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the 1000 HELLS™

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DESCENT OF A SOUL: A CAUTIONARY TALE

Even the Second Breath was not as painful as the one I must draw now. Above me, sheets of flame dance off these burning waves like leaves caught in an autumn wind, while all around the water boils. The wind whistles over the face of the waters with a scream like a teakettle as gusts of steam jet upward into the breeze. Demons pole rafts through the waves, prodding the heads of sinners under the water with sadistic precision.

There are few sinners here, at the boundary between fire and water. Most choose a single form of punishment and swim in the depths. There they stay until the flesh boils from their bones and they sink to the ocean floor. Then the servitors of the Queen who rules here re-assemble them, to be tormented again. The pain is exquisite, but it is familiar, and so many choose to endure it patiently.

I, however, am of another sort. I do not belong here, any more than I belonged in any of the other domains I have traveled through. My lot is not to have my flesh abraded away by Tou Mu's winds, nor is it to allow Rangda's maggots to burrow beneath my skin. Yet I have journeyed throughout both of the Demon Queens' realms without complaint, and found the path out again. I will not let the Hell of the Seven Burning Seas keep me, either. My duty, that for which I have returned to this place of torment and pain, is too important to allow me the luxury of failure.

I have chosen this spot deliberately. To those who have not studied the omens and auguries that I have, it seems ordinary, just one more wave on an endless sea. Around me the demons do their work; below me the sinners bob and dangle. Through the smoke and curtains of steam I can see the Great

Gate which links this place with the next in the series of the Burning Seas. Each one is supposed to be hotter and more dreadful than the last; I have no desire to test this supposition.

Yes! There it is! A bare hundred feet away I see her masts breaking the waves, and the rest of the ship rising as well. The sails are sheets of flame and the prow is ablaze, but that does not matter; the *Keshi* has risen from the depths once more. She is all fire and splendor, and her crew stalks the decks undisturbed by the inferno that surrounds them. The sailors look left and right, searching for the one soul they have arrived to attempt to rescue. In a matter of seconds, the ghosts on board set their course; they are of course headed straight for me. So said the auguries I consulted before beginning this last leg of my journey, and I am glad to see that they are correct.

It has been said that the crew of the *Keshi* are doomed to rise and sink eternally until the day comes when they rescue an innocent soul that has been wrongfully brought here. Until the day when that soul is found, they are condemned to repeat their cycle of torment, servants of justice in an unjust place. Such matters are of academic interest to me only, now that the time for me to act has come. As the *Keshi* comes toward me, presumably heading for some poor damned fool beyond, the demons scatter out of its way.

It is all the distraction I need. I fill my lungs with the scalding air, more out of habit than out of need, then dive for the depths. Briefly, I hear shouts, then my ears fill with the boiling water and the voices of the surface are lost to me. All that comes to me now is the hissing and bubbling of an ocean of boiling water and the faint moans of those trapped within.

Already, the light is fading. I have a choice: I can close my eyes and dive blind, which would make me easy prey for any demons in the depths, or I can keep my eyes open and hope that they are not cooked into uselessness as I descend. I could try to heal them, but I have precious little Chi to spare if I am to leave this place. So I keep my eyes open, and try to avoid wasting energy in screams, and I swim ever downward.

It is said that at the bottom of the Seven Burning Seas there is a passage through which a brave and enterprising soul can swim out to the seas of the Middle Kingdom. Such is my fervent hope, else I am trapped here after all. It is also said that the Empress of Pearls' servants dwell on the bottom, building cities from the stuff of the ocean floor, and that other monsters swim in unfathomed depths. I have heard other, worse tales as well, from *akuma* I have spoken with in other domains. Of all the hells, this is one of the most feared, and with good reason.

My vision blurs. Some of that must be the damage the water inflicts, while the rest is due to the depths to which I descend. No light can penetrate far into these waters, even the firelight that dances on the waves above. I pass sinners huddled into balls, making no effort to buoy themselves up. The pain has become too much for them, and now they sink, slowly, ever downward. There is a rain of gobbets of flesh that I swim through, as I am moving into the depths faster than the boiled strips of muscle and fat. A few hundred meters away, something that crudely resembles a shark swims through the hail of flesh, snapping at morsels drifting past. I swim faster so as to avoid being any closer than necessary to the beast. And still I descend.

Now, faintly, I can see the cities of the Empress' servants. They are lit by green flame that somehow manages to burn underwater, and they are titanic. The walls of the city I am swimming past must be 30 meters high, and there are buildings within that would collapse under their own weight in the open air. I can see the inhabitants now, scuttling crablike throughout their thoroughfares and up their towers. Some are pointing at me with claws the size of, well, it is impossible to tell from here, save to say that the Empress' servants are monstrous indeed.

I continue to swim past the city. The floating bodies are fewer here; they tend to sink very rapidly once they reach this stage. Things should be getting dark, but they are not. Instead, they are brightening, glowing with the bright orange of firelight. Perhaps this is a sign that I am truly on the right path, that I have light when I should have darkness.

An instant later, I realize my error. The light is coming from behind me. The light is truly fire, not a sign of divine favor. It is not me that the things that serve the Yama Queen are pointing at.

The *Keshi* is plummeting into the depths on my heels. I turn and look behind me, and there it is, still ablaze even in the deeps of this hellish ocean. It has failed once again, and now it rushes to the ocean floor. If I do not move quickly, I will be trapped beneath it, and that will be the end of me. Even worse, I might be pressed into the crew and spend eternity looking for a soul who does not exist.

For there are no innocents in Yomi.

I swim harder, and try to twist out of the ship's way. It moves to follow me. I can hear the shouting of the crew now,



impossibly loud in the water. There is a clamor rising from the city as well, as I press desperately downward. I risk looking backward, and am dismayed by what I see. The Keshi is closer, and the crew is talking about how they might best bring me on board. It is clear they intend me as one of their hellish crew, and my duty cannot allow that.

I can see my escape route now as well. It is too narrow for the Keshi. If I can reach the tunnel, I am safe.

Their hands are almost on me. The clamor is deafening. The heat of the burning ship makes the water unendurable. I will fail. I cannot make it ere they drag me on board. One of the sailors extends a burning hand to grasp me by the ankle, and I know that all is lost.

Then, suddenly, the Keshi is plummeting past me, its crew wailing despair as it falls into the ocean floor. I do not stop to watch as the sands of the sea floor swallow the ship. Instead, I kick downward, marveling at my good fortune. The path to the seas of the Middle Kingdom lies open before me, and I put all

of my strength into reaching it. I have triumphed.

It is only much, much later that I ponder the means of my escape. Perhaps the auguries were too true. Perhaps I was the soul the crew of the Keshi sought this time. And perhaps, by my very attempts to flee, I proved myself corrupted and unworthy.

If so, I have committed a great offense. I have doomed the brave souls who man the Keshi to centuries more of torment. Their pain is my doing.

So my duty is clear. I must return to Yomi Wan, to the Hell of the Seven Burning Seas. I must bear an innocent soul with me, as mine is no longer worthy, and I must offer another innocent's torment to rectify the evil I have wrought. All this I shall do, though the prospect fills me with dread.

No one ever escapes Yomi for good, I was told when first I fled. It is simply that now you get to choose how you return.

My way is chosen. Let the innocent and the guilty alike tremble. I am going back to Yomi Wan.

INTRODUCTION

There is Heaven, and there is Earth. There is Yin, and there is Yang. There are the lands of the living, and there are the lands of the dead.

And then there is Yomi Wan, and nothing else is like it, anywhere.

Yomi, also known as the Thousand Hells, is more than just a place of torment. It is where the Yama Kings dwell, each awaiting his chance at the title of Demon Emperor. It is where the souls of the truly wicked are punished without surcease for all eternity. And it is the place where every single Kuei-jin comes from.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS

The Thousand Hells is not a comprehensive guide to all of the various hells and their masters. There are just too darn many of them for that. Instead, the book is a guide to the most notable and famous regions of the Yomi World, the routes in and out, the place's most famous inhabitants and a quick analysis of how the hells warp normal vampiric powers and habits.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Most of the material in *The Thousand Hells* is Storyteller-oriented. Players may not want to read all of what's

contained within, for fear of spoiling the unpleasant surprises waiting for them when their characters descend into Yomi. On the other hand, scholars, sages and those few suicidal Kuei-jin who voluntarily take the trip back into the hells may well have heard some or all of what is contained in here. Whether or not they believe it, however, is an entirely different matter.

Chapter by chapter, here is how the book breaks down:

Tapestry is a brief overview of the history of the Yomi World, as well as an examination of the routes in and out. The Ebon Path and the Scarlet Road get special attention, along with the creatures that dwell along them. Other methods of escaping Yomi are covered as well.

The Map of Damnation covers the most famous and infamous hells in Yomi Wan. The history, notable sites and common inhabitants of these domains are detailed.

The Face of Yomi introduces you to the most notable and terrifying Yama Kings. Mikaboshi, Emma-o, Rangda, Tou Mu and others take center stage here. In addition, there is information on *akuma*, those Kuei-jin who have taken service with the Yama Kings. (More *akuma* material can be found in the Appendix; see below)

Storytelling in Yomi discusses the best ways to use Yomi in your chronicles, either directly or indirectly. Furthermore, there are sections on building your own hells and Yama Kings.

Systems of Yomi is a brief look at rules, and the way in which Yomi alters even the most basic aspects of vampiric existence. Rules for gathering Chi, resisting frenzy and more are included as well.

Finally, there is a separate appendix on *akuma*, including rules for making a deal with the Yama Kings, the benefits of becoming *akuma*, the powers these traitors to Heaven receive, and the down side of becoming a servant of the Yomi World's mightiest powers.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

The *Thousand Hells* is not, however, a simple travel-guide-style map book to Yomi, complete with information on accommodations, local sights and good restaurants. Nor is it a rogue's gallery of candidates for the Demon Emperor's throne, each lined up with statistics so that they can be knocked down in turn. Part and parcel with the factual information in the *Thousand Hells* should be the moods of terror and horror that it incites. The Yama Kings are vast, inhuman and unbelievably

powerful. The *Thousand Hells* stretch out beyond human comprehension, each one more horrific than the last. The torments of Yomi are sadistic and nigh-infinite. None of these things can or should be quantified. There will always be Yama Kings until the end of the world, there will always be more hells to endure or explore, and there will always be new horrors waiting in the Yomi World.

TERMINOLOGY AND USAGE

There are any number of sticky terms in *The Thousand Hells* (both the place and the book). A brief guide follows:

- "Yama King" refers to entities of any gender who control one or more of the *Thousand Hells*, or who are equivalent in power and respect to those who do rule. "Yama Queen" refers strictly to entities of this sort who are more female than not.

- *Akuma*, within the context of the *Thousand Hells*, are those Kuei-jin who have made formal binding contracts with one or more Yama Kings, exchanging their souls and service for power. Outcasts, criminals and other undesirable Kuei-jin of the Middle Kingdom may be called *akuma*, but this book only concerns itself with the real thing.

- The *Thousand Hells*, as a specific piece of cosmological real estate equivalent to the Yomi World or Yomi Wan, is capitalized throughout this book. Individually, the terms "hell" and "domain," referring to subdivisions of the *Thousand Hells*, are not. Each domain also has a specific individual name, by which it is generally referred.

- The souls trapped within Yomi Wan are not ghosts in the classic sense, but rather singular P'os of mortals whose evil deeds during life doomed them to Yomi. The vast majority of the dead in the Middle Kingdom either pass on to the next level of existence or find themselves in Yu Huang's empire. A relatively small number of souls do find their way to Yomi in the end. What swells the ranks of the damned is the fact that while the influx is slow, the outflow is nonexistent. Almost every soul ever to fall into Yomi is still there.

In any case, for the duration of this book, "soul" is synonymous with P'o unless it is specifically stated otherwise.

- "Demon," "demon servitor" and "devil" are all synonymous terms for the servants of the Yama Kings who make Yomi their home. Most are in direct service to a particular Yama King, and are constructed with the unique conditions of their home domains in mind.

HELL VERSUS HELL

Some of the hells described within this book would seem to have already been covered in the pages of *Dark Kingdom of Jade*, and specifically in the chapter on Ti Yu, the Earth Prison. Some of the hells in this book don't even bear much resemblance to their counterparts in *Dark Kingdom of Jade*, and some individuals appear in both versions of hell.

The explanation is simple. Yu Huang's hell, the Earth Prison of the Yellow Springs, is an artificial place. It has been constructed from memories, dreams and second-hand accounts, and populated with artificial demons crafted from Spectres and the worst souls of the Empire. Ti Yu is designed to turn souls into white jade, and to keep the citizenry of the Yellow Springs in line. It was build by the dead, for the dead, and it houses the dead. For all intents and purposes, Yu Huang is a Yama King (though there are those who claim he is a Malfean).

Yomi, on the other hand, is the real thing.

THE TAPESTRY OF YOMI

Li-Tsang ran along a road of skin stretched tight over fat, her footsteps drowned out by the shrieking of a thousand tormented P'os. Her foot sank into the earth — if it could be called that — with every step, and each stride was a battle to extricate herself. The spider huntsman pursuing her was nowhere in sight, but she could see that the pack of Unfaced Ones behind her was gaining ground. Despite being bent nearly double by unseen deformities, they still ran faster than hounds. Their smiling Buddha masks covered the absence of their faces. In any other place she would have assumed her demon form, but here she dared not call upon the power of her P'o. It was by unleashing her darker nature too frequently that she had gained the unwanted attentions of the Yama King Emma-o to begin with.

The Unfaced Ones caught up to her in moments. Squealing like enormous pigs, they circled Li-Tsang and contained her as they waited for their master. Li-Tsang recognized that there was no escape to be had by running, and assumed a fighting posture. Her feet sank into the moist flesh beneath her. Black talons sprouted from the tips of her fingers as she prepared for a brief but honorable battle.

She did not have long to wait. Within minutes, Emma-o's enormous Kumo huntsman caught up with his pack of "hounds" and skittered around the circle that held Li-Tsang prisoner. The sharp

black tips of his eight enormous legs punctured the tortured landscape at every step, and pus welled up from the festering land when he pulled his leg free. He pointed at her with the end of one dripping chitinous leg, chuckling unpleasantly. Li-Tsang prepared to block his attack and realized the huntsman was not moving forward.

"Oh, Li-Tsang, dear old enemy, you must put aside these rash confrontational gestures," he crooned, his voice filled with Yin calm. "In your time, I will admit, you were a most excellent warrior. Perhaps you were feared in that lovely city of yours, perhaps you held some silly little title among the Hungry Dead — Predator of Shanghai, was it? — but it no longer has any relevance, dear old hag. In Yomi, my sweet morsel, it is you who are the prey."

He turned away without striking, much to Li-Tsang's surprise. After putting distance between himself and his pack, he bellowed, "Unmask!" The swaying Unfaced Ones reached up and removed their unchanging visages.

For a brief moment, Li-Tsang, the Predator of Shanghai, mandarin of the Court of Opalescent Mirrors, screamed. Foul sounds followed, and then all was quiet except for the cries of the tormented in the distance.

HISTORY OF THE YOMI WORLD

The story of Yomi is not in any book of occult knowledge that might be accessible in the lands of the barbaric West, nor is it readily accessible to those who were not born speaking centuries-dead dialects of Asian languages. Those who know of Yomi — or at least some of it — hoard their knowledge, while those who do not know continue not to know. The great Dragon Wizards of the East do not speak of Yomi — outside of nervous whispers — because, in addition to being most unwise and inauspicious, it is considered rude. The Kuei-jin, on the other hand, avoid the subject of Yomi not because of its great import, but because of its obviousness. A Cathayan would no sooner mention Yomi in a conversation (or an interrogation) than she would mention that sunlight hurts or that blood nourishes. The P'o of every Kuei-jin ever to breathe the Second Breath has passed through the Yomi World. A fortunate few never go back; the rest know what waits for them someday. The horror of the Yomi World is a shared experience among the Kuei-jin, but one that few like to remember, and fewer still care to discuss at length. They have all been there, and that is enough.

Furthermore, while every Cathayan has some small knowledge of Yomi — a fleeting memory of the storms blowing across the Hell of Being Skinned Alive, a haunting image of a landscape or an unshakable reminiscence of agonizing moments in the Hell of Eternal Paralysis — very few know anything more than that. Bodhisattvas and arhats are rumored to know the truth about Yomi (as they're rumored to know the truth about everything) but if they do, they're notoriously tight-lipped around those less enlightened than they. What little they have said is hidden in fragile scrolls of scholars and occultists. Privileged *akuma*, particularly those wielding the powers of Hellweaving, know more than most; they may even be willing to discuss what they know for a price, but dealing with such beings presents dangers of its own.

THE FIRST LASH

Before the Second Age, there was no Yomi World. The worlds of Yin and Yang were balanced, and as the two were balanced, the Ten Thousand Things were in harmony. The August Personage of Jade still administered order to the world, and the Yama Kings were barely distinguishable from the other petty tyrants of the worlds of Yin and Yang. In that ancient age they were still nothing more than terrible children given control over the deepest holes of the world, existing in tiny islands of concentrated nightmare and corruption. They had been given the consolidated filth of the Middle Kingdom, the afterbirth and the offal, the defiled regions left over from the messy creation of the universe, and they felt slighted as a result. The August Personage called their tainted little realms "kingdoms" and called them all "Yama Kings," almost as if trying to mock them. They were enraged, but held their tempers in check, lest what little they had be taken from them.

The August Personage of Jade delegated to these Yama Kings the task of instructing and rehabilitating the wayward souls of the Middle Kingdom. The Yama Kings accepted

their charge as graciously as they might, but all it took for them to overstep the bounds of their mandate was for the August Personage to move his attention to other celestial matters. Left to their own devices, the Yama Kings realized that the suffering of others was to be their joy, their beauty and their solace.

The end of harmony and the genesis of the Yomi World came about when one of the slighted Yama Kings (all claim the distinction of being the legendary First, though legend more commonly gives "credit" to one of the Yang-aspected Yama Queens) learned that Chi tainted by strong negative emotions lent itself more easily to consumption than did calm or joyful thoughts. Armed with this knowledge, she glutted herself on the Chi near places where great pain or anger had stained the tapestry of the Yang World. The other Yama Kings grew alarmed at this "unfair advantage", and began watching the First with relentless curiosity. The First tried to keep her knowledge to herself, but even then there was no power under Heaven that could evade the full scrutiny of nine (or more) Yama Kings for long.

It is said that a servant of the First, Liao-chuh Kung, called the Wandering Dark by scholars, revealed the secret of the consumption of corrupted Chi to the other Yama Kings in exchange for vast power in the Middle Kingdom. While Liao-chuh Kung initially found the power his new allies granted him intoxicating, spending the intervening ages evading the traps and torments of his former master has made him bitter and vengeful. Knowing what Heaven asked of the Yama Kings, and seeing how they have overstepped their bounds, he seeks a way to banish them entirely from the Middle Kingdom. The Wandering Dark gleefully seizes any opportunity to undermine the works of any Yama King.

Once it was known to the other Yama Kings that they could consume almost unlimited Chi so long as it was generated from pain or rage, they all sought out realms of the Yang World tainted by such foul emanations. They found pockets of the Yang World that were bursting with suitable Chi ripe for the taking. They also found that none of the realms of the spirits of the Western lands was accessible to them. Regardless of how much will they brought to bear, regardless of the mantras they chanted or the rituals they performed, they could not affect the Western world in any way. At first the Yama Kings were incensed beyond comprehension, but after looking at the desert nomads and fur-clad barbarians of the West, they decided it was no great loss.

Over the course of their quest, it became clear that just as agriculture was more efficient than hunting and gathering, cultivating pain and rage was much simpler than seeking it out, and they set out on a dark new campaign. The Yama Kings began an aggressive policy of subverting the denizens of the Middle Kingdom, tricking humans and *shen* alike into creating more misery for them to feed on. Where there was stability, they would undermine it; where there was a spark of anger, they would fan it into violence; and where there was harmony, the Yama Kings would sow discontent, boredom and greed. They repeatedly pushed human events toward a negative outcome in order to harvest the rich Chi of agony and malice. Experimenting

on the humans they hated, the young Yama Kings learned that corrupt Chi had a different "taste" depending on whether it came from war, plague, torture or some other atrocity. By seducing those early mortals into acts of violence, lust or greed, they began mixing the flavors of corruption in symphonies of atrocity. The Yama Kings would flood realms with noxious Chi for a time until misery and hatred saturated the spiritual essence of the region, at which point they would feast, leaving a spiritually barren wasteland behind.

While the August Personage of Jade was attending to the business of Heaven, the Yama Kings constructed entire gardens of misery. They fed from an enormous buffet of hatred and suffering, growing gluttonous and malevolent on the pain of others. With every great famine, war or plague that sprang up, the Yama Kings grew more powerful and rebellious toward Heaven.

Discord spread throughout the spirit worlds as the Yama Kings gorged themselves on Chi in quantities previously unthinkable. Whole cities drowned themselves in the tainted Chi resulting from a war or other great atrocity, which in turn attracted the ravenous Yama Kings. Their presence, as might be expected, did little to alleviate the suffering that had drawn them in the first place. Many of the Yama Kings strove simply to find what limits, if any, their appetites had, devouring any and all tainted Chi they could find. Whole realms of the Yang World were desecrated and sucked dry before the August Personage saw what had transpired. In wrath, he assigned the Wan Xian to



ferret out the Yama Kings' lackeys and *agents provocateurs* in the Middle Kingdom, so as to prevent them from further disrupting the cycle.

The realms that the Yama Kings had sterilized were no longer in harmony with the rest of the Yang World. No spirit could enter those defiled regions without falling prey to its darkest inclinations. Having no Chi of any sort, the resonance of these regions was a *tabula rasa*, and the Yama Kings engraved their will upon it. In a great unprecedented joint venture, performed primarily as an act of insolence toward the August Personage of Jade and the arrogant Wan Xian he dared to put in their way, the Yama Kings ceased their internecine wars and made their first (and arguably greatest) show of power by ripping the dead realms away from the Yang World. These spirit lands they took back to their twisted nightmare kingdoms. There the Yama Kings worked and shaped and blended their spoils until their home realms and the stolen spirit lands fused into an entirely new realm neither above nor below the Middle Kingdom, but contiguous to it, abutting all great centers of corruption or decay. This twisted place they called Yomi.

The Yama Kings were triumphant. They were certain that this was the true beginning of the eternal reign of the Yama Kings and that Heaven would soon start to tremble before their every step. The August Personage of Jade did not see it that way. As an act of insolence, the savaging of the defiled realms was a failure. The dragons of Heaven would have soon uncreated the ravaged spiritual realms anyway as a form of celestial cautery, but the Yama Kings, glutted on Yang Chi and lacking any self-restraint or subtlety, acted rashly, revealing to the August Personage precisely what they were capable of while simultaneously expending titanic amounts of their newly gained power. They stood exposed yet defiant before the August Personage of Jade, and the one thing recorded in all three chronicles of the event is the ineffable smile upon his face as he turned his back upon them forever.

Weak from their gratuitous display of force, the Yama Kings were again ravenous. They roamed the Middle Kingdom seeking mortals to tempt and seduce into unwise actions that would result in atrocities, corruption and malice. Willing dupes were found everywhere, but the Ten Thousand Immortals blocked them at every step. As soon as a Yama King sought to manipulate an advisor, the Wan Xian would smell the mortal's corruption and expose the pawn for what he was. The Ten Thousand Immortals efficiently blocked the Yama Kings from using humans as tools with which to taint Chi and steal more lands from the Yang World. The Yama Kings struck again and again, in China, in Japan, in Tibet, giving more and more of their power to weak-willed mortals as they became desperate to feed their enormous appetites. Each time, the Wan Xian disrupted the attempt, and the Yama Kings grew furious. They pronounced strings of curses upon the Wan Xian, dreamed up abominable torments for them, and declared a thousand tiny wars, but without servants in the Middle Kingdom, the Yama Kings could do nothing but seethe, rant and threaten. In

time, the Yama Kings grew silent, and peace returned to the Middle Kingdom.

The Wan Xian, no longer directly informed by the August Personage, assumed that the Yama Kings had finally accepted their role in the celestial order. While they still sniffed around for mortal dupes, most of the Ten Thousand Immortals grew lazy and turned their attentions to other, less noble, matters.

The Yama Kings, meanwhile, had not given up; they had simply flocked to the Yin World. Wu Hua, the Yama King who had just established his Pit of Salt and Iron in the lands of the Restless Dead, discovered that the atrocities instigated by the Yama Kings in the Middle Kingdom to taint the Yang World still echoed in the Labyrinth beneath the Yellow Springs. Many of the victims of the wars and the famines they had caused were now riddled with tainted Yin Chi. They raged and relived their hated lives, hiding themselves in the shifting tunnels just above the Great Well of Unbeing. The foul acts inspired by the Yama Kings still generated tainted Chi, though it was the cold, dark Chi of the Yin World.

Knowing they would be exposed and punished if they were not cautious, the Yama Kings hid themselves, like worms in a rosebud, in the regions of the Yin World where despair or stifled malice stained the tapestry. There, feasting by the unlight of Oblivion, the Yama Kings forgot the hated Wan Xian entirely as they devoured a second crop of Chi from the same malevolent sowing. What followed was a feeding frenzy on par with the first: The Yama Kings sucked the Chi permanently from several rooms of the Jade Palace, which they had defiled. By the time the act of desecration was discovered, the Yama Kings were again gorged with stolen Chi.

For the second time in known history, the Yama Kings cooperated to tear the Yin lands they had made barren from the rest of the Yellow Springs. These realms they consolidated with the Yomi World they had begun decades before. What had once been Yang realms were forcibly blended with what had once been Yin realms. The only thing the realms shared was barrenness and corruption, and that alone was to be the essence of the Yomi World.

The beginning of the Fourth Age saw a great victory go to the Yama Kings: the Wan Xian who had foiled them at every turn throughout the Age of Legends had themselves become defiled. One of the Wan Xian of distant India, called Mahanaga Visparakni, fell under the sway of the illusory charms of Tou Mu, who yanked him around by his P'o like a puppet. Convinced that he was obeying the mandate of Heaven, he became the first traitor among the Wan Xian and began treating mortals under his protection as his private reserve of Chi. He quickly convinced others among the overconfident Wan Xian that their proper role in the Middle Kingdom was that of warlord or divine ruler-representative of the August Personage, not tattle-tale or attack dog. In time, Mahanaga Visparakni was branded *akuma*, hunted down and destroyed, but not before his relentless demand for power led him to commit atrocities

that would become legendary. Tou Mu claimed his soul immediately, and Mahanaga Visparakni, the first *akuma*, has been subjected to the Yama Queen's abrasive caress ever since.

Corruption grew rife among the Wan Xian. Instead of defending the Middle Kingdom from the depredations of the Yama Kings, they warred among themselves, laying claims to little empires, and draining the Chi essence of whole villages of mortals in order to do so. The August Personage saw this desecration and grew angry. The punishment of Heaven, when it came, was in no way subtle, and when it was over, the Ten Thousand Immortals stood in the way of the Yama Kings no more. On the contrary, the Yama Kings now had direct access to the P'os of the Wan Kuei. Almost as if trying to aid them, the August Personage of Jade had taken away the Yama Kings' most hated foe. In exchange he had given the devils their greatest tool in the Middle Kingdom. The Yama Kings gloated.

SPREADING THE TAJNT

Clot by clot, Yomi grows. By adding new territories to the Yomi World, the Yama Kings increase their personal power, their ability to affect the Middle Kingdom and increase the likelihood of one of their number becoming the Demon Emperor. Every new connection or weak spot between the mortal world and the world of demons gives the Yama Kings new channels through which to inflict their will upon the Middle Kingdom and metastasize into new territory.

Not all of the methods by which Yomi grows are as dramatic as defiling rooms of the Jade Emperor's palace and ripping them away. One slow but steady means by which Yomi increases is the accretion of items blown in on the great ghost winds. The winds of the Tempest are strong enough in various locales of the Yin World to sweep away nearly anything, but they weaken as they near the Yomi World proper. As they lose energy, they drop their random contents on the ragged edge of the demon world. There are some regions of Yomi near the Ebon Road where odd items fall from the storm-dark sky almost continually. Sand, relics, plasm, Spectres and wraiths have all been tossed from the Tempest into Yomi to be collected, ignored or otherwise dealt with. The Yama Kings, and therefore their administrators, pay only minimal attention to the items that drop from the Tempest unless those items should call attention to themselves. Over time, a solid mortar of sand and plasm cements the larger items together into a hard, misshapen aggregate. In this way new terrain creates itself in some regions of Yomi. For every meter that Yomi grows, the Tempest winds recede in the same measure, causing the rain of strange objects to fall a little farther away and expanding the demon world yet more. During each of the Great Maelstroms, the quantity of items plummeting from the sky was such that Yomi grew several meters in a day. Enough time has passed in the last two ages that nearly anything could be encased in the bizarre sediment of Hell, quietly waiting to be mined and brought back, though perhaps changed in some unforeseeable manner.

While the Wan Xian are no more, the Middle Kingdom isn't entirely at the mercy of the ravenous Yama Kings. An array of forces in both the Yin and Yang Worlds keep the Yama Kings from repeating the sorts of gross manipulation that established the Yomi World in the first place. Nevertheless, these modern defenders are not so successful as the Wan Xian of old nor so inherently noble. Furthermore, any *shen* who makes a formidable enemy will always make an even better tool, should a Yama King desire to subvert so noble a foe. From time to time one of the demon lords scores a great coup in the Middle Kingdom, and the stain of the Yomi World grows larger yet.

Yomi has undergone two enormous growth spurts since the Yama Kings' initial ravaging of the spiritual worlds above and below the Middle Kingdom. Each time the demon world grew, the increase in the Yama Kings' power in the Middle Kingdom made itself manifest soon after.

The largest increase in the Yomi World, however, wasn't instigated by the Yama Kings and resulted in the creation of the Scarlet Path linking Yomi to the world of spirits. Halfway through the Third Age of the Great Cycle, all of Heaven shook under an unexpected onslaught. The Dragon of Balance and Harmony fell into the great celestial loom where the tapestry of the Middle Kingdom was being woven, and the consequences were dire. The Dragon had been preparing to bless the tapestry, but he approached too near and was pulled in by the sheer power of its need. Tangled in the endless strands, the Dragon bellowed and began a violent thrashing that resonated throughout the spirit world. The resultant chaos destroyed the orderly pattern of creation, and the tapestry was nearly ruined as a result. In its struggles of panic and pain, the Dragon disordered the pattern of the universe, kicked a huge chunk of the spirit world directly into Yomi, conducted itself in a manner unbecoming to one of the great Dragons of Heaven, and lost

POPULATION

Though scars (see page 18) rend the landscape in places, and certain hells may be imbalanced toward Yin or Yang, for the most part Yomi is a warped alloy of the worlds of the spirits and the Restless Dead where the worst elements of both are brought beneath the dominion of the Yama Kings. The Yomi World is the only place where one can see Spectres and Banes fighting in pits like feral dogs while their demonic masters watch from silken pavilions and bet on the outcome. Because it combines elements of both the world of spirits and the world of the dead, any type of creature can be found either wandering through Yomi or being tormented there. All manner of *shen* from all known worlds pass through Yomi on errands for the Yama Kings. Others end up there through karmic imbalance. The Yama Kings welcome any creature that knows pain.

face before the August Personage and the rest of the celestial realm. Since that most inauspicious of all moments, the Dragon of Balance and Harmony has completely retreated in shame, leaving only imbalance and disharmony in all of Heaven and throughout the Middle Kingdom.

Similar, yet different, are the tales told by the Kuei-jin of the Infinite Thunders Court of India, who speak of three gods: Brahma, the creator, who is an endless font of energy and shape; Vishnu, the preserver, who gathers and protects those elements of creation that are most excellent in form and virtue; and Shiva, the destroyer, whose dance is destruction, and who shall dance away the world when the Great Wheel of Ages stops turning. The Indian Kuei-jin claim that the great quaking of the spirit world was caused when Vishnu, blinded by the sight of raw possibility for so long and unable to clearly discern the excellent from the defective, began preserving everything he took from Brahma. The universe filled rapidly with all manner of things, causing Shiva to believe that the universe had already reached its capacity and to take the first *mudra*, or posture, of his final dance. This terrible first step sent the initial rumbles of destruction throughout the spirit world. Though Shiva immediately realized his mistake, the terrible and endlessly reverberating thunder of that first step infused all the universe with the energy of destruction.

Whether the upheaval was caused by the Great Dragon's blunder or the first step in Shiva's dance, the outcome was the same. Whole realms of the Yang World crumbled and fell into Yomi, there to be conquered by the opportunistic Yama Kings.

These realms were quite different from the ones that had been ravaged to create the Yomi World. They were not defiled and ripped away from the Yang World before melding with Yomi, and still remained wholly connected to the Yang World. Though twisted beyond recognition, these places survive and the majority of them connect to the most corrupt realm in the Yang World, called Malfeas by the inhabitants of the West. The blistered tissue connecting these two unwholesome worlds is called the Scarlet Path, and it has the curious property of always taking those walking on it from a bad situation to a worse one, regardless of which direction they travel.

Though both are places of evil and torment, the affinities between the Yomi World and the realm known as Malfeas are not in dispute, even as some scholars argue that one might be a part of the other. Yomi is distinct from Malfeas, however, in that it comprises an almost infinite number of small hells, and it is composed of the spiritual fabric torn from both the Yin and Yang Worlds. Malfeas is entirely a realm of the Yang World. Yomi is neither of the Yang World nor the Yin World, but contains elements of both; its only constant is corruption.

The most recent large-scale annexation to the Yomi World occurred on two separate days in August of 1945 in what the Yama Kings called "the Joyous Harvest." Huge chunks of Japan's spiritual landscape were instantly desecrated by a tidal wave of pain and horror and blasted

SCARS ON THE FACE OF HELL

Because of the way in which the Yama Kings ripped away parts of other realms and spliced them onto their own, the Yomi World is like a body made from pieces of many other mismatched bodies, and even the best stitching can't make a man's hand fit readily on the end of a little girl's arm. These areas where flaws run through the fabric of the Yomi World are called scars. Scars appear like huge reflective cracks through the realm, like the cracks that develop when water becomes ice too quickly. Some scars are stable and can be built around, others are fluid and ripple like a silk scarf in a strong wind. When a moving scar passes through an area, distances expand and contract, buildings and other objects (including individuals) fuse into each other, tunnels collapse, individuals disappear, pipes back up, technological items break or go haywire, and torture comes to a complete standstill amidst the chaos.

Mayhem, riots and looting follow the passing of a scar until the Yama Kings grow angry, at which point torture commences and everything gets back on track and existence in Hell carries on. Scars are the primary reason the Yama Kings haven't adapted to technological torments much more rapidly. When a scar passes through an area loaded with high-tech devices for implementing pain, a Yama King can lose thousands of souls' worth of high-end torment-induction equipment.

Certain regions of Yomi, particularly those annexed during the Joyous Harvest, are a dense maze of shifting scars and are nearly unusable as a result, but the Yama Kings are concerned with the quantity, not quality, of the realms they steal. These scar-riddled wastelands are the homes of many fugitive *akuma*, *chih-mei* and brief-lived "resistance movements" of the unwashed and unwise idealists who hope to destroy one Yama King or another. The dense mass of scars in these areas provide refuge from the devils but not much else. The Yama Kings themselves avoid these areas assiduously, because scars also sever their connection to the dragon lines that supply their infernal power. Were it not for scars, the Yama Kings would fancy themselves gods in their own realms. As it is, scars are reminders to the Yama Kings that every realm in Yomi is tainted and stolen.

directly to Yomi in the atomic detonations that ended World War II. The Yama King Pika Don entered the Yin World immediately after the atomic explosions, intending to reap the vast amounts of defiled Chi from the surrounding lands for use in his bitter war with Emma-o. Things did not go as he intended, however, and after imbibing only a small quantity of his intended meal, Pika Don fell into a nightmare-laden Slumber that continues today. This development makes the other Yama Kings uneasy. If Pika Don is absorbing the fouled Chi of Hiroshima in his Slumber, he may be so glutting himself that he will be able to wake at the dawn of the Sixth Age and claim the title of Demon Emperor with little real opposition from the other Yama Kings. If, on the other hand, Pika Don were somehow sickened or injured by the Chi left behind by the nuclear destruction, then the Yama Kings may have cause to be more attentive to just what kind of spiritual pollution they consume.

The 20th century has already been an enormous festival for the Yama Kings, a delicious prelude to the Sixth Age. The sheer number of wars and associated atrocities in the Middle Kingdom, particularly in Southeast Asia, is providing the demon lords with pain-corrupted Chi to devour and scores of ruined territories to annex. Such windfalls have allowed the Yomi World to grow at a rate unseen since the windfalls of the Third Age. Every torture spree and napalm bombing strengthens the Yama Kings' hold on the world and hastens the day of the crowning of the Demon Emperor.

THE MODERN HELLS

The modern Yomi World is fouler than can possibly be imagined. The demon world grew more with the Joyous Harvest than it had in entire centuries preceding that cataclysmic event, and the Yama Kings have almost grown complacent in their power. The Wall between the world of mortals and the world of demons grows so thin that at certain inauspicious times and places, demons can cross over if they are so much as pondered too intently. Thus the Yama Kings wax powerful.

The hells of the Yomi World vary wildly. Some are home to entire twisted cities of demons and *akuma*, while others were created specially for lone individuals whose pride or sins earned them special attention from one of the Yama Kings. There are hells being constructed even now for mortals yet living whom the Yama Kings have already identified as their own.

Just as in the Yin and Yang Worlds, it is possible to find items from all times and places in Yomi, and just as in those two worlds, pastiche has become an art form. For example, while Tou Mu's iron mask and gauntlets may appear archaic, the tiny drills in her talons are strictly 20th century.

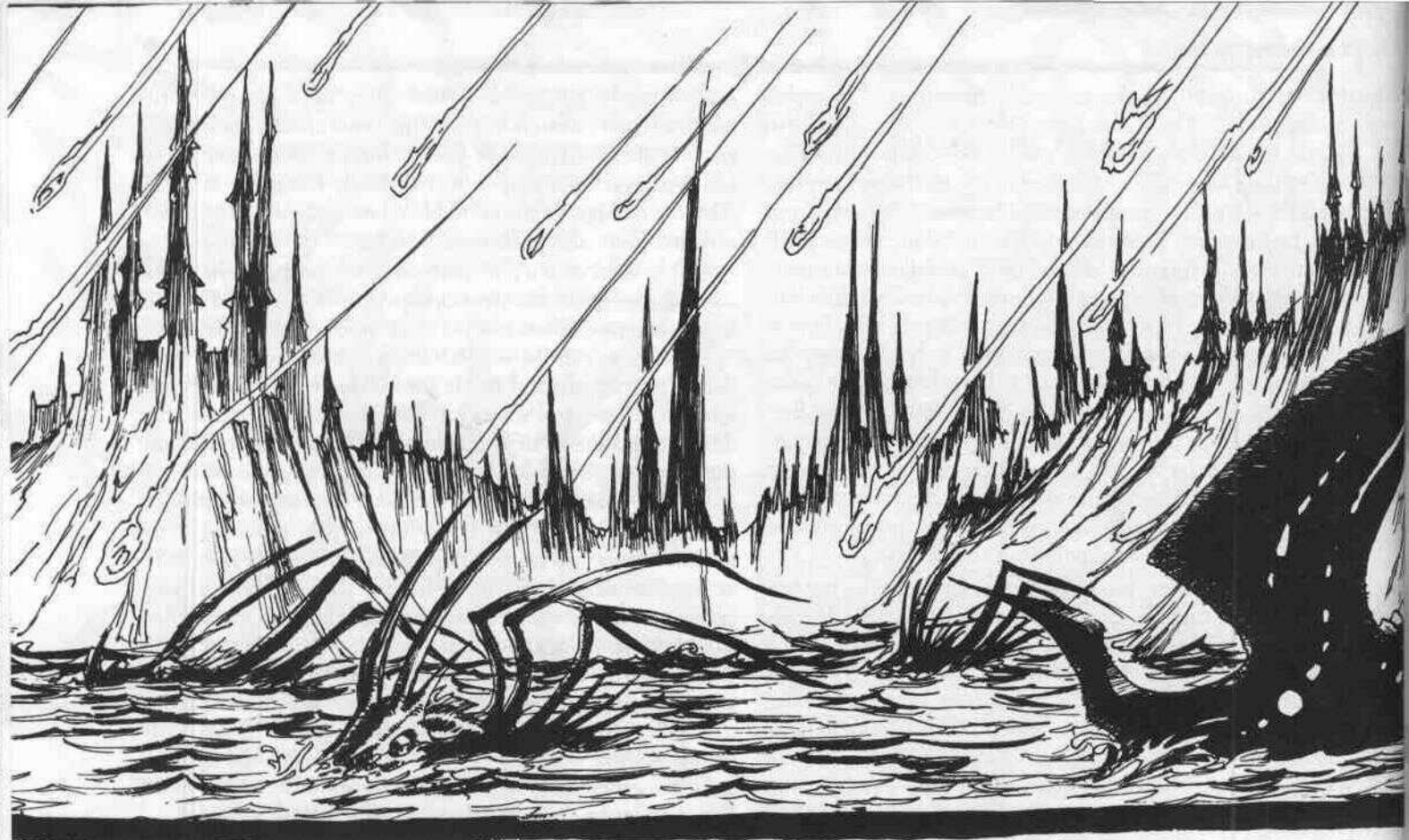
The modern hells are booming. Corruption of all kinds, war and despair are thriving industries. While many Kuei-jin, especially older individuals, imagine the Yomi World to resemble a picture from a history book, quaint and out of date, the popular methods of torture used in Yomi have not remained constant over time. Water torture, slow flaying and molten copper spattered on flesh may once have been consid-

ered "high tech," but with time they have grown overly familiar; most torturers in Yomi find them classic, but slightly passé. Bold new trends in the production of torment have followed every war fought in the Middle Kingdom, and the 20th century has seen a veritable renaissance in the philosophy, hardware and technique of torture.

The Wicked City in particular has adapted the most cutting-edge scientific developments from the world of the living, and now boasts horrors undreamed of in simpler ages. Specula, power drills, rubber tubing, catheters, piano wire, dental instruments and staple guns all have their uses in the modern interrogator's tool kit. While electric power is still difficult to come by in Yomi, anything causing pain through the clever application of electricity is currently considered quite *chic*. Likewise, certain methods of chemical torture, from drain-cleaner all the way up to pain-inducing neurotransmitters, are gaining popularity because they produce an excruciating pain while assuring that the victim can endure a more extended session before requiring Chi in order to revive for the next go-round. It is important to the Yama Kings that their guests get the most out of the experience. Obtaining the raw materials for complex, modern techniques can sometimes be difficult, but a booming trade exists with the other three worlds, and a Yama King or a favored interrogator can generally get anything she wants to extract the most sublime agonies from her object of affliction.

The overcrowded and highly polluted cities of the Middle Kingdom furnish copious quantities of negatively resonant Chi. Like water down the Yangtze, misery flows freely in lands where organized crime, drug smuggling, government censorship and mass poverty reign. In this way do the Yomi World and the Middle Kingdom reflect each other. Corruption, in Yomi, is the absolute rule, not the exception, and the Yama Kings would have it no other way.

Oblivious to fashion trends in torment, a small minority of Yama Kings are staunch traditionalists who insist on retaining a look from some previous era. Most, however, have broken with stagnant tradition and have chosen to have their hells reflect, to one degree or another, the modern world. Certainly, Mikaboshi's Wicked City is the most extreme instance of this development. Patterning scenes of his compact *avant-garde* hell as much as possible on the high-stress, high-tech and morally bankrupt lives of low-level Tokyo businessmen, Mikaboshi has created a wonder of agony. Here, ghosts go about soul-deadening tasks in dimly lit and smoky offices by day and seek protection at night from demons, Spectres, cybernetically enhanced gangsters, organjackers and bakemono. Mikaboshi adhered to strict guidelines when having this hell built. Consequently there are living quarters in the Wicked City for precisely half of its inhabitants, and the horrors that roam the city by night make certain that there is always a thriving competition for those places of relative safety. Prostitution is a popular means of finding safety when the "sun" goes down, but Mikaboshi has thought of everything, and the larger-than-life STDs of the Wicked City are miracles of malice, particularly placed as they are in a milieu of intensified



social pressure snatched right out of modern-day Japan. Watching his little "project" brings Mikaboshi hours of enjoyment. He awaits the day when he is crowned Demon Emperor so he can play in this lighthearted fashion with all of the Middle Kingdom.

Life in the demon world is not all fun and games, even for those in positions of power. The skillful induction of agony, not to mention the logistics of everyday existence in Yomi, is made more difficult by the fact that areas ripped from the Yin and Yang Worlds don't always fuse together as neatly as the Yama Kings would like.

It cannot be said that the Thousand Hells want for variety. Never have the techniques employed in Yomi been so varied as they are now, and never have the Yama Kings been so insistent that their victims suffer the maximum possible amount of pain before being restored to full health for the next round. Thugs and idiots can always be tortured through simple physical agony, but the refined and educated victims of the modern age call for more ingenuity. From this simple realization came the impetus for the creation of places such as the Hell of Eternal Paralysis, the Hell of Unceasing Failure, the Hell of Exquisitely Slow Disintegration, the Hell of the Ceaselessly Violated Spouse and the Hell of Absolute Self-Loathing and Self-Sabotage (among many, many others). These so-called "subtle hells" are very much in vogue at the moment, and the mental anguish they generate pleases the Yama Kings greatly.

There is a great deal of hope in the Yomi World, but it all belongs to the Yama Kings. Everyone else suffers. The demon lords congratulate themselves as they watch the Middle Kingdom drift inexorably toward Yomi. They see only one barrier to their ultimate control of the entire world, and that is the ancient agreement that limits their influence to the Middle Kingdom and nowhere else. They cannot watch events in the Western world unfold as they can spy on the happenings of the Middle Kingdom, nor can they directly affect any creature of the West. Those portions of the world which are not a part of the Middle Kingdom are completely free of their direct influence. This is not to say that they cannot gather reports from well-traveled *akuma* or from the demons of the Western world, or even through news broadcasts, but the Yama Kings can't play with the fates of Westerners as they can those of the denizens of the Middle Kingdom. Though every Yama King pursues his or her own preferred method of working around the ancient agreement — sending *akuma* to the West to do their work for them and expanding the influence of the Middle Kingdom to new shores (i.e., into Chinatowns across North America) — powerful forces are working against them to keep their influence contained. Such resistance infuriates the Yama Kings beyond all other things, and they constantly search for evidence of a concerted effort against them, but thus far they have found none.

THE OTHER WORLDS

The Yomi World is connected to both the Yin World and the Yang World. The bridge to Yin and the bridge to Yang are at antipodes, and the stresses caused by being connected to two worlds so vastly different from each other takes its toll on every inhabitant of the Thousand Hells.

The Scarlet Path and the Ebon Road are the bridges by which Yomi is connected to the Yang and Yin Worlds, respectively. These areas extend from Yomi but are not entirely part of it. They are borderlands where the Yama Kings' power isn't quite as absolute as it is in Yomi proper, and fugitives occasionally try to take advantage of this. When wars break out between Yomi and the spirit worlds, these connective realms make for horrific no man's lands, and the casualty rates skyrocket as forces clash on an inherently malevolent battlefield.

Wars with the Yang World are almost unheard of. The more jaded denizens of Yomi would say that that's because the Yama Kings and the Maeljin Incarna are too busy sending gifts of souls back and forth to get around to fighting each other; less cynical observers simply note that the potential gain can't possibly be worth the horrific cost. While there is a constant exchange of flesh and other goods going between Malfeas and Yomi, the primary reason that the Yama Kings and Malfeas aren't at each other's throats is that they have too much in common — everything, in

fact, except sphere of influence. Just as the Yama Kings have no direct power in the West, the Maeljin Incarna have no direct power in the Middle Kingdom. Were there the slightest possibility of one taking over the territory of the other, all hells would break loose, and the spirit worlds would shake with the fury of the battles.

It is different in the Yin World. The Jade Emperor was insulted most egregiously when the Yama Kings invaded, and he has done everything in his power to uncreate the Ebon Road. Yu Huang still remembers quite clearly the rooms of his palace that were polluted and ripped away by the Yama Kings to create their foul little Yomi World, and he waits for the moment of his ultimate vengeance.

Thousands of little skirmishes and the occasional hot war between Yomi and Yin have been fought along the length of the Ebon Road, and the only outcome is that the Road drains more Chi and grows ever wider. Lately it has taken a major event, such a Great Maelstrom, to rile the Yama Kings. They seem so satisfied with themselves and their progress in the Middle Kingdom that they hardly notice events in the Yin World at all, with the exception of Wu Hua, who can't help but be aware of them.

THE SCARLET PATH

The febrile and demon-infested spirit bridge linking Yomi and the Yang World is called the Scarlet Path. While easier to find than the Ebon Road, the Scarlet Path is considered by many to be notably more dangerous. In addition to sporting minor hells that mar its length like boils, the Scarlet Path is a breeding ground for spirits of plague and pestilence. An unwary traveler could brave the path, escape swarms of malevolent insects, defeat hideous demons and make it to the Yang World only to fall over dead of kuru or advanced syphilis. Such are the dangers of defiled Yang Chi.

The Scarlet Path is hard to miss from any point in Yomi. The amount of traffic passing along it between the Thousand Hells and the Western hell of Malfeas makes it one of the most noticeable landmarks in the corruption realm. It has "on ramps" in most of the Yang-aspected kingdoms of the Yomi World; these are marked by heavy traffic, wayposts and occasional defensive encampments. The Path itself stands out from its surroundings by its particular mixture of sickly, web-infested jungle trees and sticky red mud. The continuous procession of bakemono, Goblin Spiders, demons, *akuma*, emissaries, fugitives, slaves and others who traverse it make the difference more obvious yet. Scores of wagons, rikshaws and tanks travel at excruciatingly slow speeds in both directions through diseased and aggressive vegetation that constantly must be hacked or burned away.

