

Chapter I

Ash and Chrysanthemum

An Introduction

THE BOOK OF QUESTIONS

Two thousand years after the fall of the angels, the outsiders came. They slew the gatekeeper of Heaven with the blade named Atrocity. In so doing, they began the Age of Pain. The phoenix built its nest and burned itself to ashes. The tree of worlds trembled. A man called Vyasa wrote the Sutra of Questions, and said that whosoever answered them all should surmount the world.

In the name of human achievement, that each of you should rise above the world; in the name of love, that my people may escape the trap of ignorance and desire; in the name of truth, that the mysteries of the world should stand revealed, I present you with this text. In it you shall find the answers to all Vyasa's questions, and more besides; and with it, you shall escape — for a time at least — the constraints of your reality.

These are the first of the words that Vyasa wrote:

1. *A woman traveling encounters a wall; yet no sooner does she come upon it than a god strikes it down. "A miracle!" cries the woman.*
2. *A dog, tied to a stake, strains to break free. A passing traveler looses it. "A miracle!" exclaims the dog.*
3. *Does the dog understand miracles? Does the woman?*
4. *A farmer says, "A river does not choose its course, but obeys the winds and stone and rain; they set its path and describe its channel. For humans, this is not so: I alone decide my course."*
5. *The river says, "I choose my course, and run where I wish. For humans, this is not so: animal drives control their mind, and all that truly determines their actions is the lightning in the meat."*
6. *Does the man know the river or does the river know the man?*
7. *A bird flew in through the cage door: and when it sought to return, it found the cage door closed.*
8. *If the bird was a god, then what would be its cage?*

"This is my judgment upon you," she said slowly, "who has trespassed in the grove of Nomina, and uprooted the hoarbound as a gift of flowers for your love. That your hand, which defiled the earth, shall burn... and that that burning will continue, inch by slow inch, in water or in air, in earth or in plastic's smothering grasp, moving from your fingers' fullest extension on the left to your fingers' fullest extension to the right, until the last still-living trace of you twists and writhes within the ashes where it lies, and only then will it stop, and only then will you die."

*—from FIRE STORIES,
compiled by Kneader Guy*

It is said that there are no wonders and no horrors save those that man brings upon himself. It is said that butterflies were born of blind evolution and insensate Nature, that the sky is but a screen of molecules between humanity and the endless void. It is said that the highest form of life is man. People have looked for more, scientists and artists reaching for some hidden magic. They have found none ... but it is there.

Hidden in the secret places, a twist of space away from the Earth that hosts them, reside the Imperators Occulte — the true gods, the banished angels, the great Lords of the Dark and of the Light. Beyond the edge of the Earth, the World Ash holds all the worlds there are. Its tender heights support Heaven. Its roots trail into Hell. And in a certain place where no mortal man has been, those branches twine and tie together to support the graves of angels, where the yellow chrysanthemums grow.

*N*OBILIS is set between Ash and Chrysanthemum, in the world these flora bracket, a world where flowers are the symbols of the oldest game of all. It is the story of the Sovereign Powers, shard-selves of the Imperators charged to act in their Lord or Lady's name. Do not misunderstand: these are no mere servitors. Alone, with none of their kind to aid or oppose them, any of these *N*OBILIS could tear down a nation or earn its worship.

They are called cruel, these *N*OBILIS. They are called soulless, or soul-twisted, and this last is true, for the divine essence of an Imperator burns its way into its shard-selves' souls. They have been called glorious and they have been called evil; they have been called slaves and they have been called Lords.

Call them, instead, human — humans caught inside when a Secret Place was built, when an Imperator chose their bodies and minds to hold its aspects. They are humans now tied to the elements of reality itself and charged with the terrible responsibility of guarding those elements. Humans now tied to their Chancel, their Secret Place, and charged with its defense and rule.

These may not seem difficult duties — but a war rages at the edges of reality, and only the Imperators hold the Excrucians back. Every Power knows as well that sometimes this war comes to Earth. And when it does, it is their problem alone.

It is perilous to be of the *N*OBILIS. The Valde Bellum, the war for the existence of the world, is not the only conflict complicating Powers' existence. The wars of Light against Dark, Heaven against Hell, and even the personal conflicts spawned by hate, pride and ambition also draw in the Imperators and Powers. Though *N*OBILIS wield great power, the other players in the games of war and intrigue, the games of lust and hate, the games of magic ... they are *N*OBILIS as well.

Their spite can shatter mountains.
Their love can shatter souls.

PLAYING *N*OBILIS

*N*OBILIS is a game where you tell stories — a special kind of story, focusing on a Family of Powers in the worlds upon the Ash. These rules are intended to help you and your friends act out these stories, and view the world through the eyes of the main characters.

The players create the story together. Each player designs a player character (PC for short), one of the protagonists in the story. Each PC is a Sovereign Power, born as a mortal and given part of an Imperator's soul. The PCs usually share the same Imperator, and comprise all of the currently active Powers in that Imperator's service. In the idiom of the Powers, this makes them a Familia Caelestis (a Celestial Family) or a Familia Potens (a Family of Powers).

A Power can serve many masters: Lord Entropy, whose dominion is the Earth itself; the cause of Heaven or Hell, Dark or Light; the warmasters of the Valde Bellum; and always, always, and firstly, their Imperator. This is the deep-rooted law of a Power's creation. Each PC, and every other Power on Earth, is associated with a facet of Earthly existence, as well — something like storms, or computers, or imagination. This is that Power's Estate. The Powers can command their Estates and must guard them. Safeguarding these things may sound simple; it is not. In this war, even storms can pass utterly from the Earth.

