

SOVEREIGN

a game of duty, loyalty, and power

GAMEMASTER'S GUIDE



A Crayon Samurai Game

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Sins of the Father

The True History of the Empire

True Nature of Sorcery

The Empire teaches its citizens that sorcery is inherently evil and sorcerers are inherently corrupt. The truth is that sorcery is neither inherently evil nor good, nor are the men and women who have the ability to wield it.

It is true that there was a time, before the founding of the Empire, when sorcery was widely employed as a tool of destruction and oppression. This was a dark time, but it was made dark by evil men and women, not because sorcery itself is evil.

Shades, the spirits of the dead, do long to return to the world of the living, but they are not all malevolent. Whether shades are actually the spirits of the dead or not is a matter of debate. Some sorcerers claim they are just that, while others say they are nothing more than remnants of the deceased, like fading memories.

Shades are, indeed, only able to inhabit once living materials. Only through objects that once held life can Shades return to the realm of life.

Sorcerers can use Shades for good as well as for ill, however. An example

is the sorcerer living on the outskirts of an imperial village who brews carefully prepared elixirs of plant extracts or bear bile that can cure even the most deadly of diseases. Or the sorcerer who imbues wooden hoes and other farming tools that bless the ground they work with an untold bounty of crops.

What Does it Mean?

So what does this mean to you, the game master, and to the game of Sovereign as a whole? It means that the world is not as black and white as the Emperor and the Empire would have its people believe.

It means that the Sovereign's role is not as clear-cut as it appears, either. What happens when a Sovereign discovers that a sorcerer is actually helping the people of a village on the fringes of the Empire by using sorcerous fishing nets to supply a bounty from the sea that the people would starve without?

Does the Sovereign carry out his duty and execute the sorcerer? It's easy to kill someone who is clearly engaging in evil activities, but what happens when

said sorcerer is clearly doing good deeds?

This is the heart of Sovereign. What do you do when you discover the man you owe your life, the country you serve, does not have all the answers it claims? What does loyalty mean to you, and at what point are you willing to risk or break that loyalty?

Good Intentions

The flip side to this is that Empire carries on this campaign of misinformation because it honestly believes it's in the best interest of its people. It may even be right. The amount of power a sorcerer can wield makes him inherently dangerous. No one can deny that a psychotic sorcerer is a thousand time more dangerous than a psychotic without sorcery.

It has been hundreds years since the founding of the Empire, and most of its subjects truly believe that sorcery is inherently evil. The Emperor himself knows the truth as well as his closest advisors, but others are not inclined to dig deeper. Even some of the Empire's enslaved sorcerers have come to believe they are truly evil and hope to repent by faithfully serving the Empire.

There are critics who point to the fact that the Empire keeps sorcerers

who have submitted, but the Empire claims it keeps these men and women for their own safety, not to actually make use of their craft.

Of course, the Empire has always relied on sorcery to one degree or another even as it realizes how dangerous a tool it is. Without the aid of sorcerers, it is doubtful that the First Emperor himself would have been able to overthrow his father. During the war of unification, the First Emperor employed sorcery at key points during battles to turn certain defeat into victory.

Perhaps the most important use of sorcery is one that has continued to this day: communications. Sorcerers are able to send whispers through the Spirit Lands to virtually any location throughout the Empire. This allows the Empire to outmaneuver its enemies, quell rebellions, and coordinate more efficiently than any other nation in the known world.

This reliance on sorcerous communications has turned out to be a horrible weakness with the recent changes in the cosmology of the Spirit Lands...

The Demon Emperor

The Empire is on the verge of turmoil due to the sins of one of its fathers, the Second Emperor.

The history of the Empire as taught to the Sovereigns is mostly true. The First Emperor did rise up against his father because of the horrible acts he witnessed by sorcerers in employ to his father. The story is altered in one very important manner, however. The first Emperor's warrior son did not die in a skirmish shortly after his father's funeral. He was murdered.

The warrior son was a brilliant military leader, but also bloodthirsty and without compassion or mercy. His tactics often bordered on outright cruelty such as impaling enemy officers even after they had surrendered in order to send a message.

The diplomat son knew that his brother could not be allowed to ascend to the helm of the Empire. Fearing his brother's wrath and a civil war if he claimed the mantle himself, the diplomat did what he saw as his only out. He waited in his brother's quarters the night of their father's funeral and slit his throat when he came back drunk with grief. The Empire had its Emperor.

There is a reason the current Emperor condemned all non-sanctioned sorcerers to be killed six months ago. When the first Emperor's warrior son was slain in betrayal by his own brother, his rage was so great that his soul refused to go on to its proper resting place. Instead, it was sent to the Inferno, a realm within the Spirit Lands where the spirits of the dead go when they can not let go of the living world. Here, they are tortured until they relent and let their life go.

Consumed with hate, the warrior prince refused to let go even after hundreds of years in this realm. As the years passed, his spirit grew strong until one day he slew the keepers of Inferno and enslaved the rest of the shades there.

He crowned himself the Demon Emperor and began a new conquest, the conquest of the Spirit Lands. Any shades who opposed him were destroyed or enslaved, tied down by spirit shackles he tempered in the fires of Inferno itself.

Now, virtually all of the Spirit Lands are under his control and it has changed the very nature of sorcery. Virtually all shades called forth are now servants of the Demon Emperor, their only goal to gain their lord entry into the physical

world and bring the Empire to its knees.

The Demon Emperor still feels the sting of betrayal and wants what is his: the Empire his father left, that which would have been his if it hadn't been stolen away by his cowardly brother, from the which the current emperor is a direct descendant.

Shades serving him share a connection and every time a demon is pulled into the physical realm it strengthens the Demon Emperor's power in it. Right now he is able to naught but whisper to the most powerful sorcerers, but he is patient and continues to work on eroding the boundaries between the two worlds.

The Emperor's own sorcerers discovered this turn of events six months ago, costing his most skilled and trusted sorcerer his life.

