

A woman stands five feet and a half amidst half a dozen broken opponents, beads of sweat dripping down her brow, a harsh smile on her lips. Her skin has the tint of bronze and her eyes are a bright scarlet littered with stars. What blood glimmers on her hands does not belong to her, and the folds of her improbably elaborate dress remain impeccable despite the wide motions of her kata.

## **There Was**

There was once a girl, who was born on a woman's dying breast.

She was old enough to talk and walk already, so perhaps she existed already; but she remembered nothing before this moment, and so then she was born.

She walked out of a hut, leaving two dead people behind, and discovered only corpses and raitons eating the lips of the dead. So she walked on. She found a battlefield, and a river full of bloated corpses, and later on a village ravaged by plague, and later on a god of stitched corpses. She walked on.

She saw a beautiful knight on a mighty horse, with rippling bronze lamellar and a mighty spear; and on his lips there was the blue tint of the plague that would kill him.

She saw a group of bandits feasting on the food of the deceased and stealing all they had, and on the road there were the soldiers that would kill them all.

She saw that no one leaned to help a little girl, and she thought: "I am hungry." But she also thought: "The world is cold and barren, and only the strength to withstand everything can help you survive." So she set out to gather this strength.

When the Chosen of Fate came to bring her along, they found the girl ruled over lost children, and could fight anything that came to her, man or beast. Yet she found herself too weak. So she followed them.

This is just a story Madame Kali tells; but it is the story she tells to those she is about to kill, and so it is perhaps closest to the truth.

It doesn't matter anymore. Now she can fight anything: opponents and armies and gods and disease and sadness and memories. All breaks under her might heel.

This is the story of a Chosen of Battles.

## **Madame Kali**

Today, Madame Kali is known to those initiated to the secrets of the world as the greatest martial artist alive and a spy of great skills. She is an elder Sidereal, and both of these talents go to the service of the Allthing - as a martial artist, she hones her skills hunting down

opponents to dangerous for the Infernals to risk their lives (hers is fair game). As a spy, she maintains a sprawling information network through most of Creation, and holds a dozen different identities. To the Infernals, the second thing matters much more than the first; there is ample supply of good fighters in the world, and another martial artist is less useful than a secret agent. They know nothing.

Madame Kali has earned her title in blood, wrestling it from her renegade Sidereal mentor in a fight that lasted twelve hours and involved an entire city and fifteen different Forms. She had a name before - but the name does not matter. It died with her mentor and lover when she pulled the beating heart from her chest and consumed its Essence. This day, she had a vision from a distant star. She was reborn Kali, spirit of perfected destruction and avatar of all endings; she was reborn Saturn Incarnate, but that name she tells no one. Madame will do, and no one has noticed the spot of violet in her eye.

The Chosen of Battles has learned a vast number of martial arts over the centuries, and she has designed her own. Under the guise of Emmanuelle Degivre, she designed the five Immaculate Styles and taught them to the freshly designed Dragon-Blooded in a private school, so that they would be more efficient commandos - and not at all, no matter what some may suspect, to bring them a form of spiritual enlightenment that will bring them to seek greater understanding of the Sword; that would imply she has plans beyond her obedience to the Allthing, and she is the picture of honest service; she even designed the Vitriolic Dragon Style, in preparation for the day when the Infernals' attempts at designing demonic Dragon-Blooded bears fruit - and there is no way this style's mutagenic aspects are intended to transform said Exalts to the point where they slip off the leash of their masters, none whatsoever.

There is more. Shards of enlightenment flickering in her dreams, veils of colors dancing before her eyes, a power she cannot grasp - yet. She has designed tools of transcendent meditation, katas that focus the power of her Exaltation within itself and flow out to reshape the world, but still it eludes her. Staring into a mirror of obsidian, she has found thousands of worlds and wonders just outside of her understanding. And though she does not admit it even to herself, she fears to tread into this black pond. Once, she snagged another Sidereal elder with her passion and conviction, and together they tried to perform the impossible kata; hovering at the edge of their understanding, her partner folded the infinite shards into a single Form - and shattered into infinite possibilities fading out of this world. Since then, fear has found a home in her heart. It has slowed her down - but it has not stopped her. Through trial and error, she has managed to design a secret ensemble of technique - something which the Infernals do not truly know about, and something which she has made sure they inherently *cannot* fully grasp; those few she has told about her research have dismissed it as amusing tricks. Everything is working as expected.