Most of the length of the Path appears as thick jungle rising up out of rich red mud. The trees along the Path are gnarled and cankered, but when hacked down, they grow back at a rate fast enough to be witnessed by the naked eye. The vines strangling the trees are fibrous, sticky and thorned, and the flowers, while spectacularly beautiful, are poisonous to smell or touch. A reddish sun shines down on the path continuously, keeping the heat and humidity very high. Luckily for the Kuei-jin, this sun is just a souvenir drawn from the fears of nuclear holocaust. It was much brighter in

HELL CAN BE FUN!

Any character making the trek through Yomi or along the Scarlet Path or Ebon Road should be expecting unpleasantness. This is Hell, after all. The trip is not *supposed* to be pleasant.

Hell is also unpredictable; some visitors lead charmed existences, while others are punished mere seconds after entering Yomi. As a result, there is no rigid system for deciding when a character is suitably Yin imbalanced to become fungus-infested or fly-swarmed. Storytellers should simply look at a particular character's Yin rating and go from there. Any character strongly imbalanced toward Yin will, of course, be besieged almost every round by flies, fungi or something worse. A character with more balance in her Chi might be ignored for a bit longer, and a Yang-imbalanced character almost blends in.

Storytellers are cautioned against going too lightly on characters in the Yomi World. These are the hells of the Middle Kingdom; the combination of the concentrated malevolence of the World of Darkness and the terrors lurking in the Goblin Jungle should be suitably menacing. It is entirely possible that without assistance, the trip down into Yomi ends fatally for all concerned. Players should be aware of that going in, and should be prepared for the consequences of their travel.

THE (YANG) CRYSTAL METHOD

Yangstones are one of the most dangerous pitfalls in the Goblin Jungle because they're as enticing as they are deadly. The euphoric rush associated with holding a yangstone is one of the most pleasurable sensations most creatures, especially Kuei-jin, can ever feel. The Yang charge contained in each of these gems floods the holder with the most ecstatic sensations of life, and the Hungry Dead yearn for that with a longing unimaginable to the living.

While holding a yangstone, a vampire behaves as if she has three more points of Yang Chi than she actually does. While this "illusory Yang" counts with regard to Yang Chi totals and Chi imbalance (and its concomitant side effects), it can't be used for anything constructive. A Kuei-jin with one point of Yang Chi in her body and three yangstones would feel like she had 10 points of Yang Chi and would behave as if heavily imbalanced toward Yang. Even if she spent her last actual point of Yang Chi, she would still believe she had nine points of Chi — until she was disabused of that notion by trying to call upon nonexistent Chi or the yangstones were taken from her. No one ever gives up yangstones of their own free will.

Example: Li-Tsang, the most revered Devil-Tiger ancestor of Shanghai, has a permanent Yang Chi of 6. If she picks up one yangstone, she feels as if she has nine points of Yang Chi in her body. If she unwisely picks up a second yangstone, she feels as if she has a full 10 points of Yang Chi, but two points of her own natural Chi are displaced, flowing out of her body and presumably to the nearest dragon line. If she is so rash as to pick up a third yangstone, not only does she grow jittery and start hallucinating, but she also displaces three more points of her own Yang Chi. Only when the yangstones are taken from her will she realize that she has only one actual point of Yang Chi left.

Yangstones do have one constructive application to Kuei-jin: They can help those vampires who have become *ch'ing shih* due to long-term Yin imbalance lose their corpse-like appearance. For each month that a *ch'ing shih* wears a yangstone (and suffers the consequences of doing so), the stone returns one dot in the Appearance Attribute lost to the *ch'ing shih* condition. More than one stone can be used this way, provided the Kuei-jin is willing to suffer the consequences of a Chi imbalance in order to do so. A yangstone corrodes to dust immediately after returning one point of Appearance to a *ch'ing shih*.

Only the *chi'n ta* have the skills to coax the energy from a yangstone, which is to them simply another form of Tass.

the '50s, almost insufferably so, but in the last decade it has begun to dim. It still casts more light than most of the denizens of the Path are comfortable with.

A traveler trying to get on the Path has to determine how best to navigate his way through the dangerous mass of thick trees and hostile insects without getting lost or eaten. While it may be tempting to try following one of the many "official" caravans of lost souls along the Path, such tactics are nearly impossible. The pitiless sun and extreme humidity generate mirages that can turn a traveler around entirely, even if it seems as though she's only feet behind her guide. Branches just hacked through drip caustic sap on anyone caught beneath them, and worst of all, the sap marks the poor individual it drips on as food or egg-host for the Path's enormous swarms of ants, hornets, mosquitoes, ticks and spiders.

Any traveler along the Scarlet Path who is not heavily imbalanced toward Yang seems dead in comparison to the rest of this realm, and the denizens of the Path respond accordingly. Enormous flies will seek lay eggs on a victim; once hatched, those eggs grow into boring maggots that tunnel throughout the traveler's flesh. Various lurid-colored fungi begin growing on the traveler's skin if not carefully watched for; left untended, such growths consume their victims within the space of a few days. If a traveler is imbalanced toward Yin, these horrors are intensified tenfold. Few experiences could be more unpleasant or lethal for a follower of the Song of the Shadow Dharma than a trip along the Scarlet Path.

Any attempt to rest while on the Scarlet Path almost certainly ends unpleasantly. Hungry green shoots or tendrils, dripping with a sticky nectar that is both caustic and anesthetic, start groping toward bodies that remain at rest for more than a moment or two (Dexterity + Brawl, difficulty 5 to hit; Perception [difficulty 7] for a target to notice anything wrong while the sap erodes a health level per turn). The powerful anesthetic agent in the nectar prevents the victim from feeling anything as the vine slowly dissolves its target. Many fugitives, exhausted by their escape from Yomi, have rested a moment too long in the jungles of the Scarlet Path and never taken another step.

The creatures inhabiting the Path, both flora and fauna, tend to be spirits representing the worst nightmare images of the natural world. As a result, they are capable of completely unnatural behaviors; thus, a swarm of army ants, for example, deviate from their path in order to engage unwanted guests of the realm, roots pop up to trip careless travelers, and the gigantic phoenixes that swarm the skies above the Path take careful aim when they spit napalm on travelers below. In short, any way in which nature could have gone wrong has gone wrong — and all of the unpleasantness gets directed at any intruders.

The most common hazard encountered in the Goblin Jungle is the nation of goblins themselves. Goblins are nothing so much as a grab bag of human and animal features grafted onto a roughly humanoid frame; hideous mismatches

are common occurrences. Worse yet, goblins possess a malevolent cunning that makes them terrible and persistent enemies. Goblins hunt for pleasure as much as for sustenance; they take great joy in terrifying, trapping and otherwise tormenting their prey before devouring it (preferably alive). It's all part of the sport for these twisted nature spirits.

The most malevolent and hated inhabitants of the Path, however, are the Kumo. The Goblin Jungle is used by the Hattar Goblin Spiders as breeding grounds. If the Kumo were to call any place a homeland, this would be it. Some Goblin Spiders have suggested, under extreme duress, that the Kumo make their lairs in the Goblin Jungle because it is there that they guard their queen until she can be freed from the stone in which she was imprisoned. That story, however, is only a rumor, and not a common one.

Kumo webs are so thick in some areas that passage through the miasma is extremely laborious and time-consuming, when it is possible at all. The Kumo seduce (or kidnap) appropriate breeding stock and bring their mates to the web-homes in the tallest trees along the Scarlet Path, commonly making deals as necessary with Yama Kings to allow free passage through Yomi or the Yang World. Most Yama Kings allow this passage, as the Kumo are some of their best soldiers; in exchange, the Kumo are responsible for hunting down unauthorized travelers along the Scarlet Path. This agreement works well for the spider demons, providing them with all the blood and Chi they might ever need.

While the nature of the Path assures that everything on it is defiled or at least imbalanced, it remains very much a living world, and living things, given time, can adapt to any environment. There are tiny enclaves along the Scarlet Path comprised of fugitives who have adapted to this malevolent environment. Called Crazy Monkeys, these lurkers in the shadows survive primarily by virtue of their hard-won knowledge of this liminal realm. They may occasionally attack small caravans (or other fugitives) to acquire needed goods like metal tools or cloth. Most official caravans, though, carry nothing more than the seemingly endless reciprocal gifts of souls and innocent flesh exchanged between the Yama Kings and Maeljin Incarna. Many of the Crazy Monkeys are originally from Southeast Asia, near the Golden Courts of the Penangallan, and more than a few have had experience with guerrilla warfare at some point in their existences. The Crazy Monkeys like to think that they are fighting a guerrilla war against the Yama Kings (or the demons of the West, or whoever they saw most recently before escaping to the Goblin Jungle) that may eventually weaken the demon lords enough to tip the balance against them. Mortals and *shen* of all types, especially *hengyokai* and *chi'n ta*, as well as the occasional overzealous Shih, have been found in the ranks of the Crazy Monkeys, and they do their best to utilize their various arts and skills against demons without bringing down the full wrath of the Yama Kings.

Needless to say, most of the Crazy Monkeys are in fact crazy. Their hatred of the Yama Kings goes so far that they

may remain in the Goblin Jungle even after they find a way back to the mortal world. While the Crazy Monkeys' idealism may be beyond question, their rationality is not. Any traveler seeking out the Crazy Monkeys had best be prepared to embark upon a nearly impossible quest in a thoroughly malevolent environment followed by an excruciating initiation — and that's if everything goes well. If things don't go well, the traveler had best be prepared to reach the end of his current incarnation in a spirit realm composed of the hatred, rage and pain of the ages. Paranoia, particularly as pertaining to spies of the Yama Kings, is one of the most common afflictions among the Crazy Monkeys.

The Scarlet Path has nearly unlimited surprises for the unwary traveler. From time to time, the thick red mud of the Path yields an intensely bright red or green gem. Yangstones, as these crystals are called, are common and have no value in Yomi or Malfeas, though they are highly coveted elsewhere. Lightning People, in particular, find them desirable for the mystic energies they contain. Carrying a yangstone gives its possessor a surge of self-confidence and a feeling of exhilaration. A single stone makes a traveler impatient and impetuous. More than one and she is rendered utterly manic. Those who bear multiple stones feel powerful, unstoppable and in extreme cases almost godlike, and don't hesitate to rush into ill-advised situations while under the stones' influence. Carrying three or more yangstones assures the traveler a fascinating series of visions, and the hallucinations caused by yangstones are always of a variety to push the carrier into unwise action at the worst possible moment. Possession of a yangstone has led more than one Kuei-jin to commit Acts of Blindness. The Scarlet Path is home to many, many manic *chih-mei* wearing entire necklaces of yangstones, generally interspersed with finger bones, bits of scalp and teeth — all added for their aesthetic value.

Near its terminus in the Yang World, the Scarlet Path branches and twists like the roots of an enormous tree as it blends with the ten thousand realms of the Yang World. The primary trunk of the Path feeds directly into the gigantic Western hell called Malfeas. Myriad smaller branches feed into the Realm of Fighting Spirits, the Realm of Atrocities and the Realm of the Great Abyss. Many tiny alternative paths feed into other realms and zones of the Yang World. A very small minority of them are even said to wind up in such unpolluted realms as Shangri La and the Hollow Earth, but it is widely known that such hopeful tales are merely legend. If the Scarlet Path *were* to connect to an unpolluted realm, however, that realm would surely have an immensely powerful guardian to keep demons from sweeping in like a storm surge and laying waste to all that stood in their way.

THE EBON ROAD

The Ebon Road connects Yomi to the Yin World like a smooth black shard of bone; it links the Yomi World to the Dark Kingdoms of the Dead and is the sole means of direct passage between the two. Were it within his power to do so, the Jade Emperor would have destroyed the Ebon Road moments after it was created, but he can no more annihilate

the Road than he can calm the winds of the Tempest. He has, however, done what damage to it he could, and his efforts have caused it to flicker. Now the Road flickers in and out like a flame in a breeze, and by its uncertain nature it keeps traffic to a minimum. Few souls can find the Road, fewer still know the secrets of traveling it.

Whether approaching from Yomi or from the Underworld that it connects to, the Ebon Road is impossible to find, or nearly so, without a clear understanding of the auspicious times and places for its manifestation. The Road is always extant *somewhere*, but rarely is it predictable in its appearance, and it is permeated with "not-there-ness." No standard map is capable of leading to it, and even great feats of magic can miss it unless the seeker is very knowledgeable about the exact nature of the Road. It is notable for its blackness in dark places and for its silence in quiet places, and composed of the cold, metallic substance of corrupt Yin.

Even those souls fortunate enough to find the Ebon Path out of Yomi are forced to traverse the Pit of Salt and Iron, ruled by the Yama King Wu Hua, or the Hell of Tisang Wang. Should any intrepid souls manage to pass through those dark places, it is only to find themselves in the deepest reaches of the Grand Caverns of the Yin World, with Spectres and shifting Labyrinth walls. Travelers know this intuitively; they realize that there is no point to their journey, and that they may as well give up. Continuing is only a greater trauma, and going back the way they came simply returns them to the agonies of Yomi.

In truth, the Road's intended effect is to instill such a weariness in travelers that they give up and let the path drink the Chi from their souls. Thus does the Ebon Path insinuate itself into the minds of all but the strongest-willed who travel upon it. For this reason, the Ebon Path is sometimes called, "The Little Hell of Despair."

Being so difficult to find, the Path is not often used as a means of travel between Yomi and the Yin World. Only the Yama Kings and their greatest generals, who know the secrets of the dark road intimately, can travel with any regularity, and they're happy with the situation. While using the Scarlet Path as a trade route with the demons of the West is all well and good, making the carefully constructed Yomi World accessible to creatures obsessed with destruction and Oblivion is thought by even the most strongly Yin-aspected Yama Kings to be unwise.

No light shines along the Ebon Road. No sun, moon, stars or glowing fungi cast any sort of light, so any kind of illumination acts as a beacon to whatever travels along the Road — or scours it for prey.

The Ebon Road is made more difficult to traverse due to the fact that the road itself is as hard and slippery as black ice. Due to its extreme smoothness, only the most dexterous traveler can tread the Ebon Path without slipping. Wise travelers stay far from the edge; slipping off the edge of the Road and into the Tempest tends to be a final and fatal error. Should a traveler lose her balance and fall (a near certainty unless special measures are taken), the Road saps Chi from her; mere contact with the stuff of the road is enough to initiate the drain. The Road steals Yang

Chi first, but inevitably draws forth all of its victims' vital energies. The amount of Chi a traveler loses in one fall depends on how hard she lands. Once a traveler has lost all her Chi, she can no longer move, and she stands, helpless yet horribly aware, as the centuries tick past. Freshly drained victims resemble statues skillfully carved from obsidian. The Road is littered with the eroding statues of those travelers who have suffered this fate. Eventually (as time is reckoned along the Road), Tempest winds and Spectral feet grind these remnants to dust which blows away into the Tempest. It is said that one or two of the Yama Kings enjoy decorating their hells with Ebon Road statuary, but no method has yet been devised whereby a traveler drained in this fashion can be restored to life.

The only creatures to travel the Ebon Road with any frequency are Spectres or the occasional Plasmic that somehow manages to wander onto the Road (or falls from the Tempest onto it). Spectres from the lower castes may find the Ebon Road an intriguing diversion from the Labyrinth's familiar terrors, and may not be in any rush to get back home.

There are a few creatures that exist on the Ebon Road and almost nowhere else. Perhaps the most frightening beings are the disturbing entities called the Unfaced Ones, though certain Yama Kings, notably Emma-o, have imported them to their own hells to use as watchdogs and pack hounds. The Unfaced Ones are the rag-draped twisted wreckage of Spectres that have lingered too long on the Road. Nothing shows beneath their tattered swaths, and they *unfailingly wear masks* that they've stolen, forged or snatched using dark powers of the Yin World. Despite their decrepit forms, the Unfaced Ones are incredibly fast and can pursue their prey for long distances at high speeds. It is not for their speed, however, and certainly not for their fighting prowess that such monsters are legendary. When the Unfaced Ones remove their masks, they expose the utter blackness of the Void that pulls their victim in like a strong riptide. When several Unfaced Ones unmask simultaneously, victims are ripped apart and sucked straight to Oblivion. Yin-aspected Yama Kings make frequent use of Unfaced Ones because *their speed makes them good hunters*, and the occasional direct sacrifice to Oblivion certainly doesn't hurt a Yama King's position in the Yin World. It is clear that the Unfaced Ones are Spectres of some ilk, but what brought them to the Ebon Road and what caused their unholy transformation is unknown. Certain scholars suspect that the answer can be found in their name, and that the Unfaced Ones are Spectres who have lost face through improper actions on behalf of the Yama Kings.

As a traveler gets closer to the world of ghosts, a great storm closes in around the Road. This is the Tempest of the Yellow Springs, and the intensity of the storm is one of the few ways in which a traveler can gauge his progress toward the Yin World.

Near its end, the Ebon Road divides into smaller twin paths. Should a traveler take the descending fork, she eventually finds herself in the Pit of Salt and Iron, which lies at the foot of the Road in the Yin World proper. The wails

of the spirits and Kuei-jin impaled on the spires of Wu Hua's towers mix with the shifting Tempest winds to create a threnody that can be heard long before its source is visible. Most wise travelers turn back at that point and attempt to take the other fork, only to discover that they seem to have lost their way. While it is possible to find the Ebon Road again by using whatever knowledge or technique got the traveler on the Path in the first place, doing so takes an intense search and a great deal of time — plenty of time for Wu Hua's servants to find stragglers. Once a traveler has been captured and aggressively interrogated by several echelons of Wu Hua's army, it is likely that her voice will be added to that of the other screaming souls impaled upon on the spires, and her travels will be at an end.

The other path slopes upward and deposits travelers on the slopes of the jagged mountain upon which Ti Yu, the Earth Prison of Ti-tsang Wang, is built. The path is heavily guarded by Yu Huang's servants and "demon jailers," and before long anyone taking this route stumbles into an impenetrable palisade of heavily armed guards. The travelers, having forfeited a "fair" trial, are sent on the long journey to Hell detailed on page 90 in *Dark Kingdom of Jade*.

Leaping from the edge of the Ebon Road before the Road splits sends a character spinning off into the Tempest, in all likelihood never to be heard from again (unless the character knows the Argos Arcanos, or there is some form of intervention). Leaping from the edge of the Ebon Road after the bifurcation sends the character into the Tempest as well, but the winds are notably weaker by that point, and instead of drifting the traveler falls a great distance while being buffeted by winds and hit by stray objects. After an indeterminate time in free fall (more than a second but less than a lifetime; time moves oddly on the borders of Yomi), the

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

The Ebon Road is so slippery that characters are not able to traverse it on foot, but there is literally no way for them to know this ahead of time. Players should roll Dexterity at the beginning of each turn their characters are on the Road. The difficulty to walk normally is 8; difficulty 6 is necessary just to stand still. If the roll produces a failure, the character falls and loses one point of Chi. If he gets any 1s, he also loses one health level, as a result of his harsh contact with the Road. Storytellers should give characters the opportunity to return to their starting point once they realize their situation. The Ebon Road is a death trap only for the unclever. Skating, flying or otherwise passing over the Road without touching it drastically improves travelers' survival rates; it is only the foolish or stubborn who insist on trying to defeat it on its own terms.

traveler comes to rest somewhere in the bowels of the Labyrinth, and must deal with its perils and pitfalls. (see *Doomslayers: Into the Labyrinth* for more information.)

While the Ebon Road is by no means an easy means of travel between Yomi and the Yin World, there are rumors of a handful of skilled operatives in the Yellow Springs who have tried to create a sort of "underground railroad" to free the imprisoned souls of loved ones from the Yama Kings. It seems unlikely that the Jade Emperor would allow such a thing, but he is not necessarily aware of everything that goes on in his Empire.

THE MAP OF DAMNATION: GEOGRAPHY

THE DOMAINS

This is where the gates of hell swing wide.

Yomi is first and foremost a place of torment. Depravity, horror and perversion are the rule, not the exception. Those rare creatures who find themselves content here are monsters in the truest sense of the word.

Lost and tormented souls are the most numerous inhabitants of Yomi. They spend decade after decade being ravaged by the Yama Kings and their servants; in Yomi mere human souls are little more than commodities to be acquired, used and traded away. Though some of the bravest and strongest souls escape to return to the Middle Kingdom, most are condemned to an eternity in Yomi's coils.

The true size of Yomi is unknown. The most accurate reading anyone has taken of the demon world is more philosophical than factual. Yomi is too small to hide in, but too large to destroy, and just large enough to hold all the souls that end up there. Outsiders call the Yomi Wan the Thousand Hells, but how many places of torment there really are is a mystery; a thousand would seem to be a conservative estimate. There are even those who believe that the exact number of hells changes with the whims of the Yama Kings. In the end, though, the number of hells doesn't matter, save perhaps to the Yama Kings themselves. The souls kept within Yomi can only dwell in one hell at a time, and that's more than enough.

SUBDIVISIONS

Yomi is divided into domains, also called "hells" by some. Most domains are ruled directly by a particular Yama King or a trusted servant thereof. Domains vary in size from vast to cramped, in accordance with their specific functions. Some hold uncounted souls, others contain just one, but all are precisely as large as they need to be.

It goes without saying that Yomi is the most hostile place known to the denizens of the Middle Kingdom. The worst torments the lands of the living can offer are as nothing before the exquisite heights of pain and terror that Yomi produces as a matter of course. Without the proper preparation and aid, even the bravest Kuei-jin is likely to last only a few hours in Yomi before succumbing to the literally hellish conditions.

THE HELLS UNMASKED

Listed below are some of the largest and most notorious or interesting domains in Yomi. The list is by no means exhaustive — it has been noted elsewhere that the Kuei-jin have got a lot of hells — but it does serve to show the varied ways in which souls are tormented here. Each entry is described as follows:

The Name

This is what the hell is most often called by those who know of its existence. Some hells may go by multiple names, but here is where you'll find its most common title.

The Hellscape

This section details the overall atmosphere or nature of the domain. This is not meant to be a detailed tour, but rather a general overview.

Places of Note

Whether it's the palace of the Yama King, the central torture installations or the main arteries in or out, every hell has at least a few locations that deserve close attention. Here is where your characters may find some notable obstacles, goals, antagonists or information.

Denizens

This section describes the creatures that dwell in the specific domain. The inhabitants of a given hell are typically the primary servants of the Yama Kings who rule there, and it is they who pose the greatest threat to the damned and the unwary.

KAKURI: THE NIGHT REALM

Desolate and hostile, lightless and cold, Kakuri epitomizes the most corrupt manifestation of the Yin principle. Emma-o, lord of the Japanese nightworld and perhaps the greatest of all the Yama Kings, rules this grim kingdom of the dead. Even those who visit this place but briefly find that the horrors of Kakuri still haunt their souls years later.

The first thing visitors notice, should they live long enough, is that there is no end to the darkness. No light blemishes the eternal night that Emma-o prefers. There is no dawn to bring hope to those imprisoned here. Sometimes the snow that blankets the hellish landscape gives off a faint white light, but this soft glow is just enough to allow the tormented to watch their own unending mutilation.

The winds of Kakuri are bitterly cold. Bearing dagger-sharp ice crystals, they gust through clothes and tear at the tender flesh underneath. Facing into the wind in Kakuri is an excellent way to blind one's self, and some unfortunate travelers have been flayed down to the bone in a matter of minutes by particularly fierce squalls. Most times, Kakuri itself is sufficient torment to its prisoners to keep Emma-o satisfied.

Fires, when they can be kindled here, provide no warmth. They instead produce a pale blue light for a few moments, then flicker and die in the incessant winds. The brief flash of illumination, however, is usually sufficient to draw the attention of any souls trapped nearby, not to mention any of Emma-o's servitors in visual range as well. Souls seeing the flicker of an outside light source often set up a clamor in hopes of being rescued. The noise instead brings more demonic attention, which makes things less pleasant for all concerned.

The basic geography of Kakuri mimics that of northern Japan. The ground is rocky and frozen, with steep mountain ridges and rare bubbling hot springs. Unlike its counterpart in the Middle Kingdom, which can support a few



communities, this hell gives nothing to its inhabitants. Where a traveler might find a small meadow when traversing the Middle Kingdom, in Yomi the familiar landscape instead produces a field of tiny black blades, ripping the flesh of the unwary. Rocks, cliffs and beaches are made of dull black crystal that leeches the energies of those who rest upon them. Though a few settlements and shelters exist here, they are frequented only by the minions of Emma-o. The souls of the damned imprisoned here tend to wander aimlessly, trying in vain to avoid the slow torture of this place. Visitors to this realm can sometimes see the souls of those who have been fully absorbed by Kakuri's terrain imprisoned inside the crystal cliffs and boulders. These trapped souls are beyond help; they are as much a part of the realm as Emma-o. Passersby can still hear their wails of torment, but attempts to shatter the crystal only rebound on the would-be rescuer.

Even if one manages to avoid being whittled down or sucked dry by the landscape, there are still greater terrors in wait. The essence of the hell itself wears away the spirit of the imprisoned. The effect first makes itself known as a general sense of listlessness, in time growing into a feeling of rootless, painful dread. Eventually, those trapped in Kakuri want nothing so much as to surrender themselves to the endless cold, laying down to sleep and awakening imprisoned by the landscape itself. In time, even the fiercest warriors abandon their will to go on, giving in to the hopelessness that is everywhere in this domain. Even those few who have escaped this hell claim that there are nights when they can still feel the biting air of Kakuri blowing across their skin, and can hear the muted wails of trapped souls. Many of these refugees are so haunted that they end their own existences rather than continue with dread gnawing them hollow.

Kakuri is also called "the *Shikome* Hell," a name derived from the primary servants of Emma-o who dwell here. These female demons, *akuma* who were seduced by the power of Emma-o, are among the most prevalent of all monstrosities here. *Shikome* are quite beautiful, and they embody not only the power of their lord, but also the perfect feminine coldness of Yin gone horribly wrong. The demons delight in ripping Chi and strength of will from the strongest of the doomed in Kakuri, speeding those prisoners' descent into despair. Sometimes *shikome* are subtle and approach their victims in the guise of fellow prisoners seeking aid or wearing the faces of old lovers or friends. When they are angry (which is quite often), the demons simply attack any they happen upon. Regardless of approach, the result of a *shikome*'s attentions is always the same: the victim's life energies pour into the *shikome*, leaving the hapless soul to wander the frozen wastes weakened and maimed. The *shikome* sometimes lead terrible hunting parties composed of a host of lesser servitors, so as to provide themselves with entertainment in the unending night.

As one more act of spite, Emma-o created Kakuri as the antithesis of honor. There are no grand battles here, no great challenges to accept nor any bragging enemies to oppose. Kakuri is a place where there is no duty, no honor and no way

JIZO THE WANDERER

Besides Emma-o and his servitors, there is only one being capable of wandering the darkness of Kakuri unscathed. His name is Jizo-Bosatsu, and he embodies the very honor that Emma-o denies. Appearing as a slight, bald man who wears the black or saffron robes of a monk, Jizo-Bosatsu has aided and advised innumerable souls trapped here. The brass rings at the top of his walking stick jingle when he walks to warn small creatures of his coming, so that he does not inadvertently harm them. At no point has Jizo-Bosatsu been known to show either fear or anger, and he appears calm in all circumstances. Witnesses have stated that he has spoken words to *shikome* foolish enough to hunt him, and that the *shikome* have fled, weeping, as a result. Many of these *shikome* leave Emma-o's service shortly after hearing the words of Jizo-Bosatsu.

Of all beings that have ever wandered Kakuri, Jizo has the singular honor of being the only one ever to intimidate Emma-o. Whenever this smiling, whistling figure is seen in Kakuri, the great Yama King withdraws into his fortress and orders his *shikome* to seek the wanderer out. Why the Yama King allows this to happen in his own realm where he is, for all intents and purposes, omnipotent, is beyond conjecture. Emma-o goes to any lengths necessary to see that this bit of information does not escape Kakuri. Were the other Yama Kings to learn of his... odd behavior in this regard, they would be less likely to find him a suitable candidate for the position of Demon Emperor.

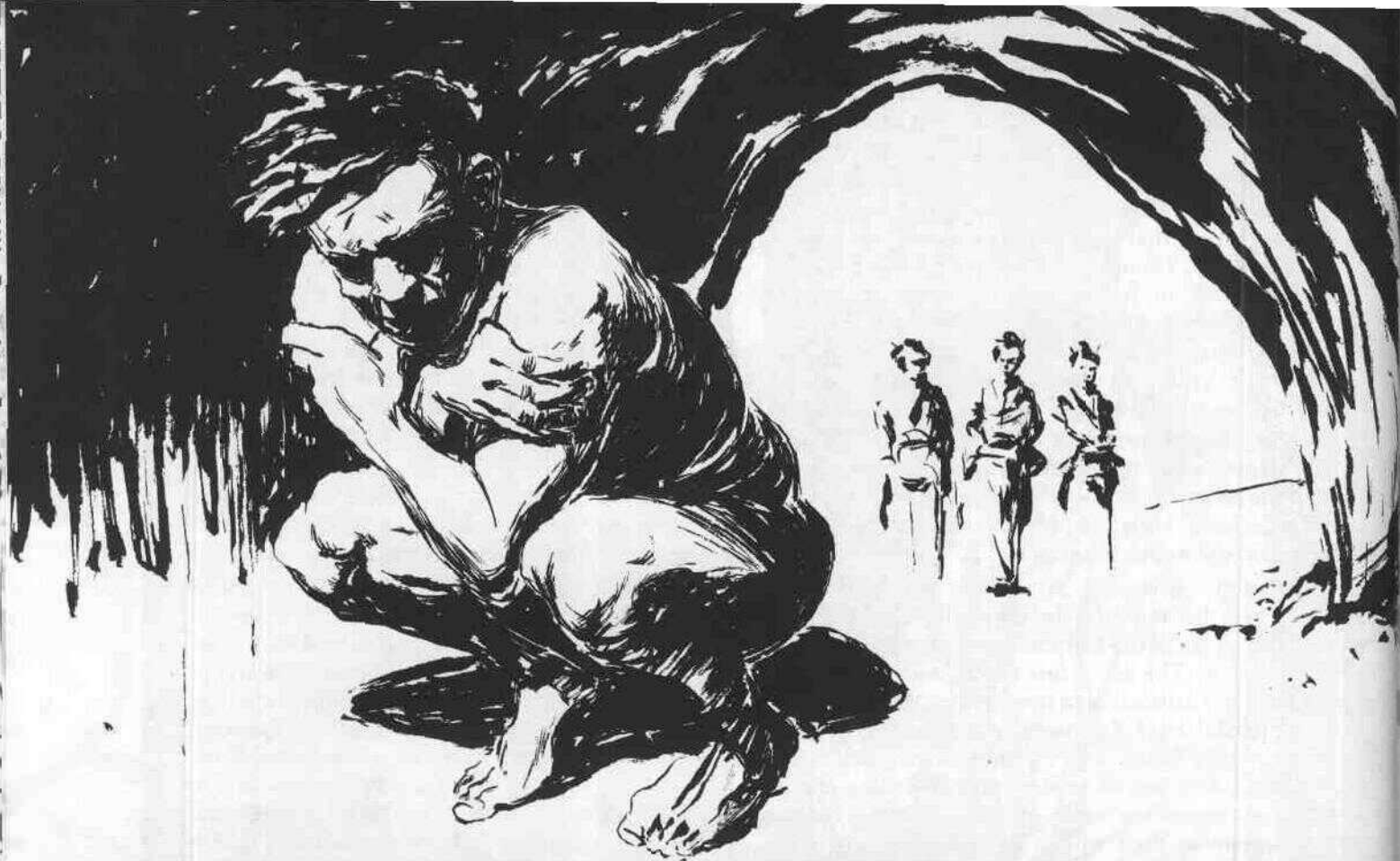
to escape. There are no devils to devour the flesh of the damned, no pits of burning oil, no grand ministries of torment. In a world without light, without honor and without hope, there don't need to be.

PLACES OF NOTE

KYUDEN NO KAKURI

"The Castle of Kakuri" is the only glorious place in this hell, and has been carefully situated at the top of an enormous peak to render it unassailable. This is the stronghold of Emma-o, and its elaborate obsidian walls and battlements are a testimony to his vanity and conceit. The castle is guarded by the Yama King's most potent *shikome*, who attend him as *yojimbo* (bodyguards) and *geisha*. Souls trapped in Kakuri hear strange sounds coming down from the mountain, making them wonder about what perversion goes on within, while reminding them of the earthly pleasures they will never experience again.

On those rare occasions when Emma-o allows others into Kyuden no Kakuri, they are kept in the courtyards and lower levels of the black palace. No one, save Emma-o and his most trusted servants, has ever been allowed into the inner sancta. The Yama King keeps those places barred from



even his most honored guests, not that many would desire to enter. What Emma-o keeps there remains the topic of much concern among the other Yama Kings.

THE CAVE OF MAIDENS

One of Emma-o's favored traps in Kakuri, the Cave of Maidens is where the *shikome* spend the majority of their time. Certain Kuei-jin who have escaped (or been let go, under suspect circumstances) claim that the Cave of Maidens is the cruelest of the torments in Kakuri because it is a place of false hope.

Chilled travelers entering the cave believe they have found a way out of Yomi. The small cave appears to be an oasis from torment and sometimes a passage to the Middle Kingdom. A pearly sheen covers the walls of the cave, causing them to glow with a pleasant light. Edible fungi that both smell and taste of honeyed rice grow throughout the cave. Most importantly, the winds that wear away the souls of those imprisoned in this hell are still within the cave's walls. The cavern appears in all ways to be a place of peace and rest.

Upon entering the cave, lost souls are always met by fellow "prisoners" who have also been so fortunate as to find this place. These fellow souls are always young girls of great beauty who seem wearied by their suffering, and who seem lost, lonely and vulnerable as well. At first the maidens seem to be shy and act afraid, but after a brief time they attach themselves to their new companions. Briefly, the "maidens" dote on their visitors and go to any lengths to bring them

comfort and pleasure, but only briefly. It is rarely long before the true horror strikes.

At an unspoken signal, the *shikome* cease their ministrations and accuse the party of inappropriate behavior: stealing a weapon, rape, murder and worse. If the victims haven't figured out they've been played for fools, they are quickly cut down as punishment for their "crimes" and driven from the cave back into the wastes of Kakuri. The martial prowess of the *shikome* is generally enough to force even a powerful *wu* of Kuei-jin from the cave, and there are always more demon temptresses who can be called upon if the victims show signs of putting up a stiff resistance.

The most insidious aspect of the Cave of Maidens is the way in which it catches the same victims over and over again. The powers of the *shikome* to make men trust them can work again and again, so even a spirit that has been teased and betrayed nine times still falls for the ruse a tenth.

There is a secret to the Cave of Maidens that even most *shikome* don't know: For one in every several million souls that comes through the Cave of Maidens, it truly is a place of tranquillity. Souls who find the cave who are of Ainu blood, and who are relatively compassionate and just, see the *shikome* for what they are but can avoid them and instead follow a faint, fragrant breeze to the back of the cave, beyond where others can follow. This will lead Ainu, and only Ainu, to the Underworld of their ancestors, now nearly deserted, but still warm and ruggedly beautiful. No one who is not of Ainu descent can enter this place, and those Ainu souls who do so are gone forever, having achieved their just reward.

DENIZENS

Most of the servitors of Emma-o are *shikome*. Emma-o has given all of these female *akuma* the ability to survive the terrors of Kakuri without harm. More insidiously, the Yama King has given all of his *shikome* the same terrible power to devour the will of men. In exchange for these powers, they are charged with the collection and torture of souls and other, more personal, duties for the Yama King. Should they fail in their duties, Emma-o does not hesitate to take their souls instead.

Other creatures roam the wastes of Kakuri. The most numerous of these are the female Kumo who serve Emma-o. These creatures have taken up lairs in the deepest shadows of the domain, trapping what souls they can and draining these hapless victims of their Chi. These hideous huntresses act as the Yama King's huntsmen. Their leader fancies herself "queen" of the Kumo and sees herself as the consort of the Daimyo of the Dark. Non-Kumo think she's delusional, but few creatures are powerful enough to tell her so and survive.

Many corrupt spirits of the dead also wander the wastes of Kakuri. The Ebon Road often manifests itself here, allowing the Spectres and Faceless Ones who roam its length to enter Emma-o's domain. Such interlopers are either rounded up to be used as minions or they are tormented like any other spirit.

LANKA: DEMON CITY OF THE RAKSHAS

In a blackened corner of Yomi, far from the more populous and better-known hells, lies the ruined island realm of Ravana, Demon-King of the *Rakshas*. It is not clear, or even conceivable, when looking at the decay and stagnation of this domain, that Lanka was once among the greatest hells in Yomi. There is little sound to break the disturbing silence. The air reeks of stale smoke from fires long extinguished. The blood that once ran in the streets and coated the stones of the buildings is dry and flakes off in the breeze. For devils, Lanka is a sad place. For most others it is a place of brief respite.

Lanka is charred, its greatest buildings gutted by fire. Thorny vines wrap around soot-blackened walls as if trying to pull the remaining structures down; thus far, they seem to be doing a good job of it. The barren land that surrounds the city extends off into the distance, ending only where it meets the sea of boiling blood that surrounds the island-city. There is no night or day here, as the domain seems stuck in perpetual twilight. Visitors say that the sky glows a grim red, eternally promising a sunrise that never comes.

Once, long ago, Lanka literally pulsed with the power of tainted Yang Chi. The buildings throbbed and moved to the rhythm of the screaming souls imprisoned within. The island itself was a horrid living entity that existed only to serve the desires of its lord, the ever-shifting, ever-hungry Ravana. Lanka was filled nearly to bursting with the suffering souls to which the Yama King laid claim. The Lanka that

remains is a sad and distant echo of that time. The few structures that remain are lifeless. Occasionally one manages a quiet death rattle as the last of its stored essence flows away; such actions attract the attention of the relentlessly destructive vines. The city is dying slowly, and its struggle against entropy is almost over.

Violence feeds this hell. Every act of aggression, every drop of blood that lands on the ground in Lanka grants the city a little more Chi, and extends the life of the foul thing that is the domain itself by a few more moments. While Lanka has very little strength left with which to personally inflict violence, it does what little it can to instigate what it craves in others, including rearranging streets and otherwise using trickery to lead intruders into one another under suspicious circumstances. Acts of extreme violence committed here, especially conflicts in which blood is drawn or deaths are incurred, strengthen the land, allowing it to create further violence directly by toppling pillars or pulling the unwary underground to devour them whole. The more those trapped struggle, the stronger the land grows.

Despite the malice of Lanka itself, visitors to the city are generally quite safe so long as they are careful. There are a few hazards, as occasional patrols of *rakshas* still roam near the palace, looking for souls to feed to their fallen master. Furthermore, creatures from other hells sometimes come to Lanka to hunt down those who have escaped to this dying domain. Most of the time, however, Lanka is eerily serene. Though it was once one of the most feared places under Heaven, it is now often thought of as the one possible refuge for the innocent in all the Thousand Hells.

It is for this reason that many come to Lanka. Some who have escaped the Yama King or hell that pulled them to Yomi — but who cannot escape Yomi altogether — find Lanka a respite from the ceaseless torments they might otherwise endure. Others use Lanka as a base of operations for hopeless assaults on the rest of Yomi, and still others see the city as a way in which they might seize power and rise to the status of a Yama King. Over the past few decades, a thriving colony of refugees and ruffians has arisen in Lanka, one which the city tolerates for reasons of its own.

The emptiness of Lanka means that if *rakshas* or other hunters do track down "visitors," they have ample time in which to practice their arts of torment on their captives, but those who escape other hells are more than willing to accept the possibility of torture over the certainty thereof. Some of the most numerous refugee gangs are even thought to have deals worked out with the *rakshas*, turning over a tithe of rivals in exchange for protection.

The *rakshas* are obsessive about feeding their realm. If the beast that is the ground beneath Lanka dies, then other Yama Kings will undoubtedly rush in to claim the territory for their own, no doubt annihilating the remaining *rakshas* in the process. To this end, *rakshas* are very aggressive about bringing souls to Lanka. It makes no difference to them whether the souls come from the Middle Kingdom or the domain of another Yama King. The more plunder with which they can provide their land and the more violence they can engage in here, the better their chances of avoid-

ing servitude to a new master, and nothing breeds cunning like desperation.

There is only one exception to the dormancy of Lanka, and that is the grounds around the temple and Ravana's palace. Those few who have ventured close enough to the palace (and avoided the ubiquitous *rakshas*) tell of a great rebuilding — or perhaps a monstrous growth. They claim that the *rakshas* and souls they have taken are hard at work, repairing the palace of Ravana. Some say that Ravana is enacting a plan that will again pull souls of the Middle Kingdom into Lanka. Others say that Ravana's general, the *raksha* Thratri, has tired of waiting for Ravana and has decided to rule as regent over Lanka until her master either returns to his senses or is destroyed.

Under Thratri's command, the *rakshas* work together with a coherence they never had under Ravana. Many observers wonder if Thratri is destined to usurp Ravana's place, and become the next great Yama Queen.

PLACES OF NOTE

THE TEMPLE OF LANKA

At the center of the city of torment lies one of the few standing structures that is not tangled in vines. This enormous structure appears to be covered with a strange white mosaic, but it is actually constructed from the teeth pulled from the victims of Lanka. More dangerous to trespassers is the huge pit in the center of this round building. The hole is actually the gaping maw of the island, and every creature fed directly into it increases the strength of the land beneath by giving up its Chi. Once there were lines of tormented souls feeding into this edifice, each victim awaiting his turn to be dismembered and dropped piece by piece into the mouth of the island.

While the island has no way of pulling victims in by itself, the *rakshas* frequently grow nostalgic for the days when Lanka was a thriving hell, and they go to whatever lengths are necessary to bring back victims for the temple. The native demons have been growing more aggressive and more numerous of late, so there is clearly something happening. Some have suggested that the island is recovering, and that its appetite is actually growing....

THE DEMON KEEP OF RAVANA

Though it has seen better times, the fortress of Ravana is still a terrible sight to behold. Much like Ravana and his demon servitors, the palace cannot hold one form, constantly flowing from one shape to another. Visitors say that the palace behaves like a living thing, a stationary mass of pulsating sinew and flesh. Even the *rakshas* who move into and out of the edifice are more swallowed or vomited out than they are allowed to enter or depart. The building accepts guests by absorbing them into itself and only then deciding if it will allow them to leave. This makes for a very disturbing — but secure — sanctuary for the fallen rajah Ravana, who dwells there brooding over his past defeats.



The building itself bears scars of the fires that razed the city long ago, though Ravana has managed to heal most of the damage inflicted on his beloved citadel. Unsubstantiated reports say that the keep is still terrified of fire, and that anyone approaching the building with open flame is liable to be buried under swarms of defending *rakshas*. The keep is very concerned with its own safety, all the more so for having come so near to destruction.

Only Thratri has access to the keep while Ravana is indisposed, and there are those who wonder if Thratri has been slowly sucking the life out of Ravana when she visits. Whatever the case, the Demon Keep grows stronger after every visit by Thratri, and the future of the realm is expected to be decided there.

THE JUNGLE PATH

Thorny vines cover many of the ruins of Lanka, and these vines become thicker and less navigable as one goes farther from the sea of blood. As one pushes through the thick vegetation, the light changes and the vines grow more aggressive. Eventually, the intrepid explorer will find the Goblin Jungle, which lies along the Scarlet Path. The Scarlet Path is infinitely more dangerous than Lanka proper, and few who seek to escape Yomi realize the perils. The terrors of the Scarlet Path are detailed elsewhere in this book and also in *Hengeyokai: Shapeshifters of the East* in the passage on the Goblin Jungle.

DENIZENS

Ravana welcomes only *rakshas* in his domain. What few *akuma* Ravana used before the fall of Lanka have long since perished or left to seek new masters. Occasionally, goblins or other creatures from the Scarlet Path find their way into Lanka, but they are swiftly captured and tortured by the *rakshas* for their pitiful resources of Chi.

There are other creatures in Lanka, however, that have found their way here to hunt, rest and meet in private. *Shen* from throughout the Middle Kingdom can be found in Lanka, attempting to free themselves from Yomi or making tentative explorations from the known world. The farther from Ravana's palace one strays, the more likely one is going to encounter something that is not simply a *raksha* in disguise, but on the other hand, Lanka is also where some spirits of sickness breed. Such beings are rare, but fearsome, and they don't take kindly to intruders.

As for the shapeshifters, they stay close to Ravana's keep except when out hunting. Since the great fire that brought down the city of torment and destroyed most of this domain, those sections that are dead are anathema to the *rakshas*. Enormous scars mar the landscape, and shapeshifters who venture too near the sea of boiling blood risk catching an infectious rot that appears to affect all Yang-aspected creatures. For this reason, most of the changing demons stay close to the few parts of Lanka that remain vibrant.

THE HELL OF BEING SKINNED ALIVE

If there is a worse place under Heaven than the Hell of Being Skinned Alive, no one has yet found it. At a glance, this hell resembles the surface of a desert world. Visitors with knowledge of astronomy liken the terrain to the reports of the surface of Mars. Others say it combines the worst of the deserts of the Middle Kingdom. The point is moot; the twisted realm of Tou Mu is infinitely worse than any of these, or all of them put together.

The howling winds that forever whip across the red sands of this hell are enough to strip flesh from the bones of lesser beings in seconds. Shards of glass and metal blown on these sonic-velocity winds have enough force to penetrate tank armor; skin, even the tough hides of Kuei-jin, is worn away in moments. These winds have sculpted the rocks and mesas into jagged, horrifying shapes. Those who can see through the constant sandstorms of this domain can see demonic forms performing all manner of torture on the souls of those drawn here, but the screams of the victims are covered by the howling of the wind. The winds frequently become funnel clouds, sucking sand and souls up miles above the ground before letting them plummet onto the sharp pinnacles of stone below.

As if the cutting winds were not enough, the energy built up by the constant motion electrifies the air itself. Prisoners trapped here often find that the iron shards that the storms imbed in their flesh conduct this energy with agonizing efficiency, and victims are regularly subjected to bolts of infernal lighting blasting through their bodies.

Tou Mu is associated with space and the stars, and it is often from that height that she watches events in her domain transpire. Those souls she deems worthy of her special attention she draws from the surface by means of the winds, and pulls them into the cold and silent vacuum above. There, the Iron Empress expresses her dissatisfaction personally. This, more than any other factor, keeps her servitors loyal. It is impossible to know when Tou Mu is watching from above.

Souls trapped in the Hell of Being Skinned Alive are often those who hoarded and abused power. By Yomi's rough justice, such individuals are now tormented after death by having everything ripped away from them. At first, the winds flay only the body, but the worst is yet to come. Once the flesh and muscle falls away from a victim's bones, the prisoner finds that the very essence of his being is now peeling off, layer by layer, to be carried away on the churning winds. The only thing resembling peace in this domain is the period, however brief, when the winds subside. Flayed bodies regenerate in these precious seconds, but the moment the pain fades, the winds start howling again and the cycle begins anew.

Many Kuei-jin here are victims of Tou Mu's vendetta against the Wan Xian. Troublesome Kuei-jin and their mortal descendants, friends and allies often find their way here as well.

It is these souls that the Iron Empress covets above all others, and every agony the Wan Xian suffer in her hell brings the Yama Queen a flash of purest ecstasy.

Those who serve in this hell are well-protected against its torments, but even those creatures who are favored by Tou Mu take care not to spend long periods of time on the open plains of this domain. Most of Tou Mu's servitors dwell in a series of pits that are connected by a labyrinthine series of tunnels. Some say it is possible to barter with these fiends for shelter and safe passage through the realm, but due to their mistress' hatred of all things concerning the Wan Xian, any Kuei-jin attempting to do so would have to pay a hefty price. Even then, the demons could decide to take the bribe and then cast the refugee out to perish on the plains.

The Hell of Being Skinned Alive is likely the single most dangerous place in the most dangerous realm known to Kuei-jin. The Iron Empress hates those who have drawn Second Breath like no other, and makes certain that they are hounded by demons and murderous winds from the first instant of their arrival. For the descendants of the Wan Xian in Tou Mu's hell, there is no sanctuary, no rest and ultimately, no escape.

PLACES OF NOTE

THE SILENT STRONGHOLD OF TOU MU

The Iron Empress is paranoid. The farther she can be from potential assailants, the happier she is. It is for this reason that she has multiple places of retreat.

The strongest, and perhaps strangest, of these is the Silent Stronghold. Thousands of miles above the surface of her domain floats an enormous upside-down palace of twisted and inhuman architecture. Its sharp transparent spires point downward like the tentacles of some enormous vitreous jellyfish. Those unfortunates whom the Empress desires to interrogate she pulls up with enormous gusts of wind and impales on one of these barbed glass spires. Tou Mu interrogates these prisoners telepathically with such brutality that the skin peels away from their heads and blood leaks from the eyes, noses and ears of those she questions; those upon whom the blood falls, far below, are considered particularly unlucky, and most meet a permanent end within days. Once the Yama Queen gets an answer, she releases her captives, who drop back into the hell below.

Walking the corridors of this stronghold are those servitors Tou Mu considers too fragile for the surface of her domain. Her honored guest, the chi'n ta Voormas, perhaps the greatest of Kali's children, resides here while he avoids the justice of those he betrayed. Other creatures with whom Tou Mu is allied also haunt these corridors. The stronghold is also where the envoys of the outer darkness are granted audience.

The Silent Stronghold is not primarily a place of torture, but rather a place of communication, and its most disconcerting property stems from that purpose. The crystal of this place renders unguarded thought into sound. Those not used to controlling their own minds through meditation or magic announce every thought aloud to every other creature in the stronghold, with predictable results.



THE SINISTER FORTRESS OF TOU MU

The Sinister Fortress is one of the few structures that rests on the actual surface of this hell. The fortress is a great palace, fortified with rusted iron that twists into a hideous visage that mirrors the mask of the Yama Queen herself. The entire fortress courses with energy from the lightning that constantly strikes there.

On the outer walls are lashed the bodies of those in whose torments Tou Mu has taken a special interest. These damned creatures are constantly subjected to the cutting winds and bursts of lightning. Tou Mu does not allow them to die, however, and their screams can be heard even over the howling winds. Most of these beings are Wan Xian, captured long ago when Tou Mu took her vengeance on her foes, while others are disobedient servants. Those punished in this way are under a sentence of certain death; the Iron Empress has never removed a victim from the wall, not since the moment when the first traitor was lashed there.