Once you have learned enough about the *N*OBILIS, you can take on the role of your PC — saying the things you want your character to say, and describing the actions you want your character to take. This is how you play *N*OBILIS; it is very similar to impromptu theater, games of “let's pretend” and collaborative writing projects.

Players make other contributions to the story. The players co-operatively create the PCs' Imperator and the Chancel in which the Imperator and their PCs live. Individual players often control Anchors, mundane people bound to serve the Powers, who have certain protections from the actions of the Excrucians and Powers alike. One special player — known herein as the Hollyhock God, or HG, and in other games as the Game Master, Storyguide, or Storyteller — takes charge of everything else. This means, more precisely, that the HG is responsible for the story as a whole and the world as a whole. The HG will create and play most of the people in the game, and will also serve as a kind of referee, deciding the outcome of each player's actions. Together, the players and the HG play out the story of the PCs' lives.

Some basic roleplaying terms used herein include:

- ☛ **Scene.** A scene in *N*OBILIS is like a scene in a play — a set of more or less continuous events. Whenever the HG fast-forwards game time (for example, to skip a dull train ride or a quiet night) the current scene ends and a new one begins.
- ☛ **Session.** When the players and the Hollyhock God assemble to play *N*OBILIS, the game events of that real-life day comprise a “session”.

“The rules of the game are simple,” Scott explained. “First, you pretend to kill me with this stage dagger — as you see, when pushed into flesh, the plastic blade retracts into the hilt. Then, in retribution, my three hired thugs will tie you into a sack and throw you into the river.”

“It seems somehow asymmetric,” Andrea observed, her forehead wrinkling.

“The house always has an advantage,” Scott answered, “but this should not interfere with your enjoyment of the game.”

—from A PERSONAL HISTORY, by Emily Chen

- ☞ **Story.** A story is a set of game events with a beginning, middle, and an end, spanning at least one game session.
- ☞ **In Character (IC).** When a player is speaking as their character would, describing the PC's actions, or thinking like their PC, they are considered to be "IC".
- ☞ **Out of Character (OOC).** When a player is not IC, they are OOC. For instance, discussions about who is going to order pizza are OOC. Humorous comments about the events of the game are also OOC, unless they come from a PC and not a player.
- ☞ **Campaign.** A campaign (or "series") is a set of stories that have the same main characters and general continuity. When all the players make up new characters, the HG makes up a new version of the game universe, or both, the result is a new campaign.

NOBILIS CONVENTIONS

"I do not understand," Terrence admitted. "I have done everything in the proper manner. I have preached to the multitudes, worked miracles subtle and vast, healed the sick and the blind; yet still I am ignored by the populace."

"You're doing fine," Emma assured him. "You've established a nice solid foundation as a general messiah. Now the trick is to develop a miracle that substantively distinguishes you from all the messiahs that have come before."

—from UNDOCUMENTED HISTORY, by Walden Fargo

NOBILIS conventions are somewhat unusual among roleplaying games. A few of the ways in which NOBILIS differs from the norm are shown below:

DIRECT PHYSICAL OR MAGICAL CONFRONTATION IS RARE
In NOBILIS, killing or beating up your enemies is generally undesirable. Sure, it's nice to have them out of the way, and there's even a bit of magical energy that can be pulled from a beaten or slain enemy. There is, however, an awful lot of energy that can be siphoned away from an enemy through destroying the things they care for while they are alive and free. The deadliest enemies are near impossible to kill; the cost of battle exceeds its benefits; and sabotage is terribly efficient. Smart Nobilis, therefore, do not seek open combat, and fight reluctantly when they must fight at all.

Of course, the NOBILIS don't cite those reasons, at least not publicly. They will tell you they're peaceful souls, and who would they fight anyway? The Excrucians? Then they'll look awfully nervous, like someone's walking over their grave. It is a general rule of the Valde Bellum, but there are many exceptions: if it comes to blows, both sides have already lost.

DEATH IS NOT THE END

NOBILIS characters are half-human or, more rarely, half-animal. This is important. Their humanity makes them comprehensible. At the same time, however, each contains an immortal fragment of the Emperor's soul. Even if the Power falls in battle with Excrucians, the fragment endures, and the Emperor passes it to an heir or successor. The player can therefore continue playing someone with the same abilities (or related ones) even if their first PC dies. Some Nobles even remember their Emperor-shard's previous lives, allowing a great deal of character continuity. The player can decide how much of the old character lingers in the heart of the new one. A PC's noble spirit may or may not survive the destruction of their soul, and the eradication of the aspect of reality for which the character is responsible can also extinguish them (Most attacks on a particular aspect of reality weaken it and its Power, but some aim for destruction.)

THERE ARE NO DICE

Before their Commencement, that moment when they become high servants of the Emperors, Sovereign Powers have mundane skills. The Lord or Lady exalts those skills along with the rest of the soul. People raised to the rank of Sovereign lose doubt about their abilities. A Power can accomplish literally anything that their magic and skill make possible. Matters become uncertain only when other Powers, Excrucians, or Emperors are interfering in some manner.

