a raised rim. The ritualist then recites a fixed prayer, in Japanese, calling on Amaterasu-o-mi-kami to purify the blood. He then lights the paper cup, so that it burns away. The ritualist must resist frenzy in order to successfully complete the ritual. The fire is only equivalent to lighting a cigarette, and is at a safe distance, so most ritualists can do this. Once the fire goes out, the ritualist bows twice more to end harai.

After that, the blood and ashes are cleaned from the altar. Drinking the Vitae would be deeply improper.

Harai (•• Crúac Ritual)

The target of the ritual, who must be a mortal (not a ghoul, vampire or other supernatural creature) from whom the Kindred has drunk since sunset the previous night, is mystically cleansed of his impurity. There are several forms of this ritual, almost identical in performance, but each applying to a different form of impurity, and having slightly different wording in the prayer. In all cases, the ritual grants the target peace of mind.

The ritual can only be used once on a given source of impurity, and only once per night on a given target. Harai cannot be used if the Kindred has spent all of the Vitae he drew from the target.

Injury: The target heals two points of bashing damage or one point of lethal damage per success on the ritual.

Disease: The target gets an additional roll to overcome the disease, with a number of bonus dice equal to the number of successes on the ritual.

Crime: The target may roll again to avoid Morality loss. If the re-roll is successful, the Morality point is regained. (This has no effect if the target did not lose Morality.) Successes on the ritual roll do *not* grant any bonus to this roll.

Other forms of the ritual may well exist where some Amanotsukai has wandered far both physically and philosophically.

If the Crúac ritual is performed, the offered blood is consumed in magical fire, leaving no remnant. The ritual automatically fails if the flames provoke a frenzy in the ritualist, regardless of the number of successes gained on the Crúac roll.

Some Amanotsukai perform the Crúac version of the ritual even if they have killed the target. They claim that it helps purify the soul of the victim, but there is no evidence for that.

O-HARAI

O-harai, “great harai,” is a ritual designed to cleanse the vampire himself of his impurity. This ritual can never be fully effective, because the fundamental nature of the Kindred is impure. The ritual is particularly sacred, and a vampire must refrain from killing for at least one lunar month before performing it. As always, the ritualist must perform misogi before entering the shrine where o-harai is to be carried out.

At the beginning of the ritual, the ritualist drains all of the Vitae he has into a vessel, which is normally air-tight to keep the smell of blood away from him. The ritual fails if the Kindred enters frenzy before finishing it. In principle, the vessel of blood should be placed outside the shrine, but many vampires are unwilling to take that risk, and keep the vessel to hand.

The vampire then bows twice to the mirror, pours water over himself three times and recites a fixed prayer to the sun goddess. This takes at least a minute, even for Kindred who have practiced repeatedly, and so the vampire can only succeed if he actually overcomes the frenzy. The ritual ends when the vampire bows twice more, and leaves the shrine. Most ritualists drink their own Vitae back again at this point.

This ritual must be performed after the vampire becomes particularly impure. Spending the day in a shrine, taking on the impurity of a particularly impure person by killing him and using a Crúac ritual without performing misogi first are the most common causes of such impurity.

There are rumors of a Crúac ritual corresponding to this ritual. It is said to make the vampire truly pure, and thus remove the need for drinking blood and the vulnerability to the sun. Some believe that Ketsueki-hime used that ritual in Nagasaki, and now watches over the faction.

HI-NO-MAIRI

This ritual’s name means “paying one’s respects to the sun.” It is very simple. The ritualist bows twice to the shrine mirror and repeats a fixed prayer while letting a Vitae flow from his arm to the floor, bowing twice more at the end. The whole ritual takes 12 seconds: one turn for the first two bows, two turns to repeat the prayer and one turn for the final two bows.

The ritual starts as the sun begins to rise.

Standard ritual clothing covers most of the vampire’s body, and facing the mirror means that he has his back to the sun. As a result, he loses only one Health point to aggravated damage every turn. All sensible ritualists establish somewhere to hide within the shrine; after performing this ritual, the vampire is worthy to sleep

within the shrine for one day. If the vampire enters frenzy before completing the ritual, it fails. That requires him to undergo o-harai the following night, to purify himself and the shrine.

Any vampire who wants to take up a leadership position within the faction must perform this ritual at least once.

HI-NO-MON

The “Gate of the Sun” is a re-enactment of Ketsueki-hime’s entry into the faction. The subject is staked in a shrine, facing east, and left to face the sunrise. The subject and the ritualists must perform misogi on entering the shrine, but beyond that there are no common elements.

A vampire who survives this ritual is guaranteed admission into the faction, having been chosen by the sun goddess herself. If he was already a member, he is guaranteed a leadership position, almost certainly the leadership position within the city. It is almost impossible for anyone else to oppose the authority this ritual grants.

Of course, the subject takes one point of aggravated damage every turn as the sun rises. Ghouls, cameras and any other precautions that the ritualists can think of are taken to prevent cheating, although carefully staking the subject renders many possibilities moot. This ritual is effectively suicide, and most subjects see it as such.

However, the subject does, occasionally, survive. The survivor is invariably badly burned and without any memory of the day, but his Requiem continues. The Amanotsukai attribute this to the intervention of Amaterasu-o-mi-kami.

Hi-no-mon in Play

There are no rules for Hi-no-mon. Normally, the vampire is utterly destroyed within 30 seconds of sunrise. Sometimes, he is not. This is not a matter for game mechanics or dice pools. This is a chronicle-changing event that happens at the will of the Storyteller.

Survivors gain the following Merit:

HI-NO-KO (•••••)

The vampire has the equivalent of Status ••••• in the Amanotsukai and Status ••••• (at least) in the Circle of the Crone. This Status cannot be lost by any actions; no matter what the vampire does in the future, he was chosen by Amaterasu-o-mi-kami in the most spectacular way possible.

Players’ characters may choose to undergo the ritual. Players should expect such characters to burn in a gruesome Final Death, just like any other vampire who chooses to face the rising sun, unless the players know in advance that the Storyteller has other plans for them.



DAUGHTERS OF THE GODDESS

The Goddess has become more important among the kine recently, a development which the Kindred of this faction view with approval. They believe that the Goddess is for everyone, Kindred and kine alike, even if Kindred and kine should express their worship in different ways. Some are quite militant in this belief.

HISTORY

The beginnings of the Daughters of the Goddess are lost in the mists of time. Stone Age people worshiped the Earth Goddess in her three aspects of Maiden, Mother and Crone, and Kindred of that era naturally worshiped her as well. These societies were matriarchal, egalitarian and lived in harmony with nature. Kindred had an accepted place as the harbingers of winter and death, and the Masquerade was unnecessary. Mortals of a certain age would offer themselves as sacrifices to the Kindred, and the Kindred provided protection to the community from the unnatural threats that faced them.

In that time, Kindred did not suffer from the hollowness of soul that they face now. The Goddess provided them with their purpose, and they served the Crone well, bringing death and fear when it was needed, as well as supplying wisdom and acting as midwives to creation. They were creatures of the night, of darkness and mystery, just as the Crone herself is.

Time passed, and the mortal worship of the Goddess was crushed under the conquering heel of warrior Aryans, who slaughtered the priestesses. The Aryans worshiped a sun god, and interpreted the Kindred's aversion for the sun as a sign of evil. The Aryans, turning their weapons against the Kindred, drove them away, creating the first break in the unified whole that was the life of the Goddess.

Deprived of the presence and guidance of the Kindred, driven even to hunting them, the mortals fell further and further into factions and violence. Patriarchy took over from matriarchy, inevitably bringing inequality, rape and war. Women became little better than slaves, begging for scraps from the tables of the men.

The Kindred were, at first, better off. They still dealt with mortals, and thus Kindred society could still function as a whole. However, it was now necessary to hide from mortals, and the Masquerade was instituted. The wisest Crones established the Camarilla to protect all Kindred and preserve their connection to the Goddess.

The Camarilla was led by the women of the Circle, and, unlike the structure of later nights, had no Princes, no Primogen. All Kindred were valued for their gifts, and those who threatened others were gently guided back to the true path through counsel. The Kindred looked on the suffering of mortal society, and grieved for it, but their souls, at least, were still whole.

And then the poison of patriarchy found its way even into the Kindred. The Invictus and the Lancea Sanctum, drawing inspiration from the worst aspects of mortal tyranny, rose up and, uniting, overthrew the Camarilla. The peaceful elders of the old order were reluctant to use their full power against the usurpers, because you cannot save something by destroying it. As a result, they lost, and patriarchy was imposed.

There followed the descent of the Kindred into violence, horror and monstrosity. Cut off from the Goddess, they became slaves to the Beast, with no way to defend themselves from it but clinging to the fading shreds of their mortal life. Even those Kindred who remembered the old wisdom found that, without the community, it was not enough to fully sustain them.

But those few, wise Kindred faced an even larger problem. The patriarchs of the Invictus and Lancea Sanctum would not countenance the threat that the truth posed to their petty power. Thus, they persecuted the followers of the Goddess, murdering uncounted thousands in a frenzy that reached its peak during the nights of the Middle Ages.

The Goddess had not forgotten her servants, and a few hidden groups of Kindred kept the faith alive, passing the secret from sire to childe or preserving it in torpor. At last, as patriarchy began to falter under its own weight, the Goddess inspired her servants to come forth once more, and restore the peaceful matriarchy to its rightful place in the night.



HISTORY AND MYTH

There is ample evidence that the history of the Daughters of the Goddess is made up; the idea of the Camarilla as a benevolent, egalitarian matriarchy, in particular, makes many elders laugh. Most Kindred outside the Daughters are sure that their history was made up by analogy with the constructed history of the New Age movement, and dates back a few decades at most.

The Daughters get very, even violently, offended if Kindred question their account of the earliest nights and the events since. More scholarly ones point out that the elders who laugh are members of the Invictus and Lancea Sanctum, with a clear interest in the prevailing lie, and remind people of the effects of the Fog of Eternity. The most careful neutral scholars concede that it is *just possible* that the Daughters know a truth hidden from most Kindred. No scholars believe that to actually be the case, however.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

The Daughters believe that all the ills of the world and the Kindred stem from the abandonment of the Goddess. If everyone would just worship the Goddess properly, then a peaceful, creative, egalitarian matriarchy would naturally arise, mortals would live in peace with each other and the natural world, and Kindred would no longer need to fight the Beast or maintain the Masquerade as they return to their appointed place in the order of things.

Thus, if that is not the case, it is evidence that the Goddess is not being properly worshiped, and so the Daughters take action to rectify the situation.

MEN AND WOMEN

The Daughters believe that male and female matter just as much after the Embrace as before. They insist that men and women are equal in the eyes of the

Goddess, but that the two sexes have different roles. Women are responsible for creation, nurture, guidance, leadership, wisdom, magic, punishment and destruction. Men are responsible for everything else: repairing havens, carrying out the wishes of the matriarchs, cleaning up, gathering materials and so on.

The leaders of the faction concede that men may, and indeed should, try their own hands at creation, as that is an important part of the worship of the Goddess. However, men face a greater need of purification through tribulation than women do, as a result of the centuries of history of patriarchy.

In addition, only women are taught the mysteries of Crúac. Mortal women are the ones who bleed; accordingly, among the Kindred, women should wield the secrets of blood magic. Men who know rituals may join the Daughters, but they must undergo severe blood purification, which culminates in imposed torpor. During torpor, their improper knowledge of Crúac falls from them, or so say the Daughters, rendering the men fit for their place in the scheme of things.

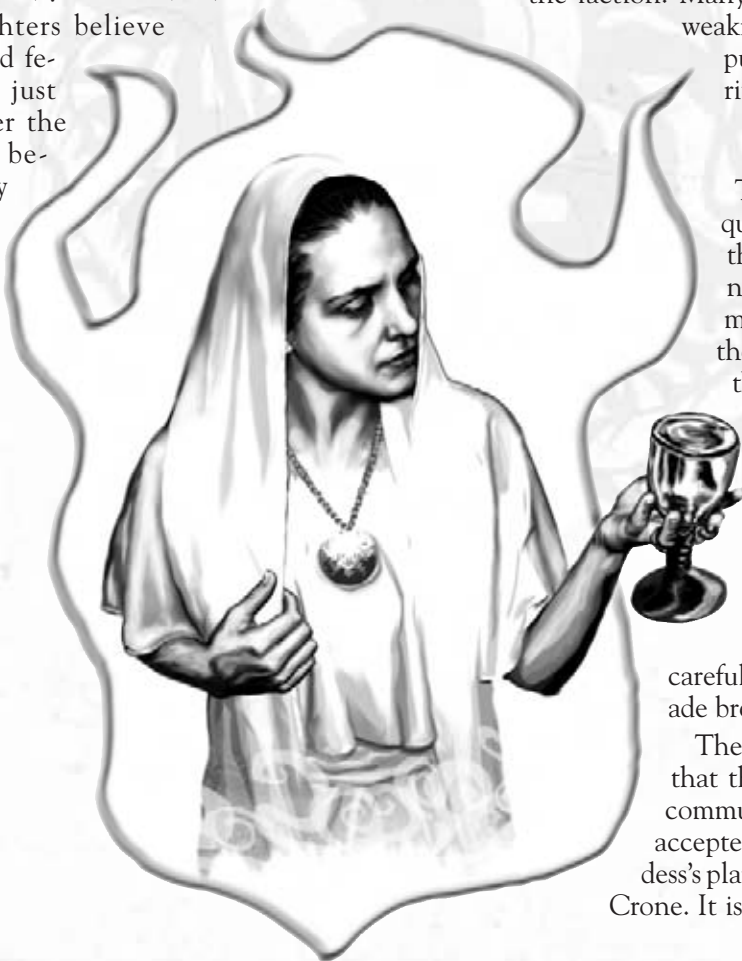
All leaders of the Daughters are female, although some have male assistants. There are male members of the faction, all of whom are firm believers in the importance of playing their role in the Goddess's plan. Those men who come to doubt that belief generally try to leave the faction. Many high priestesses believe that such weakness is a sign of the need for blood purification, possibly the ultimate purification of the Oak King.

THE MASQUERADE

The Daughters believe that the Masquerade should not be necessary, and that in the ideal state of society it is not. When everything is as it should be, mortals accept Kindred and their role in the order of things. Mortals volunteer their Vitae, and even their lives, to the Kindred who keep the mysteries of the dark and of endings.

All Daughters, at least publicly, concede that the Masquerade is necessary, and cite this as clear evidence that the world is not in the ideal state yet. Princes who know the beliefs of the Daughters keep a careful eye on them, watching for Masquerade breaches.

There are some. The Daughters believe that they should be able to integrate into communities of Goddess-worshippers, being accepted as a normal part of the Triple Goddess's plan, and particularly as channels for the Crone. It is not that uncommon for a Daughter



to join a Wiccan coven or similar pagan group, keeping her nature hidden while she gains acceptance, planning to reveal her true place in the scheme of things later. Sometimes this revelation never happens, as the time never seems right, but more often it goes terribly wrong as the pagans recoil from the monster in their midst.

One thing that the Daughters never do is claim to be goddesses themselves. They do think that they are favored and important servants of the Goddess, but at least in principle they acknowledge that a mortal priestess might be wiser and more suited to leadership than they are. However rare that might be, the relationship between Kindred and mortals is basically one of equality.

This attitude could lead to good relationships with mortals, and the Daughters believe that the world will not be made right again until Kindred and mortals live together in harmony, so Daughters are far more likely to have mortal contacts, or even friends, than other members of the Circle. These relationships are, ultimately, highly fragile, a circumstance that most blame on the fundamental nature of vampires as predators and mortals as prey, but that the Daughters say is merely one more sign that the world is out of joint.

THE BEAST

The Beast is not a product of patriarchy; it is a natural part of the Kindred condition. The Beast's rage against the Man, however, is. The Daughters believe that the secret is plain for those who can see. As long as the Beast is opposed by the Man, it rages and seeks its freedom. Once it is faced with the Woman, it becomes calm, docile and a boon rather than a burden.

The Daughters say that those who have truly become the Woman never enter frenzy, but that they can draw on the power of the Beast at will, becoming stronger and indomitable. If a Kindred does enter frenzy, then, this is a sign that she has yet to reach the natural state of all Kindred.

A few high priestesses claim to have reached this state, but most Daughters still believe that they have some way to go, and put themselves through blood purification after they frenzy. Many women among the Daughters believe that it is impossible for men to fully transform the Man into the Woman, at least in the current state of society, and that their progress is slow. This is often cited as another reason for not allowing men in leadership positions: the passions of their Beasts would distract them and prevent them from deciding wisely.

THE EMBRACE

The creation of childer is an important part of the Goddess's plan for Kindred, and therefore not something that should be done lightly. Just as only women can give birth, so only women should sire new Kindred. Many Daughters believe that the Embrace should parallel pregnancy, with the future Kindred first made a ghoul,

and kept that way for nine months, meditating in darkness on her role in future service of the Goddess. Where this faction has some power, its members build special birthing temples, symbolic wombs where the chosen can be prepared for the Embrace.

As a concession to political necessity, most Daughters seek permission from the Prince before beginning the process of the Embrace. However, they believe that the decision is actually made by the Goddess, and they follow her guidance in selecting their childer. If the Daughters believe that the Goddess has actually commanded them to Embrace someone, rather than simply granting them permission, they often carry out their plan even if refused permission. This almost invariably makes it necessary to flee the city.

Daughters only Embrace those who are ready to serve the Goddess in a new capacity. The Requiem is neither a curse nor a blessing; it is merely another essential role in the Goddess's plan. Thus, the criteria have nothing to do with virtue or vice, and everything to do with being ready to play a particular role. As a result, the overwhelming majority of Kindred Embraced into the faction are priestesses in Goddess religions, and a substantial majority are past menopause, making them more attuned to the Crone even before Embrace.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE SANCTIFIED

While the Daughters oppose patriarchy in all its forms, they reserve particular venom for Christianity and its Kindred shadow, the Lancea Sanctum. The Christian persecution of Goddess-worshippers and the Sanctified's persecution of the Acolytes are held up as examples of the worst crimes that patriarchy is capable of.

This means that the Daughters must keep a low profile in most domains, where the Lancea Sanctum holds significant power. Even there, they often mount guerrilla campaigns against the Sanctified, and against mortal churches. Where the Circle holds power, the Daughters agitate to have the Lancea Sanctum outlawed completely, and use any excuse or none to hunt down and burn, at the stake, its members.

DISSENT

There is very little dissent within the Daughters of the Goddess. The high priestesses are vigilant for signs that their followers are falling away from the true path back to a tolerant, peaceful, egalitarian society, and use any means necessary to set them back upon it.

There is a certain amount of variation among domains, as is to be expected, but this variation is more cosmetic than for most factions.

In part, of course, this is a matter of definition; Kindred who do not hold these beliefs do not count as part of the faction. There are, however, a

substantial number who do hold these beliefs, and the leaders of the faction put a strong emphasis on what, for want of a better word, can be called "orthodoxy."

RITUALS

The basic form of the rituals of the Daughters is fixed, described in the *Book of Night*, a text said to have been passed down hidden Kindred lineages for millennia. High priestesses are encouraged to improvise within that, however, so the details of the performance vary a great deal from one domain to another.

CRÚAC RITUALS

Daughters believe that the Vitae spent to power Crúac is symbolically the same as menstrual blood, and thus should be drawn from the same part of the body. The favored ritual tool for these purposes is a narrow dagger.

Oak Kings are expected to castrate themselves, inflicting a single point of lethal damage, to draw the blood.

ESBATS

Esbats are monthly, held on the night of the new moon, when the sky is darkest. The Daughters gather, and recite portions of the Liturgy of the Crone. The Daughters also have liturgies calling on the Maiden and the Mother, and recite portions of these as well, but the Crone dominates the proceedings.

A small majority of Daughters gather naked ("sky-clad") for esbats, but this and the brief liturgies to the Maiden and Mother are the only differences from the stereotypical Acolyte gathering. Daughters sounding out new recruits from within the Circle normally invite them to an esbat first.

SABBATS

Sabbats are holier than esbats, and are normally held twice a year, at Samhain and the Winter Solstice. The Samhain Sabbat is all but identical to the celebration found across the covenant, and Daughters are particularly enthusiastic in their celebration at this time. A large majority feel that nudity is appropriate for this holy event, although a few still demur.

The Daughters' version of the Winnowing is their holiest Sabbat. If there are only one or two Daughters in a domain, they hold it on the same day as the Winnowing, but if there are enough of them to hold a ceremony by themselves it is always held on the Winter Solstice. The purpose of the ceremony matches that of the Winnowing: Daughters contemplate their acts of creation

and destruction over the year. Virtually all Daughters agree that nudity is the only garb holy enough for this night, and the ritual must take place outside, in a place surrounded by trees.

A mortal man is brought, stripped and bound, and the Daughters gather round him. Instead of spilling their Vitae on the ground, they force him to drink it. When all have done so, they contemplate in silence. Some listen for messages from the Goddess in the screams, pleas or moans of the bound man.

At a moment chosen by the high priestess, the man is released from his bonds and told to run. He is given a few moments' lead before the Kindred pounce on him and tear him limb from limb. The celebrants are forbidden to drink his blood; instead, it must be allowed to soak into the ground.

The police normally find the dismembered body, but there is nothing to tie the crime to vampires, and so the risk to the Masquerade is judged to be slight.

In principle, the Daughters also celebrate Sabbats on the other quarter days. However, their doctrine requires that these Sabbats be led by living priestesses. There are rumors of covens that have recruited ghouls to serve as their priestesses for these rites, but if true, this is quite rare, as the priestess should really be a true mortal. Most Daughters believe that these Sabbats can only be celebrated properly once Kindred and mortals are once more united in front of the Goddess.

THE KING OF THE OAK

The King of the Oak is a male Kindred who plays an essential role in the celebration of the festivals, albeit one secondary to the high priestess. He is the only man allowed to learn Crúac, but he is entitled to be taught any rituals that a Daughter knows.

Any male Kindred may volunteer for the position, but it is normally restricted to neonates; the king is a young man, relying on the Crone for wisdom and power. The high priestess has absolute discretion to accept or reject a volunteer. Members of other covenants may take the position, but this means joining the Circle. This draws disapproval, but few covenant elders bother to take action.

This is because the King of the Oak reigns for a limited time. At some ceremony, which may be the day after he takes the position or may come decades later, the high priestess declares that his reign has ended. Traditionally, she makes the declaration in his presence, and the presence of other Acolytes, at a time when the King is fully free to move. Once the declaration is made, the other Acolytes must hunt down and destroy the King. It is said that this Final Death should be by diablerie, but the Daughters deny this every time it is brought up.

While the mortal victim of the Winnowing never escapes, the King of the Oak very occasionally does.

Kings who manage to conceal their true power from the Acolytes have a chance to get away, and move to a different city. Normally, however, the king is vastly outnumbered by more powerful Kindred, and so faces Final Death. Most Kings of the Oak are devout male followers of the Goddess; such Kindred may not even try to run.

A few are occult scholars seeking access to Crúac; they always run, but escape is vanishingly rare.

The Daughters point to the central role of the King of the Oak as evidence that men are not inferior to women in their beliefs. Many male Kindred are unconvinced.



Not all Acolytes believe that there is a Crone who created the Kindred. Some believe that the teachings of the Circle capture very important truths about the Kindred condition and the proper relationship between vampires and the living, but that the legends expressing those are mere metaphors.

The Semioticians believe that Crúac is a real power, and really works. It also really works for them; they can perform the rituals just as effectively as those who truly believe in the literal existence of the Crone. This belief guarantees the Semioticians' acceptance within the covenant as a whole, although their relationship with individual Hierarchs may be strained, or even hostile.

The Semioticians themselves have no intention of leaving the Circle. While they think that the legends are only metaphors, they think that they are the right metaphors. They would not even consider joining the Lancea Sanctum, and feel that the Carthians and Invictus are missing something important. Many Semioticians do, however, find the teachings of the Ordo Dracul attractive, as discussed below.

MYTH AND LEGEND

The faction has no foundation myth. Or, from a different perspective, it has every foundation myth current in the covenant. The members of this faction are fascinated by the legends told in the covenant, and interested in learning as many of them as possible.

This fascination arises directly from their conviction that the legends are not literally true. If a vampire believes that the story of Amaterasu is literally true, there is no need to learn the other legends, because they are merely distorted versions of the facts. On the other hand, if a vampire believes that all legends are equally metaphors, she has a good reason to learn as many as possible. Every metaphor casts a different light on the hidden truth, and the more legends you know, the deeper your understanding.

This attitude also breeds a great deal of respect for the legends. The Semioticians do *not* see the covenant's

myths as stories told for their entertainment value. Rather, they are the expression of profound insights into the vampiric condition. Most believe that it is impossible to express those insights in simple, straightforward language, and that myth is the only option. A few believe that a simple exposition may be possible, but it is certainly extremely difficult, and learning as many myths as possible is a vital first step.

Either way, a myth expresses wisdom, and those who understand it have a particular kind of wisdom lacked by those who do not. Thus, Semioticians genuinely believe that they are taught wisdom by the Kindred from whom the Semioticians learn legends they do not believe. They never mock, never criticize, never point out logical flaws. Metaphors, after all, may gain even more power from being logically incoherent.

One notable scholar of the faction has said that "the Embrace sounds like the night changing its mind" is a powerful metaphor, one in which many Kindred see a deep truth, despite the facts that changing your mind is not the sort of thing that makes a sound and that the night has no mind to change. Compared to that, a legend that has a deity doing an implausible number of things in one night is quite reasonable, and thus can carry an equal truth.

This respectful attitude means that many priests are willing to teach the Semioticians. Many hope that the misguided Kindred will see the literal truth of their legends, but even if they do not there is no loss in planting the seeds of truth in the mind of a respectful student.

Similarly, the Semioticians are prepared to go through painful initiations in order to learn new myths. They believe that tribulation literally brings enlightenment, and that there is enlightenment to be found in the knowledge of myths, particularly secret ones. In almost all cases, a Semiotician refuses to teach a secret myth to a vampire who has not undergone the initiation; the wisdom contained in it can only be properly understood by those who have undergone the requisite trials.

HISTORY

Members of this faction claim that it has been around since the earliest nights. A few even claim that the first vampire created by the Crone knew that she was only a metaphor; others are unsure whether this is a joke, or a saying containing deep wisdom within the apparent paradox.

Most other Acolytes with an interest in history say that this faction dates from the late 18th century, and from the influence of the human Enlightenment on Kindred thought. As humans started to compare and deconstruct the myths of various cultures, some Kindred also became aware of similarities that suggested the myths could not be independent, combined with conflicts that meant they could not all be true.

While most decided that their legends were true, a few felt that the comparative method was the way to true wisdom. This faction has never been a large one within the Circle, although it has grown in recent nights as the covenant has been able to take a larger part in Kindred politics.

The Semioticians do, however, have rather better contact among their members than most factions. Correspondence, by letter, is the oldest unique tradition. Because the letters appear as disquisitions on comparative mythology, there is no threat to the Masquerade should they fall into human hands. By comparing versions of myths in different places, and sharing their thoughts about the deeper meanings, the Kindred of this faction hope to deepen their own wisdom further.

CORRESPONDENCE

A member of this faction should take one dot of the Contacts Merit to represent the Kindred with whom he corresponds regularly. These letters rarely contain any information about Kindred politics, and such information would rarely be of use, but it does provide the vampire with friendly contacts in other cities.

A Semiotician without the Contacts dot is either still building a correspondence network, or deliberately isolating himself from the rest of his faction for some reason.

UTES AND RITUALS

As would be expected, the Semioticians take rituals from many different traditions.

As with the myths and legends, the Semioticians do not believe that the rituals have a literal effect. Nevertheless, they do believe that rituals have an effect, and a powerful one, derived from the influence of the rite on the psychology of the Kindred involved. That effect, the Semioticians hold, is important if Kindred are to deal with the strains of the Requiem, and can only be gained if the rite is performed with due ceremony and reverence.

Individual Semioticians choose the rites they like the best. This preference may be aesthetic, cultural or purely a matter of familiarity. Some Semioticians take all of their rites from a single tradition, believing that the whole is then greater than the sum of its parts, and that picking and choosing means losing something vital. Others believe that different traditions have different strengths, and that by picking and choosing you can assemble a set of rituals far more effective than any single tradition.

Others argue that, as every Kindred is different, the most effective rites are also different from one vampire to the next. These Semioticians try out many different rites, generally over a period of some years, testing to see which speak most clearly to them. Some of these vampires go so far as to design their own rituals.

Opinions in the faction are divided over this practice, and it is a popular topic of debate when members gather. On the one hand, if the rites are only metaphors, creating new metaphors should be possible. Thus, there is nothing wrong with doing this in principle. On the other hand, if the rites encode great wisdom, the creator of a new rite had better have that wisdom to encode. Some Semioticians feel that creating your own rites is arrogant, and a sign that you lack the necessary wisdom. Others point out, reasonably, that someone had to do it.

In general, a neonate creating his own rites is snubbed by other members of the faction, and effectively cast out. A neonate cannot have enough understanding of the Requiem to create an effective ritual. On the other hand, rituals created by elders are accepted by most members as likely to have something of value. A few elders go so far as to create a whole system of legends and rituals based on their own understanding of the Requiem, and then publish the system to the rest of the faction. This is not the same as creating a cult, as none of these elders expect many, if any, other Semioticians to adopt the system wholesale.

Ancillae often experiment with creating rituals, and most members believe that is acceptable, possibly even necessary. An ancilla who shows great wisdom and understanding of the Requiem may even be asked to explain his ritual to others, and this is often an early sign that the faction, at least, has begun to regard someone as an elder.



Whatever the pattern of rituals a Kindred adopts, the Semioticians' attitude to their rituals is somewhat different from that of those who believe that they have literal power. Because there is no external force supporting the ritual, most Semioticians aim for a double effect in performance: the inward effect of the ritual itself and a purely practical effect on the world.

As one example, it is almost universal for Semioticians to feed as part of a ritual that sacrifices blood. They rarely hunt in a non-ritual manner, as they feel that they might as well get the benefits of the ritual as well as the benefits of blood. Acolytes in other traditions rarely apply the rituals so universally, feeling that it is inappropriate to extend the sacred everywhere.

Similarly, in a ritual that requires a sacrifice of objects, a Semiotician might sacrifice items stolen from an enemy. That meets the requirement of sacrificing something that would be valuable to the Kindred, but serves to weaken an enemy at least as much as it weakens the sacrificer.

Some of the more literal believers in the Circle hold that this attitude cheapens, or even profanes, the rituals. Most Semioticians argue that this is the point when it is important to remember that the rituals are only metaphors; weakening yourself for a metaphorical gain is foolish, and should be avoided.

CRÚAC

Crúac fascinates the Semioticians, because it obviously has literal power. Almost every member of the faction knows some Crúac, and all want to learn. Many of them become Crúac theorists, an attitude that marks them out within the covenant.

Most ritualists perform the ritual exactly as they were taught, not worrying about the underlying mechanisms, and simply accepting the power as a gift from the Crone. Semioticians want to understand what makes Crúac different. They are often less interested in the simple power.

Thus, a Semiotician might choose to learn a single Crúac ritual with a clear effect, such as Rigor Mortis. He then varies the actions he takes to cast it, testing each combination several times as he tries to work out what is necessary. The goal is to find out what, precisely, is necessary to make the ritual work.

This research has produced results that confuse the issue further. Some Semioticians have created Crúac rites that work only for themselves, although the effects match commonly known rituals. Other Semioticians have created two ways of performing the same rite that have absolutely nothing in common apart from the intent of the Kindred performing the ritual. It is, however, well-known that the intent of the Kindred is not sufficient to turn any arbitrary performance into an effective Crúac ritual.

Others learn as many rites as they can, in the hope of finding some common factor that will allow them to create new rituals at will. This line of research has been a

complete failure; while a few Kindred have learned new Crúac rituals, this has never been as a result of their results and study. The only bright point is that engaging in this research does seem to make a Kindred more sensitive to the inspirations that grant knowledge of new rituals.

PLAYING WITH BLOOD

Changing Crúac rituals is not without its risks. In general, changing any aspect of the performance inflicts penalty dice, and the size of the penalty is potentially unlimited. In many cases, the penalty is as large as it needs to be to reduce the Kindred to a chance die.

However, if a revised ritual succeeds, the ritual can be performed that way without penalty in the future. If, on the other hand, the revised ritual fails, then repeating that method automatically fails.

A ritualist must know a Crúac ritual before experimenting with it in this way. It is not possible to learn new rituals by random trials, only to discover new ways to perform rituals already known.