The inner areas of the Yama Queen's keep are a hive of chambers. Even the most trusted of her servants do not know all of them, and it is believed that some of them may have existed even before the Iron Empress came to rule this place. If this is the case, then parts of the fortress may hold dangers of which even the Yama Queen is ignorant.

THE VALLEY OF THE LAST STAND

In all of Tou Mu's realm there is only one place where the winds do not blow: The Valley of the Last Stand. The valley is the place where the great Wan Xian Lei-Tsu fell in battle against the Yama Queen, and it still resists Tou Mu's torments to this day. No one finds the valley of her own volition. Instead, this place seems to draw Kuei-jin of great promise and virtue who find themselves in this unholy realm.

The valley itself is surrounded by figures that have been shaped by the surrounding whirlwinds. Those few who have visited the valley say that these formations resemble warriors of old, who supposedly look out over the surrounding plain and protect the valley from the elements. It is believed that these shapes house the souls of the Wan Xian who fought with Lei-Tsu.

DENIZENS

Because of her hatred for Kuei-jin, Tou Mu does not use (or allow) *akuma* in her domain. Though she may employ the occasional pawn among the Kuei-jin, she never allows them in her realm unless they disobey her, and then the Kuei-jin are not present by choice. Most of the creatures who live here are monstrous ogres, trolls and demons who live in the underground hives scattered throughout the hell. These creatures vary greatly in appearance, and many are quite bestial, but they are all resilient and physically powerful. Many of them have carapaces or other armor to help them withstand the relentless winds. Tou Mu's demons are among the few creatures who can cross this realm with their flesh intact.



THE WICKED CITY

A cyberpunk dream combined with the worst nightmares of a *fang shih*, Mikaboshi's Wicked City is a place of endless urban blight stretching to the horizon in all directions. The air is thick with acrid vapors and burning smog. What little sky can be seen churns and twitches with electric urgency. It is always overcast and dark in the Wicked City, and more often than not acid sleet falls from the sky. The stench of urine blows out of every alley on the noxious breezes, mixed with the scents of vomit, excrement and old blood. The streets and buildings are packed with both the souls who mindlessly slave away in inescapable agonies and the power-mad demons who torment them. The entire hell is a monument to the twisted genius and unswerving ambition of the master of this place, the Yama King Mikaboshi.

The city itself is a profane hybrid; the twisted spires and structures that currently rise up from the streets are built atop older crumbling buildings that have outlived their usefulness. The skyscrapers of today are built over the temples and castles of eras past. There are cities built on cities, and the farther down one goes, the more monstrous the demonic inhabitants grow. It is thought that within these subterranean ghost towns dwell creatures that have not seen the sky for centuries. What these monsters have become in the intervening years is unknown, but no soul has ever entered the abandoned tunnels and subways of the Wicked City and returned sane. Most simply don't return at all.

The buildings and neighborhoods of the Wicked City themselves strongly resemble those in cities like Shanghai, Tokyo and Hong Kong, though the structures of hell are gloomier, sharper and more twisted. *Akuma* frequently report feeling a disturbing sense of familiarity with the Wicked City, and Mikaboshi prefers it thus. The Yama King wants all those who see his city to understand his grand vision of a hellish metropolis connecting Yomi and the urban centers of the Middle Kingdom. He also wants those in his hell to see the comfortable trappings of the daily world perverted toward his demonic ideal. By undermining faith in the known and comfortable, Mikaboshi increases his subjects' feelings of dread and suffering, and his power with them.

The *feng shui* of the Wicked City is beyond negative, instead resting in the realm of the impossible. No place in the Middle Kingdom could warp and pervert the flow of Chi the way the Wicked City does. The entire landscape assaults the Chi of the city's victims. "Poison arrows" point everywhere; every structure interferes with the natural flow of energy; and razor-cornered metal boxes are everywhere, spiraling in directions that cause vertigo from the merest glance. For the demon servitors who dwell here, the foul Chi serves as an almost electric charge that empowers them. For all others, the disharmony saps their will and impedes rational thought. The more time one spends in the Wicked City, the more destructive the vile Chi becomes.

This hell is the final destination of all those who have fallen irredeemably into the corruption, isolation and ano-

nymity of urban life. Politicians, artists, criminals, wage slaves, executives and police officers are all pulled into the sweat shops and dark streets of this doomed megalopolis. These souls are worked beyond their limits, and when they falter or fail, the foremen arrive instantly to probe, jolt or otherwise punish them for their incompetence. The demon servitors use terrible technologies to violate their subordinates and satisfy their own malicious natures. Those victims who show the capacity to return to the same dull position they held in life — textbook salesman, telemarketer, burger-flipper, export agent — do so, day after day and week after week, with no hope of ever improving their lot. Such prisoners are given enough salary to barely cover rent, so they can almost support themselves while enduring the agonies of hell. Those who cannot survive the traumatic boredom are sent from the office with the laughter of their co-workers ringing in their ears. They become the homeless of the Wicked City, available for demons, bakemono and embittered salary drones to beat, torture or set ablaze. If such outcasts were worth anything, the reasoning goes, they would have succeeded in their jobs. Occasionally homeless are plucked from the streets to replace workers who have gotten too comfortable. No one is safe in the Wicked City, ever.

In as many cases as possible, Mikaboshi's staff sees to it that victims are placed in a degraded job that closely parallels the depths of their iniquities in the Middle Kingdom. Those who were truly wicked in the course of their lives are given jobs in sales.

There are no safe places in the Wicked City. Every street corner can be home to a demon of iron and violence. Every worker can be an *akuma* spy. No one can be trusted and everyone is the enemy. Even the imprisoned may betray a visitor for the chance to gain promotion. It is a place where all the worst elements of greed and capitalism meet in Yomi's atmosphere of corruption.

The technology of this domain is beyond disturbing. The corrupted Yin of this place feeds all manner of implants, gadgets and devices that serve only to heighten the suffering of the doomed. Cyborgs hunt workers who have escaped their workshops, and cameras observe everyone. Citizens are jacked in to this hell through direct bionic connections that allow them to feel the feet that walk the streets, hear the whispers muttered in corners and recognize individuals by their voice and retina patterns. Mikaboshi and his lieutenants miss nothing that occurs in the Wicked City.

It is possible to reach the Wicked City from any number of the worst urban hellholes in the Middle Kingdom. The child brothels of Bangkok and the squatter neighborhoods of Hong Kong and Jakarta are the best-known routes, but many others exist. In these places of corruption and anguish, the Wall between the Middle Kingdom and the Wicked City is weak. With minimal effort, any *shen* can travel here from such an area. Of course, there are few reasons to do so, and the door swings both ways. Many denizens of this hell often visit the Middle Kingdom looking to snare new souls. Because of such expeditions, there are many innocents who now serve as demons' playthings in the Wicked City after

being pulled from lives that were already more nightmarish than they deserved.

It is also possible to reach the Cyber-Realm from the city, as well as other places of the spirit worlds with ties to urban rot and abuse of technology. In fact, many creatures from related or similar realms have found a home in the court of Mikaboshi. The Yama King is willing to employ anyone of use to him, regardless of color, creed, breed or species.

The Wicked City makes the worst cities on Earth look like tranquil suburbs. It is a place of pollution, death and tortures of the foulest sort, a product of man's own abuse of technology and nature. Most importantly, the City portrays a clear picture of what the Middle Kingdom will become should Mikaboshi rule in the Sixth Age as the Demon-Emperor.

PLACES OF NOTE

MIKABOSHI TOWER

This hideous skyscraper rises to the clouds and beyond, its peak invisible from the ground below. The Tower is at least 90 stories tall, but only Mikaboshi and his lieutenants have the code to the elevator and know for sure. It is from this twisted spire of blackened steel and glass that the Yama King observes all that goes on around him, and it is to the Tower that particularly recalcitrant souls are brought for re-education. In addition to housing the Yama King and his followers, the Tower also acts as a vast antenna for receiving energies from all across the hell. Mikaboshi himself is often linked to his stronghold by all manner of strange devices that allow him to interpret these energies in the form of information. By doing so, the Yama King can see, hear and feel any part of the Wicked City.

Mikaboshi Tower is filled with favored *akuma*, demons and other creatures who help maintain the delicate administrative structure of this city. The Tower is used as a sort of corporate headquarters where plans are made that affect everyone under the Yama King's rule; everything from upgrades of the city's hardware to management plans to corporate slogans designed to sap morale flows from the Tower. Creatures of metal and dead flesh patrol the halls, and souls deserving of special punishments are subjected to all manner of experiments on the medical floors.

THE SHINJUKU NECROPOLIS

Also known as the Undercity, this area consists of the places where Mikaboshi has built new structures over those he has abandoned. Though one would expect much of the crumbling underground to be vacant and barren, this is not the case. All manner of creatures dwell in the Undercity. Most are demons who have been demoted for chronic incompetence. Some are predators who seek to feed off the refuse of the Wicked City. There are even rumors that a few rare Kuei-jin who have learned to survive here hide in the Necropolis. What these vampires are doing in the Wicked City is unknown, but they might aid travelers if given proper incentive.

DENIZENS

The Wicked City has perhaps the greatest variety among its inhabitants. Metal elementals, corrupt urban spirits, cyborgs and business-minded *akuma* are only some of the creatures that have fallen under Mikaboshi's sway. The demons who serve here are organized in a tight corporate hierarchy. Subordinates are expected to obey their superiors and follow protocol at all times. Those who disobey are demoted or destroyed, according to the seriousness of their offense. Promotion is possible but rare, and usually involves actions that aid their master's cause beyond all expectations or the untimely destruction of one's immediate superior.

Among the most powerful of Mikaboshi's servants are the corrupted City Fathers of many of the cities that connect to his realm. These high-ranking powerful beings often act as corporate executives and governors of those areas that correspond with their analogs in the Middle Kingdom. The most powerful among these spirits is Masakado, the former guardian spirit and City Father of Tokyo. Masakado acts as Mikaboshi's right-hand man, and has a number of *akuma* and powerful demons serving him as lieutenants.

Other notable inhabitants of this realm include the great *oni* that have been shaped and changed by Mikaboshi's experiments with technology. These three-eyed cybernetic terrors are often used to hunt down escaped souls and lead assaults on the Yama King's enemies.

THE HELL OF BOILING OIL

The name of this hell is a misnomer, as the domain is not filled with boiling oil, but rather with rendered human fat. Gobbets of charred and burning fat float atop the surrounding ocean of thick, bubbling grease. A dark gray froth of overcooked scum floats to the surface in places.

The atmosphere is hazy with brown smoke and a fine mist of grease. The stench is intolerable. Individuals who arrive and manage to stay on the surface — mortal and otherwise — vomit uncontrollably, adding the contents of their stomachs to the repulsive stew beneath. Those few individuals who escape this realm are never able to rid themselves of the stench entirely. The scent lingers interminably, and may, on occasion, be strong enough to taint social interactions with others.

There is very little to see in this hell: smoke, grease, foam, unrendered fat and the writing bodies of the tormented. It makes little difference; the eyes of most souls are scalded into uselessness in the first minute of their stay.

This hell is primarily the place of torment for the gluttonous. Here is where the corpulent executive and the rotund bureaucrat are haunted by the excesses of their lives. Like other hells, the Hell of Boiling Oil preserves its victims from final annihilation until they've suffered enough. Given the current state of business ethics in the Middle Kingdom, that can be a very long time.

The Yama King of this realm is perhaps the least human of all the Yama Kings. Its name is Hluh, and it is thought to be a gelatinous creature resembling an island-sized, bright-

red armored jellyfish with sharp-toothed sucker mouths at the ends of each of its tentacles. Given the nature of its chosen home, it is unlikely that this creature exists in any way that the mortal mind can easily (or comfortably) understand. Regardless, it makes little difference to those imprisoned here, as they burn and boil just the same.

PLACES OF NOTE

THE POCKETS

This hell has little in the way of specific locales, but one phenomenon does deserve mention. It happens from time to time that a large bubble of cool air, perhaps from one of the Yin-aspected realms, floats through this place, congealing the grease around it. These air pockets are, for a time, safe from the burning hell outside, and they can be used as temporary shelters, albeit with two caveats.

First, these air pockets are often home to some of the repulsive demons that make this hell their home. Some of these creatures are able to maneuver and steer these bubbles as a form of travel. To seek solace in these places is to risk confrontation with the original owners.

Second, these air bubbles have been known to implode when they travel through an especially warm current of fat. When this happens, everything inside is flooded with boiling fat and tissue. Those who are trapped inside are generally unprepared for the sudden bursting of their bubble, and often wind up drawing in mouthfuls of boiling fat. Such unfortunates then have the unique pleasure of being fried from the inside as well.

DENIZENS

The demons of this place have no names, no faces and in most cases, no senses of self. Most are great parasitic organisms that somewhat resemble chitinous tapeworms; others look like gigantic water striders that skim along the surface of the boiling sea. The demons do not speak, but at times they let loose a bubbling high-pitched laugh. A favorite habit of these monsters is to tear chunks of fat from struggling victims and then cast them into the sea to be rendered down. Once a sufficient quantity of the victim's blubber melts, the demon tosses the source of the fat into the middle of the pool, there to be boiled in his own drippings.

THE HELL OF BURROWING MAGGOTS

A quick glance reveals this place to be a vast plain of what appears to be fine white sand. There is no sun, but the overcast sky is not particularly dark. Many who come here initially scoff at the sight, thinking they have somehow cheated fate or that Yomi isn't so terrible as they have heard. Only then do they realize that the sand beneath their feet is crawling. Other times the reality of the situation is made clear when an enormous demon maggot the size of an elephant breaks through the sand and snatches away a trespasser. After a few moments more, the smell of rot fully hits any travelers, and the stench of decay staggers any who



are so unfortunate as to need to breathe. The entire realm is filled with maggots and others eaters of carrion, and there is no surcease anywhere in the domain from the rot and decay.

The domain belongs to Rangda, the Mistress of Pestilence. It is a place of torment for sinners who have met their end by disease, including radiation poisoning, cancer and the effects of biological warfare agents. The souls who are trapped here are covered with visible and amplified signs of the diseases that killed them. Tumors grow enormous and hang from the body like bags of rot, enormous berry-colored lesions cover the skin, and emphysema victims cough up fist-sized clots of lung. It takes no time for the boils, tumors and open sores of the inhabitants to attract the maggots, and within days a soul trapped here can literally feel her skin crawl.

Everywhere, the worm-ridden souls of this domain can be seen crying out in pain, scratching off their own skins in vain attempts to rip away the burrowing larvae, and trying desperately to find some place of shelter from the maggots that eat them alive. Few places offer any relief, although the enormous bones of things now dead mark the plain in places and offer some hope. The carcasses of these titanic creatures cannot protect all the doomed from their suffering. There are thousands of victims seeking these few places of respite; inevitably a tenth suffering soul climbs on a bone that can only support nine and the whole thing tips over or cracks, spilling everyone back into the mass of ravenous maggots. There are no buildings or hand-made structures; any that are built disappear under a wave of maggots almost immediately.

Rangda and her more human-seeming servitors wander this realm with impunity. No creature attacks the Yama Queen or her servants, though anyone else is part of the twisted food chain. Even the healthy find that the demon maggots of this realm, unlike their counterparts in the Middle Kingdom, find the taste of healthy flesh pleasing to their palates.

PLACES OF NOTE

THE GREAT BEAST

Within the Hell of Boring Maggots is a formation that appears to be a large white mountain. It is home to the largest and most vile of all the realm's inhabitants. As visitors approach this area, they begin to understand why this is the case. The outcropping that appears to be a mountain is actually the remains of a creature of immense size that died in this place long ago. Some have said that the beast was there before Rangda herself, and that it has been dead longer than the world has lived. The creatures that feed off of it cover it like a swarming blanket, but strands of gnawed pink flesh can still be seen flapping in the stench-ridden breeze. What the creature once was cannot be seen past the layer of maggots that cover it, and many suspect that even Rangda does not know what kind of beast rests here. Others tell the story that Rangda wanted this domain and the enormous Yama King who claimed the realm made himself the size of a small continent so that he could pulverize the young Queen. By afflicting the brute with



every conceivable disease all at once, Rangda destroyed the Yama King and carved out a niche for herself in the Thousand Hells.

In any case, it appears that it may take an eternity to fully devour the monster, and the creatures that feed off its carcass are without a doubt the largest and most aggressive of this realm's maggots. Some have reached the size of a blue whale, while the smallest of them is at least six feet long. These creatures also seem to have developed a rudimentary intellect and means of communication, allowing them to act in synchrony.

THE SPAWNING PIT

When a soul in the Hell of Burrowing Maggots is either nearly consumed or has proven itself worthy of serving Rangda, it is taken to the Spawning Pit. The pit itself pulses with tainted Yang energy and is aggressively guarded by Rangda's greatest servitors. Those servants thrust the chosen soul into the pit, and the top of the hole is sealed. After a time, the soul inside undergoes a transformation. The corrupting energies of the pit transform the body of the victim, and the soul emerges as a servitor of Rangda. Some rise as human wellsprings of plague and disease, while others mutate into great maggots and are put to work as soldiers and overseers in Rangda's soft white army. Those who are too weak or mostly consumed are wholly absorbed into the hell itself, strengthening the Yama Queen's power in her realm.

DENIZENS

The words describing the creatures who reside in this hell all follow a theme — disgusting, foul, hideous. With the exception of the *akuma* and plague-ridden zombies that sometimes serve Rangda, nothing here even vaguely passes for human. Most beings that dwell here are fat white maggots whose only purpose is to eat.

While Rangda does not care for the mature version of her pets, maggots all do eventually become flies. The flies of this domain are spectacularly vile. Iridescent monstrosities, they fly in grotesque swarms, devouring live meat and laying eggs inside paralyzed victims. As though this realm needed anything more vile, the flies' method of consuming prey is particularly foul; by vomiting acid from its proboscis, the fly dissolves its meal outside of its body and sucks up the resultant liquefied mass. Becoming a meal or a host for a fly is considered the worst fate possible in this realm. Rangda inflicts her flies upon individuals for whom she has a particular dislike.

The maggots as well as the other deformed carrion eaters of the realm — beetles, vultures, hyenas and enormous flies — are mostly mindless, though they do have a certain instinctive hierarchy. Some of the largest and strongest of these creatures direct the others to better insure that no soul exists in this hell without feeding the worms.

Most of the demon maggots are small, though the largest dwarf most living things in the Middle Kingdom. Few are intelligent enough to do anything but devour the souls Rangda brings here, but some are "trainable" and are sent to the Middle Kingdom to assist *akuma* in their endeavors.

Aside from maggots and the *akuma*, Rangda's favored

servants are the so-called plague zombies. These walking dead are creatures whose entire bodies have been saturated with disease. Any who touch them are courting contamination and lingering death. Rangda often sends these creatures, disguised as attractive young men and women, to the less developed regions of the Middle Kingdom to spread their queen's afflictions. They are typically fairly dull in terms of personality, but their good looks insure that they will be able to touch others and spread their contagions to the masses.

THE PIT OF SALT AND IRON

In the Middle Kingdom, the earth is the giver of life. It nurtures the plants that feed living beings, and provides a foundation for all things under Heaven. This is not true in the Pit.

The Pit of Iron and Salt is the domain of the Yama King Wu Hua, who runs his hell in a manner of which the great robber barons of the West would have approved. Those who labor in his hell do so in the false hope that through hard work, they will eventually move up in the ranks and one day be relieved of their suffering. Such fools are wrong, of course, but that doesn't keep them from trying.

The Pit appears to be a sickly white slash in the landscape of Hell, surmounted by a series of rusted iron spires. Upon closer inspection, one sees that the terrain is pure salt and that the vast pit appears to have no bottom. The citadels of Wu Hua appear as great shards of iron that jut from various depths of the pit. The souls trapped here labor in the mines for treasures they will never find, beneath the lashes of cruel and ruthless overseers. Such creatures delight in discovering excuses to cut or lash their charges, simply so the salt of the pit can inflame any open wounds.

The citadels of iron that house the more fortunate residents of Wu Hua's domain are places of decadence and depravity. Souls intermittently rotate from the mines to act as slaves in the citadels, and most mine workers view the change as a desirable one. Inevitably, every soul so chosen

WHAT IS THE GREAT BEAST?

Among those few souls who have seen it, the nature of the Great Beast is subject to intense debate. Some believe that the beast is somehow tied to creation, and that when it is gone, the universe will cease to be. Others believe that it is the corpse of some long-forgotten entity who ruled in this place before it became tainted and annexed to Yomi.

In times past, a foolhardy *chi'n ta* entered this hell to see the beast. Devising a way to shield himself from the hell's inhabitants, he simply sat and watched. Days later, he returned to his monastery, pale-faced and feverish. For a long while he screamed only gibberish. Even his soul-companion could coax only two words from him before he finally took his own life:

"It moved."

learns that this is not the case.

In accordance with Wu Hua's twisted notions of *feng shui*, there are six citadels located equidistantly on every level of the pit. No one knows how many levels there are to the mine, but the suspicion is that the number is infinite. The visual effect of this makes the pit look like a great gaping maw when viewed from above, and each citadel seems a jagged iron tooth.

The workers are allowed no clothing when they work, leaving them unshielded from the harsh environment of the pit. Those souls who are particularly useful, like those who inform on their fellows or agree to help the overseers convince certain souls to serve in the citadels are often allowed to wear a few scraps of clothing. Prisoners who cover their bodies in this way are both envied and hated by their fellows.

The Iron Citadels are designed in a reversed hierarchy. The higher up in the citadel you work, the less status you have. It is said that Wu Hua's fortress is located at the theoretical bottom of the pit, though few have ever seen it.

On the tops of the citadel spires are impaled the bodies of traitors and failures. Those impaled on the higher citadels have committed minor offenses. It is said that Wu Hua surrounds his own fortress with the carcasses of those who have failed him in the most unforgivable of ways.

The Pit's landscape is largely unchanging and sterile. It is not a place of shock or disgust, but a hell of quiet oppression that wears away the souls of those imprisoned there at an agonizing pace. More can be learned of Wu Hua's domain in *Dark Kingdom of Jade* and *Doomslayers: Into the Labyrinth*.

LOCATIONS OF NOTE

THE CITADEL OF WU HUA

At the bottom of the enormous salt chasm rests the great Citadel of Wu Hua. It is a city of iron surrounded by six enormous barbed spires on which hundreds of bodies are impaled. Sputtering, greenish fires can be seen from a distance, and in the cold glow of these flames can be seen hints of grotesque rituals and obscene torments. The rust on the city's iron walls makes the entire place seem to bleed.

The central palace is a place of great mystery. Only the Yama King and his most trusted advisors dwell there; even the most honored visitors are received at higher levels within the Pit. What exactly goes on inside this inner sanctum is unknown, but the screams of the tormented can be faintly heard many levels away.

THE IRON BROTHEL

In the middle levels of Wu Hua's hell, in the sixth citadel of the 12th level, an enterprising soul can find the Iron Brothel. This vast building is a place of grossest perversion. Within the walls, the domain's prisoners labor to entertain the darkest desires of the servants of Wu Hua. Some do so because they cannot endure the labor in the mines, others see it as a temporary respite from the overseer's whips and blades. In reality, the souls that suffer there are treated worse than those anywhere else in this domain. Their suffering feeds Wu Hua's realm more generously than any ten thousand souls with picks and shovels, because it is



so much more personal.

Occasionally, Wu Hua recruits from the brothel staff. Such new agents are usually those souls who have endured in the brothel for some time, yet who have retained some spark of independence. Only a spark is wanted, though — those who cling to individuality are sent back for more dehumanizing labor.

DENIZENS

Wu Hua's servants are a carefully chosen mix of *akuma*, Spectres he has seduced away from Yu Huang and other demons. His elite are chosen largely from among the first souls he brought under his control centuries ago. Most of these things have forgotten that they were ever human.

The Yama King's organizational structure has been styled after the bureaucratic structures of early China. Obedient servants are rewarded with gifts and promotion. Disobedient lackeys are punished and finally destroyed. Any creature who has moved up through these twisted ranks is undoubtedly a creature of great wickedness and cunning, and should be treated with caution.

THE HELL OF THE SEVEN BURNING SEAS

It would be hard for most individuals to choose the worse fate, burning or drowning. The souls doomed to the Hell of the Seven Burning Seas do both. As they flail about in the scalding waters of the Burning Seas, they have a choice of trying to stay above water and having their garments burst into flame, or submerging and boiling themselves. Even those lucky few who can find air pockets or other brief places of shelter are assaulted by superheated steam that insures they find no peace.

This hell houses those souls whose crimes involve the waters of the Middle Kingdom. Pirates, polluters and mutinous crewmen suffer here. So do any number of murderers who burned or drowned their victims. As punishment for their crimes, these souls are now denied the life-giving waters of the Middle Kingdom and forced to drown and boil forever in the churning waters of the Burning Seas.

There is no calm surface to the Burning Seas. Those who avoid undertows, devil-fish and steam bubbles to get to



the surface find a roaring conflagration rising thousands of feet from the stormy face of the waves. One part of the hell is worse than the next, with the seventh invariably being the least hospitable of all. Those who somehow escape this hell surface in the waters of another part of Yomi, often the blood-sea surrounding Lanka or the sludge-dumps of the Wicked City. Some Yomi theorists have suggested that it should be possible to swim to the River of Death from this place, but no one has survived the attempt.

While the surface of the water is intolerable to any creature, the ocean floor is not. Nestled in the depths of this hell are the great cities of the Kani no Jigoku, twisted crustacean spirits who are rarely seen in the Middle Kingdom. They have built great cities of volcanic glass and black coral where they torment the worst of all the souls that dwell here. Even through the dark depths of the sea, the eerie pillars of flame from their volcanic forges can be seen for miles. The Kani are creatures of great industry, and they often create relics, weapons and implements of torture for their more humanoid allies, the *akuma* who serve their lady, the Empress of Pearls.

This Yama Queen never addresses any of her servants directly, instead communicating through a series of complex omens that are interpreted by the high priests among her cult. It is rumored that she dwells at the greatest depths of this hell, where any other creature would implode from the pressure. At times both her victims and servants have sworn they have seen a great shadowy shape swimming many leagues away. Whether this is the Mother herself or one of her more powerful servants is unknown, but unlucky Kani have had entire cities wiped out as punishment for disobedience, heresy and failure. The few survivors of these attacks whisper tales of a great "devil-fish" unlike anything else in the Burning Sea. They swear the beast ravaged their settlements and devoured the most impious souls. It has even been suggested that the Yama Queen travels to the Middle Kingdom to cause great tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and storms to send even more souls down to her depths, but most suspect this is simply the frightened superstition of the terrified Quincunx. If the Mother of the Depths does visit the Middle Kingdom, it is for reasons unfathomable to the minds of mere *shen*.

The waters of the Burning Sea are so saturated with Yang energy that anything even remotely flammable ignites. Due to the intense heat of the water itself, souls who tarry too long in this hell may find themselves bursting into flame while underwater. Such spontaneous combustion is rare, but it is often fatal as the Yang-tainted waters feed the blaze until it consumes everything around it. Unlike the waters of the Middle Kingdom, the Hell of the Seven Burning Seas is a place not of life, but of death.

PLACES OF NOTE

THE GREAT TRENCH

Far from the cities of the Kani exists a gaping wound in the ocean floor. This chasm appears to be a great trench that travels farther down than any inhabitant of the realm can go. The high priests among the Kani swear that this place is the home of their dark goddess and queen, and they often

take traitors and interlopers to this trench and cast them into it, tied to boulders, as a sacrifice to their Empress. The remains of these sacrifices come floating back some time later, free of the boulder, and settle around the mouth of the trench. Over time, the length of the chasm has become lined by an enormous bone reef made of these remains, and rumors circulate about the terrifying creatures that make their homes within the palisade of bones.

THE KESHI

On a calm night in the distant past, a grand Quincunx war junk, the *Keshi*, anchored off an island known for its reverence to Haha no Fukami. Its crew, three exalted battle *wu*, were there to dispatch the *akuma* who were said to infest the island. While no *akuma* or Kuei-jin were found, mortal hedge wizards who dwelt on the island assaulted the agents of the Quincunx with magics the Quincunx agents decided were "gifts from the devils of Yomi." By dawn, the mortals of the island were butchered and the Kuei-jin were well-fed. The vampires set sail the next night for the Bone Court of Shanghai.

They never made it. The Mother of the Depths manifested as a monstrous sea dragon and pulled the entire ship into the Hell of the Seven Burning Seas. The crew were quickly annihilated, and their souls found their way to their murderess' domain. The *Keshi* herself was scuttled outside one of the great Kani cities. After a time, the ship began to burn and the entire craft was quickly engulfed in flames. It burned as hot and bright as anything in the flammable waters of this hell, but the wood would not char or the sails ignite. This was looked upon as a powerfully inauspicious omen, and the Kani buried the *Keshi* far from their city. It is suggested that a great Quincunx treasure, containing much Chi, must have been aboard to protect the ship from destruction. In fact, it is the crew of the *Keshi* that protects it. They inhabit the wreck of their ship, the one thing familiar to them in this hell, and seek to defend it against Yomi's corruption. These powerful ghosts have sailed their ship on the fiery surface of the water to rescue souls from the Yama Queen of this domain, but in every case, the souls they tried to rescue were already corrupted. Every time the ship's guardians discover this, the *Keshi* sinks again, only to rise in hope once more. The ghost crew believes that when they do rescue an innocent victim from the torments of the Empress of Pearls, they will be allowed to return to the Middle Kingdom.

DENJZENS

The most numerous inhabitants of the Seven Burning Seas are the Kani no Jigoku. These crablike demons aren't particularly humanoid, but they can stand vaguely upright when the need arises. Their shells are bright red, like boiled lobster. The lower legs of the Kani are tentacles that enable them to swim at tremendous speeds through the boiling water, while their claws are surprisingly dexterous.

The Kani are unswervingly loyal to their Queen. She gives no commands *per se*, but their fanatical fervor does much to compensate for their lack of leadership. They have little direct contact with the Middle Kingdom, though the

occasional Kani may venture there as an emissary to one of the island cults, spreading the glory of the Empress of Pearls.

This realm, being rich with Yang force, is populated by all manner of spirit fish. Demon-squid and devil-sharks punish the wicked and devour their Chi. Various elementals of fire, water and stone can be found here as well, doing the primal bidding of the Lady of the realm.

THE HELL OF UPSIDE-DOWN SINNERS

This domain defies description. Depending on accounts, this is either the cleverest of the Yomi realms or the maddest hell devised by the sickest of minds. Time and space are inverted; sensation and thought are twisted. Minutes pass like an eternity, and millennia rush by in the blink of an eye. It is a place where torture soothes and failure produces feelings of elation and joy. In this hell, the strong perish and only the weak survive. That which is soft and dull cuts, while sharp objects bring comfort. A Kueijin may fall from a great height with no effect, yet meet destruction by stumbling on a smooth road. The unwary frequently assume that this hell is like others they've been in. They learn their mistake within seconds. Recent arrivals are often driven mad as their senses become jumbled. It takes only a few short minutes for souls to begin to see odors, smell sounds and hear the sights. This, in conjunction with the fact that crossing a grassy plain can ravage the body like a million razors, means that it is little wonder that few venture far into this place.

To make matters worse, after long periods in this hell emotions grow jumbled as well. Souls begin to hate those who have helped them and love those who have done them wrong. They fear the helpless and refuse to flee from certain destruction. The natives of this place have little trouble preying on the strongest outsiders, and even the weakest of these creatures is as effective as if it were an army of stronger foes.

Captive *shen* find that their skills and powers do not work here as they should. The more potent the ability, the weaker and more difficult it becomes. A master swordsman finds himself unable to hold a sword in this domain, and a creature of legendary strength finds itself unable to stand.

No one has ever met the Yama King who rules here. It is likely a being impossible to comprehend with a rational mind. Whoever he is, it is believed that he has never left this place. The realm is unbalanced toward neither Yin nor Yang, but that is small consolation to the souls trapped within.

Other Yama Kings do not venture into this domain. It is rumored that even they fear the nature of the place, and with good reason. When you invert the nature of a dark god,

what is left but a good-natured child? No Yama King wishes to risk his candidacy for the Demon Throne by finding out the truth of that proposition.

PLACES OF NOTE

THE CROSSROADS

The Crossroads rest near the arrival points for most who arrive in this hell. Usually a soul comes to this place shortly after arriving, but after traveling a fair distance. Four paths radiate out at right angles to one another. After a few hours, a traveler cannot remember which direction she came from or where she is, or even distinguish which direction she's facing. Souls become fascinated by the simple signpost here and suffer the most intense feeling of being lost they've ever known. A few particularly unlucky individuals have been driven mad by this place alone, though most endure to walk on a bit farther.

DENIZENS

The denizens of this realm are as much a mystery as the Yama King they serve. They are imperceptible to the normal senses. One may be able to see their odor or hear their faces, but few can process such snippets of alien information into any picture that can be recognized by a rational mind.

These demons do not touch the physical forms of those they torment. They haunt their minds instead, enhancing feelings of terror and uncertainty in the strong and leading the weak into acts of arrogance and cruelty. Thankfully, the domain's inhabitants rarely intrude into the Middle Kingdom. It is not certain if this is by their own choice or the fact that they simply are incapable of surviving outside of their own, highly specialized, environment.

SURVIVING THE MADNESS

The surest way to avoid being destroyed by the Hell of Upside-down Sinners is not to go there. Failing that, the only salvation is balance. The more balanced an individual is, the less this hell affects him. If a being's Yin and Yang, Hun and P'o, strengths and weaknesses counteract each other, then he can stave off the debilitating effects of this realm for much longer periods of time than an unbalanced, aspected individual. However, unless a person is utterly enlightened and has achieved a life of perfect balance and harmony, he will eventually be forced to succumb to this realm or leave. That being the case, it is known that at least one arhat left the Middle Kingdom for this hell after proclaiming the Middle Kingdom "the fat belly of madness."

AND STILL MORE...

Additional hells that characters might discover on their travels include:

- **Pueleko:** Pueleko is a Polynesian Yin-aspected hell of lifelessness and gloom. Souls trapped here are preyed upon by cannibalistic spirits.
- **The Hell of Eternal Castration** This self-explanatory hell is reserved for those who force others into sexual acts. Each time a victim regenerates, packs of demons arrive to mutilate him again in new and different ways.
- **The Hell of Those Who Sell Their Children** This place is not as sparsely populated as one might expect, since it includes those who victimize any children, not just their own. Quite Yang-aspected, this is the destination of many sweat-shop overseers.
- **The Feverish Hell of Tou Shen** This is not an especially large domain, for it is populated by those who have caused the spread of or profited from smallpox. Many souls of this Yang-aspected hell have slowly been stolen away by Rangda as smallpox has been all eradicated in the Middle Kingdom.
- **The Hell of Being Cut to Pieces** This fairly well-known hell is imbalanced toward the Yang principle. Souls who arrive here fall into a sea of razor-sharp blades that spin and move about, cutting sinners to shreds. The domain is typically the place where Triad and tong members — and others who made their livings through violence — pay off their karmic debt.

THE FACE OF YOMI: THE YAMA KINGS

THE NATURE OF THE YAMA KINGS

The undisputed masters of Yomi are the Yama Kings. Infernal entities of immense power, the Yama Kings draw their vast power from spiritual corruption and the suffering of the spirits trapped and tormented in their domains. There are a handful of Yama Kings who do not claim a domain, but most of the hells are actively ruled by the lords of Yomi, who fancy themselves the dark gods of their domains. There is a clear *spiritual connection between the lords of Yomi and the hells they rule*, and it is common for a domain to take on the quirks and instabilities of the Yama King who rules it.

Most Yama Kings strive toward one goal: to throw the August Personage of Jade from the throne of Heaven once the Sixth Age arrives and then to seize the title of Demon Emperor. The prophecies are regrettably clear on this matter, and the question is not if one of the Yama Kings will rule over Heaven and Earth, but when and which Yama King it will be. Scheme after malevolent scheme, some of them millennia old, are coming to fruition now as the Yama Kings reap the harvest from seeds of agony planted long ago. Their time is coming soon, they feel, and each wishes to be in the best possible position to seize the Mandate of Heaven.

The majority of Yama Kings are imbalanced toward either the Yin or Yang principle, manifesting the most vile and twisted aspects of their imbalance the way mortals demonstrate *their taste in clothing or hobbies*. Those inclined toward Yin are ceaselessly calculating and cruel, while those with a Yang imbalance exemplify the vices of incendiary rage and insane over-stimulation.

Some few Yama Kings have maintained a balance of Chi, or represent unfathomable mixtures of Yin and Yang. These entities are rare and odd, even among the bizarre ranks of the Yama Kings, who consider them to be odd curiosities. Of these, only the fabled Yen-Lo ever had any power to speak of, not that it helped him much in his struggles with his peers and rivals.

Regardless of their karmic inclinations, the Yama Kings represent an evil of such magnitude that the mortal mind can scarcely conceive it, much less oppose it. Any direct confrontation with *any of these entities is almost certain to result in an eternity of suffering in the hell of the Yama King's choosing*. One might as well attempt to slay hate or pain as to seek to destroy a Yama King; the level of power necessary is something beyond mortal imagination.

THE YAMA KINGS

At their essence, the Yama Kings are a system that has gone wildly out of control. Originally intended to tend the spirits of the dead who demanded exceptional punishment, over the centuries they have instead slipped their celestial leash and arrogated unto themselves power never intended for them. They corrupt the Middle Kingdom and roost like shrieks in Yomi, wallowing in the sustenance their cruelty generates.

In truth, "Yama King" is more of a title than anything else. The origins of the various beings who stalk Yomi like colossi are varied. Some were created by the Scarlet Queen and her consort, others set in their place by the August Personage of Jade. Others seem to be akin to ghostly Malfeans, spirits of vast atrocity or even the ancient rivals of Yu Huang, grown terrible in their power. Still, the roots of the Yama Kings matter less and less with each passing year; they are more akin to each other than they are different, and all of them are possessors of great power and dominion within Yomi.

As the Ages have unfolded, certain of the original Yama Kings have met with annihilation. Some spiraled out of

control and destroyed themselves. Some, like Yen-Lo, were murdered by their fellow Yama Kings, while others were put down to prevent Yomi from being ripped asunder from within. The dread Shau-yar Han's death screams echo still in the hearts of the Yama Kings who were forced by his madness to destroy him, suffering great agonies to do so. Still others were destroyed by agents of the Middle Kingdom. At least one was absorbed into the fabric of Yomi during the first great consolidation of tainted Chi.

As Yama Kings can be destroyed, so too can new Yama Kings arise. Some few inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom have channeled their dark ambition and vile natures to forge a place for themselves in Yomi. Depending on the legends one listens to, one hears that these entities were monstrous mortals trafficking in hellish pleasures, spirits of vengeance gone bad, or *shen* who found a way to turn their corruption into a source of power. This is the dark apotheosis sought by those who follow the Howl of the Devil-Tiger Dharma and, happily, few have ever achieved it.

THE STRENGTH OF THE YAMA KINGS

The demonic lords of the Yomi realm wield unfathomable power. When they are in their own domains, the Yama Kings' rage makes volcanoes erupt or oceans freeze; reality itself shifts to appease them. Here — and only here — do most Yama Kings feel safe. The majority of these devils prefer to sit like bloated spiders at the center of their webs, orchestrating events through their chosen agents.

Outside their own hells, the Yama Kings' power fades rapidly. While they retain great power everywhere in Yomi, a Yama King in another's domain is at the mercy of his host. Most Yama Kings do not trust their fellows enough to enter their domains, and with good reason. More than one Yama

A GNAWING FEAR

The Yama Kings have stolen chunks of Heaven and rent asunder the hells. They have corrupted the Middle Kingdom and tainted the Chi of uncounted realms. Their enemies are scattered or enthralled, and the August Personage of Jade no longer stands in their way. Why, then, are the Yama Kings afraid?

Deep in each one's heart is a cold ember of terror, never quite extinguished regardless of how many atrocities the Yama King might commit. Even the screams of the tormented are not enough to drown out the small voice whispering in each Yama King's ear, causing him to know fear.

The secret fear that each Yama King harbors (and all of them share this terror, though none confesses it to his peers for fear of being thought weak) is that somehow, in some way, they were permitted to achieve all that they have done. After the creation of Yomi, the August Personage could easily have destroyed them — but instead, he merely smiled and left them to their own devices. The Wan Xian, so effective for so long at thwarting the Yama Kings, were allowed to grow corrupt, and thence removed from their duties — again, why? Could it be that the Yama Kings' schemes and atrocities were merely what they were allotted, and that all of their actions are really the complicated steps performed by a particularly clever puppet? If that is the case, what is the ultimate fate for these marionettes who thought themselves puppetmasters? Will they be rewarded for a job well done — or discarded?

That is the fear that torments the Yama Kings, and it will continue to gnaw at their hearts until the end of time, if not beyond.

HOW MANY DEVILS?

One of the great unknowns concerning the Yama Kings is their number. While most who know of the Yomi Lords have heard of Tou Mu and Mikaboshi, few know how many other, less prominent Yama Kings exist.

Most scholars of cosmology say that there are but 10 Yama Kings, but the source for this number is *The Red Book of the Iron Bridge*, which may or may not be accurate. Others, particularly those who have spent time in Yomi, swear that there are orders of magnitude more than that, all orchestrating their own schemes to rise to the position of Demon Emperor. There are uncountable hells in Yomi, and if each one is ruled by its own Yama King, then the Yama Kings are truly legion.

Those who believe that there are thousands of Yama Kings suggest that many of these lords are very weak or have little interest in the Middle Kingdom. Still, with thousands of beings of great power dwelling in Yomi, most *shen* agree that there is no more dangerous place in all of creation than the Thousand Hells.

King has met with destruction in the domain of another, and the lesson has been studied carefully by all survivors.

In the material world, the power of the Yama Kings ebbs to a fraction of what it is in Yomi. While that's still enough to annihilate all but the greatest ancestors and certain other powerful *shen*, this weakening makes the Yama Kings feel intolerably vulnerable. As a result they enter the Middle Kingdom only for the briefest periods, and then only with a small army of servitors. Most Yama Kings are wise enough to know that charisma, suggestion and etiquette are more effective tools than flagrant displays of magic, violence and steel. The *akuma* in their service, however, may or may not share this outlook.

PROMINENT YAMA KINGS

Described below are some of the more prominent or noteworthy Yama Kings. The existence of most of these beings is known to those who have traveled through or dealt with the Yomi World (or who have at least one dot in Cosmology). The Yama Kings are creatures of ancient lineage and vast power. Any attempt to harm a Yama King made by a lesser being is doomed to failure. Even in the Middle Kingdom, where the Yama Kings are weakest, only the greatest of arhats would possibly be able to best a demon lord, and the arhats know better than to try.

EMMA-O: THE DAIMYO OF THE DARK

Emma-o, the lord of the Kakuri Hell, began his existence before the Japanese invaded the nation they now call home. Originally, Emma-o was a guide of the dead for the Ainu, who lived on the islands now called Japan. Emma-o was revered by the Ainu for his graciousness toward their dead, and shrines and temples to him were ubiquitous. The influx of spiritual energy and belief this worship produced granted Emma-o great power, and it was this power that he used to protect the good and punish the wicked among the Ainu.

That changed around 2000 B.C.E. when the Japanese decimated and subjugated Emma-o's people. Over the centuries, the Ainu way of life vanished. Those few who remain are far from their former glory. As the Ainu's way of life changed, so did Emma-o. He became bitter, cold and harsh. He wished vengeance on those who had destroyed his people and scattered his worshippers. The Japanese gave him that opportunity.

Like many conquering people, the Japanese adopted many traditions from the people they conquered. The Japanese had often seen the Ainu invoke Emma-o's



name to punish the souls of the invaders and had assumed that the spirit was some sort of demonic lord of punishment. Over time, this belief spread and was accepted into Japanese culture. For decades, Emma-o scoffed at this unflattering portrayal, but as more and more Japanese embraced this belief, he found himself becoming exactly that — the Japanese Lord of the Underworld.

Had Emma-o been a spirit from a peacefully integrated native culture, he may have more gracefully accepted his new role in the celestial hierarchy, but his resentment of the Japanese invaders would not abate. He didn't just feel obligated to punish the souls of the Japanese, but rather, he truly *wanted* to do so. Even the souls of the just earned his ire.

Emma-o soon found a huge quantity of souls coming to him. It took very little time for him to carve his own hell from the spirit realms in which to house his treasures, which he ruled with great and majestic cruelty. During this period, the Yomi remained little more than a loose collective of stolen realms bordering one another, and it was relatively easy to metamorphose one domain into another. While doing so resulted in more conflict with other Japanese Yama Kings, it took very little for Emma-o to turn his simple underworld, Soko no Kuni, "the Deep Land," into Kakuri, the dark and icy hell he now rules.

While Emma-o reworked his domain, the Yin realm around Japan was especially crowded. At least two other Yama Kings were vying with Emma-o for control of the dark lands. Most problematic to Emma-o was Pika Don, the ancient grotesque ravager of Japan's ghostlands. The two had clashed repeatedly as Emma-o began taking more and more Japanese souls to Kakuri. Of secondary importance was a new and relatively weak Yama King, called Mikaboshi, whom Emma-o intended to destroy.

For centuries, Emma-o kept a small section of his hell unchanged for the just souls of the Ainu people, but over the course of history, as the Ainu were subsumed by the invaders, Emma-o all but forgot his origins. He fully embraced the ideology and values of the Japanese and then twisted them to best torment the souls that came to his realm. He relished draining the will from the souls imprisoned in Kakuri. Were he able to remember his past, he might even take pleasure in tormenting the souls of those who subjugated his people, but there is little of who he once was left in him.

Emma-o now contemplates the coming of the Sixth Age. In his stronghold, Kyuden no Kakuri, Emma-o summons his most trusted *shikome* to him seven times a week, so that they might serve him behind the great sealed obsidian doors. He orders his *shikome* bind him and flay the skin from his muscle and sever the muscle from his bones with their whips and daggers. In this way does the Daimyo of the Dark allow himself to be punished for his wickedness. On a good night this process is completed within an hour. When the *shikome* are feeling particularly cruel, they can make their lord suffer for up to 20 hours by rationing out his suffering, blow by agonizing blow. It is rumored that when a *shikome* inflicts a particularly inspired agony upon Emma-o, he rewards her with her freedom. Where the *shikome* go when he releases them is unknown.

Emma-o is the archetypal Yin-affected Yama King: cold, calculating and utterly devoid of mercy. He is certain that only one who has subjugated Japan as he has could possibly rule as the Demon Emperor. None of the other Yama Kings have his experience with battle, conquest and conflict, and he knows it. Emma-o's conceit stems from his ancient feelings of moral superiority. Long ago he thought himself above the Japanese because of what he perceived as their corruption and wickedness. Now that he has become that which he once ridiculed, he has forgotten his old honor and only the conceit remains.

Despite Emma-o's icy demeanor, there is an entity that shakes even his preternatural calm. Emma-o has seen some mortals overcome petty tendencies and embrace lives of honor. In most cases, this is just annoying, but in the case of one being it truly disconcerts him. This entity is Jizo-Bosatsu, whose ability to exist comfortably in Kakuri terrifies Emma-o.

THE HONORABLE ONE

Despite the spiritual degradation of Japan and the strengthening of Emma-o's vast power, old and powerful enemies still plague him, even within his own domain. Among those who stand against him are many ageless monks, samurai, *Shih* and *chi'n ta*. Often, their harassment endures even after they have become Kuei-jin or wraiths. These beings have little in common save their desire to redeem Japan from the corruption visited upon it by Emma-o and the other Yama Kings. By far the most renowned of these is Jizo-Bosatsu.

Jizo is an utter enigma to scholars and to Emma-o himself. He is rarely seen in the Middle Kingdom, preferring to wander the desolate landscape of Kakuri, comforting and inspiring those trapped there. A few Kuei-jin, former captives in Kakuri, swear that it was Jizo-Bosatsu who inspired (and empowered) them to return to the mortal world. Some even say that the monk has faced down Emma-o himself, though none (alive) witnessed this confrontation.

The identity of Jizo-Bosatsu is unknown. Some whisper that he's a powerful arhat or a benevolent spirit of honor. Others suggest that he may be the physical manifestation of Emma-o's abandoned Hun. Few even know where to begin to search for the answers. What is known is that those in the Middle Kingdom who follow his example are among Emma-o's most relentless enemies. By adhering to a strict (some say excessive) code of honor, compassion and rightness-of-action, these humble monks embody all traits antithetical to Emma-o, and their very existence is an insult he punishes harshly. It is fortunate for them, then, that they are immune to the charms of the *shikome*.

Emma-o's mode of operations mirrors the trappings of Japanese business. He cares little for immediate results; instead, he is looking for long-term gains that will further his ultimate goal. In the end, he knows the throne of the Demon Emperor will be won by plans made now, not in the final moments before the Sixth Age.

Emma-o himself appears most commonly as an exceedingly tall man with a black beard and eyes that radiate malice. Unless he chooses otherwise, he has no Asian features and is extremely hairy, a remnant of his Ainu heritage. His skin, where it shows through, looks like obsidian and is made of the substance of pure Yin. He occasionally wears a vestment of fine Ainu cloth embroidered with exquisitely rendered scenes of battle, disease and death. He carries a fan or a sword for ornament when the mood takes him.

All of Emma-o's servants are female. Foremost among them are the *shikome*. Many of these Kuei-jin were abused, neglected or forgotten in their mortal years, and now happily serve their master in whom they have found the qualities of a father, lover and lord. He, in turn, shows them respect. The Yama King does not hesitate to punish the incompetent and rebellious, however, and many souls walking the tortured wastes of Kakuri once served him as one of his *shikome*.

MIKABOSHI:

LORD OF THE WICKED CITY

Mikaboshi is a product of his own ambition. He began his days as a philosopher and scholar in Japan, and traveled to China to study in the schools of the nascent Dalou'laoshi. Mikaboshi's mastery of the principles of geomancy and alchemy made him one of the most celebrated scholars of the time, and he was invited to be an advisor in the Chou Dynasty. However, Mikaboshi wanted to rule, not advise, and he returned to Japan vowing to rise to power one way or the other.