THE PLAYERS HELP TO CREATE THE GAME UNIVERSE

The Hollyhock God arranges most of the game's setting, themes, and inhabitants. It's the players, however, who create the most important person and the most important place in the game: their Emperor and their Chancel. Further, some of the game's themes will be determined by the nature of the player characters. For example, if one PC is a Power of Time, the game might feature such issues as free will versus determinism and Fate, the human slavery to schedules, life in the moment versus life lived for the future, and so forth.

PLAYERS CAN PLAY IN SCENES WHERE THEIR CHARACTERS ARE NOT PRESENT

NOBILIS players' contributions do not stop with their characters. Powers can participate in events apart from their physical presence, by stepping into the mind of one of their Anchors. Many Powers have (limited or unlimited, depending on the Power) ability to speak to their Familia over long distances. This allows a Power to participate in action in several places at once. Of course, sometimes there are long scenes where a given Power will not or cannot be involved. In this case, a player can simply play a character who is present in that particular scene, either just this once or on a regular basis whenever their Power isn't relevant. Players should remember that these characters are not necessarily loyal to that player's character, or to any other PCs, for that matter.

RESOURCES

NOBILIS draws on myth, religion, and high fantasy for inspiration; it is intended to capture elements of each. Specific works that influenced NOBILIS, and others of similar spirit, include:

- ☞ Piers Anthony, *On a Pale Horse*
- ☞ Terry Bisson, "They're Made of Meat"
- ☞ John Brunner, *The Complete Traveler in Black*
- ☞ Susan Cooper, *The Dark is Rising (Over Sea, Under Stone; The Dark is Rising; Greenwitch; The Grey King; and The Silver on the Tree)*
- ☞ Charles de Lint, *Moonheart; Greenmantle* and others
- ☞ Stephen R. Donaldson, *Mordant's Need (The Mirror of Her Dreams and A Man Rides Through); The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever (Lord Foul's Bane; The Illearth War; The Power That Preserves)*
- ☞ Alan Dean Foster, *Journeys of the Catechist (Carnivores of Light and Darkness; Into the Thinking Kingdoms; and A Triumph of Souls)*

In the years since a shepherd found the Record of the Dawn, seated on a stone pedestal overlooking the sea, it had had many owners. Most of them were scholars and philosophers, drawn by the book's irresistible allure: a chance to understand the true nature of beauty. On this subject, the book was absolutely accurate, scientifically precise, and perfectly encyclopedic. A scholar could read the sections already uncovered as long as he or she liked; no danger lay therein. Near the end of the transcribed section lay the danger, and the mystery — for the Record of the Dawn is sacrosanct, not to be defiled by mortal eyes, and the first one to read any given word therein would turn instantly to dust. It is a statement on the nature of beauty, and the nature of scholars, that when the book came into Jordan's hands, over half of its text had been read, understood, and transcribed.
—from TIABHAL'S LIBRARY, by Sam Cavanaugh

- ☞ Neil Gaiman and various artists, *Sandman* (available as a series of graphic novels)
- ☞ Guy Gavriel Kay, *The Fionavar Tapestry* (*The Summer Tree*; *The Wandering Fire*; *The Darkest Road*)
- ☞ Jane Lindskold, *Changer*; *Legends Walking*
- ☞ Jack Vance, *The Moon Moth and Other Stories*; *Lyonesse* (*Lyonesse*; *Suldrun's Garden*; *The Green Pearl*; and *Madouc*)
- ☞ Lawrence Watt-Evans, “Denner’s Wreck”
- ☞ Roger Zelazny, *Lord of Light*; *Jack of Shadows*; *Creatures of Light and Darkness*

All of the above are highly recommended, although it is the opinion of the author that some (Gaiman and Donaldson in particular) may be hard on the squeamish.

THE CONCEPTS OF NOBILIS

For a time, Riđya sought to corrupt souls through personal contact. He eventually judged the failure rate of this technique unacceptable. Too many souls, on seeing him, saw not the devil he had become but the angel he had been; and, made exultant by that beauty, were lost to him forever.

—from LEGENDS OF THE NOBILIS, by Luc Ginneis

IMPERATORS

Imperators are the greatest and the most terrible of the magical beings of the world. The Earth trembles at their touch, and mortal men who see their true nature inevitably go mad. Angels, both Celestial and Fallen, are Imperators; the Magisters of the Dark, the Light, and the Wild are as well. Imperators are formed from the fundamental stuff of the world, called the *spiritus Dei* or *causa causans*. Their existence defines reality. Every love on Earth is a different expression of the inherent spiritual nature of the Imperator of Love. The Imperator Ashkel of Words, Doorways, and Bronze defines and controls and is those three things. Other beings of great power exist — but if they lack this essential quality, if they are not made of the first stuff of creation, they are not Imperators.

The Imperators are bitterly divided, holding to the causes of Hell and Heaven, Light and Dark, and (on occasion) Old Gods against New. Yet necessity has united the bulk of them for many years. Not even Hell, the heartland of suffering, wants to see the Excrucians succeed ... for they will destroy all creation.

Other Names

- ☞ A female Imperator is called a Regina; the plural is Reginae.
- ☞ A male Imperator is called a Rex Regius; the plural is Rex Regi.
- ☞ Either can be called a Regius (the plural is Regi), a Ymera (plural Ymerae), or a Masha (plural Mashai).