PHILOSOPHY

The Semioticians throw themselves wholeheartedly into the philosophy of the Circle. The twin principles of tribulation and creation are not metaphors; they are what all the rituals, myths and legends are metaphors for.

The Semioticians place a particularly strong rhetorical emphasis on the creation of new metaphors, as these bring increased wisdom to the Kindred and to others. However, as noted earlier, the Semioticians are much more cautious about this in practice, as a Kindred must have wisdom before he can impart wisdom. Thus, Semioticians produce art, tend gardens and guide Crucibles, just as other members of the Circle do.

The Semioticians also place great value on tribulation. Tribulation brings enlightenment, and enlightenment allows a vampire to create his own metaphors, bringing greater understanding and greater power. This is partly manifest in the Semioticians' willingness to suffer through the initiation rites of multiple sub-cults within the covenant in order to learn new metaphors. Many risk everything for the chance at greater knowledge.

This enthusiasm for the Circle's core beliefs is another important reason why the group is generally accepted. The Semioticians very obviously *are* Acolytes, even if their beliefs are a bit strange.

SPIRITS

Most Semioticians believe that talk of spirits is simply another set of metaphors for the vampiric condition. Semioticians are just as keen to learn such legends as any other.

A few know that spirits really exist. This is often a result of learning, and performing, rites to interact with spirits in some way. Sometimes, this leads to the vampire accepting the literal truth of one set of legends, or deciding that there must be a true set and setting out to find it.

Others argue that the fact that spirits exist doesn't stop them from being metaphors, and doesn't stop the metaphor from being the most important thing.

ROLE

The Semioticians have come to play a very important role within the covenant. They are its internal diplomats and ambassadors, linking together groups with very different specific beliefs about the Crone and keeping the whole covenant unified.

Many Acolytes find it difficult to deal with other Acolytes who have obviously wrong beliefs. They want to educate them, or occasionally exterminate them. The Semioticians have no such problem; they are willing

to learn from anyone, and treat everyone with respect. Covenant elders who know, intellectually, that the covenant should stay together as a unified force, often entrust Semioticians with the task of making sure that there is some co-ordination.

Thus, Semioticians often find themselves sent as ambassadors to different cities. While they are, fundamentally, no more willing to travel than other Kindred, many have contacts in the other city already, and the opportunity to learn new myths, legends and rites is a powerful draw. As a result, Semioticians are more likely than most Acolytes to volunteer for the job.

In recent times, the covenant elders have also come to realize that the Semioticians make good ambassadors to the other covenants, as well. An ambassador who can say, with perfect honesty, that he doesn't believe in some sort of dark spirit that created all the Kindred often sounds rather less threatening to a largely secular Carthian. Even when dealing with the Sanctified, the Semioticians are less likely to feel that they have to get into a theological debate.

AN ACOLYTE GHOUL FAMILY

BELLSMEADE

SOLSTICE IS COMING AGAIN. UNLOCK THE DOORS.

High up in the mountains is a vast hotel, a ski resort abandoned for nearly 60 years. The roads leading to it are mud-slick, slushy and closed down. Trees have fallen upon walls. Ivy and thorn tangles grow up and into the cracked walls, even during the harshest winters. Park rangers from the nearby wild preserve know the place is haunted and stay far away. Those who risk going near see things in the windows: faces staring out, beasts stalking the empty halls, blood streaking the glass. Others suggest that it's not haunted at all, but is the place of awful Satanic worship — a temple used for demonic debauchery a few times a year.

In a way, they're right. The Bellsmeade Hotel is not abandoned, as many assume. It has, in fact, been occupied always, even since the time it closed its doors to the public. Its residents are ghouls — blood-bred servants to a vampire called Bartholomew Bellsmeade. This ghoulish family no longer recognizes its own family name, accepting instead the vampire's surname of Bellsmeade. But he calls them by another name: his pigs.

They exist to serve him. Once upon a time, he loved them — and in a way, he still does. But he no longer loves them as a father, and instead adores them as a god. He knows that he is divine, and they are his servants upon this mortal plane. Several times a year — during solstices and equinoxes — Bartholomew returns to the hotel with his “friends.” For a week each time, he acts as a god in his kingdom, demanding blood, debasing the bodies of the ghoulish servants, committing upon them bizarre sorceries (old favorites and new tricks). But the ghouls are not without their rewards. Not only does he leave them enough of his own Vitae to keep them strong and powerful until his next visit, but he also brings them all the things they love: exquisite chocolates, rare books, unusual cuts of delicious meat. And like that, he's gone, leaving rewards in his wake until next he returns to celebrate his divinity upon his pigs.

Nicknames: Piglets, Pigs

Clans: Bartholomew is a Ventrue, and so the members of the ghoulish family that inhabits the hotel are all of that

clan. From time to time, the ghouls escape the hotel and can then enter the service of a vampire from any clan. From time to time, Bartholomew also gifts one of his allies with a ghoul from the Bellsmeade stock.

Covenants: Bartholomew's Pigs belong to the Circle of the Crone *and* to the Invictus. Bartholomew belongs to both covenants. Not only is he a rich and productive member of the First Estate, but he also believes himself a god among Kindred. He demands pagan worship and even calls himself a "Crone." He has little interest in existing gods or myths, preferring instead to be a *new* god at the center of *new* legends. Still, he is capable in Crúac and delights in the creation of new ghouls within this family. He gladly considers himself a member — a paragon, even — of both covenants, and so his Piglets belong to both as well. Most ghouls who escape (or are gifted) often end up as the prized servants of other Acolytes, largely because they are familiar with the nature of dire worship.

Appearance: The Bellsmeade ghouls dress as they wish most days out of the year, for their regnant brings them fashions (and fashion magazines) when he visits. Of course, most of the styles are five or 10 years out of date. Some are too debased and feral to care about fashions, however — those ghouls tend to be filthy, foul creatures lurking in the margins of the 300+ rooms of the derelict hotel.

Havens: The Pigs call only one place home: the Bellsmeade Hotel. It is a monstrous resort, far too large for the small family that resides within. It sits nestled deep in the mountains, barely accessible. A few ghouls have escaped from Bartholomew's service over the years — these ghouls are free to have havens wherever.

Strengths: The Bellsmeade ghouls are not the only residents of the hotel, actually. Bartholomew has a great "love" of beasts, and also allows enthralled animals to walk the halls and grounds of the resort. As such, his Pigs must become somewhat proficient at dealing with these creatures. Being a Bellsmeade ghoul affords the individual an automatic dot in Animalism, free.

Weaknesses: Each ghoul has one of the following mild derangements automatically: Fixation, Inferiority Complex or Irrationality. If the character already possesses one at mild, it is upgraded to the severe version.

Organization: Within the Bellsmeade ghouls, the highest authority is Nehemiah, the first ghoul of the lineage. Nehemiah looks nearly like a child in his early teens, but he has the mental capabilities of someone far older (though he still possesses some immature sensibilities, and acts upon them more often than the other ghouls might prefer). While some wish for him to suffer an unfortunate accident (thus ending his capricious ways), Nehemiah remains the favorite of Bartholomew; the vampire calls him his "Favored Piggy." While the Ventrue is away from the hotel for those long periods of

time, Nehemiah is the one who leads the cult of ghouls in worship of the vampire.

The rest of the family breaks down, quite literally, as a family. Fathers and mothers rule over their children, who in turn have nobody to rule over except the animals.

Concepts: Adoring worshipper, animal keeper, escapee, hateful slave, hermit, the madman of Room 243

HISTORY

The Bellsmeade Hotel was once a popular resort frequented by only the wealthiest moguls and stars, all of whom came to the hotel for the luxuries that such a massive chalet could afford. The staff was renowned for its service; each member was said to be utterly gracious, bending over backward to serve the hotel's patrons. The fall of the hotel — particularly that of its staff and owner, Bartholomew Bellsmeade — would come from a single dark night during a terrible blizzard.

BELLSMEADE'S BECOMING

The way Bellsmeade tells it, he wasn't Embraced. He's wrong, of course, but his story isn't a lie in his mind. He woke up at the stroke of midnight as the guests in the hotel lay sleeping, and he found himself visited by the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. The walls grew dark with blood, and outside he watched the black sky turn bright with shimmering lights, like those of the borealis. It was, at this point, he claims a "brilliant madness" overtook him, and he leapt upon his visitor, ravishing her sexually — and with his teeth. He gnashed at her flesh and drank her blood, and then cites what he calls his "becoming." It was then, he claims, he became a god.

His opinion of that night was that he was visited by a goddess. And, instead of making the choice to become her consort, he chose to destroy her and take her power. Bellsmeade — always an eccentric man, privy to great wealth and odd peccadilloes — felt that her visitation was a trial. A trial that he passed.

The reality remains unclear. Was he visited by a vampire patron who Embraced him? Did she leave him there, or was he strong enough to be able to attack her in return, consuming her after the Embrace? Bellsmeade's Requiem following was untrained, untested and certainly confused. He had (as he felt was his due) been sleeping with a number of the hotel staff, and even impregnated one of them. He went to his mistress, Annalise, and tried to grant her some measure of godliness by feeding her his blood.

It seemed to work, but not on the same scale that was given to him. And so, he did it to his other favored staffers, granting them a portion of his power in return for promises of love and satiety.

Annalise had her child despite her supernatural condition. The child — barely surviving a bloody birth

— seemed special, somehow. Bartholomew knew that he had created this child, and named him Nehemiah.

MADNESS AND EXILE

Bartholomew's descent into madness was coupled with the madness of his staff. Few could handle the burden of untested supernatural power, and it slowly winnowed their sanity. The conditions at the hotel dwindled, and it wasn't long before people simply stopped coming. The hotel closed its doors a little more than a year after Bellsmeade's Embrace.

He did not let his "family" go, however — he locked the doors and closed the gates at the end of the road, but they were not free to leave. They had a great deal of food — freezers full of it, easily enough to support the staff of two dozen — and plenty of wood to burn in the fireplaces. Curiously, despite his provision to remain, Bellsmeade did not stay — sometime a year or so later, he disappeared, leaving a note behind that said he would return, and his family was to wait for him. Most of them waited. Those who did not fled, never to be heard from again.

RETURN

How Bellsmeade found civilization remains unclear. Furthermore, how he found other *vampires* is equally uncertain. Was his wealth a beacon that attracted the Invictus? Did his presupposed godhood lead him to activities fracturing the Masquerade? Or, as he claims, was he lead by a series of visions and portents?

Whatever the case, he did find others. His money and personality were enough to lure in weaker Kindred — and over time he developed a small following of sycophants. He played with the vampires of the First Estate, enjoying the finer things in unlife, but he also swayed the local Acolytes, selling them a story about how the old gods are dead and how they, the vampires, are the *new* gods. He led his new friends to his old domain, the hotel, where his ghoule family awaited.

SOCIETY AND CULTURE

The ghoul family dwelling in the Bellsmeade has swollen during the last 50 years. Three generations of isolated thralls await the constant return and departure of their regnant, Bartholomew.

SOLSTICES AND EQUINOXES

Bartholomew returns every season for a week. He brings with him no fewer than five other vampires, who come to feast upon the

ghouls and treat them as servants and slaves. The vampires demand worship and force the ghouls to perform in humiliating rituals, even performing blood sorcery upon their kept bodies. In return, the family members get whatever they want in terms of food, clothing or other luxuries. Provided they grant these "new gods" worship, they are free to enjoy whatever riches and treats they desire.

MASKS

One of the odd provisions of Bartholomew's self-centered "religion" is that he and his Kindred cohorts wear animal masks during most rituals. Bartholomew's mask is a vicious pig face, an exaggerated rubber disguise with a stumpy snout and jutting tusks. Whether this is just a vain curiosity on his part or whether he feels that he is some kind of Lord of the Swine (he *does* call his family "pigs," after all) is not something he'll explain.

BEASTS

One of Bartholomew's odd fascination is with animals. He allows various creatures both ghoul and otherwise to roam the grounds freely, both indoors and out. The family is expected to take care of them and share space with them — the animals are treated almost as family themselves. Most of the animals are somewhat expected: cats, dogs, rats and birds. A few unusual specimens do wander the property, however. Some have seen a bear or two, and a herd of elk bed out back. A den of foxes lives in the upper floors of the building, and owls nest in the building's attic.

Some of the ghouls (his "prized" ones) know that he has stranger interests these days. Bartholomew is said to know some grotesque amalgamation of Crúac and Animalism, and has lately been using it upon his Piglets. His intention — which he has been vocal about to some of the ghouls — is to cross-breed a new lineage, a clan of enthralled beast-men, half-animal, half-human. His attempts have been abortive thus far, but progress has been made.



THE ASNÂM

DON'T TAKE SOMEONE LIGHTLY WHEN HE REFERS TO HER FOLLOWERS AS HER "PRIESTS."
EITHER SHE'S DELUSIONAL AND THINKS SHE'S A GODDESS...
OR SHE'S NOT DELUSIONAL.

The founder of the Asnâm bloodline was an exceptionally bold and cruel Arab vampire named Atiqua Azad. In life he was renowned for his depraved indifference to human suffering, an asset that made him extremely rich as an Arab slave trader in the late 1400s. The Embrace only perfected a nature that was already so predatory and arrogant that its actions seemed beyond sanity to ordinary people.

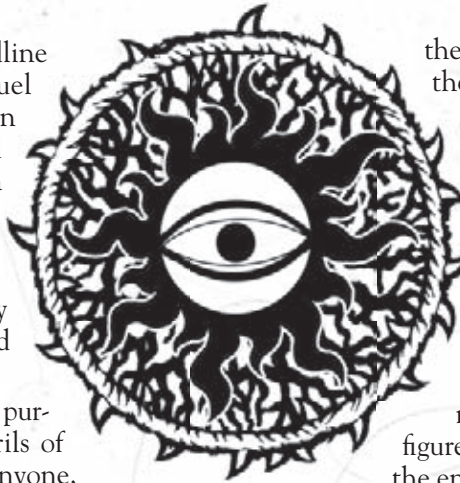
As a vampire, Azad continued to pursue the slave trade despite the perils of the Middle Passage. Never safe for anyone, the seafaring dangers of shipwreck or storm were doubled for one of the Kindred race. Whatever his personality, it's a testament to Azad's skill and courage that he succeeded as a slaver for more than 300 years.

In fact, Azad not only sold slaves to François Lelande but gouged him severely on the price. It was the first time Lelande was exposed to Majesty.

By the dawn of the 19th century, Azad stopped crossing the Atlantic. He'd finally overplayed his luck and survived a storm only by the slenderest of margins. When he made it back to North Africa he swore to never set foot in the Americas again. But without the excitement of his perilous journeys, Azad became restless. At that time, he was initiated into the Circle of the Crone.

The name of Azad's mentor is a secret held tight by his bloodline (or perhaps the secret is that they themselves do not know). Clearly, Azad was taught by someone who believed Kindred were nothing less than agents of an inhuman hierarchy, existing at on a rarefied plane above and beyond the confines of mere mortal experience. The idea that he was a demon given flesh, who could rise in time to the rank of a fallen god, was appealing to Azad's ego and certainly explained a lot about his experience in the Requiem. With his wanderlust fired by his a philosophy, Azad set off to the East, eventually arriving in Tibet.

To understand what happened to Atiqua Azad in Tibet, and how he came to found a bloodline known as



the Asnâm, it's important to understand the complex history of Tibetan religion. Specifically, one needs to understand Palden Lhamo.

("Asnâm" is the plural form of the Arabic word "Sanam." It means "idol," and its connotations of worship are well suited to the children of Atiqua Azad.)

Palden Lhamo was at one time a pagan goddess of the native, animist religion of Tibet. A fearsome three-eyed figure of wrath, her story says she resisted the encroachment of Buddhist thought from India until the eighth-century reign of King Trisong Detsen. King Detsen's guru, Shantarakshita, called upon a great *tantrika* named Padmasambhava. Known as "the Lotus Born," Padmasambhava came to Tibet, persuaded the native deities to submit themselves to the Buddha and founded a great monastery that stands to this day. Palden Lhamo rejected her old ways so thoroughly that her former husband, the Cannibal King of Sri Lanka, attempted to kill her but only hit her mount in the hindquarters with an arrow.

From a Kindred perspective, there are interesting elements to this story even before a prideful interloper arrives all the way from far Araby. First off, the great Lotus Born teacher started his career in a decidedly inauspicious fashion: he was exiled for murder. Fleeing to the charnel fields where corpses were burned, he became enlightened by the visceral evidence that the things of life were meaningless. Educated by the demons there, he returned as a Buddhist emissary. As one might expect, the Acolytes have a different viewpoint of a murderer who was sent to a realm of the dead, returning with a supernatural education.

As for Palden Lhamo, her husband consumed the living, and most illustrations of the goddess show her doing the same thing. (Some Gangrel insist that because she was depicted riding a type of wild mule known to be untrainable, Palden Lhamo must have known the secrets of Animalism.) Despite her role as protectress of the pacifist Dalai Lama, paintings of Palden Lhamo show

her covered with blood, ashes and corpse fat, gnawing dead bodies and wearing a wreath of severed heads and an apron of bones.

It may indeed have been her gruesome images that caught Atiqua Azad's attention. Certainly, by the time of his disappearance in 1904, he had a huge collection of tapestries and statues of her. But at the time of his journey (in 1822), he just wanted to find out what possible incentives could have led a radiant blood goddess to meekly confine herself to what he called "the water-hearted cowardice of Buddhism."

It is certain that Atiqua Azad entered a Tibetan mountain temple in 1822, and that when he emerged he went on to found the Asnâm bloodline. It's less clear exactly what he did in there.

Atiqua himself claimed that he confronted the monks, debated them for a few hours and, as the night wore on, got bored and started killing them. Then the goddess possessed the head nun there and fought him for a while. The fight degenerated into a theological discussion (which he claimed to have copied down word for word, but if he did, no one in his bloodline knows where that text is now). After that stalemated, they fought again. This time he killed her and devoured her purified, immortal, inhuman soul, giving him the power to create his own bloodline.

That version was the stock version for some time — after all, Azad was awake and aware and a 400-year-old monster. But after he dropped out of the scene (Dead? Torpid? Transcended into Golconda? No one's sure), another story started making the rounds. In this version, he still fights against and talks with the goddess, but instead of killing her, he convinces her to renounce Buddhism and become pure evil again. His ability to sire the Asnâm is his reward for being her first servant.

That's the story you get from the breakaway branch of the Sanam family, who worship their reconstituted cannibal queen version of the goddess. There's a third version of the story wherein

she whips him like dog, drives him out of the temple and remains the Dalai Lama's unsullied protectress. That story has no explanation for how he came to found his bloodline, but most Asnâm who've gone to Tibet haven't come back. The two who did make it out wouldn't talk about what chased them away, except to say that whatever it was, it worshipped the *Buddhist Palden Lhamo*, knew all about the bloodline and was mad as fucking hell.

Parent Clan: Daeva

Nickname: Idols

Covenant: The Circle of the Crone holds about 60% of the Asnâm, since they explicitly believe themselves to be gods and the Circle is the covenant in which that belief fits most smoothly. Another 10% are Invictus, typically because the Asnâm are in domains where the Invictus is dominant and where the usual Invictus/Lancea Sanctum bond is weak. (The Lancea Sanctum despises the Asnâm on principle.) The Carthians have about as many as the Invictus, since the Movement is often religiously tolerant and provides easy access to mortals for the Asnâm to enslave. Twenty percent or so are unbound, for those Asnâm who cannot abide any authority beyond their own.

The Ordo Dracul has yet to recruit a Sanam for two reasons. First, few Asnâm see any need to escape or improve upon their situation. Second, no Asnâm can tolerate being anyone's slave.

Appearance: About half the Asnâm are of Middle Eastern descent, with the remainder being spread evenly across racial types. Most Asnâm are good-looking, and those who aren't often possess such self-confidence that they seem gorgeous even if they aren't. When dealing with non-Acolytes and mortals outside their cults, Asnâm dress with exquisite (and expensive) taste. When they're directing the services that praise them, they traditionally array themselves as Palden Lhamo did. They smear their bodies with blood and the ash of corpses, they wear snake and tiger skins. A sun tattoo or drawing on the navel often accompanies a moon headdress, and a third eye painted (or, again, tattooed) on the forehead



is not uncommon. They ride a mule into services, on a saddle made of human skin, and drink their Vitae from the skull of an infant born of an incestuous union.

Haven: There are stationary Asnâm and mobile ones, and the havens of each type are distinct. A stationary Sanam typically lives in some sort of temple dedicated to herself, complete with pews, altar and sacred art depicting the triumphs of her Requiem. (Often these triumphs are exaggerated to mythic levels, or depicted in highly symbolic form. If she overcame a wealthy Invictus rival who had connections to the drug trade, her home might feature a tapestry showing her trampling the head of a vampire who's bleeding and vomiting dollar bills, while drug traffickers flee in terror, shoot at her and miss, are devoured or are consumed by the flames of her wrath. If the tapestry were typical of Asnâm art styles, the defeated rival would be about two-thirds as tall as the Sanam, while the fleeing or dying drug thugs would be at 1/10th scale.)

Mobile Asnâm have to forego any ritual trappings they can't transport themselves (though some travel in semis in order to put on religious ceremonies that rival rock shows, complete with smoke machines, pyrotechnics, mood lighting and platforms that rise up from under the altar). The typical haven of a traveling Sanam is the home of a worshipper. Asnâm who make their expectations clear often get exceptional comfort and defenses from their followers, especially those who bear the triple yoke of Vinculum, blood addiction and Ralab.

Background: Asnâm almost always Embrace a worshipper who has a complete Vinculum. Childer are chosen for discretion, beauty, cunning and their ability to lure mortals. Where older Asnâm were Embraced as traveling merchants, confidence tricksters, sailors or explorers, the modern Sanam is likelier to leave a life as a performer, a journalist or an insurance investigator.

Bloodline Disciplines: Celerity, Majesty, Ralab, Vigor

Weakness: Once the bloodline manifests, the Sanam becomes a true egomaniac. He believes he is a demon incarnate in flesh, superior to all mere mortals, unsurpassed by any of the human riff-raff. Unlike megalomania, this is not a front for secret fears of failure. Far from fearing it, Asnâm can barely conceive of it. Twice per session, the

Storyteller is permitted to grossly underplay the difficulty of a task, leading a Sanam's player to think it's much easier than it is. If your Storyteller routinely tells you the Difficulty of a task, she's free to understate it before the roll. Asnâm controlled by the Storyteller should simply behave as if they believe themselves to be the most competent Kindred around. After all, they do.

If a Sanam develops derangements, Narcissism and Megalomania are good picks. A phobia is most likely to be seen as an "Achilles' heel" (or, for less educated Asnâm, "like kryptonite to Superman"). Inferiority Complexes or Hysteria are difficult to pull off, but can be managed if the Sanam ruthlessly overcompensates, conceals or denies the problem.

Organization: The Asnâm have a hierarchy, but they prefer the term "pantheon." Given their habit of Embracing only those who are already fervent (and blood-chained) believers in the mythos of Atiqua Azad, the cult's beliefs are pretty robust. Atiqua the Goddess Devourer was at the top of the heap, and is still venerated by many Asnâm. Beneath him are his childer (and he sired a remarkable four times at least) and under them the other Asnâm of the line. Subordinate to the Asnâm proper are those Daeva who have Asnâm sires but have not yet placed themselves at the center of cults and developed the powers of Ralab. Those Daeva are considered emissary demons and not charnel deities worthy of veneration. Under the Asnâm's Daeva agents are various ghouls, then mortal worshippers, then the vast human shit-heap that is ignorant of the faith and under them animals, insects and plants. (Not very far under, to be sure.)

Almost every Sanam worships his sire and is worshipped by his childer. The Sanam may teach their followers that there is a goddess greater than them and instruct them in their sire's name, but most don't. They figure their worshippers have enough to think about figuring out a way to keep one Sanam fed and happy.

Concepts: Smuggler, traveling revivalist preacher, blues musician, fortune-teller, itinerant beauty-parlor scissors sharpener, consulting psychic, self-esteem coach, New Age feel-good psychobabble merchant, skip chaser, plastic surgeon

CARNON

THE ROAD OF EXCESS LEADS TO THE PALACE OF WISDOM.

The Carnon were a mistake. The first of these so-called Horned Gods was a San Francisco vampire who had confused Wiccan writings and the monomythic analyses of cultural anthropologists with historical fact. Thinking he was fashioning himself in the timeless image of an ancient god, this young vampire invested his Vitae with his wild passion for earthly thrills and, in a night of bloody frenzy, transformed his blood forever.

He never learned that Wicca was a modern creation made from fragments of old pagan beliefs in an effort to honor ancient ways. Rather, that first Carnon went out of the world in a screaming, fiery mess after leading mortal witch-hunters on a brutal, three-night chase by car, on foot and across the Northern California hillsides.

Later Kindred claimed the first Carnon was an ignorant neopagan hippy driven to his mad destruction by tainted blood. But that misses the point. To the Carnon, it doesn't matter if he was wrong about Cernunnos and Pan and the scholastically correct origins of their image. What matters is that he survived for three nights with desperate, hateful hunters on his heels.

The first Carnon terrified his enemies and was part of a great hunt. Vampires will sing songs about it. That's what it's about for the Carnon.

The Horned Gods are the descendants of that first Carnon, who they worship not like a god, but like a rock star. His name is unknown, lost in the tangled grapevines of a million mistaken versions of his tale. Tonight, they call him John Carnon, and nobody cares that it's wrong.

John Carnon put himself through hell, heroin and the Requiem in an effort to create something new in the 1960s. He tried painting, music, poetry, but he always met with miserable failure. How exactly he came to be Embraced is unclear, but it happened somewhere between 1965 and 1967. Something about his tribulation — his self-destruction in pursuit of art — appealed to

some Acolyte witch who took his blood and gave him hers. That was the turning point.

John Carnon took to bloodsucking like he'd been born to do it. He looked like Jim Morrison and fucked like John Holmes. He hunted women and the LSD in their veins with animal intuition. He imagined that hunting would be his art.

Somewhere during this time, John Carnon fell in with an Acolyte coterie and became obsessed with neopagan symbolism. Based on just the barest threads of pagan belief and imagery, he chose to fashion himself and his Requiem on the virile and wild Horned God archetype. In 1970, all but starving and tripping on precious little laced Vitae, he fell into a terrible frenzy while in pursuit of a woman on the streets of San Francisco. According to bloodline legend, this frenzy lasted for six nights. On the seventh, John Carnon's blood had changed into the Carnon bloodline.

What, if anything, Carnon intended for his bloodline will never be known. In the weeks immediately following his transformation, John Carnon Embraced five childer in a flurry of insane excess. As William Blake wrote, and Jim Morrison lived, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." John Carnon spent an eternity in half a decade under this philosophy.

With his four childer left reeling in his wake, and his will broken by the expenditure of their creation, John Carnon degenerated into an almost animal state. Within a month his bloody attacks had attracted the attention of vampire-hunters from as far away as Portland and L.A. His legendary chase and destruction took place soon thereafter. John Carnon's Requiem was no more than five years long from end to end.

In his absence, left with only his confused legacy, the Carnon bloodline stood on the verge of extinction. But each of Carnon's four childer adopted their sire's bloodline within a few years and reinvented it for their own Requiems. In their hands, the bloodline was calmed and refined, if only in comparison to their frenzied founder.



Those first Carnon researched more of the Horned God myths that had inspired, however vaguely, their sire and strove to give their Requiems new meaning through its symbolism. But they also worked to make themselves more valuable to the covenant that had taken them in, the Circle of the Crone, and to express their rebellious attitudes against the first establishment they found to oppose: the Lancea Sanctum.

That first Carnon coterie used the Sanctified church as a landmark to position themselves on the Kindred philosophical spectrum. These young rockers would be religious radicals and the Lancea Sanctum would be their crusty adversaries. To the Carnon, the Sanctified were narrow-minded oppressors forcing a single, suffocating take on religion down the throats of the Kindred masses. Nevermind that this was hardly the case in San Francisco, where the Circle of the Crone had a robust membership. The Carnon wanted to protest, and they'd found their cause.

That gave the bloodline its appeal to other fiery neonates. The Carnon became pagan radicals with a rock 'n roll sensibility, and hedonistic new vampires ate it up. Kindred came to the Carnon (and, by extension, the Circle of the Crone) from the shadows of unaligned society and the ranks of the Carthians in startling numbers. This gave the bloodline new credence in the eyes of the local Hierophant. At least for a time.

The Carnon cult of personality eventually imploded when, in the tradition of their sire, those first four childer Embraced too much too soon and left themselves weakened to the sway of the Beast. None of them went out as spectacularly as their sire, but it seems that none of them survived to 1980.

Such is the tradition of the Carnon. Few of these Horned Gods enjoy long Requiems. Thus, not many Kindred know what secrets lurk in the blood of the Carnon, waiting to manifest in those rare Bucks whose Vitae ripens with power.

Tonight, the Carnon have spread throughout the United States and into parts of Canada and Mexico. Nomadic Requiems appeal to the kind of souls that become Horned Gods, and escape from a scuffed Masquerade is often necessary for these wild ones.

Modern Carnon strive to make more of their Acolyte traditions. A few decades of circulation in the Circle of the Crone has given many Carnon a desire (or a mandate) to become more meaningful parts of the covenant, besides stage performers and thug service.

Though plenty of older Acolytes mock and deride the Carnon to their faces, plenty of others see something marvelous in these young lunatics: The Carnon have endured through a crazy time and great tribulations to create something that is both new but mindful of its ancient roots. If they accept that the Carnon are not yet finished with their creation, and so have not yet reached the heights of their power, then the Acolytes should be able to appreciate the admirable, exuberant possibilities inherent in the Horned Gods.

Parent Clan: Gangrel

Nickname: Pucks, Bucks or Horned Gods.

Covenant: The Carnon bloodline, as it stands tonight, was created by a coterie of Acolytes as a means of solidifying and demonstrating not only their devotion to the covenant but their overconfident certainty that they were bad-ass sexy thugs entitled to represent the covenant and thumb their noses at stodgy local Sanctified. Though the blood and the culture of the Carnon has managed to spread throughout the western world in the past few decades, their attitudes haven't been diluted by new members. Bucks are still self-aggrandizing pagan rockers waging a gauche guerilla war against a close-minded, old-fashioned Kindred church that they only know how to relate to as an exaggerated cartoon of itself.

The same Lancea Sanctum that the first Carnons pumped their fists at turns out not to be as narrow-minded, grey-haired and impotent as those early Bucks said they were.

The rhetoric of those first Carnon was shouted so loud, though, that it's still echoing through the bloodline. To date, no Carnon is known to have joined the Lancea Sanctum, though several vampires have joined the bloodline after fleeing that church. In practice, of course, many Carnon actually get along just fine with their local parish Priest or coterie confessor. "I hate those gay-bashing, red-neck old fucks!" says the Carnon. "But not you,



Mother Lourdes. You're not one of *those* Sanctified." Indeed, few Sanctified probably are.

Carnon have wandered into the ranks of every other covenant, however. In some cities, they serve Invictus or Carthian powers as Hounds, even going so far as to maintain membership in multiple covenants. The Ordo Dracul has attracted a few Carnon into its midst over the years, as well, though the type of monster that makes a good Horned God tends not to make a good Dragon. Carnon enter the Order for short-term benefits then bail when the dues (in service, in blood, in study) get steep.

Appearance: Many modern Carnon are drawn from the various subcultures of woodsy backpackers, base jumpers and hostel regulars. The iconic image of the Carnon tonight is something akin to a buff, neo-hippy Marlboro man: stubble, long hair, great physique, easy-going demeanor. In practice, it seems that just as many Horned Gods are ratty tattooed neo-punks with thousands of dollars worth of body modifications, from earlobes with oversized inset rings to clamped collarbones to ritual scars. Twisted, overgrown beards are common — even before the Embrace most Carnon looked like the Green Man.

Almost universally, Carnon have solid, impressive builds. Often this means taut muscle, but sometimes barrel chests and simple height is all it takes to fulfill the image. The change of the Gangrel blood into that of the Carnon line somehow brings with it a firm grace, a practiced strut that exaggerates the stature and posture of the Horned God. Some move with the delicate precision of a stag, others with the sure calm of a wolf.

As their Blood Potency increases, Carnon develop more and more unnaturally inhuman qualities. In modern nights these seem to be subtler: some Carnon leave hoof prints inside their own footprints when they walk barefoot, others cast shadows or distorted reflections that seem to be capped with forked, elk-like horns. According to rumor, the eldest Carnon grew horns and were forced to flee the sight of mankind.