People often say that an elder Exalt hasn't grown up to that age by being bold and foolish. What does it say, then of the Exalt who was bold and yet became an elder? Madame Kali is not a secretive Vizier hiding from the world. She is an actor, an agent, someone who goes out into the

world and does things. She exerts her martial arts (and designs new ones) by experimenting, first-hand, the raw turmoil of the world as a wellspring of creativity. Stripped of her contacts, of her set-ups, of her tools, of her allies, of her astrological preparations - she remains a finely tuned instrument of destruction. And she has seen and tasted so much more of Creation than her colleagues and so-called masters - so much that this one facet of enlightenment she has reached, this hidden martial arts she calls the Prismatic Arrangement of Creation, she has derived from her attachment to it. The world is the only sifu she needs. And now it is time for her to be rid of the shackles imposed by its secretive masters.

It is time to put on the Mask.

## **Identities**

Madame Kali uses a smattering of second identities when dealing with the world. Here are some of the most common:

Across the world, her current true name is actually well-known in martial arts circle as that of a practitioner of literally divine skills - generally assumed to be a martial god in unusually good standing with mortal governments and allowed to roam at her leisure. Characters with Martial Arts 3+ and a modicum of worldly knowledge are likely to have heard her name at some point. She uses this identity to build relationships and contacts without having to go through the pains of an expiring Resplendent Destiny, and to justify the immortality of her public identity; rumored to be undefeated and undefeatable (though she has yet to go against a Solar opponent publicly), she exploits her reputation to scour tournaments and contests and find worthy pupils to teach her art to... And build into her efficient servants.

The **Yellow Raven** (Resplendency of the Banner) is an Air Aspected Dragon-Blood of renown; based in Meruvia and loosely working for the government, this master of the Air Dragon Style and its iconic sonic waves initiates Meruvian commando into the supernatural martial arts, and leads special task forces against the enemies of the state. But her true loyalty is to the people first and foremost, and the common folks cheer when they see her battle rogue spirits and infiltrators in the streets of the Crane's Bay. Under this identity, Kali maintains a tight influence on the Dragon-Blooded commandos of the most powerful nation in the world... And takes the pulse of the public opinion.

The **TechnoSeer** (Resplendency of the Mask) is an elusive figure, so much that even many of those aware of her name dismiss it as a urban legend. For those in the know, the Seer is the faceless hacker and information-broker behind many of the most daring attacks perpetrated against Meruvian database; a living legend to hacker communities and a sprawling meme on forums and image boards, she often contacts expert hackers and nobodies of the web alike, asking them cryptic services or favors without any justification - sometimes one is asked to obtain dangerous sensitive information by any means necessary, sometimes one is simply asked to stand outside of a particular shop on a given day while wearing a green scarf. Those

who receive these requests comply without questions, for to be in the TechnoSeer's good books is an invaluable asset for one's reputation - and those who perform well always receive [i]something[/i] in exchange, though they never know why in advance.

The **Violent Pursuer of the Wicked** is an ambiguous figure in the popular imagery of An-Teng; the vigilante maintains the order of the country by delivering swift and merciless punishment on those who overstep the bounds of the law and commit the Unforgivable Sins of Zhenjiao; but despite the elaborately pious set-up of her murders and the mask featuring the Silver Dowager which she wears at all time, she is nonetheless a vigilante and a criminal, and the police has standing orders to bring her down at once. Few delude themselves in thinking that this will happen; it is an open secret that the Pursuer is an Exalt, generally rumored to be a Solar (of the Night Caste, for those who know enough to use such labels). While this identity was originally a tool for Kali to publically eliminate dangerous targets, she has grown strangely fond the country and its belief system, and sometimes go on vigilante hunts there as a form of vacation.

### **The Arcane Mask**

"There is no Arcane Mask," joke the Infernals in their towers of glass and those Sidereals who watch Kali work from afar. It's a secret organization, yes, but it's not secret to *them*, which makes it accountable and not something to be feared. It is a group designed for deep cover, manipulation of governments, information gathering, and so on... Traditional fare, though one would be hard-pressed to say what, exactly, they are doing with their time. Most do not think about it; the rest are handed polite, informative reports. The Arcane Mask does good work, but ultimately is a small, inconsequential faction; three or four Sidereals (no one's really sure) at any time belong to it, which is already severely taxing the Fivescore Fellowship, and they will not be allowed more.

Not that many would want to. The Mask demands specific training; an initiate must spent an entire year Walking Outside Fate, a phase few are willing to endure. Even among those who accept this training, they remain connected to the mask only peripherally - its inner circle, the handful of Sidereals who are truly considered (and recorded as) part of it, have all created a family under a Resplendent Destiny, then voluntarily shattered it and endured the pain of having their loved ones forgotten. These few insiders are hardened to the needs of their cause, and gain access to the formidable resources commanded by the Mask - originally gathered by Madame Kali's restless efforts, then bolstered by the works of its members. Now it commands a network of spies and unwitting pawns - and also, more notably, a wealth of astrological lore deliberately kept out of the hand of anyone else, including the rest of the Sidereal host, to the point that the work of any other Vizier pointing in that direction brings immediate sabotage - for no one must know the true goal of the Mask.

The Mask is built around one simple, but incredibly dangerous idea: some Sidereals are tired of serving the Infernals, and would prefer to be free. In the current state of the world, of course,

this is impossible; so the world has to change. The Masks have studied long and deep the implications of the astrological natures of all Exalted, and have come to a number of conclusions. First and foremost is that, as creatures outside of Fate, the Infernals naturally see through most of the Sidereals' illusions and trickeries, including their ever-so-useful Resplendent Destinies and the Charms of the Mask. Regardless of the benefits the Sidereals may gain facing them, any simple rebellion or splitting off of the Allthing's service would be doomed to failure due to this very fact. So this fact, too, has to change. There lies the true goal of the Mask.

The insiders of the subfaction - those known to each other as the Masks - have been trained harshly to learn to live without a personal identity, without friends or family. They have meditated greatly upon the nature of the mask, and the genius crafter known as Reed in the Wind has begun to design an astrological device of considerable power - a bomb, so to speak, that will break the stars. He is currently hiding in the ruins of the divine city of Yu-Shan, where his self-sustaining crafting Charms are building an elaborate underground fortress. As for Madame Kali herself, she is grooming a Chosen of Secrets to perform a crucial part of the plan. Beyond all the preparatory work and minutia and the thousand things that could go wrong, the core idea is simple: gather the entire Allthing at an extraordinary meeting. Have a Chosen of Secrets perform the Greater Sign of Jupiter, bringing all living Infernals inside Fate. Use the Charms of the Mask and detonate the device, breaking the prison of Jupiter and retroactively erasing the Sidereals from Creation's history - wiping out the memories all mortals and Exalted, Infernals included, so that no one remembers their existence.

In the chaos that will follow for the Sidereal host, the leaders and guides will be the ones who have trained for this moment all their life - and they will forge the Fivescore Fellowship into a powerful secret host, free of all outside authority. The Infernals will be missing one of their most crucial support and *they will not even know it*, leaving a period of confusion and uncertainty where the Mask's control over spy networks and Dragon-Blooded across Creation will allow them to break the Allthing's hold on the world with the Infernals none the wiser; then they will be the true shadow puppeteers of the world.

*If it all goes flawlessly, it is the perfect plan.*

### **Personae of the Mask:**

Aside from Madame Kali and Reed in the Wind, the numbers of the Mask are left deliberately vague; they may count anywhere from four to a dozen members, depending on the scope the Storyteller wishes to give to the conspiracy - and aside from Kali herself, they probably don't even know how many they actually are. Other faces of the organization include:

Anaximandra Sanders, known as the **Mistress of the Web**, a Chosen of Serenity who has chosen to wear the blindfold of Harmonic Completion permanently. The aging Sidereal does not have the ambitious arrogance of Madame Kali, but she has grown weary of the Infernals' rules

and fears the excesses of the Solars. In a world without a better compromise, she believes secrecy is the path of the wise. While her mastery of astrology and her prophetic readings are an incredible tool for the Mask, more important is her mastery of the Scripture of the Dancer which has allowed her to find loyalties and trusted assistants in the most unlikely of places - including most of the spirit courts. She is currently building a relationship with a young Lunar Exalt, hoping to obtain his trust and reinforce it in such a way that even in the aftermath of the Mask's climactic action, she will find in him a friend and student - the assistance of one of the other Exalted hosts would be invaluable in the time of secret chaos.

The **Crimson Hood** is in it for himself, and because even the tremendous effects of Kali's plans would not change anything for him. Rumored to have been horribly scarred in a fight during his early days, the Hood constantly wears a mask of red-tinted starmetal under a crimson hood. The Chosen of Battles is an unseen spy and assassin, and no one knows his true name or face thanks to his constant use of stealth technologies and Charms - nowadays he has taken to wear state-of-the-art Tengese stealth armor. No one but him knows *why* he does this, and his fellow Masks sometimes wonder if he is truly on their side - or even a Sidereal Exalt at all. Only Madame Kali seems to put unfailing (and oddly out-of-character) trust into him, so the others go along with him. When the day of reckoning comes, his will be the most dangerous task - pruning the Infernal tree of all those who might have escaped the retroactive rewriting of Creation's history.

**Madame Kali's pupil** might be one of several Sidereals she has built ties with and groomed in the past - it might be Hajime Ryogi, whom she initiated into the Celestial Martial Arts and trusted with information much too important for his age; it might be Sasha Takaminov, whom she forced to perform the Greater Sign of Jupiter three times in her young life - more times than most elders use it in their life. Perhaps both of them are decoys for another hidden pupil; either way, there is one Sidereal that does not yet belong to the insider circle of the Mask and whom Madame Kali is intending to use for her final masterstroke. Unless there are several, with different objectives... Perhaps she intends to teach the Prismatic Arrangement of Creation to Hajime, hoping to exploit his youth to mold him more perfectly than older Sidereals could be to the mastery of the Perfected Lotus, while she retains Sasha to perfect the mastery of greater astrology so that it can avoid the defenses of the Infernals and harmonize with the plan's final movement. There are many "perhaps," and few certainties, where the Arcane Mask is in play.

## **Background Matters**

Madame Kali is one of the foremost martial artists in Creation, and as such her tutorship is highly sought after - and found with surprising regularity. Being a student of the Sidereal elder always carry some price - if she does not ask for services now, then she is most likely using the student as pawn in her long-term game; this is not unusual for Sidereals and, most importantly, not necessarily a deterrent - being a "pawn" is not necessarily detrimental to one's status and carrier prospects, and not always even dangerous. Those who know her may access the broad array of her styles; those Dragon-Bloods who know her as Yellow Raven may be taught the

Immaculate Styles (and for a few rare chosen, other Celestial styles). She has secretly taken at least one Solar pupil under the guise of the Violent Pursuer of the Wicked, for reasons unknown, and has taught at least two Alchemicals one style, of which at least one was rogue - in a risky attempt at studying the interactions between the external nature of the Alchemical Exaltation and the internal nature of Celestial enlightenment.

Styles Kali may teach include, but are not limited to: the five Immaculate Styles, Violet Bier of Sorrows, Shadow Throne, Solar Hero, Infernal Monster (up to the Form) Snake, Tiger, Crane, Mantis, Crystal Chameleon. They do *not* include Dark Messiah, which she is eager to learn. Finally, she has mastered Prismatic Arrangement of Creation, and is choosing which pupil to teach it to very carefully.

To her full potential, Madame Kali is a five-dot mentor, but she may be taken at a lower level to represent the fact that she is busy and has other irons in the fire.

The Arcane Mask provides a valid justification for a number of social Backgrounds - Contacts, Allies, Spies, Backing may be obtained through its influence. However, it also provides specific benefits available only to the member of its insider circle, or "test subjects" of the members. These are as follow:

### **Glitch Spiders - Familiar 5**

To the Sidereal host, it is known that the Mistress of the Web took her name from her web of intrigues and contacts. This is inaccurate. The Chosen of Serenity has long been fascinated by the Pattern Spider, their nature and function - and while she has done her best over the decades to connect with them, understand them and manipulate them, she has often met indifference or rebuttal. So she decided to go another way: she secretly abducted Pattern Spiders to reverse-engineer them. The results were used to design a fantastic new creation - "parasite" Pattern Spiders which emulated some of the functionalities of the original, but were loyal to their individual creator or companion and could be used to divert some of the attention of Fate. These rare few creations are invaluable to the members of the Arcane Mask, though there is rarely more than one in activity at any given moment for fear of them being discovered.

Relevant statistics of the Glitch Spiders include Strength 3, Dexterity 7, Intelligence 5, Martial Arts 3 (Poisoned Bite +2), all Crafts 4, Craft (Fate) 6, Performance 4. They possess a mote pool of 50 and the following Charms:

Materialize - by default, the Glitch Spider follows its master invisible and dematerialized.

Poisoned Bite - a successful Martial Arts attack injects the target with a Poison Fate-keyworded effect that raises their target number by one and does not stack with any other target number-affecting effect; this lasts one scene, or one full day if the spider spends 10m, 1wp.

Hurry Home: the Glitch Spider may skitter along a rerouted thread of destiny back to the secret base of Yu Shan.