The way he eventually chose was infernalism. With his vast knowledge of magic, Mikaboshi ensnared a demon and interrogated it. After pulling all knowledge of Yomi and the spirit worlds from it, Mikaboshi slew the demon, butchered it and distilled the creature's essence into an elixir that granted Mikaboshi access to the cold realms of the dead. When he returned from the Yellow Springs, Mikaboshi used his standing in the court and his skills as a *fang shih*, or geomancer, to have a series of monuments built in the cursed *chueh ming* configuration that amplified and concentrated unhealthy Chi at the center. When the construction ended, Mikaboshi returned to the Yin realm to the center of the *chueh ming* configuration to see what he had wrought. Weeping ghosts stood around him, and he felt the Chi of their suffering flow to him (a result of the demon elixir).

That, however, was only the beginning. Mikaboshi had larger and more complex configurations built to harness corrupt Chi until a visiting artisan of the Dalou'laoshi saw what Mikaboshi was doing and sent word back to the

SHIKOME: THE CHILLING ONES

By trial and error, Emma-o has created a fierce legion of female *akuma* to act as his bodyguards, servants and concubines. He has trained his servants mercilessly until they are the ideal Yin-aspected killers: quiet, emotionless and icily cunning.

Every *shikome* was hand-picked by Emma-o himself and carefully lured into becoming one of his *akuma*. They share many similarities: Each is devastatingly beautiful and utterly sociopathic. Most *shikome* are past masters of the Yin Prana and Bone Shintai Disciplines, though none bears the marks of the *ch'ing shih*.

A *shikome*'s most dangerous ability is her skill at manipulating men. *Shikome* feed on the Willpower of men the way most Kuei-jin feed on Chi. While women automatically despise *shikome* and try to attack them, men will do anything for them, give them anything they desire and die for them in the hopes of a kind glance (which they will never get).

System: When confronted with a *shikome*, male characters roll their Willpower against the *shikome*'s Appearance + Manipulation (difficulty 8 for both). If the *shikome* has more successes, the character loses one Willpower for every success achieved by the *shikome* above the number of his successes. This roll is made each round until the character reaches zero Willpower, at which point the *shikome* asks the character to commit some foul deed in the name of Emma-o. One *shikome* has found her way into infamy by asking Kuei-jin so charmed to go "watch the sun rise for me."

Female characters roll their Hun against the *shikome*'s Appearance + Manipulation (difficulty 8 for both). If the character gets more successes, she retains her composure, but if the *shikome* gets more successes, the character attacks immediately with her most dangerous weapon or Discipline. The *shikome* will initially ask male characters to protect her. Failing that, she will proceed to use her martial prowess to send another soul screaming into Yomi.

At Storyteller discretion, gender reactions can be reversed based on character preference.

school. Mikaboshi's configurations were torn down, and he fled to the Yin realm where power was plentiful for him. He built configurations in the Yin world to channel torment from the mortal world directly to him, but unable to harness the power that flooded through those channels, Mikaboshi grew grossly fat.

The early geomantic configurations Mikaboshi built quickly grew into a town built on principles of disharmony. As more souls were pulled in, the town became a city, and Mikaboshi attained a level of power that put him on par with the weaker Yama Kings. It was then that Pika Don and Emma-o took notice of him. Pika

Don, the ancient and cunning monstrosity that stalked and ravaged the souls of the dead proved to be relatively easy to appease with occasional sacrifices of souls and Chi, but Emma-o was spiteful and attacked Mikaboshi with legions of *shikome* at every opportunity. The bizarre flow of Chi around the Wicked City, however, insured that whatever the invading *shikome* did, it was always plagued by disharmony and bad joss.

For centuries, Mikaboshi fought off the depredations of Emma-o. The souls caught between the two Yama Kings were in agony regardless of whose hell they were in, but that mattered little to their overlords. Certain border provinces changed hands between Kakuri and the Wicked City over 500 times. All omens pointed to Emma-o destroying the Wicked City, until the arrival of the powers of the West and the technology they brought with them. Mikaboshi's quick-witted use of artifact and relic weapons and technology shifted the balance of power, perhaps decisively.

Almost solely due to his quick adaptation to technology and the opportunities it presented, Mikaboshi now ranks among the most powerful of the Yama Kings. Two centuries ago he was warring with Emma-o and losing territory almost daily. The Wicked City now exceeds Kakuri in souls, and many expect him to ascend to the throne of the Demon Emperor when the Sixth Age thunders in.



There has never been a moment when Mikaboshi did not want more than he had, and this is still true. There are those who say that Mikaboshi's ambition is both his greatest strength and his most glaring weakness. A hunger for power has pushed the lord of the Wicked City to rash acts of brilliance that have surprised his rivals and gained him a great deal in a very short span of time. Regrettably, his tendency to focus on his own great schemes has often blinded him to the manipulations of others. He has been outwitted before in this way, although those who do so inevitably wind up as the object of his machinations. Only Emma-o has ever survived his direct attentions.

Mikaboshi is obsessed with becoming the Demon Emperor. To accomplish this he seeks to expand his holdings in the Yomi World and the Middle Kingdom. Each day he spreads urban blight and decay like a seine to pull in more souls to his domain. He has no interest in thwarting his fellow Yama Kings; Mikaboshi prefers simply to make his power base so monolithic that he cannot be defeated. He knows that once he has taken control of the Sixth Age, he will need skilled servants, so he sees no reason to destroy his rivals now. In the meantime, he entertains himself with games and pastimes that shame the worst excesses of mortal powermongers.

Mikaboshi is rarely seen outside his tower in the Wicked City. Those few who have ventured there, or who have seen him elsewhere, claim that he is a grotesquely fat and pallid creature supported by a complex techno-organic structure. This exo-skeleton is often seen suspended from the ceiling or carried about by swarms of cyborg slaves. These servants are typically lashed to the lord's technological carriage by cables that coil around their necks and into their skulls. Disobedience or incompetence results in direct electrical stimulation of the pain centers of the brain. Mikaboshi's cybernetic form boasts an array of weapons and implants. These devices can change at the lord's whim, though the Lord of the Wicked City seems to have a fondness for tentaclelike devices that end in a variety of ripping and injecting instruments.

Some *akuma* claim to have seen Mikaboshi in a completely different guise. In these cases, the witnesses claim that the Yama King appeared as a Japanese man with mechanical hands, dressed in a finely tailored suit. It is rumored that this is how he dresses when he finds it necessary to take care of business in the Middle Kingdom personally, something he does with a frequency that disturbs the other Yama Kings.

The sheer number and adaptability of Mikaboshi's servants serve as a true testament to his tactical brilliance. The Lord of the Wicked City scrutinizes his followers with the eye of an architect (or a high-level manager), making sure that the correct minions go to work where they are most effective. The end result is an infernal hierarchy that is greater than the sum of its parts. If one of those parts becomes ineffectual or compromised, it is replaced. In Mikaboshi's view, all cogs are equally replaceable; those willing to give everything to their dark manager achieve upward mobility, while those who are weak remain at the

bottom where they are inevitably crushed by the great iron wheel of Mikaboshi's advancement engine.

The organization of Mikaboshi's legions is part corporate empire and part feudal court. Powerful *akuma* organize and direct his operations. He has Kuei-jin agents to infiltrate the courts, Kumo spies to bring him information, and bakemono thugs to enforce his will. More than any other Yama King, Mikaboshi employs Lightning People, and through them he manipulates the stock exchange to protect his holdings in the Middle Kingdom and devastate those of his rivals. Mikaboshi's minions are distinct from other Japanese corporate businessmen only in that few businessmen literally consume the living flesh of their rivals and strive to corrupt the natural balance. Only malice takes precedence over profit, and then only on special occasions.

The Lord of the Wicked City also uses mortals with an effectiveness that the other Yama Kings envy. Yakuza enforcers, corporate raiders and government officials all labor, sometimes unknowingly, to expand the source of his power — the cities of the East and the corruption that breeds there.

RAVANA: RAJAH OF DEMONS

In the ruined hell of Lanka can be found Ravana, the devastated lord. At one time this Yama King was the most feared and powerful of all the Yang-aspected lords of Yomi. His minions, the shapechanging *rakshas*, were fierce creatures who terrorized demon and man alike.

Then Ravana, with his vile love of desecrating glades and temples, so enraged the powers who served the Green Mother — even beyond the other Yama Kings — that they sent a clever *hengeyokai* named Hanuman to teach Ravana humility. The Kitsune and the Nuwisha both claim Hanuman as one of their own, though the legends suggest that Hanuman was a monkey. With masterful stealth, Hanuman infiltrated Lanka and, using Gifts given to him specifically to punish Ravana, he engulfed the whole island in cleansing fire. The island screamed, the ministries of pain collapsed, and the island bucked in agony as the walls of its buildings burned and crumbled. The strong Yang imbalance of Lanka made it want to burn, and so most of it did. Only the center of the island, the land beneath Ravana's palace and the unholy temple where sacrifices were made to the island itself, still show any signs of life.

Now, Ravana's kingdom, once a foul example of hellish efficiency, crumbles around him. The carefully planned ministries of torment remain charred and unused. No souls come to Lanka from the Middle Kingdom, only refugees from other domains. Some of these creatures do not realize they are in still hell at all, and are trying to establish courts, the better to clean and repair the sprawling dead city. Ravana himself, meanwhile, remains hidden in his pulsating demon keep, pondering what new horrors he might reap the greatest benefit from. He thinks he's finally arrived at one.

Ravana was once the most arrogant and selfish of all the Yama Kings. He truly believed that no being could surpass him in power, intellect or cruelty. This arrogance made him

very dangerous, but also very predictable. All who knew the Yama King knew how easy he was to manipulate, flatter and enrage. This predictability led to his downfall.

Since his ruin, Ravana has himself undergone a transformation. On the surface, he appears brooding, self-destructive and hopeless. He refuses to leave his keep. Those who have seen him describe him as a sulking child lacking the ambition or power to succeed. This was true for the first days after the harrowing of his hell, but fear of the ultimate failure has brought out a new and more dangerous Ravana, more subtle and not so prone to manipulation. He has no qualms about doing anything it takes to win the throne of the Demon Emperor. The *rakshas*, many half-mad themselves from watching their realm burn around them, whisper that Ravana must be mad to do what he's attempting, because only Shau-yar Han attempted anything like it, and he was brought down by the combined might of every other Yama King. Not a one dares question their master, though. Their fear of him is still that strong.

All of Ravana's intrigues are part of his master plan. None who learn the true details of his scheme survive to tell it; even his trusted servitors are expendable if they probe too closely to the truth. Those who dare to delve at his schemes find that while the *rakshas* are not as numerous as they once were, they are still exceedingly deadly.

Ravana is a master of infinite forms. Unlike so many of his fellow Yama Kings, who seem to prefer a few select shapes, Ravana's visage is always in flux. He may even shift several times over the course of a conversation. The only constants in all of Ravana's forms are his monstrosity and terrible power.



IN RIGHTEOUS FIRE...

On May 12, 1998, India tested its first nuclear weapon. The political and military ramifications were felt all over the world. Within days, Pakistan, Iran and many other nations hinted that they too might be forced to "go nuclear" as a result of India's bold statement.

India now makes many of the currently nuclear-capable nations nervous. The United States was at the forefront of condemning India's current tactics, but nearby China would seem to have more cause to worry.

And that's precisely the way Ravana wants it.

Since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, most Yama Kings have pondered the potential of nuclear war. Over time, most of the Yama Kings have decided that too little would remain of the spirit world to warrant the effort. Most souls destroyed by such weapons are so tainted as to be useless, even to a Yama King. And so they have looked elsewhere for their power.

Ravana has not. He believes he knows how to harvest the souls of the nuclear dead. Better yet, if the nuclear exchange is large enough, he believes he could rip up the devastated dragon lines of the surrounding countries and channel them directly into his ruined hell. So, while Ravana rocks and mutters to himself in his writhing demon keep, his loyal *rakshas* assume the guises of Indian, Pakistani and Chinese generals and nuclear officials. And all of them say the same thing, chanting it like a mantra: "We must not back down."

Whatever the case, when the Sixth Age arrives, if Ravana has his way, it is likely to be ushered in with a very loud bang.

RAKSHAS: THOSE WHO CHANGE

Ravana saw the mighty *hengeyokai* as a work to be improved upon. If those creatures were so powerful, with only animal and human forms to alternate between, how much more powerful would be creatures that could assume the form of any creature? To this end he created the infinitely malleable *rakshas*.

True *rakshas* are spirits of nature tainted by the corrupting powers of Lanka. They are able to assume the shapes of all creatures and all shapes between any two animals. Clearly, the *rakshas* are powerful warriors, and because they can also perfectly mimic mortals, Ravana uses them as spies, and in that role they are insidious and devastating.

SERVITORS

Ravana's favored warriors and spies are his *rakshas*. Most *rakshas* are *hengeyokai* who have been terribly transformed by the taint of Lanka. These he chooses because their flesh and spirit are inured to the rigors of transformation. The favored among the *raksha* also possess a number of other powers, often control of fire or storms, making them truly dangerous foes.

Alternatively, Ravana may use *akuma* with knowledge of the shifting arts, though such beings are not considered *rakshas*. These lesser creatures possess the Flesh Shintai Discipline, and all have an especially bestial Demon Shintai form.

Though their master may no longer be so feared as others of the Yama Kings, the *rakshas* are perhaps the most dangerous servitors used by any of the demon lords. Their infinite adaptability makes them resilient and nearly impossible to destroy. Every year Ravana remains hidden in his demon keep, plotting and plotting, more *rakshas* make their way from Lanka to partake of the power and pleasures of the Middle Kingdom themselves. Whether they will return to Lanka if Ravana calls them is a matter of some debate.

RANGDA: THE PESTILENTIAL QUEEN

Rangda is the Yama Queen who draws power and sustenance from those sinners who have met ill ends from disease. She is present wherever plagues and cancers ravage the Middle Kingdom. Her powers have waxed and waned over the years, but she is always there to strip the souls from those bodies that have been brought down by pestilence.

Rangda is the least arrogant of the Yama Kings. Neither haughty nor greedy, Rangda feels that disease and slow death should be available to all, rich or poor, city- and country-dweller alike. To this end she is the most egalitarian of the Yama Kings. She wants only that all living beings fall under her sway and die after enduring as much agony as possible. She despises the healthy, as they are an affront to her, but she loves the sick with an intensity and literalness that even the other Yama Kings find disturbing.

This Yama Queen's chief goal is simple: she wishes to spread plague and pestilence across the Middle Kingdom so that she can drink in the energy of the multitudes of dying souls. The creative ways she works toward these goals bear close attention. Rangda has agents throughout the East who prevent health education or the regulation (or even acknowledgment) of prostitution in order to increase the spread of diseases like AIDS, hepatitis and syphilis. She also impedes research into vaccines or cures that might slow the spread of her power.

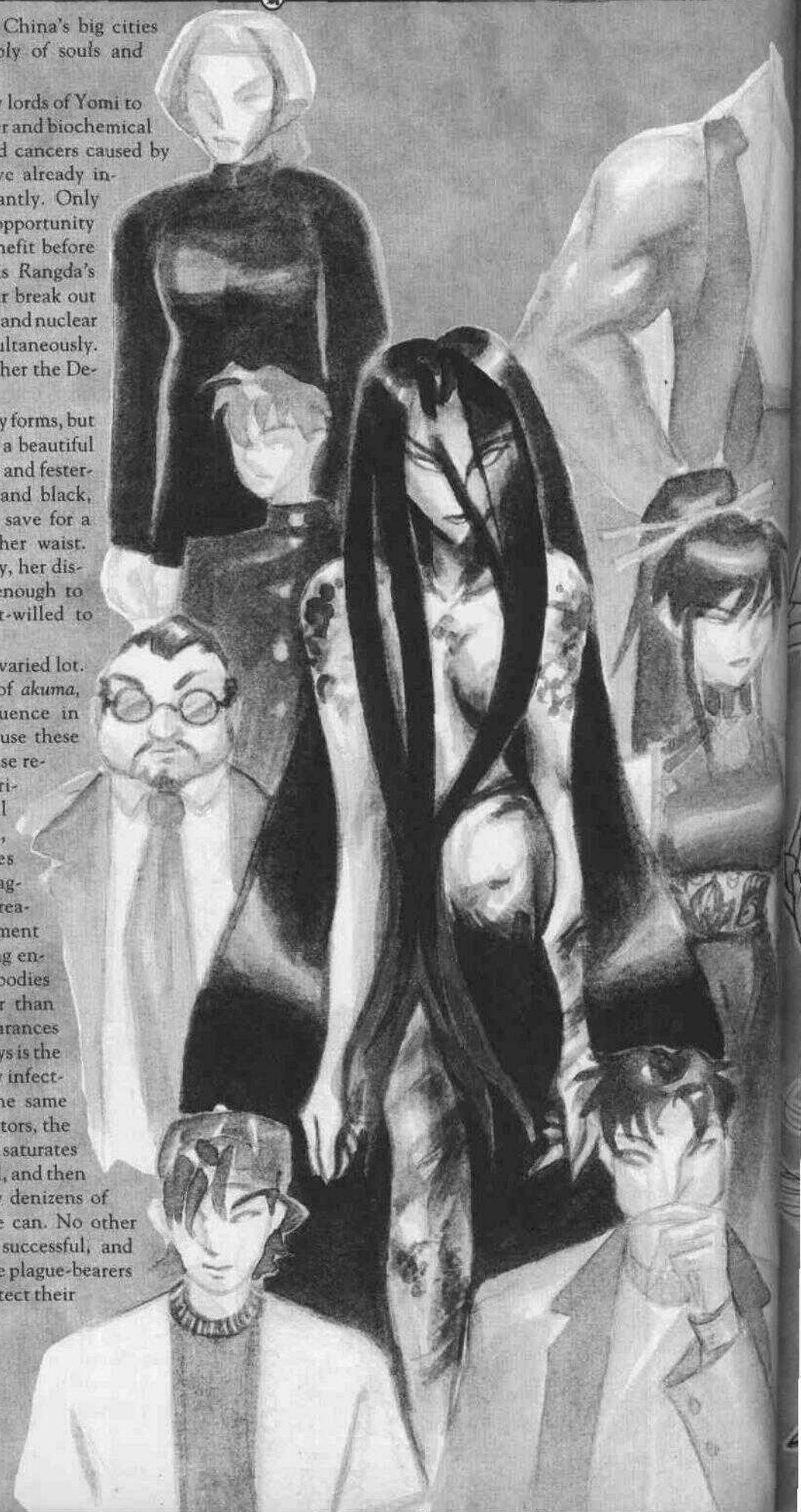
Thailand is currently Rangda's favorite nation. With over half the country infected with HIV, Thailand is a time bomb that will begin going off very soon, and when it does, she expects the flood of souls rushing into her domain to allow her to vie quite aggressively for the position of Demon Empress. Rangda has recently also begun claiming the souls of sinners who come to her after dying of cancer and the other strange ailments caused by exposure to toxic wastes.

The acrid and sooty air of China's big cities brings her a constant supply of souls and fouled Chi in this way.

Rangda is one of the few lords of Yomi to take interest in nuclear power and biochemical warfare. The poisonings and cancers caused by these new technologies have already increased her power significantly. Only time will tell if she has the opportunity to use these tools to her benefit before the Sixth Age arrives. It is Rangda's fondest wish that a large war break out wherein biological, chemical and nuclear weapons are all utilized simultaneously. Such an event would assure her the Demon Throne.

Rangda can assume many forms, but her favorite shape is that of a beautiful woman covered with lesions and festering sores. Her hair is long and black, and her body is unclothed, save for a tattered loincloth around her waist. While her features are lovely, her disease-ridden appearance is enough to move all but the strongest-willed to outright revulsion.

Rangda's servants are a varied lot. She makes occasional use of *akuma*, especially those with influence in health care. She prefers to use these quiet agents to subvert disease research and expedite experimentation with biological warfare. For less subtle work, Rangda employs creatures spawned from the hellish maggots of her realm. These creatures are the living embodiment of disease, full of raging Yang energy, and their soft white bodies spread rot and decay better than any other agent. Their appearances vary, but their function always is the same: to serve their queen by infecting those around them. The same holds true for her other servitors, the plague zombies, whom she saturates with disease, makes beautiful, and then sends out to infect as many denizens of the Middle Kingdom as she can. No other agents of Rangda's are as successful, and Kuei-jin seek to destroy these plague-bearers when they can, if only to protect their living descendants.



TOU MU: THE IRON EMPRESS

The Kuei-jin have an enemy in Yomi more terrible than any other, and her name is Tou Mu. While the other Yama Kings see the vampires of the Middle Kingdom as tools and vanquished foes, the Iron Empress has not forgotten the effrontery of the Wan Xian, and the Kuei-jin bear her wrath as a result.

Tou Mu is among the most malicious of the Yama Kings, and it is this hatefulness that has brought her so near the throne of the Demon Emperor. The Iron Empress is by far the best-known Yama Queen, perhaps because unlike other Yama Kings who spread evil in a myriad of guises, Tou Mu always appears the same way: as a woman in elaborate iron armor complete with horned mask and talonlike gauntlets on each of her 18 arms. Her long black hair flows out from behind the steely mask, the one human touch she allows herself.

Tou Mu was created by the Scarlet Queen and the Ebon Dragon as a devil to punish the arrogant and unmerciful. Such a mandate became ironic once Tou Mu had her first taste of corrupt Chi, however, as she soon surpassed any of her victims in pride and cruelty. Tempting mortals into atrocities became an art form to Tou Mu. She mapped the territories of hatred, greed and lust in the human heart, and welcomed soul after soul to her hell after leading them into chains of violent events that they could never have foreseen. In this way, Tou Mu became one of the most powerful Yama Kings early on.

And then the Wan Xian were created. The Ten Thousand Immortals were brought to life by the August Personage as guardians of the Middle Kingdom, and granted tremendous enlightenment to protect their charges. With the arrival of the Wan Xian,



THE IRON PANOPLY

The infamous iron panoply of Tou Mu does much, much more than simply shield the Iron Empress from the abrading winds of her domain. It frequently shows signs of sentience, moving of its own accord on occasion to protect the Yama Queen from threats she had not sensed. It produces a formidable array of weaponry from its own dark substance, including spinning blades, iron chains terminating in hooks, shuriken, drill bits and metal tentacles. Some believe it to be an independent demonic entity bound to Tou Mu in some way, while others have suggested the inverse. It was a gift, some say, from the Outer Ones. Regardless of its nature, the armor constantly shifts according to Tou Mu's wishes. When she is meeting with Those Outside, it appears sinewy and techno-organic; alternatively, if she is in the midst of battle, it appears coarser, like the crudest work of a primitive blacksmith.

The panoply retains certain features at all times. It is never any color other than dark iron gray, there is never a mouth slit, and the crown of horns, three eye slits and sharp, barbed talons on her gauntlets all remain as signatures of this Yama Queen. It is very important to Tou Mu that she be recognized for who and what she is at all times, and woe unto those who impersonate her.

the schemes of the Yama Kings tore apart like poorly woven silk.

The Iron Empress watched in fury as her dupes were exposed and her servitors slain. When she tried to punish the Grand Wan Xian Lei-Tsu, he called an army of Wan Xian to his side and slew Tou Mu's avatar. Of all the Yama Kings, Tou Mu clearly suffered the most at the hands of the noble Wan Xian. It was decades before she was able to trick Lei-Tsu and his forces into the Hell of Being Skinned Alive, where she abraded their bodies away and remade them a thousand times in order that they might begin to understand the extent of her displeasure.

For a lengthy time during the Third Age, Tou Mu abandoned the way of the temptress and mostly left the Middle Kingdom alone. Her attentions were captured by the dark things that lurked beyond the boundaries of the Yang realm. She is still known to parlay with them, though what goals she may be pursuing by doing so remain unknown.

When the Fourth Age arrived, the Iron Empress was again able to revel in scheming, against both the Middle Kingdom and her fellow Yama Kings. It was she who placed the ideas about the Outer Ones into Shau-yar Han's mind that led him to madness and destruction.

The Fifth Age has almost been too easy for Tou Mu. There are, it seems, none who will not do her bidding for a little gift or favor. The last century in China alone has seen

enough butchery and oppression to push her relentlessly toward the throne of the Demon Emperor, a destiny she hopes to seize before the next century is out.

Tou Mu's three serpentine eyes glare, unblinking, from beneath her iron mask. At the end of her 18 gauntleted arms, each of her talons holds something deadly, foul or wondrous: a dragon's head belching fire, an ancient scroll, a lotus blossom, a baby's head, a black pennant leaking the taint of Oblivion.... Most of these items are artifacts of great power that Tou Mu has collected to strengthen her grip on Yomi. Wielded in concert, they make her effectively invulnerable, even outside the Hell of Being Skinned Alive. Little unsettles the other Yama Kings like beholding Tou Mu in full battle regalia, but they have yet to unite against her in order to prevent her from ascending to the Demon Throne.

Tou Mu is the only Yama Queen who refuses to use any *akuma* as servants; even corrupt Wan Xian are repulsive to her. Most of Tou Mu's servants are gigantic, warped beasts capable of enduring the relentlessly hostile environment of her hell. The most durable of these are the enormous sand tortoises. Resembling a cross between a rhinoceros and an ankylosaurus, these creatures are the size of a four-story building and hibernate beneath the cutting sands of Tou Mu's hell. When they sense prey or when Tou Mu calls them, they rise out of the sand like trapdoor spiders.

Tou Mu has no aversion to using *bakemono* and corrupt *hengeyokai* on occasion as well, but her favorite pawns are mortals, because they ask for less and their actions inevitably lead to the greatest suffering and horror.

YEN-LO: FIRST OF THE FALLEN

Though not all believe the legend that Yen-Lo was the first of the Yama Kings to learn how to distill the Chi out of suffering, few contest that he was the first of all the lords of Yomi to fall prey to his rivals.

The August Personage of Jade created Yen-Lo as a powerful spirit of balance, giving him control of the energies of both Yin and Yang. Yen-Lo was an exacting yet fair ruler of his domains, and even those who despised him admitted that there was a twisted honor to his actions. When it came time to punish imbalance, he insured that the punishment was appropriate to the transgression, and he never used cruelty excessively. In the rare instances when a soul came to him without true wickedness, he would guide it from his realms. If these spirits were yanked into the hell of one of his cohorts, he would never acknowledge the fact. Yen-Lo likewise opposed the machinations of the other Yama Kings when they sought to corrupt and steal more spirit realms. Such action, he said, fell well outside their duties under Heaven.

As a minister of the August Personage of Jade, Yen-Lo was ordered by that entity to create a realm of just punishment for the dead, that they might learn lessons before their next incarnation. In a sense, Yen-Lo was the ruler of the first small realm around which the rest of Yomi later grew. He was perhaps the most ancient of the lords of the Yomi realm, and he later allowed other beings of great power to create their own realms of punishment when the number of wicked

souls became too great for him alone. He did not take note of where these spiritual realms originated, and when the other Yama Kings grew fat on the souls and corruption that they harvested, Yen-Lo refused to acknowledge their unrightness of action while keeping sight of his own sense of duty. He always comported himself, first and foremost, as a servant of Heaven. The Wan Xian never had need to correct Yen-Lo; his actions were never anything but just.

Inevitably, it was Yen-Lo's sense of honor that left him vulnerable to the schemes of his fellow Yama Kings. Where Yen-Lo saw himself as a servant of the karmic balance, his fellow lords of Yomi saw him as a fool and an obstruction to their quest for more power. Despite their differences, the other Yama Kings all agreed that without Yen-Lo's obstinate adherence to outmoded ideals of honor, all of their realms could be flooded with the wicked souls of those they corrupted.

It is written that Emma-o planned the assault on Yen-Lo's palace. Rangda herself, still beautiful then, swept into Yen-Lo's domain bringing with her enormous hillocks of hungry maggots and an agonizing pox on the souls who existed there. Emma-o himself ambushed Yen-Lo and slew the Yama King and his registrar, P'an Kun, with a blade of pure Yin.

Emma-o expected, as Rangda herded Yen-Lo's dead to her Hell of Burrowing Maggots, that the power of the newly conquered realm would fall to him, as van-

quisher of the domain's former lord. Instead, the full power of Yen-Lo, minister of Heaven, guardian of balance and karmic punisher, fell, as he had intended, onto the soul of a wise woman and Buddhist saint, Ama Odashu, the soul of righteousness. Emma-o was immediately stricken as the realm itself assaulted him and sucked the ichor from his veins. Rangda's own maggots turned on her, consuming the substance of her body and returning her power, cleansed, to the realm beneath her. Both were nearly destroyed before escaping to their own domains.

In an act never seen before or since, Ama Odashu forged a wall of scars around her domain through which other Yama Kings can neither pass nor see nor s cry. Into this realm, located at the very heart of Yomi, are drawn the spirits of the truly compassionate and who might otherwise languish elsewhere in Yomi. Emma-o wants desperately to become the Demon Emperor so that he can crack this realm open and devour its contents like an egg.

The torments he has planned for Ama Odashu will be legendary, even in the bloody Sixth Age.

Yen-Lo was the epitome of cold, impartial justice. He cared nothing for the souls of those he punished, nor did he relish their suffering in his domain. He was neither merciful nor cruel. No amount of pleading ever swayed his judgment. Yen-Lo cared only for the greater purpose he served as a minister of Heaven. He revered the principle of balance and saw that his goal was achieved even in his destruction.

Yen-Lo appeared most often as an elderly jade-skinned Chinese man. In this form, his eyes blazed with the fires of Hell, and his gaze could strip away all illusion and deception. Regardless of his form, his attire was always that of a magistrate. Portraits and



other representations of the vanquished Yen-Lo can still be found in the oddest places within Yomi, perhaps as reminders to the other Yama Kings that they, too are vulnerable.

THE WANDERING OVERLORD

Among Yomi's enigmas, the Wandering Overlord is one of its greatest, even to his fellow Yama Kings. He holds no domain, he has no servitors, and he seems equally at home in Yomi and in the Middle Kingdom. None of the horrific conditions of the Thousand Hells seem to affect him, and none of the Yama Kings has ever bested him in any way.

The greatest question concerning the Wandering Overlord is not who he is, but rather what he is. Unlike his fellows, he appears to have no interest in gathering souls. Since the harvesting of souls and corrupted Chi is at the heart of the Yama Kings' power, the question exists of from where the Overlord draws his strength. No one knows, though speculation is rampant throughout Yomi.

Some have suggested that the Wandering Overlord is Yama — Death — himself. If the Wandering Overlord is in fact Yama, then it is possible that all souls that have ever died have paid him some manner of spiritual tithe. This would certainly explain the source of his power. Most scoff at this legend, however. The Yama Kings are masters of all manner of ripping Chi from spirits, and surely they would know if anything in their domain were being bled for power by some other entity.

Another explanation that nettles the other Yama Kings is the notion that the Wandering Overlord is the Demon Emperor himself. Those who believe this fall into two distinct camps. The first believe that the position of Demon Emperor is a predestined one and that the Yama Kings are fooling themselves by trying to alter that which has already been determined. If this is true, then this being need only continue his existence to insure that he will rule in the Sixth Age. The second interpretation of this possibility is that the Overlord is the Demon Emperor in the Sixth Age, returning to the past to either prevent some future calamity or to ensure that his reign comes to pass. Only time will tell if either of these theories holds any truth. If the Overlord is the Demon Emperor, then he has no need to harvest souls. All that dwell within Yomi are his already.

Old and scholarly ghosts and Kuei-jin of a spiritual bent have another theory about the Wandering Overlord that derives from the fact that these creatures must constantly fight against their own dark natures. They reason that perhaps the Overlord is the manifestation of the P'o of some great arhat or powerful ghost. It has been speculated at one time or another that the Wandering Overlord could be the P'o of the Scarlet Queen, the Grand Arhat Xue, or perhaps the August Personage of Jade himself. If this is true, then the Wandering Overlord would be as wicked and terrifying as his counterpart is pure and enlightened. As with the other theories there is no proof, only speculation.

Whatever the Wandering Overlord may be, it is known that he exists. Too many beings have encountered him for his existence to be passed off as legend. Though none may know if he is associated with the powers of Yin or Yang,

Heaven or Yomi, he is definitely real, and portents suggest that his presence is never accidental, but always part of a horrible and intricate design.

The Wandering Overlord is like the eye in the center of a hurricane. Wherever he goes, corruption and strife follow, but he remains untouched and unmoved by anything. In the 20th century the Wandering Overlord has been known to smile precisely three times: once when China invaded Tibet and once when each atomic bomb was detonated over Japan.

The goals of the Wandering Overlord are unknown. At times he aids those in need for no discernible reason. On other occasions he manipulates events in such a way that thousands suffer. He offers no explanation for his actions and the other Yama Kings, perhaps afraid of the response, have never asked for one.

The Wandering Overlord has no set form; she has appeared female and male, old and young, human and otherwise. The forms chosen by the Wandering Overlord are suited to those he's dealing with. To a child he appears as another child or a trusted adult. To Kuei-jin he may appear as a helpless mortal or an honored ancestor. At times she has manifested as a gust of wind or a whisper.

The Wandering Overlord has no regular servants. He manipulates others into serving him, but they rarely realize whose bidding they do. Even the most virtuous souls have found that they have acted on the Wandering Overlord's behalf.

HABA NO FUKAMI: THE EMPRESS OF PEARLS

Haha no Fukami was not among the original Yama Kings, and some would say she is still not corrupt enough to stand among them. Only her dominion over one of the Thousand Hells puts her in such company. Haha no Fukami was the primal ocean mother at the end of the First Age, and only when the August Personage of Jade requested that she become the punisher of crimes against the oceans and crimes using fire or water was her celestial station changed.

Her name translates as the Mother of the Depths, and while her domain, the Hell of the Seven Burning Seas is not particularly influential in Yomi, this Yama Queen has terrifying cults throughout Micronesia and New Guinea. Her elemental nature gives her tremendous powers over oceans and the volcanic fires of the South Pacific.

The Empress of Pearls is unlike the other Yama Kings in that she still acknowledges her role under Heaven as a punisher of wrong action. The root of her power is oceanic and volcanic; the power she pulls from suffering souls is negligible. She does not seek out the souls of the innocent, although if they find their way to her hell of their own accord, she accepts the tribute of their pain.

Like most Yang-aspected Yama Kings, Haha no Fukami revels in changing her form. The forms she adopts most frequently are those of a salamander with a woman's legs, arms and breasts, and a gargantuan devil-shark.

Most numerous among Haha no Fukami's minions are the vast cults spread throughout the islands of the Middle

Kingdom. Hedge magicians observe her ancient rites and reap the benefits of her favor. Entire small islands in Micronesia are controlled by her cultists, and while not evil *per se*, these mortals understand the occasional necessity of sacrifice. The magics of these sorcerers and the bizarre abilities of her few *akuma* have created a whispered legend known to any who spend time on the islands. The blasphemous and bizarre nature of these rumors

makes the proper courts of the Quincunx detest the Kuei-jin of the Gold Courts all the more.

Few *akuma* serve the Mother of the Depths. Even devils like the corrupted Kuei-jin tend to shun things that make no pretense of humanity. More significant is the fact that Haha no Fukami feels herself to be a punisher, not a corrupter, and as such she has no need to offer power to Kuei-jin in exchange for their servitude.

What few Kuei-jin she uses are drawn from the islands and coastlines of the Middle Kingdom and have powers that allow them to function effectively in environments of water and flame.

OTHER LORDS OF YOMI

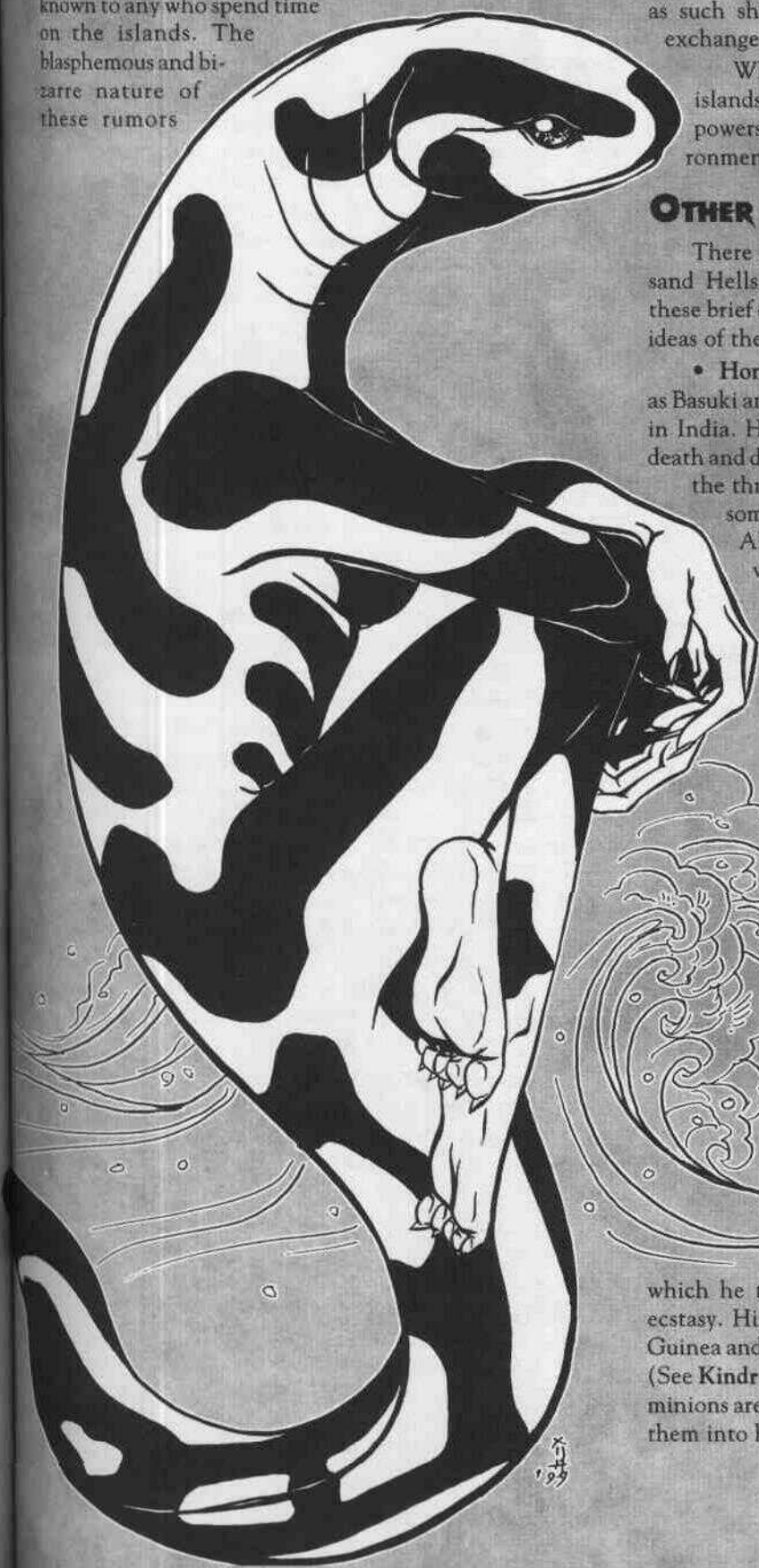
There are other Yama Kings to be found in the Thousand Hells. Storytellers are encouraged to expand upon these brief descriptions here or use these devils as a basis for ideas of their own (See page 72).

- **Honoyeta** This Polynesian serpent deity is also known as Basuki among the Balinese, and as Kaliya or Naga Pahoda in India. Honoyeta is a spirit of corrupt Yang energies of death and disease. Honoyeta knows that he will never rise to the throne of the Demon Emperor, but his friendly — some say sycophantic — relations with the Maeljin Aliara give him other options. Honoyeta favors venomous snakes as the agents of his power and servitors. While he constantly tries to corrupt Nagah to his cause, he has succeeded only a handful of times, and those he tainted were destroyed by their fellows after only a short period of service.

- **Hine-Nui-Te-Po:** This Yin-aspected Yama Queen is among the weakest of the lords who rule in Yomi. She manifests as a cloud of darkness and feeds on feelings of self-loathing. Souls falling to despair and suicide in the Pacific Islands plunge into her domain of icy seas. Her rare and fanatical *akuma* primarily skulk along the far edges of the Golden Court.

- **Malaveyovo** Originally assigned by Heaven to watch over the souls of those who died of hunger, this devil was quick to abandon his duties for the lure of power. Another of the Yama Kings vying for control of the Golden Court, Malaveyovo governs a small domain in Yomi. By afflicting his followers with an insatiable hunger, he drives them to cannibalism

which he then rewards with sensations of euphoria and ecstasy. His cult is strongest in Northern Australia, New Guinea and in Cambodia where the brutal Toc Faan wizards (See *Kindred of the East*, p. 207) worship him. His favored minions are the Same-Bito, and he constantly strives to lure them into his service.



THOSE WHO SERVE: AKUMA

Akuma are vampires who, out of laziness, weakness, stupidity or greed, have grown tired of the slow progression along their Dharmic paths and chosen quick power over lasting enlightenment. The cost of this act is, of course, the Kuei-jin's soul and an eternity in servitude. By making a pact with a Yama King, the fallen Kuei-jin gives up any progress she has made along her Dharmic path and is kept from becoming *chih-mei* only by the favor of the Yama King she serves. Thenceforth, so long as the Kuei-jin is in the service of infernal powers (and escaping servitude to the Yama Kings is nearly impossible), she is entirely incapable of continuing along any Dharmic path. Being a lackey to the infernal is antithetical to true enlightenment.

While the rulers of Yomi are on a constant quest for more servitors, the Yama Kings won't accept just any weak-willed Kuei-jin who petitions them. They have already met their quota of half-witted knuckle-dragging muscle goons — that's what *bakemono* are for. Just because a vampire has been cast out of Kuei-jin society does not mean that the Yama Kings are obligated to invest him with infernal power. An overly persistent but lousy candidate is often promised great power upon the achievement of a mission that the Yama King knows to be suicidal, just to get him out of the way.

Most would-be *akuma* bargain with the Yama Kings out of a hunger for power. Others are tricked into servitude. Regardless of how a Kuei-jin becomes *akuma*, he quickly finds that he has traded away his freedom for the privilege of being a tool. While he may be a slave with some degree of power, he is still taunted with the knowledge that he has given up freedom and the pursuit of his own enlightenment for a small taste of his master's might.

If the favor he seeks is minor, a Kuei-jin can enter into temporary servitude to a Yama King. Under these circumstances, most Yama Kings are likely to behave quite honorably and give the Kuei-jin the better of the bargain as a way of enticing the vampire into a more permanent arrangement. Yama Kings have even been known to grant favors in exchange for "some action to be named at a later date, if ever." These arrangements can be the most dangerous for the Kuei-jin, because if the vampire doesn't like the favor when it is asked of him, the Yama King may consider that a violation of the terms of the agreement and take the soul of the vampire directly back to Yomi. Many Kuei-jin have also performed a deed for a Yama King out of (perceived) necessity, only to be branded *akuma* decades or even centuries after the period of service is ended, and the Yama Kings are not above blackmail. On the whole, however, temporary service to the infernal, despite its perils, is still preferable to the full *akuma* pact.

Entering the service of a Yama King as an *akuma* is surprisingly difficult. Just contacting the Yama Kings is a challenge in and of itself. Once the initial contact has been made, however the Yama King chooses to do so, a representative of the Yama King interrogates the Kuei-jin regarding her reasons for wanting to serve the forces of Hell. If her answer is even vaguely plausible, the representative gives the applicant the contract to sign (in blood, of course), and at that point the Kuei-jin is required to swear eternal fealty to her new demon master. The

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Yama King then rips away a portion of the Kuei-jin's soul and places it in a piece of jade, often a bracelet or small statue with the vampire's name written on it, and the jade repository is sent to the Yama King's domain for "safe keeping." The final step in becoming *akuma* is a vitriolic renunciation of the Kuei-jin's former Dharma. Every truth discovered on that path must be logically and enthusiastically undermined and dispensed with by the vampire as her first official act of fealty to the Yama King. Then, and only then, with a portion of the new *akuma*'s soul safe in Yomi and the *akuma* herself a half-step from becoming *chih-mei*, the Yama King rebuilds the helpless vampire by imbuing her with some small fraction of his power. To reinforce their dominance, Yama Kings typically choose whichever method of investment the recipient finds most loathsome and invasive, from breathing a thick, black liquid down the throat of the new *akuma* to forcing her to pluck and eat one of the Yama King's eyes. Anything goes, and tentacles are often involved.

The powers granted to *akuma* vary from Yama King to Yama King. Most common among these are abilities that mimic standard Kuei-jin Disciplines. These gifts must be granted to the *akuma* by the Yama King he serves, since *akuma*, having no degree of enlightenment, have no ability to use Disciplines. The Yomi Lords also commonly grant their vassals use of the Discipline of Hellweaving for use in their work as corrupters and agents of the infernal (A detailed description of the Hellweaving Discipline can be found in the *Kindred of the East Companion*).

Yama Kings give their servants whatever powers they may need to accomplish their mandated goals. If the *akuma* is to become the ancestor of a large city, then she is given great charisma and trained in the arts of leadership. Likewise, if the *akuma* is to be deployed in an assault on a *penanggalan* lair, she is made strong, fast and capable of unexpected combat maneuvers. Some powers granted by the Yama Kings strongly resemble the Disciplines of the Kin-jin, while others impart an increased mastery of one's P'o or the ability to draw Chi from acts of torture, perversion and cannibalism. *Akuma*, particularly those favored by their lords, are fearsome opponents because they inevitably have abilities that are completely unexpected and unpredictable.

Most Yama Kings make extensive use of *akuma*, though others utilize few or none. The Yomi Lords who make extensive use of *akuma* often bestow special abilities or powers to their most trusted or competent minions. The most prominent examples of these types of *akuma* are Emma-o's *shikome*.

The pact between an *akuma* and her master is firm and exacting. The Yama Kings expect utter obsequiousness above and beyond simple obedience. The Kuei-jin who enters into this bargain soon realizes that her every moment — waking and dreaming — henceforth belongs to her lord.

Akuma who serve well and survive long are often elevated to great status among the Yama Kings. These beings become devils of such power that they can give even the strongest ancestor pause. Those who serve poorly are punished. Early on, punishments are relatively mild, such as a loss of power or a short torture session. Greater failures elicit greater punishments, however, and every hell in Yomi holds a special place for those *akuma* who failed or betrayed their masters. Some devils have been known to weep at the fates of these pathetic creatures.

Akuma have a mixed status among the others servants of the Yama Kings. In many ways, they are admired for their

strength and versatility, and in most cases, an *akuma*'s ability to dwell among mortals far surpasses that of other demonic servants. Also, their ability to mingle with Kuei-jin who oppose the schemes of the Yama Kings can prove very useful. On the other hand, *akuma* are still Kuei-jin, descendants of the Wan Xian, and this is a stigma that they never truly are able to overcome. Because of this, most *akuma* find that they are constantly scrutinized by their masters and must repeatedly prove their loyalty through exemplary action.

There is never a shortage of Kuei-jin who can be tempted to join the ranks of the *akuma*. The path seems to promise great power, enough to almost seem worth its price, but failure is not an option, weakness is unacceptable, and disobedience is punishable by torments the mortal mind cannot begin to fathom. For every *akuma* who has risen to great heights, dozens of failures suffer brutalities in the deepest pits of the Thousand Hells.

NAMING THE DEVILS

In the Fifth Age, only a very small portion of those pronounced *akuma* are truly servants of the Yama Kings. Most of these so-called *akuma* are simply Kuei-jin with a knack for making enemies in the court. Ironically, many of these innocent fugitives are forced to turn to the lords of Yomi for protection once they are excluded from Kuei-jin society, and the court swells the ranks of its enemies through pride and arrogance.

Conversely, few Kuei-jin who truly are *akuma* are ever pronounced so publicly, though an individual's status may be a very open secret in some courts. The Green Court of Korea, for example, is a haven for many who owe fealty to the Yama Kings, and it is considered both rude and inappropriate to examine these arrangements too critically. In the Golden Courts of Southeast Asia, however, where *akuma* are as hated as they are ubiquitous, even a rumor that one has dealings with the forces of Yomi is liable to bring down the wrath of the *penanggalan* queens themselves.

YOMI PERSONALITIES

A few of the more prominent servants of the Yama Kings are well-known enough to warrant recognition here. A word of warning, though: these lieutenants are eminently powerful in and of themselves, and any characters who seek to trifle with them may not enjoy — or survive — the experience.

ZHOU-EN, IRON MINE FOREMAN

Wu Hua, Lord of the Hell of Iron and Salt, entrusts the mechanics of his mines to this cold servant. Zhou-En's origins are unknown, but his current position is made painfully familiar to every soul — and every lesser demon — caught in Wu Hua's hell. Dressed in bushi-style armor that resembles the shell of a monstrous beetle, the foreman visits each mine to ensure that progress is being made according to the supreme wishes of Wu Hua. His schedule is never the same and never announced — things must be in good order and peak production at all times, just in case he drops in. Zhou-En's visits are opportunities for demon overseers to offer up the worst of the troublesome souls to a worse fate than they could hand down themselves. In turn, the overseers must be careful not to attract his ire, as Zhou-En is as quick to bind a demon to a rock, flay it and expose it to the salty winds for eternity as he is to use a

difficult P'o as a chisel in the mine. The surest way to incur Zhou-En's displeasure is to be sloppy or inefficient in one's work, and by the foreman's standards everyone is sloppy and inefficient.

Attributes: Strength 5, Dexterity 4, Stamina 5, Charisma 2, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 4, Intelligence 4, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 4, Brawl 4, Dodge 4, Intimidation 5, Martial Arts 3, Melee 5, Stealth 3, Subterfuge 3

Advantages: Rage (P'o) 8, Gnosis (Hun) 6, Yin 6, Yang 9, Willpower 8, Chi 16

Disciplines: Black Wind 3, Demon Shintai 3, Jade Shintai 5, Obligation 4

HSIAN LO FAN

This gaunt demon is one of Tou Mu's most trusted subordinates, if anyone can be said to truly trust anyone else in Yomi. Lo Fan is the embodiment of dour Yin energy. He appears in a male form in balance to Tou Mu's female; his skin is black and his body skeletal. In a realm where imprisoned souls' only shelter comes from forcing or convincing demons to look the other way while they hide from the scouring winds, Lo Fan is mercilessly alert and moves unscathed through the sandstorms to capture and punish the demons who aren't performing their duties properly. Of course, this discourages the demons from helping the souls find shelter, which in turn breeds hate among the damned for the lieutenant. Were he ever to show an instant's weakness, the huddled masses of souls he torments would gladly rise up and destroy Hsian Lo Fan. He is careful, as a result, never to show weakness.