Haven: Carnon live like stags. Many dwell together in seedy, dank bachelor pits littered with unwashed clothes and crumpled magazines. Many others dwell alone in the kind of unreasonable independence that make up adolescent fantasies: sleeping in blacked-out trailers, nesting in the hidden attics of record shops and movie theaters or hiding out in the bomb shelters beneath the high school. Carnon thus favor Haven Location above all else, though for them a prime location may have as much to do with their self-indulgent pastimes as it does with the practical concerns of feeding. Haven Security is also important, though seldom is it anything high-tech; a Carnon finds safety in obscurity and cement walls, not expensive equipment. Haven Size seldom matters much to a Buck, so long as it has a good stereo or television.

Eventually, all of these modern (and bright) *things* mean nothing to a Carnon, though. Eventually, they all must retreat from the eyes of mortals, either to prowl the wooded shadows at the edge of civilization where they can stalk other vulnerable, isolated vampires for their Vitae or to sleep off the inhuman deformities sparked by their own blood.

Background: The Carnon bloodline isn't the sort that Kindred adopt after long centuries of searching or consideration. Carnon are impulsive, shameless (but often regrettable) creatures. Carnon worry about tomorrow when it comes. Tonight is about tonight.

The vast majority of Carnon were Embraced in their youth, and maintain a mixture of teenage rebellion and twenty-something vagabondage throughout their Requiems. Carnon are often thought to be exclusively male — which is to say that many Kindred passively assume that all Carnon are men while many others presume the bloodline is philosophically closed to women — but this is not the case. Only a small number of Carnon are Horned Goddesses, but such Kindred do exist, particularly in the Pacific Northwest and the UK.

Plenty of Carnon are intelligent, but many lack the discipline to put it to work. The early Carnon wrote insightful, biting critiques of the Lancea Sanctum in their night — manifestos potent enough to draw lesser-willed vampires to adopt their blood. As the number of Carnon grew over the years, the percentage of great minds in the bloodline naturally dropped as followers gathered around the rock star-like leaders they celebrated. Still, rocking revolutionaries and savvy punks continue to be drawn to the Carnon family, even if they don't realize their potential or find their discipline until decades after.

Character Creation: Carnon thus tend to favor power Attributes (Strength, Intelligence, Presence) over others. On average, Social or Physical traits tend to be primary. The Expression Skill is common among the bloodline, whether carried over from life or learned in undeath. The Iron Stamina Merit is a good choice to represent the bloodline's reckless disregard for its own comfort or wellbeing. Likewise, though it does them little good in damnation, the Iron Stomach Merit seems to have been common among many Carnon in life.

Bloodline Disciplines: Animalism, Nightmare, Protean, Resilience

Weakness: Carnon suffer the same base affliction as their parent clan: the 10-again rule does not apply to Intelligence- or Wits-based dice pools for these vampires. Additionally, any 1's that are rolled subtract from successes (see p. 107 of **Vampire: The Requiem**). These penalties don't apply to perception-related dice pools or to the Resolve Attribute.

Additionally, Carnon forever struggle with the unusually close relationship they have with their Beasts. While all Gangrel face the challenge of the Beast over-

riding their rational minds and mores, a Carnon must endure the Beast's gradual usurpation of his body. As a Carnon's Humanity spirals lower, his body alters into that of a mystical wild man, growing a tangled, crusted beard even if he had none in life. His eyes yellow and twist into those of a goat. His teeth yellow and take on an animal-like, predatory shape that cannot be hidden. Without an expenditure of Vitae to stir the blush of life, a Carnon is much more likely to attract mortal attention through his physical weirdness than typical Kindred. A Carnon does not simply appear distorted in reflections or photographs — he appears as a horned shape.

In time, as a Carnon's Blood Potency increases, his physical changes become shockingly drastic. His forehead sprouts unmistakable horns or branching antlers. Eventually, no Carnon can be seen by human eyes without risking the Masquerade.

In game terms, a Carnon's Humanity is considered two dice lower when figuring his dice pool maximum for Social actions involving mortals. When a Carnon's Blood Potency reaches 6, his horns manifest, imposing an additional -2 penalty on all Social dice pools, even with fellow Kindred. This penalty increases to -3 at Blood Potency 8 and -4 at Blood Potency 10. None of these penalties apply to Intimidation or Animal Ken dice pools.

Finally, due to the Carnon bloodline's closeness with the Beast, Carnon do not gain the benefits of the 10-again rule on dice pools to resist frenzy. In exchange, however, a Carnon enjoys the benefits of the 9-again rule on Resolve + Composure rolls to "ride the wave" (see p. 181 of **Vampire: The Requiem**).

Organization: As a bloodline, the Carnon have no real organization beyond their counterculture. In many domains, Carnon are simply one facet of the Circle of the Crone's modern punk-pagan indie crowd. In other domains, where individual Bucks have won some adoration or notoriety, the Carnon may be the nucleus of cliques or coteries, the way a rock band is the anchor of an after-party.

In several domains, mostly those farther removed from the first Carnon bands, members of this bloodline have taken to regarding themselves as brothers. Even in cases where two Horned Gods are truly sire and childe, they may adopt big brother and little brother roles instead. Throughout the UK, this practice is implicit — just a matter of custom that goes without saying. In the American South, this practice is just as common but much more formalized — an Alabaman Carnon would probably find it offensive to be regarded as anything but the sibling of another Horned God.

Carnon often maintain close, if casual, ties with their bloodline brothers within a domain, even when every Carnon in the city is also a member of different coteries. Like brothers who get together for football and in-fighting, Bucks gather after weekly Acolyte rituals to touch base, trade stories and bust each other's balls. Some Carnon cliques are closer than others, of course. Where two Carnon might be as devoted and loyal as true brothers, two others might squabble and undermine each other like rival frat brothers.

Concepts: Anti-Christian death-metal singer, body-modification artist, environmental terrorist, fear-mongering biker, free-loading emo lay-about, long-haired militant liberal, patchouli-smelling politico, Space Monkey.

CHILDER OF THE MORRIGAN

OUR FATES ARE DEATH. IMMORTALITY LASTS ONLY AS LONG AS WE LET IT.

The Childer of the Morrigan are the orphans of a vanished army. Where once they were generals and war-chiefs of the covenant, tonight they are mercenaries and advisors in service to segments of pagan power.

Or so the legends say. In truth, because the Circle of the Crone has never had the cohesion necessary to facilitate the formation of a great fighting force — and has never been willing to violate the Masquerade to such a degree — it's doubtful that the Childer of the Morrigan were ever much more than respected advisors, wise warriors or cunning leaders. (As if such roles were not legendary in their own right.)

What seems to have changed for the Morrigan is the assumption of their necessity. No longer is the blood of a Stormcrow widely recognized as an essential component in the defense of the covenant. It has been a century since the Morrigan name was synonymous with great rank and, therefore, given respect and fear out of reflex. Tonight, many Morrigan are cherished and praised as leaders, protectors and visionary warriors, but just as many are anonymous vigilantes and forgotten veterans of forgotten wars.

The Morrigan blame the changing notions of war in the modern night. Although, on the one hand, a single warrior is still seen as a viable and potent force in battle, a warrior is so often cherished less than a weapon these nights. Why go to the trouble of funding and housing a Morrigan for the domain when any cheap Hound can carry the very best weaponry against the enemy and is cheaper to replace besides?

The Kindred who say such things are short-sighted fools with no memory. The Childer of the Morrigan have swung swords in defense of the Circle of the Crone for three thousand years. The first Morrigan were the warrior-queens of the covenant. They laid the foundation stones and raised up the tents under which persecuted pagan cults were unified. The history of the Morrigan's



devotion and contribution to the Crone is sterling, tarnished only with age.

In the earliest nights of the covenant, the Childer of the Morrigan swore to defend it. Though stories of Kindred descended from the Morrigan go back beyond the founding of the covenant, it seems clear that this bloodline was formed on that night, when its blood was promised to the covenant for all time. Thus the Stormcrows became a part of the mortar holding the loose stones of the Circle together. Three unconnected, religiously

distinct cults in a single city might not be able to agree on a name for the Crone, but they could agree to pay tribute to the Childer of the Morrigan to keep hostile vampires at bay.

But that was a long time ago.

Since then, the Morrigan have dwindled. By the Middle Ages, the notion of a whole coterie of Stormcrows residing in a single domain had become unrealistic. In place of three or four warriors to oversee Hounds and assist Sheriffs, average Acolyte domains kept a single Morrigan near the Prince and Primogen as the nucleus of a war council — a body of advisory vampires of which the Morrigan was just one member. The largest Acolyte territories boasted war councils populated entirely by Morrigan. These wise women advised Princes and Hierophants alike in the proper uses of violence and when the promise of violence was enough to secure victory. They were generals, but they were historians and poets, too. They didn't just lead vampires to victory, they lead Kindred away from needless battles and toward precarious peaces.

But that, too, was long ago.

The number of Morrigan has dwindled in the face of more bloodlines vying for Kindred attention and the presence of more cities pulling Kindred factions apart. Tonight, the Childer of the Morrigan are as likely to reside as hermits on the edge of Acolyte society as they are at the side of a Hierophant. They are warrior-poets without wars to fight, supplanted by subtler power-plays

and political back-stabbing. Acolyte cults, after centuries of religious change and mutated by decades of neopagan revisions, have grown further apart from each other. Tonight's Circle of the Crone looks so little like that the first Morrigan swore to protect, but still their blood is bound to it.

But the covenant can never be wholly safe. The night when Acolytes need the Childer of the Morrigan again cannot be far off.

OPTIONAL BENEFIT:

INHERENT RITUAL POWER

At the Storyteller's option, the Childer of the Morrigan may enjoy a special benefit as a result of their bloodline's unique devotion to (and dependence on) the Circle of the Crone: Any Morrigan with ••• in Blood Potency and Covenant Status: Circle of the Crone • or higher may be allowed to purchase the ••• Crúac ritual Touch of the Morrigan, even if the Stormcrow has no dots in Crúac herself. The roll to activate this ritual is therefore simply Manipulation + Occult, with a cost of 1 Vitae as usual. If learned in this way, the ritual becomes an instant, rather than an extended, action to cast — however many successes the Morrigan earns on a single roll is what the ritual power deals in damage.

This power costs six experience points to learn in this way. If the Morrigan later learns Crúac ••• or higher, she must buy the ritual again if she wishes to cast it according to the usual method (and thereby gain the benefit of her Crúac dots in her activation dice pool).

If the Storyteller creates other bloodlines, he might offer a similar benefit to them, as well, allowing the purchase of another *single* Crúac or Theban Sorcery ritual that is closely linked with the bloodline's theme and abilities. This benefit shouldn't be given to bloodlines with unique Disciplines.

Parent Clan: Gangrel

Nickname: Stormcrows or simply Morrigan

Covenant: The Childer of the Morrigan have been dedicated followers of the Acolyte philosophy for thousands of years. Though some claim that their lineage predates the gathering of vampire cults into the covenant of the Crone, it is undeniable that the Stormcrows are a distinctly Acolyte tradition. Morrigan who are not members of the covenant are likely to be ostracized — or at least thought turncoats — by their kin.

That said, these warriors know that they must often serve multiple masters. Childer of the Morrigan who act on behalf of other covenants, or even accept a degree of membership in other ranks, may simply be seen as respected experts enjoying the benefits of their authority. If the Invictus can recognize the value of the Morrigan, then good for them. As long as a Stormcrow remembers where her spiritual loyalty lies — to the Morrigan — all may be well.

Stormcrows become unaligned vampires with surprising frequency, however. When the covenant's political or practical aims diverge too far from those of the Stormcrow (or her matron war god), the best she can do oppose her mother covenant is to cut her support of it. A Stormcrow who turns against the covenant her ancestors fought to forge is the worst sort of betrayer... as long as her enemies within the covenant remain in power. All may be rewritten by a victorious Morrigan after the battle is won.

Appearance: Although men and women, young and old, have become Childer of the Morrigan throughout history, it's a matter of fact that, tonight, white women over the age of forty are the archetypal Morrigan. Many of these warrior-witches led painfully mundane lives before the Embrace, coming to love the thrill of conflict only after their bodies died. Thus many Morrigan do not have physiques that match their true physicality — or their philosophy.

Morrigan seldom dress like "warriors," whatever that means tonight.



Rather, they dress to impress, often combining simple elegance and sturdy functionality. Many fights can be overcome by preempting them with a display of confidence and poise. Morrigan's excel at this.

Common modern dress for Stormcrows combines comfortable jeans and attention-getting T-shirts with fur-hooded military parkas, or pairs simple slip-like dresses with oversized feathered jackets. Large outerwear increases the Morrigan's perceived presence in the room and gets in an enemy's way in a fight, but it can all be shed easily if need be. Just like a Morrigan's calm demeanor.

Raven imagery is popular with Morrigan's trying to attract attention. Black, feather-rimmed jackets are common tonight, painted wings on leather jackets or army coats have been traditional within the covenant and the bloodline since the '60s. Black-blotted eyes, black nails and feather-themed jewelry is popular among the Stormcrows.

Haven: Morrigan's maintain havens as distinctive as their individual personalities. In general, personal comfort is not a major concern for these vampires, though Morrigan's who consider themselves the childer of the Great Queen are liable to act like princesses. The majority of Morrigan's who are able use the power of Protean (••) to make their havens in soil, rock or even water.

This isn't to say they shirk the benefits of modern protection that Kindred may enjoy. But a Morrigan's protection can take many forms. Remote, difficult to reach havens in industrial parks, forest preserves and local ruins discourage random visitors. Colder, wetter or generally harsher sites can tire out or frustrate many would-be vampire-hunters as they make their approach — every little edge helps. Whenever possible, a Morrigan's haven should require an approach on foot, to prevent the sudden arrival of screeching enemy SUVs; even a short hike can go a long way towards discouraging searchers.

Obviously, Morrigan's are more concerned with Haven Security than Haven Location. For these vampires, security means false doors, ghoulish raven sentries and sturdy doors with high-quality padlocks. A barred concrete shed with a thick layer of cold black dirt on its floor is an ideal nest for a Stormcrow.

Background: Though somewhere along the line the archetypal image of a Morrigan became that of a tough middle-aged warrior woman, the truth is that Stormcrows come from all ages of mortals. Likewise, contrary the ignorant notion that Morrigan's are man-hating lesbian *feministas*, most Morrigan's seem to be old-fashioned providers and protectors, part iron-fisted mother and part femme fatale. As many Morrigan's were soft-skinned, shy bookworms in life as were weight-lifting power jocks.

For many of the Childer of the Morrigan, the idea of a harder demeanor and a more severe existence only becomes appealing after the social checklists of mortal life are relieved. Without all the bullshit that

comes with a mortal *life* — job pressures, family issues, relationships, sex, money — a new Morrigan finds the razor-sharp simplicity of faith and ferocity attractive. For some, the appeal of the Morrigan's Requiem is as simple as the appeal of change. The vampire is no longer the living woman she used to be, so why shouldn't she try something new?

That said, there is no shortage of butch soldiers in the ranks of the Stormcrows. They simply aren't the majority that some vampire jokers claim they are. In fact, the inherent change in the blood that comes from adopting the Morrigan bloodline may even be more appealing for those vampires for whom the transformation is more drastic. A former marine turned Acolyte has little need to tap into the Morrigan myth to think of herself as a soldier, but the churchgoing soccer mom turned Savage may want to commit to her new existence by becoming a Stormcrow.

As with several other Acolyte bloodlines, the Childer of the Morrigan are not strictly closed to vampires of either gender. Many Morrigan's find the idea that their patron goddess would forbid herself to have sons to be absurd, but others maintain that the bloodline is meant to symbolically uphold the role of the goddess as the Great Queen and warrior-woman, which males simply can't do. Thus in some domains all Morrigan's are female due to unspoken assumptions and in others all are female out of tradition (or sexist custom), but several so-called Sons of the Morrigan can be found throughout the lands to which this bloodline has spread.

Character Creation: Because so many Childer of the Morrigan weren't raised to be warriors, they do not often begin their Requiems with traits that match bloodline stereotypes. Morrigan's are a varied lot. By the time most would-be Stormcrows enter into the bloodline, however, they have had years (if not centuries) of undeath to learn Skills and hone Attributes more in line with their new roles.

Morrigan's seldom put much importance on Firearms, whether out of a ceremonial appreciation for traditional weaponry or out of a practical desire to do more damage to undead foes. Crúac is regarded by some Morrigan's as witches' work, not the business of warriors, but others see it as just another weapon.

Bloodline Disciplines: Animalism, Protean, Resilience, Vigor.

When a Morrigan learns Protean •••• (or when a Gangrel with that power becomes a Morrigan), her bat-form is replaced with that of a carrion-crow. The traits of this form are identical to those of the bat form, except that bonus dice apply to scent rather than hearing. With the Storyteller's permission, a Stormcrow may spend three experience points to gain (or regain) access to the more traditional bat form bestowed by the Shape of the Beast power.

Weakness: Stormcrows suffer the same base affliction as their parent clan: the 10-again rule does not apply to Intelligence- or Wits-based dice pools for these vampires. Additionally, any 1's that are rolled subtract from successes (see p. 107 of **Vampire: The Requiem**). As their Humanity scores erode, Stormcrows' minds become more bestial and base. In the case of these warriors, elegant strategy gives way to brutal tactics. A humane Morrigan strives for the right victory for the battle; a monstrous Morrigan takes unnecessary risks to hurt the enemy and add suffering to defeat.

Defeat, however, is not something a Morrigan makes peace with easily herself. Her dedication to the covenant is distilled in her blood. In addition to the afflictions inherent in her Gangrel blood, a Morrigan is subject to a terrible dread of the soul. Stormcrows suffer from a permanent, incurable case of Depression (as per the derangement, see p. 97 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). In addition to normal triggers, the following circumstances also prompt a Resolve + Composure roll to see if the Morrigan suffers the derangement's effects:

- **Defeat in battle:** The Morrigan is a part of any battle in which Acolyte losses (including ghouls, Retainers and the like) outnumber the opponent's losses. In some cases, losses may not even be necessary, if the number of injured or routed Acolytes is very high or if the persons hurt or slain are very close to the character.

- **Wasted effort:** The Morrigan spends a Willpower point to augment any trait or dice pool outside of combat yet fails at the action she was attempting. A Morrigan shouldn't devote herself so utterly to anything but the defense and safety of her fellow Acolytes.

- **Disfavor:** The Morrigan's Covenant Status: Circle of the Crone is reduced to zero dots. Each night that a Morrigan spends out of favor with her people provokes her Depression.

If two or more of these triggers come into effect at the same time, a Morrigan's gloom may sink further, into Melancholia, for the remainder of the night.

Organization: The organization of the Childer of the Morrigan has collapsed along with their prestige. Their war councils are largely things of the past. It's rare now when Stormcrows gather in groups larger than pairs or trios within a single domain — sisters, sires or coterie-mates.

The majority of Stormcrows tonight are solitary women without childer or fellow vampires in their bloodline.

That is, they are crones, waiting and hoping that some bold young warrior will seek them out for tutelage and make a commitment to the Morrigan's lineage.

In the meantime, the Childer of the Morrigan serve their covenant as if it were their church. Many serve their Prince or Hierophant as if she were their queen. They are lonely (but not necessarily independent) warrior-women bravely patrolling the edges of Kindred society, where the orange glow of the streetlights turns into darkness, defending the domain against mortals and monsters. Without a war to fight, without devoted followers to lead against an enemy, however, they sulk and sigh in the dark, uncertain what to do with themselves.

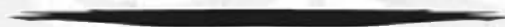
Concepts: Battle maiden, blood-worshipping corporate warlord, cold-blooded marine, general in Hecate's army, Hierophant by the sword, modern-night Joan of Arc, romantic warrior-poet, self-styled black-leather hoplite.



OPTIONAL BLOODLINE WEAKNESS: TRIUMVIRATE OF POWER

This optional bloodline weakness may be too potent for some chronicles, and not potent enough for others. Storytellers with a sizeable number of vampires belonging to bloodlines in their chronicle's domain may get use out of this optional bloodline weakness, possibly even attaching it to a bloodline like the Gorgons or one drawn from **Bloodlines: The Legendary**. If bloodline-based vampires are rare in your chronicle (or even if Kindred themselves are especially rare!), this bloodline may be too restrictive to be of use to you:

"For any vampire from this lineage to gain the benefits of the bloodline's unique Discipline, there must be at least three members of the bloodline within a fixed mystic range of one another. This range is a number of miles equal to the highest Blood Potency of the bloodline's local members — the vampire whose Blood Potency defines the range is known as the Matron. Unless three vampires from the bloodline are within range of the Matron, none of these vampires may use the bloodline's signature Discipline. If more than three members of the bloodline are within range, each additional member beyond the third imposes a cumulative -2 penalty on all dice pools to use the unique Discipline."



GORGONS

I AM A QUEEN, HEIR TO THE GREAT BLOOD OF MEDUSA. LOOK UPON ME AND BASK.

They are ancient and new again. They are the old and the young. They are regal and they are filthy.

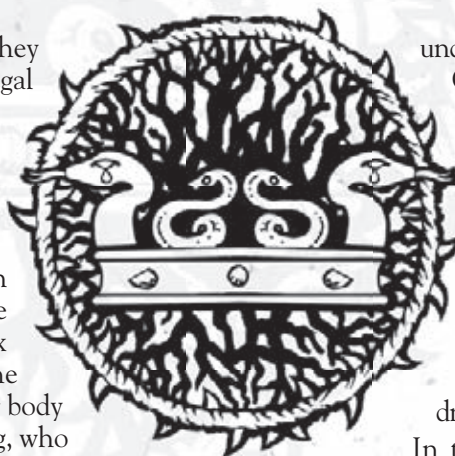
Gorgons claim descent directly from the immortal gorgons, Stheno, Euryale and the infamous Medusa, the mythological monster herself. As the Gorgons tell it, Medusa an ancient vampire Embraced by the gods, such that her blood was a mix of the earthly and godly. When she perished at the hands of Perseus, her body was fed upon by her ladies-in-waiting, who were lowly, terrestrial vampires but nonetheless queens among their kind. These were the first of the Gorgon bloodline of the Kindred.

In the ancient nights, before the Camarilla rose or fell, the Gorgons were monarchs among the Damned. They ruled the nighttime palaces of numerous Mediterranean cities, spreading this brilliance and authority as far as Turkey, Egypt and Iberia. For centuries they were loved, celebrated and feared among their kind.

What caused their glory to wane is unclear. Some blame the waning power of the Olympian gods. Others point to the gradual collapse the human civilizations on which Kindred society was built. Whatever the true cause, a near-extinction of the Gorgons took place as rival Roman bloodlines swept in and conquered the Gorgons' cities. Those Gorgons who survived slipped into the earth to wait out the ages.

After the fall of the Camarilla and the Roman Empire, the Gorgons emerged again, crawling through the cracked floors of the Byzantine cities that had sprawled over their heads. For decades the Gorgons flitted about among the illustrious pillars of human and Kindred society in Constantinople and throughout the Mediterranean. In time, they spread to the west, seeking out palaces and hidden havens in the empty vaults beneath the earth of what would one night be Italy, France and Spain.

It was during these nights that the Gorgons first allied themselves with the Circle of the Crone, they say. These serpentine queens seemed to be a natural fit, as the



undead descendents of demigods, and soon Gorgons were figureheads in a handful of Acolyte domains.

But it didn't last. Within a few decades, most of the Gorgons disappeared again. By the time of the Renaissance they had vanished from Europe. Accounts of Gorgons still haunting Kindred courts in the Near East were thought to be legend.

Where had the Gorgons gone? What had driven them off — or lured them away?

In the 19th century, Gorgons emerged once again into the glittering lights of Kindred society. But were these the same Gorgons, from the same bloodline, as those who had been ambassadors for the Acolytes hundreds of years ago? Were these the same that had ruled Kindred cities in ages past?

Modern Gorgons claim that they are, in fact, the same bloodline, suspended in places, it's true, but unbroken yet from the day of Medusa's death to this night. Who can say if this is true? Whether modern Gorgons are a new Medusa-idolizing family of the undead or an ancient lineage of demigod daughters, they are here now.

In the past hundred years or so, the Gorgons have taken their association with the Circle of the Crone for granted. Though many Gorgons came onto the scene in the 1800s expecting to find that the Acolytes had saved their seats for them, the truth is that the modern nights have much more appeal for these Damned debutantes than the appeal of dead goddesses and hungry gods. For the Gorgons, ancient gods are old hat, after all — just a part of the family tree. As Lords by blood, Gorgons are more interested in reclaiming stature and authority, in bringing cities back under their rule.

The modern approach of these Gorgons casts a great deal of doubt on the legends of the ancient Gorgons, however. Tonight's Gorgons seem to have little interest in genuine power and authority. Instead, many seem content to be puppets for real politicians just so long as they can keep their posh suites and sit on the thrones that they feel are rightly theirs.

SISTER BLOODLINES AND HOUSES

Two other Kindred lineages associate themselves with the Gorgon bloodline's interpretation of their familial myth. These are not mystic bloodlines — they incur no additional weakness and unlock no unique Disciplines — but are simply Ventrue families that exalt the mythological gorgons. These two families draw their names from the immortal sisters of Medusa, Stheno and Euryale.

The defining quality of each family is their dedication to mastering mystical physical powers of the Damned from other clans. The Stheno family learns Vigor as a matter of custom, while the Euryale line studies Celerity. Historically, Stheno is known as “the strong” and Euryale as “the wide-ranging.”

Kindred of other familial lines and clans who serve Gorgon masters (be they Princes, Regents or something else) may associate themselves with the Stheno or the Euryale “houses,” provided they can demonstrate proficiency with vampiric strength or speed, and thereby be of some use to their Gorgon leaders. In game terms, the Stheno and Euryale families may grant some characters access to City or Clan Status through their mastery of Vigor or Celerity. In this case, such characters can gain Status dots equal to their dots in Vigor or Celerity minus one, provided they promise to serve their patron family in time of need. Such service might include:

- Three nights of protection (or battle) to an elder per month.
- Two tastes of Vitae for an elder.
- 300 miles of travel per year for deliveries, errands, escorts and scouting.
- 300 hours of manual labor without pay each year.

THE SISTER FAMILIES AS BLOODLINES

If it suits the chronicle, the Stheno and the Euryale could be made into mystic bloodlines easily enough. Simply impose the Gorgon bloodline weakness on each and grant the family's celebrated Discipline — Vigor or Celerity — as their fourth Discipline. Some individual members of the Stheno or Euryale families might even be members of these “true” bloodlines without Kindred society at large even knowing it.

Parent Clan: Ventrue

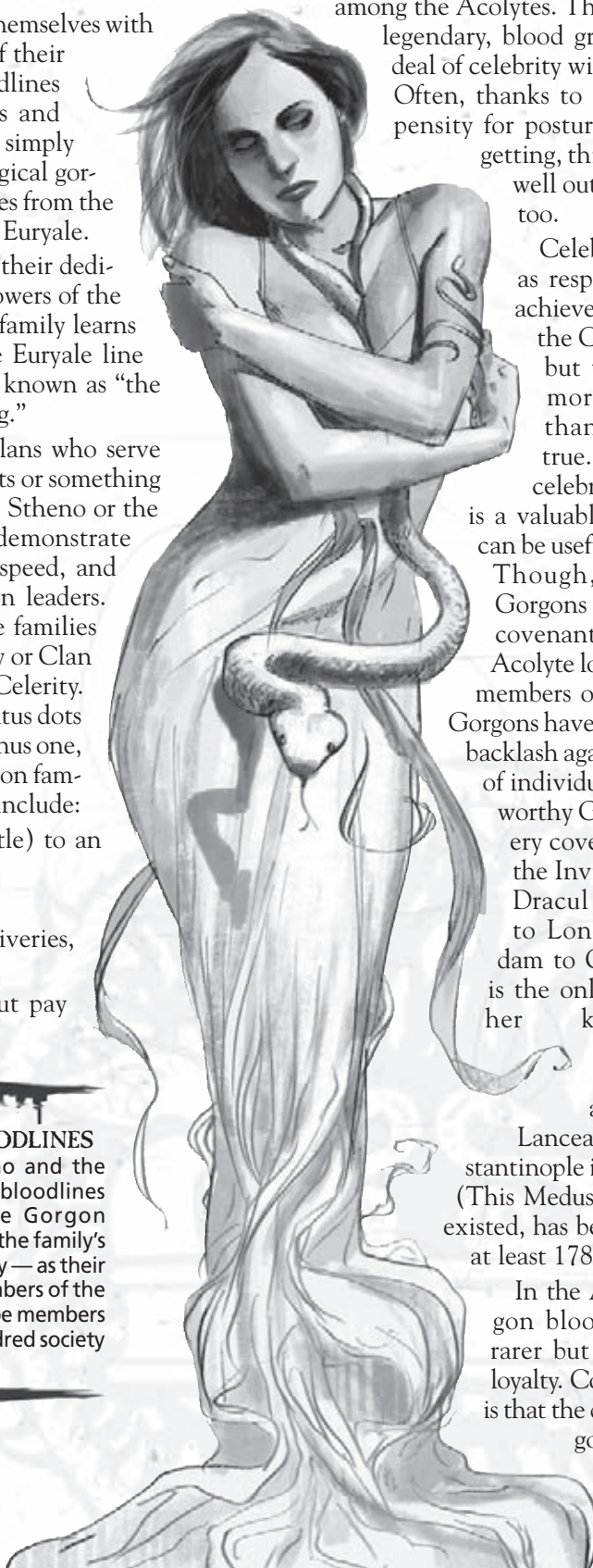
Nickname: Medusas

Covenant: Though the Gorgon bloodline is supposedly much older than the

Circle of the Crone, it owes its modern incarnation to the covenant and its members do not forget it. Gorgons, in the few cities where they do reside, are nobility among the Acolytes. Their infamous, even legendary, blood grants them a great deal of celebrity within the covenant. Often, thanks to the Gorgons' propensity for posturing and attention getting, this celebrity extends well outside the covenant, too.

Celebrity isn't the same as respect. Gorgons may achieve great Status within the Circle of the Crone, but they are not truly more likely to do so than any other Ventrue. What a Gorgon's celebrity does afford her is a valuable visibility, which can be useful to any covenant. Though, typically, most Gorgons with ties to other covenants operate more as Acolyte lobbyists than actual members of other covenants, Gorgons have avoided sparking a backlash against the disloyalty of individual Medusas. Noteworthy Gorgons exist in every covenant — especially the Invictus and the Ordo Dracul — from Moscow to London and Amsterdam to Cairo. Though she is the only Gorgon most of her kin can cite, one noteworthy Medusa even became a Bishop of the Lancea Sanctum in Constantinople in the 18th century. (This Medusa, if she ever truly existed, has been in torpor since at least 1780, however.)

In the Americas, the Gorgon bloodline is not only rarer but more strict in its loyalty. Common speculation is that the distance of the Gorgon heyday in both years and miles has given American Gorgons a monumental



prestige among New-World Acolytes that is too fervent to risk betraying. In North America, especially, Gorgons are seen as too emblematic of the Circle of the Crone to be allowed into the service of other covenants. Naturally, a few Gorgons still manage to mix among the glitterati of the American Invictus, either by hiding their loyalty or their lineage.

Appearance: Gorgons draw their members from throughout the world. Despite what many Acolytes think, it seems that most of the world's Gorgons come from North Africa and Persian lands, with the rest of the Mediterranean trailing behind. Gorgons throughout history have been male and female, but tonight the echoes of academic feminism keep male membership low; few try to join the lineage, fewer still are accepted.

Many Gorgons present themselves with an odd mixture of peasantry and pageantry, wealth and filth. A clean white dress gets thrown on over skin caked with mud. Precious jewelry decorates dirty hair. Though some Gorgons consider themselves masterful enchantresses and benders of mortal will, few position themselves outside the reach of "earthly souls" or common folk. They hunt where there's dirt and relax where there's not.

No one thinks of the Gorgon line without thinking of snakes. In practice, however, Gorgons don't dress themselves in cobras. Instead, a single viper coils around one arm, appearing almost like jewelry, or an asp bites its own tail around a Medusa's neck. All this supposes the Gorgon is able to find a snake worth showing off to other Kindred, and risking mortal attention for.

Wearing a snake in the hair is a privilege for elder Gorgons or Medusas with some status in the Circle of the Crone. A young or unimportant Gorgon with a snake in her hair is liable to be labeled ignorant, an upstart or a poseur. This isn't some familial policy, it's custom. A Gorgon can get away with wearing a so-called serpentine crown when her peers and her betters let her do it without hassle or shame.