The Emperor immediately issued his edict and has forbidden his own sorcerers from binding any new objects. Items housing old shades are safe, but they will not remain forever as the bond between object and shade needs to periodically be reinforced...

Impact on the Empire

This poses a problem for several reasons. First, despite its rhetoric

against sorcery, the Empire has always relied upon it, in part, to assert its military might.

Second, the lack of sorcery has crippled the Empire's communications. Sorcerers used their craft to send messages through the Spirit Lands, faint whispers that only other sorcerers can hear.

With any disturbance in the Spirit Lands alerting the Demon Emperor, such communications are used only as a last resort. The Outlands under imperial rule have already begun to suffer from this as they can no longer outmaneuver their barbarian neighbors. The Emperor has had to lean more and more on his Sovereigns to keep order in these regions.

Third, there have always been areas where shades have had some level of success in breaking through to the physical world and asserting themselves whether through seducing people into doing their bidding, through manipulating animals, weather and other local phenomena or, rarely, by actually manifesting in the physical realm.

Although extremely rare, these breaches have the potential to wreak unimaginable havoc. In the past, the Empire has relied on its sorcerers to

seal these breaches and deal with any escaped shades (under the watchful eyes of the Sovereigns).

With the rise of the Demon Emperor, the Emperor is hesitant to send any sorcerers to undertake such a task. Fortunately, there have been no reported breaches since the takeover in the Spirit Lands but it's only a matter of time before another breach occurs...

Sorcery Corrupted

With the rise of the Demon Emperor, increasingly the shades a sorcerer calls forth are those who have been subjugated by the Demon Emperor himself. This has drastically changed the way sorcery operates.

For one, it is now very difficult to bind objects with non aggressive abilities due to the will of the Demon Emperor. For another, any demonic shade that is called into the physical world through a bound object or otherwise struggles to serve its true master by creating death and a rift in the physical world.

Backed by the power of the Demon Emperor, shades will whisper perverted messages to those using them in an attempt to corrupt them into the service of the Demon Emperor.

Any sorcerer who attempts to directly manipulate the Spirit Lands runs the risk of becoming possessed by a servitor of the Demon Emperor.

Anyone using a bound object inhabited by a demonically-influenced shade must roll their Focus plus sorcery knowledge once per day. On a success, they are able to ignore the subtle whisperings of the demonically-influenced shade bound inside the object.

Upon failure, the subject begins acting in ways that serve the Demon Emperor and the Demon Emperor's anger begins to seep into him. This is subtle at first.

A person may find himself thinking or speaking against the Empire, for instance, or find himself in a constantly poor mood. If he fails the resistance roll a second time, the person will have bouts of uncontrolled rage, taking it out on the Empire when possible, but on whoever is convenient when it isn't.

If he fails the resistance roll a third time, he is consumed with hatred for the Empire and will seek to destroy it by any means. This doesn't mean he'll throw his life away in a suicide attempt, and he can lie convincingly and be quite subtle when required.

The only way to remove this influence is by destroying the bound object, and releasing the demonic shade held within. The subject will then lose a level of influence per day.

However, if a person has been under this demonic influence for weeks or months, then he may very well continue to act in that manner beyond the time required to reduce the influence. Alternatively, he may very well have come to agree with the dark whispers and continue the mission of the Demon Emperor even after that influence is gone.

The Empire's Secret

The fact that potential Sovereigns are rescued from horrible lives is a known fact and one the Empire promotes to show its compassion.

What is unknown to all but the highest ranking subjects of the Empire is that the Emperor's men routinely scout the land for potential Sovereigns everywhere, not just in filthy streets and run-down orphanages. When such a child is found, the Emperor arranges to have her family killed, leaving her with only one loyalty -- the Emperor himself.

This is viewed as a necessary evil by the Emperor as Sovereigns are given a tremendous amount of responsibility

and trust, a trust that can only be given to those with no other loyalties.

No Sovereign is aware of this carefully guarded secret. The Empire has occasionally had to orchestrate murders to keep this fact hidden. If a Sovereign were to find out the truth, it may cause him to question his loyalty and cause all manner of... complications for the Empire.

Trafficking with Shades

Rules for Sorcery

Methods of Sorcery

Most sorcery is accomplished by binding specially prepared objects to serve as homes for the spirits of the dead. But there is another method to work sorcery that is unknown to all but the most learned of the Shadow sect of Sovereigns.

An extremely skilled sorcerer who is brave or desperate enough to try it can take the very essence of the spirit lands and transform it into fantastic results in the physical world.

Using this method, a sorcerer can rain fire from the sky, cause a monolithic building to explode, or create huge tidal waves to swallow coastal cities.

The dangers of direct contact are twofold: first, every Shade in the area is aware that their home is being trespassed on and ripples of this transgression spread throughout the Spirit Lands. Second, the sheer amount of power being handled can tear a sorcerer in half, shatter his bones, ruin the countryside, cause an unintended violent storm, or any other number of violent backlashes.

Some sorcerers have even claimed to be able to travel into the Spirit Lands itself.

Basic Rules System

Sorcery in Sovereign is dangerous and powerful and even those who live outside of the Empire are not wholly at ease with it.

Players should never be able to completely understand how sorcery works, even Sovereigns from the Shadow sect don't completely understand the cosmology of the Spirit Lands or the specifics of how or why a shade powers an object in a certain way.

For bound objects that specifically enhance combat abilities rate the object at a dice level from 1-5 along with the caveat that it operates on either the One Success, One for Two, One for One, or Two for One rule.

The One Success rule is a typical roll with one wound dealt regardless of the number of successes rolled as long as at least one success was rolled.

The One for Two rule means that for every two successes rolled the attack causes one wound.

The One for One rule means that for every one success rolled the attack causes one wound.

The Two for One rule means that for every one success rolled, the attack causes two wounds.

EXAMPLE: Lion's Paw – This preserved, severed lion's paw is worn as part of a belt around the waist. It provides whoever wears it with unnatural strength and speed.

