1 The Circle of Bloodletters

In every era, there have been those who killed. For profit. For glory. For a cause. For effect. For vengeance. Sword-dancers and holy warriors, mercenaries and soldiers, thieves and cutthroats, all of these have wielded and bloodied their blades --and those of others-- time and time again.

But they are not the Bloodletters. To your select Circle has been given the true craft, the *art* of the assassin, the Code of the Bloodletter. You have mastered the secret of the *jivatmaya*, the blooding blade, first taught by Storm Bluemist the Assassin, the *an-ishtoya*, the Grandmaster, an Easterner who arrived in the Realm during the Border Wars. Storm taught to his first disciples the ritual of the blooding-sword, which destroys the soul of its victim. He taught the ritual of naming, which binds the *jivatmaya* evermore to its wielder's bloodline and insures that others may not wield it. And he taught to his students, along with respect for the blade and its power, the skill to wield it properly. Thus was born the Circle of Bloodletters.

Storm left the Realm a decade ago, but his legend has survived him, as has the tale of his one failure -- the one man (or, perhaps, more than man) who was ever able to defeat the *an-ishtoya*, the great master. It is said that in the early days after the Crown Wars, when the Realm was in danger of being destroyed by the warring of the families and gangs that had ruled the underworld, there came a man known only as the Shadowlord, who took control of those factions and fashioned the united whole that is the Thieves Guild. Since then, the Thieves' Guild achieved great prominence within the underworld, and when Storm arrived, his first disciples were culled from the Guild. Soon, however, the Circle declared its independance of the Guild, and in response the Shadowlord brought grave insult to the Circle and he who formed it. Thus Storm took an oath of honor that the Shadowlord would die by his hand.

It is not known what became of Storm, but when the dust settled the Shadowlord was still alive, and Storm was gone -- a blot on the Circle's otherwise untarnished honor. The Circle has lived on, taking on those who wield the *jivatmaya* and prove themselves in the test of life. It survives by the Code of the Bloodletter:

Never kill without purpose.

Never kill without need.

Never kill in anger.

Never get caught.

But now this code has been violated by one who wields the *jivatmaya*. Three days ago, a dozen bodies were found by the Guard of the Realm in various places across the Capital City. These bodies were not merely dead--they were soulless shells, as the victims of the Circle are left soulless shells, killed with a single swordstroke through the chest. They were found in their homes, in places of worship, in the streets, with no rhyme nor reason to their deaths -- and the Guard has placed suspicion on the Circle, and vowed to bring you to "justice". Indeed, whoever performed this slaughter has made many undeserved enemies for the Circle; when you find him he will be made to face *your* brand of justice. The Circle is large, and there are circles within circles, and many seek the answer. Three of you are on the Castle, under the leadership of a Master, an *ishtoya*, a Master, (a title bestowed to very few men in the Circle), seeking it here. It is perhaps here that your best chance lies -- the bodies themselves are here, to be studied, and one of your own is performing the investigation.

Another oddity has been noted recently, which may have some bearing on the matter. Underworld rumour has it that the

Thieves Guild is engaged in a war with renegades, or perhaps with another organization altogether, and that this crisis has left many uncertain as to its eventual fate. Further, it is said that the Shadowlord himself is on the Castle, seeking a resolution. If true, then perhaps the fates are being kind to you, that you may clear the Circle of both the blemishes on its honor within a single week.

The three of you on the Castle are:

- Shalaphi ello-Dreamer Vellad, ishtoya. A botanist of the College of the Seventh Day's Work, here for the College conference. The youngest ishtoya in the Circle's history, and the only halfbreed to achieve the title. He is leader of this circle.
- lle-Victory Sorsha. After fighting her way free of the Realm's gladiator pits, she joined the College of the Six Day's Work. She is now the realm's foremost forensic analyst.
- Za'nannim Iared. Peer of the Realm. Wielder of the Executioner's Axe, perhaps the rarest jivatmaya the Circle has known.

There is also Stratus Bluemist, Sword-dancer of the Iron Gauntlet. Blood-kin to the an-ishtoya, and possessed of knowledge of the Circle's rituals, he has proclaimed himself an honorary member of the Circle though he has as yet crafted no jivatmaya with which to secure his place. His actions this week shall determine his status.

Table of Contents