Haven: Most Gorgons nest less like their monstrous namesake snake-women and more like the Ventrue they are. Secure marble rooms in cold but richly appointed penthouses are more common than caves. Still, one common thread seems to run through the spaces beloved by many Gorgons: stone. Gorgons seem to prefer the security of solid rock, whether it's marble, cement, flagstone or brick. The seams of polished concrete condos may hide the secret doors leading to sunless crypts. The light-proof insides of renovated chimneys hide coffin-sized nests. Marble columns contain secret spiral staircases leading down to gloomy grottos.

Rumor has it that Gorgons let poisons snakes wander freely in their havens, and at least a few well-known account give credence to those tales. Whether the rumors are true because it's an old Gorgon tradition or whether modern Gorgons have taken up the practice

since hearing the rumors seems impossible to verify. What's known is that Gorgon havens in dank but elegant forgotten subway stations are likely to be prowled by asps, while the constrictor snakes coiled around the cold, raw metal girders in that Gorgon's posh loft space are probably real.

Thus, for Gorgons, Haven Security often amounts to the raw strength of stone materials — though it might also represent the peril of encountering hidden vipers. Haven Size is important to Gorgons, who want the freedom to move about (and also hide) in their lairs. Haven Location may be important to some, but more for the prestige of residing within striking distance of coveted real estate (by Kindred reckoning). One well-known Gorgon, at least, met her Final Death by taking too much pride in the haven she kept in a choice feeding ground in Paris — it burned with her inside in 1956.

Background: The majority of modern Gorgons are of Mediterranean descent, regardless of which continent they call home personally. The vast majority of Gorgons are women. These two characteristics are mistakenly thought by many to be inescapable facets of the bloodline, either because the Medusas are sexist elitists or because the mystic qualities of their blood simply won't take effect among males or those not distantly descended from the Olympian gods. Both notions are rubbish. Gorgons may be of any race and either gender. Reports from a series of Kindred nomads in the 1990s suggested that a mix of male and female Gorgons are largely in control of the Primogen in Accra, Ghana, for example.

Gorgons also share an insatiable desire for both attention and privacy. On the one hand, when they're out in the night playing their part in the Danse Macabre, Gorgons starve for affection and attention. Some Gorgons are disgusting fame whores whose sole qualification for celebrity is wealth or shameless posturing. Others are elegant, dignified diplomats whose poise and measured behavior could make a bowling alley seem classy.

On the other hand, Gorgons are fiercely protective of their private spaces, where they lure their most precious vessels for fatal visits. Many Gorgons are, in fact, degenerate recluses, dwelling like asps in a pit rather than towering proudly like king cobras.

To want to join this bloodline, a person must have the desire to be a social ambassador or queen among orgiastic nobles, and yet the hidden capacity to be a filthy, monstrous hermit. Thus most modern Gorgons are indulgent, hedonistic and shallow party monsters who secretly despise those less beautiful or hip, just as they secretly despise themselves, who are so often hideous within.

Character Creation: Social traits are almost always primary for a Medusa, with Mental traits a close second. Social Merits are especially valuable here. Barfly and Contacts can be excellent descriptors of a Gorgon's

widespread but shallow social relationships, while Herd describes the entourage of empty designer shirts that flit after a Gorgon's cheap celebrity. Resources are essential to the Gorgons as well, though some Medusas weren't born heiresses or royalty. Once accepted into the bloodline by a Gorgon Avus, however, every Medusa becomes wealthy to some extent, even if only by staying within the aura of thoughtless excess that radiates from the older Gorgons. As all Gorgons are the heiresses of Medusa, all expect to be truly wealthy one night.

Bloodline Disciplines: *Amphivena*, Animalism, Dominate, Resilience

Weakness: Gorgons suffer the weakness of their parent clan, the Ventrue: a -2 penalty to Humanity rolls to avoid acquiring derangements after failing a degeneration roll. In addition, all Gorgons are unable to escape the monstrous nature of their immortal ancestor, Medusa.

Unlike their Ventrue cousins, Gorgons also experience a dependence on — and an unbreakable link to — the legendry from which they claim their power. All Gorgons suffer a unique form of the Power Fetish Obsession derangement (see p. 191 of **Vampire: The Requiem**). The Gorgon variant on this derangement is special in that it is mystically genuine — without a serpent in contact with her person, a Medusa suffers a -3 penalty on all Discipline dice pools and may not spend Vitae to augment Physical dice pools. This is a supernatural fact of the Gorgon Requiem and cannot be cured or bought off.

In addition, as the Vitae of a Gorgon grows closer to its ancestral state and further from its mortal origins, her physical body changes subtly. A Gorgon's body adopts some oddly serpentine feature, usually no more than a stretch of scaly flesh, at Blood Potency 3. At this stage, the feature might be mistaken for scarification or masterful tattoo work. When her Blood Potency reaches 7, her whole body becomes dry and rough, like a snake's, in a matter of nights. Her eyes catch the light like a cat's, shining in the dark. Few Gorgons can bear to be seen after this transformation and retreat into hidden lairs or flee into torpor. Those who choose to remain active feel compelled to spend time in the alternate form afforded

to them by their unique Discipline (*Amphivena* •••••, Body of the Gorgon). When a Medusa is in her haven or otherwise safely removed from the eyes of strangers, her player must succeed on a Resolve + Composure roll or the Medusa must activate the Body of the Gorgon power for the scene. At the Storyteller's discretion, a Willpower point may be spent to forego the Resolve + Composure roll.

Organization: Gorgons have little organization among themselves other than a generally elitist cliquishness. Most Gorgons have a sense of entitlement stemming from their lineage that drives them to associate themselves with only the most prominent, influential or coveted Kindred. Being brought into the Gorgon bloodline is something like being welcomed into a flock of popular girls — as a Gorgon you “don't talk to people like them” and “don't feed from their kind.” The Gorgons are, then, like the bitchy sorority matriarchs of some domains. Elder Gorgons and richer Gorgons have a *de facto* power over their kin, who may be regarded as little sisters or token ugly friends.

In other domains, however, the prestige and exclusivity of the Gorgons is both genuine (in that other Kindred truly do fawn over them) and deserved. These Gorgons are at the center of high-status coterie or in positions of authority because they are extremely capable and, in turn, attract other capable monsters into their orbit. These are the real heiresses of the bloodline, the ones for whom nobility is matter of action, not of association. Elder Gorgons in these groups not only have power, but are bestowed more of it through the deference of their younger sisters, who may be regarded as students or ladies in waiting.

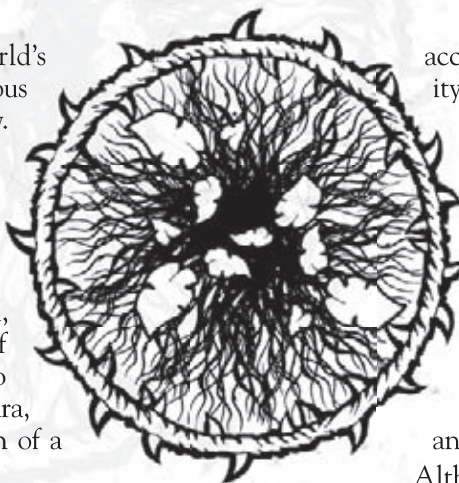
It has not been lost on many modern Acolytes that the essence of the Gorgon's identity is no longer based primarily on faith, but ancestry and appearances.

Concepts: Care-free heiress, crazy old wise-woman, exotic foreign firebrand, fearless corporate maven, high-priced elite assassin, Lady MacBeth with snakes, legendary monster behind the Prince, Mean Girl, seductive evil queen, self-important demagogue, skanky hard-drinking fashionista

THE MARA

IN LIGHTLESS DEPTHS WERE WE SPAWNED. IN LIGHTLESS DEPTHS
DO WE DRINK THE GIFT. COME INTO THE DEEP AND ENTER
THE AGE-OLD REALM OF THE MARA.

In the lightless murk of the world's waters, a horrifying line of monstrous Gangrel dwell, silent and predatory. Concealed beneath the icy waves of northern shores or walking in the murky silt of the blood-warm bayou, they wait to drag their living victims down under the surface to feed upon or present as sacrifice in their warped, wordless rituals. No material goods of the walking world tempt them and no fire threatens them. They are the Mara, the drowned Kindred, the witch-kin of a Goddess both tragic and merciless.



Those few who know the Mara come to understand that they worship a being known as the Sunken Mother, a Tethys-like figure who appears, in their litanies, to have birthed the waters of the world by a union with a titanic sun god. They say she loved and cared for all her countless children, laying them upon the earth and showing them how to spawn a multitude of creatures so that they need never dwell empty and alone. Her attention was so devoted, so focused upon them, that her lover burned with violent jealousy. Eventually, unable to accept that the waters could be more important to the Mother than he was, he took up her body, searing her flesh, and flung her into the depths where she drowned. Shamed by the part they played in her death and hungry for justice, the waters took the lessons of the Sunken Mother and created the Mara as her Kindred grandchildren so that they might wreak bloody vengeance on the God of the Day and his worshippers.

The true origins of these dark, deeply faithful vampires are difficult to discern. It seems that their litany is a mish-mash of ancient Greco-Roman, Celtic and Germanic myths, and it's almost impossible to determine whether those elements precede the more accessible mortal legends or if they're drawn from them. One wonders: did ancient Saxon tribes witness a Mara's vicious attack at a lakeshore and name her Nixe, or did early Mara style themselves after these legends, building a sinister myth to justify their activity? Over the centuries, it has become increasingly difficult to unravel the reality from the fable. Very few

accurate reports of ancient vampiric activity remain in modern nights, and none of those mention the Mara or anything like them at all. Those Kindred who are old enough to know are victims of the fog of long torpor, suffered several times over in most cases, and can contribute little in the way of illumination. Even the eldest of the Mara themselves are unable to attest to their own origins, having slumbered too long or too frequently to speak with any authority on their first nights.

Although they don't keep their own history, there is an early record of a meeting between the Mara and a representative of the Lancea Sanctum. Some time during the 11th century, a Sanctified scholar calling himself Brother Erik, who appears to have been charged with surveying the Kindred population of a portion of northern England, wrote a record of his discoveries. Among the entries, a short passage refers to the bloodline. A rough translation follows:

"... in proximity to the fortress of Mamucium, now long past, a market town is formed of no more than 200 souls. The town has lost some folk and many heads of cattle to the shores of a nearby river. They are often found days or weeks later, floating there. My investigation of the waters has uncovered a cabal of ungodly Kindred wretches calling themselves 'Mara,' damned creatures of extraordinary ugliness and violence. My attempts to bring the missive of Longinus to these horrors met with naught but a most undeserved hostility. With a gnashing of their yellowed fangs, they threatened bloody murder if I remained at the shores of their 'holy mother,' and I withdrew."

Whether or not the Lancea Sanctum chose to act on Brother Erik's discovery is unknown at this time. The region he refers to in the text would correspond roughly to the modern location of Manchester, and it's likely the river he mentions is the Irwell (or the Mersey). There are no other references to the Mara in those areas in Kindred records, and whether or not they remain there now is unknown.

Some time during the 16th century, the Kindred of Copenhagen are said to have encountered a family of the Mara in their harbor waters and made peace with them

there. These Danish Mara even emerged to attend Elysium on several occasions, engaging in negotiation for territory and presenting gifts of honor to the Prince. Conflict arose between them and the land-based Acolytes of the Circle of the Crone, though, resulting in the Final Death of one of the bloodline. The rest withdrew to the ocean, and relations with the domain were brought to an end. There are scattered reports throughout Northern Europe of further encounters, most ending just as badly. Late in the 19th century, Mara are said to have made appearances in several domains of the American South, prompting speculation that one or more may have arrived with sea-borne trade from across the Atlantic. Limited attempts were made to purge or otherwise discourage the Mara from settling on American shores, but the difficulty in verifying their presence (or lack thereof) led to a great deal of wasted effort.

In most territories around the world, the Mara refrain from making contact with other Kindred wherever possible. The Mara prefer to be left alone, hunting and practicing their worship in peace, away from the prying eyes of outsiders. Suspicious of land-dwelling vampires and taught to believe that all surface creatures are either enemies of the Sunken Mother or have forgotten their loyalties to her, the Mara rarely stray from the waters.

Mara in the modern world are, one imagines, very much as they were in the dark centuries of long ago. They may have more modern abodes (the reservoirs of more than one city are known to have housed them, as are a number of wrecked submarines and ships), but their ritual practice and ascetic existence have remained essentially unchanged. They are as inhuman as ever, and as mysterious.

Parent Clan: Gangrel.

Nickname: Lampreys

Covenant: The overwhelming majority of the Mara are Acolytes of the Circle of the Crone. Their malicious ritual practices and severe austerity are alienating influences, forcing a powerful divide between their members and the more moderate, politically active Kindred of other covenants. A lack of understanding often prevents peaceful interaction on both sides: the Lampreys rarely reconcile themselves with the mannerly

posture of Kindred culture and outsider vampires often can't see past the mud-and-blood accoutrements of the bloodline.

There are a few Mara who have been "civilized" by outsider Kindred. Inducted into a covenant by some enthusiastic outsider, these Mara are often paraded around Elysium as an example of the edifying qualities of their new membership. Most chafe against the constant attention and enthused expectations that accompany these "uplifting" conversions though, and eventually return to the chill embrace of dark waters, even if they no longer wish to participate in the rituals of the Circle of the Crone.

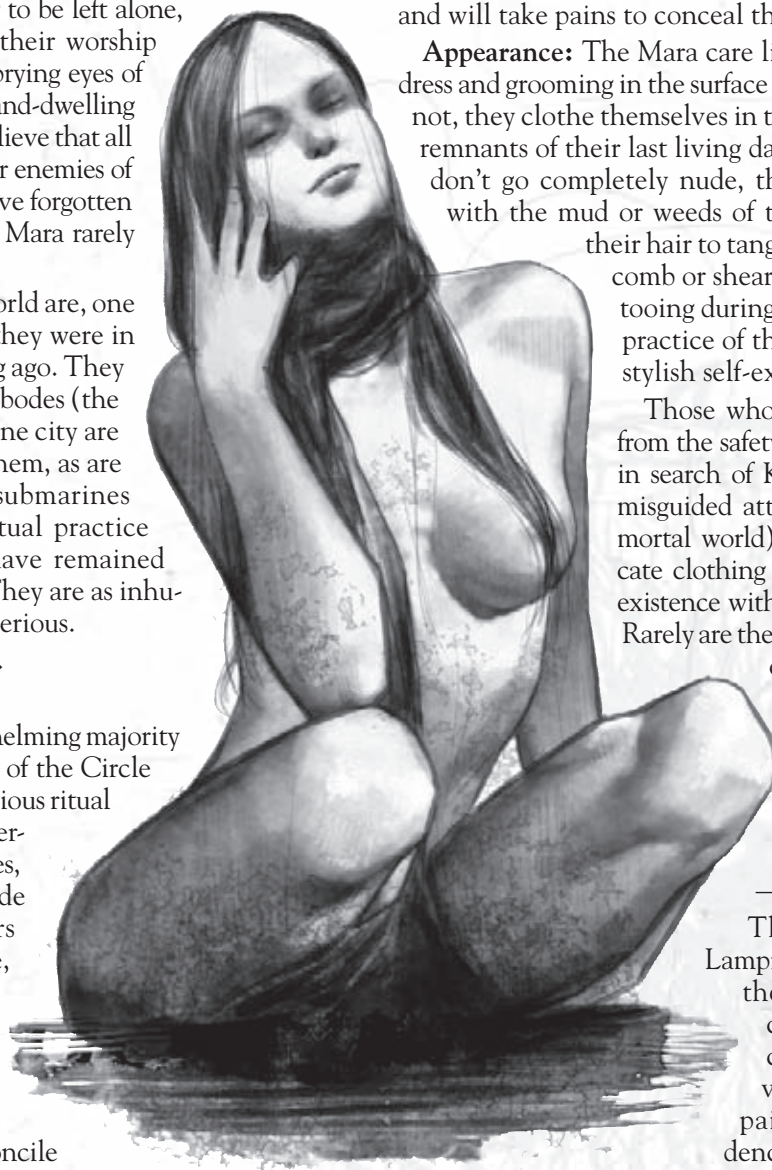
The rare Lampreys who find satisfaction outside the Circle are almost always numbered among the scholars of the Ordo Dracul. Acting against type, these Mara seek an intellectual road to enlightenment and discover their true path in the Coils of the Dragon. These Kindred are often more surprised with their choice than anyone else, and will take pains to conceal their true lineage.

Appearance: The Mara care little for the fashions of dress and grooming in the surface world. More often than not, they clothe themselves in the ragged, waterlogged remnants of their last living day's attire — those who don't go completely nude, that is. Most are caked with the mud or weeds of their haven, and leave their hair to tangle freely, untouched by comb or shear. Ritual scarring or tattooing during Crúac rites is the only practice of the line that approaches stylish self-expression.

Those who do choose to emerge from the safety of their murky havens in search of Kindred company (or a misguided attempt to mix with the mortal world) may take pains to locate clothing and conceal their wild existence with a quick, cursory scrub.

Rarely are these attempts entirely successful, though, and even those few who manage to look the part of a "normal" vampire often carry the scent of their home territory — bog, sea or sewer — unawares.

Those few "civilized" Lampreys who dwell among the Kindred of outsider covenants are usually cared for by mortal servants who take great pains to eliminate evidence of their origins. Before any public appearance, these



poor creatures are scoured, perfumed, plucked, styled and wrapped in appropriately fashionable coverings. The process is almost always interminably torturous for all participants, and is generally avoided unless the appearance is absolutely necessary.

Haven: Because of their weakness, all of the Mara dwell in or near a body of water that is large enough to cover them completely. Beyond that basic need, the actual details and features of the haven are chosen in accordance with the individual tastes of the vampire, and can vary from the filth and horror of a toxic industrial well to the sublime beauty of a coral-sculpted ocean hollow. Many make use of the Haven of Soil (Protean ••) to merge with the waters of their homes during slumber and choose havens that they feel best reflect their souls' truth.

Whatever the superficial details of her home, a Lamprey will take pains to become intimately familiar with its features. She will feed on the fauna, just to learn the taste of its Vitae (even if she is too potent to sustain herself upon it); she will wrap herself in its flora and dig her body down into the silt that lies at its bottom. She will run her fingers over every surface, every pit and growth, identifying it with her own body and working to extend her perceptions to its natural ebb and flow. This is an important ritual for the Mara, and serves a double purpose: it helps the vampire accept her new home as a place of comfort and it gives her a sense of the normal state of the surroundings, the better to alert her if something is amiss.

It is common for the Mara to band together and share a large haven. Some of the lakes, shores and swamps of the world are claimed by Circles of the bloodline, rumored to number five or six members in some cases (and even as many as a dozen Acolytes in one particularly horrifying, oft-told tale among the Kindred of the Louisiana Bayou). These vampires will completely dominate a body of water, ruling it as a domain of their own. Difficulties in maintaining the Masquerade can arise when a single haven is too populous, but no more so than in any surface territory.

Background: The cold, frightening Embrace of the Mara is rarely bestowed upon mortals, and never without careful consideration. Not many of the living are both physically and spiritually hardy enough to survive induction into the deep cult of the Lampreys without going mad. Even the strongest of candidates often barely endure the terrifying, submerged Embrace, and more than a few end up drowned before they can take their sire's Vitae. Those mortals drawn to water are often watched with interest, and of those, the ones who gravitate to traditional belief and practice (instead of modern religion) are considered ideal candidates. Independence is a valuable asset: a number of survivalists and reclusive artists on solitary retreat have ended up among the ranks of the Mara.

The Mara rarely Embrace wealthy mortals. The Mara find that the resulting neonates are often unable to abandon their previous habits, and cannot properly acclimatize

themselves to the ascetic Requiem of the bloodline.

Character Creation: Physical Attributes are of primary importance in satisfying the survival needs of the Mara, especially because of the rigorous demands of their feeding practices. Those who cannot rely upon their speed and strength alone to locate and retrieve sources of Vitae rarely last long enough to devote the necessary attention to the spiritual pursuits of the Circle. Attendant Physical Skills, most especially Athletics, Brawl and Survival, are logical priorities as well. While material Merits are much rarer than Physical or Social ones, nearly every Lamprey has a sizable, naturally secure Haven.

Bloodline Disciplines: Animalism, Obfuscate, Protean, Resilience

Weakness: The Mara are victims of a singularly peculiar curse. If they are not completely submerged head to toe in liquid water while feeding, they gain no sustenance from blood. In fact, the blood drained in a "dry feeding" is mystically transformed to water in the vampire's gullet, and is vomited back up immediately. Since there is no way to prevent this transformation, members of the bloodline must be very careful to avoid hunger frenzy when they are not in a body of water. Even in frenzy, they will instinctively carry their victims to the nearest visible pond, lake or swimming pool — whatever qualifies — but they'll do so with the Beast's attendant lack of attention to discretion or territorial concern, and that can lead to catastrophe.

Only the vampire need be submerged to feed successfully. Part of the victim may be above the surface (though many less humane Lampreys prefer to drag their prey completely underwater just to prevent interruption while draining Vitae or to facilitate disposal of the bloodless body afterwards).

If one of the Mara wishes to appear to have fed successfully above the surface without vomiting immediately, he may spend a point of Vitae to hold the water in his stomach for a scene, as with ordinary food and drink.

Organization: Circles of the Mara are usually relatively small, and so their function is much more informal than most. The eldest of the group defaults to the position of Hierophant (and is often the sire or grandsire of the rest of the Acolytes) and leads the others in rituals, in group hunts and in any dealings with outsider Kindred. If the Circle dwells in a group haven, the location will be the Hierophant's choice. If not, the others come to her home at least twice a week to conduct their rites and receive her wisdom. Keeping frequent (or constant) company not only helps to cement the ties of loyalty in the line but also makes it easier to keep an eye on those members who are suffering from the temptations of the surface world.

Over the centuries, Mara Acolytes have developed a complex language of hums and clicks that they often use to communicate under the surface. One of the first things each member of the line learns is how to understand and speak as his fellow Mara do, so as to enable participation in the holy rites of the line. All of the Crúac rituals of

the Mara are performed in this language, and the entirety of their litany (which is exclusively oral — there are no written records) is likewise encoded.

While the worship by the Lampreys is isolationist and xenophobic in group practice, individual Mara without the support of close relations (whether by accident or design) are known to emerge from the deep on occasion and join up with a surface Circle. Their dripping, sullen presence may be a source of discomfort for more urban, modern Acolytes, but the Mara are no less devoted or talented in their veneration. Some Kindred are frankly fascinated by the mythology of the Mara and eager to hear translations of their litany, slow and difficult as they may be, and many of the line are more tolerant of outside interpretations when separated from their inward-looking under-dwelling Circles.

Each Mara cult prepares a central ritual space for their prayers and rites. The space is usually deep in dark waters, the better to hide it from the prying gaze of the surface world, but really only needs to be submerged enough to allow the Lampreys freedom to move and feed within it. An altar of stone or metal generally marks the center of the space and may be surrounded with decorations as elaborate or sparse as the Acolytes prefer, but these additions are often camouflaged so as to seem random. Many of the Mara choose ritual spaces that are naturally formed, if possible, so as to avoid suspicion in the event of accidental discovery.

Each week, the Mara gather twice to venerate the Sunken Mother and her progeny. On the first evening in the week (as determined by local practice — in some places it's Sunday night, in others it's Monday), they come together and sing a dirge-like humming prayer, commemorating the birth of the waters, the murder of their Goddess and the spawning of their line from the aftermath. In midweek, normally three nights after the previous ritual, they return to the ritual site and perform an eerie, silent rite meant to reassure the waters and reiterate their intent to commemorate the Sunken Mother. A carefully prepared, live surface creature is cut open and allowed to bleed out below the waters. A slow, undulating dance in the cloud of dissipating blood follows, and the Mara take it in whenever it crosses their path. The rest is left for the waters to carry away. After the dance is complete, the Lampreys are free to discuss the needs of the Circle and perform any Crúac rituals appropriate for the week.

In addition to the weekly rites, there are two annual holidays celebrated by the Mara. The first commemorates the occasion of the spring thaw, and accompanies the cracking of the ice in the temperate zones of the world

(or is symbolically marked in March in the Northern Hemisphere, October in the South). It is a jubilant, energetic affair, celebrating the release of the waters and the relative ease with which the Mara may feed. Kindred in torpor are often ceremonially awakened on the first night of the thaw.

The second is a more solemn rite, marking the winter freeze. Once again, in temperate climes, the date is varied and depends on the actual physical formation of ice over the ritual space. In warmer zones, where the water never freezes, a ceremony is still held — in December in the North and May in the South. In all cases, this holiday is a somber, funereal affair as the Mara acknowledge the yearly binding of their holy mothers and the relatively difficult feeding season they now face. Some Mara choose to enter torpor for the winter voluntarily, and will be placed to rest in the ritual space on this night.

Concepts: Chattering mud witch, creature in the well, deepwater spiritual visionary, dockworker's bane, heartbroken mermaid, Invictus Liza Doolittle, reservoir monster, vengefully Embraced real estate agent, whispering strangler, wild-eyed swamp cultist

Crúac: The practice of Crúac among the Mara is distinct and extremely focused on the bloody loss of their Sunken Mother, as well as the recurring themes of drowning, rising from the deep and war with the sun god. All rituals are performed in or under a quantity of water, and the peculiar humming dialect of the line is integral in invocations.

There is little in the Kindred world as alien to human experience as the practice of the Mara. Witnesses to their eerie, slow dances and the mingling of their tangled hair or bone-pale flesh with waterborne blood is enough for most to assume the Mara are, and can only be, thoroughly monstrous beings.

Ritual Variation: The Mother's Eye (Cheval, •• Crúac Ritual)

When a Lamprey wishes to see or hear through the eyes and ears of a surface-dwelling creature, the Mara must make serious preparation. At the beginning of the ritual, she sinks to the bottom of her ritual space, humming a quiet prayer of appeasement for the close contact she intends to make with the dry world above. When her prayer is complete, she floats back upwards, allowing herself to surface.

When next she sees the subject of her ritual, she must cut across one of her eyes with a sharp stone taken from the floor of her sacred space. She tips her head back, allowing her Vitae to pool in the socket. When she submerges again, clearing the blood away and healing the eye, the ritual will be active.



CHAPTER FIVE: DISCIPLINES AND RITUALS

“Be scared and be sacred.”

Oh you who are born of the blood of the gods,

[...] easy is the descent to hell[.]”

—Virgil

DISCIPLINES

AMPHIVENA

The mystic power of the Gorgons takes its name from the Amphisbaena, the serpent with a head at each end of its body, which is said by some to have been spawned from blood that dripped from Medusa’s severed head. Some modern Gorgons claim to have encountered offspring of the Amphisbaena, whose young have spread as far as Delhi and London, if the legends are to be believed. The song of an amphisbaena (as any spawn of the Amphisbaena is called) is supposedly enchanting or maddening, depending on the harmony or disharmony of the two heads.

The Gorgons’ unique Discipline of Amphivena grants its user power over serpents and her own body. Some of these powers, when seen by other Kindred, have lead some to mistake Gorgons for an offshoot of the Gangrel clan. But while this Discipline grant a Medusa bestial, shape-shifting abilities, it’s ultimate aim is to empower her use of the other Disciplines inherited from the Ventrue clan.

• SERPENTINE RAPPORT

The fundamental power of the Gorgons opens the vampire’s intuition to the manners and mindset of serpents. Modern Kindred sometimes call this “unlocking the lizard brain.” This base, animal sensibility grants the vampire insight and affinities that improve her abilities with other Disciplines and Skills, all stemming from her rapport with and reverence for the serpentine mind.

Cost: None

Dice Pool: This power requires no roll to activate and is considered always “on.” The basic effect of this power simply augments the dice pools of other actions. In a way, this power might be considered a kind of universal Specialty in snakes of all sorts. This grants the vampire several general benefits:

- First, the Gorgon gains a +2 bonus on all Animal Ken dice pools involving snakes (except those used to activate other powers of Amphivena). If the Gorgon already has an Animal Ken Specialty in snakes, this power’s +2 bonus replaces it. This bonus applies to Animalism dice pools involving Animal Ken as well.

- The Gorgon is considered to have a “Snakes” Specialty in any suitable Skill in which she has dots of her own. For many Skills, this Specialty grants no real benefit (for example, a “Snakes” specialty in Politics is nonsense and “Snakes” are not a suitable Specialty for combat Skills). A “Snakes” Specialty in Survival, for example, can help a Gorgon locate snakes in the wild. The Storyteller is the final judge of when this “universal Specialty” applies.

- The Gorgon gains a +2 bonus on dice pools when using the Leashing the Beast Power (Animalism •••••) while she or her subject is in contact with a snake subject to (or created with) Serpentine Union (Amphivena ••).

- The Gorgon’s snake ghouls gain a heightened, intuitive awareness of their supernatural state. They may use Vitae to heal themselves and augment Physical dice pools. Plus, the Gorgon’s snake ghouls may learn and use Heightened Senses (Auspex •) and Aura Perception (Auspex ••) if their regnant can teach it to them; these are useful for Gorgons who use Subsume the Lesser Spirit (Animalism •••••) on their ghouls.

Action: N/A

•• SERPENTINE UNION

After a Gorgon has attained her supernatural intuition for the serpentine mind she learns to develop a mystic bond with the serpentine form. To gain powers from a snake, she must first enhance its own mystic potency by projecting hers onto it. Through the use of this power, a Gorgon can then absorb the snake into her body, thereby gaining several potential benefits from it.

Cost: 1 Willpower point

Dice Pool: Presence + Animal Ken + Amphivena vs. Composure + Blood Potency (Blood Potency, in this case, is a stand-in for whatever supernatural trait a subject snake might possess as a result of strange magic or other effects)

Action: Instant, contested; resistance is reflexive. If the subject snake is the Gorgon’s thrall, resistance may be waived.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The Gorgon somehow mis-channels her mystic power. The target snake immediately turns on

her, attacking with all its might until it is dead or out of her presence. The snake enjoys a +3 bonus to its initial attack roll from the Gorgon's spent Willpower point.

Failure: The Gorgon fails to channel her power into the target snake. Her Willpower point is wasted.

Success: The Gorgon infuses some of her supernatural might into the body of the subject snake, thereby preparing it for a mystical union with her undead body. The Gorgon gains the benefits described below.

Exceptional Success: The character gains no special additional benefits above those described below.

Once a snake is prepared with a successful activation roll, the Gorgon swallows it to complete the union. As long as the snake stays within her, she gains a +2 bonus on all perception-related dice pools involving smell or touch; her tongue becomes visibly forked and her skin becomes dry and coarse. The Gorgon may also gain a +2 bonus to vision-based perception dice pools, but her eyes are visibly transformed into those of a snake during such actions. Finally, the Gorgon gains a +1 bonus to either her Dexterity or Strength, as decided when she activates the power.

An absorbed snake can also be transmuted into an amount of Vitae equal to its Size, without any of the usual potency loss associated with animal Vitae (see **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 165), regardless of the Gorgon's Blood Potency. This is an instant action. Once a snake has been consumed for Vitae, it can be transmuted back into a snake (or snakes) equal in Size to the amount of Vitae expended per turn. These conjured snakes are wholly mundane and not under the effects of Serpentine Union, though they may be subjected to any of the Gorgon's Disciplines on subsequent turns. Transmuted snakes must leave the Gorgon's body somehow, whether through the mouth or through cuts and slashes on her body.

Because spending Vitae is a reflexive action, the Gorgon can release snakes from her blood as a reflexive action as well. Thus she may loose tiny vipers from her body through a gash made in her gut by a fearsome witch-hunter, the snakes slipping out of her flesh where a mortal woman might bleed.

A Gorgon may only subject one snake to this power at a time. Once a snake has been digested into Vitae, the Gorgon loses any perception or Attribute bonuses derived from it. A Gorgon may only absorb (that is, swallow) snakes of a Size equal to or less than her own minus one.

If this power is used on a snake too large for the Gorgon to absorb, she may instead feed from the snake to gain Vitae on a one-for-one ratio to its Size, without any of the usual potency loss associated with animal Vitae, provided all such feeding is done within the same scene.

••• ARMS OF THE AMPHISBAENA

Upon activation of this power, the Gorgon's hands are transformed into grotesque lethal monstrosities like the heads of snakes. The precise effect varies from Gorgon to

Gorgon; some grow curved, yellow fangs from the pads of their fingers while others open gaping pink mouths on their palms. Whatever the precise effect, the details are always serpentine. These bizarre transmogrifications evoke the image of the Amphisbaena itself — the two-headed serpent — and enable the vampire to menace foes, feed rapidly through terrible violence and, eventually, deliver perilous venom.