It has a rating of 2 using the One for One rule. Whoever wears this bound item adds 2 dice to any combat roll AND every success rolled counts as a wound. So, if Yelena the farmer wears this belt and attacks a Sovereign she would roll 2 dice (0 Focus, 0 relevant skills, + 2 sorcerous item). If she rolled a 7 and a 9, she would deal two wounds to the Sovereign.

For some objects, you may place limitations on these combat abilities. For instance, in the case of the Lion's Paw you may decide that its sorcerous powers affect only unarmed combat as the strength and speed it bestows is too unwieldy to use with a weapon.

Resistance and Sustenance

Objects may also bestow points of Resistance and Sustenance. Resistance operates like Conviction. A Resistance of 1, then, acts as a one-die penalty to anyone attacking the user of the imbued object. If the user is injured and he suffers a wound, any points of Resistance are lost first.

Sustenance allows the user to take more wounds. Since sorcerers and the unenlightened have no Focus, they are taken out with one wound. Not so if they carry a bound object with the Sustenance trait.

A sorcerer who consumes a heart imbued with the shade of a surgeon, for example, may gain 2 Sustenance. This means the sorcerer may now take three wounds instead of one before being reduced to death or incapacitation.

Describing Sorcery

Equally important to any ranking you assign a bound object is describing how the sorcery works.

For the Lion's Paw you might describe how person wielding it paces back and forth before rushing forward to attack, muscles bulging in places a person shouldn't have muscles, mouth pulled back in a snarl with teeth that seem slightly sharper than is normal.

Bound objects should impart strange side effects. They don't have to be over the top, but should be noticeable. The Lion's Paw bestows qualities of an angry lion onto its user while a healing salve made from rose petals may have a slight glow or smell strongly of fresh roses.

Unique Powers

For bound objects that have other unique powers, you're completely within your rights to assign it one or two specific powers and roll with it.

For example, say you're centering a game on a sorcerer who uses a four foot long wooden staff treated with the blood from a dozen warriors. The staff, you decide, allows the sorcerer to call lightning down on enemies.

You quickly scratch a few notes relating to this power. It takes the sorcerer one turn to call dark, thick storm clouds by thrusting the staff towards the sky.

On subsequent turns, he may call down a lightning bolt to strike any one person or object. You decide to assign the lightning three dice to hit using the One for One rule.

Taking a non combat example, say the sorcerer instead has a small glass vial containing the tears of a newborn child.

You decide that when this vial is smashed, it causes its user to turn into a wispy smoke that blows away in the wind up to 500 feet before reforming into the user's physical form.

You decide using this requires no roll. Cornered by Sovereigns, you have the sorcerer break the vial and escape in his smoky form.

Direct Manipulation

Directly manipulating the essence of the Spirit Lands is very dangerous and sorcerers do it only out of desperation. By manipulating the essence of the Spirit Lands a sorcerer can accomplish amazing feats without the need of bound objects.

Raining down fire from sky, turning a battlefield into quicksand or swampland, shattering great stone walls, all of these are possible.

Failing to properly control this essence can lead to horrible backlashes. A sorcerer attempting to create fire out of thin air, for instance, may find himself engulfed in flames.

A sorcerer attempting to rain fire on a city may find that fire raining over the entire countryside instead.

Direct manipulation of the Spirit Lands should be a rare event in Sovereign. Sorcerers are hesitant to do it

because of the inherent risks and the potential effects are large enough to drastically change a campaign.

There are no rules governing this use of sorcery. It should be used largely as a plot device.

Islands, Adventures, Advisors

Miscellaneous Tid Bits to Inspire

The Blue Kingdoms

The Blue Kingdoms were once a relatively peaceful haven for sorcerers who desired to practice their talents without fear of death or enslavement. The ascendancy of the Demon Emperor has turned this place into a huge pot growing hot with violence and depravity. It's only a matter of time before it boils, spilling war and destruction into the Empire.

Brief History

During the foundation of the Empire, many sorcerers fled to the nearest safe haven. The hundreds of islands off the eastern coast of the fledgling Empire were the most attractive. The closest island was two days travel and the native people had always celebrated sorcerers as semi-divine beings who contained pieces of the souls of particularly wise shades that had been reincarnated.

The Second Emperor believed it would be too costly man a large enough fleet to try and root out the sorcerers from the hundreds of islands in the

archipelago, and so he negotiated a treaty with them instead.

The Empire would recognize the sovereignty of the islands, which soon thereafter united as the Blue Kingdoms, and in exchange the island nations would pay an annual tribute to the Empire.

In addition, no one from the Blue Kingdoms would be allowed to set foot in the Empire, and vice versa, without authorization from the Emperor himself, or from the Council of Seven. The two nations still conduct trade in a few port cities throughout the Empire, though. But no one from the kingdoms is allowed to step foot off of the docks.

After recognizing the independence they now held, the myriad nations united in a confederation known as the Blue Kingdoms, governed by a Council of Seven. These were seven elders from the seven largest island-nations of the archipelago elected by the people of their respective nations to represent the confederation.

At the request of the council, the sorcerers on each of these islands also each elected one of their own to serve

as an advisor in the Seven Advisors. As time went on, other island nations were allowed send their own elders and sorcerers. Each of these representatives are allowed to speak at council meetings but are not allowed to cast votes.

Council of Seven

The Council of Seven meets twice a year unless an emergency council is requested and agreed upon by at least five of the seven. The bi-yearly councils rotate among the seven island-nations and typically last one to two weeks during affairs that are just as much about establishing contacts and alliances and trading information as they are about setting policy.

In fact, each nation in the Blue Kingdoms largely makes and enforces its own laws with a few exemptions. Each nation must pay a yearly tax to the coffers of the Blue Kingdoms as a whole. This tax is used to pay the Empire's tribute and for policies or construction agreed upon by the council.

Each nation must also get permission from the council before declaring war as more often than not, if one nation gets into a conflict so do the Blue Kingdoms as a whole.

Historically, the Blue Kingdoms have been peaceful but they have occasionally declared war on one of the outlying islands that do not claim membership with the kingdoms.