SECRET PLACES

Imagine the Earth as a lake, and the Imperators as pebbles. When a pebble drops into the lake, the surface of the lake, once flat and uncomplicated, becomes rippled, convoluted, and shaken. As the effect spreads from the source, it grows weaker. The ritual that makes a Secret Place, a Chancel, requires a hundred nights, and a human death each night of it. Then a piece of the Imperator’s self is bound into a piece

of land, and vice versa. Much as with the lake, that piece of soul wraps the contours of the Earth around it. Winding roads lead in and out of these Loci Celatum; straight tracks glide by as if that place had never been. These Chancels were once rare, but in modern times — the past five millennia or so — the Imperators have needed secure places to store their bodies while their spirits wage war against the Excrucians.

Other Names

A Secret Place can also be called a Chancel, a Sanctum, a Ward, a Guard, or a Keep. The rarely used Latin term is Locus Arcanus (plural Loci Arcani); a debased version thereof is Locus Celatum (plural Loci Celatum).

SOVEREIGN POWERS

The Valde Bellum or Excrucian War is waged in the spirit world. With Excrucian victories there, the things of this world lose a little bit of magic and of soul. (This effect is opposed not by Excrucian losses, which do not restore the ravaged realm, but by new glories brought forth from Heaven.) The Excrucians would like to destroy the Earth more directly. The Imperators, who prefer not to turn their attention away from the spirit war, have created agents to guard the Earth and their Chancels. Humans caught in the creation of a Chancel and humans who spend years inside a Chancel or its vicinity make the perfect receptacles for a shard of the Imperator’s own divine essence.

These humans become the Sovereign Powers. The shard of Imperator-soul they are given burns out a piece of their own soul, and their minds are shackled and made loyal. They are given in return a gift that is sometimes full consolation: power. The typical soul-shard is a prototype for a single aspect of reality, such as night, metal, or agony, and it gives the one-time human control over that thing. Often, these humans receive other great blessings as well. Their normal responsibilities are simple: defend the aspects of reality associated with their Imperator, guard and govern the Chancel and its inhabitants, and (when it does not interfere with the above duties) help in the general defense of the Earth.

Other Names

- ☞ Sovereign Powers are also called Nobilis, the Nobilis, Domini or the Noble Ones.
- ☞ An individual female Power can be called a Domina or the Domina of [what they rule].
- ☞ An individual male Power can be called a Dominus or the Dominus of [what they rule]. An example is Arikel, the Dominus of Night.
- ☞ A Sovereign Power of either gender can be called a Noble, a Sovereign, or a Power.
- ☞ The phrase “Sovereign Powers” is commonly abbreviated to “Powers”.

LORD ENTROPY

The Imperator Lord Entropy heads the Council of Four, who have chosen (or have been chosen; it is unclear) to rule the Earth instead of participating in the war. His power

“At first,” Lucifer answered, “my duties were minimal; my schedule, uncluttered. Then, bit by bit, humanity began to surrender responsibility for its evil to me. Now, sometimes, I lay awake at night, the burden of it all weighting my immortal spirit down. To be personally responsible for all of the evil of the world! What if I get it wrong?”

—from THE ENDS OF THE EARTH, by K.C. Danine

The guides who lead travelers across Semane Menheneott Pass firmly insist on a party size no less than six. To cross that Pass, one must turn left thrice, then right twice, along the path; then straight at the bend; and finally, on the hairpin turn high above the world, one must push one of one’s traveling companions over the edge. Those who do not follow this simple prescription remain lost in the mountains forever. Novice travelers are often heartbroken by this practice, which the guides do not explain in advance; experienced wayfarers know to recruit an ignorant “patron” from the city below.

—from EARTH STORIES, compiled by Kneader Guy

He raised my head and looked into my eyes. His fingers left carmine smears under my chin. “You still have spirit,” he said, and shook his head. “Do you not understand? I cannot end your torment until it has broken you.”

“I’m trying,” I told him. He almost smiled. “I am glad,” he said, “that we are working towards the same end. But I am afraid that you are making rather a poor contribution to it.”

—from the Thought-Record of Augusta Valentina

THE MEANING OF MIRACLES

The Sovereign Powers can change the world in ways that humans cannot. NŌBILIS calls such uses of divine energy “miracles”. The abilities of the Powers appear unnatural. They cut open the ocean, call down rains of diamonds, and turn roads back on themselves. In truth, these miracles are profoundly natural, more so than the things of mundane reality. Powers draw upon the soul-shard of their Emperor to work their miracles — and the Emperors are the deep truth that moves behind the shapes and processes of the world. A rain of diamonds, invoked by a Sovereign Power, is more natural than an ordinary rain — it draws directly on the strength and will of an Emperor. Compare this to a normal storm, which exists because of the Emperor of Storms but has none of that Emperor’s strength behind it.

Vyasa describes a god striking down a wall, and a woman who calls this a miracle. He also describes a traveler freeing a dog, who calls this act a miracle. The dog is incorrect, but both the dog and the woman understand the basic truth of miracles. An empowered being draws upon the strength of some deeper truth — the god drawing on Imperial power and the traveler drawing on an understanding of knots — to change a lesser creature’s world.

trickles down into the mortal governments in subtle ways. With the Powers, he and the Council have been more direct. He has set down harsh laws for the Nobles to follow, and these laws are as often stumbling blocks as they are useful. He is called the Darkest Lord by those of the NŌbilis, at least in part because of the following decree:

THE WINDFLOWER LAW: *Thou shalt not love.*

It is not a law whose violations are easily discovered: Lord Entropy has no power to peer into the heart. Even if he could, he is often merciful, often even forgiving. Yet no Power that loves dares to speak of it, and for causing this the Powers both hate and despise Lord Entropy.