Cost: 1 Vitae per scene

Dice Pool: This power requires no dice pool to activate. The Gorgon's hands transform through a silent act of will. Once transformed, however, her hands may hiss or spit (harmlessly) as if they were angry snakes. A Gorgon that has absorbed a snake using Serpentine Union may even taste the air with flickering tongues from her palms. At the Storyteller's discretion, this power may grant as much as a +2 bonus to Intimidation dice pools; it should make normal dealings with mortals and unprepared vampires more difficult by a like amount.

These transformed hands can be used to make bite attacks (using the Brawl Skill) that deal lethal damage. Each hand is considered to have a Damage rating of 1. A Gorgon doesn't have to grab an opponent to bite with her hands if her goal is simply to deal damage. Each hand may be used for separate attacks, though this power doesn't grant the vampire any special ambidextrous ability or associated fighting styles. If the Gorgon uses both hands in an attack, she gains the benefit of both hands' Damage.

Should the Gorgon want to feed through her hands, she must achieve a grapple hold on her target first, using both hands. She gains the +2 bonus Damage bonus from her altered hands only to the attack roll, but not to rolls to contest the grapple. A Gorgon with Arms of the Amphisbaena active may draw two Vitae from a target in a single turn — one Vitae through her transformed hands and one through her mouth. (See **Vampire: The Requiem**, p. 165 for information on biting for damage or Vitae.)

A Gorgon's transformed hands do not gain any of the benefits of the Kiss. Their bite is ferocious, tearing and terrible; the Amphisbaena's teeth are not seductive. The wounds caused by transformed hands cannot be closed with the lick of a vampiric tongue.

The effects of this power last for one scene unless the Gorgon transforms her hands back prematurely. Reactivating this power requires the expenditure of another Vitae.

This power cannot be used simultaneously with Claws of the Wild (Protean •••) unless the vampire possesses the Claws of Amphisbaena Devotion, as well.

Action: Reflexive.

•••• MEDUSA'S VENOM

After she learns to alter her flesh, a Gorgon learns to alter her blood. With this power, the vampire transmutes her Vitae into a mystic toxin, potentially capable of incapacitating or killing kine and Kindred alike. Aged Gorgons are rumored to have no Vitae in their bodies at all — only a vicious mixture of poisons.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: Strength + Animal Ken + Amphivena

Action: Reflexive; resistance is reflexive.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The Gorgon fails so utterly to poison her Vitae that she is unable to use this power again for the duration of the scene.

Failure: The Gorgon fails to transmute her Vitae into poison, but may try again next turn.

Success: The Gorgon transmutes her blood into a paralytic or lethal toxin, as described below.

Extraordinary Success: The Gorgon transmutes her blood into toxin without any special benefit.

With a successful roll, this power reflexively transforms one of the Gorgon's Vitae into poison. The power grants the character no special means to deliver the poison, however. It may be applied to a melee weapon with an instant action or delivered reflexively through a bite attack, however. Any toxin created through the use of this power must come into contact with a target's blood, however, to be of any use.

When a Gorgon first learns this power, she is capable of afflicting targets only with a paralytic toxin. This toxin has a Toxicity equal to the Gorgon's dots in Amphivena. This poison is resisted like any mundane toxin, except that it effects Kindred and kine alike. Damage suffered from this toxin is lost from the subject's Strength, rather than his Health, and heals at a rate of 1 dot every 15 minutes. With the expenditure of three experience points, the Gorgon gains the ability to create a second toxin, which effects Dexterity rather than Strength.

By spending another three experience points, a Gorgon can also learn how to create a necrotizing toxin that deals lethal damage to living targets equal to its Toxicity. Against other vampires, this toxin destroys Vitae in place of causing lethal damage.

No matter how many Vitae a Gorgon can spend per turn, only one application of one type of toxin can be created each turn. A Gorgon can store a number of doses of toxin in her body equal to her Stamina. These toxins decay rapidly, however; each dose reverts to harmless water come dawn, when the Gorgon must vomit it out of her system. There is no way to store Gorgon venom to avoid this disenchantment.

Kindred victims of this power may substitute their Blood Potency for Resolve when resisting the effects of Gorgon venom. See the **World of Darkness Rulebook** for more information on poisons (p. 180-181) and Attribute damage (p. 43 and p. 167).

Suggested Modifiers

Modifier Situation

- | | |
|----|--|
| -1 | Each previous attempt to use this power in the same night (successful or not). This penalty is cumulative. |
|----|--|

-2

Character is not in contact with a venomous snake when this power is used.

••••• BODY OF THE GORGON

At the height of her supernatural power, a Gorgon becomes a perilous, inhuman monster. With a bit of blood, her whole form changes, infused with the timeless, dreaded enchantment of the mythic gorgons. Her body is transformed into soft and scaly serpentine coils, her mouth becomes a fanged pit and her eyes cast a profane yellow glow. She becomes dangerous even to behold.

Cost: 1 Vitae per scene (plus 1 Vitae per turn for additional abilities)

Dice Pool: This power requires no roll to invoke. The transformation from a human shape to a monstrous one (or back again) takes one turn to complete. The Gorgon cannot take any action or even move during this time.

While in her monstrous form, a Gorgon's Size increases to 6, including her new tail. Her species factor for Speed becomes 8 (instead of the normal human factor of 5). The Body of the Gorgon spoils the vampire's ability to interact with anything but snakes and other Gorgons, however. Attempts to use Animalism or Social Skills on subjects other than snakes and other Gorgons suffer a penalty equal to the Gorgon's dots in Amphivena.

A vampire effected by Body of the Gorgon can attempt to spray Medusa's Venom at a target with open wounds (meaning, in game terms, a target with one or more points of lethal or aggravated damage currently marked on his Health track.) The Gorgon must be within close-combat range of the target, however, and succeed at a raw Dexterity + Amphivena roll penalized by the target's Defense and any other appropriate modifiers.

The most profound aspect of the Body of the Gorgon, however, is doubtless its ability to amplify the powers of Dominate through a great and terrible mystic radiance. On her turn, a vampire transmogrified by the Body of the Gorgon can reflexively spend one Vitae to activate the Command or Mesmerize powers of Dominate against all onlookers. This reflexive use of Dominate puts the onus on subjects to look *away* from the Gorgon, rather than tasking *her* with achieving eye contact. The Gorgon must issue a single instruction to all onlookers, though each contests the action on his own as usual.

Onlookers must be able to see the Gorgon directly. Reflections and broadcasts do not carry her power, but simple filters like sunglasses offer no protection. At the Storyteller's discretion, substantial visual interference between the onlooker and the Gorgon such as smoke or a waterfall can grant as much as a +5 bonus to the onlooker's contested roll to resist these powers.

The Body of the Gorgon persists for the remainder of the scene unless the vampire chooses to transform back to her normal form earlier.

Action: Instant

RALAB

In Arabic, “ralab” means “to vanquish” and the signature Discipline of the Asnâm is aptly named. It blurs the lines between an Idol and his worshipper, always to the worshipper’s detriment. While the bonds that pass among Kindred and kine are already potent, the Asnâm exploit those bonds to depths of loyalty and degradation that most Kindred can only envy. Through Ralab, the Idol can draw upon the mortal strengths of his followers, offsetting Kindred restrictions in a manner that might baffle even some in the Ordo Dracul. On the other end of the bargain, the mortal worshipper can taste the power of the undead while retaining his mortality — at least, to the extent that his goddess permits.

• PACT OF ALLURE

Even the most primitive students of Ralab are armed with something to offer — and something to take. This Discipline takes the form of a pact between the Sanam and a mortal, who must willingly submit to it (though the Sanam is under no compulsion to explain the full ramifications of the deal). The essence of the pact is that the pair exchanges that intangible quality called “allure” until the next sunset. Neither party changes appearance, but the mortal typically seems more poised, charming, vital — she’s nicer to look at, though not in any way anyone can name.

The pact is consummated when the Sanam anoints the human with his blood, and the human lets the Sanam taste hers. (Only a drop is needed, though often Asnâm imply that much more is required.)

In olden times, this Discipline was commonly used as a direct exchange — you pay me, I make you beautiful for a while. In modern nights, fewer people believe in such things (though there are still gullible occult dabblers in every city), so a Sanam is more likely to use this with one of his own long-term followers to create a sort of “body double.”

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: This Discipline is not rolled.

Action: Once the Asnâm has taken and spent a Vitae from the subject, the mortal (or ghoul) can substitute the Sanam’s Presence score for her own, if it’s higher. This bonus lasts until the Asnâm next rises from sleep or torpor. (Thus the risk to the Asnâm: if the ghoul learns this, he may have good reason not to rescue his regnant from torpor so quickly.) Typically, only the homely seek out the Pact of Allure, but even the lovely can be driven to extremes by competition. Many Asnâm use Majesty to “polish up” what they offer, though the effects of that Discipline do not enhance a mortal who has made a Pact of Allure.

For that same duration, the Sanam does not provoke the Predator’s Taint in other Kindred (though he still needs to make Resolve + Composure rolls for frenzy as usual). His aura may reveal his nature, but the Taint is muted for the duration.

Specifically, it’s redirected to his mortal pact-mate. Her aura shows her humanity, but she provokes Predator’s Taint in vampires as if she had the Sanam’s Blood Potency.

For an additional three experience points, this power may be expanded, granting the subject the equivalent of the Striking Looks Merit (••) for its duration. If the subject already has Striking Looks ••, then this expanded power grants Striking Looks •••• instead.

•• HAVEN OF FLESH

At this level, the lines between ghoul and goddess are so blurred that one can flow into another. By taking her worshipper into her arms, the Sanam can dissolve into his very body, dwelling invisibly within him until she chooses to emerge.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: This Discipline requires no roll to invoke. The overlap of Idol and servant has a powerful effect on each. The Sanam can only slumber within her ghoul (though there are rumors of Auspex Devotions that let her perceive and remain awake). The Sanam may choose to wake up at nightfall, or if the thrall becomes afraid or any time the thrall takes damage. Any damage done to the thrall while the Sanam is ensconced is done to the Sanam as well, though bullets still only do bashing damage to her. If the thrall dies, she is automatically ejected from his corpse, coalescing like oil from his skin. No matter how or why she emerges, she has the option of automatically taking as much of her thrall’s remaining Vitae as she chooses.

The ghoul, while holding his Idol, enjoys a calm bliss of satiation — like a mild version of the euphoria of the Kiss, but extended on and on. All his dice pools suffer a –2 penalty due to this lassitude, but he can still walk, talk, reason, get on the plane to Fresno — even fight if he must. He may not draw on any of his mistress’ Vitae, however, save that which he had before she merged with him. If he does use up all the Vitae in his system, he feels no craving for it. After all, he has its source slumbering within — she can’t go far.

It is clear to Aura Sight that *something* is strange about the conjoined entities, though unless the viewer has seen this unique overlapping of auras before he’s unlikely to recognize what they mean. Other than that, there’s little way to recognize the phenomenon. The ghoul carrier gains no weight, provokes no Taint and doesn’t even spook animals.

Action: Instant

••• THE INFINITE CHALICE

This feared Discipline is the foundation upon which an Asnâm can build a regional or even national cult. Most Kindred keep their ghouls close, so that the thrall can protect the master while the master enhances the thrall. But the Infinite Chalice allows the bond of blood to transcend mere space, so that a Sanam may feed from a ghoul regardless of distance, or replenish his servant’s Vitae across miles, time zones and oceans.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Dice Pool: Strength + Occult + Ralab – the subject's Stamina

Action: Instant

This Discipline permits a transfer of Vitae between regnant and ghoul. Only the Kindred half of the pair can initiate the process.

For each success rolled, the Idol can drain one Vitae (though he may take less if he so chooses). There is no swooning Kiss effect with such feeding, or pain. The ghoul may not even notice, if his regnant takes only a little. On the other hand, the ghoul may pale and pass out, suddenly and mysteriously a liter short on precious blood.

When replenishing a ghoul's supply, the Kindred may transfer one Vitae for each success rolled. He may donate less — for example, rolling three successes but only giving his ghoul one Vitae. Under no circumstances can he grant a ghoul more Vitae than the ghoul's Stamina permits.

Suggested Modifiers

Modifier	Situation
+2	The Sanam spends his last point of Willpower to activate this Discipline
+1	The ghoul is within sight of the user.
—	The ghoul is within 100 miles of the user.
–1	The ghoul is more than 100 miles away.
–3	The ghoul is more than 500 miles away.
–5	The ghoul is more than 1,000 miles away.

•••• OF WILL UNDIVIDED

Asnâm who are already glutted on the physical blood of their slaves can, with further study of Ralab, transfer the inner strength that is the very core of identity. A Sanam may bolster a tried-and-true worshipper to nearly superhuman levels of competence and concentration with this Discipline. Far more often, the Sanam uses it selfishly, sometimes leaving his thrall a veritable empty shell of a personality.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Occult + Ralab – the subject's Resolve

Action: Reflexive

This Discipline permits the transfer of Willpower between Sanam and ghoul. Only the Kindred half of the pair can initiate the process. With any number of successes, the Sanam can transfer a single Willpower point. If he's draining, the ghoul loses a point of Willpower and the vampire gains it. If the Sanam is sending, the ghoul gains a point of Willpower and the Sanam loses it.

Suggested Modifiers

Modifier	Situation
+1	The ghoul is within sight of the user.
—	The ghoul is within 100 miles of the user.
–1	The ghoul is more than 100 miles away.

–3

The ghoul is more than 500 miles away.

–5

The ghoul is more than 1,000 miles away.

••••• UNHOLY AVATAR

If there is a more odious, inhuman and self-serving Discipline studied by the Asnâm, no one outside the bloodline is talking about it. The depraved apex of Ralab answers the question, "Why would a vampire bargain for a living infant, anyway?"

Through the warping influence of her blood, a Sanam who acquires a child who is too young to walk or speak can so entangle the child's life with her Requiem that upon the destruction of her Kindred frame, her spirit moves on to vanquish that of the child (even if the child is grown by the time this fateful night comes). The soul of the child passes on to whatever waits beyond death. The Sanam retains the memories and knowledge of her Requiem, only now in a new place, residing in a new body.

One of the Asnâm could infect a child with this curse, leave him somewhere to resume some normal life and then unexpectedly seize control when necessary.

Cost: 1 Willpower *dot* plus 5 Vitae (see below)

Dice Pool: Presence + Occult + Ralab versus the subject's Resolve + Composure

Action: To anoint the subject: instant; resistance is reflexive. To transfer the vampire's consciousness: reflexive; resistance is reflexive.

The complete use of Unholy Avatar requires two rolls. The first is made when the victim is still an infant (less than one year old) and requires the expenditure of five Vitae and one Willpower *dot*. One of these Vitae must be fed to the child. If the role is successful, there are several effects.

- The child cannot be placed under a full Vinculum, and upon being fed any Vitae, makes a reflexive Stamina + Resolve roll to resist developing even a partial bond. A single success is sufficient to shake off the false adoration of the blood bond, no matter how potent the Vitae consumed. This protection persists until the Sanam takes over the child's body, until the child is made another vampire's ghoul or until death, whichever comes first. The supernatural bond of thralldom that binds a ghoul to his regnant supersedes this power's protection. Thus the Asnâm is faced with the quandary of making his Unholy Avatar his ghoul or of maintaining his back-up corpse's protective anonymity.

- The child develops an extreme sensitivity to daylight. He suffers a –2 penalty to all actions taken in direct sunlight. The subject sunburns easily, possibly even suffering one point of bashing damage per additional hour spent in full sunlight after the first four (at the Storyteller's discretion).

- No Asnâm can gain nourishment from feeding off this child, though other Kindred can feed from it as normal. Vitae taken from the subject harms her but is not claimed by the feeding Kindred — it simply vanishes.

- An Asnâm instinctively knows if his Avatar suffers lethal or aggravated damage or is killed. This effect operates no matter how far the vampire is from her subject.

- If the Unholy Avatar is Embraced, he is released from this power's effects (as his body has effectively died).

- The child can (if the Sanam wishes) be ghoulized with most of the normal effects — addiction, mental instability and access to Disciplines. However, one notable exception is that the child's Vinculum resistance prevents him from becoming maniacally devoted to his Idol.

The Asnâm often ghoul these children, once they reach the peak of their physical prowess and appearance — by keeping the Avatar eternally young, the Sanam ensures a fitting vessel when she decides (or is forced) to move on. Aura Sight reveals that there is something occulted about the Avatar, but unless the viewer is familiar with the effect, he's unlikely to recognize the tell-tale signs for what they are.

The Sanam cannot finish the transaction required by this power until her own demise, and even then it's an uncertain thing. If she is slain (or kills herself because the Avatar's body or circumstances are more desirable than her own), she makes the second roll to complete this power's invocation, which costs no Vitae. If that roll garners even a single success, she takes over the Avatar's body, which becomes, in that moment, that of a vampire. Any blood (Kindred or mortal) that was in the Avatar's body remains there when the new tenant moves in.

When an Asnâm's consciousness moves into its new body, the following changes are made:

- The Asnâm's Mental Skills and Attributes replace those of the Unholy Avatar.

- The child's Physical Attributes replace those of the Asnâm.

- The Asnâm's Composure and Manipulation replace the child's. The child's Presence replaces the Asnâm's.

- All of the Asnâm's Social and Physical Skills are reduced by two dots, as the Asnâm is not familiar with his new body. If the Unholy Avatar is not yet old enough to be a playable character (by the Storyteller's standards), then these diminished Skills may be reduced even further until the Asnâm's new body comes of age (see below). Some Skills (such as Expression, Intimidation or Athletics) may reflect the Asnâm's former abilities faster than others, as the Storyteller sees fit.

- Merits must be handled on a case-by-case basis. The Asnâm's Mental Merits most likely survive the transfer, but Physical Merits may no longer be usable until the Asnâm once again fulfills their prerequisites. Social Merits might be lost if Contacts and Allies no longer recognize the character.

- The vampire's Humanity replaces that of the child. The vampire's Blood Potency drops by one.

- Once the vampire's wicked will replaces the subject's, the new body begins to age and grow. This process takes a number of nights equal to 10 minus the vampire's Blood Potency.



Over this time, the avatar's body alters to resemble the age that the vampire was at the time of his Embrace — unless the avatar was the Asnâm's ghoul, in which case the ghoul's *apparent* age at the time of the vampire's destruction determines the body's apparent age at the end of its transformation. These days of change are extremely awkward and painful for the vampire, who's new body may be transformed from that of an infant to that of an old woman in a matter of hours.

- The Asnâm's new body is effectively Embraced when the vampire's will usurps it. It is considered to have Vitae equivalent to the body's Health and be immediately subject to all the banes of vampiric existence — including the damage of sunlight.

Some Avatars are utterly ignorant of their fate. They are placed in orphanages, find good homes and often receive excellent health care and schooling, courtesy of some “mysterious benefactor.” Indeed, their lives seem charmed, coddled and protected by some anonymous mentor, until the day their spouses wake up and find the Avatars radically different . . .

Other Avatars know full well their fate. Even without a Vinculum, the wiles, Majesty and addiction of being Idols' ghouls can so warp the Avatars' minds that they are willing, even honored, to give up their body for their mistresses — though most Avatars are attached enough to themselves to try and stave off that eventuality. An Unholy Avatar who fights against his mistress' plans is rare. After all, one false move could prematurely end her existence.

If an Idol has multiple Unholy Avatars in waiting, he is transferred into the one subjected to this power the earliest.

DEVOTIONS

CALL OF COURAGE

(Crúac ••, Nightmare ••)

Using Nightmare to feed is problematic, but for Acolytes who practice the Call of Courage, feeding is almost beside the point. This is a Devotion for those whose destiny it is to be the Minotaur, Grendel or Baba Yaga. Call of Courage frightens the weak and draws the strong. It's not a safe Devotion, but many find it a deeply satisfying one.

Cost: —

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Intimidate + Nightmare. (The Nosferatu clan weakness does not apply to the Devotion user's roll.)

Action: Instant, but see below.

The Acolyte who uses Call of Courage radiates a sense of deep unease. This radius starts about 10 yards out from him, and every success he rolls pushes it out another 10 yards. All mortals inside that radius are affected, but supernatural beings are immune.

Every mortal affected gets a sense of the Nosferatu's location, accurate to about 10 yards. The subject with the highest Willpower feels frightened, but with a growing

conviction that the only way to resolve his terror is to go straight to where the Acolyte is and confront his fears. Everyone else feels that going there is the most foolish and dangerous thing anyone could possibly do.

This sense cannot, by itself, compel a mortal into a particular action. Rather, it imparts a grave challenge to one bold individual and a warning to all others. Whether subjects choose to heed this mystic impulse is up to them — usually. If the Storyteller wants a mechanical means to determine (or enforce) the reaction of a mortal subject, she may pit the vampire's Manipulation + Intimidate + Nightmare versus the subject's Resolve + Composure in a reflexive, contested roll. If the vampire wins this contest, he may instill a sense of dreadful destiny in the subject, compelling the mortal to seek out the vampire's position. This may come in the form of a grim vision, a phantom voice or even just a fleeting feeling.

This power does not undermine a subject's intelligence, exactly. The subject doesn't simply march carelessly to his doom. Rather, he feels that, even though it may be a trap, it is a trap he was *meant* to confront and overcome. He may be afraid, he may go in the maze armed and armored, but he goes.

Subjects who are not drawn — those who are frightened of the vampire's position by the Call of Courage — are likewise free to make their own decisions whether to stay or go. If the Storyteller needs a mechanical means to settle the issue, the same contested action as above can be used, except that mortals avoid the vampire's position if the vampire wins the contest.

The dread oozing out of the Acolyte is more of an emotional or spiritual fear, as opposed to the trembling terror inflicted by other uses of Nightmare. Thus, no dice pool bonuses or penalties affect mortals who stay or go. Nonetheless, the most common outcome of Call of Courage is to bring the bravest mortal nearby into direct conflict, alone.

This power costs 12 experience points to learn.

CLAWS OF AMPHISBAENA

(Amphivena •••, Protean •••)

This power combines the bizarre transmogrification of Amphivena with the feral potency of Protean.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: This power involves to roll to activate. Rather, when a vampire with this power activates both Claws of the Wild and Arms of Amphisbaena, she gains both the enhanced blood-drinking capability of Amphivena ••• and the aggravated damage capability bestowed by Protean •••. Because each of these powers requires a reflexive action to activate, the Storyteller may rule that each power must be activated on a separate turn.

Action: Reflexive

This power costs 15 experience points to learn.

THE HEKAU

(Auspex ••••, Crúac ••)

This Devotion is, for now, unique to the Covey of the Three Roads. The Hekau allows the faction's members to scan a crowd, listening to the murmur of all the thoughts in the room. They listen not only for thoughts, but for spoken words, too, and they even catch glimpses of all the collected auras. The witch listens and watches intently until she finds what she is looking for: a persistent question or nagging indecision in the mind of a nearby vampire. Once the witch finds this, she has her prey. It is time to prepare her offer of aid.

Cost: 1 Vitae

Dice Pool: Wits + Occult + Auspex

Action: Instant (though activation may take several minutes)

With this power, the witch does not literally hear all the thoughts in the room — or, she does, but those thoughts cannot be deciphered into a coherent string of information. This power does not work by the vampire consciously uncovering a question or indecision in one of the room's Kindred. Instead, she opens herself to the power, and it tells her who stands at the crossroads, and what problem or uncertainty keeps them there. (In other words, a player can't use this power to hear all the thoughts in the room. It comes across only as a maddening tangle of murmurs and whispers, an incomprehensible jumble.)

If the roll to activate this Devotion is successful, it grants the witch a target at the crossroads, and provides her with one question or statement that encapsulates his problem. (For example: "I continue to be humiliated at Elysium" or "How can I punish my adversary without him knowing it was me?") Each success beyond the first allows the witch to know one more detail of the subject's quandry. These details might include names, dates, physical locations or supplementary physical details. With three successes, for example, the witch might learn that the subject's question is about how to defeat an adversary (the first success), the adversary's name (the second success) and the last time the target and his adversary confronted one another (the third success). This information comes in the subject's own voice or in words the subject has heard or read first-hand. Information the subject does not know cannot be gleaned through this power.

This Devotion has a radius around the vampire equal to twice her Wits dots in yards. A single roll is enough to listen in on virtually any space, provided the vampire has toured the area. Once the vampire has defined her search area by "painting" it with her area of affect, she makes the Instant action to activate the power. The Storyteller is the final judge of how long it takes the user to define the search area — a small room might be completely within the radius of her power,

while a large club might require 20 minutes of scouting in preparation for the power's use.

This power costs 18 experience points to learn.

MEDUSA'S SCALES

(Amphivena •••, Resilience •••)

With this power, a Gorgon can transform her flesh into firm, shining scales sturdy enough to protect her from harm. These scales grant temporary armor, shedding and flaking away soon after they form.

Cost: 1 Vitae per scene

Dice Pool: Strength + Animal Ken + Amphivena

Action: Instant

If the roll is successful, the Gorgon grows scales over the course of her turn. They rise up and break free of her flesh like a peeling burn, hardened and crusted with blood. These scales grant the Gorgon armor (Rating: 3, Defense: -1) against all physical attacks except fire. Each success of fire damage destroys one point of the armor's Rating in addition to damaging the Gorgon as usual (the armor is a part of her, after all).

This power can only be activated once per scene. It costs 15 experience points to learn.

CRÚAC

Crúac has been known to the Kindred since the earliest nights. Some legends of the Circle claim that the first Crúac ritual was born when the first vampire fed, others that the Crone wove all of them in the nights before time and now teaches them to her chosen servants.

Wherever Crúac came from, it is the truly defining feature of the Circle. Only those within the Circle teach it; only those within the Circle learn it. A few renegades might know its rituals, but woe be to those who think to pass their knowledge on. Crúac is bloody, primal and powerful, and the same is true of those who guard its secrets.

THE NATURE OF CRÚAC

Crúac is not simply a matter of performing certain actions, speaking certain words and sacrificing Vitae. Blood magic is a matter of the state of the soul of the vampire. Those Kindred who know a Crúac ritual have had it branded into their being, and that brand is expressed through the ritual.

The ritual itself is both essential and irrelevant. There must be a ritual. It is not possible to invoke Crúac with a simple effort of will and invisible expenditure of Vitae. The ritual may be very brief, particularly if a skilled ritualist performs an easy ritual, but it is always present.

On the other hand, the *details* of the ritual seem to be largely irrelevant. Different traditions within the covenant perform the rituals in different ways, and they all work. What is more, if a Kindred knows a Crúac ritual's power, she can learn other practices to enact it simply by learning new words or dances. Ritual forms learned in this way work just as well as the one she learned initially.

That is not to say that any old ritual works. There are some that do, and some that do not. No one among the Acolytes truly understands what makes the difference, although many seek answers — and many claim to have them.

CRÚAC AND HUMANITY

Dots in the Crúac Discipline do not allow a vampire to do anything. Only individual rituals do. Nevertheless, the dots a vampire has in Crúac limit the maximum level of his Humanity to 10 minus dots in Crúac. For low levels of Crúac, this is rarely a practical problem; very few Kindred have Humanities of 9 or 10.

While vampires do not know about dots and Humanity scores, they do know that knowledge of Crúac limits how closely the vampire can approach to humanity. This does not worry most Acolytes — they accept that they are not human, and thus are not supposed to act human. What interests them is *why* Crúac has this effect. The number of rituals a vampire knows seems to make no difference, though that is the most important measure of power for many blood sorcerers.

Theories are many and varied, and draw on a myriad different mythologies. The most popular are variations on a single theme, however: that the Discipline prepares a vampire's soul to receive the imprint of the rituals, and that in that preparation some elements of humanity are scourged away, perhaps to make way for divine knowledge. A soul more in tune with Crúac can accept the truth of more powerful rituals, and force more power through weaker ones.

Legends claim that vampires with potent blood can gain access to Crúac rituals that far outstrip the power of those commonly known. Some claim that the most powerful rituals (that is, each of the ••••• rituals) turn the ritualist into an avatar of particular deities. Of course, to learn the ritual allowing such a literal deification the vampire must give up her humanity — gods are not human, and humans are not godly. A master of Crúac is.

LOSING CRÚAC

What if a ritualist decides to turn her back on Crúac and seeks to restore her Humanity? Is this possible?

It is. A player may choose to raise her character's Humanity above the maximum level permitted by her score in Crúac. When she does so, the dot of Crúac, and all rituals of that level, is lost. The character does not regain the experience points, and the abilities do not come back if her Humanity later drops once more. The increase in Humanity washes the vampire's soul clean of the rituals, and they must be learned again if a reforming ritualist changes her mind.

(At the Storyteller's discretion, if the lingering temptation of once-known mystic powers is important to the story, a character might not lose access to Crúac rituals immediately. Rather, she might lose her dot in Crúac but retain her rituals for a year and a night (or some other suitably arcane period). When the deadline comes, and the rituals are about to be lost forever, will the

character still be willing to surrender her mystic powers for the sake of her Humanity? Or will she spend experience points to regain her Crúac dot and retain her rituals before it's too late?)

It is incredibly rare for a ritualist to turn her back utterly on Crúac. The stories of those who have are legends on a par with legends of vampires who have achieved Golconda.

CRÚAC IN THE GAME

The dice pool for performing Crúac is Manipulation + Occult + Crúac. This represents the three sources of power for the ritualist.

Manipulation is her wiles, her ability to persuade the forces of the universe — or the magical Beast within herself — to give her what she wants. Ritualists who rely on Manipulation tend to be very expressive in their rituals, shading every word with pleading emotion or turning every gesture into an imperious signal of command.

Those who emphasize **Occult**, in contrast, play up the details of the rituals and their sympathetic correspondences with other occult creatures and phenomena. If a ritual requires a knife, this ritualist uses a knife embellished with names of power. If the ritual requires a chant, the ritualist holds forth an image of the being named therein.

Crúac, finally, measures the fitness of the ritualist's very soul. A ritualist with many dots in Crúac imparts an unmistakable quality of authenticity to every part of a ritual. It might still be horrific, or stomach-turning, or glorious, but even a mortal viewer gets the sense that there is something entirely proper about this creature behaving this way. Of course, that might inspire an intense desire to destroy such an evident monster.

This mystical authenticity may impart a sense of ancient but forgotten traditions, chthonic creepiness, fairy-tale dreaminess, fearsome wildness or practically anything else, but the influence of Crúac dots are always spiritual or supernatural. The influence of Manipulation dots may be terrifying, ecstatic or sexy, but they are always emotional, whether animal or humane. The influence of Occult dots may be archaic or modern, Eastern or Western, but they are always complex, precise and intellectual.

INTERPRETATIONS OF CRÚAC

Crúac is about manipulating someone or something. The manipulation may be a petition, a command or a deception but is essentially an interaction with something *other*. No vampire who knows Crúac rituals disputes this. Similarly, no blood sorcerers dispute that the power is real, depends on blood and is ultimately granted from somewhere outside the control of the Kindred (even if that uncontrolled place is thought to be *inside* the vampire). The details, however, are widely debated, even within groups with otherwise uniform beliefs.

THE ROLE OF THE RITUAL

As noted before, the same effect can be produced by very different rituals. Some sorcerers speculate that specific effects are caused by the details of the rituals, and that it just happens that there are several ways to bring about the same goal. Others, however, believe that the ritual itself is rather unimportant.

The most common view is that the ritual petitions the gods to cause a certain effect. Different rituals petition different gods (and define “gods” in different ways), but petition them for the same effect. In this view, the scars on a ritualist’s soul show that she is worthy to have the petition answered, which is why simply repeating the actions of a ritualist is not enough to bring about the effect.

The other common view is that the ritual resonates with something within the vampire, amplifies it, allowing the ritualist to draw out the power necessary to cajole the powers whose intervention is sought. In this view, all ritualists invoke the same power but use a ritual that is appropriate to their own personality.

Finally, some believe that the ritual merely draws the attention of the appropriate powers, but that it is the mark on the vampire’s soul and the sacrifice of blood that actually seals the bargain. The different rituals are merely different notable signals; anything that gets the attention of the correct power will do. Diana prefers slaughtered stags, but the Morrigan’s eyes are drawn to bloody heifers.

THE PETITIONED

The second substantial debate on Crúac is over the function of rituals. Ritualists cannot agree who or what they are petitioning for the effects of Crúac.