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 4, Stamina 5, Charisma 1, Manipulation 3, Appearance 1, Perception 5, Intelligence 4, Wits 4

Abilities: Alertness 5, Athletics 3, Brawl 4, Dodge 3, Intimidation 3, Investigation 4, Martial Arts 5, Melee 5, Stealth 4

Advantages: Rage (P'o) 7, Gnosis (Hun) 5, Yin 9, Yang 5, Willpower 9, Chi 15

Disciplines: Yin Prana 4, Bone Shintai 4, Chi'uh Muh 3, Obligation 5

IBARA-SAMA

No one has ever seen Ibara-sama's face. This tool of the Wicked City hides itself in the buildings and the streets, watching everywhere at once yet never being anywhere at all. Its power, obviously, lies in the psychological torture of its subjects: everyone is so afraid of its anger that they move about in a constant state of panic and frenzy. Souls here whisper that Ibara-sama does not punish anyone, only absorbs them — swallows them up and binds them into the fabric of the city without losing their consciousness. If that is the truth, the souls taken by Ibara-sama spend eternity as part of a humming demonic machine, aware of every other soul trapped with them. It is small wonder, then, that this hell is so feared even in the Middle Kingdom.

Attributes: No one knows anything about Ibara-sama's Physical Attributes, its Charisma, or its Appearance. Manipulation 5, Perception 5, Wits 4, Intelligence 4.

Abilities: Alertness 5, Computer 3, Investigation 3, Occult 4.

Advantages: Rage (P'o) 8, Gnosis (Hun) 7, Yin 7, Yang 7, Willpower 8, Chi 16

Disciplines: Cultivation 5, Internalize 5, Obligation 5

STORYTELLING IN YOMI

Storytelling Yomi is a little different than storytelling chronicles anywhere else, even those set in the Middle Kingdom. Dealing with any sort of hell in a roleplaying context is always tricky, and the Thousand Hells offer more pitfalls than one might think for the unwary Storyteller. However, the Yomi World also has the potential to produce incredibly rich, detailed stories and exciting, deeply moving roleplaying experiences when handled well.

WHY YOMI?

Before you move your chronicle into the Yomi World, you need to answer one very important question: Why? Yomi is someplace that neither characters nor Storytellers should approach lightly. There are many good reasons for involving the Thousand Hells in your story, either indirectly or directly, but it helps to have one in hand before you commit your chronicle. Think about what Yomi's involvement can add to your storyline. What can you accomplish by bringing in the Thousand Hells that you can't do any other way? If you can't answer that question, then perhaps you don't need Yomi after all.

On the other hand, if you do need one of the unique elements of Yomi, you've found the first building block of your chronicle's next step. Whether it be the influence of the Yama Kings, one of the hells itself or even lingering memories of Yomi, you've got something to work with in bringing hellish influence into your storyline.

HOW MUCH?

You don't want to overemphasize Yomi, at least not at first. The Thousand Hells are a place of fear for even the Kuei-jin. Too much safe contact with the Yomi World tends to erode that fear and turn even the Hell of Boiling Oil into

HAZARDS OF YOMI

Storytelling Hell, any hell, is always fraught with peril. Above and beyond the very real possibility of offending a player with strong religious belief, there's the fact that by your choice of chronicle setting, you've turned the eternal torment of souls into what is essentially a backdrop. Doing so risks having your players and their characters grow inured to the suffering around them, forcing you to up the stakes constantly in terms of atrocity and hellish detail. If the escalation continues, one of two inevitable results looms: Either you will genuinely offend one of your players, or your attempts to horrify devolve into cartoonish grotesquerie, no more frightening than a rubber monster mask but possibly more comedic.

There are other potential problems with using Yomi in your chronicles. The denizens and resources of the Thousand Hells represent a tremendous source of potential power for characters, and Yomi certainly has the potential to unbalance any chronicle if given a chance to do so. All it takes is one character deciding to go *akuma* and betraying the rest of his *wu*, one treasure rescued from the storehouses of the Yama Kings, and suddenly your campaign leaps off the rails.

Storytelling Yomi is not easy, and there are manifold risks. The rewards of doing it properly, however, make the risks worth it.

a tourist attraction instead of a threat. Instead, use Yomi and its terrors sparingly when you begin. Demonstrate how lethal the hells are, and what a tremendous and irrevocable step it is to get involved with them. These are hells, after all — dealing with them is not something one should do halfheartedly or without due consideration.

If you decide that your chronicle needs a heavy dose of Yomi, perhaps even to the point of sending the characters into the demon kingdoms, then be prepared to go all the way with it. Hell is a completely alien setting; one cannot fall back on familiar geography and patterns. Each hell is unique and horrifying, a scene of endless suffering. Think about which hell or hells the characters are likely to enter, and what's waiting for them in each place. Consider the creatures they're likely to encounter along the way, and the ways the characters can get in to and out of Yomi if the situation requires. Prepare for the *wu*'s descent into hell as thoroughly and diligently as you can, because a slapdash hell can completely sap the effect you were striving for in your game.

THE CLASSICS

The three basic tools of storytelling are mood, theme and plot. Your mood is the core emotion that your story conveys, your theme is the central idea of the chronicle, and the plot is the *sequence of events*. Needless to say, dealing with the hells can limit your choices in terms of these three elements. There aren't too many stories involving Yomi that have lighthearted, chipper moods, and your plot options tend to get sharply limited once you move away from the elements of Yomi itself.

The most important thing to remember when working with the mood, theme and plot of your chronicle is appropriateness. Think about the story you want to tell, the feeling you want to get across, and consider if they're appropriate for a Yomi chronicle. All of the rest, the individual encounters and Storyteller characters, simply build upon that.

ANTAGONISTS AND CONFLICT

Conflict is semantically equivalent to action within the bounds of a chronicle. Whether the conflict is internal (Hun against P'o) or external (the *wu* faces down a pack of demon servitors) is a matter of detail; conflict is what drives a narrative. Triumph in a conflict sends the plot one way, failure drives it another, and you as a Storyteller need to prepare for both outcomes.

Of course, there are certain types of conflict that are endemic to Yomi chronicles. As Yomi has a salutary effect on a Kuei-jin's P'o, the internal conflict that rages inside every Cathayan heats up once he steps into the Thousand Hells. On the other hand, the Yomi Wan offers plenty of opportunity for certain types of physical conflict. There are enough tormented souls, demon servitors, *akuma* and other, less identifiable creatures in Yomi to keep even the most bloodthirsty Thrashing Dragon busy.

Conflict demands antagonists, the characters on the other side of the disagreement. It can be tempting to use a Yama King as your ultimate antagonist — the Yama Kings are the ultimate power in Yomi, after all — but that doesn't

mean that the Yama King himself should necessarily appear on stage. Each Yama King has a great many servants, flunkies and mindless adherents, and each of these can serve as an antagonist who can keep characters busy for a good long while. Just because you have an antagonist that you like doesn't mean that you should rush him on the scene immediately. This is especially true in Yomi, where the ultimate villains are so near the literal definition of "ultimate"; the beings who will someday topple the August Personage of Jade should not be brought onstage lightly, or too soon.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

It is impossible for the characters ever to learn all of the secrets of Yomi. That level of understanding is beyond even the wisest Kuei-jin. Furthermore, it is not for even the boldest Cathayan to seek to explore every nook and cranny of the ever-changing Thousand Hells, as it is highly unlikely that anyone's karmic debt can be resolved by a thorough mapping of Yomi. The hells should be a phantasmagorical experience, not a long-running chronicle setting. Emphasize the alienness and other-worldliness of the environment. Drill the horror of the various hells into the characters over and over again, reminding them why exactly their P'os fled these realms in the first place. Game statistics and hard rules can be found elsewhere in this book, but the realms of the Yama Kings are more about story, vision and theme than statistics and effects.

HOW TO USE HELL

The Thousand Hells is a setting that, when used properly, can inspire dramatic character progression. No encounter with the Yomi Wan leaves a character unchanged, and the best uses of the Thousand Hells showcase that. The descent into the underworld is a classic device seen in many myths: A hero may brave the underworlds in pursuit of knowledge or enlightenment, but he never leaves without paying a heavy price. As a Storyteller, you should therefore make sure that your applications of the Thousand Hells in your chronicle are methodical, directed and carefully measured for effect.

HOW NOT TO USE HELL

Considering that the Thousand Hells are the ultimate expression of torment and sadistic evil in the known universe, the characters should not be allowed to explore them like a city park. The consequence of a visit to Yomi, even a brief one, cannot be overstated. One trip to the Yomi Wan was enough to drive the character to return from the dead. What will a second journey, one not mercifully blotted from memory, do? You cannot allow your players to take the Thousand Hells lightly. An eternity of torment and ever-spreading spiritual corruption is not something anyone, even the most vicious devotee of the Devil-Tiger, can afford to laugh at.

It may be tempting to incorporate the ideas found here into a sort of search-and-destroy rampage across Yomi Wan, but doing so shortchanges both your story and your players.

PRELUDES FOR SHADOWGUIDING

If your troupe uses Shadowguiding, (described on page 93 of *Kindred of the East*), a prelude specifically relating to the Thousand Hells should be played by the player who runs the P'o in the game. You may let the player of the actual Kuei-jin character sit in, but the Shadowguide should make all decisions and reactions for the P'o in this instance.

The hells exist as part of the cycle of nature, and serve a purpose even in their corruption; blithely allowing characters to disrupt that function disrupts the ordered workings of the universe. If that's what you're after in your chronicle, go for it, but bear in mind that the piper will have to be paid in the end.

A final concern to keep in mind is overemphasizing the influence the hells have. Not every plot has its roots in Yomi. Not every Yama King spends his time spying on the characters' *wu*. Not every shady figure standing on a corner is an *akuma* spy, nor does every trip into the Mirror Lands land a group in the depths of Yomi. As in all things, a balance must be maintained; too much Yomi and the characters grow inured to it, too little and they forget why they should fear it. Should that essential balance be lost, the Yomi Wan becomes nothing more than an uncomfortable place to travel.

SETTING THE STAGE: PRELUDE TO A KUEI-JIN CHARACTER

Keep in mind that every Kuei-jin has already had a taste of the Yomi World. Interactions with the Thousand Hells should be colored by this prior experience. Flashbacks and false memories, reminiscences and old acquaintances can all be vital parts of a new story that takes characters back into the realm they once escaped from. So before you take your story into Hell, think about the characters' previous trip there and how that might inform what comes next.

• What brought a character to one of the Thousand Hells?

Everyone who ends up in a hell ends up there for a very specific reason. What did the characters do to land in their particular torments, and do those deeds still reverberate? Are there consequences the characters might still have to deal with?

• Which of the Thousand Hells did they visit?

Were the members of the *wu* guests in the Hell of Iron and Salt or the Hell of Being Skinned Alive? Typically, the sins of the living dictate which hell they go to, but not everything in Yomi works as it should. Several of the more

famous hells are described in more detail in Chapter Three. Decide if one of these was home to the characters, or create your own hell for them to re-discover in their travels.

• What punishments did the characters undergo?

Figuring out what happened to the characters in hell can be critical for later developments. Such detail can be crucial in triggering flashbacks, exciting old enmities and otherwise flavoring the trip into Yomi. Will the characters have sympathy for others undergoing their torments, or will fresh reminders of pain move them to acts of vengeance?

• Did the characters attract the attention of a servitor demon or Yama King?

Catching the eye of a being of power in Yomi is a double-edged sword. On one hand, demonic favor may have lessened the characters' torments, and may have been the x-factor that allowed them to escape eventually. On the other hand, the rejection of that favor (as demonstrated by the fact that the characters did escape) may have produced some very angry overseers and Yama Kings. Plus, there are always resentful souls still trapped in hell who saw the preferential treatment the characters got and resent them for it.

• Were the characters allowed to escape?

This can present an interesting quandary for players, and should never be fully settled for them by the Storyteller. The Kuei-jin may think that they escaped on their own, but you can certainly lay hints that the whole affair might have been the doing of the Yama Kings all along. The second-guessing and paranoia keeps the mystery of Yomi intact, and characters can never assume "I got out once, I can get out again."

A LIFE OF TORMENT: PLOTS IN THE YOMI WAN

SAMPLE PLOTS

The tools explained in the first part of the chapter are now brought together to create a story set in the Thousand Hells. Below are a few examples of plotlines and what tools they are best used with. Do not feel bound by guidelines and strictures, or just what's presented here. Explore the Thousand Hells by constructing your own plotlines and devices. Determine what tools you are going to employ to deliver your plotline. Conflict, mood and theme — these three critical aspects can be combined together in countless variations using different tools of each to create a unique story and approach.

VENGEANCE

In theory, Kuei-jin remember fragments, at best, of their time in the Yomi World. A constant palpable memory of the torments they suffered among the ranks of the damned would be so painful as to prevent many Kuei-jin from functioning at all. Alas, theory is sometimes wrong, and there are occasions when reminiscences of Yomi return to haunt escapees.

Needless to say, with painful memories of torment come painful memories of tormentors. If a face or a name surfaces in a Kuei-jin's flashbacks to Yomi, he may well decide that it's time for some payback. A particularly sadistic or wide-ranging torturer (or more likely, an overseer) could be the common link between some revenge-minded Cathayans, providing the impetus for an entire *wu* to descend into Hell.

Another possibility is that of vengeance, not on a tormentor, but on one of the tormented. A Kuei-jin can send an enemy screaming into Hell with relative ease, but what if that rival's crimes were so heinous that they demand further personal attention? It is not enough that the soul suffers an eternity of torment at the impersonal hands of some random demon servitor; the Kuei-jin wants to make things personal. Hence, a trip to Yomi to finish what the sinner's death merely started.

Fortunately (for the sake of the plot, at least), extracting vengeance is not the same thing as planning it. Just finding the object of the *wu*'s ire can take up the better part of several sessions. Perhaps the intended victim has allies or protectors, or has been transferred elsewhere in Yomi — the chase can go on and on. Then there's the question of what happens when the hunters catch up with their prey. They may be in for a nasty shock if, for example, the lowly demon servitor has risen in the ranks to an overseer's position and now has hordes of lesser torturers at his command....

RESCUE

Just because a soul lands in Yomi doesn't necessarily mean that it should stay there. Perhaps the characters are on a mission to rescue a particular individual from the Thousand Hells for whatever reasons seem appropriate — family bonds, favors owed, deals struck, perhaps even a kidnapping of a particular sinner — and must descend into Yomi to carry out their task. There's every chance the characters will have to wander the length and breadth of Yomi if they don't know precisely in which hell the target has landed. That sort of situation can make for an extended picaresque narrative, as

FREEING THE CAGED SOUL

Every soul in Yomi should have earned its way into perdition. Once in a very great while, however, an accident occurs. A soul slips through the cracks and finds itself in a place where it has no business being. Such unfortunate victims are not likely to receive much sympathy from their jailers, however, and so they exist as karmic imbalances within the fabric of a particular hell. They stand out to those who know what to look for, but for the most part, no one is looking.

An attempted rescue of one of these stranded souls is a variation on the rescue theme. Instead of taking the target out of Yomi for other purposes, however, the characters simply set the wrongfully imprisoned soul free to seek its proper destiny.

the Kuei-jin wander from hell to hell seeking their goal, encountering the denizens of Yomi along the way and being helped and hindered by them. If the *wu* knows where the target of the extraction is held, things get a little easier, but there are still other matters to deal with: demon servitors to bribe or defeat, *akuma* to avoid, an angry Yama King (who presumably does not like having her property stolen out from under her) to appease or flee and the mechanics of leaving Yomi with the rescued soul.

THEFT

Souls aren't the only things that can be taken out of Yomi. There are uncounted treasures rotting in the warehouses of the Yama Kings, and even the landscape of Hell itself can yield riches. Certainly there are magical researchers who'd pay heavily for items taken from the hells for experimentation, and anything from Tempest flotsam (see p. 17) to yangstones can fetch a staggering price outside of the demon underworld. Expeditions to retrieve the treasures of Yomi, while insanely hazardous, can also be intensely profitable, and the rewards of a single trip can be staggering.

Conversely, the characters might be forced into ransacking Yomi by an unwise bargain or favor owed, or there may be a specific item they are seeking. Another possibility is that the characters are already traveling Yomi and are captured; the price of their freedom is stealing something from a neighboring hell. Perhaps one of the Yama Kings has uncovered an artifact of power which is enabling him to wreak havoc in the Middle Kingdom; the *wu* has the choice of allowing the carnage to continue unabated or attempting to filch the demon king's totem of power.

ENLIGHTENMENT

Sometimes the road to Heaven leads through the pits of Hell. A character (or a character's teacher) may decide that the easiest way to speed up a Kuei-jin's ascent to enlightenment is a stint in Yomi Wan. Dwelling among the damned again may provoke great insight; at least, that's the theory.

Regardless of the relative merits or flaws of the position, however, there are some Kuei-jin who return to Yomi voluntarily as part of their spiritual development. If the characters are of this sort, they may find that their lofty goals intersect uncomfortably with the reality of Yomi. The members of the *wu* may wish to observe and meditate, but that doesn't mean that demon servitors, paranoid overseers and jealous *akuma* are about to let them have their way. The quest for enlightenment becomes a struggle for survival as well, as the characters attempt to endure Yomi's worst assaults while still gaining some measure of insight from the experience.

EXPLORATION

Knowledge of Yomi can be just as valuable as any treasure or artifact taken from it. A *wu* that learns the various back routes of Hell, and the ways in which it connects to the rest of the universe, is sitting on some extremely important information that others may be willing to pay heavily for. Garnering such information, however, is risky and time-consuming. The passages of Yomi are well-hidden, and sport all sorts of dangers to the unwary traveler.

The denizens of Hell who already know the secrets the characters are trying to uncover may not want their knowledge disseminated, and are capable of taking any action necessary to preserve the silence they crave. Rival explorers and territorial inhabitants of Yomi pose hazards as well, and not every path leads to the same place twice.

A caveat: While it is tempting to lead a *wu* in a kaleidoscopic tour across Yomi, revealing wonders and horrors every week, remember that the longer the characters stay in Yomi, the more hazardous their stay becomes and the more likely they are to be discovered by unfriendly powers. All the knowledge of Yomi in the world won't do the characters any good if they get pitched into the Hell of Boiling Oil before they can sell it.

DAMNATION

The path of the *akuma* is not a pleasant one, but it does lead to great power very quickly. Perhaps the characters have decided to pledge service to one of the Yama Kings for one reason or another, and have decided to go to the throne of their new master to present themselves. The journey can be difficult, as the Yama King in question tests his would-be servants — if they prove weak or unworthy, it is better that they are culled before they have a chance to fail him, after all — and other dangers threaten. Servants of the Yama King fearful of being displaced could seek to prevent the characters' arrival, or the minions of a rival demon lord may try to deprive the Yama King of useful servants.

A more dangerous tack to take is for the characters to try to instigate a bidding war for their services. Traveling from hell to hell and court to court, they present themselves and their qualifications to a series of Yama Kings in hopes of leveraging greater power and higher offers out of rivals in the bidding. Even the Yama Kings may be amused by such effrontery, and choose to humor the characters' *chutzpah*. There's always the possibility of a pre-emptive bid, however, and the losers in the bidding may not take their defeat well.

DIPLOMACY

Some of the wisest and most powerful of the Kuei-jin elders do in fact deal with the Yama Kings on a semi-regular basis, trading tribute, knowledge and an unimaginable array of other items back and forth across the differing levels of reality. Delegations taking trade, offerings, proposals, treaties and other items into Yomi are infrequent, very prestigious affairs. Being attached to a delegation of this sort is high honor for a *wu*, and a very great responsibility as well.

Of course, such diplomatic missions are also hotbeds of intrigue, dealmaking and other, less savory forms of behavior. No doubt the characters will be approached with offers, threats and assorted propositions, some more traitorous than others. What happens if any of the characters — or all of them — accede to the importunings? What happens if they don't? There's also the ever-present threat that someone else in the delegation has gone rogue — or was subverted before the mission began. And what about the possibility of doppelgangers? The potential situations are innumerable, and the potential paranoia unquantifiable.

DUTY

Brave, greedy, vengeful or foolish Kuei-jin may choose to go to Yomi. However, not all visitors to the Thousand Hells are volunteers. Some Cathayans are obligated to descend once again into Yomi Wan for some reason or other. The mandate of a teacher or a mandarin, the necessities of Dharma or other obligations incurred can send a Kuei-jin or even an entire *wu* into the depths of Hell. Such sojourns tend to be quick, focused affairs — get in, do the job, get out — at least in their conception. The reality often gets a little stickier, as complications arise in Yomi to divert the characters from their focus. The discovery of a loved one's soul in torment, for example, or the opportunity to loot a hell of its treasures may be tempting diversions, even as they stand in opposition to the *wu*'s original, stated mission.

PUNISHMENT

The stated purpose of Yomi is to punish great sinners, to inflict torments on them commensurate with their crimes. As every Kuei-jin earned his place in Hell once, it is not hard to imagine a Cathayan lapsing back into old habits and earning a repeat trip. However, this time the vampire does not have to wait for death; instead it may be the displeasure of a greater power in the Middle Kingdom that forces a character into Yomi for punishment. A sentence of a year and a day in Yomi can serve as the setup for an extended sojourn in the hells, as the character and his companions seek to survive their sentence. Do they attempt to escape and risk greater punishment? What alliances can they make in Yomi against the one who banished them? And what will the characters do when they get out?

DENIZENS OF HELL

TORTURED SOULS

The nameless, faceless souls trapped therein form the bulk of the population of any hell the characters are likely to visit. Tortured souls are as much a part of the landscape as bubbling oceans of boiling fat or pits of fire. Everywhere one goes in Yomi there should be imprisoned souls present, confounding the senses of the characters with the smells and sounds of their torments. It is not necessary to detail pre-

A NOTE OF CAUTION

Do not gloss over the tortured souls, tempting as it may be to do so. It is easy enough to get into the specific plot at hand and merely brush off the suffering as "Yeah, there's a lot of screaming in the background," but doing so cheapens the very notion of the hells and the very real human pain they contain. Returning to Yomi can and should be a very traumatic experience for a Cathayan, especially if he finds himself in the specific hell wherein his P'o was tormented in the fashion he now gets to observe.

cisely what each and every soul trapped in a given hell is going through, but it should be very clear to any sojourners in Yomi that torment is universal and inescapable. One technique for getting this point across is to explain in detail once or twice the appearance and torments of a particular soul the characters come across, so that players have a frame of reference for future, broader descriptions.

Interaction with a hell's tortured souls is a likely possibility; characters may wish to help, hinder or question the souls they find on their travels. Such interaction is fairly limited by a few constraints, such as the constant torment the souls are in and interference by demon servitors who have no interest in letting their charges have chat breaks. To approach a specific soul, the characters may have to distract the demon servitor overseeing its punishment, or find a way to grant it some ease. Few of the torments suffered by the damned leave enough sanity for casual conversation.

Furthermore, remember that the souls trapped in the hells are not poor victims being tortured for the joy of it. Only P'os with heavy crimes dragging them down them fall so far as the Thousand Hells. The first thought on prisoners' minds is a respite from the pain they endure, and characters who do not take that into account don't get far. Tortured souls are not above lying, pleading and blackmailing to obtain such surcease, and when it is given they may not automatically be cooperative with the characters for fear of incurring the wrath of their jailers. In other words, finding good conversation in Yomi is harder than it looks.

DEMON SERVITORS

Behind every good torment is a talented torturer, and in Yomi that position is filled by the so-called demon servitors. Landscapes of windswept razor shards are not enough to do the Yama Kings' will. Tortured souls need a personal touch, and that's where the demon servitors come in. Furthermore, torturers of this sort are the second-most populous residents of Yomi; if the characters run into anyone at all, they're likely to run into servitors.



Servitors are an essential fixture in the hell, giving the landscape a sense of personal menace. Servitors are always on the lookout for escaped souls or new victims, and a torturer in the right place at the right time can become the perfect instrument for hurrying along a *wu* that seems inclined to dawdle. In the end, the demon servitors are the primary antagonists of any conflict characters are likely to encounter in the Thousand Hells proper; *akuma* are too rare, while Yama Kings are unlikely to deal with minor annoyances like Kuei-jin unless the characters get extremely noisy.

As a result, servitors are important Storyteller characters and deserve some attention; they aren't generic monsters or thugs. Minor servitors should share common characteristics throughout a specific hell, even if that characteristic is merely cosmetic. Overseers, the demon servitors who monitor lesser demons and determine the torments of damned, are liable to have distinct personalities and names, and should possess power in proportion to their position.

The traits of a given hell should help you define its inhabitants. Every realm has its archetypal conditions, so incorporate these into your servitors. The Wicked City is a corruption of monolithic technology; servitors within may appear as robotic creations, technically augmented humanoids or even sentient masses of wiring and machinery. Servitors in the Hell of Boiling Oil are liable to have long limbs and claws, the better for plucking souls out of vats of sizzling fat. Remember, though, that all servitors are there for the duty of tormenting souls, and any distraction by the characters takes them away from that. Overseers are the only servitors who have the time for a conversation of any length, and they're not likely to look kindly on trespassers. If a demon servitor does take time to speak with a character, it does so for its own reasons; perhaps it intends to lead the Kuei-jin into a trap, or wants assistance dealing with a particularly harsh overseer. No servitor simply hands out information for free, or can afford to be away from its tasks for long.

AKUMA

Akuma in the Thousand Hells go far beyond the most basic use of the term in the Middle Kingdom. Though outcasts and criminals in the Kuei-jin court may be branded *akuma*, those found in the Thousand Hells are true devils in Kuei-jin bodies. They have sworn allegiance to the Yama Kings, worship demonic forces and strive to further the causes of the Yomi Wan in the Middle Kingdom. If the characters are luckless enough to run across a true *akuma* in the Thousand Hells, they are in for a rough time. Only the most powerful servants of evil and corruption make the trip from the Middle Kingdom to the halls of the Yama Kings, so it is unlikely that visiting Kuei-jin will encounter any *akuma* weaker than they themselves are. More likely, any *akuma* encountered is among the local Yama King's elite and most prestigious servants, and has power to match.

A Kuei-jin may be able to overcome a low-ranking demon servitor, or even an overseer. An *akuma*, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter. Not only are powerful

akuma typically very old Kuei-jin, whose centuries of valued service show in numerous investments of demonic power, but the Thousand Hells is their home turf. As a result, they should know every nook and cranny of the landscape, and be able to bend its every feature against any attackers. *Akuma* make better master antagonists of low conflict, directing the efforts against the characters, than direct combat potential.

Within Yomi itself, *akuma* serve a delicate role. They are likely the most powerful and intelligent entities the characters can interact with on a reasonable level, but that doesn't mean that a given *akuma* slays Kuei-jin on sight. Indeed, the *akuma* may try to recruit, seduce or trap the Kuei-jin; there's a great deal more in the fallen's repertoire than just full-throttle combat. By the same token, *akuma* should be rare. Overusing one *akuma* can unbalance a chronicle; overusing a herd of them can drive the story right off the rails. Creatures of such power avoid each other instinctively out of a sense of self-preservation, and they do not necessarily announce themselves for what they are on first meeting suspicious-looking interlopers.

AKUMA CREATION

Each *akuma* is a character, not just a gangly pile of statistics and attitude. In order to create a believable *akuma* to interact with your characters, you need to build her from the ground up. Think about who she is — in essence, the *akuma* is your character, and you want her background, motivations and whatnot fleshed out as thoroughly as possible so you can play her as well as possible. Remember, also, that no one starts as *akuma*. Think about who she was before she accepted service with the Yama Kings, her hopes, dreams and obligations that may still survive within her, albeit horribly twisted.

• Reason for Becoming Akuma

The next step is to figure out what pressures brought your *akuma* to the doorstep of the Yama King? Was she threatened by other forces and needed quick power as a matter of survival? Had she given up on Dharmas and

WHO AND HOW MUCH

Akuma are not the sorts of characters your players should be getting their hands on. Incredibly powerful and malevolent, they work best as cautionary devices and antagonists. An *akuma* in a player's hands may well be the stuff of disaster.

One of the reasons *akuma* generally make poor characters for players is simple: They're extraordinarily tough. *Akuma* should be created with as many dots as a Kuei-jin character who's been around at least a century, and that's before you add in any demonic investments or other benefits bestowed by Yama Kings with partisan interests. The toughest *akuma* are nigh unto bodhisattvas in terms of their power potential, and they're not shy about demonstrating that fact.

enlightenment after repeated attempts and failures? Alternatively, did she simply fall from grace, a proud Kuei-jin succumbing to the twin temptations of P'o and the *diao*. The method of conversion is very important in an *akuma*'s development, and helps to determine what she ultimately becomes.

• Warping the Concept

Whatever she once was, and however she came to become *akuma*, your character cannot escape the process of transformation unscarred. You should decide precisely how the change has warped your *akuma* — physically, mentally, philosophically or in ways that are hellishly unimaginable. This warping may very well frighten the characters, especially if the *akuma* is someone they used to know and respect, but it demonstrates that no one enters the service of a Yama King casually. One does not become *akuma* and remain unchanged.

• Goals

Once you know why your character became *akuma*, you can detail what her new goals are. Does she wish to see her Yama King rule above all else? Perhaps she herself secretly wishes to gain enough power to become a Yama King? Sometimes goals can be as simple as continued immortality or seeking revenge on past enemies. However, the goals should not be based on the characters who eventually cross the *akuma*'s path, unless it makes a very good reason to do so.

• A Foot in Hell, a Foot on Earth

Akuma exist as a bridge between the Middle Kingdom and the Yomi Wan. How does your *akuma* manage this dual existence? What influences or station does she hold in the mortal world, and what offices and responsibilities does she have in Yomi? Upon leaving the Thousand Hells, do the characters risk encountering the *akuma* again in the Middle Kingdom? Rooting your *akuma* in both worlds makes it easier to weave her into plots both in and out of Yomi.

• Evil Incarnate

Beware of the temptation to make your *akuma* too heroic or noble. No matter how lofty her original intentions, one way or another she has sold out to the forces of corruption, and now she serves them willingly. She is evil, not morally ambiguous, and works toward the twin goals of taint and destruction. Characters who meet and deal with *akuma* should leave feeling soiled by the experience. The circumstances leading up to an *akuma*'s conversion may have been tragic but the *akuma* herself has ceased to be a sympathetic figure. She's simply too far gone.

• Interacting with the Characters

Remember that when interacting with the characters, an *akuma* seeks nothing more than to further her own goals. The servants of the Yama Kings do not go out of their way for anyone, unless there is something in it for them. Though they may interact in a friendly fashion with the characters, *akuma* are ruthless, merciless, cold-hearted servants of evil who are as likely to flense a *wu* into jerky as to deal with it in a civil manner. If the characters offer him something in return, an *akuma* is not above aiding or even temporarily allying with a *wu*. Just keep in mind that the *akuma* drive

hard bargains, and that any alliance with a *wu* is a marriage of convenience, not a signal of intent to reform.

YAMA KINGS

Above all others within the hells are the Yama Kings themselves. Yama Kings are forces of nature, equivalent to a tsunami crashing on the shore or a volcano erupting in devastating fashion. Their concerns are grand and majestic, aiming toward the toppling of creation itself. They have no time for the dust motes that call themselves Kuei-jin; the characters are as far beneath their notice as individual ants are below yours or mine. The power of the Yama Kings is vast and inhuman; while they have personalities, they are most assuredly not "people." They can diminish themselves so as to speak to *akuma* and whatnot should the situation demand, but there is always something hollow in the impersonation. An entity whose ultimate goal is to become the Demon Emperor has bigger concerns than conversation, after all.

Each Yama King also serves as the overseer for the hell he rules. A Yama King's traits and personality determines his domain's look and feel. Whatever an individual hell punishes or manifests is merely an aspect of its ruler's personality.

If the characters ever have the misfortune of meeting a Yama King directly, the experience should overawe and terrify them. One does not haggle with or mouth off to a Yama King; one merely attempts to survive the conversation. The Yama Kings are themes in and of themselves, and merely meeting one can be traumatic enough to shift the current theme of the game onto a new path. While a Yama King may wish something of the characters (service is always a possibility; almost every Yama King wants more *akuma*), the lords of Yomi are used to obedience and submission. Even the most favored *akuma* or servant cannot count on his lord's aid or favor in times of crisis. The Yama Kings are simply alien in their immensity, and your chronicle should strive to keep them that way.

GETTING THE CHARACTERS INTO HELL

As a Storyteller, you are strongly encouraged to make entrances to the Cathayan underworld specific to your chronicle, and to emphasize the bizarre nature of the journey to Yomi. Travel between the realms can be as difficult and complex an endeavor as wandering a razored labyrinth

PATHS TO OTHER PLACES

Umbra: The Velvet Shadow, Doomslayers: Into the Labyrinth and Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds describe many different realms that may well have some connection to the Thousand Hells.

blindfolded, and procuring the proper tools and knowledge with which to enter the Yomi Wan can make an excellent story in and of itself. Examples include:

SOUL DISCIPLINE: CULTIVATION — CLEAVE THE DEMON

The frightening Cultivation Soul Discipline known as Cleave the Demon can help one gain entrance into one of the Thousand Hells, though doing so is extremely risky. At the moment in process when the Kuei-jin's dominant soul would normally push out the weaker, driving it into the Yin or Yang Worlds, the Hun can instead choose to fall toward Yomi. The Hun may now enter the specific hell the P'o came from but only that hell and no other, retracing the path left imprinted in the memory of the P'o's original escape. By losing its entire Chi, the Hun can separate itself from the Middle Kingdom to follow this path and enter Hell. While the Chi is being drained, the P'o has complete control of the corporeal body and can take this infrequent chance to wreak all manner of chaos.

CHI ARTS: TAPESTRY — CHI RIFT

The system used is the same as for a regular Chi Rift, but a character must possess the secret knowledge of the *akuma*, or have one as a guide. While the rift is created, demonic energy pours through the opening, corrupting the Chi surrounding the gate for months to come and leaving a telling footprint for those hunting *akuma*. Characters caught in this welter of demonic Chi must roll or enter Shadow Soul immediately, with the result that they are deposited in Hell in the midst of a full frenzy. Spirit travelers caught in the vortex of an opening run the risk of being sucked into the Yomi Wan as well.

FINDING A RIVERGATE

Dragon lines spread throughout the Middle Kingdom like cracks in a shattered mirror's glass. The intersections of these lines form a complicated pattern of Chi lines across the Middle Kingdom. Where strong lines of Yin and Yang connect and inter-



weave, the dragon nests form a pool of raw life energy.

Some Rivergates are fed by Demon Chi, bubbling from the Yomi Wan to the Middle Kingdom like a thick sludge. No dragon lines of Yin or Yang connect these tainted nests. Kuei-jin courageous enough to cross these gates, and disciplined enough to subdue their P'os during the process, find that such demonic Rivergates offer relatively simple access into one of the Thousand Hells. Traveling this way is no more difficult than using a Yin or a Yang dragon line, except the destination is a far more perilous place than one might normally expect to arrive in.

It's generally a good idea to place Rivergates fed by Demon Chi in remote areas far away from human habitation or Kuei-jin influence. Yang life energies and Yin death energies, naturally balancing forces to one another, weaken and corrode Demon Chi, and too much activity around a Demon Chi-fed Rivergate could sap its energies to nothing. Demonic Rivergates should be difficult to find, their existence known only to a few mandarins and *akuma*, who aren't likely to share the information.

Unless the Rivergate is newly formed from a monstrous incident, the Storyteller should put guardians on both sides of the gate. As the demonic taint fades with time, a Rivergate to the Yomi Wan might fade or close altogether, potentially stranding characters or denizens on the wrong side....

BRINGING HELL TO THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

If a chronicle has been gathering steam for some time, it may not be appropriate to divert the movement of the game into a full-scale trip to one of the Thousand Hells. Fortunately, Hell can also be brought into the Middle Kingdom.

THE DIAO

The *diao* is a good time to go back to the beginning of a character's existence, drawing upon the prelude to shock or terrify with glimpses of the first descent into Yomi. Short snippets of previously suppressed memories can provide brief interactions with the Yomi Wan, while keeping Hell from overwhelming the story as a whole. *Diao* interludes work particularly well to remind characters who have strayed from their original conceptions of what they're supposed to be doing.

GAINING THE ATTENTION OF THE YAMA KINGS

There are a myriad of ways in which even the most disinterested Yama King might find his eye drawn to a particular character or *wu*. Some are obvious, others less so, but all provide a way to work the influence of Yomi into a chronicle that reaches far beyond the Thousand Hells. Some suggestions include:

INTERFERENCE

The Yama Kings have many servants in the Middle Kingdom, ranging from *akuma* to mere mortals. Such pawns and trusted agents don't advertise themselves as working for greater powers, and as such it is entirely possible that the characters might blindly stumble into a plot crafted not on earth but in Yomi. If the characters destroy the Yama King's operatives, they may draw his ire. On the other hand, they may find themselves unwittingly serving a demonic power by allying with his servants. Either way, the characters could well attract the gaze of the master plotter himself.

SETTING THE TABLE

If a Kuei-jin's actions produce a massive amount of tainted Chi, odds are that a Yama King will rouse himself to feast on the negative energy. Naturally, the Yama King will have an interest in the author of the feast set before him, and may well follow the career of a Kuei-jin who has allowed him to feast well.

SPEEDING THE DESCENT

Normally, the Yama Kings do not worry overmuch about the individual souls that cascade into their hells. What's one soul more or less, after all. But if a steady stream starts raining down, and if all of those sinners were sent to Yomi by a single source, the local Yama King may well take notice.

DEMON ARTS: DEMON SHINTAI

When a P'o shreds the Wall and escapes from the hell in which it manifested, it takes a piece of the hell with it. All Kuei-jin start with a Demon Art, though most choose to leave such practices far behind them as they evolve out of the *chih-mei* stage and progress along their respective Dharmas. The few Cathayans who cannot resist the power that comes from the use of Yomi-spawned power are often tempted to learn Demon Shintai in a more advanced form, and can attract the interest of the Yama Kings as a result.

STOPWORDS

The object of Yomi is to make visitors uncomfortable. The object of a game of *Kindred of the East* is to have fun. When people get too uncomfortable, they don't have fun. Know when to back off in your descriptions of your hell, and don't be afraid to let players know that you're willing to stop. Try to be sensitive to the people you're playing with; making them uncomfortable is a long way past simply making their characters unhappy.

In the end, it's all a game, and that should take precedence. If, by accident, you stop tormenting characters and start disturbing players, it's time to stop.

Immediately.

AFTERMATH

Eventually the natural life of any plotline expires and the time comes to wrap things up gracefully. Usually, when dealing with Yomi, that means getting the characters back to the Middle Kingdom, establishing what changes Yomi has wrought upon them and determining the relative success or failure of the characters' actions. That's not all there is to do, however. Leaving Hell and escaping it are two entirely different things.

LOOSE ENDS

Are there any outstanding issues that were left hanging at the conclusion of the game session? During the session itself, make notes of what's left undone: a tortured soul promised a rescue that never materialized, a character's realization that he's left a personal artifact behind, a gate left opened, or a question with ominous consequences left unanswered. These loose ends do not need to be concluded onstage where the characters can see them; life is messy, after all, and not all loose ends get tied up neatly. Most just fade away, their conclusion remaining unimportant to the characters. Some though may resurface at a later date, however, as hooks for new stories.

HOOKS

It's often a good idea to pull new plot threads from events within the Yomi Wan. Just because the characters have left Hell doesn't mean that Hell is willing to let them go that easily. Characters who made a strong impression on the *wu* can make return appearances in later episodes, while souls the characters treated less than kindly in Hell may crawl their way out and come looking for vengeance. Remember, nothing ever ends in the lands of the damned and the dead. The Yama Kings have all eternity to ponder and act on the deeds of any trespassers.

CONSEQUENCES

Everything makes ripples; every action produces a million reactions. Never allow a trip to the Thousand Hells to draw to a close without closely reviewing the characters' actions and pondering how those actions might affect the characters, their surroundings and the rest of the world. These consequences may come about as direct changes to characters' Traits, or perhaps new perspectives on the world around them. Then again, the world itself should not remain static; the *wu* could very well acquire allies or enemies, and the actions they take could disrupt the plans of anyone from fellow travelers in Hell to one of the Yama Kings. A trip into Hell is never over and done with. The taint and the repercussions of the journey linger for centuries — and it's up to you to include those echoes in your story.

CREATING YOUR OWN HELL

As one would expect, there are many more infernal domains than can be catalogued. It is safe to say that the details of most of the domains of Hell will not make their way to the ears of any in the Middle Kingdom. There are

simply too many hells to be recorded, especially since most of them offer limited Storytelling potential for any given game. The Hell of Perpetual Descent (wherein sinners fall eternally but never reach bottom) may be hellish for those trapped inside, but the number of stories that can be told using that particular domain as a setting are, to say the least, limited.

By the same token, though, there are so many hells, offering such a wide variety of torment, that if you decide your chronicle needs a hell that's not detailed here, there's plenty of cosmological wiggle room for you to create one. After all, the Thousand Hells are supposed to be terrifying and disturbing places. If none of the hells here disturbs your players' characters, then come up with something worse. If being devoured by enormous maggots for eternity doesn't bother them, then find out what does and build a hell around it. If the Hell of Boiling Oil doesn't prove to be enough of a challenge, try the Hell of Spinning Blades, the Hell of Off-Key Singers, the Hell of Eternal Paralysis, the Hell of Supreme Isolation or the Hell of Unending Vivisection. All it takes is a little careful planning and creativity, and a willingness to experiment with the stuff of Yomi.

CREATING A SLICE OF HELL

It's easy enough to create a domain in Yomi. What's harder is creating an interesting one. The best way to go about creating an interesting, dynamic hell that can serve as a chronicle setting is to ask yourself a few questions about what you're trying to accomplish, and then to design your domain around those answers.

1. WHAT IS THE THEME OF YOUR HELL?

Every domain should have a theme around which its horrors cluster. It's the thing that makes the hell interesting and disturbing at the same time. While a bunch of souls being randomly cut open by demons is unpleasant, a bunch of souls being purposefully cut open by demons because they were gluttons in their lifetimes is simultaneously more just and more disturbing. A hell needs a purpose, a reason why it is specially suited to torment those who make their way there.

In choosing a theme for your hell, there are many things to bear in mind. If you are trying to design a Yomi realm with ties to a particular aspect of Eastern culture, then a little research goes a long way. The mythologies of India, Tibet and China offer a wide variety of decidedly unpleasant hells with all sorts of built-in horrors.

Be sure that your hell is suitably disturbing. The Hell of Bad Tattoos may make your skin crawl, but unless it does the same to your players, it probably won't make much of a hell. (Unless, of course, the name is simply euphemistic; a hell devoted to skin art that crawls around victims leaving trails of scorched flesh or flayed muscle could rival any hell discussed here.)

2. TOWARD WHICH PRINCIPLE IS YOUR HELL IMBALANCED?

The balance of Chi energy is crucial in understanding the nature of an object, person or place. Despite the corrup-



tion and evil in the Yomi realm, the same rules apply here. Knowing whether a hell is Yin- or Yang-oriented suggests other traits of the place, and goes a long way toward filling in the details of the domain.

Those hells that are inclined toward Yin tend to be more like the realms of the dead. They are cold, dark, sterile places of negative energy. Also, since Yin is the feminine force, Yin-oriented hells often tend to be ruled or populated by female entities. The sharp black material of Yin is omnipresent in these places, along with iron, steel and metals of all types.

Yang realms, on the other hand, are hot, humid and often seething with frenetic energy. They are places of heat, twisted life and violent action. This is the male aspect, and many creatures here embody all the worst qualities of male aggression. As Yang is the energy of wood and other living things, these hells tend to be constructed of living matter, and to be very densely populated.

There are some rare hells that are not imbalanced. In general, the Yomi Wan tends to rebel against places of harmony, and most neutral sites eventually tip one way or the other. Should you wish to create a hell of balance, remember that only the strongest or most twisted realms in the Yomi realm can hold off the pull of both forces.

3. WHO RULES?

The only thing that shapes a hell as much as its aspected nature is the Yama King who rules there. It is he who has carved this realm out of Yomi, it is he who rules over the creatures there, and it is he who shapes the very substance of the realm in accordance with his will. By establishing

what you know about a particular domain's ruler, you gain insight into the place itself.

Even if you don't intend to use the Yama King himself, you should still know his habits. Is he a violent overlord who delights in torturing and maiming? Then it's unlikely that his hell will be one of sophisticated mental torment. On the other hand, if he is a skilled manipulator and politician, then the agonies suffered by his "guests" might be largely psychological. Also, pay attention to the culture the Yama King comes from (if any) and look to mythological sources for insight and inspiration.

(Note: Just as you are free to make up hells to suit your purpose, so too are you free to make up Yama Kings as well. Just because none of the characters has heard of your Yama King before doesn't mean that he doesn't exist; there are many powerful demons in Yomi, and no one save the August Personage of Jade knows all of their names.)

4. WHAT IS THE NATURE OF YOUR HELL?

This is the most important question, and all the others lead up to it. The appearance and operations of the hell are what really matter once the chronicle gets rolling. If you can describe your hell in chilling detail, then you've done what you've set out to do.

The most obvious aspect of a hell's environment is visual. The first way someone is likely to experience a Yomi realm is by seeing it. To this end, it is important to be able to describe the overall look of the hell. Is it dark and foreboding, or is it filled with an intense light that burns the eyes? Is it barren and lonely, or does it pulse with the movements of many unnatural things? Can one see the souls

trapped here and the creatures that torment them, or are the denizens of the domain hidden from view? The visual description you give of your hell will be the first and most lasting impression your characters have. It may be deceptive, perhaps extremely so, but it is still a lasting image.

The other senses help evoke the feeling of your hell as your story progresses. Horrific sounds and repulsive stench convey the environment just as effectively as visual cues. Also, the way things feel or taste may be used to remind visitors that this place is unnatural and corrupt, even when it does not seem to be. For example, the air may smell of charred flesh and leave a thick film on everything, or perhaps the waters taste of soured milk and bubble constantly. Whatever the sensory input, it should remind trespassers that they are definitely not in the Middle Kingdom.

The environment should probably be harmful. It is Hell, after all. Even the briefest stays in the Yomi realm should be uncomfortable, and extended ones should leave permanent effects. Burning, boiling and the slow torture of souls are popular themes, but feel free to experiment. Whatever the particular flavor of your hell, it should taste nasty.

Even if characters in this realm find some way of shielding themselves from this environment, it can still be used to affect them. For every soul that is safe in Yomi, there are legions who suffer. Describing the torment of others can sometimes be even more effective than inflicting pain on the characters themselves. Use Hell to pull at their heartstrings and play on their anxieties. If they're callous enough not to feel this, make them suffer for their lack of compassion.

5. WHO LIVES THERE?

Besides the Yama King and the souls he's tormenting, a hell usually has other inhabitants as well. These are typically the demons serving the Yomi lord, though other entities may be skulking around as well.

Demons who serve in a hell should be creatures bred specifically to thrive in that environment. In some cases they may be creatures from elsewhere that the Yama King has imported for their particular talents. This is the case with most *akuma* and corrupt *shen* who have made a pact with the lord of a particular hell. It is likely that most of these creatures would not survive in Yomi without the power lent to them by their masters. Because of this, demons tend to be both obedient and cautious.

The other possibility is that the inhabitants of this realm are natives of the hell spawned from the domain's very essence. In cases like these, the creatures tend to be perfectly suited to their environment. They can easily survive the worst parts of their home domain, and thrive where intruders tend to bog down. Little is more disheartening to a band of travelers who are barely holding their own against a hell's conditions than to see the natives of the place loping toward them, completely unhindered by their surroundings.

The appearance and powers of these demonic minions depend greatly on their environment. Demon-beasts from a Yang-aspected hell are most often creatures of fury and action. Such beings often have some mastery of shapeshifting, and have natural forms that mirror the aspects of the hell.

For example, a hell that is composed of vast fiery plains may have demons that resemble living flames, scorched humanoids or fire-blasted wooden golems. Creatures from Yin-aspected realms tend toward more incorporeal or abstract forms, and often resemble the various castes of Spectres. These creatures tend to have more static forms, though they often have great powers of concealment. Those few creatures that come from balanced realms are typically strange amalgams of these two extremes.

6. WHAT IS THIS HELL CALLED?

Naming your domain may not seem to be particularly important, but the title of your hell should convey to characters what they might be in for should they go there. For example, the Hell of Being Skinned Alive is fairly direct. It works, gives players the general idea, yet doesn't go into the specifics too much — and this allows characters to work themselves into an imaginative frenzy. Many traditional hells from Indian and Chinese mythology have direct names like this, so a title of this sort even has the advantage of sounding authentic.

Those who want to base their hell on a piece of literature or mythology can use names from other sources. The name of Kakuri, drawn from Japanese mythology, exemplifies this approach.

If all else fails, just name the hell after the Yama King who rules that domain. Doing so leaves the exact nature of the torments of the hell a mystery and highlights the Yama King who is so odd or incomprehensible that his domain must be named after him.

These are just basic inquiries to get you started. Feel free to ignore or add whatever elements you choose to make the experience more playable and enjoyable.

THE CREATION OF A YAMA KING

While more than a few Yama Kings make appearances in the pages of this book, it would be impossible to list them all (just as it would be impossible to list all of the hells). There is plenty of latitude for you, as a Storyteller, to create as many Yama Kings as you need to satisfy the demands of your chronicle, and nothing in the continuity will gainsay your doing so. Of course, if your chronicle demands that you create a slew of Yama Kings it might be time to reconsider power levels, but that's an entirely different matter.

The following questions can help guide you through the creation process. This list is hardly complete, but it covers the basics.

1. WHAT IS HIS HISTORY?

Most Yama Kings have a history that dates back to the Second Age, when they were created by the Ebon Dragon and Scarlet Queen to be guides for the dead, agents of retribution or functionaries of the will of Heaven. Other Yama Kings began as spirits or even mortals and somehow usurped enough power to ascend to the same level of power as the ancient forces of wickedness that rule Yomi.