Other Names

Lord Entropy is commonly known as the Darkest Lord or the Bloody Emperor.

ANANDA

The Emperor Ananda rules Murder, the Infinite, and (some say) the Fourth Age that is to come. His glory is terrible: humans and Powers weak in spirit dare not face him, lest his countenance drive them mad with joy. Where he walks, the world sings, grass and trees becoming crystal instruments, birds pouring out symphony after symphony until their hearts burst from the strain, and even concrete buildings clamoring out hard-edged refrains. He sits on Lord Entropy’s Council, but his voice there has been silenced — he sees some unacceptable horror to come if he should cast his vote against the Darkest Lord’s. In other respects, he is a creature of conscience, and, through the dregs of power that remain to him, the greatest hope of virtue on the Council of Four. Some Powers idealize Ananda as the symbol that the world has not gone so far astray. Others point to him as the living proof of the poverty of Heaven’s philosophy — a creature of endless beauty, whose beauty kills; a creature of justice, whose justice has fallen under the Darkest Lord’s thumb; and a creature of might, rendered impotent by fate.

Other Names

Ananda is sometimes called the Lord of Expectations or the Emperor to Come.

CAMMORAE

In 1342, Lord Entropy created the Cammora as the mortal arm of his rule. From the rulers of the human Earth (both on and behind visible thrones), he built an organization of those who were willing to serve him. He gave them two gifts: his protection, and the protection of those who dealt with them.

That is, Lord Entropy’s law decrees that a Power may aid a Cammoran without fear of retribution — that any Power who can pay the Cammora’s price may do so without fear.

The Cammora style themselves “the mortal servants of the Powers”. Yet they are not humble: they bargain hard with Sovereigns for every mission they undertake. They know that even now, carrying with them over six hundred years of

miraculous payments, they are no match for a Power — but they also know that Powers are bound by laws which do not apply to them. Powers must be circumspect; the Cammora gleefully uses every magic and every scrap of political power it possesses. Cammora are skilled in criminal acts and political persuasions, with their fingers in many governments and crime rings in the mortal world. For this reason, even the mightiest Nobles come to them for aid ... but the Cammora is a terribly, terribly corrupt organization. Its members mirthfully use excessive force and terror tactics in pursuit of their goals, both personal and professional. From the point of view of many Powers, this is not a good thing. If Lord Entropy did not prevent them, the Sovereigns of Earth would have rended the Cammora into shreds and scattered them to the four winds. The Darkest Lord does protect them, however, and the bargains Powers make with them. When the chips are down, it often comes to one of three choices: use the Cammora, fail against a Breakthrough, or sunder the air with law-breaking magics and soon after die.

Other Names

- ☞ Members of the Cammora are normally called either Cammora or Cammorans.
- ☞ Sometimes, they are known as Bicorns, after the star of a particularly unpleasant myth.
- ☞ The Cammora is sometimes called the Vehmgericht.

ANCHORS

A Power’s Anchor is a mortal that can serve as a metaphorical ground or channel through which their power or their mind can flow. Using an Anchor (and another trick; see below) enables a Power to “hide their hand”, to work miracles that can’t be traced back to the Power. In the worst case, if an Anchor is caught in an act that could get the Power killed, the Power can break off the connection between the two. This usually destroys the one-time Anchor’s mind, giving even greater security. A Power can have many Anchors, but there must be a connection between the Anchor and the Power’s mortal self. Specifically, a Power must love or hate their Anchors in order to use them at all.

Other Names

Anchors are also called the Ephemeral, or Hooks.

EXCRUCIANS

More beautiful than the angels are the Excrucians, whose eyes show darkness full of ever-falling stars. It is said that the Creator bargained with them long ago, that he or she might capture a touch of this beauty in the world of Ygg — and then failed to carry out his or her end of the bargain. It is said that this is why the Excrucians on their pale horses seek the destruction of all that there is, why even the Emperors fall at times beneath their razor-edged swords. The Excrucians themselves give a more kindly explanation: that they are from beyond Creation. They will leave it when it dies. When that death comes, all the things they have destroyed will awaken within them, and ride out with them

It was a mistake to engineer the creature, Dr. Adams later agreed. Its mortal body posed no danger to the researchers, nor its feeble mind; but the avarice it nurtured in its heart like a hen warms an egg — that was dangerous. Absolute greed, such as that the monster possessed, could not remain bound in a single heart; it surpassed limits, broke boundaries, and crumpled the cage like a paper shell. It spread from heart to heart like a contagion, soon binding ten, then a hundred men to its service; and even when the hydrogen bomb turned its human hosts to dust and light, it lay twitching and snarling until there had passed a dozen darwns.

—from GENETIC VISIONS, edited by Emily Chen

Generally, Nabushezibanni found that the most embarrassing part of being a sorcerer in Babylon was asking the local demons to serve him as familiars. In Eastern Anatolia, such creatures had acquiesced instantly, eager to gain any foothold in his soul. In Babylon, however, he constantly felt as if they rather looked down on him — that taking the time to corrupt Nabushezibanni would simply upset their rather full social calendars.

—from THE HANGING GARDENS, by Michael Kay

into the void and its tomorrows. The Excrucians are roughly as powerful as the Imperators, but they are almost never able to send more than a fraction of their strength out of the spirit world to Earth ... only a few tiny, lethal shards. The battle rages too fiercely, most often, for more.

