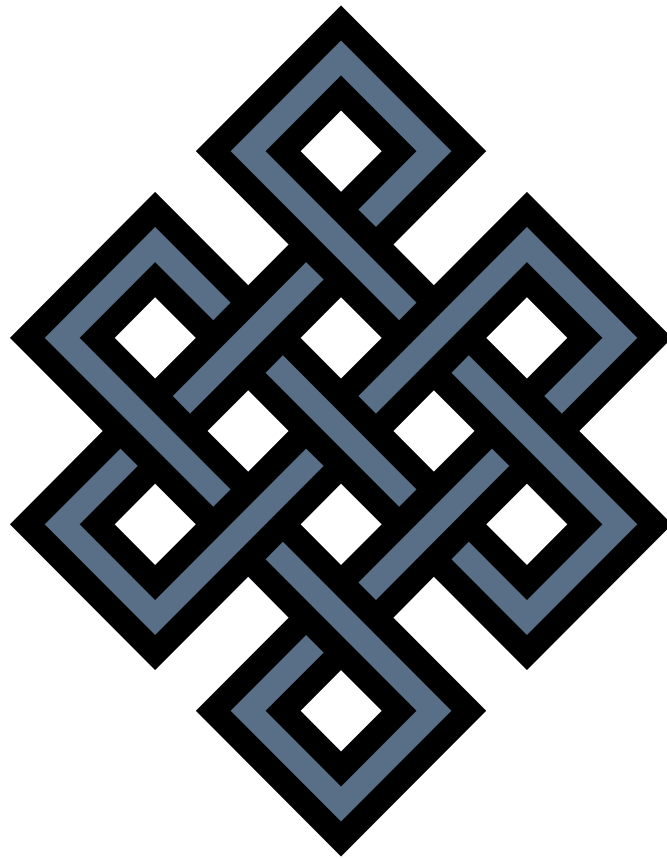


# *The Shackled Self*



A ROLE-PLAYING GAME FOR 3 PLAYERS

BY RAFU

The Shackled Self

a submission to the Ronnies, April 2011 round

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In a game of *The Shackled Self* you, the players, collectively tell the story of a great Prince, or Princess, who left a sheltered life amongst all of earthly delights and went to the Mountain, undertaking a regime of asceticism so that he, or she, may become a Saint. The Prince made this choice out of necessity, after understanding there is no other way for the world itself to be saved from impending doom. But Temptation lurks: the charms of the flesh – of love, even – hailing from the past impede the route to ascetic sainthood and may condemn the Prince to tragic defeat. Or maybe not? Maybe it is success which would be the most tragic, while so-called Temptation actually speaks for a little sanity through the inhumane harshness of the Mountain?

## Backdrop

The game can be set in any suitable world, place and time period, such as in India in late Vedic times, in Warring-states China, or in the Europe of Middle Ages, as well as dragon-inhabited Melniboné or some imaginary land of your own devising: this is left to you, the players, to decide. While you are at it, feel free to also discuss the nature of the doom which menaces everyone should the Prince fail (is it something subtly spiritual, maybe, or a very tangible supernatural catastrophe? irreversible imprisonment in the cycle of death and rebirth, armed invasion by barbarian hordes, or a plague unleashed upon the land?) or other such details, but only debate those briefly and don't overly dwell on any part of it: nothing is nailed down. Such a discussion, in fact, should only serve as a springing board for your imagination, while actual facts about the setting can be made up and changed during play, depending on your expressive needs, by each player according to their specific authorities.

## Player roles

There are three distinct roles in the game: the Prince, the Temptation and the Mountain. Each player plays one and only one such role throughout the game. First, choose one of you to be the Prince. The Prince player is going to always be in the spotlight: he or she plays the main character of the story you're collectively telling (and no other character) and has to stand constant pressure. Whoever first volunteers to be the Prince should get the role.

If possible, the Prince should then choose the player they're most attracted to or fascinated by (in real life) to play Temptation, while the remaining player takes the role of the Mountain. If you can't – or don't want to – apply the above criterion, then consider that the Mountain is probably going to be the one who does the less speaking and spends the less time being active and in the spotlight throughout the game: he or she who believes this won't be a problem for her please volunteer to be the Mountain, leaving Temptation for the last player to take.

Temptation and the Mountain both assume the role of multiple secondary characters through the game, but their tasks are not limited to that.