Influence of the Demon Emperor

Since sorcerers are under no one's authority in the Blue Kingdoms, it was relatively easy for the Demon Emperor to gain a foothold here. Within the course of a month, most of the sorcerers here were either outright possessed, forced, or manipulated into serving the Demon Emperor's whims.

A few were warned or figured out the situation on their own, but many of these sorcerers still attempted to reach into the Spirit Lands in the hope of finding shades that weren't enslaved or to see the truth for themselves.

The Demon Emperor has not showed his hand in the Blue Kingdoms yet. Instead, he has used his sorcerous servants to begin maneuvering the Blue Kingdoms towards war. Sorcerers on seven largest island-nations have begun advising their countries to increase their armies and prepare for war.

They've also been whispering in the ears of their rulers that the Empire is

thinking about breaking the truce they negotiated centuries ago.

Land's End... Verge of Collapse

The eastern port city of Land's End is on the verge of collapsing from within. Within two days travel of the Blue Kingdoms, the Empire has always made this city of 60,000 a priority.

A garrison of 8,000 soldiers are stationed here under the command of Aturo Pellius, a veteran seafarer who grew up in the nearby village of Hillport. Although gruff and known for his extensive use of language that would make most sailors blush, his men love him for his fierce loyalty and willingness to go above and beyond what most commanders would do for their men.

One of his two lieutenants, however, has been undermining Pellius for the last several months. Lieutenant Tellen Kran has been spreading lies about Pellius, about how he has forgotten where his loyalties lie and how he has been stealing from the Empire's coffers.

Pellius is aware that something is amiss, but hasn't begun to suspect the real truth: Kran has been dominated by a sorcerer from the Blue Kingdoms. His

mind is being poisoned. Occasionally, he has bouts of clear-headedness. Before he can seek help, though, the madness returns.

The sorcerer, Nikita Rollo, was sent from the Blue Kingdoms by the Seven Advisors. Her mission was to travel undetected into Land's End and return with detailed information on the city's defenses.

She has taken it upon herself, though, to try and destroy the imperial army here by turning it against itself. She has convinced herself that if she does this, she may win the favor of the Demon Emperor and be rid of the shades in his service that constantly whisper in her ear.

Imperial Rule

The Empire is a very centralized state. Power is centered in the Imperial City with the Emperor himself.

His word is law, backed by a lineage that travels back centuries to the First Emperor, a man who is almost deified for having broken the oppressive shackles of sorcery and freed most of the known world from its evils, allowing them to live their lives and fulfill their potentials.

The Empire is broken into about two dozen provinces, ran by provincial

governors. Each province is further divided into counties overseen by county governors. Large cities (10,000 or larger) have their own governor, appointed by the Empire. Small towns and villages usually have a mayor elected by the people.

The Emperor's word is final, but he is advised on a daily basis by a group of counselors. Each counselor oversees a particular area of the Empire. Their number and titles have changed throughout the centuries.

The current roster includes Marcus Noma, counselor of war; Ran Soril, counselor of infrastructure; Cassa Aniamia, counselor of diplomacy; Aetos Nilum, counselor of trade; Utica Villo, counselor of the people; Theon Wutan, counselor of health; and Marie Aurora, counselor of sorcery. Counselors answer to no one except the Emperor and his sovereigns.

The Counselors

As Counselor of War, Marcus Noma is unique among the proxies in that he actually shares authority with commander general Augustus Octanius. Although Noma is technically at the head of the imperial army, in the field Octanius answers to no one except the Emperor or to sovereigns (and the

hard-headed commander general has been known to even defy sovereigns at times... fortunately, those decisions turned out to be for the good of the Empire). Noma oversees overall military strategy, expenditures, and training.

As Counselor of Infrastructure, Ran Sorilus oversees maintenance and construction of roads, bridges, toll booths, public water and sewer systems, and other infrastructure needs. He spends most of his time in the Imperial City but does occasionally travel to see particularly large projects for himself.

As Counselor of Diplomacy, Cassa Aniamia oversees foreign relations as well as relations with and between imperial provinces. She is in charge of the runners, men and women who relay messages throughout the Empire.

The number of runners has traditionally been small due to the much more efficient method of communicating with sorcery. But with the rise of the Demon Emperor, the Empire has begun to grow more reliant on the now growing group of messengers.

As Counselor of Trade, Aetos Nilum oversees tax collection, trade policies, and the budget of the Empire. The dark brown coats of his tax

collectors are rarely welcome, but the Empire has traditionally had a policy of taxing no more than the people can afford.

As Counselor of the People, Utica Villo is responsible for advising the Emperor on the wishes of his citizens, public opinion, uprisings, heretics, and anything else regarding the people. Utica Villo inherited a network of spies and informants from his predecessor and he continues to use these in service to the Empire.

As Counselor of Health, Theon Wutan oversees the health of the Empire and its cities as and serves as a personal physician to the Emperor himself. Wutan left the Blue Kingdoms many years ago. Now an old man, he is renowned for his knowledge of herbs and other natural medicines from the four corners of the known world.

As Counselor of Sorcery, Marie Aurora is responsible for knowing the location of each and every imperially-sanctioned sorcerer.

She works closely with sovereigns of the Shadow sect and has come to lean on them more and more as she grows more and more fearful of her charges. She counted the Empire's most talented sorcerer as a trusted ally.

When he died horribly while uncovering the truth of the Demon Emperor, she became fearful and paranoid and has begun looking for excuses to execute the remaining sorcerers for their own good and the good of the Empire.

Sovereign Rebellion

The name Eio Onoria is well-known in the Empire, although the Emperor wishes it was otherwise. Onoria is a Sovereign, but she no longer answers to the Emperor, although she claims to still serve him.

She was sent with two other Sovereigns to execute a sorcerer, Teneus Bakus, flaunting his powers in the west of the Empire.

The Sovereigns cornered him in the small port city of Bounty near the Western Sea. The sorcerer called a great wave that pounded into the shore and took one of the Sovereigns out to the depths of the sea.