Perhaps the most useful asset of the Glitch Spider for their owner, however, is their ability to

offload Paradox. Acting as glitches in the matrix of Fate, these Familiars may take on and store some of the deleterious effects of the actual Pattern Spiders's bite. Whenever their master suffers more than one point of Paradox from any given source, the Glitch Spider may take one of these points upon itself. Of course, this respite lasts only for a time; at some point the Glitch Spider accumulates too much Paradox and must offload it. Upon reaching 10 Paradox (and no sooner), the Glitch Spider may perform one of the following actions at its master's choice:

- Discharge it into the environment. This releases the venom of the Pattern Spider while reaching into the Loom of Fate to erase and rewrite informations pertaining to the Sidereal's own misdeeds so that any record of this Paradox disappears; the surrounding area suffers from deleterious after-effects which are left to the discretion of the Storyteller, but should be construed as generally negative, often destructive, and when taken together more damaging than the actual Paradox effect would have been for the Sidereal.
- Reroute it back into the Sidereal. At this point, the Exalt suffers the normal effects of having accumulated ten points of Paradox. However, as a beneficial side-effects of this, his records show up as "clean" to the Pattern Spiders, and his personal Paradox track is brought back to zero.
- Reroute it back into *someone else*. In a disturbing disregard for the integrity of Fate, the Sidereal orders the Familiar to transfer his Paradox to someone else and to let them suffer the consequences. This is an undodgeable, unblockable Shaping effect which may not target beings outside Fate. The creature suffers the effects of having acquired ten points of Paradox. The mishandling of the threads of fate is blatant, however, and as an aftershock the Sidereal rolls ten dice (0s do not count as successes) and accumulates that many dice of Paradox.

#### **Fated Kata Bracers - Artifact 4**

The Perfected Kata Bracer is an invaluable tool of the celestial martial artist, but sometimes one needs a more... Specific instrument. These weapons have been designed by Madame Kali herself, and constructed by Reed; they are theoretically illegal to use, as they require snatching and forging threads of fate into weapons, but the Sidereal host has no central authority or administration that would care enough to notice or punish possession of these tools. At their core, these Artifacts are a "fated" weapon (Glories of the Most High - Maidens, p. 37) While they are superficially similar to starmetal Perfected Kata Bracers in appearance, their mechanical benefits are entirely different.

The Bracers activate as an Obvious effect when their owner assumes a supernatural Martial Arts Form as they rotate rapidly and their scriptures illuminate. From this moment, all unarmed attacks are considered to be done with Fated weapons, and enjoy the same benefits, including the starmetal bonus (this does not stack with any other magical material bonus the wearer's unarmed attacks may enjoy). Furthermore, any form weapons of this particular style wielded by the user acquire the starmetal and fated weapon bonus. As a final benefit, the wearer is considered to have an effective +3 specialty in all form weapons of the Charm he assumed, which does not stack with other specialties.



Fated Kata Bracers cost six motes to attune.

Design note: this is fairly powerful, but here's the thing compared to actual PKBs - it does not stack. The idea here is that you can grab and use any weapon that fits in your current style as if you were a master of it, which plays into the whole concept of Sidereals being master martial artists - by giving them broad applicability rather than a higher (cap-breaking and mote-discounting) ceiling.

### **Shards of the Forbidden Planets - Artifact N/A**

These Artifacts are rated N/A for two reasons: they may not be crafted, only broken off the surface of one of Creation's planets or gathered from their gaseous envelope; and their effects are entirely Storyteller fiat. These shards are strangely reflective, allowing someone who holds them to catch a glimpse of a strange deity sealed away at the beginning of time. Each Shard comes from a specific planet and is attuned to a specific Maiden of Destiny. By holding it and performing a successful prayer, an owner may send some Essence to that Destiny through a tiny and fragile conduit. This Essence, escaping the normal restrictions of their prison, may allow the Maidens to answer the holder in some way - reaching out from their cell as a whisper on the wind, a fateful moment, an ephemeral blessing.

Sometimes the Maidens may not answer - perhaps the offering is too weak, perhaps the bars of their cage too strong at the moment, or perhaps they do not feel like the holder needs or deserves their aid, and they wait for a more appropriate use of their small strength. Perhaps, however, are they simply gathering the precious Essence to be able to perform a greater miracle - perhaps to scrutinize the threads of Fate from afar or perform a prophecy, or perhaps to appear to their worshipper in full ephemeral glory. Perhaps, by sending enough power to them, it would be possible to give them the strength to break free - in a way, the plan of the Arcane Mask relies on this principle, amplified to the upteenth level.