## Player goals

- The Prince's agenda is to play the main character faithfully and passionately as a “real” person – and a resolute person at that: one with a strong will not to be crushed.
- Temptation's agenda is to drive the Prince away from the Mountain, and nothing else.
- The Mountain's agenda is to evaluate the Prince and only let him achieve sainthood if he's worthy of it; or to crush him if he isn't worthy.

## Player seating and play area arrangement

While playing the game, the Prince and Temptation sit facing each other, at about arm's reach from each other, with the GAME BOARD between them (probably placed on a table). The Mountain sits behind the Prince's back, slightly removed from the table and also facing Temptation – in such a fashion that the Mountain can still see the game board but she typically has to peek over the Prince's shoulder to have a clear look at it, and also that it would be comfortable for the Mountain to whisper in the Prince's ear while the Prince would have to turn awkwardly to stare at the Mountain's face.

Nothing else is necessary, except for a few small tokens.

## Refreshments during the game

For the Prince and the Mountain, but the Prince especially, I suggest they have a drink apt to awake their senses and ease meditation, such as strong black coffee or a tea (with no sugar in it). Refrain from eating any snacks during the game, or at least stick to some very light, bland and unenticing food – such as unsalted rice crackers – and have very little of it.

Temptation doesn't have to obey to the above rules, and in fact I suggest the player pours herself some inebriating drink if it suits her and maybe keeps an array of delicious looking, tasty and somewhat unhealthy snacks on her side of the playing table. Genuinely tantalize the poor Prince player with his favorite variety of sweets as a way of setting the mood!

## Getting started with the game

The Prince takes a copy of his QUESTIONNAIRE and answers all of the questions. He both speaks his answers aloud for the other players to hear and writes them down for later reference. Then the players separate for just a few minutes.

- The Mountain reads carefully through her own QUESTIONNAIRE: she reflects on the questions and gives silent answers she mentally commits to. She

doesn't have to tell the other players what her answers are.

- Meanwhile, Temptation takes the Prince's questionnaire and studies it carefully, trying to devise some strategies for tempting him.
- This is a good time for the Prince to meditate quietly and focus his mind on his character; and maybe to sip some tea. He also sets up the game board, as explained below.

As soon as the Mountain is ready, then, the players start playing out scenes – which are the real meat of the game.

## Setting up the game board

The Prince chooses a small token or trinket to represent his own character's ascetic progress on the game board: this is called the Avatar. A small item of personal jewelry from the player, such as a ring, makes for a perfect Avatar. Initially, the Prince selects one of the square Gate spaces (marked “x” on the game board) to place his Avatar onto.

He also takes eight identical tokens (beads, poker chips, pennies...) and places five on the lowermost part of the game board to represent his starting Resolve. Keep the leftover tokens handy, for the Prince can gain more Resolve during the game as well as lose it.

## More on the game board

The game board is shaped like a faux-*mandala* made up of colored spaces. There are spaces in four main colors: white, gray, yellow and red; plus a fifth unique color marking the central space. Each space is also marked with a number indicating how many “steps” away it is from the center of the board (the four Gates, marked “x”, are 6 steps away from the central space). The outermost gray ring is a single space which could be numbered “7” but is subject to a few special rules.

The Avatar moves around the board, one space at a time, as determined by the players and by the outcome of the scenes they play, until it reaches the central space – triggering the endgame phase – or the Prince's Resolve is exhausted.

There are three possible directions of movement for the Avatar:

- Inward, to an adjacent space marked with a *lower* number than the current one (or from the outermost ring to a “6”).
- Outward, to an adjacent space marked with a *higher* number (or else from any of the spaces marked “6” or “7” to the outermost gray ring, and from the outermost ring “off the board” entirely).
- *Circling around*, that is, moving to an adjacent space marked with *the same* number (or from the outermost ring to a “7”).

Some additional rules restrict how the Avatar moves on the board:

- One can never “reverse” a move, that is: no player is ever allowed to move the Avatar into the last space it occupied before the current one.
- The Avatar can't be moved *into* spaces marked “x”: such spaces, called Gates, only serve as starting points and are never re-entered.
- The Avatar cannot *actually* be moved off the board: whenever it *would* move

outward from the outermost ring, it remains stationary instead and the Prince loses one token of Resolve.