The other Sovereign allowed himself to be eviscerated by the sorcerer's shark-tooth club in order to give Onoria a chance to strike him down. Instead, she spared the sorcerer's life.

The Emperor's spies have reported that in the three months since that day,

Onoria has established a “protectorate” that encompasses Bounty, several farming communities, and two other small cities. Within this area, Onoria guarantees the safety of all sorcerers. She has gained the cooperation, or at least blind eye, of the local imperial army and citizens.

Onoria proclaims she is doing this in the best interest of the Emperor, but has refused to comply with orders to return to the capital.

But What's it Look Like in the Empire?

The Empire is described in broad strokes in the Player's Guide.

The visual aesthetics of The Empire are heavily influenced by Ancient Greece and Rome. When detailing the people, the buildings, break out a book on the ancient cultures, watch *Gladiator* or HBO's *Rome*, or *Ben Hur*.

You get the idea. Add in some of your own details like maybe all married men have three earrings in the left ear, and you have your own unique Empire.

The feel of a “classical” society is more important than any one particular fact.

And more important than that are the themes of duty, loyalty, and power. In the end, the Empire and sorcery serve as tools to explore those themes.

Stories of Duty, Loyalty, Power

Advice for Running Sovereign

Suggestions

Sovereign focuses on some subjects that may differ from other roleplaying games, so it's helpful for any gamemaster to know what those differences are up front and how to use them to make the game a unique and, hopefully, fun experience.

Players start at the peak of their powers

There are no rules for character advancement in Sovereign because players are already considered to be at the peak of their powers.

It may be possible for a player to gain a new skill at +1 or maybe even raise a skill to +2, but there is no mechanic for this. Instead, a player who continually roleplays the effort to get better may be granted an increase. It may also be possible to raise Focus and Conviction in this manner, but that should be even more difficult.

Here's an example. If a player describes how his character is trying to become better at a skill through dedication and training at least once a game session, then he should be

allowed to take a +1 bonus to that skill after five sessions. He may raise a skill to +2 after doing so for ten sessions. If a player fails to describe his training for a session, then he starts all over again. This is tantamount to the Sovereign getting frustrated or lazy and having to renew his dedication.

For Focus, you could require that players eschew fine food and drink and live only with the bare necessities for ten or more sessions. Or maybe they have to continually push themselves, to strive to excel in everything they do from ordering lunch to dealing politely with citizens.

For Conviction, you could require the player purposefully put himself through hardships for ten or more sessions. Or maybe they have to allow themselves to have harm inflicted on them, physical and emotional, in order to become stronger and more resilient.

No matter which route you go, remember that Focus and Conviction are the two most important traits that a Sovereign has. Raising them should be very, very difficult. Raising either trait

by more than one is strongly discouraged.

In order to gain new devotions or disciplines, you could require that players actively seek out a teacher, another Sovereign who is willing to share his techniques. Maybe this involves nothing more than a single detailed scene where the technique is taught. Or maybe it requires the player training over the course of one to three sessions.

I strongly suggest you tailor any advancement to your own group, however. Maybe you don't want to impose any strict rules, and will decide yourself after a player has invested enough time roleplaying in order to qualify for an advancement. That's perfectly fine.

Or maybe you even decide that as Sovereigns, the characters have already fulfilled their potential and simply have no room for advancement in skills, disciplines, or anything else. That's fine, too. In fact, it's the rule I use for my games.

No matter which way you decide to go, you should always be up front with your players on how advancements will work in your game.

For your first game, I actually suggest not allowing advancements in

order to simplify things. If your game takes off and you end up turning it into a full blown campaign, then you can always allow advancements later on. If you do allow advancements, players should always be required to detail their struggles to improve.

Players are among of the most powerful people in the world

Both physically and authoritatively. Let's take sorcery out of the equation for a moment. Okay, now Sovereigns ARE the most powerful people in the known world. Few citizens can hope to stand toe to toe with a Sovereign for longer than a few moments. Backed by the authority of the Emperor, a Sovereign's word is law to those within the Empire.

This may be a change if you're used to running games where players start off low man on the totem pole with little or no authority to lord over other people. The easiest way to adjust is to just let go and let your players wield their power, let them abuse it even. But it should always have consequences.

Say, for instance, that a player starts getting a little greedy. While in a town, he comes across a very nice horse stable ran by a rather well off family. He

commandeers a couple of fine horses, some gold, and a fine statue that catches his fancy. The family lets him take the stuff because he's a Sovereign and citizens of the Empire have been taught to treat them as they would the Emperor.

However, the family is now in a difficult situation because their finest studs were taken, rendering their stable all but useless. They can't purchase new studs because their money has been taken. Taking the statue just aggravated them even further, and now they're spreading the word about what a complete jerk the Sovereign is.

For immediate consequences, maybe one of the Faithful hears about this indiscretion and takes it upon himself to question the Sovereign on his actions. Or maybe one of the family's friends or relatives just can't take it and throws himself at the Sovereign's feet in the middle of town, begging for the return of the property.

Or you could go the long-term route. Maybe when the Sovereign has to return to the town months later he finds the citizens unwilling to help him unless he makes direct request. Or maybe the family has now gone bankrupt and is living on the streets. When they see the

Sovereign return, they devise a plan to kill him.

You shouldn't seek to punish players whenever they exercise their authority. Doing that is what a Sovereign is supposed to do, for the good of the Empire. If players repeatedly abuse their authority, however, don't hesitate to throw complications their way.

Players have responsibilities

Sovereigns owe their life to the Emperor. They live only to serve. This is exemplified by the Oath. A Sovereign who continually breaks the Oath will be viewed poorly by other Sovereigns, citizens, even the Emperor himself. A Sovereign who breaks the Oath continually and purposefully could face execution or imprisonment.

There are no instances where a Sovereign is simply ejected from the order. They would pose too great a risk to the Empire.

For an idea of which tenets are more important, and warrant stricter punishments for breaking, see Page 25 of the Player's Guide.

The Eagle's Nest

Notes for a First Session

Introduction

This is a scenario intended for beginning players that should take up a good evening (2-4 hours) of play while leaving room to build an entire campaign from the after-effects.

This scenario was designed with 2-4 players in mind. This scenario provides an outline for the adventure along with advice and NPC stats. Details are in the hands of the game master.

Swearing the Oath

Players begin the game the day of their initiation ceremony before the Emperor. Briefly detail the importance of this event, the years of training that has gone into it, what an honor it is to meet the Emperor and be accepted into his family.

The ceremony itself takes place in a grand hall with dark, polished marble. Pillars line either side of the lengthy hall with copper braziers sitting atop of each one. The flames from the braziers cast shadows across the floors and walls, which are covered in mosaic tiles depicting scenes from the history of the Empire, including the First Emperor

rallying his troops against an evil sorcerer.

The group of players is led down this long hall by their trainer to a large but simply adorned throne where the Emperor himself sits with his back rigid and straight. The Emperor locks eyes with each of the players before the trainer tells them to kneel before the Emperor.

The Emperor then rises and steps before the kneeling players. An aide carries over a small pedestal with a brazier with a branding iron shoved deep in the coals and flames.

The Emperor tells the group how they were found abandoned and alone but how their greatness was recognized even then. He tells them how they have proven themselves to be disciplined and dedicated and that he now asks for their loyalty.

At this point, the players are asked to recite the Oath. I suggest having you read each part off and then ask your players as a group to recite it in order to drive home that this is important and that each is taking a solemn vow to uphold this code.

After the players have done so, the Emperor tells them to rise and receive the mark of the Empire, the mark of their family, so that all will know that they speak for the Emperor and the Empire.

At this point, have each player offer his left arm. The Emperor's aide then presses the hot iron onto their wrist, burning the mark of the Empire into their flesh. At this point, have each player make a straight roll to determine if they show pain on their face or not. This is more to get the players used to rolling more than anything else. Each player will roll his focus plus any applicable skills (resist pain, etc.).

A success earns the player a slight nod or other small show of respect from the Emperor. A failure results in a slight frown or other small show of disappointment from the Emperor.

As each player completes this process, the Emperor embraces them and welcomes them as a son of the Empire. He then motions for the players to follow him outside into the courtyard. He begins to speak as he walks the group towards the stables.

The Mission

“Even though I have just welcomed you into my family, I have a great task

to ask of you,” the Emperor tells the group. “Even though you're young, I sense greatness in each of you. It has been many months since we have received word from our northernmost fortress, The Eagle's Nest.

“We have sent several messengers and received no reply. It is not like governor Brutus Amenicus to be untimely with replies. I fear the fortress and the surrounding city may have fallen to barbarian hordes. I want you to travel to the Eagle's Nest and aid the citizens there if they need it. If Brutus is not besieged, you are to remind him where his loyalties lie.”

As the group approaches the stables, the Emperor tells them that they will be accompanied by Thacius Illa, a veteran officer in the imperial army and Brutus' right-hand man during the Outlands campaign twenty years ago, where barbarians were driven out from the areas surrounding imperial outposts in the outlands.

Thacius introduces himself in the stables. He is an older man, in his fifties, with gray hair in a bowl cut, a weather-beaten face, and a missing finger. He is equipped with a leather breastplate and skirt, a gladius, and a spear thrown across his back along with a small round shield.

Thacius is a battle-hardened no-nonsense veteran. He is respectful towards the Sovereigns and defers to them whenever they make a decision, but he is not shy about voicing his opinions when asked for them.

The Eagle's Nest fortress itself is in an excellent defensive position. It is on top of a tall cliff. To the north, west, and east, is a 1,000 foot drop. A road is cut into the north of the cliff face. This road winds to the city below, which is located around the base of the cliff. To the south, are the thick woods of The Hills. The city has a population of 15,000. There is a garrison of 1,000 imperial soldiers there.

The Sovereigns are instructed to take a little-known, roughshod trail through The Hills in order to make better time.

Information from Thacius

Some things the Sovereigns may learn from Thacius, should they strike up a conversation:

- Brutus served with distinction during the outlands campaign. He served on the frontlines with his men and brought a swift end to a war that could have otherwise lasted ten years.
- Brutus has served as governor at the Eagle's Nest for over ten years and

the city has grown prosperous under his guidance. The city exports large amounts of timber harvested from the woods near the base of The Hills to the Empire.

- Another of Thacius' comrades lives in the city. Arturo the surgeon has his own practice in the heart of the city.

- If hard-pressed about any faults Brutus may have, Thacius reveals that at times he did seem overly sympathetic to the barbarians. On one occasion, he released over 100 able-bodied warriors that they had captured after a particularly bloody battle. Thacius holds Brutus in high regard, however, and even when he says this he will try to spin it in a favorable or understandable light.

Journey to the Eagle's Nest

Players have only their weapons, clothes on their back, horses, and enough provisions for the trip to the Eagle's Nest. As Sovereigns, they may commission virtually anything they request, however. If it is not available at the Imperial Fortress, they have only to track down the proper citizen and claim use of the materials in the name of the Emperor.

Let the players decide on their own whether or not they need anything else

and then let them realize that they can get virtually anything they need due to their status.

It takes approximately two weeks to reach the trail. You don't need to devote any more time to the journey than that. As the group approaches the gentle-rising mountain range of The Hills, the ground begins to be covered here and there with trees and the ground begins to rise and fall in gentle hills. The sun is setting, and Thacius suggest the group camps on the foothills for the night.

If the players agree, ask what they wish to do. Maybe they want to speak with Thacius some more or hunt some game or devise a plan for what to do if the barbarians have invaded the city.

At some point, have Thacius tell the group he is going hunting for some rabbit or, if he can get lucky, maybe even a deer.

If any players offer to go with him, have them make a perception roll as they near the woods. Remember, everything is based on focus. So each player will roll Focus plus any applicable skills (such as notice, perception, or sees everything). Again, remember that a single 7 is all that is required for a success.

Anyone who succeeds notices leaves rustling on the lower branches of one of the trees. A spectacular success (the player risked a Focus chip and succeeded) reveals a pair of dirty feet scampering across the branches.