The most popular (but not necessarily most informed) belief is that the rituals petition the Crone herself. The details of this vary depending on the ritualist’s beliefs about the Crone, but the claim is that Crúac goes straight to the top. Those who know about the existence of Crúac rituals to deal with spirits cite this as evidence — Crúac could not bind spirits unless its power came from a source beyond them.

Only slightly less common is the belief that Crúac petitions spirits. These sorcerers feel that it is arrogant to claim a hotline to the Crone, and also worry that it would be very dangerous if they actually had one. Accordingly, they preach a more humble position. As support, they point to the fact that more difficult rituals have stronger outcomes. This can be easily explained in their beliefs by claiming that stronger spirits are harder to persuade. It is rather more problematic for those who believe that all rituals, weak and strong alike, reach the Crone herself.

Finally, some vampires believe that Crúac petitions the vampire’s own Beast. They point to the necessary loss of Humanity involved in learning blood magic, and to the absence of apparent responses to a Crúac ritual. If ritualists truly were petitioning the Crone or other spirits, these Acolytes argue,

they would at least occasionally get some response other than the ritual’s results. That does not happen. Thus, they argue, the Kindred can only be arguing with herself.

PETITION, COMMAND OR DECEPTION

The final main debate is over how the ritualist approaches the power in question. By far the most common position is that the ritualist is requesting the intervention of a higher power, whether in a polite, seductive, deceptive or exuberant fashion. This is overwhelmingly the most popular position among those who believe that rituals invoke the Crone.

A substantial minority, however, point out that petitions can be denied, but that Crúac only fails if the ritualist fails. They suggest that this is more characteristic of commands, where only the power of the sorcerer compels the mystic forces in question to act. This is favored by those who think that Crúac petitions the Beast.

Finally, some that Crúac tricks mystic forces or beings into doing what the ritualist wants. They argue that this is one of the reasons Crúac erodes Humanity — it is fundamentally a deceitful relationship with the world, and such inherent spiritual dishonesty is incompatible with morality.

CREATING CR AC RITUALS

New Crúac rituals can be created by ritualists within the Circle of the Crone. Many regard this as the ultimate expression of the maxim *Creation Is Power*. However, a vampire cannot simply decide to create a new ritual as if it were a poem or a dance. Nor can she be sure what power the ritual will have.

An external impulse, the spiritual gift, is needed to start the process; without that seed, nothing can be developed. The vampire must then suffer tribulation to set the mark of the ritual firmly on her soul. Only then can she sit down and write the ritual itself.

No Kindred knows for sure how many Crúac rituals there are, or how many new ones are discovered in modern nights. Some Kindred believe that all rituals were known to the earliest Kindred, and that modern inventions are rediscoveries. Others believe that all possible rituals are known now, somewhere in the world, and that the inventions merely introduce them to new areas. Still others believe that the number of Crúac rituals is constantly increasing, and that one night, if not already, there will be too many rituals for a single Kindred to master them all before passing into torpor.

THE GIFT

The gift comes when it will (or when it is sent by the gods), sometimes uninvited, and always in a moment of struggle. A gift can be prayed for but it cannot be demanded. The form the gift takes is unique, although surviving reports and modern accounts suggest that there are some broad types that are relatively common.

The Daymare: While sleeping during the day, the Kindred dreams that horrible monsters enter her haven and torture her immobile body. Sometimes the gift comes in the agony of the dream, sometimes it comes when the Kindred sees wounds left on her body the following evening.

Scars on the Body: The Kindred takes aggravated damage, and the tatters of her broken flesh form patterns of mystic significance. The meaning is immediately obvious to the wounded Kindred, although others cannot see it.

Slaughtered Kin: The vampire attacks a friend or ally while in frenzy, but as he comes out of it he sees profound meaning — words, images, pictograms — in blood-soaked carpets, smeared bloodstains and scattered body parts.

Staked Wisdom: While the Kindred is staked, a figure appears in her field of vision, speaking in a low voice that she can barely make out. The whispers carry hints and clues toward the ritual. No one else present is aware of the figure, who can be seen even if the place is completely dark. The figure vanishes when the stake is removed, but the wisdom remains.

Starvation Dreams: Although the Kindred is hungry and on the verge of frenzy, something prevents him from feeding. If he exerts his will to force himself (by spending a point of Willpower), the blood burns like fire as he drinks it, inflicting one lethal wound for every Vitae taken. But with the fire, he drinks in inspiration.

Torpor Visions: The Kindred sees visions in torpor that provide the foundation for a new ritual. Some are initiated into a bloody cult and taught its secrets, others dream of being blasted to ash, but retaining consciousness and awareness of the pattern that their remains form.

Some dream of going on quests, and wake in a place other than where they fell into torpor.

The gift often has bad side effects, such as inflicting wounds or leaving a vampire's lover dead. The insight it grants, however, burns in the vampire's soul, understood in a deep way that can't be articulated in words. The recipient of the gift knows exactly what the ritual will do, and how difficult it will be, but is still missing some of the pieces needed to put the understanding into practice.

The Gift In Play

In game terms, the vampire's player should be told the game mechanics of the ritual at this point. However, she cannot use it or teach it. The vampire also intuitively knows what she should do next to continue on the quest, so the player should be told this, as well.

Most gifts are of rituals the vampire could learn immediately. That is, the number of dots of the ritual is equal to or less than the number of dots the Acolyte has in Crúac. However, vampires are occasionally struck with inspiration for rituals that are slightly too difficult for them to learn; the number of dots in the ritual exceeds the vampire's current Crúac dots by one. In this case, the vampire must learn more secrets of Crúac before he can complete the quest. Occasionally, Kindred with no dots in Crúac are struck with inspiration for a one-dot ritual. Those who are members of the Circle know the inspiration for what it is, and generally seek instruction, but Kindred outside the Circle may search in vain for years before finding (or being found by) the right Acolytes.

Legends say that, sometimes, the inspiration for a ritual comes with the inspiration for the necessary dots of Crúac,



enabling the vampire to learn the Discipline without a teacher. There are no solidly attested instances of this happening outside the realms of legend, however, and most Acolytes believe that the stories were created by Kindred seeking to avoid punishment for teaching the Discipline to outsiders.

WHO DOES THE CREATING?

So who, exactly, is doing the actual work of creating these new rituals? The frank answer is: You are. Whether you're a player or the Storyteller, you can potentially come up with an idea for a new Crúac ritual and find a way to inject it into the game. Players must clear any new rituals with the Storyteller, of course, but even the Storyteller won't get much use out of a new ritual if some player isn't interested in paying the experience-point cost for it.

What this creation process allows you to do is disguise the true origin of new rituals in whatever mystical wardrobe best suits your chronicle. A player's character might strive to create or discover a new ritual for months before finally receiving a clear sense of the ritual in a vision. Alternately, an imaginative player might create a new ritual for a character that isn't at all likely to think of such a thing, in which case the ritual gift can simply arrive mysteriously (from a god, from a spirit, from the character's Beast) to satisfy the player and drive her character into a new storyline.

Don't assume that the process described here is set in stone. This isn't science, it's a game about stories of the supernatural — there's a lot of gray area here for you to play with. Make the process more mysterious, more gruesome, more Zen or more precise if you'd like. As long as the ritual-creation story is as mysterious, spiritual and entertaining as you'd like it to be, you're doing it right.

THE QUEST

The second stage of creating a new ritual is generally referred to as the quest. This is slightly inappropriate, as the thing sought is already within the Kindred. On the other hand, the vampire must overcome difficulties to reach a goal, so the name is also appropriate.

The gift not only provides the core understanding of the ritual, it also reveals the first steps of the quest. The ritualist knows what she has to do, although she does not know how she knows. Occasionally, this knowledge is of the ultimate goal of the quest. One Kindred, struck with inspiration for a ●●●●● ritual, knew that she had to become Hierarch in her city. It took her years of struggle, but the ritual she was granted in her success made her position extremely secure, and her reign of terror lasted for centuries.

More often, the Kindred knows what she must do first. That action has consequences, and as she deals with the consequences, she completes the quest. There are no customary restrictions on taking others along on these quests.

Even non-Acolytes are not unwelcome — the gods often speak through the fates and actions of nonbelievers.

In most cases, the Kindred receives a single inspiration. For example, a ritualist might divine that she has to be at the junction of 4th and Main at 9:15 the following Tuesday night. Just by being there, she witnesses a battle between two packs of werewolves, and comes to their attention. The quest involves dealing with the monsters, though whether she is to fight them, befriend them or merely endure the tribulation they bring may be unclear.

Inspirations may be immoral. There are many known examples in which ritualists have been driven to kill. In some cases, murder itself is the quest. In most, however, the consequences of the killing bring the struggle that, in turn, brings enlightenment. In its wake comes the Discipline's moral erosion.

Some ritualists have been driven to travel to distant cities, kidnap mortals and take them to a lake deep in the wilderness or perform a particular ritual in a public place. Sometimes, the inspiration is very sophisticated, nothing like the primal image normally associated with Crúac. One Kindred was inspired to start a rumor that one of the Harpies had sired more than a dozen secret childer, another to study for a master's degree in forensic anthropology. In the former case, the political turmoil caused by the rumor led to the ritualist's exile from the city, and the details of the ritual became clear as she reached her new home. In the latter case, the vampire became caught up in strange but enlightening rites being performed by the faculty, but never did complete her degree.

In most cases, then, the vampire is placed in a situation, to which she reacts. This has only two meaningful outcomes: the vampire is destroyed or she comes to understand the ritual. There are no known cases in which a vampire has followed the urgings of the gift, endured the correct path, but failed to learn the ritual. The belief is that the quest is not a matter of success or failure, but merely of tribulation.

Some Kindred choose to ignore the urgings of a quest. This is a bad idea. Such vampires tend to get swept up in their quests anyway, but in a position of considerable weakness. Ignoring a quest makes suffering, rather than enlightenment, a more likely outcome of tribulation. A vampire who chooses not to go to the intersection shown to her by the gift might find that the werewolf battle takes place within her haven, instead. One who avoids committing a murder finds herself framed for it, and thus facing the same problems but without the useful information she could have gotten from the victim.

An occasional problem is Kindred who try to manipulate Acolytes by faking the gift and the inspiration for a quest. This is actually very difficult to do; it requires powerful Disciplines at the very least, and often a great deal of planning. Nevertheless, it happens. Kindred who have previously experienced a genuine gift can tell the difference; even a vampire who has experienced divine

inspiration cannot counterfeit the experience in others who have felt it too.

Those who have not yet been inspired with a new ritual — that is, the vast majority of Kindred — are more vulnerable. There is no way for anyone other than the Kindred himself to judge the quality of the experience, although other means of investigation might uncover a faker.

Persistent rumors claim that, sometimes, even a Kindred targeted by faked inspiration comes to create a genuine ritual. Whether this is wishful thinking, or a sign that the world is beyond the abilities of Kindred to understand, is an open question. Why can't liars be instruments of destiny, too?

The Quest in Play

The quest is a story, and should be played in full. There is nothing stopping an Acolyte from bringing the rest of her coterie along, and nothing stopping them from suffering along with her. However, only the character who received the gift learns the Crúac ritual.

The quest should be rare, for two reasons. The first is that these inspirations are rare within the Circle. Characters who are gifted with inspiration often gain status within the covenant; characters who have had two or more are very strong candidates for Hierarch, and may be known throughout the domain. Thus the chapters that eventually lead to new rituals should also be dramatic enough to warrant experience awards or free dots suitable for the traits to be won.

When the quest is complete, the inspired Acolyte learns a ritual without needing to spend experience points. In addition, she may gain a number of dots in Covenant Status equal to the dots of the ritual, if anyone else in the Circle knows about it. This privileges the Acolyte, and is another good reason not to run such stories too often.

Second, a quest railroads players to a significant extent. They are given little choice but to get involved with a particular plot, and if they try to run, powerful and mysterious supernatural forces arrange events so that they flee only towards their fates. This is good for occasional dramatic momentum, but not for the whole structure of the chronicle. Used too often, it can be downright un-fun.

CREATION

The actual creation of the ritual is the final stage. Although the Acolyte knows the ritual's effects at the end of the quest, she cannot perform it until she has devised or deciphered a ritual to perform.

This requires an extended Intelligence + Expression action. Each roll takes one night, and the Acolyte needs a total number of successes equal to twice the ritual's level in dots. Once the successes have been accumulated, the Acolyte has a ritual, and can perform it.

Many Acolytes create very short rituals, which can be performed in a few seconds and repeated as necessary. This is clearly the more practical approach. It is,

however, no easier than creating a longer ritual. In some ways, it is harder, as the proper balance of all elements must be maintained in a small compass.

Some Acolytes deliberately create longer rituals, so that its power cannot be used in less than half an hour. This may be a way of limiting others to whom the Acolyte teaches the ritual.

While the Acolyte must create at least one ritual form, she may create as many as she likes. Each requires a separate extended task, and the number of successes required is the same in each case. Some Acolytes create a very short ritual form for their own use, and another longer form for teaching to others.

Note that an Acolyte can only create ritual forms this easily for a ritual she has learned through the gift and quest. An Acolyte may create new ritual forms for a ritual learned from other sorcerers, but doing that is much more difficult.

LEARNING CRÚAC

Crúac cannot be learned from books or other records, though records can reveal how others have learned Crúac rituals. Kindred can either learn the rituals that are gifted to them by the gods, as described above, or study with ritualists who already know the ritual the Kindred wants. As very few Kindred are given rituals, the latter is by far the more common approach.

The first step, then, is for an aspiring ritualist to persuade some other vampire to teach her the ritual. No vampire does this for free, although some may be willing to teach now in exchange for payment later. For low-level rituals, a simple monetary payment sometimes suffices, although even then the price is high. For higher-level rituals, the price is almost invariably set in terms of service. If the student has better (or just different) political connections than the teacher, the teacher may simply require a favor, often before he will teach the ritual. If the teacher has more power, which is more common, the student must often do something more menial or physically daunting for the teacher. Most teachers set difficult tasks, but seldom object if a student involves the rest of her coterie in accomplishing them.

The organization of this varies from city to city. The Hierarch of Annapolis reserves the right to approve any training in Crúac, although he very rarely does any teaching himself. Both teacher and student must petition him, and he almost always requires some sort of service before granting his permission; this is in addition to anything the teacher requires of the student. In most cities, however, these arrangements are entirely personal, and the hardest part may be finding a potential teacher in the first place.

The process of teaching is violent, bloody and physical. Lectures and discussions are completely ineffective — Crúac is taught by torturing the student. First, the teacher trains the student in the proper ritual forms. This

rarely takes very long, although for particularly elaborate ritual forms it may take a few nights. Then the teacher tortures the student in particular ways. After each night's agony, the student tries to perform the ritual. Once it succeeds, the training is over.

Different teachers and different rituals demand their own forms of torture. One teacher imparts the basic knowledge of Pangs of Proserpine by digging the student's stomach out of her body. Another teaches the ritual by forcing barbed wire down the throat, and drawing it out through the navel. Still a third pours acid into the student's throat. At some point in the agony, the student's soul shifts and he understands the ritual. The student knows when this has happened, but the teacher does not. Because many teachers stake or restrain their students before beginning the process of instruction, to avoid the consequences of frenzy, the students may well have no way to share their breakthrough with their teachers, and thus must continue to suffer, until the teacher is satisfied.

Some students ask for their coterie to be present during teaching, and many teachers allow it. It's not possible to gain enlightenment simply by witnessing torture, and the torture doesn't have any effect if repeated by someone who does not know the ritual to begin with. It is ultimately the responsibility of every sorcerer not to diminish their power by sharing rituals with those outside the covenant.

OTHER WAYS TO LEARN

What if your teacher isn't a vampire? The system described herein assumes that your Acolyte character is learning Crúac rituals from another Kindred blood sorceress, but that doesn't have to be the case. A vampire might be taught a voodoo rite by a mortal shaman (see *World of Darkness: Second Site*), with the rite being translated into Crúac by the vampire's flesh and Vitae. Or your Acolyte might be put through a tortuous ordeal by a spirit or ghost intent on teaching him a new ritual, whether your character knows it at the time or not. If you were inspired create a new Crúac ritual by some Gift you read in a Werewolf book, you might even have some bizarre werewolf medicine man haunt the vampire student for days, biting and slicing the ritual into his flesh and soul.

Remember: Unique, strange events are a classic ingredient of supernatural horror tales. As the Storyteller, you have the authority to deviate from the rules for the purposes of setting up a great story or granting a player a special award. As a player, you have the right to suggest such deviations — and the joy of fearing the limitless possibilities lurking in the *World of Darkness*.

Ultimately, the story is king. Riff on this teaching process as you like if it helps you translate gameplay into better stories.

TEACHING CRÚAC

The teacher must torture the student in order to impart knowledge of a Crúac ritual. The form that tribulation takes depends on the sorcerer doing the teaching and the ritual being taught, but should require the student to endure two lethal wounds per level of the ritual, no matter what form that damage takes.

If a sorcery teacher is attempting to sear the ritual, Touch of the Morrigan, into a student's soul, she might burn his body with a hand-shaped brand — or she might simply afflict her student with the agonizing touch of the ritual itself. To teach a student the mystical hunger-inducing ritual, Pangs of Proserpina, a teacher might taunt a starving student with Vitae before feeding him razor blades or a mixture of motor oil and roofing tacks to tear up the student's gullet, where the essential nature of the ritual can best be felt. Different teachers have different traditions or philosophies about how to best evoke these ritual secrets in a student (no doubt many teachers are merely reproducing the lessons taught them, without any real understanding of the process). What's consistent from lesson to lesson is this: the tribulation of the flesh leads to an enlightenment of the soul.

In most cases, the ceremonial tribulation required to learn a Crúac ritual can be assumed to happen successfully in the background, between stories, as part of other covenant holidays and rituals. An Acolyte might be considered to have undergone the necessary tribulation for some ritual to be learned in the future when she participated in holy night ceremonies last autumn, for example. Only when she later spends the experience points to buy the ritual in game terms is she considered to have mastered its effects.

(*Note:* The following action is ultimately a dramatic tool for Storytellers. Use it to illustrate what an Acolyte's Requiem is like. Use it to determine if a blood sorcerer can master a particular ritual before the arrival of some dreaded event. Use it to test the limits of a childe's love for her sire or Mentor. But you probably have no good reason to use this rule every time a player wants to buy a new ritual for his character — if he's earned and spent the experience points, he's probably waited long enough already.)

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Empathy + Crúac. Instruments of torture simply enable this dice pool to deal damage, but do not add any bonus dice to the roll as a result of their Damage ratings.

Action: Extended. Each roll represents one night of tribulation, and inflicts one lethal wound per success. The action succeeds when a number of successes equal to twice the ritual's level are accumulated. Each sunrise between the beginning of the extended action and its completion imposes a cumulative –2 penalty on subsequent dice pools in the extended action. If even a single night goes by without a new roll being made, all successes thus far accumulated are lost. Note that rolls yielding no successes *do not* ruin the extended action.

Teaching does not quite take a whole night; both teacher and student have time to hunt, provided that they do so quickly. A student may attempt to feed once per night using the abstract system detailed on p. 164 of **Vampire: The Requiem**.

A student may return to his haven or undertake other interim actions in between bouts of educational tribulation without canceling the extended action. Exactly how much time is left over in any night after a student's studies is up to the Storyteller, but higher-level rituals generally require more time per night.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The student is too overwhelmed or distracted by his physical suffering to appreciate the benefits of his tribulations. The extended action is broken and must be begun again.

Failure: The student does not learn the ritual but has not lost his educational momentum. The extended action continues.

Success: The student endures lethal damage and gains some new understanding of his soul, his body and they combine to make the ritual possible. If this success completes the extended action, then the student's player may spend the necessary experience points to buy the ritual now or at any time in the future.

Exceptional Success: The teacher finds just the right means of getting through to her student, who learns the ritual more rapidly than most.

RITUAL FORMS

The form of a Crúac ritual is vital, but not fixed. As a result, characters who know the same ritual may practice alternate forms of it. If the character learned the ritual through the gift and quest, this is a relatively straightforward process, as described above. Most ritualists, however, must rely on a certain amount of trial and error.

The Purpose of Ritual Forms in the Game

The rules given here make it relatively easy for characters to create new ways to cast the Crúac rituals described in any **Vampire** book. This is deliberate, as it allows all factions within the Circle to customize Crúac to fit their beliefs. The ritual form is mostly just a matter of narrative color, so allowing player characters to do this is unlikely to cause serious game balance issues.

However, you might prefer to restrict the creation of new forms to those Kindred who are gifted, rather than taught, a ritual. Multiple forms thus still exist, but a group following Hel might still teach a ritual that invokes Isis, as no one in a Nordic tradition has been given that particular ritual. This yields rituals that reflect their region or belief system of origin, rather than rituals that are easily adapted to other ritual styles.

In the end, the rules for altering ritual forms only come into play if the Storyteller decides that rituals available for use in

the chronicle require them. The mechanics for making major revisions to ritual practices will likely only come into play for one of two reasons: either individual expression of one's rituals is a matter of some importance in your chronicle, or the Storyteller is creating obstacles to be overcome.

The individual expression of a ritual, and the ability to alter it, might be essential in a city with warring Acolyte factions. Maybe a ritual's customary practices need to be altered to disguise the fact that it was learned from a turncoat sorcerer. Perhaps a schism in the local covenant has caused Acolyte coterie to stake out philosophical turf within the covenant's beliefs, and the way one invokes the Crone says something about whose side he's on.

Alternately, the Storyteller might only introduce a five-dot Crúac ritual into play as a major reward for recovering some ancient artifact. To keep the ritual from being used too often, eroding its sense of importance, he decides that each roll of the extended action to invoke the ritual requires not one turn but one *hour* until such time as your coterie successfully revising the ritual down to its simplest form with several nights of translation, prayer and ceremonial bloodletting. Or maybe the extended action to devise a major variation on the ritual is an essential part of the dramatic deadline in a forthcoming story. For example, the coterie must reduce the invocation time on the ritual they've learned if they'll have any hope in completing the ritual during their midnight window of opportunity next week.

None of these optional rules can reduce a ritual's casting time below the basic rules specified in **Vampire: The Requiem**.

MINOR VARIATION

The first option is to make minor changes to the ritual. The ritualist may want to use his left hand rather than her right, for example, or chant the necessary words in Hindi rather than Arabic. In this case, the ritualist simply tries the ritual with the change in place.

This imposes a penalty to his dice pool. The penalty is at least -2, for the smallest changes, but be as much as -5 for changes such as translating a chant into another language. If the ritual succeeds despite the penalty, the new ritual form is viable and can be used without penalty in future. If the ritualist gets no successes on any roll, the new ritual form is inert, and can never succeed for that sorcerer.

It is not possible to stack variations in this way. The change must always be minor compared to the original form of the ritual, not to the form that the ritualist knows. It is thus possible to make a minor change to a known ritual form, but for penalties to be determined as if the ritualist were making a major change because of the new form's dissimilarity from the original overall. If the ritualist does not know the original form of the particular ritual he is altering, there is no way to know the penalties in advance. (Thus the Storyteller may

choose to make certain rituals more difficult to deviate from than others in his chronicle.)

Experienced ritualists who know the original form of a ritual can make minor changes without risk, and many do, imposing their own style onto the traditional ceremonies for the sake of confusing or frightening other sorcerers.

MAJOR VARIATIONS

It is harder to design a major variation on a ritual form, but a major variation can be anything, even a completely new ceremony. Ritualists most often make major changes when they have learned a ritual form that takes hours to perform but want a ritual practice that can be completed in a few seconds.

Designing a major variation requires an extended Intelligence + Expression + Crúac action. Each roll represents one night of work, and a dramatic failure sets the number of accumulated successes back to zero. These nights need not be consecutive, as long as the ritualist is able to maintain an undisturbed shrine or ceremonial space where he can continue his work for the duration of the extended action.

The target number of successes for the ritual is 10 plus twice the ritual's level. Thus a major variation on a third-level ritual has a target number of 16 successes.

The ritualist may attempt to cast the ritual at any point during this extended action. The dice pool to activate the ritual suffers a dice pool penalty equal to the successes not yet achieved on the extended action. That is, successes on the extended action diminish this penalty on a one-for-one basis. As with minor variations, if the casting succeeds, the new ritual form is usable, and may be used without penalty in the future. If the ritualist gets no successes on any roll, the new ritual is useless, and can never succeed. The ritualist must start the revision process from scratch.

STORYTELLER'S OPTION: ACOLYTES ARE WRONG

Some Acolytes know Crúac rituals that allow them to deal with spirits in a more direct and commanding way. However, under this option, it is important for players and Storytellers to know that the Acolytes are wrong about the actual effects of these rituals. The description of each of the following rituals describes both what the Acolytes think the ritual does, and what it actually does. The actual effect of the ritual is normally indistinguishable from what it is thought to do, which is why the mistakes persist.

Sometimes the difference matters a great deal. Such are the perils of meddling with things you do not fully understand.

Each ritual also includes a description of the mechanical effects the power has on spirits. If you are not using the rules for spirits explained in **Werewolf: The Forsaken** or

Mage: The Awakening, these details can be ignored. The descriptions of the visible or believed effects of these rituals are sufficient to adjudicate them and the later details simply give you an idea of how observations of mystical powers can be misleading. (You can a bit of mileage out of these by recasting the descriptions of ghosts in the **World of Darkness Rulebook** as spirits, which are mechanically very similar to ghosts.)

•• Imperious Call (Optional Crúac Ritual)

This ritual is believed to compel a particular spirit to appear before the ritualist. The spirit is named three times during the ritual, and appears as its name is spoken the third time. The ritual does not provide any control over the spirit, but as the spirit appears in physical form, physical defenses are effective.

The ritual actually makes it possible for a spirit to manifest in the physical world, taking on a physical form. Any one spirit present may do so, and may choose the form it takes freely, even if it is normally restricted to appearing in a single form. If multiple spirits want to manifest, a contested Power + Finesse roll determines which one manages to take advantage of the ritual's power. A manifested spirit can use its traits to affect the physical world, but mundane weapons can cause Corpus damage to the spirit. The spirit can stay manifested for a number of hours equal to the successes on the ritual's activation roll.

Except as noted above, this ritual allows a spirit to use the Materialize Numen, whether or not it has that Numen normally.

••• Servant from the Hidden Realms (Optional Crúac Ritual)

Ritualists believe that this power compels a spirit to carry out a single command. The command can take any length of time but must be something that the spirit is naturally capable of doing; the ritual does not grant the spirit any extra abilities. The command can be quite complex but must be a single action, possibly including an instruction to report back when the task is complete.

The ritual actually offers a valuable reward to the first spirit to complete the task described. Twisting the spirit of the request denies access to the reward. If multiple spirits are present, they might race to earn the reward. The more successes the ritualist gains, the greater the reward — on an exceptional success, affected spirits may even risk destruction, if the risk is small enough. However, if the task is too difficult or risky given the reward, no spirits will act.

The ritual generates one point of Essence for every success on the activation roll, available to the first spirit to complete the task specified. This Essence can only be used by genuine spirits — it is not usable by werewolves and mages can't translate it into Mana even through the use of the Prime Arcanum.

••• Veiled Curse (Optional Crúac Ritual)

Kindred believe that this ritual marks a mortal as cursed, and that the power of the magic forces spirits to harass him. The subject must be within sight of the ritualist when the ritual is completed, or it fails automatically. The subject's Composure is subtracted from all activation rolls. The effects of the ritual persist for one night per success on the activation roll.

This ritual does not actually curse a mortal, it simply makes him visible and significant to spirits. In practice, this is a curse, as plenty of spirits have no love for humans. This means that machines may refuse to work (as the spirits in them decide not to cooperate), animals become hostile (possibly even attacking) and plants and weather really do conspire against the subject. As a rule of thumb, the subject suffers a one-die penalty to any actions taken while cursed, and must deal with a great many unhelpful circumstances, as the Storyteller sees fit (rain, broken equipment, etc.).

The ritual has no effect on Kindred — their corpses cannot be brought to the attention of the spirits in this way. The ritual also has no effect on werewolves and mages, as they are already the subjects of much spiritual notice. The ritual does affect ghouls, the wolf-blooded and Sleepwalkers, although spirits may react slightly differently to such mortals. Ghouls, in particular, tend to be the target of more focused hostility.

•••• ETERNAL GUARDIAN OF THE DARK MOON (OPTIONAL CRÚAC RITUAL)

Acolytes believe this ritual binds a spirit to serve as the ritualist's guardian. It does not obey particular commands, at least not without the use of another ritual but remains close to the Kindred and uses its powers to protect her from harm. A vampire can only have one such spirit guardian at a time, and the ritual must be directed to a particular spirit.

Despite the name of the ritual, it has a limited duration, ending at the next full moon. Wise ritualists thus cast this ritual on the day after the full moon, for maximum benefit. If the subject spirit is destroyed, the effects of the ritual immediately end, of course.

This ritual actually lets a spirit draw a great deal of power from the vampire. First, the vampire's presence allows the spirit to linger in the physical world. Second, every time the vampire spends Vitae, the spirit potentially gains power. Third, the spirit can materialize in the ritualist's presence, spending one of the Kindred's Vitae to do so. (The vampire cannot resist this, as she gave the spirit permission by performing the ritual.) Thus the spirit is given good reason to remain present and protective of the vampire — if the vampire is destroyed, the effects of the ritual end for the spirit. On the other hand, the spirit does



CRÚAC OVERVIEW

For the convenience of players of Acolyte blood sorcerers, the general guidelines for using Crúac are reproduced here, with some updates made to the text as it appears in the first printing of *Vampire: The Requiem*.

Cost: Uses of Crúac always cost one Vitae, spent on the first turn of the ritual casting's extended action, unless the text of the ritual states otherwise. Vitae is essential to the magic of Crúac; it is the medium through which the vampire channels mystic power — no matter where she thinks that power originates, from some god or earthy life-force, it is Vitae that undeniably gives material form to the ritual's mystic might.

The activation of a Crúac ritual requires that Vitae be spent in a visible or otherwise dramatic manner. A sorcerer may slice the veins on the back of her hand, bite her wrist or stretch flesh to the point of tearing. She may proclaim the will of her goddess for all to hear or she may splash and paint the Blood throughout the casting area. Even when the effects of a Crúac ritual are meant to be subtle or secret, the casting almost never is.

Costs to activate a ritual must be paid before the activation roll can be made. Normally this isn't an issue, as a ritual that costs one Vitae can have its activation roll made in the same turn (spending Vitae is a reflexive action, remember). In some cases, though, a ritual costs more Vitae than the caster can spend in a single turn. In these cases, the caster's player makes the roll on the turn he reflexively spends the last Vitae necessary to invoke the ritual.

Crúac is insidious. It demands a degree of devotion and even cruelty from its practitioners, whether in deference to dire old gods or through tribulation of the self. Its costs tax a vampire's Humanity in addition to her blood. A character's dots in Crúac, subtracted from 10, is the maximum to which her Humanity may rise. For example, if an Acolyte possesses Crúac ●●●, her maximum Humanity is therefore 7 ($10 - 3 = 7$). If a character's dots in Crúac increase to the point that her Humanity score is higher than the Crúac-imposed maximum, her Humanity immediately and automatically drops to that allowed by her Crúac rating and the player makes a derangement roll for the character (see *Vampire: The Requiem*, p. 182-188 for more on Humanity and derangements). As the sorcerer heightens her awareness of the occult powers inherent in Damnation, she necessarily becomes less human.

Dice Pool: Manipulation + Occult + Crúac. Because of its sanguinary nature, Crúac doubles any bonuses (or penalties) that a vampire's blood ties might afford, such as in rituals performed on a sire or against a grandchilde. The Nosferatu clan weakness does not apply Crúac activation rituals; it is a vampire's mystic monstrousness that makes the Discipline work. (At the Storyteller's discretion, the Nosferatu weakness can apply to activation rolls for rituals intended to affect mortal targets.)

Action: Extended. The target number of successes is equal to the level of the ritual, so a level-three ritual requires three successes to activate. Each roll represents one turn of ritual casting. The ritual is activated on the turn in which the target number of successes is reached or surpassed. Note: Each point of damage incurred by the caster in a turn is a penalty to the next roll in the extended action, in addition to any wound penalties imposed.

If a character fails to complete the ritual in time (perhaps she's put into torpor midway through the extended activation action) or decides to cancel the ritual before completing the casting, the ritual simply fails. Vitae spent on the activation roll is not recovered, and any other ritual ingredients are wasted.

The variable effects of many rituals are based on the result of the caster's activation roll. The result of an activation roll is the total number of successes produced in the extended action to invoke the ritual. Whether the ritual is completed in one turn or five turns isn't relevant. Only the total number of successes accumulated up to and including the final roll matters.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The ritual fails spectacularly, inflicting the caster with some aspect of its intended effect. A damage-dealing ritual injures the caster while a hunger-inducing ritual plagues the sorcerer instead of the subject.