- When the result of a scene dictates a player moves the Avatar inward, but there is no legal inward move according to the above rules, then the player mover the Avatar circling around instead.
- Likewise, when the result of a scene dictates a player moves the Avatar outward, but there is no legal outward move, the Avatar circles around.
- In case there is only one legal move to be made, such move is made, regardless of what happened in the scene.

## Playing scenes

There are four standard types of scenes in *The Shackled Self*, which are mostly played under the same rules, except for a few differences. Which kind of scene is to be played depends on where the Avatar currently is on the game board. At the end of each scene one of the players moves the Avatar into a new space and immediately a new scene begins.

A scene always has a single player responsible for framing it (which one depending on the type): describing the location, situating the scene in time, telling which characters are in the scene besides the Prince and what the current situation is – what, if anything, has just happened. The Prince character is always present in all of the scenes and the Prince player never assumes the role of any other character. The framing player also retains an exclusive right to add more characters to the scene at any time and to control backdrop phenomena which aren't characters proper (such as, for example, weather). Some kind of scenes, though, have another player (i.e. Temptation) “take over” framing player rights from them once the scene is ongoing.

It is also the framing player's privilege to declare when a scene is over, although they should be very open to the other players' suggestions on the matter, so that scenes end at whatever time feels the most “natural” to everybody.

Players usually have full power over whatever characters they are playing in a scene (except where otherwise noted), so should a conflict of any kind arise between characters the players have to agree on its outcome naturally and instinctively, not interrupting the game for a lengthy discussion, but rather relying on their own sense of drama: trust your fellow players, improvise and be ready to yield ground. Should an agreement not be reached immediately, the framing player – or the player who took over – overrules the others and has the final say on the outcome, thus resuming the game.

## The power of Temptation

When Temptation has framed the scene, or taken it over, she also has (limited) power and authority over the Prince's character: concurrently with the Prince player, she controls his body's reaction to stimuli, his physical sensations and involuntary behaviors. She still can't, however, directly affect the Prince's mind, will, nor dictate his conscious actions.

## Memory scenes (*yellow*)

The Avatar entering a yellow space triggers a memory scene, where the Prince recalls an episode of his own past life. It can consist of any event or situation, be it happy or sad, extraordinary or commonplace. Sometimes such memories strengthen and motivate the Prince, but at other times they distract and confuse him.

The Prince frames the scene, distributing characters other than his own to the Mountain and Temptation, assigned as the Prince sees fit. Once the scene is ongoing, though, Temptation can take over. This can happen in one of two ways: either

- the Prince *invites* Temptation to take over, which she can accept or refuse, and if she accepts the Prince gains one token of Resolve (up to a maximum of eight); or
- something happens in the scene which in Temptation's opinion *warrants* her taking it over, and she petitions the Mountain accordingly. If the Mountain grants Temptation permission to take over (a silent nod is all which is needed), the Prince still has the option to resist this, at the cost of spending one Resolve token.

Either way, only one attempt at a takeover can be made per scene.

Once the scene ends, the Mountain passes judgment on it (see below) and the Avatar moves accordingly.

## Flashback scenes (*red*)

The Avatar entering a red space triggers a flashback scene, when the Prince's mind is forcefully overcome by unwanted memories. Such memories may be sad or happy, but they all distract the Prince from his path, tempting him with the lures of the earthly and mundane.

Temptation frames the scene. She plays most character herself, but at her discretion she can hand some to the Mountain to control.

Once the scene ends, the Mountain passes judgment on it (see below) and the Avatar moves accordingly.

## Judging scenes from the past

At the end of a memory or flashback scene, the Mountain's task is to tell whether the Prince or Temptation *prevailed* during it. To “prevail” in a scene is unrelated with the takeover of framing rights; it has all to do with which player was able to make the scene naturally flow their way, somehow, or to dictate the other player a pace. Often it just comes down to a gut call on the Mountain's part.

Whichever player's side prevailed, in the Mountain's opinion, that player (Prince or Temptation) gets to move the Avatar one step on the board, in a direction of his or her own choosing.

Instead of moving, though, the Prince can choose to let the Mountain move for him: if he so decides, he gains a token of Resolve (up to a maximum of eight).