If your Yama King is one of the elders of his kind, then it is necessary to know at least the major events in his history. Where did he originate? Is he still haunted by his original responsibilities to Heaven? If so, does he honor those duties in private or rebel against them entirely? Is there a particular nation with which he identifies? Who are his oldest and most reliable servants and why? By answering these and similar questions, you help to flesh out the history, and by derivation the character, of the Yama King. The demon lord's history usually suggests strengths, weaknesses, allies, enemies and obsessions.

If your Yama King is not one of the original spirits that went bad, then other questions arise. Most importantly, how did this being gain the necessary power to seize the title of Yama King, and how was he able to gain the acceptance of the other lords of Yomi? Given the nature of the Yama Kings, the answer to this usually lies in acts of great cruelty and corruption. Many of the most powerful Yama Kings began humbly, and only through treachery and the most obscene acts of barbarism did they reach their current stations. In this case, it is not so important to know what the Yama King has done since he achieved power. More important is mapping out how he attained power in the first place, and what he plans to do next to increase it.

You must also decide if your Yama King will be an entirely new creation or if he is based on another source. Original creations are a lot of fun and great for surprising characters, but they involve a lot of work and preparation. Taking ideas from anime, Eastern mythology and literature can cut down on your preparation time, and gives your players a reference point. Even if your Yama King is adapted from another source, however, you should alter the original concept to suit your needs. An exact translation of an anime or mythological villain loses impact if your players are too familiar with your source material. Still, sometimes it is more interesting and satisfying to arrive at a new interpretation of an old idea than to come up with an entirely new one.

2. WHO IS SHE, AND WHAT DOES SHE WANT?

Who is your Yama Queen? What language is her name derived from? Japanese? Thai? Korean? If Chinese, which dialect? It isn't always necessary to go into that much detail, but it can be very satisfying to do so.

Next, look at your devil's history and pull a personality from it. Is the Yama King violent, fiery, mutable and aspected toward Yang, or is he subtle, cunning, cold and more attuned to the Yin principle? Is your Yama Queen entirely and unswervingly corrupt, or is she more complex than that?

Yama Kings are simultaneously forces of nature and characters in an enormous pageant. How do you intend to reconcile these elements? What your Yama King is has already been established. What makes her interesting is *who* she is, and how her actions in the chronicle are derived from her personality.

3. HOW DOES HE CHOOSE TO APPEAR?

All Yama Kings can change their shapes to suit their needs, but what form most captures the essence of your particular demon lord? Is she a short, coldly attractive Japanese businesswoman, or does he have six arms and blue skin, and wear a necklace of severed heads? Does your Yama King want to soothe those who behold him into underestimating him, or does he want to terrify them into submission? The forms he wears can show a lot about the Yama King's self-image, as well as the image he wishes to project to others. A Yama King who appears as 50 tons of sentient sludge probably does not want to be perceived as cultured or refined; one who appears dressed in the attire of a magistrate probably wishes to distance herself from her cruder compatriots.

In choosing a standard form for your Yama King, bear in mind that Yin lords tend to be feminine or corpse-like in appearance, whereas Yang lords are most frequently masculine and bestial. Lords who began as mortals usually retain some ties to their old appearance, but other Yama Kings are often grossly inhuman in form. Also, the type of hell your demon lord rules over can influence his appearance. The lord of a hell of disease and decay will be tainted with those afflictions, though he probably welcomes them as a small price to pay for the power he now wields.

4. WHERE DOES HE RULE?

As noted previously in this chapter, Yomi contains a huge number of domains, all of which are wildly diverse. Unless your Yama King travels continually like the Wandering Overlord, he probably should have a hell of his own. A domain is essential to any self-respecting Yama King; it is home and fortress, and the place from which he draws power by tormenting souls in his keeping.

What aspect of his domain appeals to the Yama King? As the most powerful entity in his own domain, a Yama King can change his realm with a thought. Why has he chosen to make it look the way it does? Does his subconscious ever wander, or does he ever lose fine control over his domain? What happens then?

In most cases, the hell of a Yama King is aspected to the same energies as its lord. Yin-aspected Yama Kings have realms closer to the Underworld of the dead, while Yang-aspected Yama Kings have realms full of corrupted nature spirits and flame. If the Yama King is not aspected to either Yin or Yang, because he follows the way of balance or for other, odder reasons, then his hell is likely to be quite odd. Any domain in the Yomi World tends naturally toward Yin or Yang, and realms that defy this are bizarre even by the standards of Hell.

5. WHO SERVES HIM?

Entities as vast as Yama Kings do not need to fight their own battles. The whole point of granting demonic investments is to lure others into doing their fighting, spying and corrupting for them. These devils utilize a wide array of

akuma, *bakemono*, twisted *hengeyokai*, power-hungry *chi'n*ta and especially plain old mortals. Why does your Yama King use the agents he does? What does it say about Emma-o that he only uses female *akuma*? Why does Ravana limit himself to his shape-shifting *rakshas*?

Yang-aspected Yama Kings are more likely to use *Kumo*, *bakemono* and twisted nature spirits, while their Yin-aspected counterparts tend to use Spectres, Faceless Ones and stranger things out of the Labyrinth. Nearly all Yama Kings use *akuma*. The Wan Xian aggravated the Yama Kings to the verge of madness (and often beyond), and now it gives the Yama Kings a vengeful satisfaction to use the spiritual descendants of the Ten Thousand Immortals as concubines, lackeys and slaves.

Yama Kings have access to the foulest monstrosities in the Middle Kingdom, so there's no need to stick to the basics. If your Yama Queen would rather be served by an army of terra cotta soldiers, corrupted bamboo-spirits, carnivorous flying monkeys or a cult of cannibalistic hedge wizards, she has the power to make it so.

Follow these guidelines and you will easily populate the Thousand Hells with horrors barely hinted at in these pages. And once you've mastered these rules, start breaking them. The Yama Kings are too varied and terrible to be restrained by anything so simple as a set of guidelines.

Yomi is yours now, to create and populate as you will. Have fun.

SYSTEMS OF YOMI

However the characters might manage to get to Yomi, their unlives suddenly become a great deal more difficult once they arrive. Simple things, so often taken for granted in the mortal world, provide potentially fatal complications in the Thousand Hells. An unwary or careless Kuei-jin is likely to make a lethal mistake within hours of his arrival, simply by refusing to realize that once in Yomi, the old rules of existence no longer necessarily apply.

Chi

GATHERING CHI

Kuei-jin must have a source of Chi on which to feed, so as to support their Arts and their bodies each night. Alas for any Cathayans caught in Yomi, the Thousand Hells are low on potential foodstuffs of the mortal variety. As a result, any vampire trapped in Yomi must find either an alternative to blood or — much less likely — another *shen* trapped in the realm.

Fortunately for lost travelers, doing so is easier than it might sound: Chi flows through the stuff of the Thousand Hells in the same way it flows through the Middle Kingdom. Individual Chi streams, called serpent lines or demon rivers, wind through the realms and meet in demon pools all across

the landscape. While such confluences are by no means common, there are enough that a dedicated, cautious and lucky Kuei-jin might well find enough to survive on.

Feeding from the serpent lines is not a pleasant experience, however. By its very nature, Yomi infects these rivers with its pain and cruelty. The Yomi World is made up of the most defiled parts of both the Yin and Yang Worlds; a Kuei-jin drawing Chi from the environment here is drawing into herself the embodiment of corruption. The taint from doing so persists in a vampire's body long after she leaves the realm — assuming she does in fact manage to leave. Each time a Kuei-jin absorbs Chi from Yomi, she gains one point in the Flaw: *Defiled*. At one point, the defilement of the vampire's body lasts a year; at two points, two years; at three, four years, and so on until the character reaches six points. After that, the Flaw is permanent unless bought off in the normal fashion. The usual effects of this Flaw begin as soon as the character gains the first point of defiled Chi.

Because the Yomi World is a spirit realm, Kuei-jin may access ambient Chi there more easily than they might in the physical world; osmosis is therefore the most common manner of gathering Chi in Hell. Cathayans may also attempt to steal Chi from other beings in the Thousand Hells, but any Kuei-jin wishing to try this method must be prepared to deal with an extremely angry soul.

BLOOD (DHARMA 1+)

If a particularly young or inexperienced Kuei-jin has the misfortune to find himself in one of the Thousand Hells, he has no choice but to find a still-living being to sate his hunger. For the young Cathayan, feeding on the blood of the living works as usual, but the chance of finding something on which to feed is slim. It is quite probable that the lack of food leads most Hell-bound young Kuei-jin to their Final Deaths. Attempts to feed on *akuma* or other creatures native to Yomi can have results ranging from the horrific to the catastrophic; it is not blood that flows in those creatures' veins. Ingesting these foul ichors can do anything from flooding the Kuei-jin with defiled Chi to melting her face right off.

OSMOSIS (DHARMA 2+)

When a Kuei-jin attempts to draw in ambient Chi, she first needs to find a relatively undisturbed area in which to meditate for a few moments. Once the desired location (and peace and quiet) has been attained, the player then rolls the desired Chi Virtue (difficulty of 8; 9 if the vampire is attempting to gather Yang Chi in a Yin-aspected realm or vice versa — see "Aspected Hells," below). Any success on this roll allows a character to absorb one point of Chi during a turn of undisturbed meditation.

A Kuei-jin may not feed from the same site more than twice in a row. Doing so drains the area dry and may well attract the attention of local powers who are very interested in anyone stealing their resources. Though Chi is relatively easily gathered in Yomi, it must still replenish itself after being drained; doing so takes 24 hours and during that time the spot that has been sucked dry stands out as psychically empty (Perception + Empathy, difficulty 7, to detect the void in the energies). Should a player botch his Chi Virtue roll, his character is first flooded with defiled energy, then forcibly ejected from the stream of Chi. The sudden influx of corruption demands an immediate Shadow Soul roll. In addition, the character suffers three levels of aggravated damage (soakable) as a result of his violent removal from the flow of Chi.

BREATH (DHARMA 6+)

Only the strongest Kuei-jin can attempt to steal Chi from other denizens of the Yomi World. Not only are the demon servants, *akuma* and other assorted spirits extremely possessive of anything they consider their own, but the resultant Chi itself is defiled beyond anything that could ever appear in the Middle Kingdom. Kuei-jin with enough understanding to draw Chi from Yomi spirits can cleanse the energy as they absorb it. On the other hand, an arrogant vampire who uses this technique before she is ready is certain to be overcome by the tainted Chi she draws forth.

Just as in the physical world, any Kuei-jin attempting to feed thus must be in Wind Soul and in physical contact with his target. The player then rolls the Chi Virtue corresponding to the type of energy he wishes to steal. The target resists with Willpower, and both rolls are made at a difficulty of 7 (which may, of course, be modified by the

DRINKING FROM THE SAME WELL

One might reasonably assume that once a character finds a favorably aspect dragon line, she might be able to return to it again and again for sustenance. Alas that Yomi is not reasonable. Dragon lines have earned their name, in part, due to the way they writhe across the landscape of Yomi. A Kuei-jin looking to revisit a friendly source of Chi is more likely to find a scorched and barren channel, or even nothing at all. The serpent lines move at their own whim; none can predict where they might go. Even the Yama Kings have difficulty controlling the flow of Chi within their realms; only the mightiest have tamed serpent lines such that they follow stable courses.

Storyteller). If the vampire gains more successes than the target, each success beyond the number the target rolled allows him to drain one point of Chi. If the players roll the same number of successes or the vampire rolls fewer successes than his victim, the attack fails and the target is free to retaliate. On a botch, a Kuei-jin may not attempt to steal breath from the victim ever again; furthermore, the offender gains a point of Demon Chi.

DEMON CHI

The calm soul may reflect the universe, but what happens when the universe so reflected is made of suffering? The Thousand Hells are designed to torment souls; for a Kuei-jin, this means that her P'o is constantly being strengthened and agitated for as long as she dwells in Yomi. The right kind or amount of pain can make even the most rigidly disciplined Cathayan lose control, and pain is what Yomi is all about. The P'o grows stronger as the character spends more time in the Thousand Hells, feeding off the negative energy of its surroundings.

In Yomi, the character's Demon Chi pool is no longer restricted by the P'o rating. Characters may accumulate up to 10 points of Demon Chi. Once a character reaches that level of contamination, his P'o may attempt to take control of his actions. The player should make a Shadow Soul roll; if the Hun fails to stay in charge, the player — or Shadowguide — must give the P'o Archetype free rein for the duration of the scene as the darker half of the Kuei-jin's soul comes to the surface. Furthermore, when the character's Demon Chi rating reaches 10, the player acquires a permanent dot in the P'o Virtue, regardless of whether or not the P'o takes over.

ASPECTED HELLS

Like individual Kuei-jin themselves, individual hells within the Yomi World may be Chi-imbalanced. Depending on its proximity to either the Yin or the Yang World, its ruler's whim or something more arcane, a realm may have a strong disposition toward one or the other of the aspects.

CAN'T A VAMPIRE GET ANY PEACE AROUND HERE?

Many Arts require that some time be spent in undisturbed meditation to facilitate their effective use. This generally implies that the Kuei-jin needs a relatively secluded place, freedom from interruption by other creatures and some degree of physical shelter, whether it's just a shady spot under a tree or an enclosure in front of a household shrine. A focus for concentration is also important — postures, chants or katas often help Kuei-jin in their meditations.

None of these things come easily in the Thousand Hells. All sorts of other beings from demons and *akuma* to tortured souls fill each hell, just looking for something new to torment. The point of Hell, after all, is punishment — sitting still and focusing one's will most assuredly does not, in the minds of demon servitors and torturers, work toward that end. Even if the hell's residents don't find the vampire and disrupt her concentration, the basic environment of many hells acts as sufficient distraction in itself. Shards of glass blown on gale-strength winds, scorching heat or unbearable atmospheric pressure tend to make concentration difficult, to say the least.

In game terms, difficulty for meditation in one of the hells increases by two unless the Kuei-jin has a Meditation rating of 4 or better. At four dots in the Meditation Skill, the vampire's difficulty for achieving calm is at +1; only the most practiced bodhisattvas (five dots) are disciplined enough to ignore all of Yomi's distractions and meditate as usual in Hell.

Whether a particular hell is aspected and to what degree is left up to the Storyteller, but in a strongly imbalanced realm, assume an 80-20 split of the two kinds of Chi.

Any Chi imbalance affects the hell in various ways. First and most obviously, the disharmony shapes physical appearances. In a Yang-aspected hell, colors may be mad-deningly bright or might ripple rapidly enough to cause vertigo in any soul unfortunate enough to be trapped within the light show. Sensations may be so heightened that a single touch can drive characters out of their minds with agony, while scents and tastes grow strong enough to be painful. Yang-aspected hells include, among others, the Hell of Being Boiled Alive and the Hell of the Seven Burning Seas.

Yin-aspected hells, on the other hand, often appear withered and barren, their inhabitants skeletal or rotted. Colors are dim here, the light pale and wan. Motion in Yin-aspected hells is usually slow and painstaking; only decay is

rapid here. In such places even the strongest sensations may be reduced to a dull twinge. It is quite common for souls trapped in such places to be slowly eviscerated over the course of centuries, as the victims suffer more from awareness of what is being done to them than any physical pain the sluggish hell inflicts. Punishment in a Yin-aspected hell might involve being abandoned to the ravages of a cruel environment for years at a time or being forced to die slowly over and over again. The pain is no less in a Yin hell than in a Yang one, but the manner of its infliction does change. The Hell of Pestilence and the *Shikome* Hell are good examples of Yin hells.

A hell's local Chi imbalance also affects how Kuei-jin may gather and store Chi within its borders. Finding Chi attuned to Yin in a Yang realm — or vice versa — is particularly difficult. Kuei-jin attempting to locate a serpent line of Chi attuned to the realm's opposite aspect should roll the corresponding Chi Virtue (difficulty 7). Success indicates that the vampire finds the demon river he needs. If the roll fails, the Kuei-jin can find only the dominant type of Chi. On a botch, not only does the character not find the Chi he sought but he also gains a point of Demon Chi as his senses are assaulted by the corruption of the serpent lines. Even if a character finds the opposite-aspected Chi he seeks, he may not store more than his Chi Virtue rating's worth of energy at a time. In effect, the hell's imbalance is so strong that it imbalances all who exist within it.

DISCIPLINES AND ARTS

Characters finding themselves in the Yomi World quickly discover that things simply don't work the same way as they do in the Middle Kingdom. The corruption of Chi, the unrelenting torment of both resident souls and visitors (like the characters) and the fundamental differences in the raw materials available to Kuei-jin all combine to warp Cathayans' Arts into things sometimes only vaguely resembling their earthly equivalents.

CHI ARTS

EQUILIBRIUM

These Arts are significantly affected by the presence or absence of a Chi Imbalance in the hell. The difficulty for using any of the Equilibrium powers to adjust the opposed type of Chi in an imbalanced hell goes up by one. Additionally, it is impossible to attune another Kuei-jin to Balance, as with Adjust Balance, in a strongly aspected realm.

Note: Chi Mastery (Equilibrium •••••) functions in Hell in a fashion similar to gathering Chi from another creature's breath. To use this power, a Kuei-jin must be in physical contact with his target. The player then rolls the Chi Virtue corresponding to the type of energy he wishes to steal. The target resists with Willpower; both rolls are made at a difficulty of 7 (which may, of course, be modified by the Storyteller). To infect Chi, the vampire rolls Intelligence + Equilibrium (difficulty 8); the target may resist as above. If the Kuei-jin succeeds, the target vomits defiled Chi and suffers a health level of damage as per the Flaw: *Defiled*

(Kindred of the East, page 95). If the target scores more successes than the vampire, the attack fails. A botch gains the Kuei-jin a point of Demon Chi.

TAPESTRY

Attempting to shape the raw stuff of the Yomi World is folly. The serpent lines in Yomi are corrupt, and manipulating them directly is sure to gain the Kuei-jin little more than a taint on her own soul. If the vampire wishes to try, though, she must spend a Willpower point in addition to whatever Chi the Art demands. Handling the defiled lines directly also gains the character a point of Demon Chi; if the character spends too much time immersed in the serpent lines, she begins to amass points in the Flaw: *Defiled* in the same manner as she would when feeding. For each three uses of this Art, the player rolls Stamina (difficulty 8). Success means the vampire manages to keep the taint from her soul; failure allows the corruption to course through her with predictable results.

YIN AND YANG PRANA

Like the Arts of Equilibrium, these Arts are influenced by any Chi Imbalance in the Yomi realm. The difficulty for using Yang Prana in a Yin-aspected realm increases by one, but the same power used in a Yang-aspected world functions at a -1 difficulty. The same is true for Yin arts in Yang and Yin hells. From a purely logistical standpoint, Yang Prana Arts are often more accessible in Hell because their required motions and postures are quick and explosive, whereas the katas used in Yin Prana Arts are slow, deliberate and time-consuming.

Note: Semblance of the Scarlet Queen (Yang Prana •••••) and Semblance of the Ebon Dragon (Yin Prana •••••) might seem like ideal ways to escape the Thousand Hells — and they are, if the Kuei-jin can pass the Wall surrounding the Yomi World. Yomi is meant to keep souls in, and the barriers between it and the Yin and Yang Worlds are deliberately made thick. To escape, a character must first achieve his desired semblance, then submerge himself in a demon river of the appropriate Chi type to travel between the worlds. The player must then roll Willpower to remain inside the filthy Chi stream; if the roll fails, the vampire is ejected from the demon river and gains a point of Demon Chi. If the roll is successful, one more challenge awaits the Kuei-jin: Guardians of the Wall (see "Creatures of Hell," page 90) make a point of watching the serpent lines where they flow into the Yin and Yang Worlds for just these kinds of would-be escapees.

DEMON ARTS

The greatest danger in the use of Demon Arts is the potential for Shadow Soul. As usual, the player must roll for Shadow Soul each time she uses a Demon Art, but certain applications of this discipline require even more rolls, reflecting the effects of the Yomi World upon the Kuei-jin P'o.

BLACK WIND

This Art costs two points of Demon Chi to initiate in Yomi, but no further Chi must be expended while the Kuei-jin is in this state. Each turn after the first, the player must make two rolls: one for Fire Soul and one for Shadow Soul. The Fire Soul roll is always made first. If the vampire falls into frenzy, no further Shadow Soul rolls must be made, but if she resists Fire Soul, she is still vulnerable to her P'o. Should her P'o take over, no further Fire Soul rolls must be made — Black Wind's pitfalls are doubly threatening in the Thousand Hells, but a Kuei-jin can still be in only one soul state at a time.

HUN AND P'O

The pull of the Thousand Hells upon the P'o is strong and seductive. Demon Chi is easy to get and easy to spend, and the ambient pain of the realms call the Shadow Soul to the surface. It is simple for Kuei-jin in the Middle Kingdom to talk about the necessity of balance between the Hun and P'o — in the Yomi World, vampires need balance perhaps less than they need restraint and a good measure of luck. If the P'o takes over for good while a Cathayan is in Hell, the Kuei-jin is likely doomed to stay in Yomi until the Sixth Age and beyond.

Because of Yomi's constant reinforcement of the P'o, a Kuei-jin has more difficulty than normal in recovering from Shadow Soul. While a P'o's takeover still lasts but a scene, even in Hell, it is much more difficult for the Hun to regain command at the end of the P'o's usual time in control. At the end of the normal Shadow Soul duration, control of the vampire's body does not automatically revert to the Hun's control. Instead, the Hun must make a concerted effort to regain control of its body; if it does not, the P'o retains control for at least another scene.

To allow the Hun to reassert itself, the player rolls Hun Virtue (difficulty 8). If she succeeds, the Hun is able to regain command itself. If she fails, the P'o remains in control for another scene. At the end of the next scene, the player may roll again. For every 24 consecutive hours during which the P'o retains control, however, the difficulty of the Hun roll increases by one.

The P'o, however, can occasionally represent the Kuei-jin's best chance for survival. Sometimes the best way to respond to violence is with violence. The Hun can voluntarily submit to the P'o should the situation demand it. However, the P'o may not want to relinquish control at the end of its mandated time in charge.

DEMON SHINTAI

Because the P'o is so much closer to the surface in the Yomi World, a Kuei-jin need only spend two Demon Chi points and two turns to invoke Demon Shintai. The Art does invite the P'o to assume control, though. For each three turns that the character stays in his demonic form, the player must make a Shadow Soul roll to see if the P'o emerges and assumes a dominant role.

SHINTAI DISCIPLINES

The Shintai Disciplines function almost as usual in the Yomi World, but the corruption of the environment bleeds into the physical appearance of the Shintai forms. Each form becomes more gruesome in its manifestation, mirroring the particular taint of the Kuei-jin's specific hell.

BLOOD SHINTAI

Blood Shintai works quite easily in the Thousand Hells. Flow Like Blood (Blood Shintai •••) is the only part of this Art that changes. In a Yin-aspected hell, the vampire must spend two points of Yang Chi to initiate the change.

BONE SHINTAI

In a Yang-aspected hell, this Shintai costs double the normal amount of Yin Chi. In certain hells, the bone extensions seem to be made of the actual stuff of the realm — sand, ice, lava or steel, for example.

JADE SHINTAI

This Shintai is the most dangerous of all to use in Yomi. In the Middle Kingdom, a Kuei-jin may safely channel Chi through her body, but in Yomi it's a different story. Each use of Jade Shintai requires the player to make a Chi Virtue roll, (difficulty 8), to avoid absorbing the taint of the Thousand Hells. If the player fails or botches the roll, the character gains a point of Demon Chi.

Note: Jade Servant of the August Personage (Jade Shintai •••••) becomes somewhat problematic in the Yomi World. There is no guarantee that there will be water, wood or metal within an individual hell, so the vampire must make do with the materials around him — drawing the raw stuff of Yomi into himself. If the Kuei-jin does attempt to use something from the hell to guide his Jade Servant form, the Storyteller should determine the Yin and Yang Chi costs, keeping in mind the realm's Chi imbalance or lack thereof. Whatever the Yin or Yang cost, however, the vampire gains a point in the Flaw: *Defiled* each time he uses this power, as the realm's basic corruption floods and shapes his body.

FLESH SHINTAI

The only factor affecting this Shintai's use in Yomi is Chi imbalance; in Yin realms, the Yang Chi costs for these powers double.

GHOST-FLAME SHINTAI

This Art works normally in Yomi.

SOUL DISCIPLINES

Soul Disciplines are powerful in the Middle Kingdom, and they are even more so in the Yomi World. The Kuei-jin in control of both halves of her own soul — and potentially others' — stands the best chance of not only escaping Yomi but achieving whatever end she might have there as well.

CULTIVATION

Cultivation is an extremely important Discipline in the Thousand Hells. Since the P'o is strengthened through exposure to the Yomi World, a vampire who can truly harness that power wields a terrible weapon indeed. As mentioned above, the P'o can be a Kuei-jin's best chance at escaping or enduring the torments of Hell. Directing that energy, then, and repressing it in others, is a particularly effective strategy for getting things done.

CHI'JU MUH

This is the most powerful Discipline a Kuei-jin can bring into Yomi — and the most dangerous. Uses of Rasa, Purification and Spirit-Eating while P'o-dominated certainly do not endear characters to the masters of various hells. On the other hand, the demon lords make a point of learning this Art specifically so they can use Purification upon their victims. Unfortunate souls who find themselves in a hell ruled by one of a lord with such talents frequently succumb to the sheer volume of demonic energy forced upon them.

INTERNALIZE

Free time to perform rituals is virtually nonexistent in Yomi. All rolls to utilize this Discipline are at a +1 difficulty because of the lack of time, space and other necessities required to perform these Arts.

OBLIGATION

Rooting around in the minds of *akuma* or demon lords is decidedly dangerous. Each use of this Discipline results in a resisted roll instead of a simple roll (the character's Willpower versus the target's Willpower, difficulty 7). If the target gains more successes than the vampire, no information is gathered or no link is established between the two minds, and the target is free to act as normal. If the vampire rolls more successes, she achieves her goal and the link is formed. A botch inflicts one health level of damage upon the character from either the violence of the mental intrusion or the ferocity with which the intruder is ejected from her victim's mind.

RISES

Rites suffer the same difficulties as other meditation-based Disciplines: There's no time, no space and no peace. Few rites are even the slightest bit effective in Yomi, and those rites that do work often have unexpected effects. Completely ineffective rites include Imbuing the Jade — even if jade does occur naturally in a given hell, there is no moon as the Kuei-jin know it to purify and enchant the

figurines. Rites of Wind and Water, because they deal so closely with Chi flows, accrue Demon Chi for the Kuei-jin performing them. All rolls involved in performing rites are made at a +1 difficulty in Yomi, assuming the rite in question can be performed at all.

Social and Individual Rites may work, depending on the Storyteller's preference, but the usual occasions for performing them are unlikely to come up in the Thousand Hells. One Social Rite, though, is almost exclusive to the Yomi World: the rite used to formally make a Kuei-jin into an *akuma*. This rite varies from hell to hell and Yama King to Yama King, but each version incorporates submerging the candidate in both Yin and Yang demon rivers. Many versions also include some form of ritual combat.

BEHOLD THE SPIRIT'S DOORWAY

Gateways out of Yomi are certainly more numerous than gateways into Yomi, but that's a matter of damning with faint praise. The gateways that do exist are also closely guarded by the demon lords' handservants. After all, Yomi is not designed to let anyone out easily. Appealing to the spirits governing the realm is also problematic; in effect, the rite calls directly to the Yama King or demon lord holding the hell.

Behold the Spirit's Doorway must be performed either under great protection or near the site of an existing gate. In either case, the character must be utterly undisturbed in order to perform the rite; intrusions from guardians and the like spoil the rite immediately. Even if the rite is successful, it does not open a gate. Instead, it merely grants the Kuei-jin performing the rite knowledge of where a gate can be found. The character must still avoid the guardians and make his own way out of the particular realm. (See below)

RITE OF SUPPLICATION

Once a gateway has been found, this rite may be attempted in order to open the gate. The rite works normally, but the guardians of the gateways out of Yomi are ever watchful.



WESTERNERS IN YOMI

It is exceedingly rare for a Kin-jin to come to the Thousand Hells. Perhaps one Westerner in ten thousand becomes lost in the astral realms; perhaps a vampire might travel to Yomi in the company of a visiting *akuma*; perhaps the vampire was directly summoned by one of the more recruitment-minded Yama Kings — the exact details are uncommon regardless. Whatever the circumstances, the vampire sticks out like a butterfly pinned to black velvet. Because of this scarcity of Kin-jin, the details of the ways in which Yomi warps Western Disciplines are not well-documented in the Middle Kingdom or in any of the hells.

THE KIN-JIN THEMSELVES

The Yomi World is something most Kin-jin would never even dream of encountering. The first experience with these hells is more than simply frightening for a Western vampire. The Kuei-jin dread Yomi and they know a little bit about what to expect, so the terror of the place for an unsuspecting vampire is magnified a thousand times. And it's not just the foreignness of the hells, either. Culture shock — even in Hell — can be overcome, but there are very good reasons for Western vampires to be afraid in Yomi.

The Kin-jin suffer more than the usual run of torments and punishments in Yomi — these inelegant outsiders are restricted to Yomi's lowest form of sustenance: drinking the blood of other living things. As a result, their sources of food are significantly limited. A vampire attempting to feed from a Kuei-jin (*akuma* or otherwise) finds herself with a mouthful of black sludge and an extremely irritated Kuei-jin, and tortured P'o souls just don't have blood in their bodies, only more sludge. (See p. 82 for some potential effects of drinking *akuma* ichor.) Feeding from a demon or a demon lord merely exacerbates the problem to hideous new levels.

So the *gweilo* go hungry in Yomi, which means that they slip further out of balance with themselves, frenzied more and more easily as they get hungrier and hungrier. As a result, they become more likely to tangle with anyone or anything in their paths — including such inadvisable targets as demons — and they spend blood to heal themselves and activate their Disciplines. Doing so increases their hunger, and so it goes. Thus, if a Kin-jin in Yomi cannot find some reliable source of blood, her unlife is liable to turn into a rapidly shrinking spiral of hunger and madness.

THE YOMI CURSE

Kin-jin and the Western mortals do not pay even a fraction of the attention to energy attunement — and defilement — that the Kuei-jin do. It's not that the *gweilo* don't care if they become tainted or defiled, it's more that

they see it in terms of a disease or a curse put upon them by some completely outside influence instead of in terms of Chi flow and inner corruption. As a result, Kin-jin in Hell do not develop the Flaw: *Defiled*. Instead, they accumulate up to six points in the Flaw: *Cursed*.

Because Kin-jin do not interact with Chi in the same way as Kuei-jin, the manner in which they acquire their Flaw is uniquely theirs. Western vampires slowly absorb the taint of the Thousand Hells simply by being in contact with it, like a sponge. They don't need to deliberately ingest Chi; rather, it infuses them.

The Yomi Curse manifests itself in various ways, depending on the level of defiled energy absorbed.

- The vampire's blood becomes tainted and acidic, inflicting one health level of damage on any creature — vampire, ghoul or intended child — attempting to drink it.

- The vampire exudes an aura of corruption beyond the normal vampiric aura. All rolls to read aura, Sense Wyrn and so forth, are made at a -1 difficulty and return an almost overpowering sense of evil.

- Each evening, the vampire's flesh attempts to rid itself forcibly of the corrupt vitae. The player must make a Stamina roll, adding any Fortitude, to avoid the character's taking a health level of nonaggravated damage from the violent retching that racks his body.

- The Curse spreads into the vampire's flesh, making her skin wither and her face sink in upon itself. The skin also darkens, but not into any remotely human-seeming color: it turns the blackish-gray of grave rot. These vampires also give off a version of the stench of the grave — an odor that mixes the worst aspects the scents of rotted flesh and hydrochloric acid.

- The vampire gains a muted version of the Giovanni clan weakness: each time the character attempts to feed from a mortal vessel, the taint seeps into her victim and inflicts one extra health level of damage — not double the levels — on the poor mortal. (Giovanni afflicted with the Yomi Curse suffer both effects.)

- The vampire's corruption is now complete; all the effects of the Curse are now permanent. No cure for this state of unlife has yet been found, although rumor has it that the Salubri know more of Eastern curses and infections than any other vampire might suspect.

DISCIPLINES

ANIMALISM

The most obvious problem with this Discipline is that there are few animals in Hell. Unless the character is in a realm specifically populated by animals, the first two levels of this Discipline are useless in Yomi. The applications of this Discipline to the inner Beast, however, do function, but they suffer the same difficulties as the Soul Art Obligation. The minds and Beasts of even the least powerful Yomi creatures are treacherous territory for Kin-jin. All uses of this Discipline relating to quelling or inciting the inner demon require a resisted roll as per Obligation Arts.

FRENZY

Western vampires are not subject to shadow nature like Kuei-jin; their souls aren't constructed for it. Instead, frenzy rolls should be substituted for Shadow Soul rolls where appropriate.

Provocation	Difficulty
Sight of blood (when hungry)	5
Smell of blood (when hungry)	6
Demon taunts	5
Physical torture	6
Prolonged mental contact with Yomi creatures	7

Storytellers should feel free to modify these difficulties to suit their chronicles.

AUSPEX

Heightened Senses is exceedingly painful in Yomi — increasing the amount of sensation transmitted from the body's organs to the brain is a bad idea in a realm dedicated to torment. The actual effects of the use of this power vary from instance to instance, but suggestions include being dropped into frenzy from the sudden increase in physical pain, gaining derangements, inflicting an extra health level of damage from any actual physical attack and so on.

Telepathy used on any creature native to the Thousand Hells works like Obligation — rolls are automatically resisted and the consequences of failure are dire indeed.

Difficulties on Psychic Projection are increased to anywhere between 8 and 10, owing to the unfamiliarity of the environment. Additionally, a vampire willing to leave her body unattended in one of the Thousand Hells may deserve what she finds when she returns — assuming she returns at all. Even the protection of another vampire or Kuei-jin cannot guarantee that nothing will happen to the Kin-jin's physical husk. The Yomi World, after all, is nothing if not unpleasantly unpredictable.

DAIMOINON

No Discipline emulates the tortures of the Yama Kings or their demon overseers more accurately than Daimoinon. The effects of this Discipline are largely unchanged in Yomi, as they are already so corrupt that only their appearances and presentations are affected by the tainted surroundings. The systems relating to this Discipline work as usual if the vampire is attempting to twist a P'o soul or other such unfortunate, but any attempt to affect a demon, an *akuma* or any other Yomi creature results in a resisted roll as per Obligation. Though the effects of Daimoinon aren't much changed in Yomi, the simple use of the Discipline opens the channels of corruption even wider in the vampire. Each time a character successfully uses Daimoinon, the player must roll her Path rating (difficulty 8). If the roll fails, the character gains a point in the Flaw: *Cursed*.

DOMINATE

The minds of demons are not healthy places for vampires. Dominate works as per Obligation.

NECROMANCY

Necromancers in Yomi are suddenly in a spirit realm themselves — there's no need to reach across the Shroud to affect a ghost because it's right there in front of the vampire's face. Still, the vampire can attempt to compel the souls in the Thousand Hells, summon them, *et cetera*. Spirits in Yomi may spend Chi to negate successes on a necromancer's roll to compel, summon or otherwise control them; one point of any type of Chi cancels one success.

The Sepulchre Path is the most useful in the Thousand Hells, as it deals primarily with manipulating souls. The Bone Path is relatively useless, on the other hand, because it often needs corpses — Yomi is a spirit place, and the corpses of its inhabitants are mostly long rotted away. The Ash Path is even less useful than the Bone Path in Yomi — once again, there's no need to attempt to cross the Shroud, as the vampire is already in a spirit realm. With the exception of Ex Nihilo (Ash Path ♦♦♦♦), the powers of the Ash Path have no real effect.

Ex Nihilo may be used to create a gateway out of the Yomi World, but such gateways are subject to the same restrictions and dangers as gateways created and opened through Kuei-jin rites: finding an appropriate site, finding time to perform the ritual to open it and passing the Guardians of the Wall. Shroud Mastery only allows the necromancer greater ease in performing feats like Ex Nihilo in the Yomi World.

Necromantic rituals, of course, are difficult to perform in Yomi for precisely the same reasons that Kuei-jin have difficulty performing their own rites. In addition to the lack of free, uninterrupted time, Kin-jin have the disadvantage of being easily distinguished from the rest of the souls inhabiting Yomi, which translates into their being more easily picked out and harassed by the overseers of the hells. Kin-jin attempting to use rituals take an extra +1 difficulty to all rolls in addition to the +1 Kuei-jin suffer.

PRESENCE

The Yomi World and its creatures are impressive in their own right; a Kin-jin thinking to out-awe the Thousand Hells can be foolish indeed. All rolls involved in invoking Presence effects are made at +1 difficulty, and those in range need only spend a Willpower point to neutralize the effect.

PROTEAN

Like Demon Shintai, Protean invites the darker side of the Kin-jin to the surface. Each time the vampire uses this Discipline, she must make a frenzy roll as her Beast surges up. Additionally, the modifications to the vampire's body show up as twisted reflections of the hell, much like Bone Shintai. A Gangrel unfortunate enough to gain an animal feature through frenzy in the Thousand Hells gains a distinctly demonic feature instead of a normal animal attribute. Some examples of demonic features are listed in Demon Shintai Characteristics (Kindred of the East, page 109).

Earth Meld in Yomi risks the vampire's sanity as well as her soul. Each time a Kin-jin succeeds in fusing her essence with that of the Yomi World, she gains a point in the Yomi Curse. In order to actually succeed, though, the player must first make a Rotschreck roll. Failure means the character not only does not meld but flees, frenzied and screaming, from the site. Should the player botch the roll, the character gains a derangement of the Storyteller's choosing.

THAUMATURGY

In Yomi, the basic building blocks of Thaumaturgy — blood and reality — are fundamentally different than they are in the physical world. Blood is scarce, and reality is warped beyond imagining. While this Discipline is eminently flexible when used normally, the flexibility itself becomes a liability in Yomi. Uses of Thaumaturgy tend to have utterly unpredictable — and usually unpleasant — side effects. Such effects can range from attracting unwanted demonic attention to energizing the very landscape of Hell against the thaumaturge. In all cases, the effects of mind-to-mind contact with Yomi creatures apply. All rolls are resisted and present the chance that the demon (or *akuma*, or whatever) will be able to affect the thaumaturge equally. Rituals are also performed at a +2 difficulty, again owing to the lack of undisturbed time and space in the Thousand Hells.

The Yama Kings resent any creature — vampiric or otherwise — that has any power over their domains. Use of Thaumaturgy is one of the fastest ways to disrupt the flow of energy through a hell and get the attention of its lord or lords. Whether the thaumaturge is aware of this fact, however, is an entirely different matter.

VICISSITUDE

This Discipline works much as usual in the Yomi World. The shapes that a Tzimisce creates, however, reflect the hell in the same way that Shintai Disciplines and Protean do. No matter how careful the vampire tries to be, the flesh- or bonecraft comes out warped. Vicissitude becomes most dangerous at the higher levels. Horrid Form, like Demon Shintai, invites the Beast to take control and the player must make a frenzy roll (difficulty 7) to avoid this fate. A vampire takes the greatest risk, however, in the use of Bloodform. The bloodformed vampire's liquid state absorbs the hell's taint more quickly than a solid flesh body does. As a result, each time a vampire uses Bloodform, she gains a point in the Yomi Curse.

OTHER DISCIPLINES

Celerity, Obfuscate, Obtenebation and Potence all function as normal in the Yomi World. No information has been gathered on the use of Chimerstry, Quietude or Serpents, and if the Malkavians know anything about how Dementation works in Hell, they're not telling.

ESCAPE FROM HELL

Despite the best efforts of the Yama Kings and their minions to keep all the souls that come to Yomi bound to them, some still escape. Some P'o souls claw their way out of the spirit world entirely to reunite with the Hun and receive the Second

Breath, becoming Kuei-jin. Others find their way into the Dark Kingdom of Jade; still others are loosed upon the Dark Kingdom of Iron to plague the Shadowlands.

WHAT IT TAKES

Most souls in Yomi never scrape up the guts or the courage even to attempt an escape, though they may dream of leaving every second of every day of their unives. Those P'o souls that do manage to get out share two characteristics in particular: a driving reason to leave (above and beyond the animal desire to avoid pain) and the force of will to make it happen.

Souls that escape to become Kuei-jin often have outstanding karmic debts that cannot be resolved through punishment alone. They need to return to the physical realm to deal with their families, their lives and their unfulfilled dreams face to face. Not every escapee has such noble goals, however. Most are driven not by a desire to make things right but an insane need to hurt other souls as much as and more than they themselves have been hurt. There is a slight chance that such sadistic souls may be recruited by the Yama Kings as overseers and torturers, but most never evolve beyond the Yomi equivalent of schoolyard bully — so they go looking elsewhere for souls who aren't expecting them.

A few P'o souls just slip through the cracks and end up as dronelike *kuei* in the Yellow Springs, destined for slavery or an eternity as white jade. *Kuei* don't have any particular reason to escape; they are just trapped in the trauma or the pain of their deaths and so they replay their death scenes in the Deadlands over and over until they're collected by servants of the Jade Emperor.

Strength of will is the other necessary component in an escape. Often, the simple fact of having a driving goal engenders that willpower, but sometimes strength of will must be accumulated slowly. Souls destined to become Kuei-jin have the necessary strength of soul to escape from the beginning, but other escapees tend to develop their wills through decades or centuries of resisting soul-crushing labor and torment.

SOLITARY ESCAPES

Most P'os that manage to break free of the Thousand Hells, including those of the Kuei-jin, do so alone. First the soul finds a moment when it is unwatched by the demons and overseers of the hell, then it rips through the Wall and flees. Most hells allow souls some time between periods of torture to heal — the better to break them down again — and it should be no surprise that these rest periods are favorite times for individual P'os to attempt their escapes. Unfortunately, the overseers are aware of this tendency as well, so a P'o seeking to free itself during a mandated downtime must either be unusually brutal in its rending of the Wall or unusually quick.

Some clever P'o souls create a diversion before they attempt to escape. Starting trouble is relatively easy in Yomi, especially during the height of an overseer's involvement in punishing its charges — the hard part is starting trouble without being caught in it and punished for it. This strategy tends to be used mostly by older P'os intent upon wreaking their own havoc elsewhere and other souls with more experience in the hells.

ORGANIZED ASSAULTS

Occasionally destruction-minded souls band together, forming a rough *wu* within the confines of Hell. Such organized and dedicated groups stand the best chance of escaping the Thousand Hells, as they generally have a wide range of tactics and powers at their disposal. The trouble with getting organized is twofold: First, convincing a handful of tortured souls bent on inflicting suffering on others to work together is a feat worthy of the strongest leaders. Second, keeping the alliance secret is virtually impossible. The demons watching the hells are enthusiastic about their work and they enjoy finding reasons to hand out extra punishment, so they watch very closely indeed for signs of organized resistance.

BETRAYALS AND BRIBES

The sneakiest P'os cultivate some kind of relationship with the watchers of the official gates out of Yomi, perhaps even becoming the watchers themselves. Then, once they're in a position of relative power, they simply open the gate and leave. The Guardians of the Wall (see "Creatures of Hell," below) are conditioned not to challenge those souls given authority by the Yama Kings or other lords, so the fleeing P'os need not fear pursuit — at least, not for a while. Again, though, the demon lords are aware that this sort of deception occurs, so they take care to choose only creatures or souls they believe will not betray their trust to guard the gates, and they often take steps — ranging from hostage-taking to implanting devices of control — to ensure their watchers' loyalty.

If a P'o soul simply cultivates a friendly relationship with a watcher, the trick becomes finding the thing or favor the watcher desires so much that he will look the other way as the P'o slips out the gate. The bribe could be a sacrifice to be made once the soul gets where it's going, delivery of a certain number of souls for extra attention or a promise to return, later, and to help the watcher escape then as well.

HARSH REALITY

Even with all these methods of escape detailed, it is still a rare occurrence for a soul to flee Yomi and survive the experience intact. The stories Kuei-jin tell of Yomi, in their rare talkative moments, are bone-chilling in their extremity — the torturers and Yama Kings are evil beyond any earthly concept,

and they are all-powerful in their realms. The perpetuation of destruction in the material world — thereby guaranteeing souls to be delivered to Yomi — is one of the Yama Kings' primary goals, and it is rumored that the overlords select certain P'os to be their unwitting handmaidens in the Middle Kingdom. If such talk is true, then there are no true escapees, only souls who have been set out like hounds and duped into thinking the whole exercise to be their own notion. According to other Kuei-jin, however, the Thousand Hells and their overseers are focused solely on keeping souls in and creating as much suffering as possible in Yomi itself. Their focus is so thoroughly directed inward that they banish escapees from their attention immediately, the better to concentrate on the work at hand.

CREATURES OF HELL

Not all of the denizens of the Yomi World are demons or even souls. Some are the spirits of creatures, set to guard or terrorize Yomi's inhabitants. Statistics for some of these creatures, plus statistics for the more common demons and P'o souls, are set out here; Storytellers should, as always, feel free to modify them as necessary.

GUARDIANS OF THE WALL

Created by the Yama Kings specifically for the purpose of guarding the Wall surrounding the Yomi World, these spirits are terrifying combinations of Middle Kingdom predators and Yomi demons. A typical Guardian moves on six scaled and taloned legs, its sinuous body covered in black jade armor plates. The beast's head is blocky, its golden eyes set in the front of its skull. When hunting or pursuing quarry, the Guardian snarls and roars in a demon's voice, and its fangs drip an acidic ichor.

WATCHERS OF THE GATE

Typically demons or particularly evil and trustworthy P'o souls, these guardians watch the gates to Yomi from the inside. They are generally armed with spears or swords, and no one in Hell looks twice if the Watchers destroy a soul they claim was rushing the gate or attempting to open it. The position seem to produce a rather high turnover rate, but all Watchers, regardless of origin, tend to exist along roughly similar lines.

DEMON SERVITORS

SHIKOME ASSASSIN

Physical: Strength 3, Dexterity 4, Stamina 3

Social: Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 4 (Seductive)

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 3, Athletics 3, Dodge 3, Empathy 2, Subterfuge 4 (Men)

Skills: Drive 2, Etiquette 2, Martial Arts 4 (Kuji-kiri), Melee 3, Stealth 4 (Quiet), Survival 3

Knowledge: Investigation 2, Linguistics 3 (English, Kaja, Korean, Japanese, Mandarin), Medicine 1, Occult 2, Rituals 2

Disciplines: Black Wind 4, Bone Shintai 3, Jade Shintai 2, Yin Prana 2

Backgrounds: Mentor 3, Contacts 2

Hun: 2, P'o: 8, Yin: 10, Yang: 0, Willpower: 7

Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-5/Incapacitated

Quote: None — the *shikome* generally do not speak.

Image: Icily beautiful, the *shikome* are the assassins and spies of Emma-o. While they may appear as anything they choose when on the job, all *shikome* share a massive Yin imbalance, snow-white skin, black hair, scar-

let lips and a thoughtlessly perfect efficiency. While working, most *shikome* do not appear as anything at all: Emma-o's assassins approach their targets in the Yin World, and use White Tiger Corpse, Shrouded Moon and their well-honed natural abilities to render themselves virtually impossible to detect.

Possessions: Ninja-to, steel kama-gusari, steel tonfa, bali-song, white ninja suit, puffer-fish toxin lip gloss

Roleplaying Hints: Strongly Yin-imbalanced, the average *shikome* is analytical and rational to a terrifying fault. The *shikome* are past masters of manipulation and seduction, as well as assassination. Countless are the numbers of *shen* who believe that they had redeemed a servant of Yomi, with love or otherwise, only to find themselves a pawn in the plans of Emma-o. It is believed that the Lord of the *Shikome* Hell often conducts such betrayals to no real end, save to make it that much more difficult for his servants to escape his grasp. Only a fool among the *shen* trusts one of the *shikome*, though the powers Emma-o has granted his servants have turned many wise men into fools.

As noted in *Kindred of the East*, *shikome* are given a great deal of freedom by Emma-o to accomplish their tasks, so long as they fulfill their performance quotas. As a result, *shikome* tend to be highly individualistic creatures, each one having her own favorite methods and techniques.

Storyteller Notes: The *shikome* are very dangerous, and have access to Corpse Skin, Bone Armor and easy sources of aggravated damage. Even in Kakuri Yomi, where their attacks are expected, the servants of Emma-o are still perhaps a bit much for beginning characters. An encounter with a *shikome* assassin outside of the Yomi World is quite likely to be the last event in a character's life. Storytellers should be careful about using *shikome* in a directly confrontational role, unless they'd like to see new player characters introduced into the game.



KUMO HUNTRESS

Physical: Strength 3 (6), Dexterity 4 (6), Stamina 4 (6)

Social: Charisma 2, Manipulation 2 (1), Appearance 3 (1)

Mental: Perception 4, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 4 (Her Web), Athletics 3, Brawl 4 (Spider-woman Form), Dodge 3, Intimidation 2, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Crafts (Weaving) 3, Etiquette 1, Stealth 3, Survival 4 (Kakuri Yomi)

Knowledge: Linguistics 2 (Cantonese, English, Japanese, Mandarin), Occult 1, Rituals 1

Equivalent Disciplines: Black Wind 1, Demon Shintai 5

Demon Shintai Investments: Horror, Huge Size, Thousand Fangs Form (allows the Kumo to explode into their own weight in spiders. Unless each and every spider is destroyed, the Kumo will eventually re-

generate, though doing so may take several months), Weave Webs (these sticky webs requires a 9 on the Feat of Strength chart to escape), Poison Bite (as per the poison of the Tail Stinger; requires a successful bite to use)

Backgrounds: Resources 2, Mentor 2, Contacts 1

Hun: 4, **P'o:** 8, **Yin:** 5, **Yang:** 5, **Willpower:** 5

Health Levels: -0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-5/Incapacitated

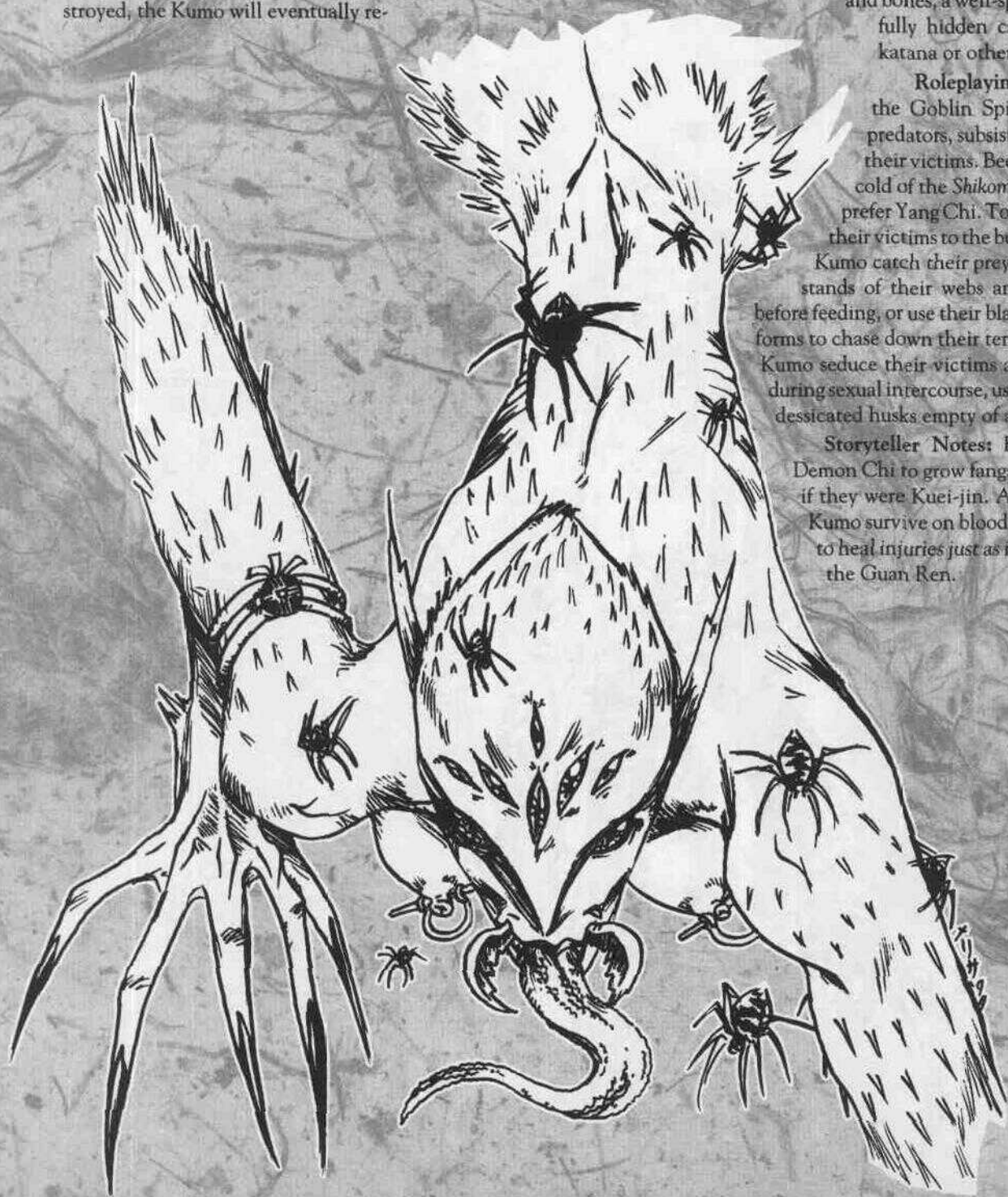
Quote: *Will you struggle? I love it when they struggle, and then I kiss them.*

Image: Thin and pallid, the Kumo inhabitants of Kakuri Yomi are spidery even in their human form. In their Lilian forms, they are monstrous black nightmares, their fangs dripping with toxin and each leg tipped with a razor-sharp talon.

Possessions: Some nicely polished skulls and bones, a well-spun web in a carefully hidden cave, a Glock-17, katana or other light weapon.

Roleplaying Hints: Kumo, the Goblin Spiders, are solitary predators, subsisting on the Chi of their victims. Because of the brutal cold of the Shikome Hell, the Kumo prefer Yang Chi. To bring the Yang in their victims to the bubbling fore, some Kumo catch their prey in the steel-hard stands of their webs and torment them before feeding, or use their blasphemous spider-forms to chase down their terrified prey. Other Kumo seduce their victims and feed on them during sexual intercourse, usually leaving only dessicated husks empty of all but bones.

Storyteller Notes: Kumo can spend Demon Chi to grow fangs or a maw, just as if they were Kuei-jin. Also like Kuei-jin, Kumo survive on blood, and may use Chi to heal injuries just as if they were one of the Guan Ren.



RAKSHA OF RAVANA

Physical: Strength 4 (7), Dexterity 3 (5), Stamina 4 (6)

Social: Charisma 3, Manipulation 4, Appearance 3

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 2

Talents: Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Dodge 3, Intimidation 2, Streetwise 1, Subterfuge 4 (Deception)

Skills: Drive 2, Etiquette 3, Firearms 1, Melee 4 (Demon Weapons), Performance 2, Stealth 3, Survival 4 (Yomi)

Knowledge: Investigation 2, Linguistics 3 (Bengali, Cantonese, English, Hindi, Korean, Japanese), Occult 2, Politics 2, Rituals 3

Disciplines: Yang Prana 4, Demon Shintai 5, Chi'u Muh 2, Bone Shintai 1

Demon Shintai Investments: Demon Weapon, Horror, Huge Size, Demon Armor (2 dice)

Backgrounds: Allies 3, Contacts 2, Resources 2

Hun (Gnosis): 3 **P'o (Rage):** 7, **Yin:** 5, **Yang:** 6, **Willpower:** 7

Body Levels: -0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-5/Incapacitated

Quote: Perhaps you cannot understand. To you, Lanka is just another Yomi realm, but to us, it is a refuge, a place where we can live without the interference of the other Yama Kings. It is our hope

that you do not take your dismemberment and sacrifice to the Living City personally.

Image: Raksha can — and do — look like anything. Anything at all.

Possessions: A handful of the gold coins of Ravana's mint, some travel jades, a dwelling in one of the city's less ruined parts, a position in the Temple of Lanka

Roleplaying Hints: For flesh-eating monsters who forsook their Dharmic paths and fled to the Yomi World, the servants of Ravana are quite likeable. Among the raksha, one often sees more sincere respect than among the most disciplined of Resplendent Cranes. Some raksha were formerly Devil-Tigers or Resplendent Cranes, and a fair percentage of them still half-cling to the trappings and tenets of their lost Dharmas.

Storyteller Notes: The raksha travel to the Middle Kingdom with fair regularity to feed and conduct business, as well as furtively roaming Yomi in search of offerings for Lanka. As meticulously polite individuals whose souls (however degraded) are their own, the raksha provide an interesting temptation for the characters. Life in Lanka Yomi is easy, certainly compared to that lives of players in the politics of the Middle Kingdom.



THE CHILDREN OF TOU MOU

Physical: Strength 4, Dexterity 2, Stamina 6

Social: Charisma 1, Manipulation 1, Appearance 0

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 2, Athletics 1, Brawl 4, Intimidation 2

Skills: Etiquette 2, Stealth 2, Survival 3

Knowledge: Rituals 2

(Equivalent) Disciplines: Protean 1, Potence 3, Fortitude 4

Backgrounds: Resources 1

Hun: 3, **P'o:** 4, **Yin:** 3, **Yang:** 3, **Willpower:** 6

Body Levels: -0(x4)/-1(x2)/-5/Incapacitated.

Quote: *This is not your place — leave. Oh? You have liquor? How much?*

Image: Blocky, hunched, black-iron figures with glowing red eyes, half man-shaped automaton and half insect, the Children of Tou Mou are designed to survive the harsh conditions of the

Yama Queen's realm. Not only are these huge subterranean-dwelling creatures excellent manual laborers, they possess blocky metallic fists that can easily crush unwanted visitors flat. While Tou Mou occasionally sends her four-meter-tall minions to the Middle Kingdom to accomplish some task or to serve as guardians for her legates, the creatures are generally seen only in the Hell of Being Skinned Alive.

Possessions: Sledgehammer and pick to scale, harness for dragging heavy loads, a small personal space in the caves beneath the surface of the Hell.

Roleplaying Hints: While the Children were created to be loyal servants to Tou Mou, they aren't very bright, and they aren't very devoted. Most of them are simple-minded bullies, and the ones that aren't are simple-minded thugs. While they can be bribed to, for example, offer travelers shelter, they are more likely to take bribes from the weak and then either smash them flat or throw them out into the desert above anyway. The Children are likely to accept bribes in good faith from strong figures, then smash those fugitives flat after



they fall asleep.

Storyteller Notes: Brutally strong but not especially tough or bright, the Children make good opposition for younger Kuei-jin and fairly formidable (but not overwhelming) opposition for older Guan Ren. Remember that the Children were created with loyalty to Tou Mou ingrained into their natures. Don't let the characters turn them into an instant army to back up their hare-brained plans. Unless one of the characters has Chi'u Muh-5 and rewrites his allies, the Children will eventually and inevitably betray the characters.

MIKABOSHI'S DEMONS OF IRON AND VIOLENCE

Physical: Strength 4 (Cybernetic), Dexterity 4 (Smooth), Stamina 4 (Machinelike)

Social: Charisma 1, Manipulation 1, Appearance 1

Mental: Perception 5 (Visual Enhancers), Intelligence 3, Wits 5 (Boosted Reflexes)

Talents: Alertness 5 (Wired for Combat), Athletics 3, Brawl 5 (Fists), Dodge 2, Intimidation 4 (Raw, Unconcealed Power), Leadership 1, Streetwise 2

Skills: Firearms 4 (Stocked weapons), Melee 3, Stealth 2, Survival 2

Knowledge: Computer 1, Investigation 1, Linguistics 3 (Cantonese, English, Han, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Thai) Medicine 1, Occult 1, Politics 1

(Equivalent) Disciplines: Black Wind 3, Potence 4, Fortitude 4, Protean 2, Auspex 1, Chi'h Muh 2, Yin Prana 1

Backgrounds: Contacts 3, Mentor 1, Allies 1

Hun: 0, **P'o:** 7, **Yin:** 3, **Yang:** 6, **Willpower:** 5

Body Levels: -0(x7)/-1(x2)/-2(x2)/-5/Incapacitated

Quote: Clatter of gunfire. Wet thump. Snarl. Sound of flesh tearing. Sound of something feeding messily.

Image: Huge, savage and bionically enhanced, the Demons of Iron and Violence are Mikaboshi's answer to Iteration X's Hit-Marks. Three meters tall and studded with cables and patches of black metal armor, the Demons of Iron and Violence are typically clad in clear plastic capes, rain-proof gear and armored goggles as protection against the acid sleet when deployed in the Wicked City. When sent to the Middle Kingdom, these accouterments are sometimes omitted, but more often they are retained for purposes of intimidation.

Possessions: Very large helical-clip assault rifle (Damage 10, Range 250, Rate 3, Clip 100, Not Concealable), protective gear providing two dice of armor, nutrient-filled Rest and Repair Vat.

Some of the Demons of Iron and Violence carry special weapons (automatic grenade launchers, flamethrowers, two-handed chainsaws) when on special missions.

Roleplaying Hints The programming of a Demon of Iron and Violence is simple: Seek out target. Terminate target. Cause as much collateral damage as possible during termination. To these servants of Mikaboshi, there is no such thing as too much.

Storyteller Notes: With the ability to chase down and slaughter entire parties, the Demons of Iron and Violence are brimming with adventure possibilities. Just be careful that you don't accidentally kill the entire party, rather than frightening them witless.



SHINJUKU UNDERCITY SCAVENGERS

Physical: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4 (Die Hard)

Social: Charisma 3, Manipulation 3, Appearance 1

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 3, Athletics 1, Brawl 2, Dodge 4 (Craven), Empathy 2, Expression 2, Intimidation 2, Leadership 2, Streetwise 2, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Crafts (Scrounging) 3, Drive 2, Etiquette 3, Firearms 1, Melee 2, Stealth 4 (The Undercity), Survival 4 (The Undercity)

Knowledge: Computer 2, Finance 2, Investigation 1, Law 2, Linguistics 1 (Mandarin), Occult 2, Politics 3, Rituals 2

Disciplines: Auspex 1, Potence 1, Bone Shintai 1, Black Wind 2, Protean 2

Backgrounds: Resources 1

Hun: 4, **P'o:** 6, **Yin:** 6, **Yang:** 4, **Will-power:** 6

Body Levels: 0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-5/
Incapacitated

Quote: Hey! You! Looking for someone? Looking for God? Maybe you'd like to meet him!

Image: No one makes it out of the Wicked City. Most ricochet between the streets and mental labor until they finally wear down (and shortly after, wink out). But for those who do manage to claw their way up out of the brutal grind, the unavoidable fall is that much worse. Stripped of their rank, without maintenance support for their coveted cybernetic implants, these fallen middle managers are fair game for any inhabitant of the city who thinks she can take them down. The only fallen who last long are the ones who take to the Shinjuku undercity, where they form a furtive subculture. There, these refugees' enhancements are patched together with scrounged wire, and their synthetic tendons replaced with carefully dried human ligaments.

These feral, withered beings still cling, cargo cultist-like, to the trappings of the corporate structure in which they once clawed out a position. Organized in gangs called Divisions, and led by Presidents and Vice-presidents, these miserable creatures eke out a tenuous existence in the forgotten tunnels below the Wicked City. Most spend their days dodging the Demons of Iron and Violence and victimizing the more fortunate residents of Mikaboshi's hell for electronics, fresh flesh, debt cards and other essentials of existence. Some, however, occupy themselves with plans of escape. Many of the more determined scavengers manage to escape to other Yomi realms, or even to take the Second Breath.



Possessions: Axe made from a shattered cast-iron sewer lid welded to a steel bar, armor made from old newspapers and black electrical tape (one die of protection), industrial box cutter, a number of large resealable plastic bags for storing especially delectable catches.

Roleplaying Hints: Somewhere between a cannibal degenerate and an MBA, the scavengers are the lowest of the low. Many would sell their mothers to Mikaboshi's geisha palaces for a chance to have their old positions back. The rest would sell the old girl for two pounds of fresh human meat and a handful of pistol cartridges.

Storyteller Notes: If the players can impress these mongrel savages that chopping Kuei-jin up and eating them while they sleep isn't the best course of action, the scavengers of the Shinjuku make an excellent group in which to hide for those on the run from Mikaboshi's troops. Properly handled, the dwellers in the undercity might even make moderately useful minions, though they're not very reliable, or sane.

FAT-STRIDERS OF THE HELL OF BOILING OIL

Physical: Strength 6, Dexterity 5, Stamina 6
 Social: Charisma 0, Manipulation 0, Appearance 0
 Mental: Perception 4, Intelligence 1, Wits 3
 Talents: Alertness 4, Athletics 3, Brawl 4, Dodge 3
 Skills: Stealth 3, Survival 3
 Equivalent Disciplines: Celerity 3
 Backgrounds: None
 Hun: 2, P'o: 4, Yin: 4, Yang: 5, Willpower: 5
 Body Levels: -0(x4)/-1(x2)/-5/Incapacitated

Quote: (Tittering laughter)

Image: Almost two meters long from head to what passes for a tail, the Fat-Striders are almost twice that size with their legs extended. No one knows where the Striders come from — like so much

else in the Yomi World, they are scenery. In appearance, these creatures look somewhat similar to a mosquito larva crossed with the immature form of some particularly vile sort of locust or cicada, with the spindly legs of a water-skating insect attached. Fat-striders attack (they have never been seen to feed) with a steel-toothed mouth on the end of a lightning-fast extensible proboscis. Some specially tamed Fat-Striders are used as mounts by *akuma* in this hell, but unless subjected to extensive training, these creatures generally shake off passengers with a deep dive followed by an extended submerged swim.

Designed to withstand accidental plunges into the fat of

the hell and still work at peak efficiency, a Fat-Strider can strip the rolls of fat from even the most corpulent victim in less than a minute.

Buttocks, thighs, gut and breasts are all sliced neatly to the bare muscle in just a few bites. Then, the monster

restrains its pretty with a gentle bite to the head until the

stripped-off fat has rendered down and heated to the proper temperature. This

can take as long as 15 minutes, and most victims have gone completely mad by the time they are deep-fried in their own juices.

Possessions: None. They're a bunch of giant bugs.

Roleplaying Tips: Find the plump ones. Strip them down and cook them up, then move on.

Storyteller Notes: Fat-Striders can do as much as six dice of aggravated damage with a bite, but are generally much more precise than that, striking only to maim their victims. Unless the creatures are defending themselves from an obviously supernatural opponent, assume they will do no more than a health level on a strike. Fat-Striders can use their Stamina to soak aggravated damage.



WU HUA'S CORPSE-TIGER DEMONS

Physical: Strength 7 (Brutal), Dexterity 6 (Catlike), Stamina 7 (Unfeeling)

Social: Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2

Mental: Perception 4 (Astute), Intelligence 6 (Clever), Wits 4 (Changing Situations)

Talents: Alertness 5 (Night), Athletics 4 (Leaping), Brawl 6 (Animalistic), Dodge 4 (Liquid), Expression 5 (Poetic), Intimidation 3, Subterfuge 3

Skills: Etiquette 4 (Courtly), Stealth 4 (Quiet), Survival 3

Knowledge: Law 3, Linguistics 5 (Most Asian Languages), Occult 3, Politics 2, Rituals 4 (Hac Tao)

Equivalent Disciplines: Yin Prana 4, Bone Shinrai 4, Chi'u Muh 4

Backgrounds: Resources 4, Contacts 4, Allies 3, Mentor 2

Hun: 4, **P'o:** 9, **Yin:** 7, **Yang:** 5, **Willpower:** 7

Body Levels: -0(x7)/-1(x4)/-2(x2)/-5/Incapacitated

Quote: *They shake in white pain / with cat joy I salt their wounds / and lick forth new screams*

Image: The Corpse-tiger Demons appear to be huge (three meters tall), heavily muscled men and women with the heads and tails of tigers, and tigerlike paws with long, black retractable claws instead of hands. The Corpse-tigers get their name from their appearance — each looks as if he is dead and just beginning serious decomposition. Corpse-tigers' eyes are sunken and unreflective, and their skin has ripped in places, revealing dead tissue. The meat hangs awkwardly from the Corpse-tiger's bones, and most of these demons support a few small but vibrant colonies of maggots or mold. All around these demons hangs the charnel reek of spoiled meat.

What Wu Hua lacks in numbers of minions, he makes up for in the power of the individuals who serve him. While most of the Yama King's servants are Spectres, he retains some few powerful beings, such as the Corpse-tiger Demons, as troubleshooters and senior administrators. Hopelessly overeducated and aristocratic, the Corpse-tiger Demons see themselves as the true nobles of Hell and Earth, and as vastly superior to the overrated Wan Kuei and the upstart Shinma. The Corpse-tiger Demons are not just Wu Hua's heavy artillery, they are also his court. Each demon is a master of some different art form, and many expressive souls have quite unexpectedly found themselves given a respite from the endless toil of the Hell of Salt and Iron to perform under the patronage of one of Wu Hua's minions. Some are actually set free for the perfection of their performances. This is thought

to make the performances of the others that much more inspired. Those who falter are generally sent back to their toil or impaled on the spires of one of the iron towers.

Possessions: Elaborately brocaded robes and other ceremonial garb, a well-appointed suite in the Pit of Salt and Iron, any number of beautiful servile slaves, heavily enchanted sword doing Strength +3 aggravated damage, and heavily enchanted armor that provides four additional dice of protection.

Roleplaying Hints: You're not just *any* demon. You're a *noble*. And you will act like it, and be enlightened in all ways. And people will treat you like it. And if they do not, you will pull their tendons out and use them as strings to manipulate the disrespectful wretches in an elaborate puppet show whose moral is that one should treat one's betters with the respect they deserve.

Storyteller Notes: Corpse-tiger Demons can soak aggravated damage with their Stamina. Their bites do Strength +3 aggravated damage, and their claws do Strength +2 aggravated damage.



KANI NO JINGOKU, SERVANTS OF THE EMPRESS OF PEARLS

Physical: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 6 (Untiring)

Social: Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 0

Mental: Perception 2, Intelligence 3, Wits 2

Talents: Alertness 2, Athletics 1, Brawl 2, Dodge 2, Empathy 1, Leadership 1, Subterfuge 2

Skills: Animal Ken 3, Crafts 2, Etiquette 2, Melee 3

Knowledge: Occult 1, Politics 1, Rituals 1

(Equivalent) Disciplines: Fortitude 3

Backgrounds: Resources 2, Contacts 1, Allies 1

Hun: 4, P'o: 6, Yin: 4, Yang: 4, Willpower: 4

Body Levels: -0(x3)/-3/-4/-5/Incapacitated

Quote: OnetwothreeLIFT. OnetwothreeLIFT.

Image: The Kani no Jingoku are inhabitants of the Seven Burning Seas and servants of the mysterious Yama Queen the Empress of the Pearls. These strange, bright red crustaceans appear much like shrimp oddly paired with the unbalanced claws of a fiddler crab. In place of legs, however, they have octopuslike tentacles that allow them to move at a startlingly rapid clip through the scalding waters of their home realm.

The Kani no Jingoku are highly industrious, raising towering cities (or perhaps monuments to the Empress) decorated with the treasures of the wrecked ships which make their way

to the bottom of the Seven Burning Seas. The Kani are also quite aggressive, swarming intruders with trained sharks and squid and then hacking the interlopers to bits with coral axes and shell-tipped spears. There are some reports that the Kani no Jingoku capture beings for sacrifice, but these tales are unsubstantiated by any surviving witnesses.

Possessions: An ornamental shell harness commemorating your spirit patrons and the Empress, spear tipped with a wickedly sharp shell, underwater whistle for summoning pet sharks.

Roleplaying Hints: The Kani no Jingoku are extremely aggressive, and almost incomprehensible, even to the wisest members of the Umi Court. When roleplaying one, simply react in a random but generally hostile fashion to various stimuli. There are some who theorize that the Kani are somehow related to the Crab-soldiers of Umi, but this is as much speculation as the rumors of the Kani's human sacrifice. Certainly the normally frank Crab-soldiers know of no relationship.

Storyteller Notes: The Kani no Jingoku and their assortment of finny friends make great soldiers to defend whatever item the players need to retrieve. Characters who can find a way to communicate with these strange creatures and understand their culture will (at the very least) have a bit of knowledge that no shen outside of Yomi possesses.



GENERIC SERVITOR

Physical: Strength 5 (Demonic), Dexterity 3, Stamina 5 (Inhuman)

Social: Charisma 1, Manipulation 2, Appearance 1

Mental: Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3

Talents: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 4 (Weaker foes), Dodge 3, Empathy 1, Intimidation 4 (Vile), Subterfuge 1

Skills: Etiquette 1, Melee 3, Stealth 3, Survival 2

Knowledge: Law 1, Occult 2, Politics 1, Rituals 1

(Equivalent) Disciplines: Black Wind 3, Fortitude 2

Backgrounds: Allies 1, Contacts 1, Influence 1

Hun (Gnosis): 1, **P'o (Rage):** 6, **Yin:** 4, **Yang:** 4, **Willpower:** 5

Body Levels: -0/-1/-1/-2/-2/-5/Incapacitated

Quote: *Back in line, scumbag!*

Image: Not everyone in Yomi can be an exciting and unique servant of evil. Someone has to take the role of the middle-level monstrosity, the shambling horror, the run-of-the-mill torturer who helps to make up the rank and file of the legions of Yomi. These statistics represent a perfectly average, generic demon. Storytellers should customize them according to the specific sort of demon being represented.

Yomi-spirits come in all shapes and sizes. Some are the generic kettle-

black tormenters of the damned, armed with barbed forks and whips. Others appear as bestial creatures resembling dog-, snake-, ape-, bear- and rat-men, or as slumping, shambling corpses in various stages of decay. Some are more unique than this, and take the forms of gibbering mounds of flesh lashing out with seven-foot tongues, mounds of maggots in the shape of men, or strange crossbreeds of phoenixes, cicadas and human infants. Whatever the case, none of these creatures are pleasant to behold, and they are even less pleasant to interact with.

Possessions: Some armor that gives one or two dice of protection and subtracts one from the wearer's Dexterity, and a weapon that may or may not do aggravated damage.

Roleplaying Hints: Demon servitors are heartless, ageless spirits of evil forces created in earlier ages to serve the Yama Kings. With the coming of the Third Age and the fall of Yomi into ultimate spiritual degradation, some of these beings attained free will, while the majority became slaves to their masters instead of their tasks. Most of these

creatures are inherently wicked, simply because inherent wickedness makes undertaking their painful and otherwise unrewarding task that much easier.

In an ideal world, this wickedness would have been retrained by the natural order of things, but Yomi is not an ideal world. Run wild if you can, because you have no choice.

Storyteller Notes: These creatures are whatever you need them to be, from detailed and sadistic reminders of a Kuei-jin's tortured past, to generic mooks to be shipped in to the locations of dramatic battles by the school-bus load and cut down like so many howling, gibbering bags of wet oatmeal.

Overseers tend to be more powerful versions of basic servitors.



AKUMA

Sometimes the demon-serving Kuei-jin are called to Yomi to meet with their masters directly. Such an honor is granted only to the most powerful and prestigious of *akuma*—any Kuei-jin who meets up with one in a Yomi realm is likely to be in for the fight of his unlife. These corrupt vampires can be of any sort as long as they are faithful servants of the Yama-Kings. Storytellers should refer to the templates for Kuei-jin in the *Kindred of the East* rulebook for basic *akuma* stats and Disciplines.

The Yama Kings take very good care of their pets. When *akuma* arrive in Yomi, they are given some kind of shield against the worst of the Thousand Hells' dangers. This usually takes the form of one of the Yomi manifestations of Jade Servant of the August Personage if the *akuma* cannot use the power herself. Otherwise, the demon Kuei-jin resorts to her own abilities—Willpower primary among them—to with-

stand the rigors of Yomi. Additionally, Yama Kings have frequently been known to gift their favorite *akuma* with talismans that allow them to move freely through their domains before inviting them in; however, such talismans can be lost, dropped or stolen by enterprising (and foolhardy) P'o souls or other Kuei-jin.

P'o Soul

P'o souls make up the swarming masses of sinners in the Thousand Hells. As a result, these souls are destructive, caught in their pain and more likely to attack any well-meaning character thinking to help them than to accept help. Incidentally, only a tiny fraction of the P'o souls in Yomi has an intact Hun and corpse waiting in the Middle Kingdom, so a character wishing to free the souls and create more Kuei-jin is only going to let a swarm of malicious P'os flee into the spirit realms, there to create all sorts of malicious chaos.

APPENDIX: AKUMA THE DEVIL-EATEN

It is the discourse of hell on the subject of sin.

—Thomas Ligotti, "The Lost Art of Twilight"

THE ECONOMICS OF DAMNATION

In this ever-darkening Fifth Age, the term *akuma* is bandied about as a descriptor for political enemies of the Kuei-jin's court, those seen as racially inferior or those who have committed grave offenses against the ancestors. Now cheapened with misuse, the term is little more than an insult. Most Kuei-jin blame this on jina and mandarins eager to press emotional buttons. Yet there are some who wonder, is this truly the case, or is it simply that the once-unthinkable crime of commerce with the Yama Kings has grown so common that Kuei-jin can no longer take it seriously? Surely, only the bodhisattvas know, and rarely do they cease their weeping for this fallen Age long enough to converse with its lesser inhabitants.

Much has been said earlier in this book about the history of the Yama Kings and the relationship between the *akuma* and their infernal patrons. Of Mahanaga Visparakni and his sins, and of the history that follows, no more shall be said. Rather than discuss the theory of dealings with the Yama Kings, this chapter concerns itself with the practice.

THE NATURE OF THE CRIME

Technically, all that a Kuei-jin must do to be an *akuma* is to have willing and knowing congress with a Yama King or his emissaries. Yet, as in all things, there are degrees. Even in the relative civilization of the Five August Courts or the great *uji* of Japan, the influence of the lords of Yomi Wan is plain to see. Walking the nightmare-haunted sleep of the fallen Guan Ren, the Yama Kings and their minions tempt and torment. The lords of Yomi seek to spread suspicion, dissent and sedition among the ranks of the Wan Kuei, as well as to recruit pawns for their endless schemes in the Middle Kingdom. In furthering these goals, truth is as effective a weapon as lies, if not moreso. Yet by ancient law, a Kuei-jin who pays heed to a Yama King's words, no matter to what end, would be considered one of the Devil-eaten.

While proven dream-congress with a lord of Yomi without the court ancestor's permission is still a death sentence in rigidly traditionalist areas like the Japanese *uji no Bishamon* and the Chinese Blood Court, Kuei-jin society generally adopts a

INFERNALISM VERSUS DEMONOLOGY

It's worth taking a moment to differentiate the Kuei-jin concept of infernalism from the Kuei-jin notion of demonology. Infernalism implies a feudal, worshipful or master-slave relationship between a Kuei-jin and some higher supernatural power of darkness, almost always a Yama King. Infernalism is a capital offense punishable by a horrible death and a vast dishonor for one's *wu*-mates and tutors. Reliable information on this topic is extremely rare and invariably proscribed.

Demonology is the summoning and mastery of Banes, Spectres and other wicked spirits. Many Kuei-jin practice this to some extent or another. Such practice is even one of the specialties of the Devil-Tiger Dharma, who consider it a natural part of their religious practice, and who have produced a literature on the practical aspects of this subject as extensive in its own specialized way as the magical libraries of the Wu Lung and the Order of Hermes. Demonology is perfectly legal, though it is often considered in exceedingly poor taste outside of Devil-Tiger circles.

more permissive attitude than this. Of course, what is permitted to go on in secret may (as in the Golden Courts) be radically at odds with public morality. While it may be accepted in the Green Courts as natural to barter for this and that with the minions of Yomi and highly impolite to inquire into the state of a Kuei-jin's soul, such infernalism is still a capital offense. A Kuei-jin with the misfortune to be caught practicing will be duly executed, even if the mandarins and ancestor who sentence her to death regularly indulge in commerce with the Yomi realms. Appearances must be maintained, after all.

Outside of wordplay and conversation, commerce with the Yama Kings is generally divided into three major categories by Kuei-jin legal scholars. The first category of commerce is called General or Lesser Commerce. This commerce is "lesser" only in that it does not involve the Kuei-jin's soul. Instead of a fragment of her soul, the Wan Kuei pays the Yama King in something of equivalent value — an artifact, important information about the doings of her court, or an eye carefully averted as the Yomi lord's minions go about their business in the Kuei-jin's demesne.

The prescribed penalties for this so-called Lesser Commerce are some of the most painful in the decidedly unpleasant Kuei-jin legal canon, given that each of these acts recreates in miniature the fall of the Wan Xian. Kuei-jin caught at these inauspicious activities are be lucky if their soul is consumed by the First Oni of the court. Those less favored by the mandarins may have their bones draw out of their still-active corpses with white-hot hooks, or their Chi lethally and creatively imbalanced by a master of the Equilibrium Discipline, cursing them to a slow painful demise over the course of many days and nights of sleepless agony.

Despite this, Lesser Commerce is disturbingly common. The rewards that the Lords of Yomi Wan can offer for even paltry favors are enough to make it seem worthwhile to many Kuei-jin, especially jina eager to get ahead in their courts or embittered heimin and exiles with nothing to lose. While it would not be politic to say that a majority of Kuei-jin undertake such commerce at some point in their unives, it would be disturbingly close to the truth. As in all transgressions, the sin lies not in the guilt over the performance of the deed, but in the shame of being caught.

The next category of dealing with the Yama Kings is Soul Commerce, also called Iris Bulb Commerce because it splits up the Kuei-jin's soul as the gardener splits up iris bulbs when they are removed from the ground for the winter. In this form of commerce, the Kuei-jin enters into negotiations with a Yama King or his representatives, usually by summoning them through the *Ritual of the Black Peony*. Though the Yama Kings occasionally approach prospective *akuma* themselves, they are as a rule uninterested in dealings with those who do not have the determination, resources and skill to perform the ritual. Thus, Iris Bulb Commerce is, by and large, the province of jina and mandarins. Only the most talented Running Monkeys will make it over the minimum competence bar, and even fewer of these souls are valuable enough for a lord of Yomi Wan to deign to negotiate directly.

If the ritual is successful in contacting the appropriate Yama King, the Kuei-jin states what favors, power or knowledge he wishes to purchase. If the Yama King or her representative are interested, the two parties then engage in an complicated and ritualistic series of legal negotiations to determine what size piece of the Kuei-jin's soul will be taken in payment. The resulting contract, written in blood on white silk, is signed with a jade seal that contains the portion of the soul given. It is possible — though not easy — for a skilled and clever Kuei-jin to "cheat" the Yama King, cleverly placing a clause in the contract that allows him to substitute a mortal's soul or a jade effigy for his own soul, to pay with a decayed or otherwise valueless portion of his soul, or otherwise to evade the clutches of the Yama King. On the other hand, it is much more likely for the Yama King to come out ahead, seizing much more of the Guan Ren's soul than he bargained for, or even becoming its sole owner.

Why this is so is a matter of speculation among the philosophers who make it their habit to dwell on such forbidden topics. Some believe that it is a result of some mandate of the August Personage of Jade, while others believe that the Yama Kings themselves abide by these laws to tempt Kuei-jin into dealing with them. Others note that these are the same laws that are used to negotiate contracts between the various inhabitants of Yomi, and speculate that the ability of Kuei-jin to occasionally come out ahead in their dealings with the Yama Kings is a coincidence (happy or otherwise) of the deep-rooted desire of the Yama Kings to cheat one another, thus demonstrating the negative karmic effects of dishonesty. Whatever the case, the flickering hope that one may outwit the lords of Hell and come out a "winner" has tempted many otherwise intelligent Kuei-jin in difficult positions to come to the table with a Yama King in hopes of bettering their situations.

THE RITUAL OF THE BLACK PEONY (LEVEL 3 RITE)

The Ritual of the Black Peony is the most common means used to contact the Yama Kings. While there are other rituals that can serve the same purpose, this is the one most commonly used, because the ingredients are simple and evidence of the ritual is easy to conceal. Other methods of contacting the Yama Kings, while perhaps surer, leave irrevocably damning evidence behind.

So named because of the manner in which it manifests, the Black Peony Chant is a series of unnatural mantras and unharmonious meditative postures that must be performed over a period of several hours prior to the Kuei-jin adjourning for her day's sleep. Over the course of several days, the vampire has increasingly severe nightmares of her torments in Yomi. When the ritual reaches its climax, the Kuei-jin is visited in her dreams by the Yama King she wishes to treat with, or the servants thereof.

In game terms, the character must meditate for (6 minus Meditation) hours before bed. The player must then make a successful Intelligence + Occult roll (difficulty 8) and spend a point each of both Demon Chi and Willpower as the character drifts off to sleep, in order to form the metaphysical link with Yomi Wan. On each successive night of the ritual, the character has increasingly terrible nightmares as dark spirits gnaw away at the veil between her dreaming mind and Yomi. One sage described the process as similar to the way in which ants gradually gnaw away the peony buds and allow the flowers to blossom; hence the name of the rite. When the ritual has been successfully performed for a number of successive nights equal to the local Wall rating, the link with Yomi is complete and the character dreams of the desired Yama King or his servitor.

There are certain side effects to the ritual. Usually the character suffers the effects of the Flaw: *Nightmares*

for up to a dozen nights after she successfully performs the ritual, and at the Storyteller's option, wicked spirits and other negative influences may be attracted to the area by the outpouring of Yomi energy. Note also that the Ritual of the Black Peony is relatively safe. While the Kuei-jin may negotiate and receive powers, only the most dreadfully inauspicious circumstances (such as botching the ritual's Intelligence + Occult roll while on a defiled dragon nest) can open a true gate to Yomi or put the vampire's soul in peril from something other than bad negotiation.

This ritual requires cooperation from both sides to succeed. As discussed earlier, the Yama Kings are not looking for fools or thugs; they have bakemono and demon servants for those roles. Kuei-jin too young, unknown or inexperienced to have come to the notice of the princes of Yomi are likely to get nothing more from the Ritual of the Black Peony than bad dreams.

Yama Kings may also choose not to come to the table with elderly Kuei-jin. Wise are the sages of the Wan Kuei, and the princes of Yomi are unwilling to allow themselves to be cheated mercilessly by those who understand their legal codes better than they themselves do. If the Kuei-jin has 10 or more dice in her Intelligence + Law pool, it is entirely possible that her summons will be ignored. It is certain that the Yama Kings will cease to respond to such a Kuei-jin's entreaties after the first time she sells some poor sap up the river with calculated ease during contract negotiations.

Because it is rare, strictly proscribed and potentially unbalancing to the game, characters cannot purchase the Ritual of the Black Peony with the Rituals Background unless given special permission from the Storyteller to do so.

The third form of commerce is the total and unconditional subjection of the Kuei-jin's soul to the Yama Kings. Called the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade, the transaction occurs when the *akuma*-to-be willingly offers his entire soul all at once. In order to undertake this rite, the Kuei-jin's soul must be entirely his own — the Yama Kings are not interested in damaged goods or slaves whose loyalties are divided (and have no doubts, self-inflicted slavery is indubitably the truth of the newly minted *akuma*'s state). However, while the Ebony and Scarlet Jade *akuma* are unfree, bound even to their very highest souls into the webs of their demonic masters, their slavery is in many ways a most exalted state.

Rising stars in the society of the Guan Ren (or else they would never have drawn the attention of the Yama Kings), these *akuma* are taken to Yomi and trained as princes and princesses of darkness, to serve at the right hand of the lords of

Yomi. Given special treatments and training in consideration of their exalted state, these nobility among the Devil-eaten serve their masters as generals, ministers and agents among the fallen Wan Xian.

Such princes of Hell are thankfully uncommon, though unfortunately this has more to do with the policies of the Yama Kings than with the lack of applicants. It seems that in this Sunset Age there is always some Running Monkey willing to sacrifice his freedom and his very soul in pursuit of raw power. Thankfully, the training of such noble devils costs the Yama Kings a great deal, both in terms of resources expended and in the most precious resource a Yama King has — her undivided personal attention as she oversees the delicate and lengthy operations required to turn one of the fallen Wan Xian into something both less than and much, much more than a Kuei-jin.

For the failed supplicants, there are a number of fates awaiting them. Many fall to their P'os, and are destroyed or spend the rest of eternity in jade collars, as the guardians and hunting beasts of their court. Others choose to follow the Devil-Tiger faith, and either learn to set their feet upon the road to enlightenment or else fall to the twin lashes of their tutors and the Black Iron Talon sect of the Dharma. Some become lesser *akuma*, eking out what meager payment they can for the sale of their souls. The most insistent or inept the Yama Kings simply destroy or turn over to the ancestors of their respective courts as a good faith measure.

IRIS BULB COMMERCE

The process of Soul Commerce is simplified by the fact that it generally takes place in a dream created for that purpose by a magical ritual, where issues of physical security and authenticity are generally moot. Unless the player suffers a borch on the required roll, the character cannot be directly ripped off — meaning carted straight to Yomi immediately — in the deal. This condition alone encourages the use of the Ritual of the Black Peony, with its artificial playing field. In those cases where the *akuma* is bargaining with a Yama King whose representative is physically present, there are the added dangers of discovery, double-dealing and ambush. However, it should be noted that the contract is metaphysically binding no matter how it is struck. The Yama King must uphold his end, just as the Kuei-jin must uphold hers. This by no means prohibits intrigue; it simply means that the deal itself is sacred. Betrayal may take many other forms than the simple backstab.

The specifics of contract negotiation are left abstract by this system. Negotiating a business deal is probably not a roleplaying experience that the average reader is going to find thrilling. Even if it were, the contract laws of the Yama Kings stretch on for many, many volumes, and preparing a summary adequate to play would be daunting even with a fairly thick book devoted entirely to the topic. Also (oddly enough), this is a matter in which roleplaying is perhaps inappropriate. There is no out-talking a Yama King at the bargaining table, just outsmarting him, and for anyone the Yama Kings are willing to sit down and haggle with, each bargaining session is literally a toss of the dice. By representing it abstractly and impartially, the risk and inherent uncertainty involved in cutting deals with the infernal powers are better represented than by allowing a persuasive player to talk the Storyteller into fulfilling his in-character desires.

A character who wishes to begin cutting deals with the princes of Yomi must assemble a contact method, learn something about the legal process governing transactions between inhabitants of Yomi, and ascertain precisely what it is that the Yama Kings can provide for her (not to mention which Yama King or Queen is best for her desires). None of these are simple tasks, and each of them is discussed in detail below.

SECURING A CONTACT METHOD

A Kuei-jin who wishes to engage in Soul Commerce must first and foremost have some way of contacting the Yama Kings. Without a way to make his intentions known, even the

HIDDEN COSTS

Note that just because a Kuei-jin walks away from a deal with the Yama Kings with all the important parts of her soul doesn't mean that she's gotten off scot-free. It just means that she got away with her freedom intact. There may be substitutions involved — innocent human blood or the Chi-rich blood of other *shen* (particularly *hsien*), minor services that indirectly aid the Yama King, pieces of the Kuei-jin's memories or her capacity for certain emotions, or simply expensive effigies made from gem-grade jade and other precious substances. Regardless of the specifics (which are up to the Storyteller to detail), it is possible that there may be negative repercussions from the actions undertaken to fulfill the compact long after the payment itself is made. Such echoes may well include a Moment of Blindness, especially for Devil-Tigers and Resplendent Cranes.

most promising and depraved mandarin cannot begin to wrench his worth from the Yama Kings. While the Ritual of the Black Peony is the most common method by which Kuei-jin contact the Yama Kings, fear of persecution makes the act is highly individualistic. There are nearly as many ways to contact the lords of Hell as there are those who would have commerce with them. Rather than attempt to describe specific methods, which are really the province of the Storyteller's creativity, this section attempts to outline various roads to knowledge which aspiring *akuma* might walk, and the difficulties they may face along them.

DREAM VISITATIONS AND COURTLY GAMES

While the Yama Kings often visit the dreams of Kuei-jin who have escaped their clutches, these dream-visions are mere phantoms, not sufficiently strong for transactions involving souls and the dark power of Yomi. In order for the vampire to be able to make a deal, he must first find a way to contact his prospective masters with enough strength and certitude to get something done.

Those Kuei-jin who are unlucky enough to receive regular visits from the Yama Kings and their minions during their dreams can simply entreat the Yama Kings to teach them how to make a less tenuous contact. In many cases, the supplicant is taught the Ritual of the Black Peony as a result. Not all Yama Kings will do this, however. Because trickery is easier face-to-face, some Yama Kings arrange to speak through Kumo, Kura Sau or *akuma* servants. Regardless of the method of contact, most lords of Yomi require that a supplicant give them service of some sort in return for this tutelage. By doing this, the vampire becomes accustomed to performing tasks at the Yama King's behest, and is made to pay for the privilege of selling her soul.

Those Kuei-jin who are not so unfortunate as to have nightly visits from the Yama Kings, who distrust them or who eschew beginning their careers as *akuma* by laboring for the privilege must find other means of contacting their prospective patrons. A young member of the Wan Kuei cannot typically stroll up to a mandarin and ask him for permission to ransack his library for lore concerning ways to become an *akuma*. Elder Kuei-jin, particularly those entrusted with Hell-lore, are alert for disciples and jina who seem to be straying down the wrong path. Even if the mandarin is himself one of the Devil-eaten, he is much more likely to blackmail the upstart than create a possible competitor within the court.

There are many approaches to gaining access to this forbidden lore, and the only thing that ties most of them together is their unpleasant nature. Kuei-jin may play dangerous games, burglarizing the havens of their elders in attempts to ransack their libraries for possible lore. They may attempt to duplicitously gain access to a library, ostensibly to study one topic but in reality to rifle through it for completely different reasons. Both of these are risky tactics, as the Kuei-jin will be operating under the scrutiny of their ancestors.

TRAFFICKING WITH THE UNRIGHTEOUS

Some Kuei-jin may move outside their own courts, where their inquiries are less likely to be noticed. Some would-be *akuma* go slumming; seducing, bullying or murdering mortal occultists for their forbidden lore. Others circulate among the underworld of the *shen*, associating with *heimin*, *Kumo*, *Kura Sau*, *bakemono* and other unrighteous detritus in an attempt to gain access to their knowledge. While these approaches are less socially risky than trying the information within Kuei-jin society, they have their own negative aspects. A Kuei-jin whose peers detect her searching outside the courts for lore are likely to assume that she is doing something she oughtn't, and to take action as a result. Those who see her associating with *Kumo* or *Kura Sau* are certain to think this, and likely to do something to stop her. She may be blackmailed, or else subjected to the various applications of the Obligation and Chi'iu Muh Disciplines by suspicious ancestors.

Worse, not only is she in danger from her court or *uji* and her new-found compatriots, the neophyte must also worry about other hunters and the applicability of the lore she finds to her own condition. Members of the *Shih*, *Wu Lung* and *Yü* are almost certain to ignore a Kuei-jin who stays within the bounds of her court, but those same warriors of righteousness are unlikely to be particularly discriminating when its agents find a member of the Wan Kuei among their regular enemies. By washing her feet in the world of the unrighteous, the Kuei-jin makes her allegiance to darkness clearly known, and sets the swords of all those who would oppose the schemings of the Yama Kings against her.

SCHOLARLY SELF-APPLICATION

As mentioned above, there is no guarantee that the lore that a Kuei-jin gains through his association with the scum of the Night People will be at all applicable. Certainly, much of the information gained from a member of the *Kura Sau* will be useful, but the aspiring *akuma* is working from a position of ignorance. How can a Kuei-jin differentiate between the Ritual of the Black Peony, which is useful to him, and attempting to dance the Black Spiral, which is most assuredly not? Certainly, it is unlikely that any of the beings he consorts with will have the sort of detached enlightenment necessary to tell him that the entities the *Nephandi* of the West consort with are considerably different from the Yama Kings of the East. Kuei-jin will either have to take their chances and run the risk of drinking *Fomorol* in hopes of contacting the Yama Kings, or else become serious students of the dark arts as they attempt to learn just what precisely works and what does not.

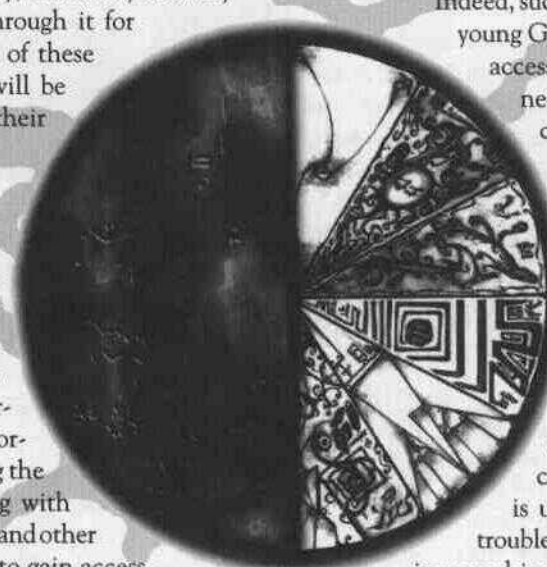
Indeed, such mastery of the occult arts provides the young *Guan Ren* with their third major point of access to the Yama Kings. While the lore needed to contact the lords of *Yomi Wan* is concealed from direct scrutiny, the Kuei-jin are always eager to tutor a disciple or jina in the occult arts for the betterment of the court. An occultist is quite likely to be able to invent the Ritual of the Black Peony, or something similar, for himself after enough study. Also, such a student is likely to be involved in the day-to-day rites of his court, and thus have much easier access to the occult wisdom of the ancestors. Of course, this also means that he is under close scrutiny, and there is that troublesome issue of Obligation constantly peer-

ing over his shoulder. It is best if the aspiring slave to darkness has a sincere interest in all matters occult when choosing this path to knowledge, and not just in learning the minimum necessary to dial A for *akuma*.

LEARNING CONTRACT LAW

Next, the aspiring *akuma* must gain knowledge of the laws by which the business of *Yomi* is transacted. Texts on this subject are strictly proscribed to the Wan Kuei, and those dealing with the specifics of the negotiating process as it applies to Kuei-jin are thus exceedingly rare. A neophyte must find a way to gain access to this information on his own, else his efforts are doomed to miserable failure.

First, the *akuma-to-be* must be able to grasp the complex (indeed, Byzantine) legal system of *Yomi*. The Kuei-jin must have also have an understanding of the basics of contracts, negotiation and litigation. In game terms the vampire must have Intelligence 3 or higher and Law 2 or higher to perform negotiations properly, otherwise the Yama King just laughs off his amateurish efforts. Obviously the higher the Kuei-jin's Intelligence and Law, the better off he is. Then the Kuei-jin must gain specific understanding of the theory and practice of



A YOUNG AKUMA'S READING LIST

So what *are* the texts that a Kuei-jin interested in serving the forces of Yomi wants to get their pallid corpse-hands on?

COMMON TEXTS

These are the texts that every Kuei-jin can count on gaining access to either during the instruction for their *ré*, or else during their discipleship.

The Ki Chuan — Just as the Bible and the Qu'ran speak much of the Devil, the most revered scriptures of the Guan Ren — the *Commentaries of Ki* — talk extensively about the Yama Kings and Yomi. While hardly a guidebook to demonology, Xue's descriptions of the fall of Meru and Ki's own lamentations of the world's increasing decadence both provide some sideways insight into the path of the Devil-eaten. Most important is the verse

Unrighteous are those

Who gamble in their dreams with the Yama Kings

Haggling like merchants for scraps of their souls.

Such false cleverness shamed the Wan Xian
and made them straw dogs in the eyes of Heaven.

which has provided the first step for many an unwise member of the Wan Kuei, eager to set her foot on the downward spiraling path. So it is with the base man, that he will pick out one grain of wickedness from a bushel of righteous exhortations.

The Songs of Hell — This is an anonymous collection of inspirational and devotional verses dating from the early Five Emperors period that forms part of the core of the Devil-Tiger philosophy. While long on the Devil-Tigers' own practical sort of demonology, *The Songs of Hell* studiously avoids mention of any of the technical details of Soul Commerce, the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade or other rites that subject the Kuei-jin to the will of the Yama Kings. However, there are a series of setpiece disputations between Xue (as the proto-Devil-Tiger) and Mahanaga Visparakni (as the proto-akuma). The author describes Mahanaga quite eloquently. While this may or may not be an actual description of Visparakni, it is most definitely an accurate (if poetic) description of an akuma created by the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade.

The Red Book of the Iron Bridge — Written by the mad poet known only as O shortly before his (or her) death, the *Red Book of the Iron Bridge* is both one of the most beautiful works of *kaja* literature and a catalog of the torments of Yomi. O was a Thrashing Dragon at the heart of the Changan Court during the very late Five Emperors period, and it is entirely possible that O's madness and possibly her Final Death (O chose to face the Eye of Heaven voluntarily as a poetic statement) was caused by one or more of akuma. What is known is that O found — or believed he found — a way to revisit the torments of Yomi, either in his dreams or through some strange use of

the Dragon Tear. O's poetic descriptions of the Yomi realms invariably touch a chord in the hearts of Kuei-jin who read her verses, as they so eloquently capture the experience of the Second Breath. While not directly useful for infernalism, the *Red Book* contains the "canonical" list of the Yama Kings, as well as descriptions of literally thousands of Yomi hells. As a piece of literature that almost every one of the Wan Kuei literate in *kaja* reads and owns, it has shaped their societal perceptions of Yomi since its penning, and thus is crucial in forming the attitudes that most Kuei-jin have toward the Thousand Hells.

ADVANCED TEXTS

Unavailable to most young Kuei-jin because they're so rare or decidedly unhealthy for those not wise enough to handle spiritual contaminants safely, these texts form the core of Kuei-jin infernalist literature. It is illegal to own these texts without special permission. At a minimum, the ancestor of the court must be informed of the Kuei-jin's intentions and give written permission before the upstart can so much as glance at these texts, and then the Kuei-jin is placed under the closest of scrutiny by the mandarins of his court. In the case of exceedingly dangerous books like *The Broken-winged Crane*, the ancestors of the Kuei-jin's Quincunx Court or *uji* must be informed as well. While their permission is not required, an expression of sincere displeasure on their part is likely to set the Kuei-jin's immediate ancestor against the idea as well. It is unlikely that a Kuei-jin below the rank of mandarin will be granted permission to look over these books, much less duplicate and own them.

The Manual of Yi — An essential training text of the *shih* demon hunters that fell into the possession of the Guan Ren during the Order's period of hubris and decline, the *Manual of Yi* is believed to exist now only in the libraries of the Wan Kuei. Many Kuei-jin consider this amusing, given the *shih*'s own relentless persecution of the Guan Ren and their destruction of so many important texts. Most Kuei-jin who know of the text expect the *shih* will get it back slightly after the Thousand Hells freeze solid en masse.

Written from an enlightened demon hunter's perspective, the *Manual of Yi* contains precious little information on the practice of infernalism; the author was concerned more with the effects of such practices than with the specific methods. There is certainly some insight to be gained about infernalism during the Five Emperors period in the chapters instructing a demon hunter in what to look for in a *shen* suspected of consorting with Yomi.

More importantly, outside of the memories of the Middle Dragons, the *Manual of Yi* is perhaps the single most complete catalog ever compiled of Investments, Gifts, Taints, Charms and Treatments given to akuma,

bakemono, Banes and other slaves of darkness in the Middle Kingdom. While the document's age (several thousand years old) means it is in some ways out of date, the book remains surprisingly useful as a reference, both to demon hunters and to neophyte infernalists trying to ascertain just what it is the Yama Kings can do for them.

Seven Scriptures of Immortal Iniquity — Almost certainly composed by a Yama King, greater *akuma* or a powerful Bane, the *Seven Scriptures of Immortal Iniquity* are, in their own words: "...an attempt to show that unrighteousness as well as righteousness is its own reward." In its original form, the *Scriptures* comprised seven disks of flawless and inclusion-free gem-quality black jade, each about 18 inches wide and an inch thick. Each side is covered in tiny, perfectly formed *kaja* characters (too small to read without Sharpened Senses) which wind toward the center of the disk, meaning they are most comfortably read on a potter's wheel. The characters are precisely the same size and spacing, and clearly hand-carved — the *Seven Scriptures* were a labor of obsessive love, hence the speculation on the nature of the author.

Obviously written as a direct answer to the Seven Taoist Immortals, the *Seven Scriptures of Immortal Iniquity* depict the lives of seven of the most glorious servants of the Yama Kings, commemorating their infamy. The first disk bears a brief introduction and tells the story of Mahanaga Visparakni, and each successive disk relates the story of another glorious *akuma*. Needless to say, each story is of precisely the same length.

The original disks are believed to have been destroyed during the Mongol invasion, but copies of the *Scriptures* survived. Of course, without the originals available for comparison, various forgeries have been produced, and the *akuma* memorialized vary wildly from copy to copy. Some copies even detail more or fewer than seven *akuma*. The accurate editions of the *Scriptures* are a guidebook to the Treatments available to those *akuma*

who enter the service of the Yama Kings through the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade. The less accurate versions range from dangerously corrupt to works of pure fiction. Kuei-jin attempting to procure copies of the *Scriptures* should do significant research before buying.

The Broken-winged Crane — *The Broken-winged Crane* is a book so dark that for many centuries it existed only as rumor and prophecy, as whispers passed from the mouth of one minion of Yomi to the ears of another, as a stain in the tapestry of dreams. It was only in the 14th century, when the first copy was discovered among the effects of the ancestor of Changan, that the book's prophecies were fulfilled and its potential realized. The Changan ancestor's copy was taken to the Young Forest Temple, where it has remained under lock and key ever since, but other copies have been discovered. One is known to be in the possession of the Shanghai Kura Sau prince Hei Ti, and another is said to have been carried from the ashes of Nagasaki by the renegade Wu Lung Kuro Seito. But where there are two, there are certainly more, and nobody knows where they come from.

Few who have perused the contents of *The Broken-winged Crane* care to speak of the details. According to the most reliable of the prophecies predicting its appearance, it is the prayerbook of the Sixth Age; a blueprint for ultimate spiritual degradation; a textbook for those who would embrace the Yama Kings as their masters. It is said that the knowledge contained within it was what exalted Hei Ti to his present state, and that its contents closed forever the third eye of the Resplendent Crane arhat Jade Rose. For an aspiring *akuma* with the spiritual strength necessary to master the verses within, possession of a copy of *The Broken-winged Crane* is the key an unrighteous *dén* so great as unlock the vistas of black apotheosis and exalt him among the servants of Yomi as those who have read its words before him have been exalted.

law in the Thousand Hells. This differs significantly from anything in his prior experience, even from the legalities of the Celestial Bureaucracy.

Those who have already begun to consort with the underworld are of course well on their way to learning such lore. There are any number of ways to force a fellow infernalist into revealing what he knows, though it's generally a good idea to crush the informant's free will in order to prevent him from misinforming about the specifics out of spite or malice. Soul Shackling the victim or devouring his soul via Spirit-Eating are the preferred methods, though there are others. For example, Lotus Cloud and Yang Mantle used judiciously in combination work well on mortals. *Shen* are more difficult to persuade, and their wrath (or the wrath of their friends) is much more dangerous. Kuei-jin who wish to wrest information from fellow infernalists but who cannot find mortal occultists to victimize should be exceedingly careful in their choice of targets.

Mortal and *shen* infernalists are not the only sources for this knowledge. The Law of Yomi is used by all its inhabitants in the course of their interactions. A Kuei-jin who can enforce her will upon a Bane, Spectre or other wicked spirit can command it to teach her, just as surely as she could command it to watch a potential target or guard a valuable possession; the Tapestry art Chi-shaping and various demonology rituals are commonly used for this purpose. What is most important is that the bound spirit be intelligent enough to relay useful information to its new master. While *kuei* and their Yang World equivalents inherently understand Yomi's rituals of dominance and the codes of behavior, this understanding is on an instinctual level. Even if its spirit is devoured by the vampire, the entity's reflexive knowledge of who is master will not aid the Kuei-jin particularly in contract negotiations.

As a rule of thumb, a spirit must have a Power of 20 and share basic thought processes with creatures that are generally considered "sentient" to teach the Kuei-jin the laws of Yomi.

A spirit must have a Power of 40 or higher and likewise share the vampire's mode of sentience in order to teach the Kuei-jin well enough for him to develop a Law specialty in Soul Commerce — a well-recommended investment for the budding infernalist.

ASCERTAINING WHAT IS AVAILABLE

Finally, before the aspiring *akuma* contacts the Yama Kings to begin the negotiation process, he must decide what precisely it is that he desires. While much of what the vampire can purchase is obvious, there are some options that the *akuma* may not be aware of. A wise young infernalist engages in a great deal of research prior to sitting down at the table — souls are forever, after all. The research methods discussed above are all valid for making such decisions, particularly the capture and interrogation of evil spirits, who are (as one might imagine) quite knowledgeable in such matters.

The Yama Kings do their part to structure the process of Soul Commerce in a fashion that encourages Wan Kuei to place their entire soul on the table each time they negotiate. In game terms, each Kuei-jin has a number of Soul points equal to her (Hun or Willpower, whichever is lower) x 10. These represent the degree to which the Kuei-jin can give portions of her essential substance away and still retain self-mastery (or as much self-mastery as any of the Guan Ren ever has). The average infernalist thus has between 40 and 60 Soul points.

When the Kuei-jin sits down at the bargaining table, she may bring with her a "shopping list" equal in value to her remaining Soul points (for the Soul point values of various Investments, see "Investments of Soul" on p. 111). Each item on the list is bargained over in turn, and the Kuei-jin may pay

more or less for a given investment than she expects. A poorly negotiated contract may even cost the vampire her entire soul. However, even if the Kuei-jin forfeits her soul on the first item, she receives her entire "shopping list."

Thus, a vampire who wagers her entire soul each time she goes to the table cannot possibly come away a loser. Any success at all in the negotiations allows her to retain her freedom, and even if the deal goes badly for her, she has commanded the maximum price for her soul — or at least that's how the lords of Yomi Wan would like to portray matters. In reality, it means that many Kuei-jin who would otherwise come to the table for a single favor instead risk their entire souls, and the Yama Kings waste no breath denying that this is their intention.

THE DEAL IS STRUCK

After the vampire has done her research and prepared her shopping list, and the Yama Kings are brought in, the process of formal negotiation can begin. As noted above, the character should bring a prepared list of requested Investments to the table — the protocol of negotiation in the Thousand Hells requires that all requested boons be stated before formal negotiations begin. A character who is successful in her negotiations cannot decide to append items to the end of her list. To prevent what might be potentially bitter arguments between the player and Storyteller, the list of requests should be written down and formally stated as done and final before the rolls for the Ritual of the Black Peony are begun.

For each item on the list, the player rolls Intelligence + Law (difficult 8) and the Storyteller consults the table below.

No. of Successes	Result
Failure:	Surely he must have meant to strike that clause. Roll a single die and add the result to the listed cost of the item. That is the Soul point cost the character pays.
1 Success:	Perhaps the Kuei-jin could have cut a better deal. The item costs the listed Soul point value.
2 Successes:	A good bargain. The character pays the listed Soul point cost - 2.
3 Successes:	An excellent deal. The character pays half the listed Soul point cost (round up).
4 Successes:	A bargain at twice the price! The character pays a third of the listed Soul point cost (round up).
5 Successes:	Surely the demon children of the Yama Kings will go hungry tonight. The character receives the Investment for free.

If the character has *not* activated the No Mind or Harmony With The All applications of the Internalize Discipline, the difficulty of the roll increases by one, as the gravity of the situation and the actively disruptive influence of the Yama King or his representative makes it difficult to negotiate. The vampire may spend Willpower on this roll. While the player should roll the dice (it's her character's soul, after all), she should roll them out of sight — behind the Storyteller's screen or with her eyes closed. If the character has an applicable specialty, the Storyteller should feel free to tweak things in the

THE HONORABLE RETREAT

It is entirely possible that a Kuei-jin may contact the Yama Kings to negotiate over matters of Soul Commerce without having any knowledge of the legalities involved. Kuei-jin who cannot read *kaja*, have no grasp of the Law of Yomi or who have not prepared a list of requests may attempt to back gracefully out of the situation and come back when better prepared. However, getting out of the elephant trap is significantly harder than getting in, and the denizens of Yomi are very persuasive. The player must make a Charisma + Etiquette roll (difficulty 9) in order for the character to slip the noose. On a successful roll, characters can manage to get out from under the deal, though perhaps not gracefully. After a failed roll, however, characters are taken for a ride, lose their souls to the Yama Kings and gain whatever minor gifts their new overlords think might make a slow-witted slave a bit more useful. As for the results of botches, while the specifics are up to the individual Storyteller, the end result is never pretty. In fact, it's generally not even survivable.

character's favor. However, other than this, the player (and character) should have no real idea how well she's done on the negotiations until the end. The soul is not an easily quantifiable commodity, after all. Even when the negotiations are over, the character knows only if she has lost some, all or none of her soul. The character's exact Soul point total, unless it is "zero" or "the same as when the negotiations started," is known only to the Storyteller.

The Discipline of Internalize is of great utility to *akuma*, not only because of its steadying effects, but because the Iron Soul art can also be used during negotiation. Iron Soul may be used once for each Investment on the character's request list, up to the point where the character runs out of Willpower. The Yama Kings encourage this as well, since to their thinking it tends to make Kuei-jin overconfident and teaches them to rely on an unreliable ability.

THE CHAINS OF SLAVERY

Sooner or later, the *akuma* habituated to Soul Commerce will go back to the well one too many times and lose his last Soul point. At that point, possibly after a short delay during

THE SOUL OF THE EXPERIENCED *AKUMA*

A Kuei-jin who has previously engaged in Soul Commerce is never entirely certain just how much of his soul is still his own. When the respective parties come to the table, he should prepare his list of boons as normal. As soon as formal negotiations begin, the Storyteller should go down the list, adding up the total costs of the requested Investments until adding another Investment would push the character over his remaining Soul point total. This Investment and all after it are not subject to negotiation and should be dropped from the list — the Kuei-jin does not have sufficient assets to make the deal worthwhile to the Yama Kings.

Many naïve *akuma* believe that they can escape slavery by parceling their soul out between several of the lords of Yomi, particularly between rivals. There are two flaws in this strategy. The first is that the Yama Kings can sense the state of the Kuei-jin's soul, and are unlikely to negotiate for the remaining soul-scrap of a Kuei-jin who is largely property of an arch-rival. The second problem is that it presumes that the Kuei-jin is significant enough in the plans of the Yama Kings to merit special attention. The scraps of the vampire's soul gained by a Yama King during negotiation are subject to resale, and even the most fiercely opposed Yomi lords transact a multitude of business deals in the fullness of time. Once a vampire has lost his entire soul to the Yama Kings, it is only a matter of time until the fragments of his soul are all consolidated in one place and the *akuma* stripped of his free will.

which the vampire's soul fragments make their way into the hands of a single owner (short in immortal terms — it may be as long as several mortal years), the vampire's master assumes control of her new property.

What this means for the infernalist is that his existence has just gotten a lot bleaker. On demand, the *akuma* must perform the Rite of Renunciation, either in his dreams before the Yama King or before one of the Yama King's servants in the material world. After he has performed the Rite of Renunciation and been stripped of his Dharma, he is completely at the mercy of his new master.

The Yama King or her servants may observe the *akuma* at any time, and at their discretion, the Devil-eaten may be destroyed, reduced to consuming flesh to gain the Chi necessary to sustain his accursed existence or transformed into a ravening *chih-mei*. Additionally, the Kuei-jin cannot disobey a direct order from the Yama King whose chattel he has become. Upon performing the Rite of Renunciation, most *akuma* are generally ordered to preserve their own existence by any means necessary, and prohibited from self-destruction or revealing their Devil-eaten condition. Most are — but not all. Some are simply destroyed on the spot (usually over the course of several hours) for the amusement of the master. Others are sent on suicide missions, often after having been reduced to *chih-mei* status. Some unfortunates are taken to Yomi Wan to amuse their owners more extensively, and these are perhaps the least fortunate of all.

Those whom the Yama Kings do allow to retain their sentience and self-will occasionally benefit to a small degree from their new state. Many are given multiple Touch of the Yama King Investments and ordered into seclusion until they are needed to lead troupes of bakemono or otherwise serve as the soldiers of the Yomi lords. Certainly some of these *akuma* gain a degree of satisfaction from their duties. Other *akuma* are kept in place as spies, or painfully reshaped, provided with new identities and sent to infiltrate the society of the Wan Kuei. Many of these Devil-eaten are sometimes able to pretend that their souls are still their own, and that they are not slaves to darkness. Many Yama Kings encourage this sort of self-delusion, even allowing their pawns to think that they have slipped through the cracks and been forgotten. Sometimes this is the case — Hell's bookkeeping is not as efficient as it could be. In most cases, however, the Yama Kings simply watch, amused, as the *akuma* infiltrates the society of the Quincunx, only to strip him of his new foster-family and associates when the time is right.

There are a few positive aspects to becoming one of the Devil-eaten. First, if the Yama Kings so deign, the Kuei-jin may be made able to feed on breath or blood as well as flesh. The lesser *akuma* created by Soul Commerce are prohibited by their masters from feeding by osmosis — this is reserved for the exalted *akuma* created by the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade. Also, these Kuei-jin will never again enter Shadow Soul. While the P'o and its urges of hate and terror remain, it is forever the subjugated toady and stool-pigeon of the Kuei-jin's new masters. It may inform on the vampire, but it never attempts to seize control outside of the instinctual urges of Wave and Fire Soul. *Akuma* immediately gain the Merit:

THE RITE OF RENUNCIATION (LEVEL 3 RITE)

Rarely do Kuei-jin, even *akuma*, learn this ritual. Most who do learn of it wish they had not, as they are forced to go through its motions by the new owners of their souls. Nevertheless, a few copies of it exist, and it is possible to perform it on oneself, though one must wonder why any Kuei-jin would wish to do so.

During the Rite of Renunciation, the vampire forswears the Road Back and instead accepts the Road Downward. He swears his enmity to the August Personage of Jade, renounces his Dharma tenet by tenet, vows eternal opposition to the Wan Xian and the other representatives of the Celestial Bureaucracy, and gives himself wholly to the Yama Kings.

Generally, this rite is performed before the Yama King or one of his representatives, who at the climax physically and spiritually violate the Kuei-jin, tearing away the remaining scraps of enlightenment and free will and replacing it with his own will. As noted earlier in the book, the precise form this spiritual rape takes can vary, but it is invariably calculated to cause the Kuei-jin to realize that his body and soul are no longer his own.

A vampire who for some reason performs this ritual on his own may or may not attract the attention of a Yama King, Bane or other spirit. If she does, then at the climax of the ritual, she too is made a soulless slave of the forces of darkness. If not, it's still good for a Moment of Blindness — Heaven frowns on the stupid.

Demon Mentor (Kindred of the East, p. 94). Finally, the Kuei-jin may be given new Investments at his master's discretion, if his owner feels it will make him more useful. While these latter Investments may be given only to be stripped away at the discretion of the Yama King and her minions, it may provide the *akuma* with some small consolation to know that the Investments that cost him his soul, at least, are forever his.

THE PACT OF EBONY AND SCARLET JADE

Not every *akuma* loses his soul by inches in an attempt to come out ahead in commerce with the princes of darkness. Some give themselves wholly to evil in a blazing moment of ultimate self-degradation. Their souls lay beside those of the lesser *akuma* in the treasuries of the infernal masters, bound in ornaments of jade, yet these self-styled greater *akuma* are the darlings of their masters. Willing mamelukes and eunuch ministers of the lords of Yomi Wan, these slave-princes in jeweled collars serve as the administrators and legates of their dark lords. Only well-known mandarins or the most promising

INVESTMENTS OF SOUL

Investments of Soul are the favors that the Yama Kings can give in exchange for snippets of a character's soul. Many of them are rather powerful, though there are few that the Kuei-jin would not develop on their own, given time. In parentheses after the name of each Investment is its cost in Soul points. Also included is a brief description, side effects and sign.

The sudden influx of diabolical power implicit in being given an Investment often causes negative effects on the character, and these negative effects (if any) are detailed under "Side Effects." Sometimes the side effects are temporary, caused by the Investment but fading with time. Others recur each time the Investment is invoked, and sometimes the effects are permanent. This is specified in the individual Investment. Side effects are cumulative, and a vampire who receives multiple Investments may be in no shape to be seen publicly for quite some time thereafter.

Also, there are often ways that an observant eye can pick out the effects of hellish influence on a Kuei-jin. Unless the vampire has the Mask of Yomi Investment, an astute observer can determine most of an *akuma*'s Investments by simply watching. Those who are not already exiles or renegades should put the Mask of Yomi Investment high on their shopping list, so that they can conceal their forbidden dealings from their peers.

Storytellers should feel free to create new Investments, should the ones listed below prove insufficient.

• The Mask of Yomi (10 points)

The character's Investments no longer exhibit tell-tale signs. No amount of mind-probing, soul-sight or truth-sensing can ascertain that the character is an *akuma* or force her to betray her unrighteous activities.

Sign: None

Side Effect: The character no longer feels comfortable with herself. She is considered to be permanently down one point of Willpower for all rolls.

• Black Whispers (10 points)

The spies of the Yama Kings are everywhere, and what their *akuma* do not see and hear, their spirit minions learn. A Kuei-jin who purchases this Investment is actually purchasing knowledge from the Yama Kings. Each Investment covers a single fact and the associated details. For example, the Kuei-jin might learn details of an ancestor's life useful for blackmail purposes, or the current location of an artifact, including advice on circumventing the traps guarding it. There are some things that even the Yama Kings do not know, and other things they will not reveal. Storytellers should use their discretion to limit the power of this Investment, though remember that the character is selling his soul for the information.

Sign: None

Side Effects: None

• **The Ebon Fountain (10 points)**

The character's P'o is connected to a wellspring of demonic power. Once per night, the character may completely refresh her pool of Demon Chi.

Sign: Those who use Cultivation on the character's P'o are likely to notice its highly energetic state.

Side Effect: The difficulty for the character's Hun to resist Fire, Wave or Shadow Soul rolls is increased by one for the rest of the night after the character uses this Investment.

• **Luck of Yomi (6 points)**

The Yama-kings alter the character's *joss*, and fortune smiles upon the *akuma* as a result. In the near future, he will gain four dots to any Background or combination of Backgrounds.

Sign: The luck that brings the character these Backgrounds is often quite improbable, and tends to be characterized by the misfortune of others benefiting the character.

Side Effects: The character's *joss* suffers in other places to compensate for his good luck. Once per scene, the Storyteller may negate a single success on one of his rolls, usually a critical one. These side effects persist until the Backgrounds manifest.

• **The Savage Kiss (6 points)**

The character's soul is subjected to the caresses of the Mukade. The Kuei-jin may increase her P'o score by up to five points, regardless of whether the resulting Hun + P'o total exceeds the Virtue Pair Maximum for her level of Dharmic progress, as listed on p. 54 of *Kindred of the East*.

Sign: The Kuei-jin's aura is shot through with fine black veins.

Side Effect: The Kuei-jin suffers from the Flaw: *Nightmares* for a number of weeks equal to the number of points he added to his P'o. Vampires who already have *Nightmares* are treated as having failed their Willpower roll for the duration of the side effects.

• **The Union of Oppositions (6 points)**

The Yama Kings lay their hands upon the character, and he is remade. The character can adjust the balance of his permanent Chi Virtues to any degree desired. He can also add up to three points to his permanent Chi Virtue total, even if this raises his permanent Chi Virtues above the Virtue Pair Maximum for the character's level of Dharmic enlightenment.

Sign: The character's aura glows with unnatural brightness, almost but not quite to the point of being visible to the unaided eye.

Side Effect: The character's corpse requires additional sustenance to adjust to its new state. The character must burn an additional Chi point per night (for 10 nights) to sustain herself. This lasts for a number of weeks equal to the sum of the number of points by which her permanent Chi Virtues changed (so shifting balance is more extreme than simply adding points).

• **The Iron Hands (6 points)**

The character now moves with the might of the Yama Kings behind her. She may add two points to an Attribute or

combination of Attributes, even if this causes her to exceed the Trait Maximum for her level of Dharmic enlightenment.

Sign: When the character exceeds her previous limits, it is patently obvious that her additional ability comes from an outside source. She may limit herself to her pre-increase dice pool, but this self-limitation requires a Willpower roll (difficulty 8) when she is performing a stressful task.

Side Effects: The character is disoriented by the sudden change in her capabilities. For a number of weeks equal to the largest number of points added to a single Attribute, she is at a +1 difficulty on all rolls involving the Attributes so increased.

• **The Breath of Knowledge (6 points)**

The Yama Kings whisper their knowledge into the character's ears, and it burns in his brain like white-hot iron. The character may add four points to any Ability or combination of Abilities, even if it increases the Ability or Abilities past the Trait Maximum for the vampire's level of Dharmic enlightenment.

Sign: A character familiar with the *akuma*'s thoughts who peers into her mind while she is using the artificial Abilities may notice strange patterns, as the character utilizes knowledge that is not properly her own.

Side Effect: The character's mind is addled from the sudden addition of knowledge. Subtract one from her Social Attributes for a number of weeks equal to the largest number of points added to any single Ability.

• **The Touch of the Yama Kings (5-6 points)**

The touch of Yomi is upon the character. He gains a Demon Shintai characteristic in his normal mortal form (which also carries over to his Demon Shintai form). If this can be concealed, then the Investment costs six points, but if it is blatantly obvious that the character has a demonic trait, then the cost is only five points. Storytellers may also choose to grant the character access to bakemono powers, though discretion is advised (Berserker and Monstrous Strength, for example, are right out).

Sign: Even if the characteristics are concealable, they appear as distinctly unhealthy areas when viewed with Lifesight.

Side Effect: The character is made somewhat unhealthy by this power. His Stamina is decreased by one for a month following his receipt of the Investment, and Yang-imbalanced characters add one to the difficulty of their Stamina roll to resist disease for that period.

• **Unfolding Scarlet Lotus (5 points)**

The Banes whisper to the character the secrets of their exalted state. The *akuma* may add one to the rating of a single Discipline, even if this increases the Discipline's rating above the Trait Maximum for the *akuma*'s level of Dharmic enlightenment.

Sign: When the character uses the altered Discipline, his aura glows a brilliant black, regardless of what level is being used.

Side Effect: The character loses a certain amount of self-perception and self-confidence. For a number of months equal to the number of times this Investment was taken, the character cannot experience an Auspicious Moment and has one added to his difficulty when resisting Wave Soul.

jina can hope to achieve this status, but for whatever reason, many prospective *akuma* dwell in hope.

It requires a great deal of effort to become one of these greater *akuma*, which might seem paradoxical. Given that by definition, an *akuma* is stripped of her soul and her freedom in a horrible fashion as she achieves her new state, why would a Kuei-jin ever subject herself to such a terrible fate? Sadly, there will always be those of promise willing to suffer for that which they see as power. Historically, men emasculated themselves to enter the service of the Imperial Court; with that as precedent, why shouldn't an *akuma* pursue power through abnegation?

The court system is just as stifling in its own way as the society of Western vampires. An error committed centuries ago may bar a talented and ambitious young Kuei-jin from advancing despite his obvious merits. Even if he receives permission to relocate (often very difficult), what then? The harsh words of his ancestors follow him in the gossiping letters of the elders, and as a new arrival, he lands on the bottom of the social heap in his new home. For many promising young vampires, it would seem as if service in the courts of the Yama Kings is more promising than service in the courts of the Quincunx.

Other Kuei-jin lose their Dharmic roads and turn to the service of the Yama Kings in frustration. As a Kuei-jin ages, the time between Auspicious Occasions stretches from months to years to decades. How easy it is, as the steps on the Road Back widen, to be consumed by doubt. Service to the Yama Kings provides certainty, if nothing else. Other Kuei-jin lose their Dharmic inertia entirely, and either find they can rise no higher in their chosen Dharma, or begin actively falling from the path. Rather than lose the position their spiritual progress entitles them to, these unfortunates choose to enter into the service of the Yama Kings. By doing so, they avoid the disgrace of a fall from grace and the enmity of all those subordinates alienated over the centuries of their existence.

Finally, many Kuei-jin fall from despair. It is certainly easy for many Wan Kuei to stare out over their bloodied blades and bare their fangs at the oncoming Age of Darkness. But for every Devil-Tiger and Resplendent Crane who has marked the place where she will fight and die, there is another (or two, or three) who is less eager to be plowed under by the onrushing juggernaut. Younger Guan Ren may have the bravado of blissful ignorance, but older Kuei-jin are all too aware of the gravity of their situation and the genuinely bleak prospects for the coming Age. Many who come to appreciate the realities of the situation arrive at what they feel is the eminently sensible decision to join the winning side. Better a slave than dead, they say, and there are not so many voices raised in doubt of these defeatist sentiments as there once were.

THE SELLING OF THE SOUL

Unlike the lesser *akuma*, who sell their souls in what are essentially business arrangements negotiated with proxies or representatives, the greater *akuma* have much more personal relations with the Yama Kings. For these Kuei-jin, there is no desperate scrabbling for infernalist lore. Those Kuei-jin promising or experienced enough to merit the personal attention of the Yama Kings know exactly how this sort of business is transacted. Many may have standing offers with one or more Yama Kings should they happen to choose to forsake their

THE PACT OF EBONY AND SCARLET JADE (LEVEL 4 RITE)

This ritual is a highly specific rite in which a Kuei-jin willingly offers up her entire soul to one of the Yama Kings, who willingly accepts it. While the ritual is generally performed in the Yama King's hall in the Thousand Hells, it is known that, should the Yama King appear in person in the Middle Kingdom (as Mikaboshi all too often does), it can be performed there as well. To perform this ritual costs a point of Willpower, and the Kuei-jin and the Yama King must both sign a contract for the disposition of the Kuei-jin's soul. Thereafter, the soul is placed into a vase or other container and stored by the Yama King in some safe place. The only requirement is that, prior to the performance of this ritual, the Kuei-jin's soul must be entirely her own. This ritual does not work if the Kuei-jin has lost so much as a single Soul point in Soul Commerce.

Dharmic paths, and some even have former friends on the "other side" who maintain a tenuous sort of contact.

When some luminary of the Quincunx or the *wu* chooses to walk the Road Downward, it is usually after some fairly serious deliberation. These are not disciples and young *jina* scrabbling for scraps of power: The Kuei-jin who become greater *akuma* are warrior-scholars, sages wise beyond human years, the proud remnants of the Wan Xian. When they choose to fall, they do so with grave certainty.

Past a certain age and level of enlightenment, it becomes impossible to avoid learning the ways of your enemy. Centuries of observation educate the Wan Kuei in the doings of the Yama Kings. As a result, most such vampires begin the process by contacting a representative of the Yama King they wish to serve. Over the decades, Kuei-jin come to learn of evils too powerful or influential to dislodge. When the decision is made, most such Guan Ren need do little more than pick up the phone to begin the negotiations over the price of their souls.

Generally, once the Rubicon has been crossed, there is no going back. A Kuei-jin who takes the first step has committed to going the entire way. Usually, the vampire negotiates for several weeks or months over the specifics, with Banes, Spectres or lesser *akuma* serving as go-betweens. The various Treatments and Investments to be received, the specific details of when and how the vampire will make the passage into Yomi, and any special concession they wish to extract are all haggled over until both sides have agreed to an exact final draft of the contract.

Then the Kuei-jin makes his preparations to depart. Servants are paid off, the disposition of valued objects that will not be taken to Yomi is arranged for, and the vampire generally puts his life in order as if for an impending demise. Some perform the Rite of the Lone Walker for their *wu*-mates alone. Such a step is a traditional sign of impending departure for the service of the Yama Kings, and it is grave enough to send his fellows into

mourning, provoke them to murder to save the honor of the *wu* or set them to scrambling for cover from the political battle sure to erupt after the Kuei-jin's departure for Yomi becomes widely known. Obviously, many Kuei-jin eschew this telegraphing of their attentions, but traditionalists, romantics, those with a deep love for their *wu*-mates and those with a wish for Final Death often do so.

Finally, the Kuei-jin departs, taking with him such loyal servants and possessions that he cannot bear to part with. It is generally considered poor form to take students, dhampyrs or fellow Kuei-jin to Yomi, but it happens from time to time. Mortal servants, lovers, pets and others do often make the trip, however.

THE MAKING OF A MINISTER OF HELL

After the Kuei-jin descends into Yomi, she is met by an escort of lesser and greater *akuma* as well as by other evil spirits. The escort is present partly to serve as an honor guard and protection against the dangers of Yomi, and partly to prevent any last-minute backing out on the deal. The Kuei-jin eventually comes into the presence of the Yama King himself, where the contract she has been carrying is signed by both parties and the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade is performed.

The Kuei-jin's retinue and goods, if any, are then set up in apartments in the Yama King's palace, a pavilion in a military encampment or whatever other plush accommodations are suitable to the chattels of one of the master's favored slaves. The vampire is taken to the places where teaching and torment become one, and subjected to the Treatments she has bargained for. Almost all survive, but few return as the creatures that their entourages brought to Yomi. Reshaped by the ultimate torments, these newborn diabolical nobles are often vastly different from their former selves. Some immediately devour their companions and destroy their memories of life among the Wan Kuei. Others, more disturbingly, do not, but instead live among them in ease, a poisonous snake among the flowers of the Middle Kingdom's sunlit fields.

Because all of the information necessary to take up a role in Yomi Wan has been seared into their minds, the *akuma* pick subordinates and immediately enter their new roles as junior ministers and lieutenant generals to the Yama Kings. While they are the nobility of Yomi Wan, the *akuma* must still prove themselves in the world of plots and violence that surrounds the throne of each Yama King. Though they may dress in robes of green jade and pearls, they nevertheless vie with their fellow Devil-eaten for favor. Each is constantly alert for a chance to better himself and his master's position, and if this is done at the expense of a rival, so much the better.

THE POWERS OF THE GREATER AKUMA

The *akuma* is remade by the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade. Each has the following abilities.

• **No P'o** — The Kuei-jin who undergoes the Pact achieves dark apotheosis. Her Hun and P'o are forever fused. Though the result dramatically favors the P'o, some harmony is achieved. Sometimes this means the *akuma*'s personality changes dramatically, and sometimes she is virtually indistinguishable from the Kuei-jin she once was. Regardless, her inner war is now over. The vampire has a base of 10 Demon Chi, which may rise due

to Treatments. The *akuma* cannot enter Fire, Wave or Shadow Soul, nor does the Cultivation Discipline function on her.

• **Increased Chi Virtue Pair Maximum** — An *akuma* is stripped of his old Chi Virtues and has 14 points to distribute between his permanent Yin and Yang however he wishes. He is still subject to the effect of permanent Chi imbalance, however, just as if he were a Kuei-jin.

• **Increased Trait Maximums** — An *akuma* may increase a Trait as high as seven. Traits higher than seven at the time of the Pact are retained, but Traits cannot be increased higher than seven without Treatments or Investments after the *akuma* undergoes the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade.

• **Increased Chi Capacity** — An *akuma* may contain as many as 30 points of both Yin and Yang Chi. She may spend up to three Chi points per turn.

• **Flexible Feeding** — The *akuma* may feed on flesh, blood, breath or by osmosis. While in Yomi, the *akuma* may feed freely from the ambient Chi. However, many greater *akuma* enjoy wounding the Tapestry by refilling themselves from the ambient Chi of the Middle Kingdom.

• **No Longer Subject to Obligation** — The *akuma* is no longer governed under the mandate of the Ten Thousand Immortals. He cannot be subjected to the Obligation Discipline.

• **No Little Death** — If the *akuma* is slain in the Middle Kingdom, her body blows into fine ash and her spirit flees to Yomi to stand before her master and explain her failure. Unless her owner chooses to destroy her for her failure, the *akuma* is then clothed in flesh once again. The only way an *akuma* can die the Final Death is for her to be destroyed in Yomi or entirely by aggravated damage.

• **No Free Will** — The *akuma* is a soulless husk, a slave to dark powers. While his masters allow him a great deal of freedom, he is still a bird in a gilded cage. If ordered to destroy himself or a *wu*-mate, the *akuma* will do so without hesitation. If his master so chooses, she may transform the *akuma* into a mindless *chih-mei* with but a gesture, or render him unable to feed from anything other than flesh. Additionally, the *akuma* is forever rendered unclean, and will never complete the Road Back. He has failed in his Dharmic journey and forsworn the final chance that Heaven saw fit to grant him.

SOUL TREATMENTS

Each greater *akuma* is subject to certain training and reshaping processes called Treatments. Each of these Treatments is a special combination of searing knowledge into the Devil-eaten's brain, brutal training and the literal reshaping of the *akuma*'s soul, all under the Yama King's personal direction. The Treatments listed are common examples, but each Yama King develops individual tastes on the matter and varies them slightly.

Each Treatment has a listed cost. Each *akuma* has an Endurance equal to his Willpower or Dharma rating upon making the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade (whichever was lower). Each Treatment the *akuma* undergoes permanently subtracts its cost from his Endurance. If the Treatment would drive the *akuma*'s Endurance below zero, it destroys the *akuma*'s body, mind or soul. Unless otherwise specified, each Treatment can only be undergone once. To take the same Treatment

INFERNALISM AMONG THE SHEN

Kuei-jin are not alone in offering themselves to the Yama Kings as willing slaves. The *hsien* also offer themselves up as thralls to Yomi. While these Kura Sau (as infernalists are called by the Household Gods) have a different structure than the *akuma* of the Wan Kuei, their Okuma leaders can be adequately represented by these rules for use in *Kindred of the East*. Storytellers using *Land of Eight Million Dreams* should use these as guidelines for designing powerful Kura Sau, and otherwise treat them as normal Shinma. One of the Kura Sau's main advantages is that she need not maintain her balance to seek the black apotheosis of Hac Tao (called the Blood-Jade Dagger) that a normal Shinma must have to seek the Jade Key.

While the specifics of Hac Tao are left up to the Storyteller, its effects should be at least roughly similar to Nei Tan. Otherwise, Kura Sau without an effect similar to Axis of Time are going to be in poor shape the first time they come upon a warlike hanumen.

Hengeyokai who willingly subject themselves to the Yama Kings are rare. Most instead choose to walk the Ebon Maze and enter the direct service of the Centipede, a vast force of elemental evil that lays beneath (and many say stands behind) the lords of Yomi Wan. Some, however, pledge fealty to individual Yama Kings. Hengeyokai Storytellers may use *Freak Legion* and *Book of the Wyrms* to model these wretched souls, who often serve as generals in the armies of the Yama Kings.

Alternately, the Storyteller may subject them to the Treatments detailed below, suitably altered for use on hengeyokai. As a rule, hengeyokai who enter the service of the Yama Kings are unlikely to retain their Gifts of Gnosis. Unlike the Centipede, the Yama Kings are not inherently linked with the natural order, and their wretched Bête slaves are likewise cut off from the natural order. To make up for this deficiency, the Yama Kings remove the hengeyokai's natural vulnerabilities and load them down with Gifts. These range from Talismans and fomer Gifts to Treatments and inauspicious talents best modeled by the use of Kuei-jin Disciplines.

Mages who fall to the blandishments of the Yama Kings are Nephandi with exotic masters. Nephandi are well-detailed in the Mage supplement *Book of Madness*. Fallen Lightning People are among the favorite servants of the Yama Kings, who put their power over reality to twisted use as court magicians and spymasters. Namebreakers who pledge their souls to the lords of Yomi Wan may be subjected to Treatments, but most are far too frail to survive the training that the more resilient Kuei-jin and hengeyoki endure. Most Nephandi are instead given standard Demonic Investments.

again lowers the *akuma*'s Endurance, but does not provide any benefits.

CRIMSON TIGER-GENERAL TREATMENT (COST 3)

The Treatment given by the Yama Kings to their front-line generals and all-out warriors, the Crimson Tiger-General Treatment fills the *akuma* with the energy of the Yomi World, forces her to endure exposure to fire and sunlight and drives her to manifest the demon within. *Akuma* who have endured the Crimson Tiger-General Treatment rarely look remotely human, even outside of Demon Shintai form.

Grants:

Four points to distribute between Strength and Stamina

Four points to distribute between Melee and Brawl

Four additional Demon Shintai Characteristics as per the Investment *The Touch of the Yama Kings* (not concealable).

Three additional levels to distribute between Demon Shintai and Black Wind

GRACEFUL REED ANGEL TREATMENT (COST 3)

A technique taught to assassins and the commanders of extraordinary forces, the Graceful Reed Angel Treatment binds the *akuma* in white-hot iron frames and forces him through the katas of the Chi pranas until he develops the soft grace of bending reeds in a rising storm wind. Those who have been subjected to this Treatment move with an unmistakable, unhesitating grace that is as beautiful as it is synthetic.

Grants:

Four points to distribute between Dexterity and Wits

Four points to distribute between Athletics and Martial Arts

Two additional Demon Shintai characteristics, as per the Investment *The Touch of the Yama Kings*, concealable.

Four additional levels to distribute between Yin Prana and Yang Prana — the *akuma* must fulfill the statistic minimums to increase their Discipline to a given level.

PEARL TEETH AND AMBER EYES TREATMENT (COST 2)

The *akuma*'s form is reshaped by the finest flesh-sculptors, and the lessons of proper behavior and charm seared into his memory as he studies courtly graces under the direct tutelage of a Yama King. Depending on the whim of the *akuma*'s infernal master, he may be made beautiful but retain his original appearance, or have his body completely reshaped by the artist/butchers of Yomi, even to the point of gender reassignment and gross changes of height and frame. This Treatment may be taken more than once.

Grants:

Four points to distribute between Charisma and Appearance

Eight points to distribute among Empathy, Expression and Etiquette

BEATIFICALLY ENLIGHTENED TUTOR TREATMENT (COST 3)

Through this Treatment, the *akuma* is enlightened. The truth of the universe is revealed to her over the course of mere

months, often during the application of other Treatments. Of all the Treatments involving the character's forced enlightenment, this is generally the one most detrimental to the character's ability to relate to other beings in a "normal" fashion — many *akuma* undergoing the Treatment are made to adopt the points of view of multiple spiritual beings at once, and few ever recover entirely from the experience.

Grants:

Four points to distribute between Perception and Intelligence

Six points to distribute among Occult, Rituals and Portents

Four additional levels to distribute between Chi'iu Muh and Internalize

SAINT OF THE GODBODY TREATMENT (Cost 3)

The *akuma*'s master awakens him to every particle of his undead body, then floods the corpse with synthetic *yugen* brewed in the bodies of human bodhisattvas seized by the Yama Kings and forcibly prevented from passing on to their next incarnation as Buddhas. The *akuma*'s corpse explodes in a frenzy of activity from this unaccustomed energy, often filling several hundred cubic meters at the height of the Treatment. After several weeks of intense awareness of its state, the *akuma* is made to "pull himself together." Most survive, some do not — this is the most dangerous of the Treatments in general use. Most Saints of the Godbody do not ever reassemble their form quite properly, usually transposing at least two elements. This in no way impairs the *akuma*. Kuei-jin who have transposed Flesh and Jade, for example, are often mistaken for members of the Immortal Guard, while those who have transposed Blood for Bone are simply grotesque, particularly when they have also been subjected to the Pearl Teeth and Amber Eyes Treatment.

Grants:

Eight points to distribute among the Shintai, excluding Demon Shintai.

ARTFUL CLOCKWORK PRINCE TREATMENT (Cost 4)

Devised and used almost entirely by Mikaboshi, the Yama King of the Wicked City, this Treatment improves the character via the addition of cybernetics and electronic enhancements. The sciences which power these devices would not be familiar to human scientists, however, and have much more to do with the prodigies of the Five Metal Dragons than with actual technology. While the character's body is made faster and stronger through the addition of prosthetic limbs and electronic ganglia, his brain is wired for the ruthless business politics of the Wicked City. Mikaboshi is said to lease *akuma* subjected to this Treatment to the shadowy Western firm known as Pentex, commanding outrageous sums for their services as analysts and consultants.

Grants:

Eye of the Electric Dragon — An electronic third eye, the Eye of the Electric Dragon acts as Rasa (Chi'iu Muh) and Chi Sight (Chi'iu Muh ●●) free of cost, as well as allowing the *akuma* to see through any security camera in the Wicked City and granting him remote access to any of the hell's many thousands of data systems, even when he himself is outside the Yomi World.

Five points to distribute among Strength, Dexterity, and Wits

Eight points to distribute among Computer, Finance, Law and Leadership

SEVEN WISDOMS MINISTER TREATMENT (Cost 2)

Used as a secondary Treatment for many *akuma* and given again and again to those who will sit at the Yama King's right hand, this Treatment enhances the *akuma*'s brain and fills the newly created capacity with information on the behavior and laws of both humans and *shen* alike. *Akuma* who have been exposed to this Treatment multiple times often communicate with one another in special languages they devise and modify on the fly.

Grants:

Four points to distribute between Intelligence and Manipulation

Eight points to distribute among Investigation, Law and Politics and Subterfuge

LEGENDS OF THE DEVIL-EATEN

Even among the august ranks of the greater *akuma*, there are some who break unbreakable stereotypes or otherwise defy the traditions of the Thousand Hells in a noteworthy fashion. Below are some of the most notorious of these *akuma*, though of course each recipient of the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade is a unique being.

THE BLACK ANIMAL GENERALS

Perhaps the only freelance greater *akuma* in existence, the Black Animal Generals have stood as mockeries of their opposite numbers in the Celestial Bureaucracy for centuries now. Composed of a hanumen in the service of the Kura Sau, a Khan who trod the Ebon Maze before the Manchu dynasty was founded and a Kuei-jin *akuma* whose Demon Shintai form is that of a great black minotaur, the Black Animal Generals have fought for and against each of the lords of Yomi Wan over the centuries since their appearance. Though they will march under the banner of any Yama King who can provide them with Chi and payment, they prefer to fight against the forces of the Celestial Bureaucracy and the Wan Kuei rather than in the Yomi World's endless civil wars. None know where the spirits of the Black Animal Generals fly when their physical bodies are destroyed, but they have returned time and time again to do battle. If rumor is true, the Black Animal Generals do not currently serve a Yama King at all, but are said to march at the head of bodyguard of the Kura Sau Okuma Hei Ti, the "Black Emperor of the Kura Sau." Certainly they have not been seen lately by anyone willing to speak about the experience.

TASHIMOTO HANKO

One of the greatest generals of the *uji no Bishamon*, Tashimoto Hanko was a Devil-Tiger warrior who was instrumental in the successful defense of the Azure Dragon Court from invading

Korean and Chinese Kuei-jin after the invasion of 1274. Said to be of unearthly cunning and possessed of strength beyond even the mightiest of the Guan Ren, Tashimoto was worshipped by his troops. Yet after the invaders were successfully thrown back and the kamikaze destroyed the second invasion fleet, Tashimoto was accused of Lesser Commerce with the Yama Kings by one of his fellow Devil-Tigers, the yojimbo of Clan Bishamon's daimyo. Hanko fled rather than stand trial, and it was only after much investigation that it was ascertained that Hanko had not only been engaging in Lesser Commerce, but had in fact accepted the Pact of Ebony and Scarlet Jade several years before the invasion of Japan. Indeed, training in Yomi was at least partially responsible for his great prowess.

Yet this was not Tashimoto's greatest trick. Several decades after his flight to the court of his patron Emma-o, the island of Japan seemed to turn upside down. Kumo and bakemono walked openly during the daytime, black magicians were found murdered at crossroads with the marks of the *shikome* on them, and packs of Hakken known to have walked the Ebon Maze were seen searching across the countryside. After weeks of turmoil, two Kumo who knew the purposes of this seemingly pointless activity were captured, and they revealed a story unique in the annals of the Yomi World. Tashimoto, with the assistance of a number of *shen* including a powerful Dragon Wizard, had stormed the gates of Emma-o's treasury, seized the gold and jade vase which contained his soul, and then fled along the Ebon Road toward Japan. Emma-o was furious, and would stop at nothing to recapture Tashimoto Hanko and his accomplices.

Yet, though the servants of Emma-o combed the entirety of Japan (and much of China and Korea as well), they never located Tashimoto Hanko. For six centuries now, Tashimoto Hanko has gone without being seen or heard from, and despite the fact that Emma-o offers a massive reward for information that even hints at his location, his whereabouts have never come to light. It is as if he had stepped off the edge of the world.

MIRIAM WEATHERBEE

Miriam Weatherbee is well-known in the Thousand Hells, and throughout much of the Middle Kingdom, as the only Kin-jin *akuma* known to be in the service of the Yama Kings. A Clan Toreador dilettante and amateur occultist, Weatherbee was several hundred years into her unlife when she came to Hong Kong searching after the forbidden lore of the East in the early 1900s. Already of questionable moral character (there were rumors that her departure from Europe was more likely a flight to escape prosecution), Miriam quickly fell in with Hong Kong's underworld of the occult.

She came to associate particularly closely with a group of *pennangallan* who took her in as one of their own, thus causing much scandal in the city's Cainite community (and no small amount of speculation that Ms. Weatherbee was not a Toreador at all, but a member of another clan well-known for its beauty). When the *pennangallan* were found to be infernalists, they fled the city and Miriam Weatherbee fled with them. She dropped out of sight for several decades, and was seen again in the Flesh Court not long afterward, at which time she diablerized a Tremere in Shanghai and made off with his thaumaturgical texts. During the Kindred investigation that followed, it became clear that both factions of local Kuei-jin were looking for her as well. A brief (almost comical) pause in the three-way hostilities ensued as the various sides compared notes and determined that they had all been had by a devoted infernalist and shapechanger of the first rate.

Since then, Miriam has turned up now and again, perpetrating her fraud on the young and naïve among the Kuei-jin who have never heard of her and take her for an ignorant Kin-jin. Most informed Kuei-jin suspect her allegiance lies with Ravana, but there's really no way of knowing. What is well-known is that she is probably the greatest *akuma* directly active in the affairs of the Middle Kingdom at this time, and that recently — as far as anyone is able to tell — her attention seems to be narrowing down and focusing on India.