Other Names

- ☞ Excrucians are sometimes called the Lost, Anguishers, or Beyonders.
- ☞ On rare occasions, they are inaccurately called the Damned.
- ☞ They call themselves Harumaph's Children.

BREAKTHROUGHS

When an Excrucian sword cleaves the veil between Earth and the spirit world and sends a part of itself through, a Rending or a Breakthrough occurs. Breakthroughs are opportunities for both the Excrucians and the Imperators. The Excrucians have little interest in bloodbaths; killing animals or humans does little damage to their immortal spirits. Their work on Earth is instead the destruction of dreams, of peace, of all the things that give humans hope and joy. This kind of thing takes an effort to destroy, an investment of the Excrucian's essential being in its work. The Power that balks an Excrucian can usually draw that investment into their own Imperator. It is wise, however, to conceal one's exact identity from an Excrucian one balks. Even if a Power can rip the throat out of the Excrucian-shard they meet on Earth, its iceberg-like extent into the spirit world may come back to haunt them later.

Because they risk losing power to the *N*obilis who oppose them, the Excrucians apply their powers very subtly when they cannot act with overwhelming force. There were twelve Anchors (who belonged to Sovereign Powers) and only two Excrucian-shards on the *Exxon Valdez* — but the Excrucians were able to conceal the crew's inebriation until it was too late.

Other Names

- ☞ As mentioned, Breakthroughs are sometimes called Rendings.
- ☞ The place where the Excrucian-shards arrive upon the Earth is a Red Zone.

REINCARNATION

The Judeo-Christian tradition that the dead move on to Heaven and Hell is in part correct. The corrupt do migrate inevitably to Hell and the spiritually beautiful will move on to Heaven. However, the angels have a bad tendency to turn all but the rarest and most exquisite human souls away from Heaven. Perhaps one in a billion is precious enough that they will be merged into an angel's own soul instead of thrown back to the worlds of the Ash.

Accordingly, most souls reincarnate, whether they are animal or human. It is up to the Hollyhock God whether intelligent and unintelligent life forms ever reincarnate in the other category.

THE WORLD ASH

Yggdrasil is a tree — but what a tree! Its branches hold worlds, dozens upon dozens of them: each suspended at once in an infinity of empty space and the sheltering embrace of the World Ash's branches. The other planets, though they are little like what we know of them, hang near the Earth; farther out are worlds populated by intelligent beings, like and unlike humanity. The whole of the Ash is cupped inside the Weirding Wall, whose crackling energies define the boundaries of Creation; above it shine the stars.

It is commonly speculated by the more philosophical Powers that the Ash is maintained by a constant flow of beauty raining down from Heaven and corruption and agony snaking upwards from Hell. Perhaps they are right, for corruption and beauty do much to define the Nobles' world.

Other Names

Yggdrasil is known as the World Ash or the Sovereign Tree.

THE PROSAIC EARTH AND THE MYTHIC WORLD

The Earth, as the Nobles know it, is a place defined by an essential contradiction. On the one hand, the world is alive with spirits, night comes with the moods of the angel of the sun, and the stars sometimes drift down from its darkness to speak. On the other, there is a huge body of human experimental data showing that all of this is nonsense: that everything in the world follows strict laws, that the humans are barely better than the animals, the animals are utterly unintelligent, the plants are sessile, and nothing else lives.

*N*obilis does not hide from this contradiction; the game embraces it. The Earth the Nobles know is divided, with subtle interconnections between the prosaic reality we know and the mythic world in which the Powers often find themselves. It is but a single step of perception to live in one world or the other, and the *N*obilis make this step freely. So do many mortals — the Anchors first among them, but also on occasion the inhabitants of the Chancels. Most humans, however, are not able to accept the contradiction: when presented with irrefutable proof that there is a mythic world, that there are miracles beyond their understanding, they *shift*. They begin to perceive the mythic reality wholly, and cannot find their way back. This is the *dementia animus*, and it is a thing the Nobles must guard against greatly — not to protect themselves, but to avoid leaving a trail of destruction and ruined lives behind them. Those in *dementia animus* can still be affected by the laws and people of the prosaic Earth, but they can no longer relate to them as anything but madmen.

Other Names

The Mythic World is sometimes also called Mythic Reality.

FLOWERS

To quote the angel Raguel, "Perfection cannot be static, or it is no longer perfection. This is the reason why Heaven brought forth the angels: to serve its beauty and make answer to its only flaw. Since the first days of Creation, when the

A soul once escaped from Hell. She began the climb up the tree of worlds towards Heaven. She has walked for uncounted miles, uncountable miles, and not reached Heaven yet. She will, of course, for this story is a romance; and there an angel will take pity on her; and rather than casting her back into the pit, it will transform her into a harp and take her into Heaven. There, it will play her soul like an instrument, producing the corrupt and venal music that comes from a Hellbound soul. In their outrage, the audience will shatter the harp and blind the foolish angel. If there is a moral, it is that damnation has a purpose; and it is with this harsh moral that our story will begin.

—from LEGENDS OF THE *N*OBILIS, by Luc Ginneis

Our enemies cannot help but kill us.

If they did not come at us with their blades and their malice, so we could hate them, we would have to love them. There is nothing in between, not for creatures of such majesty. We would have to love them; and, in loving, die; not like Romeo died, or Juliet, but like the night dies that loves the sun, or the fire dies that loves the sea. In embracing the alien, in striving to grasp that which lies forever beyond us, we would extinguish ourselves.
—from A PHILOSOPHY OF TREASON, by Augusta Valentina (suppressed)

"It is widely known that the 'channellers' and 'psychics' who can discover your previous lives for you are frauds. Our service differs; it is subtler, and has a strong basis in quantum science. It works as follows: for eight tiny payments of \$19.95, we will re-engineer your past, creating the past life that you desire. Do you dream of ruling Egypt as royalty? Do you dream of striding across Sumeria as goddess and Queen? Would you like to be JFK, Marilyn Monroe, or Elvis? For just eight small payments, we can make it have happened, and no one need be the wiser."
—from alt.reincarnation.services

On John and Tanya's wedding night, Russell crept into their room, and with a rope made from starlight and whispers, he caught and bound their love. It struggled and jerked against its bonds, but the rope held tight; and he took it home and imprisoned it in the darkest hole in his deepest cellar. Only thrice a week did he give it air or water, and only once per month did he let it eat. In this manner, John and Tanya's love grew ragged and thin, and their marriage troubled; and at this Russell felt a great and unworthy joy.
—from A COMEDY OF SPIRITS, by Keiko Takemori

"It is a perceptual poison," the merchant explained. "Simply show this to your victim, and they shall instantly lose awareness of reality. They will instead directly cognize their own symbols of their world, seeing not John but 'John,' not a wall but a 'wall,' not beat but 'beat.' The effect is dramatic: unable to manipulate these symbols with their mind, unwilling to manipulate icons with their body, they cease to respond to stimuli of any sort and all."
—from **THE BOX**, by Emily Chen

angels were the only life save for the Tree, the Celestial Host had dedicated itself to the Unending Labor: changing Heaven with every heartbeat, while maintaining the perfection of the Brightest Realm."

When the angels first began their Great Work, the changes they made in Heaven were rough and without skill. Angelic power splashed on the surface of Heaven and twisted it in sometimes startling ways. The angels needed tools, and the first such tools were flowers. Not the Earthly blooms, with petals and roots, pistils and stamen — these were symbols that carried a weight of different meanings. A boxer's padded glove balances and diffuses the force of his blow; in a like manner, flowers diffused the angels' intent over the surface of Heaven.

Events everywhere reflect the events in Heaven, with the possible exception of events in Hell. Soon after the angels began to use their new tool, flowers began to bloom on Earth. Because flowers and their symbolic "glove" are central to Heaven's design, the Powers of Earth can use them as well. The Power or their Anchor carries a flower or a handful of flowers with them; they crush the flower as they work a miracle; all traces of the power they used are tainted with it. Powers (and Imperators) can often see the residue miraculous power leaves behind — but, in this case, that residue shows the flower used, and not the Power who used it. Combining floral magic and the use of an Anchor provides a great deal of security even from the laws of Lord Entropy himself. The use of a miracle can only be traced to the Power if their Anchor is caught 'at the scene of the crime' and, even then, only if the Noble does not renounce their Anchor and withdraw their mind.

THE FLAVORS OF IMPERATORS

"In addition," Henry noted, "our University has a fine theozoology department. Few faculties anywhere can rival our professors when it comes to studying and classifying new sorts of God!"

"How many kinds of God are there?"

"One, so far," Henry admitted, "but the Department has just recently constructed a ministerial accelerator that they believe will give rise to as many as seventeen forms of God heretofore unknown."

—from **THE LIFE AND DEATH OF HENRY SERRANO**, by Emily Chen

There are seven kinds of Imperator known on Earth.

ANGELS

Angels were the first Imperators, created from the stuff of the Celestial Realm, the Bright Realm, also known as Heaven. Their first mission in life is to keep the stuff of Heaven dynamic. They change their divine home constantly, so that it never becomes stale and dull and unlovely to them. The angels hear the voice of the Creator inside their hearts, and this was the guiding force in their society and their work until the Excrucians first showed their hand. Angels are not the servants of good, although they believe strongly in compassion; rather, they are the servants of beauty. Angels are native to Heaven, but some have come to Earth to help in its defense. Others have been banished there for insisting on a different view of what Heaven should be.

DEVILS

Devils are the Fallen Angels. Lucifer, who was once the greatest leader of the angels, still leads the Fallen. He was the guiding force on all the worlds of the tree for eons, until the Great Work in Heaven produced the humans on Earth. Then Lucifer rebelled violently against the voice in his heart.

He decided that Hell, precisely because it was the Realm farthest from the Creator, that was the true Creation. He embraced the principles of corruption and suffering and began to preach them. Lucifer embodies Pride, but also Persuasion; though his power could not literally coerce the angels, it swayed many of them regardless. Nearly a third of the angels joined him before he and his followers were thrown from Heaven, all the way down to the Hell they honored. The angels could not bear to lock their former comrades away forever, so a full ten of the Fallen Angels are allowed up the tree as far as the Earth at any given time. Lucifer does not always follow the rules, of course. There have been times of purging when the Celestial Host would again drive the too-numerous Fallen away from Earth and even higher Realms. In modern times, when the Excrucians endanger Heaven itself, the angels tacitly allow any Fallen Angel to leave Hell as long as it joins them in the fight.

THE LIGHT

The Light was born with Eve's bite into the apple. She did not learn "good" from it, but rather a sense of self-preservation. At that moment the first Imperator of the Light was born, whose fundamental purpose is the protection of the human race — at any cost. Since that time, as humanity has expanded across the globe, more of these Regi have appeared.

THE DARK

The Dark was born only a short time after. Adam bit into the apple and learned not "evil" but the ways of self-destruction. The Dark's first triumph came when Adam led Eve from Eden and the Dark sank the whole of that magical land into the first of the Dark's Chancels. It has expanded as much as the Light has, and won many of its battles, but never so decisively as to end the struggle. Of all the Imperators, those of the Dark are the most likely to reach an accommodation with the Excrucians, since the Dark means the destruction of humanity. At the same time, the Dark is selfish. It wants a universe to play in, and it wants the Dark (or, even better, humanity itself) to be the agent of humanity's destruction. Also, destroying the humans one by one, life by ruined life, is much more fun.

THE WILD

Other imperators regard the Wild suspiciously, for like the Excrucians, they come from outside Creation. The Regi of the Wild remember nothing, know nothing of where they came from. They know only that they are, and that some fateful chance has trapped them in a world alien to them. Their highest principle is freedom, but the paths that lead away from Creation are closed to them. And if, as they say, the world of Ygg is green music — then they are a very different song.

TRUE GODS

True Gods are the greatest of the natural inhabitants of the spirit world. They are only very rarely understood or worshipped by humanity, but possess the frightening power and

THE RIVER AND THE MAN
Taken to extremes, the scientific worldview suggests every event derives from the interactions of physical things with predefined physical laws. Objects have no room for free will, since the quantum effects that would allow them to violate expectations are exceedingly improbable. Humans have free will only because the human mind is too complex to map.

To reconcile this with the animistic worldview — everything has a spirit and every concept has a face — NOBILIS adjusts one of the underlying assumptions. The prosaic history of the world, the observable traces of the interactions of chemicals and energy, can change. Science stands on a shifting foundation. Humans are nothing more than the product of environment and heredity — and if the human spirit defies that definition, and a person rises above their roots, their history and biology must give way. The circumstances of their past must adjust to reflect the truth of their actions.

Vyasa asks if a river, who claims that a farmer is nothing more than an automaton, knows the man. It does not. Humans are much more than just the lightning in the meat. Nor does the farmer know the river. He claims that it must obey the course set for it by nature — but the river can defy the winds and the stone and the rain, if it so chooses, and chart its own course.

THE WILD

Vyasa's third question is one of his simplest. The Imperators of the Wild entered Creation, and found they could not leave again. Unable to break free, they have reluctantly taken arms on Creation's behalf. If the bird Vyasa describes, that flew into just such a trap, were a god, then it would be of the Wild. All Creation, from Hell to Heaven, would be its cage.

ambiguous loyalties of the truly divine. They do not technically live on the Earth until they form a Chancel there, but they are bound to the things of the Earth even tighter than the angels exiled here.

AARON'S SERPENTS

Aaron's Serpents are the children of Yggdrasil, nurtured within its bark until they are strong enough to break free. On Earth, they have been called Leviathans, the monsters of the sea. That is indeed where most of them make their Chancels. Sometimes they slither across the Earth like monsters. Lord Entropy must then content himself with killing witnesses, as Aaron's Serpents are unkillable and nearly impossible to imprison.

THE ENEMY

*I ask only for an enemy worth
fighting and a cause worth
fighting for.*
—Spartan prayer

Excrucians are the most terrifying enemy the Powers face. The enemy can be fierce warriors, unnaturally persuasive liars, horrific sadists, and a dozen other unpleasant things besides. Their most lethal weapon in the mortal world, though, has nothing to do with personal power. The Dark Horsemen are adept at a kind of symbolic magic known as the flower rite, a rite which enables them to connect an ordinary mortal situation — strongly evocative of a given aspect of reality — to that aspect itself. The slow degeneration of that situation which they then induce weakens reality.

One of the Nobilis's most important roles is preventing or reversing such attacks. A Power must be prepared to act with the divine fury of a god when cast into a direct confrontation; with an understanding of the mortal world, when

moving among humanity; and with both at once, when they handling a flower rite attack. Simply striding in and casting miracles about doesn't usually help — not only are miracle cures dangerous things in general, but they have a good chance of inducing *dementia animus* among the mortals involved.

Fighting one another is a popular game among the Powers, although it rarely leads to open battle. The Nobilis have a dark rite of their own to steal miraculous energy from one another — most often by artfully ruining the things their opponent cares about. This is the selfsame rite that they use to draw power from defiling and destroying Excrucian plans; in inevitable consequence, it is known by all but the newest of Powers.

THE WORLD OF THE NOBILIS

Powers bridge divine nature and human nature, the supernatural and the natural. They fight battles on all those level, facing the challenges of gods and ordinary humans alike. They must learn to move fluidly from a world of spirits and myths to a polluted world of highways and computers, and from their Emperor's custom reality to the broader Earth. This is not the end to it — using their Anchors, they may switch between as many as half a dozen locations and perspectives with a thought. Their Emperor may send them to other Chancels, other strange realities, or even out onto the World Ash itself — and they face an enemy from another existence.

There is more to the world than any mortal imagines. All you will need to play therein is included in this book.

*By the year 2025, there will be
one million global television
networks.*

*By the year 2054, cows
will outnumber people 50:1.*

*By the year 2108, 82% of
America's youth will worship
one or more mass murderers.*

—from IF THIS GOES ON,
by Jackie Robinson