## Human limits in scenes from the past

In memory scenes and flashback scenes the Prince, not yet an aspiring ascetic, is bound by the common physical and mental limitations of all human beings: he can never take actions or perform deeds which no man or woman could. Also, should he take actions or perform deeds which would – according to the Mountain's judgment – tax human nature to the limit, such as exhibiting extraordinary strength of body, intellect or fortitude of heart, the Mountain is required to interrupt the game by asking: «*Are you sure this is what happened?*» The Mountain's judgment over such matters is incontestable.

Now the Prince can either answer «*Yes, I am!*» and sacrifice a Resolve token, or turn to Temptation and demand «*Tell me what really happened.*» In the latter case, Temptation restates the last actions of the Prince in a different way, revised so that it fits within human limits. This is the only circumstance under which Temptation is allowed to dictate the Prince's willing actions.

## Test scenes (*white*)

The Avatar entering a white space triggers a test scene, where the Prince's resolve, mettle and spiritual improvement are tested by the Mountain. Think of this scene as an examination.

The Mountain devises a test and frames a scene (which other player can take over) set in the present time, in the context of the Prince's tribulations as an aspiring ascetic. Temptation has no part in a test scene, except to play secondary character roles the Mountain sees fit to give her – if any.

The scene is set up, or played out, such as to either lead to an explicit question, exam or conundrum posed to the Prince, or as to imply a thinly veiled one. The Mountain has decided in advance which the right answer is, and silently committed to it in her mind.

Once the scene is over, if the Prince's solution to the puzzle has satisfied the Mountain, she moves the Avatar inward on the game board. If the Prince has instead failed at the test, the Mountain moves the Avatar outward. If for some reason the Mountain can't actually decide whether the Prince succeeded or failed, then she moves the Avatar circling around.

As an extraordinary but still possible outcome, the Prince could surprise the Mountain by inventing a solution to the problem she didn't at all expect, but which still satisfies her in retrospective. Should this happen, the Mountain rewards the Prince by letting him move the Avatar, freely.

## Night scenes (*gray*)

At night the demons of Temptation strike the already exhausted ascetic with hideous hallucinations, phantoms from the past (or a past that never was), visions from elsewhere (truthful or mendacious?) and glimpses of a possible future. They test the Prince from without and within, sapping his Resolve away.



The Avatar entering a gray space on the board triggers a night scene. First, the Mountain frames the scene: she describes the Prince's surrounding as he's engaging in ascetic practice or resting, always at nighttime. Then Temptation automatically takes over, to do as she pleases.

In a night scene Temptation attempts not to just elicit the Prince's reaction as much as to leave him speechless with astonishment, or with the doubt he's being shown truths. Conversely, the Prince attempts to counter Temptation's points with clever, prompt ripostes, logical reasoning and rock-solid certainty the hallucinations lie to him.

As soon as Temptation hesitates, left momentarily short of arguments, the Mountain can take over the scene again and declare it's over. Then the Mountain also judges whether Temptation succeeded, sometimes in the scene, in confusing the Prince – the main signal of this being that the Prince shut up, hard pressed for anything reasonable to say.

If Temptation confused the Prince, she gets to move the Avatar. Otherwise, the Prince moves the Avatar. Either way, it was a terrible and exhausting night and the Prince suffers a loss of one Resolve token.

## Exhaustion and failure

This is one way the game can end. If, at the end of a scene, the Prince is left with no Resolve tokens, the harsh life of the ascetic finally overcomes him, body and mind: he dies or goes permanently insane, instead of becoming a Saint.

The game ends with a closing vignette by the Prince, telling the other players what becomes of his tormented self. The fate of the world remains untold.

## Slipping off the path

This is the second way the game can end. The Prince can, at any time, willingly decide to embrace Temptation, abandoning the way of the ascetic. If he so decides, the game immediately ends with a final vignette narrated by Temptation, in which she tells the other players both about the fate of the Prince and, especially, what becomes of the world.

## The center of the board (*lapis lazuli*)

Once the Avatar steps into the center of the board, it stops moving. You can also discard the Resolve tokens, as they are no longer used.

No scene is triggered. Instead, the Mountain now has to pass final judgment on the Prince, based on his actions and behavior throughout the game. Is he fit to become a Saint? Maybe the Mountain's answer to this is a plain *yes*, in which case it just happens, and the game ends (see *Achieving sainthood*, below).

Sometimes, though, the Mountain herself hasn't made her mind yet, even this far in the game, so she defers her judgment and calls for the Prince to overcome one final trial (see *The last night*, below).