Failure: The ritual simply fails, sputtering or amounting to nothing more than theatrics. Vitae is spent for naught.

Success: The ritual takes place as described.

Exceptional Success: Any benefits of an exceptional success occur as described.

Unless otherwise specified, ritual effects last for the duration of the scene or until the next sunrise, whichever comes first.

Suggested Modifiers

Modifier	Situation
+4	Ritual is turned on a vampire with whom the sorcerer has a blood tie.
—	The character is unaffected by threats or distractions.
-1 to -5	The character is rushed or distracted, such as by combat or pursuit. This penalty is cumulative with multiple distractions (e.g. invocation while being pursued through a hurricane). Meditation rolls (p. 51 of the <i>World of Darkness Rulebook</i>) offset distraction penalties on a one-for-one basis.

not want the vampire to conserve Vitae, and may use its powers to encourage expenditures of the Blood.

The ritualist becomes a fetter for the subject spirit, even if the spirit does not normally have that Numen. Every time the Kindred spends a Vitae, for any reason, including waking for the night, the spirit gains one Essence if it is within five yards of the Kindred, present in the physical world and succeeds on a reflexive Power + Finesse roll. If the vampire spends multiple Vitae in a single turn, the spirit gains one Essence per success, up to the number of Vitae spent by the vampire. The spirit may materialize, as the Numen, by spending one of the Kindred's Vitae, as long as the spirit is within five yards of the Kindred. The spirit does not need to spend Essence to manifest in this way (the Vitae is spent in its place) and can always materialize for one hour, even if the spirit gains no successes on the Power + Finesse roll.

NEW CRÚAC RITUALS

• CONFIDENCE IN ADVERSITY

Tribulation brings enlightenment. Acolytes may surrender an advantage to glean more from their troubles, and there are several Crúac rituals that help put this philosophy into action. This is one of the simplest, removing the possibility of a lucky break for a time in exchange for a dose of insight and, thus, self-confidence. Once this ritual is complete, the ritualist loses the benefits of the 10-again roll for the rest of the scene. At the end of the scene, she regains one Willpower point. This ritual affords the character no ability to possess more Willpower points than her normal maximum.

• DROPS OF DESTINY

The ritualist allows a few drops of Vitae to fall into a vessel of water while concentrating on a future action for that night or current circumstance. The blood forms patterns in the water that convey important information about the situation. The number of successes on the activation roll determines the clarity and usefulness of the vision imparted. On an exceptional success, the blood may form recognizable figures and play out a short scene, whereas a single success might net only two abstract figures symbolizing important factions involved in the situation.

This prophetic image grants a +2 bonus on any dice pools to investigate or research the imagery revealed by the ritual.

PROPHETIC CRÚAC

This chapter contains a number of Crúac rituals that allow some degree of prophecy. These need to be handled carefully. First, these rituals do not, strictly, foretell the future. Rather, they provide important information about the present that the sorcerer may not otherwise be able to see. Crúac prophecies tell the ritualist what is important now, but not what will happen tomorrow.

Second, you should account for these rituals when designing stories. Consider what clues a prophecy might reveal to help keep the scenario moving along without short-circuiting it. These rituals do not explain why something is important, only that it *is* important. So direct the diviner to look in the right place, rather than simply supplying answers. Many of these rituals are an excellent way for you to start stories, by dropping an important clue in the coterie's lap. In such cases, the ritual might be a bit clearer than the number of successes would typically indicate.

When in doubt, if nothing else seems to work, a prophesied action can be granted bonus dice as a reflection of the sorcerer's heightened awareness of the circumstances and potential outcomes of her action.

Using the same ritual repeatedly gives the same answer every time, until something happens to change the present situation substantially.

• FIRES OF INSPIRATION

The ritualist turns her blood toward the process of artistic creation. For the rest of the night, she gains a number of bonus dice equal to her dots in Crúac on all Craft or Expression dice pools to create a particular work of art. The artwork must be specified at the time the ritual is performed. If creation is an extended action, the bonus applies to every roll made that night. The ritualist suffers a penalty equal to the bonus on all Craft or Expression dice pools to create anything other than the specified artwork; ideas for her artistic creation are burning her up, and she cannot concentrate on anything else but her mystically charged idea.

Another version of this ritual exists that can be cast upon others, rather than invoked on the sorceress herself. The roll to activate this counterpart ritual is penalized by the subject's Composure.

• TASTE OF KNOWLEDGE

The ritualist must perform this ritual immediately before feeding from a vessel. While feeding, she learns one piece of personal information about the vessel — one thing the vessel feels is of immediate importance. On a dramatic failure, the vessel learns the piece of personal information about the vampire that she feels is of most immediate importance. This ritual works on supernatural creatures just as well as on mortals, as long as the creature has Vitae to drink. The piece of information gleaned through this ritual is gained in place of one Vitae.

The roll to activate this power is penalized by the subject's Resolve.

• VISAGE OF THE CRONE

When this ritual is correctly performed, the subject appears to age 10 years. No physical impairment, no joint pain, memory lapses or hearing loss accompany this alteration. But skin sags and wrinkles, hair grays and recedes and flesh loses the vibrant tones of youth. The transformation lasts a

number of nights equal to the successes achieved on the activation roll, then gradually reverses at about the rate of one year per hour. Repeated uses of the rite add more decades, up to a maximum apparent difference of 50 years.

Some Princes forbid the use of Visage of the Crone (if they're aware of the ritual) declaring that it's a Masquerade risk to instantly age a mortal in front of witnesses. The Acolyte counterargument is that the ritual's proper use maintains the Masquerade, as Visage of the Crone enables ghouls and Kindred to appear to age as they ought (though admittedly this takes some effort).

Certain Acolytes in California have a similar ritual that causes an apparent reversal of age, down to a minimum apparent age of about 20 years old. While the ritual is in high demand among vain mortals, it's intensely painful: the subject suffers no physical damage, but he has to be cut free of his own skin, like a snake. This ritual is called Pythian Renewal.

The roll to activate this power is penalized by the subject's Stamina.

•• MAIDEN SKIN

With this power, the ritualist enhances the blessed virtue of unbroken skin. Any attack or source of injury that would break the surface of the subject's flesh has its edge turned away at the moment of impact, rendering slashes and piercings of the flesh into blunt, shallow injuries. The number of successes scored on the activation roll becomes the Rating of a kind of mystical armor that clings to the subject's flesh like sweat. This armor has no Defense penalty or Strength requirement, but it persists only for a number of turns equal to the ritualist's dots in Crúac. Maiden Skin only protects against attacks that break the skin; fire, blunt trauma and falling damage (among many other sources of damage) are unaffected.

•• PATH OF THORNS

By seeding the ground with her blood, the ritualist curses those who would tread on it. Any character or creature that moves within a space around the sorceress equal to twice her Crúac dots in yards becomes the subject of an immediate attack from a dice pool equal to the successes scored on the ritual's activation roll. Defense provides no benefit against this attack, but armor does. The attack comes from phantom thorns and brambles that slice like razor blades and pierce like syringes. Creatures within the ritual's area of effect can avoid being attacked by moving two or fewer yards per turn. Characters who Dodge within this area are automatically attacked by the phantom thorns, too, though any individual creature can only be attacked by the thorns once per turn.

This ritual's effects last for a number of turns equal to the sorceress's dots in Crúac. The ritualist is not immune to her own Path of Thorns, but she can attempt a reflexive Dexterity + Occult roll to move her Speed through the area without being attacked by her own phantom thorns.



•• SOUL'S WORK

This ritual allows the ritualist to put a bit of her very soul into a work of art. Soul's Work can only be used when creating a work of art through an extended action, and must be cast immediately after the final roll of that extended action. If the ritual is successful, the Acolyte successfully instills a single point of her Willpower into the artwork. With an exceptional success, two points of Willpower are invested into the artwork. These Willpower points no longer count towards the character's total.

To use a Willpower point invested in her art, the ritualist must engage the artwork according to its form — a painting must be viewed, jewelry worn, music heard. Only the ritualist may use Willpower points she has instilled in the Soul's Work. Once the last Willpower point in the artwork has been used, the piece fades, cracks or is otherwise damaged. This does not utterly destroy the piece, but instead renders it a broken remainder of what it once was.

A sorcerer may only have one Soul's Work in existence at a time.

•• SUCCULENT BUBOES

This rite allows the ritualist to store more Vitae in her system, but at a disgusting cost: the extra blood is not carried efficiently in her veins, but in bulging, fleshy sacs the size of softballs in her major lymph nodes. For each success rolled, a Vitae is forced into the vampire's limbic system, where one taut and glistening pustule forms and the Vitae is stored above and beyond the normal limits of Blood Potency. The Vitae contained in a Succulent Bubo may be used by the ritualist herself or drained by a biting vampire. The ritualist cannot divert more Vitae to these pustules than she currently has in her system, no matter how many successes she rolls. When she chooses to spend Vitae, she can spend it either from buboes or from her normal pool of Vitae. Vitae she consumes can only fill her regular Vitae capacity; this ritual only transfers blood from the ritualist's own body to her own buboes.

The buboes form, similar to those from bubonic plague, along the neck, in the armpits or in the groin. While the buboes are awkward and uncomfortable, they don't meaningfully impair the vampire's movements. If the pustules are visible (either to the naked eye or as bulges in clothing), they may penalize Social rolls.

•• WISDOM OF THE SOUL

Upon successfully activating the ritual, the ritualist enters a creative trance for a number of hours equal to 6 — his Crúac dots, producing a work of art in his favored medium. While creating the artwork, the ritualist is not truly aware of what he is doing. When he comes out of his trance, he finds that he has created a puzzling work of divination. When first viewed, its meaning is indecipherable (though the artwork grants a +3 bonus

to Empathy or Investigation dice pools to scrutinize or analyse the artist). The work's meaning becomes evident to the artist later when, in the heat of some later moment, he experiences a flash of insight revealing what risk or opportunity the artwork was presaging.

In game terms, the ritualist may re-roll any one failed dice pool on the same night that his soulful work is created. The results of this re-roll must be used, even if they are less desirable than the initial roll's results. Only instance of this ritual can be in effect for the caster at one time.

••• BELOVED DEODAND

"Deodand" is an archaic British legal term that applies to any object used in an unlawful killing. (Some nobles were entitled to claim deodands from crimes committed on their land as a fine.) To use this ritual, the sorcerer must obtain an item used to kill someone, e.g. a hangman's noose, a killer's knife or the gun that fired the fatal shot. When the ritual is performed over the item, it forms a mystic link with the ritualist. If the item is used again, the ritualist gains one Vitae from every subject wounded by the deodand. Distance doesn't matter, but the weapon must be used within a number of nights equal to the successes achieved on the activation roll. Likewise, for each success scored on the activation roll, the weapon can feed its master one additional time. A Beloved Deodand can only draw one Vitae from each individual victim of the weapon per casting.

Some Acolytes use these weapons themselves, as an efficient way to feed during a fight. Others find it meaningful to create them and release them, with serene faith that tools of ill omen tend to get used again and again.

Beloved Deodands do not drain Vitae from Kindred, but living supernatural creatures are typically affected. The Vitae collected through a Beloved Deodand is "neutral" — it does not count toward Vinculum and it carries no supernatural augmentation in the case of, for example, werewolf blood.

••• FINAL SERVICE OF THE SLAVE

At the climax of this ritual, the ritualist kills one of her own Retainers, without drinking his blood. The Retainer Merit is immediately lost. (If it would take more than simple murder to destroy the Retainer, the ritualist must do whatever it takes — she must genuinely sacrifice the Retainer to complete this ritual.)

The ritualist immediately gains a number of temporary dots equal to the rating of the Retainer. These may be applied to any Attribute or Skill possessed by the Retainer, even taking them above the normal limit determined by her Blood Potency. The dots may be spread among different traits. With Storyteller approval, the ritualist may also apply the dots to Mental or Physical Merits formerly possessed by the Retainer. These bonus dots may never be applied to Disciplines or any other supernatural abilities, even if the

Retainer possessed them. These bonus dots last for one night per dot the sacrificed Retainer Merit was worth.

Alternately, the ritualist may choose to re-spend experience points that were previously spent on the sacrificed Retainer Merit to permanently raise any Attribute or Skill the Retainer possessed at a level higher than the ritualist. Experience points not immediately re-spent are lost.

The roll to activate this power is penalized by the higher of the subject's Stamina or Resolve.

Example: An Acolyte sorcerer sacrifices her lawyer, a ••• Retainer, in preparation for facing a highly persuasive opponent. The vampire uses the three dots from her sacrificed Retainer to boost her Composure from its normal • to ••••. Alternately, she could "cash out" the 12 experience points paid for her Retainer and use 10 of them buy a permanent second dot of Composure. The remaining two experience points are lost.

••• RAIN

Upon completion of this ritual, the sorceress may alter the precipitation within one mile of her current location for the remainder of the scene. She may call for fog, rain, sleet, snow or clear skies. In game terms, she may summon or cast away environmental penalties equal to or less than her dots in Crúac. Thus, with Crúac •••, she can raise a fog capable of imposing a -3 penalty on dice pools to see, shoot or otherwise act within the fog, or she could clear away up to -3 dice worth of penalties from a similar naturally occurring fog.

Once conjured, this weather is real in every way. The ritualist has no power to dismiss it again without another use of this ritual. Likewise, the ritualist is as vulnerable to the dice-pool penalties the creates as any other vampire is.

••• TASTE OF DESTINY

The ritualist writes a proposed course of action on some surface, and eats the surface while performing the ritual. If the course of action is a "bad" idea, he vomits the surface up in a mouthful of blood. If the action is a "good" idea, he retains it in his stomach without problems. On a failure, the writing is vomited up without blood. The course of action need not be one that the ritualist wants to take, and the writing must specify who is doing it. The actor must be someone the ritualist knows, however. The assessment only applies if the action is undertaken in the immediate future, which normally means that it applies to the night on which the ritual is used.

(For the purposes of this ritual, a "good" or "bad" idea is one that leads to measurable benefits or suffering for the individual taking the action, respectively.)

Ritualists in Toronto typically write on living mice, but paper works perfectly well. Those relying on allied Kindred as oracles should bear in mind that any Kindred can vomit blood by expending one Vitae, and keep anything down for a scene by expending Willpower.

In game terms, this ritual grants the sorceress a glimpse at the future, which bestows on her a beneficial confidence. In the scene when the prophesied action comes to pass, the ritualist immediately and automatically regains the first three Willpower points she spends on dice pools that do not result in a success or an exceptional success.

••• TIAMAT'S OFFSPRING

This ritual creates a homunculus (as described on p. 225 of **Vampire: The Requiem**) and is particularly prized by Mother and Father Acolytes. This is a lengthy and elaborate rite, not to mention painful.

Females begin by obtaining human semen and then introducing about five pounds of sliced up animal parts into their body cavity. They must have enough organs and limbs for a nearly complete animal — a brain, a heart, legs (if it must move), eyes (if it must see) and so on. When the vampire invokes Tí'amat, mother of monsters (or, in regional variations, Lilith or Kali or other figures of dire fertility), the limbs fuse into a homunculus and it is born, mewling and repulsive. In this case, the results of the rite shed the blood needed to power it. The mother bleeds in birth, even if the homunculus fails to thrive.

The masculine version references Zeus, who gave birth to Athena directly from his head and to Dionysus after that god was sewn into Zeus's thigh. Males don't need to harvest seed as the succubi of legend, but they do need to cut themselves open to arrange the body pieces among their organs. The Vitae they spend to heal themselves with the nascent servitors inside also powers the ritual. As to how the homunculus emerges, it varies but is universally painful and terrible to behold.

Regardless of the gender of the creator, the pieces must remain inside his or her body for at least 13 hours before being born at the next midnight. While the pieces are in place, the Acolyte appears pregnant and suffers a -1 penalty to all Physical dice pools.

BETTER HOMUNCULI

With the Circle's emphasis on creation, Acolytes are very interested in making homunculi. Other than the Embrace, these warped and shriveled creatures are the closest Acolytes can come to real progeny. Due to their research, they are able to improve homunculi while they are still in what passes for the womb, though (as is typical for the Circle) it's a route fraught with agony.

It is possible to create smarter, stronger or otherwise better homunculi. Doing so is a two-step process. The first step is to design a ritual that imbues the creature with the desired properties. The character must succeed at an Intelligence + Occult roll to figure out how to do this, but the player must actually describe what the ritual *is*. The Storyteller may give bonuses for really evocative descriptions, or even just allow the roll to automatically succeed. Scant or inappropriate descriptions, on the other hand, may impose penalties.

Secondly, the player must spend the experience points required to buy the desired Skill or Attribute, just as if the homunculus were a character. Once a player has improved a homunculus, any subsequent homunculi created by that same character are born with the same advanced traits. A homunculus may only be given Physical Merits with the Storyteller's permission. A homunculus created with Crúac cannot be larger than Size 2.

•••• EYE OF THE NORN

The ritualist spills a point of Vitae over the surface of a mirror. As the ritual is completed, the Vitae steams and boils away, leaving the mirror clean. The reflection in it is perfectly clear, and it is the face of the person the ritualist most needs to confront at that time.

The ritual does not say why the ritualist must confront that person, although sometimes it is obvious. There is no guarantee that the ritualist even knows the person. The image is, however, clear and free of deception, and if the antagonist has commonly used disguises, the image shifts to show them as well. The ritualist, and anyone else who looks in the mirror, can easily identify the person shown if he sees her in the future.

The ritual works on any creature, including spirits. However, an image of the ephemeral state of a spirit may be of little use. If the main antagonist has supernatural means of concealment, and they are active at the time, the score in the relevant Ability is subtracted from the ritualist's dice pool. For example, if the antagonist were a Kindred with Obfuscate, his dots in Obfuscate would be subtracted from the ritualist's dice pool if he was using the Discipline at the time. If he was relaxing in his haven, with no Disciplines active, there would be no subtraction.

This ritual is largely a Storyteller's tool, but the following mechanical benefit gives it teeth: In the scene when the ritualist finally confronts the figure revealed in the mirror, she enjoys the benefits of the 8-again rule on all dice pools made against the revealed antagonist.

•••• FOUNT OF WISDOM

When this ritual is activated, the sorceress must specify a target from which she intends to feed that same night. For every Vitae she would normally gain when feeding from the target, she instead gains one dot in a Skill possessed by the subject. The subject loses Vitae as normal. The ritualist cannot drain more dots than the vessel possesses, but also cannot drain more than the amount of remaining blood. Drained dots are not added to the ritualist's own score; instead, she can use the drained ability if it exceeds her own rating in the Skill.

The ritualist may choose to specify a particular Skill to drain, in which case she gains nothing if the vessel has fewer dots in that Skill than she does. Alternatively, she may choose to drain the vessel's highest Skill.



One of the stolen dots fades every time the sun rises. As long as the ritualist has at least one stolen dot, she has access to the vessel's Specialties in that Skill, as well, and may apply them to her own score in the Skill or to a stolen score.

The roll to activate this power is penalized by the target's Resolve.

•••• MASK OF BLOOD

When this ritual is completed, the sorceress must specify a target from which she intends to feed. If the ritualist successfully feeds from the target within that same night, the ritualist gains no Vitae, but instead gains the identity of the vessel. Her appearance changes to match his, and she gains a degree of his knowledge and memories. Scientific tests may be unable to distinguish the ritualist and the vessel. Supernatural senses reveal that some mystic power is at work, but most do not reveal exactly which.

The ritual has some limits. It does not change clothing or anything else aside from the ritualist's own body. The ritual also does not stop the vessel from interfering with the feeding. The greatest limit is that, when used on supernatural creatures of any sort, Mask of Blood does not convey any supernatural abilities. If the subject is mundane, the successes achieved on the ritual's activation roll automatically become the equivalent successes on the ritualist's disguise roll to pass herself off as the victim.

Even more useful than this is access to some of the vessel's knowledge. The ritualist gains a bonus to Subterfuge dice pools to pose as the subject equal to the amount of the subject's Vitae she has in her system, to a maximum of her dots in Crúac.

The ritual can be used on anything with blood. The vampire's own Attributes are unchanged, so if she uses this ritual on a raven, she becomes a very tough raven. Only her Size changes.

The effects of this ritual end at sunrise. The dice pool to activate this power is penalized by the subject's Composure.

•••• SACRIFICE OF ODIN

The ritualist sacrifices part of her body in return for increased power. She cuts off an extremity or sense organ, inflicting a single aggravated wound, and the benefits of the ritual last until she heals the wound.

The extremity severed comes with a penalty. Despite the mythic resonances, male Acolytes get no benefit from severing their genitals, and female Acolytes get none from severing their breasts. The main choices are a hand, a foot, an eye or the tongue. In addition to the wound, this mutilation imposes a penalty of -3 to -5 dice on actions that would normally use the organ in question, and may impose a similar penalty on Social rolls.

While suffering from the sacrifice, the ritualist gets a greater-than-normal benefit from spending Willpower. If spent to enhance a roll, one point grants five bonus dice, rather than the normal three. If a Willpower point is spent to enhance a defensive Attribute, the spent point raises the trait by three, rather than the normal two.

A ritualist can only benefit from one use of this ritual at a time.

••••• A CHILD FROM THE STONES

This ritual for creating gargoyles only takes a moment to enact. The Acolyte writes a name in Vitae under the creature's tongue or on its forehead (sometimes the name of a deity, sometimes the Acolyte's own real name from life) and what was inanimate becomes mobile.

Awakening the gargoyle isn't easy, but it's quick. Building the body in the first place isn't even quick. It's an extended Dexterity + Crafts roll. Each roll represents two hours of labor. When 40 successes have been amassed, the body is ready. While many are carved stone or kiln-fired clay, other Acolytes have made them out of carved hardwood or even by training thick vines into human form. Rumors say there are mannequin gargoyles seeing use in Scotland, but most Acolytes are more interested in a reliable creation than in experimenting.

If this power is used to activate a gargoyle that was not crafted specifically to accommodate this ritual, the gargoyle functions only for a number of turns equal to the successes scored on the activation roll.

Creation gives insight into destruction. If a character knows A Child From the Stones, she can use it to deactivate someone else's gargoyle (often by defacing the name that animates it). She has to touch the gargoyle within three turns of completing the ritual, however, to counteract its creation.

••••• AS ONE

All Crúac blurs the line between the ritualist and the physical world, allowing her to work her will on people and objects and energies as if they were limbs of her own body. As One extends that principle farther and deeper, investing an area with her spirit and, at the same time, making her a reflection of that territory. Many Crones consider this ritual a pragmatic apotheosis: the ritualist literally becomes a local god, at least for a while.

This ceremony requires significant time. The Acolyte must sacrifice at least three living things, at three different locations, thereby marking out the boundaries of the region she wills as her own. (Some perform more sacrifices, thereby creating a square or irregular domain instead of the usual triangle.) All three sacrifices must be made during the same night, with the Acolyte making the roll and spending her own blood after the final bloodletting. No vampire, spirit or other supernatural creature may feed from the dead — doing so ruins the ritual.

Once the region is marked out and the attempt succeeds, the Acolyte operates as a local patron spirit to that area for a number of nights equal to the total successes she rolled. The Storyteller may adjudicate just what it means to be patron in terms of minor effects, but the player also chooses a concrete manifestation of authority for the character. This effect can be different each time the character



performs the ritual. Doing the ritual again while it's already in effect does not allow a second manifestation but does extend the duration of the effect already in place.

Players and Storytellers should work together to develop the effects of *As One*. Some examples include the following:

- *Eyes of the Wise*. Whenever she meets a living person who resides within her territory, she learns one thing about him that she has no other way of knowing. This could be innocuous — “Her husband’s private nickname for her is ‘Lollipop,’” or that he sexually assaulted his eight-year-old cousin when he was 13 and they’ve never spoken about it to anyone, even though they see each other every Christmas.

- *Make Straight the Royal Highway*. The Acolyte takes no penalties from mundane physical obstacles while on foot. Anything she could push through without physical harm, she can now pass through without impediment. Thus she can run full speed on ice without falling or pass through a crowd of slam-dancers without slowing down. She can walk through a downpour without getting wet and across dry leaves without making a sound. Furthermore, once per night she can defy one obstacle that would normally halt her: she can command a door to unlock or walk across the surface of a pond.

- *Immortal Viands*. Instead of spending a point of Vitae to wake for the night, she can instead drain the vitality of her domain. This can’t be used for anything but waking, can only be used once per night and while the damage is subtle, definitely harms the location she rules. If she’s in a forest, the damage might strike dead one tall tree or invite a blight that threatens all of them. If she’s in a city, a building might catch fire, a business might fail or a malevolent ghost or spirit might suddenly wake up feeling right at home there.

- *The Very Stones Defend Me*. Once per night, the Acolyte can have her land attack somebody. Both the Acolyte and the target of the attack have to be in her realm. The nature of the attack always seems to be an accident — anything from a car crash in the city to a falling branch in the woods to a lightning strike on the plains. The Storyteller decides if the damage would be bashing, lethal or aggravated. The pool for bashing damage is the ritualist’s Presence + Occult + Crúac. For lethal, the pool is Occult + Crúac. For aggravated, it’s equal to her Crúac rating only.

- *Cowan’s Mark*. Once per night, the Acolyte can curse one person who does not routinely spend time in her region with the Nosferatu clan weakness. The cursed person seems untrustworthy, shifty — like a stranger.

- *The Trees Give Voice*. Once per night, the Acolyte can gain information from her territory. This may take the form of a vision (quite similar to those garnered from The Spirit’s Touch, as described on p. 121 of **Vampire: The Requiem**), only the vision is specific to the information the character seeks. Alternately, she may call up minor spirits that reside in the area and interrogate them for what they know in a question-and-answer format. It should be noted that this power only works on physical events that happened in her

terrain. This power cannot explain what someone there was feeling, only show what that person did.

- *Taste the Blood of the Spirit.* Any time Disciplines or magic of any genuine sort are used in her territory, the ritualist knows it. If it's a Discipline she herself possesses, she recognizes it and gets a vague sense of the direction where it was used. If it's something different (a sorcerer's spell taking effect or a werewolf changing shape) she knows *something* happened and has a vague idea of how powerful the effect, but she doesn't know what or where.

- *Sanctuary.* Once per night, she may declare an area of about a 20-foot radius as her sanctuary. No one outside that area can enter unless he wins a contested roll. The interloper rolls Resolve + Composure + Blood Potency. The ritualist rolls Presence + Occult + Crúac. Sanctuary lasts for one scene.

On top of those effects, the Storyteller either rolls a die or secretly chooses one of the side effects listed below.

- Sketchy images of her face appear in stains, or arise momentarily from TV static or seem to form briefly in the patterns of rain rolling down a windshield.

- Every time a radio is playing in her presence, it plays music appropriate to her mood or situation.

- She seems very familiar to everyone in her territory, even if they know they've never met her before.

- Small plants die and instantly wither when she steps on them.

- All animals stare at her and fall silent in her presence. Unless compelled to do something else (a dog is told to heel or a car bears down on a cat in the street), the animals keep a wary distance and gaze at her intently.

- People cannot catch their breath if her shadow is touching them. Prolonged exposure won't kill someone, but he pants and feels an icy chill clutch his chest.

- No one in her territory can speak her name.

- Her mood affects the weather. If she's sad, the sky is cloudy. If she's enraged, there are sandstorms or hail. If she's content, expect unseasonably pleasant skies. This cannot create rapid or unnatural changes, but it's definitely perceptible.

- Sensitive artists have to roll Resolve + Composure every night, or else suffer a nightmare about the Acolyte.

- In her presence, shadows thicken, flames gutter and waver while light bulbs flicker and dim. All attempts to hide from sight get a +1 bonus, and all damage pools from fire get a -1 penalty. This effect happens anywhere she can be seen.

••••• CRONE'S RENEWAL

While blood of terrible potency is a powerful tool, it can also be a burden, especially when it restricts feeding. Most elder Kindred wind up using torpor to ease this burden, sooner or later. Powerful Acolyte sorcerers have a different option.

The Crone's Renewal allows a character to voluntarily reduce his Blood Potency by 1, but at the cost of siring a childe at Blood Potency 2. This is a standard Embrace in all other ways, including the Willpower dot sacrifice, but the childe begins play at Blood Potency 2. This means that it is possible for her to be an active member of a bloodline from her very first night — often led by an Avus who is weakened, but reveling in a feeding pool that's 50,000 times larger than it was the week previous.

••••• ROVING HUT

This strange ritual allows the sorceress to divide her Crúac dots over any of her Haven Merits. The ritualist must be within her haven to use this ritual, but by using it she can warp the haven beyond the normal limits of the Merit. Regardless of the changes wrought to the haven, they endure for only one scene. However, the inside of a haven altered by this ritual no longer needs to correspond to its outside, or even to the strictest rules of reality.

Here are some examples of what this ritual can do with each of the three Haven Merits:

Haven Location: Relocate the haven's doors or physical boundaries. If the ritual increases this Merit to five dots or less, nothing obviously supernatural occurs. If this ritual increases this Merit's rating to 6–9 dots, the haven's exterior boundaries warp subtly, bending around alleys, opening up on neighboring streets or into the back rooms of nearby buildings where previously the haven did not. These changes always occur in the blink of an eye, without any obvious mutation to the structure. If this ritual increases the Merit to 10 dots, it becomes possible to enter the haven in one part of the city and leave it in a wholly other part of the city. That is, if the haven is normally located in The Docks, the coterie might enter it instead through a door in Midtown. Either the entrance or exit of the haven must still be located in the haven's typical location, before this ritual was activated.

Haven Security: Augment the haven's defenses with vanishing doors or magical warning creatures. If the ritual increases this Merit's rating to 6–9 dots, doors may be replaced with brick walls or iron sheets. Windows may vanish. Gargoyles turn their heads to follow passersby with their eyes. If the ritual increases the Merit's dots to 10, the haven actively works to thwart intruders, including squeezing shut brick doorways around trespassers or trapping feet in floor drains.

Haven Size: Alter the haven's interior, possibly making it larger inside than it is outside. If the ritual increases the Merit's rating to 6–9 dots, the haven gains one or two rooms and a maze of passages branch out from the existing rooms, many of them leading nowhere. It becomes quite easy to hide or stalk prey within the haven. If this ritual increases the Merit's rating to 10 dots, the haven takes on an utterly surreal appearance to intruders, including upside-down rooms, smoky corridors and passages that lead directly, impossibly back to the very doorways from which they began.



APPENDIX: ALLIES AND ANTAGONISTS

“The gods who keep you company
are hardly more important than
the company you keep.

Pick the wrong friends tonight
and you’ll meet your gods before you’re ready.”

Choose your company before you choose your drink.

— Proverb

NONCOMBATANTS

TRICKSTER-IN-WAITING

Quote: “Don’t worry, everything’s out of control.”

Background: The Trickster-in-Waiting was Embraced a few decades ago. In life, he was a counter-culture rebel, angrier than the typical hippy, but with the same unfocused optimism that the world could be made better by the efforts of a few people like him. He found himself on the fringes of neo-paganism, and then plunged deep into a maelstrom that had nothing neo- about it at all.

He gravitated immediately to the Circle of the Crone, denouncing the other covenants as oppressive, and telling tales of the crimes he had seen. By rights, he should have perished under a Blood Hunt after insulting the Prince, but his complaints, tale-bearing, and general obtuseness brought long-simmering discontents to the surface, and the authorities were distracted by feuding that had suddenly turned violent. The elders of the Crone were impressed with their new Fool, and looked after him (possibly moving him to a different city).

Many nights have changed him, but less than some would think. His ignorance has changed in quality, but not quantity. Before, he was simply ignorant, and blundered around. Now, he has a very keen sense of just how much he doesn’t know. He thinks he understands nothing about Kindred society, about werewolves, even about the kine. Even when his predictions come out right, he sees it as a lucky guess.

More unusually, his optimism remains. He is sure that there is some way for Kindred to live in harmony with themselves and the kine, possibly with cute lambs frolicking at their feet. He has no idea what that way might be, but he is keen to try new ways of organizing the Kindred; the old ways have been productive of little but serial murder, to his way of thinking.

Years of practice have made him expert at disrupting situations. The part still lacking to make him a true Trickster is his ability to rebuild afterward, in a new and striking pattern. Still, he is working on that. A number of elders believe he will make the transition from Fool

to Trickster, and Neonate to Ancilla, sometime in the next few years.