Give each player time to perform a single action. Then have the tree-dwelling barbarians attack. Use a war band of 15 barbarians.

Barbarians Attack

The barbarians have thick, dark, shaggy hair and are wearing only loincloths and sandals. They are armed with large knives and spears, although a few of them may have bows. They are led by a large barbarian wielding a large axe and wearing an imbued amulet strung across his neck with a rope.

The amulet is a bone disc with the shape of a bear's claw carved into it. A row of three black, oily feathers are attached to disc.

Possible Cool Events During the Attack

- If Thacius is near the woods, immediately have a barbarian drop from the trees onto Thacius and stab him in the shoulder or neck. This will drive home the difference between Sovereigns and the unenlightened as

well as provide an obstacle for players (do they rush to Thacius to try to save him or concentrate on the barbarians?)

- Have the barbarians rush the nearest Sovereign. These guys are very well aware of what Sovereigns are and they'll try to gang up on them to take them out. Make sure to add their bonus for attacking in a group (+1 die for every five combatants).

- The leader will hang back and look menacing unless he is either challenged directly or unless half of his warriors are taken out, in which case he will engage the Sovereigns.

- If Thacius is seriously wounded, a Sovereign can stabilize him by making a basic medicine or first aid roll. (Remember that this, like everything else, is based on Focus. So a Sovereign would roll his Focus plus any applicable skills and would need to roll at least one 7 to succeed.)

Barbarian Warriors (Mob)

Attack: 3 (15 warriors = 3 dice)

Gregor (Barbarian Chieftan)

The bound amulet Gregor wears is a weak sorcerous item that nonetheless grants him great strength. Gregor gets three dice to roll for any rolls relating to strength (including melee and hand-to-

hand combat) under the One Success rule.

Anyone attacking him also suffers a two-die penalty thanks the amulet's two Resistance. Finally, the amulet grants him one Sustainance. Gregor is capable of sustaining two wounds before dying/being knocked out. When attacking, Gregor moves very erratically but much faster than any unenlightened person should be able to. In other words, it's readily apparent that he's being aided by sorcery.

If Gregor is killed, the remaining barbarians will attempt to flee. The barbarians speak broken imperial. If any of the Sovereigns think to question them, they may find out the following:

- They were warned ahead of time that the Sovereigns were coming.

- If pressed further and forcefully enough, they reveal that they were warned by Byorn, a great spirit man who lives deep in The Hills.

- Byorn gave Gregor the amulet and told him it would give him the strength to slay the intruders. Byorn told him that the Empire was coming to slay his people and rape his women.

- They know nothing of recent activities at the Eagle's Nest

Arrival

After a week's journey, the players arrive at The Eagle's Nest. There are two main paths to the fortress. The road from The Hills gently slopes down to the farmland below that surrounds the city's 20-foot tall wooden walls. A large gate is open and allows traffic to flow in and out of the city. A pair of imperial guards mans the gate.

The other path is simply a worn horse trail that veers into the woods and ends at the south entrance of the actual fortress.

The fortress itself is constructed of well-crafted stone and consist of a large rectangular main hall and two towers surrounded by a 20-foot stone wall. There is a large wooden gate that can accommodate four horses side-by-side with room to spare.

Regardless of which path they choose, the players are received with great respect.

Imperially soldiers clasp a fist to their chest and bow deeply to the Sovereigns and accommodate them in any way they can.

Brutus, however, is on an expedition to scout out some barbarian camps. He is expected back shortly, the soldiers inform the Sovereigns.

Waiting for Brutus

Allow the players some time to do whatever they wish.

- Arturo the surgeon can help with Thacius if he is badly injured.

- The mood in the city is generally bright, although there are plenty of whispers at the sight of the Sovereigns. Any Sovereign who pays particular attention (with a perception roll) notices the occasional nervous smile thrown his direction, like everything is okay but it clearly isn't.

- Brutus seems to be popular with the people. In particular, he seems to have been responsible for stopping the numerous barbarian raids that had recently plagued the city.

Brutus Arrives

A low horn sounds the return of Brutus. He can be seen traveling towards the wooden wall around the city at the head of a column of 40 imperial soldiers. The people in the city and working the farms stop what they are doing to gather around and watch Brutus enter the city.

He is wearing only a leather skirt and sandals. He has short, curly black hair with a well-trimmed goatee. He is also huge and is so ripped that it's amazing/bordering on scary. As he

nears the city, players can make out a bone disc necklace with the face of a bear carved into it and several black, oily feathers attached.

As he nears the city, the low horn sounds again and the herald loudly proclaims that “Emperor Brutus has returned triumphant! All hail Emperor Brutus!” The people are very happy and there are several shouts and fist pumps from the men and clapping from the women.

It can be hard to predict how players will react to this.

Attacking Brutus

If they immediately attack Brutus, he grabs his gladius and defends himself (See Page 30 for stats). His soldiers, reacting on instinct, will also jump to defend Brutus (at least initially; if the players later yell at them to cease in the name of the Emperor himself, then have them make a command roll. A success indicates the soldiers hesitate).

Speaking with Brutus

If they instead speak with Brutus, they may learn the following from him:

- The people have taken to calling him “Emperor” in honor of the successful job he’s done in protecting them. He wouldn’t dream of calling

himself that, but there’s only so much he can do to discourage it.

- About six months ago, the barbarian tribes began attacking The Eagle’s Nest in a series of raids, attacking farmsteads and killing anyone outside of the city walls. Brutus was just recently able to beat them back enough that the people once again felt safe.

- The amulet he has around his neck is a “trinket” he received from a barbarian girl he rescued from her cruel family.

- He was worried that he had not heard from the Empire, and is glad to have the Sovereigns with him. He is exhausted from his scouting expedition, but invites the Sovereigns to attend a dinner in their honor this evening at the main hall of the fortress.

Arresting Brutus

If the players attempt to arrest Brutus, he will at first try to speak with them reasonably and will deny using sorcery. If they demand he surrender the amulet, he will attempt to stall, but if that fails he will admit that he is using sorcery but will argue that it was done only to protect the people of the Empire and that if the Empire had sent help sooner he would not have been forced to turn to sorcery.

Brutus will travel with the Sovereigns to the Imperial City to answer before the Emperor, but he will not surrender the amulet. If issued an ultimatum, he will attack the players.

Accepting the Invitation

If the players accept Brutus' invitation and choose to do any further investigating before attending the dinner, they find that the city has indeed been besieged recently by particularly aggressive barbarian attacks. They also find that Brutus has stopped these attacks recently.

The Sovereigns are welcomed to the dinner by Brutus' lieutenant, Roderick Nellum. Nellum is a young man with a stiff posture who speaks in a short but polite manner. He leads the Sovereigns to the keep's great hall which features a very long dining table with room for 40. The seats are filled with military officers and soldiers.

A walkway circles above the dining hall about 25-30 feet. Life-sized stone statues carved with moderate skill depict various heroes of the Empire. This walkway is wide enough for three or four men to walk side by side.

The guests make small talk with the Sovereigns. Shortly into the conversation, however, the players hear

a loud creaking noise as Brutus shoves one of the large stone statues onto them.

Have each player make a perception roll (Focus plus any applicable skills) to figure out what's happening.

Anyone who succeeds is able to move out of the way. Anyone who fails is hit with 3 dice of damage. Roll 3 dice as a normal attack with one or more successes resulting in one wound.

At this point, it's an all out battle. Brutus has determined that the only hope he has is to kill the Sovereigns and attempt to cover it up as a Barbarian attack or attack by a sorcerer.

Suggestions for the Battle

- At first Nellum and his fellow soldiers will attempt to help Brutus kill the Sovereigns, but Nellum can be persuaded to stand down by reminding him of his true loyalty to the Empire. Nellum will then attempt to call off the rest of the men (this may or may not work depending on your needs).

- Have Brutus perform an amazing feat of strength such as picking up a statue over his head and hurling it with little to no effort or jumping onto the table, shattering it and floor beneath it.

- Take the fight onto the top of the keep with Brutus using his strength to

throw the Sovereigns across the room while he escapes to the roof through a hatch.

- If the players convince Nellum to stand down, have the rest of the soldiers attack Nellum – forcing the players to make a decision whether to keep him alive or not.

- If the players reduce Brutus to less than zero wounds, remind them that they have the option of killing him with that last blow or incapacitating him.

Aftermath

If Brutus is killed, the players will need to decide what to do with the body as well as the sorcerous amulet.

If they try pick up the amulet, remind them of their Oath and the serious consequences involved. If they still touch it, describe the power they feel rushing through their body, how they feel stronger than they ever have in their entire life. And don't forget to use the rules for the whispering shades on Page 7.

They'll also be in serious trouble once word reaches other Sovereigns and the Emperor that they touched a sorcerous item (and they will find out whether from a soldier who witnessed it or from one of the other players).

If they subdue Brutus, they'll have to decide how to remove the amulet from his body and whether they will take him before the Emperor or pass their own judgment.

You should allow the players to come to a decision and implement it before ending the session. The next session can revolve around the consequences of those actions.

Brutus - Abilities

The sorcerous amulet Brutus wears gives him four dice under the One for One rule for any rolls related directly to strength, including hand-to-hand but not ranged combat. This means he has the potential to inflict four wounds on an attack (if he rolls four or more 7s or higher). It also grants him a 2 Resistance and 1 Sustenance. So anyone attacking him subtracts two from their dice pool (because of the 2 Resistance).

With the Resistance and Sustenance gained from the amulet, Brutus is able to sustain three wounds. The fourth wound he takes will incapacitate/kill him.

Brutus - Background

Brutus has been influenced by the dark shade dwelling in the bone carving.

The shade whispers in his mind on quiet nights that the Empire is falling apart, and that only he has the power to save it.

He should be Emperor, the shade says, as only he is strong and wise enough to rule. Brutus still loves his people, but has begun to suspect that perhaps the Empire is in need of a better leader...

Brutus has a long history of service to the Empire in the army. When he lost contact with the Empire, however, he started to worry. That worry increased when the barbarians from The Hills began attacking shortly after. Unlike past attacks, they seemed particularly motivated and wouldn't relent. Brutus realized that, without support from the Empire, it would be only a matter of time before they were worn down.

That's when Byorn requested an audience with Brutus. Desperate, the governor agreed. Byorn offered Brutus an amulet that would grant him the strength to defeat the barbarians basically empty-handed. Wishing to protect the people, Brutus agreed.

Byorn the Sorcerer

Byorn has lived in The Hills for longer than most barbarians can

remember. He was sought after for his ability to heal even the most deadly of diseases.

The last time he attempted to summon a shade for healing, however, he contacted a servitor of the Demon Emperor who promised unimaginable agonies from his master if Byorn didn't do what was required of him: namely, weaken the Empire.

Cowed, Byorn first set the barbarians against the Eagle's Nest, nudging their minds with sorcery when needed. When things began to look bleak for the imperial stronghold, he then turned and offered his services to the governor, Brutus.

His hope is to corrupt Brutus to a point where he seeks to attack the Empire directly. He knows Brutus will not have a real chance at bringing the Empire down, but he hopes to create instability and fear in the Empire, weakening it from within.

Imperial Soldier

Stationed at the Eagle's Nest

Well-trained, proud of their commander Brutus, but unaware of his use of sorcery.

Individual soldiers may or may not have a die in some form of combat.

If attacking the Sovereigns, use them in groups of 10 (giving them 2 base attack dice) or 15 (giving them 3 base attack dice).

They have no Focus and no sorcery, so they go down in one hit.

Lt. Roderick Nellum

Young, polite, and a man of duty. Nellum looks up to Brutus but his loyalty will be questioned if he witnesses Brutus attack the Sovereigns or make an outright use of sorcery.

Nellum has one die to use when attacking with swords and no Focus or sorcery.