It is not possible, once the Prince has made it so far, that the Mountain just rejects it

without giving him a last chance.

## The last night

Unable to make her mind any other way, the Mountain invites Temptation to have a final confrontation with the Prince. This is similar to a standard night scene in that the Mountain sets the scene and then Temptation takes it over.

Temptation comes to the Prince in the last night under the guise of a single character: the one she deems most appropriate based on all the previous scenes, such as – for example – the Prince's true love. Don't forget *the power of Temptation* (see above)!

Prince and Temptation players establish eye contact and try to maintain it throughout the scene, while – even more so than the usual – they talk to each other in turns, an ordered back-and-forth, starting with Temptation. They can also touch hands. As soon as one pauses, the other jumps in. Breaking eye contact, as well as pausing for too long, stuttering or not knowing what to say, counts as a partial defeat before the opponent's will.

The Mountain, now even more impartial than ever, will be satisfied if the Prince overcomes Temptation in this last confrontation but, unlike before, won't question the Prince's *means* to this end. She rises from her seat behind the Prince and takes position as to get the best view of the match between the other two players – including who's dodging eye contact with whom. She acts as a referee for the confrontation, should the need arise.

For each of Temptation and the Prince, the first partial defeat they suffer is not final: they can both “take one for free”. The second time a player avoids eye contact, stutters or is left with nothing to say, though, the confrontation ends with his or her final defeat.

If the Prince is defeated by Temptation in the last night, the game ends just as he willingly surrendered, in a vignette by Temptation.

If Temptation is defeated by the Prince in the last night, the Prince achieves sainthood.

## Achieving sainthood

This is the third and last way the game can end. It can happen by the Mountain's decision, once the Avatar is in the center of the board, or as a consequence of the Prince triumphing in the last night. The finale consists of a set of two final vignettes:

- first, the Mountain tells what becomes of the Prince;
- then, the Prince tells what becomes of the world.

*You were born a Prince, or Princess. Before you left your old life behind you, you used to live in the Palace, a veritable garden of earthly delights.*

What was the most beautiful thing in the Palace?

What was the second most beautiful thing in the Palace?

What was also beautiful, but not beautiful enough to warrant your attention?

What seemed, at the time, to be a plain and ordinary thing, but now that you don't have it anymore you realize was also a wonder?

What was it that, in your most melancholic days, you expected to never be able to get in your sheltered life in the Palace – and then, to your surprise, you realized was also there for you?

Which of the above things do you miss the most bitterly, now?

Who is it that you loved the deepest?

Who loves or loved you the most, and how did they show you their love?

Whom or what you hated the harshest, and why?

*Then you left and went to the Mountain, in order to become a Saint, so that the World is Saved.*  
What you believe would have happened, otherwise?

How do you know for sure?

What you most wanted to protect by your decision, and you cannot protect any other way?

Who is it, among those you loved and loved you back, who will suffer the most should you fail to become a Saint?

You are the Mountain – high and aloof, harsh and unforgiving – representing the ideal of asceticism. Mortals come to you to become Saints...

*What is the first thing you always take away from them, and why? Do you ever give it back to them? Is it something fundamental to them, something which makes them human? Or is it something spurious, maybe, which used to separate them from really being human? Would a true Saint also possess, or retain, this thing, or not?*

*How are those mortal men and women unfit to succeed, and has any one of them succeeded, ever?*

Still, some amongst their numbers have something you admire... *what is it?* Do many mortals possess this thing, all of them, or just a rare few? And would a true Saint also possess this quality, or is it something extraneous to sainthood?

*What is it, really, in mortifying the flesh with asceticism, in living the harsh life of a hermit, that paves the way to sainthood? Does this serve as a mean to acquire something which the practitioner lacks, or to lose something of which the practitioner has too much? If the former, is it a necessary thing, or just a helpful element? If the latter, is this something they can really and completely purge themselves of? And are there any other consequences to purging oneself of it?*