Description: He dresses to rebel, which means that, no matter what the gathering, he is dressed inappropriately. He wears suits in the slums, leathers and piercings to board meetings, and BDSM fetish gear to Women’s Institute talks. Recently, he has started to appreciate the value of blending in, but he can’t quite bring himself to do it.

Storytelling Hints: The Trickster-in-Waiting is *not* naive. There is a lot that he doesn’t know, but he is aware of his ignorance. He does not let ignorance stop him, but he does not have many assumptions that can catch him out. He’s very much at home in a chaotic situation, but less able to resolve that situation than would be useful; at that point, he tends to ask for help.

Abilities

Cause Chaos (dice pool eight) — Whether disrupting a social gathering, sending bugs through a computer system, or making animals stampede, he is good at disrupting ordered systems. He has very little control over the form that the chaos takes, but that’s fine with him.



Calm amid the Storm (dice pool seven) — No matter how bad the chaos gets, he can take stock and decide rationally what he wants to do next. And then he can reject that idea and pick something he is actually capable of doing, all in the fractions of a second before catastrophe strikes.

Controlled Chaos (dice pool two) — He is not very good at redirecting chaos in the directions he wants. He does, however, try to do it a lot, as he knows that this is what he must be able to do to truly become a Trickster.

NUTURING MOTHER

Quote: “It’s for your own good.”

Background: She always took a close, personal interest in other people. With the benefit of perspective, she now describes her mortal self as a ‘nosy gossip and interfering busybody’. This was not, as it turned out, bad preparation for the Danse Macabre, and, as a ‘conniving politician’, she spent some time playing that game, while she was a Scarlet Woman.

Now, however, she has moved on. There is no such thing as society, she says, at least not for the Kindred. All that matters are individual Kindred, and their personal spiritual progression. They need to be helped along the path to spiritual enlightenment, whatever it takes.

The Nurturing Mother makes it her business to know about the Kindred in her city, particularly those affiliated with the Circle. She is more interested in personal qualities than in political affiliations, but it is impossible to learn a great deal about one Kindred without knowing something about her allies. Her knowledge is not universal, but it is surprisingly broad.

She offers advice based on this knowledge. Her child is, of course, the main recipient, and bound to get it

unsolicited. Other, younger Kindred within the Circle get some unsolicited suggestions, but mainly she makes herself available to those with questions. She never commands, although she expresses disappointment with those who reject her counsel.

She also takes steps to ensure that such Kindred make spiritual progress despite their willfulness. A few words in the right ears, and she knows the right ears, can turn a simple feeding trip into a nightmare of pursuit. She does not mean the Kindred to be destroyed, although accidents happen. No, she means them to face tribulation, and learn from it.

Even when her advice is accepted, it never leads to an easy Requiem. Kindred can only make progress if they continue to push themselves, and sometimes a little push from someone else can make a great deal of difference.

Description: She dresses conservatively, and looks uncomfortable in crowds because she is trying to keep an eye on everyone at once. In a one-on-one situation, she is very focused on the other vampire, really listening to what they say, and offering advice that is clearly tailored to this listener. Her advice is always phrased as suggestions, and is rarely what the other vampire wants to hear — although they are often compelled to concede its truth.

Storytelling Hints: You want people to make spiritual progress. This requires them to suffer, but the suffering is not the point; the progress is. Her advice should almost always be good, but difficult and testing to put into practice. Ideally, player characters should be reluctant to go to her for advice, because they know that they will not like what she suggests, but will have to do it for their own good.

Abilities

Kindred Knowledge (dice pool five) — She really knows a lot about the Kindred of the city, focused on their personalities and spiritual development. She gets a 1 die penalty for questions about political affiliation, and a 2 die penalty for questions about supernatural powers. On the other hand, she gets a 2 die bonus for questions about the Circle of the Crone.

Counselor (dice pool eight) — The Nurturing Mother really is good at giving advice. This also includes the ability to get Kindred to open up, which can be incredibly valuable.

String-pulling (dice pool four) — While she is not a political animal as such, she has enough contacts and influence to make things happen. She normally uses this influence to make life difficult for those who need it.

SOLITARY SEEKER

Quote: “What can you tell me that I haven’t already learned for myself? You’re not a teacher. You’re just another kind of prey.”



Background: A few years ago, the Solitary Seeker suffered a crisis of faith. He just couldn't accept the teachings of his covenant any longer – there was too much in him that demanded personal experience instead of passive acceptance of elder instruction. Now he dwells in the forgotten corners of the domain, convinced he's found a deeper truth that most vampires won't allow themselves to acknowledge.

Description: Ratty, ragged, and layered with damp clothes held together by stiff twine, this vampire is almost invisible to the clean-and-classy mortals of the domain. He maintains his image carefully, making sure he blends in with the life in his chosen territory so as to avoid disrupting its natural flow. Besides, it also ensures that the so-called civilized Kindred of his former covenant don't get too close unless they absolutely need to.

Storytelling Hints: The Seeker might be seem to be half as enlightened as he says he is if he could just learn a little humility. Instead, he can't resist lording his newfound self-satisfaction over every vampire he deigns to speak to – and sooner or later, it's going to get him in serious trouble with someone in a real position of responsibility. He's especially annoying when dealing with the members of his former covenant, little realizing that they consider him a mere dilettante and are expecting him to return to the fold as soon as he gets tired of feeding on muck-encrusted pigeons.

The Seeker is just as likely to make trouble for the Circle as he is to help – he's just too stubbornly independent to realize that he is benefiting from their protection. Until he commits fully, he's a loose cannon.

Abilities

Occult (dice pool 3) – It's surprising how much the Seeker's managed to put together on his own, consider-

ing how little he's got to work with. His sorcery is sloppy and occasionally completely off-base...but to discerning observers, his rough attempts show promise.

Streetwise (dice pool 6) – When you spend as much time roaming the streets as the Seeker does, you learn a thing or two about what's really going on. He can be a useful source of information if a fellow Acolyte is willing to trade for ritual knowledge.

Survival (dice pool 6) – The Seeker's got a great sense for finding shelter in the downtown landscape. He's got six or seven bolt-holes in mind at any given time, and it never takes him too long to find a new one.

CALCULATING ADVISOR

Quote: "My Prince, your plan is undeniably sound. But consultations with our Oracle suggest that the Great Mother's fortune will not favor you unless you delay 'till this month is passed. The stones are already cast: your enemy falls next month, at your hand or over your ashes."

Background: Thanks to decades of careful work, the Circle of the Crone has managed to place one of their most talented manipulators firmly in the confidence of the domain's Prince. Not only that, but her dedicated influence has rendered the Prince incapable of making a serious decision without consulting her. Now she's in the perfect position: receiving advance warning of changes in domain policy and enjoying the occasional opportunity to exert control over the features and form of that policy.

Description: The Advisor is a calm, collected figure, and must project a reassuring image of confidence and trustworthiness at all times. She dresses in muted colors and modestly tailored clothes, allowing herself to fade back even when standing at the Prince's shoulder. Her appearance is nearly sexless in public, but she will take pains to ensure that her look pleases the Prince, whether he knows it consciously or not.

Storytelling Hints: The Calculating Advisor is very, very cagey. She knows very well that her current position was won by sticking close to a detailed, long-view plan and is not likely to endanger it with a verbal slip. Even her thoughts are guarded. She confides only in the Hierophant, and only in private. At ritual, she says only what is required of her and no more.

Abilities

Intimidation (dice pool 5) – The counsel of the Advisor is tempered by her ability to frighten the Prince into thinking that ignoring it will lead to his downfall. The Advisor's usually fairly subtle with her intimidation, but when a guarantee is necessary she's not above making direct threats.

Persuasion (dice pool 7) – This vampire's great strength lies in her ability to make people think that





her ideas are originally theirs. More often than not, she accomplishes this by a subtle mix of humble suggestion and well-placed praise.

Politics (dice pool 6) – The Advisor may be able to sway the Prince, but she'd never be where she is without earning his trust...and she's done that by repeatedly applying her keen political acumen to every decision she makes.

SANGUINE PHILOSOPHER

Quote: "I have learned, in my time, that every event has its basis in a functionally teleological foundation. There is nothing, absolutely nothing that happens without conscious purpose. That purpose is, and you must be prepared to accept this, the purpose of our Great Mother, the Crone, the Creator. Every fragment of the natural world serves this purpose. How can you think otherwise?"

Background: This intellectual Acolyte's determination to understand and demonstrate the advantages of faith in logical terms has earned him an equal share of respect and derision from the members of the covenant. Some believe that he's found a new way to promote the truth of the Crone to all Kindred. Others feel that he just thinks too much, and that doing so compels him to bore the crap out of everyone who'll listen to his theories.

Description: The Philosopher is outwardly indistinguishable from the average well-groomed Acolyte. Perhaps a little on the scrawny side, he's clothed in the simple garb of a believer who feels no inclination to ostentatious display. He might wear a few of the charms of his local Circle, making clear his devotion to the Crone, but he's careful not to make a spectacle of himself. He believes that the unerring logic of his faith will win over the outsiders who care to inquire, and consciously avoids wearing anything that makes him look "crazy".

Storytelling Hints: The Sanguine Philosopher is perfectly happy engaging in long, overly analytical discussions about the operation of the world and the particulars of his faith. He can usually be found somewhere in Elysium, engaging in a lively debate with outsiders and trying his level best to come off as a perfectly rational, completely logical being. At ritual, he performs his assigned duties with enthusiasm, even if he's a little too analytical to let the energies flow freely in his Vitae.

The Philosopher will react badly to any Acolyte who is openly eccentric, because he believes that they are undermining the ability of outsider Kindred to take the covenant seriously.

Abilities

Academics (dice pool 7) – You'll be hard-pressed to find an academic subject with which the Sanguine Philosopher is unfamiliar. He's got a real talent for tracking down reference material whenever he's not entirely confident in his own knowledge, too.

Persuasion (dice pool 4) – His delivery may be awkward and sprinkled with a few too many fifty-cent words to convey the message, but impassioned repetition often gets the job done...and this vampire is all too willing to engage in it.

Science (dice pool 5) – The Sanguine Philosopher loves to find evidence of his theories in the actual elements of the natural world. Whenever he's got some free time, he dabbles in the sciences so as to satisfy his curiosity.

LIAISON TO THE LUPINES

Quote: "We wish to broker a deal between our pack and yours. Will you listen to me speak before deciding my fate?"

Background: In some cities, the Acolytes and Lupines are able to foster tenuous alliances. The two, while



certainly different, at least share a few common ideas about the reality of the world in which they dwell. Some Acolytes put forth a liaison to go to the Lupines and negotiate and advise upon such alliances. They may put offers on the table, or attempt to smooth over any “misunderstandings” that may have happened on either side of the playing field. Of course, this job isn’t necessarily one of honor or ability. It may very well be a punishment levied by a wicked Hierophant who wishes to see harm come to a lesser vampire.

Description: A liaison must look the part. Some dress too conservatively or exhibit flashy fashions – two things that Lupines don’t seem to respect. Wise brokers look tough, dress tough, even if they don’t always talk tough. Many Acolytes accept that the wolfmen can smell weakness and fear, like dogs. Hence, it is important to quash those emotions and put forth an aura of strength.

Storytelling Hints: These poor Kindred must walk a fine line. They must present strength without overt threat. And yet, they must also be somewhat obsequious – flattering without gushing, gracious without appearing weak. Few liaisons can consistently walk this line, and often pay a painful price for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. Some, however, know precisely how to dance atop the tightrope when dealing with the Lupines.

Abilities:

Persuasion (dice pool 5) – This Acolyte’s job necessitates straightforward social Skills. While other Skills certainly aid in his task (the werewolves seem to respect Intimidation, to a degree), it is better to be humble with a honeyed-tongue than too brash and too demanding. The latter can make him headless. The former might help him redraw crucial lines of territory or papers of allegiance.

Survival (dice pool 6) – The liaison must be able to go where the Lupines dwell. That might mean atop the roof of a dilapidated apartment building, in the middle of the city’s biggest park, or out in the dark and foreboding forests away from the urban lights. This Acolyte knows how to track those he seeks, and stay hidden enough from other enemies so that he doesn’t cut his Requiem needlessly short.

Streetwise (dice pool 4) – Knowing what’s going on in and outside of the covenant’s territory in town is key. Not only do other vampires roam these streets, but so do Lupines, mortal sorcerers, and human gangs. Just negotiating the treacherous tracts of city between the Acolytes and the Lupines can be dangerous enough. It’s good to know the lines of battle.

MERCENARY OUTSIDER

Quote: “Fuck your myth. I’m no hero. If I get you the sorcerer’s head, you teach me the ritual.”

Background: Many Acolytes appreciate the role of the hero, or outsider. Those who have not yet Embraced but are willing to dirty their hands for the cult are mythic figures – they become exiled, performing tasks (“quests”) for wisdom. One day the wisdom will overwhelm them and they may return to the fold and teach what they have learned. Many outsiders are without kin or coterie and are selfish creatures. Such selfishness is expected to diminish over time as true wisdom and self-knowledge comes to light.

Description: Selfish and possibly narcissistic, the mercenary outsider is often slick and stylish. He fancies himself a pretty cool cat above and beyond the witches and wretches inside his covenant, and is happy to flaunt his clothing and accoutrements accordingly.



Storytelling Hints: The outsider has had glimpse of wisdom. The power of the dark gods have shown him flashes of what he is to learn and take back to his people. Right now, he doesn't really want to listen. He ignores all that stuff, and instead performs tasks and duties for money, blood and power. But sometimes those tiny revelations are troubling, and he wonders if he is on the wrong path, somehow.

Abilities:

Computer (4 dice): Too few vampires are willing to use a computer to get information. Either they're too old to learn new tricks, or they're young enough but don't want to offend their Hierophants or Princes by messing with "trifling" devices. The outsider doesn't care what others think. If the computer helps him track an object or his prey, then a computer is what he will use.

Larceny (6 dice): They ask him to break into places and steal things. If caught, he must conceal those things. This Skill is invaluable: without it, they might not pay him as they do.

Stealth (5 dice): Sticking to the shadows is critical. Whether the mercenary outsider is hired to spy on the Sanctified or steal a holy chalice from those Invictus assholes, it's best to not get caught. Some Acolytes tell him that, within the shadows he will find secret wisdom. Right now, he thinks that's dumb. The only wisdom in the shadows is his interest in not getting strung up in front of the Prince for stealing his precious locket.

SOOTH SAYING WHORE

Quote: "The guts of this pig tell me that you've made a mess of the Mother's wishes. We are offended."

Background: The Scarlet Woman – or whore, to many – snubs her nose at tradition and expectation. For that reason, many whores in the covenant make excellent seers. As Haruspex, the whore can tell it as it is without fear of repercussion, because it is her will that allows the gods' will to be known.

Description: The soothsayer whore dresses provocatively. She demands attention through both her actions and appearance. She outperforms the Harpies and is the center of Elysium, whether the other Acolytes like it or not, and her dress accentuates her performances perfectly.

Storytelling Hints: The gods have asked her to be their voice, and she'll gladly do that. Not only does that allow her to deliver bad news with aplomb and secret delight, but it allows her to mask her own criticisms as censure straight from the heavens. Of course, she literally listens to what the gods say – the whore is a believer, after all – but she accepts the role as the providence to do as she wishes in this world.

Abilities:

Occult (4 dice): The world is filled with signs and portents. Superstitions must be accurately read. Omens



must be accurately divined. The Haruspex whose must know what it means when the psychopomp raven drops a feather in a puddle, and what happens when one cuts open a goat and finds his bowels empurpled with blood clots.

Subterfuge (6 dice): Make no mistake, the gods' will is... open for interpretation. Sometimes, that means assuming their desires and selling it regardless of the reality. Other times, it means out-and-out lying. The whore is not afraid of speaking the truth, but she is equally unafraid of spreading deceit.

MAIDEN IN DENIAL

Quote: "Spare me your excuses. I'd actually respect you more if you just acknowledged that you wanted to, or were too weak to resist."

Background: She can't deny the truth of Crúac, yet neither can she admit to herself the fullness of its dark power, or accept what it means about her and her existence. She stands at the edge of the Circle, inducted and trusted and shrilly defensive of the covenant to anyone outside it, but also arrogant in her purity and derogatory towards neonates who are unwilling or unable to refrain from killing as she has done.

She masks her squeamishness with displays of concern for the living – displays that are more than half genuine, but which are never completely selfless because her motives are tainted. Nevertheless, her generous attitude towards mortals and her hard-won retention of Humanity make her popular with the living and useful to other Acolytes, some of whom rely on her to build up herds for them. She's gracious to the elders but particularly disdainful to anyone the Circle treats as her equal, but who she secretly feels is her inferior.



Some of those elders aren't fooled. They feel no need to subject her to tribulation, knowing how serenely she's setting herself up for a big, humiliating fall. To those with less experience, their indifference could look like favoritism or even compassion. Especially since she's such a snit.

Description: She's pretty and stylishly dressed – or, at least, as stylish as it's possible to be and still be a demure little prude. She always tries to act tranquil, forgiving and compassionate, with modesty thrown in for the elders. Among her Kindred equals and inferiors, this act gets tiny touches of sarcasm – unless they earn her respect by being Maidens, like her.

Storytelling Hints: You're better than everyone else because you have moral fortitude and the willpower to resist temptation. You have to remind yourself of this every couple minutes. You're smug, but brittle and easily offended.

Abilities

Pass for Mortal (dice pool 6) – It won't fool anyone with paranormal senses or the Predator's Taint, but her high Humanity, along with the care she takes with tiny details when she's putting on the act, make her pretty convincing.

Blood Kink Matchmaker (dice pool 5) – She's got an eerie character sense for setting up blood dolls with Kindred who fit their personalities. Thus, the masochist head case is introduced to the ideal Nosferatu to alternately abuse and comfort him, while the jaded sybarite bored by typical pleasures is given to the wildly inventive Daeva pervers.

DISAPPROVING PATRIARCH

Quote: "Yes, you succeeded – you want a warm hug and a hearty congratulations? Your *success* is the only factor that mitigates your lax, careless, and foolhardy

approach! I've always expected better of you. Now I'm demanding it."

Background: A self-made man in life, he surpassed his sire in undeath. Where his progenitor lapsed into self-absorbed pleasure, the Disapproving Patriarch dedicated himself to the structure of the Circle and the adoration of his chosen deity. Eventually, he rose to a position of trust and prominence while his one-time teacher and mentor degenerated into a savage *draugr*. The Patriarch (then a Hero) took him down personally.

When he felt ready to Embrace, he took the responsibility very seriously and selected a candidate he felt had incorrigible personal strength. Perhaps it was one of the characters, in which case he is equally a Mentor and a martinet. He is only satisfied with excellence, while any setback is met with scathing criticism. But to be fair, he keeps his withering critiques private. In public he backs his progeny 100%, and anyone who dares take the childe to task had better be ready to debate the sire as well.

Alternately, this character can work as a Mentor for someone other than his own childe, and in that case it's fun to have his own offspring be a big disappointment. Maybe his chosen scion went *draugr* too, or worse – converted to Longinus. Or perhaps his childe simply despises the Patriarch's meddling, which has led the Patriarch to adopt one of the characters in a fairly transparent jealousy maneuver.

Description: Barrel-chested, hook-nosed and severe, with piercing blue eyes and a full head of white hair. He wears a full white beard, too, usually at about an inch long.

Storytelling Hints: Never forget that you really truly care for your protégé. You want her to succeed and fulfill her potential, and part of you wants her to surpass you.



But thudding against this idealistic hope comes the imperfect reality, again and again and again.

Abilities

Motivational Abuse (dice pool 7) – The Patriarch has an instinct for provoking the Vices of those he advises in such a way that they feel challenged to immediately fulfill them (and justified in doing so). For instance, he might dress down someone motivated by Pride in a fashion subconsciously calculated to spur a Willpower-replenishing counterattack. (This is riskier with the Wrathful of course.) The Slothful, on the other hand, are hectored into a spell of inaction and despair that, nevertheless, gives them resources for their next attempt.

Connected (dice pool 7) – Hey, the guy knows people who owe him favors and people who fear his disapproval. His current crop of tyros isn't his first, after all.

Excellent Instructor (dice pool 8) – The guy can teach you anything he knows quickly and efficiently, indeed rather impatiently. His fields of expertise depend on the needs of individual chronicles, but generous Storytellers may assign bonus XP to spend only on what the Patriarch is teaching (which means, only what the Patriarch thinks the character needs to know).

HERMIT MANIPULATOR

Quote: “Mm, yes. Very difficult. But don't worry young one... I am here to help you.”

Background: This wizened elder is a plot arc in himself. You start the arc with him as an ally, who subtly backs the characters against a Prince and Hierophant who seems unduly paranoid about the Masquerade. He instructs, advises and generally plays the role of patron advisor to the hilt. This is because the characters fit his plan.

His plan is to bring down the Masquerade. (Naturally, some groups are better suited to this arc than others. If your players are careful and cautious, find a variant. If they're not going to care that they were played for chumps, as long as they get to go freaky on the squares, you may want to alter the arc to prepare.)

The vigilant Prince and Hierophant have thwarted his veiled ploys – barely – for decades. Due to the Hermit's extreme sneakiness, they only barely suspect that there's an intentional actor behind it. So he builds his power base, gathers his proxies, makes his moves and, when they get thwarted, he fades back into the shadows to try again. After all, he only has succeed once to win. The forces of suppression have to win every single time.

He's doing this because he's in contact with a powerful spirit, and it has convinced him that Kindred are wretched evil and a plague upon the world. After five hundred years with them (four hundred of them awake) it wasn't even a particularly hard sell. Especially when the spirit pointed out the advantages of being the last vampire standing.



The plot goes like this: The powers that be are hardasses towards the coterie, and the Hermit is a sympathetic figure, albeit distant. He gradually pushes them into situations where the Masquerade is very vulnerable. Eventually the characters figure out that he's trying to crash the illusion and is using them as his hammer to do it. By this time, of course, they're *persona non grata* with the Prince, and the Hierophant doesn't want to believe wild accusations against one of his most powerful Acolytes. If they make an enemy of this terrifying elder, can they survive it? Can they stop his plan? Might they even succeed at destroying him?

Description: The creepy thing is, this guy was Embraced when he was about sixteen years old. Back in the 1500s, that was pretty much adulthood. He's under five feet tall, with a few missing teeth and lank brown hair. His age of Embrace and his degraded Humanity have made him a disturbing blend of young and old. His smooth, clear skin is sallow, pale and stiff to the touch. His voice is high and piping, but hoarse with age, slow and deliberate. He typically avoids the issue by wearing a robe with a deep cowl and sleeves over his hands, and by sitting on a tall chair.

Storytelling Hints: Be inaccessible and make the coterie pay for any aid rendered. He knows Kindred expect to be gouged and suspect anyone who seems to be a creampuff. Never have him insult the Masquerade openly – though he's unimpressed by it, an open opposition is too much for most vampires to accept. Besides, he doesn't want to tip his hands. If he fails again, he wants the characters' skins on the line for carelessness, not his own.

Abilities

Anticipate (dice pool 8) – His greatest strength is his ability to be five steps – or five years – ahead of the competition. His combination of spiritual, animal and mortal intelligence networks (along with the occasional

well-timed trance vision) ensures that little takes him by surprise.

Practical Psychology (dice pool 9) – Or maybe his greatest strength is his ability to calculate what people want, what they fear, and what stimuli lead them to act as he wishes without ever suspecting they were manipulated.

Golconda (dice pool N/A) – Or just maybe his greatest strength is that he's perfectly adapted to his condition and utterly at peace with his genocidal urges towards his own kind.

COMBATANTS

ACOLYTE SHERIFF

Quote: “I appreciate the position you’re in. If you’ll be kind enough to answer my questions, we can end this quickly.”

Background: In a city where the Prince and ruling vampires are not all Acolytes, an Acolyte Sheriff is in a somewhat precarious position. He must first and foremost represent his Prince and his city. The covenant’s needs come second – or, at least, must *appear* to come second. Right or wrong, the city’s Kindred feel occasionally uncomfortable around blood witches and sorcerers of purportedly black magic. The Sheriff has to let them know that he’s “okay,” and isn’t necessarily “one of them” – even if he is one of them.

Description: The Acolyte Sheriff dresses for a fight. Others seem perfectly willing to pick fights with him, so he must be ready for such encounters on any given night. Knowing this fact, sometimes its best to dress dark and stick to the shadows. With a weapon handy, of course.

Storytelling Hints: It’s best to come across a little bland. The local Acolytes bring enough color, attitude

and other strangeness to the table. The Sheriff may dial it down, appearing as much an “Average Joe” as his unique position will allow. He doesn’t wear his faith on his sleeve, even if he’s particularly religious in his off-hours. Patience is a virtue: he will suffer many slings and arrows, and must grin and bear it – at least, until they make the first move. Then the game is his.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 4, Resolve 2

Physical Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Computer 1, Investigation 3 (Small Details), Occult 3, Politics 1

Physical Skills: Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Drive 1, Stealth 4 (Walk Softly), Weaponry 3

Social Skills: Empathy 2 (Read Room), Intimidation 2, Persuasion 2, Socialize 1

Merits: City Status 2, Covenant Status 3, Fresh Start 1, Haven 2

Willpower: 5

Humanity: 6

Virtue: Prudence

Vice: Faith

Initiative: 6

Defense: 3

Speed: 12

Blood Potency: 2

Vitae/Per Turn: 11/1

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Combat Knife	1(L)	1	n/a	7

Stake	1(L)	1	target heart	7
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Armor Type	Rating	Defense Penalty
Thick Clothing	1/0	0

Health: 8

Disciplines: Celerity 1, Crúac 1, Obfuscate 2, Resilience 2

Crúac Rituals: Rigor Mortis (•)

SELF-PROCLAIMED CRONE

Quote: “You will tell stories of me. You will bring me gifts. And I will show you my favor.”

Background: Those considered to be Crones within the covenant are both blessed and cursed. Few trust them and their power; how can one trust a tidal wave or a hurricane? And yet, they are often the center of cultic activity, worshipped either as a dominant personality within the covenant or as a full-blown deity. Some are granted the title by other Acolytes. They believe her a potent force, and so they name her Crone. Other vampires must take the mantle for themselves, proving they are the



powerful creatures they claim – if others must suffer to see the truth, then that is the way of the Circle.

Description: It is often frightening to gaze upon a Crone. She might have blood matting her hair, or bits of skin between her filthy teeth. A Crone, as a so-called “mother of monsters,” must certainly look the part. She does what she must to appear both grotesque and divine: strange tattoos, asymmetric scarification, presenting her naked flesh to all who come to her. The Crone appears as a hag, bestial and primeval.

Storytelling Hints: The gods are often mercurial, and Crones tend to be the same. Their volatile natures represent teacup tempests: will they give a gift or take one away? Like the gods, Crones often surround themselves with insane levels of personal drama, amplified to purportedly divine levels. Many Acolytes are wary of getting caught up in a Crone’s hysteria and melodrama, but they are truly tidal. Like an undertow, it is easy to be swept under in the blink of an eye. (As for their actual power, many self-proclaimed Crones call themselves such earlier than they are perhaps ready. Their supposed divine power is often a mask.)

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 4

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 5

Social Attributes: Presence 4, Manipulation 5, Composure 2

Mental Skills: Crafts 2, Investigation 1, Medicine 2, Occult 3, Politics 3 (Dirty Tricks)

Physical Skills: Brawl 1, Larceny 2, Stealth 2, Survival 2, Weaponry 2

Social Skills: Animal Ken 1, Empathy 1, Expression 3 (Theatrics), Intimidation 2, Persuasion 4, Subterfuge 4 (Spontaneous Deception)

Merits: Covenant Status (Circle of the Crone) 4, Fast Reflexes 1, Herd 5, Retainer 1



Willpower: 6

Humanity: 4

Virtue: Fortitude

Vice: Pride

Initiative: 5

Defense: 3

Speed: 10

Blood Potency: 5

Vitae/Per Turn: 14/2

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Serrated Dagger	1	n/a		5

Armor: n/a

Health: 10

Disciplines: Crúac 3, Majesty 3 Nightmare 3

Crúac Rituals: Pangs of Proserpina (•), Cheval (••), Touch of the Morrigan (•••)

Derangements: Megalomania (severe), Vocalization (mild)

GARDEN DAEDELUS

Quote: “You just couldn’t leave me alone, could you? You thought you could bring me back to the cold, ugly monstrosity of a building you call Elysium for a ‘trial’. You came for me here, in my garden. In. My. Garden. Do you have any idea foolish you are?”

Background: A long time ago, this old Acolyte discovered that she had a love and talent for gardening. As the years passed, she perfected first the art of cultivating natural gardens, then the practice of ghouling plants. She secured a sizable haven and has constructed an insanely complicated garden labyrinth on the property, which she tends every night. Friends who walk its paths testify to its stunning, majestic beauty and the eloquence of her tribute to nature. Enemies who pass between its gates are swallowed within, never to be seen again.

Description: This is a vampire in perfect harmony with her chosen environment. Her appearance perfectly mimics that of a wealthy suburban retiree, although it might seem a little strange to see her out in the middle of the night with her floppy sunhat and summer dress, tending to the roses. When forced to deal with anyone who isn’t part of her trusted Circle, she can barely conceal an expression of annoyance and contempt. For her own, though, she is all smiles.

Storytelling Hints: The Garden Daedelus is a Prince in her own tiny domain, ruling her labyrinthine garden with love and fiercely protective care. There is nobody who knows more about the flora of the city than this vampire. She’s a walking encyclopedia – not because of book learning, but because she’s grown every variety of plant life she can get her hands on, tended it carefully,



and gained a deep understanding of it. She's happy to share her knowledge with any fellow Acolyte who demonstrates a humble respect for the natural world, and happy to correct anyone else's notions of superiority over "simple plants".

The Garden Daedalus rarely leaves her haven for anything but the hunt, and will never, ever confront other Kindred except on her own grounds. If battle looms away from home, she will vanish at the first opportunity and flee to the safety of her garden.

If she can draw an enemy into her territory, she unleashes the full fury of her hidden power. She will lure them into her garden, bringing them into the range of her toxic, stinging mandragora (nettles to snag and tear the flesh and ivies to irritate and burn the living) and hammer them with confusing attacks from the shadows. The construction of her garden is such that those within are easily turned around, often finding that their avenue of retreat is simply not where they thought it was. To make matters worse, she is intimately familiar

with the twists and turns of the maze, and can rapidly disappear within it, misleading and frustrating her quarry at every opportunity. More than one confident Kindred warrior has succumbed to an unadvised rage frenzy in those green corridors, only to find themselves lost, low on Vitae and covered in small wounds when they return to consciousness.

Clan: Mekhet

Covenant: Circle of the Crone

Embrace: 1868

Apparent Age: 38, but sufficiently weathered to pass for a woman in her late forties.

Attributes: Intelligence 4, Wits 3, Resolve 3

Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

Presence 3, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Skills: Crafts (landscaping) 4, Intimidation (fomenting confusion) 2, Occult 3, Science (botany, natural toxins) 3, Stealth 3, Weaponry 2

Merits: City Status: 1, Covenant Status: Circle of the Crone 2, Fast Reflexes 1, Fleet of Foot 2, Haven: Security 4, Haven: Size 4, Resources 3, Retainer: Mandragora 3

Willpower: 6

Humanity: 4 Suspicion, 6

Virtue: Prudence. This vampire is careful not to do anything rash so that she can continue tending her gardens and protecting the life within.

Vice: Wrath. If anyone crosses into her territory uninvited or fails to show the proper respect when standing on her soil, she has a tendency to fly off the handle.

Health: 7

Initiative: +7

Defense: 3

Speed: 12 (24)

Blood Potency: 3 (Vitae: 12/1)

Disciplines: Auspex 1, Celerity 1, Obfuscate 4, Crúac 3

Rituals: Blood Witness (•); Rigor Mortis (•); Barrier of Blood (••); Deflection of Wooden Doom (•••); Flower of Demeter (•••)

*"We don't worship the same gods, you and I,
but we're more alike than you think.*

*Together, we are keeping something alive —
something that has lived for thousands of years
despite the wavering faith of mortal men.*

*The old gods are not dead. They live within us.
We give them life, warm blood, and they keep us from death.
That is our covenant, our promise. Everything else is fashion."*

— Gwenyth the Grey, Acolyte Princess-in-Exile

This book includes:

- A look at the religion and culture of the Circle of the Crone — the vampire covenant made up of myriad pagan cults — and the Circle's worship of venerable creator goddesses
- Details about the nature of an Acolyte's Requiem, including guides to mythic roles, spirit contact and holy nights — useful whether you play a member of the Circle or have dealings with priests of the covenant
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