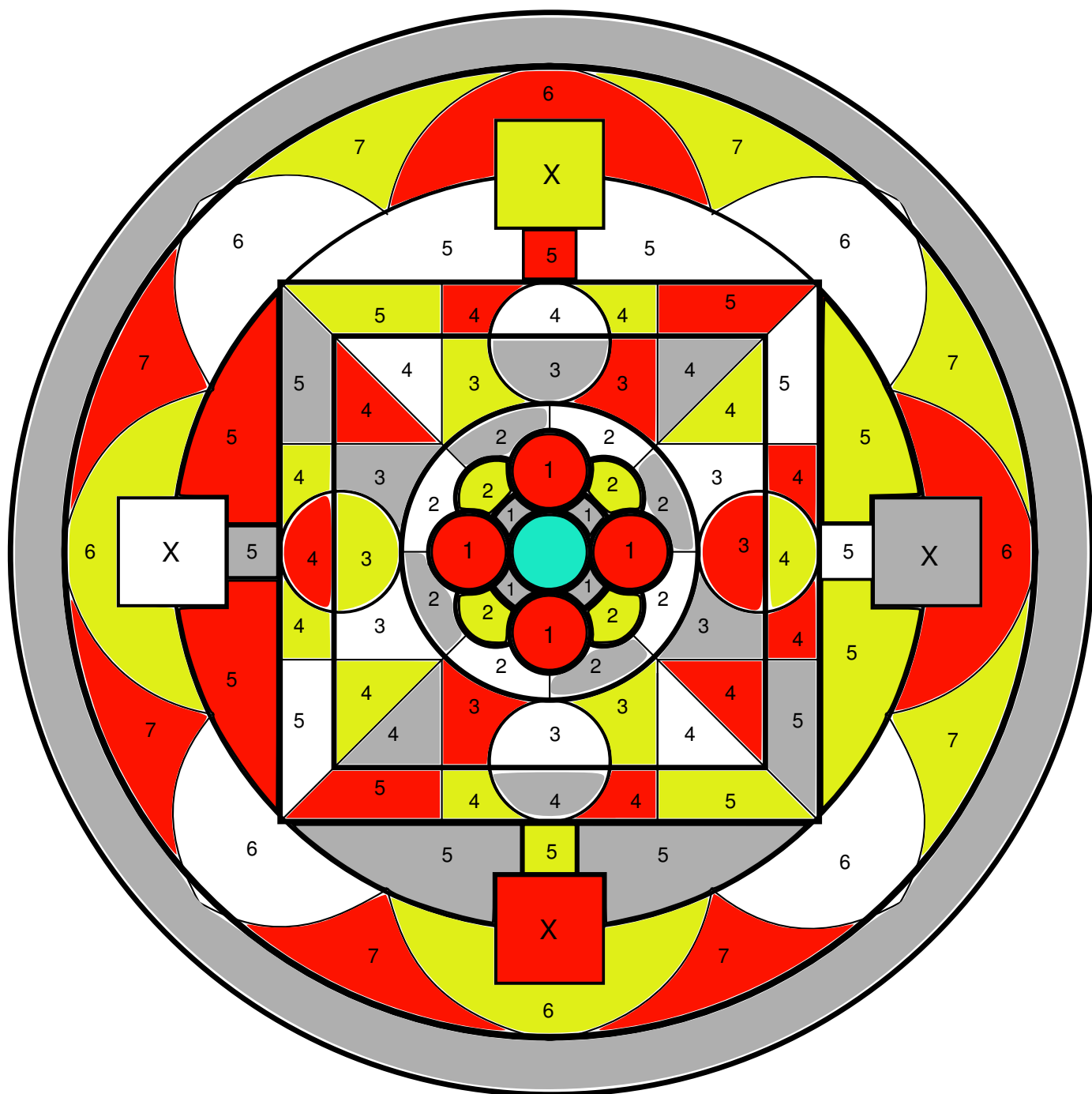
*How is it, exactly, that one can never become a Saint in a Palace of Earthly Delights? Is this just because there are too many distractions there, or is there something really fundamental to it? What happens, in such a Palace, that a Saint should not partake of, and why? Is there something in such a Palace which would harm one's sainthood even to witness?*

What is the most horrible sin one can commit, and how does that impede sainthood? *Is it a very rare, formidable sin, or a commonplace and everyday one?*

*What is a human being's greatest virtue, and how does it relate with sainthood?*

*What makes a human being human? Are humans any special compared to other beings, or not all? Are humans the only beings capable of attaining sainthood? Or maybe are they the only beings removed from it?*

*What does it mean to be a saint, anyway? You are the only one who knows for sure.*



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RESOLVE: