

Behind the Veil

The Book of Fate Witches

Introduction

This book is dedicated to the Sorte Strega of Vodacce, which is a little ironic given that they are banned from learning to read. However, if you believe that is true for even noblewoman in a country like Vodacce, you are probably a little too naïve to be playing the great game. Sorte and the women who wield it are among the most mysterious things in Théah. They are also the most difficult to bring into a campaign given the laws that bind Strega to their families and home. This book seeks to unmask a few of the secrets, as well as provide the GM with a few hints and tips to make the most of Fate Witches in their games.

We begin the book with a look at the Tesatore, the ruling council of the Fate Witches. Next we look at Sorte itself, adapting the rules for existing powers and adding a few new ones. Then we look at the position of Fate Witches, and those who try to leave the oppressive system. This article is an updated version of the article featured in Crow's Nest issue five. The GM's section that follows reveals some of the origins of Sorte and adds suggestions and tips for using Fate Witches in a campaign. Finally we end the book with a look at the unravelled, the terrible fate that lies in wait for those who twist the strands too hard.

A Cautionary Tale

Fiora sat alone at the edge of the dance floor. She hadn't chosen to be alone, but even here in Montaigne everyone knew what a Vodacce girl wearing black signified. From behind her dark veil, Fiora could feel their fear of her, of what she could do, or rather of what they thought she could do. In truth Fiora's power with Sorte magic was really quite small.

However, even with her ability she could still see the delicate lattice of fate strands joining the assembly together. It was an intricate and beautiful web of

colours, it bound everyone to each other in a complicated knot of joins and cross links. No one but a Fate Witch, a Sorte Strega, could see this marvel. More advanced practitioners of the art could twist and adapt it, which is why they were held in such fear and occasional contempt. However, today the gathered nobles had decided to

turn their attention elsewhere. They felt safe to ignore the quiet girl in black, who sat like a statue with her hands together neatly in her lap. For her part Fiora was content to observe the twists and turns of the great weave, and remain alone in the shadows of the dance floor like a watching ghost.

Out ahead of her, under the glittering chandeliers, whirled the assembled nobility of Montaigne and their guests. Fiora watched and smiled at the glamour in front of her, content to be outside it all. A part of her longed to get up and join the dancing, to twirl about in a beautiful dress laughing and



smiling, but it wasn't her place to do so. Anyway, she hadn't got the faintest clue how to dance, and so would probably only embarrass herself. No, better to sit here and listen to the music. It was wonderful to listen to a full orchestra play such lively music. She wasn't usually able to do so, as in Vodacce such an orchestra played only more sombre and fitting entertainments for the noble ladies. Of course when Fiora and her other well born feminine relations retired for the evening, things got a lot more interesting. The gentlemen brought their whores and courtesans into their halls and the music became a lot livelier. Fiora's own family, the Bernoulli, were a little more sedate in their tastes than the other families, such as the Falisci, but they were still Vodacce. As a girl she had got as close as she dared to the great parties and gazed in awe at the swirl of colour below. To any young woman, especially one born to a life where black was the only seemly colour, the courtesans were magnetic. These women dressed not merely provocatively, but sometimes downright scandalously. They flaunted themselves, with bright jewels and vivid clothing that covered little and promised much more. They swept around the gatherings, the queens of all they surveyed and held every man in the room in their thrall.

However, like most Strega, Fiora eventually grew tired of trying to watch. To be caught was to get a beating from her father, but that wasn't the only reason she stopped sneaking nearer to the lights and the music. There comes a time when watching becomes painful, as it reminds you that you can never have the life that is laid out before you. She wasn't really sure she would want that life anyway. After all, as she aged a courtesan lost her power, whereas Fiora's magic could only become stronger. The glamour of the Vodacce party was only sweet because it was denied. Certainly, she would have loved to spend just one night among the lights and the music, but it just wasn't going to happen. Everyone had their place; Theus had seen to that. She was lucky after all, how many poor folk looked to the towers of the great islands and wished they could live among such riches.

As usual she had been dumped here while her father went about his business. Erbaldo was a high ranking member of the Bernoulli family, and when invited to such events he could hardly arrive unaccompanied. To bring his favourite

courtesan, a rather shrewish but clever woman called Illyria, would be inappropriate as well as rather expensive. Courtesans charged for their services, and it was a long way from Vodacce to Montaigne. The other option that any non-Vodacce might have considered of course, was to bring Fiora's mother, Erbaldo's wife. This apparently obvious solution was utterly ridiculous to anyone who understood the Vodacce way of life. Theresa Bernoulli was herself a powerful Sorte Witch, and although she had provided Erbaldo with three sons and two daughters, Erbaldo was still utterly terrified of her. This was not unusual, most noble marriages were arranged, and Fiora's parents were no different. With a mastery of Sorte at her command, Erbaldo wanted as little to do with his wife as possible. She lived out on the mainland with Luisa, Fiora's elder sister, and spent her time sewing and (if Erbaldo was to be believed) plotting the demise and downfall of her husband. So this left only Fiora as an appropriate companion to these events, a quirk of fate that she thanked Theus for almost every day of her life.

She was well aware that she was not able to really join in these functions as any other woman might do, such things were not seemly. She had tried to join in conversations in her first few outings, but found the groups of ladies beat a hasty retreat as soon as she approached. On her second outing she made 'hunting a conversation' a sport for a while, attempting to sneak up on wild packs of noblewoman across the open plains of the ballroom. However, when she did get close enough to ensnare her prey she realised she had nothing to say. She knew nothing about the court, or the latest fashions, and the women in her presence were always far too tongue tied by her sudden appearance to enlighten her. She considered the whole affair to be another lesson from Theus about her place in life and accepted the lesson with humility.

Even though she was always stuck on the edge of the grand parties, she still looked forward to her father's business trips. It was a rare occasion to leave the shuttered apartments in the great towers of the family island of Amozare and see something of the world. Even better if the journey was a long one, and she could eat dinner in a roadside inn or sit briefly in a bar and see the amazing collection of people who frequented it. Sadly, her father usually insisted it wasn't appropriate that she should be in such a common



place and had her meals brought up to her room. However, sometimes things were rushed, or he simply forgot, or no maidservant could be found for her and she was able to 'slum it' with the gentlemen. As she was shut away in the ladies' quarters most of the time, it was refreshing to be the only woman in the company of men for a while, even if they heavily moderated their behaviour in her presence.

What she most looked forward to on such outings from Vodacce was the coach ride home. The journeys to these functions were always full of plotting and planning. However, the occasions always exhausted her father and on the way home he would usually fall asleep. This allowed Fiora to slide her arm around his and snuggle herself onto his shoulder. Her father was a busy and undemonstrative man who was frightened a little by even his youngest daughter's power. When asleep his guard was down, and Fiora could get close to him for a while at least.

Fiora looked up and saw Gianni enter the hall. He wasn't a large man like his brother, but like most Vodacce men he strode about as if he could easily defeat any man in the room. Gianni was one of Fiora's bodyguards. He and his brother Umberto were members of the Corattzi family, who had been protecting the noble daughters of the Bernoulli line for centuries. Both men were sworn to lay down their lives to protect Fiora. However, they didn't work for her; their loyalty truly belonged to Fiora's father. So more often than not they felt like guard dogs rather than bodyguards.

Gianni made his way over to the buffet table and chose for himself a small slab of chicken to gnaw on. He looked across to Fiora and met her gaze. Then he indicated the exit on the other side of the room with a dismissive nod of his head. How dare he, the man was a servant of the family, a servant of Fiora's. More than that, she was a Sorte Strega, and that alone demanded respect. However, there was little she could do, Gianni was passing orders from her father and so she could not disobey. She stood and walked over to him, as he stood there taking his pick of the food on offer. She paused as she passed him and glared at him. He started to smile, knowing that there was little she could do, but as he contemptuously met her gaze his smile faded. The look in her eyes was of barely concealed rage and with that look Gianni

was reminded of her power. He dropped his gaze by way of apology, like a wolf put in its place by the pack leader. Fiora had made her point, but she still slapped him across the face to make sure he remembered. Then she left the room, letting Gianni deal with the few intrigued glances her violence had attracted. However, her actions failed to draw much attention, as Gianni was certainly not the only man who would get a slap in the face from a woman by the end of the evening. Fiora left the ballroom, walking into the corridors beyond. Her moment with Gianni had given her a good excuse to leave. No one would be suspicious of a Fate Witch who had argued with one of her bodyguards and decided to retire. It was obvious she wasn't enjoying the party, and the other guests would be glad to see her gone. No one would give Fiora a second thought this evening, which was perfect for weaving the task her father had brought her here to do.

The TESSATORE

My Lord Villanova,
In my search for the two women who have challenged your authority, I thought it important to research what I could of the Tessatore, the ruling council of the Fate Witches. It is ridiculous to assume that two mere women could have played the great game with such expertise without help from an outside source. So I reasoned that only a force as potent as the Tessatore could help such vipers against the might of Vodacce's leading Prince.

As you know, the Fate Witches are ruled by a council of three women, the most powerful Sorte Strega in the land. How these women are chosen is unclear, but it seems it is assumed their position is based on their ability with the strands rather than any political manipulation on their part. They each serve until they die, and are replaced by whatever candidate proves herself worthy. This being women's politics, the process is of course a simple one.

My studies have convinced me that there is no great organisation to the Strega. They simply take what orders are given from the three crones who rule. These orders are few, as most of the time the Witches do as they please. It seems the Tessatore exist purely to mediate disputes between the Strega. This makes sense, as who other than the most power-

ful weaver would get between two opposing harpies? There are rumours that lesser Tessatore exist, organising the Strega on a local level. However, while these women might bear the title, they have little of the power. None of these Witches function as powers in the society on a day-to-day basis, and so it is most likely they are just mouthpieces for the three true Tessatore.

For the sake of record I should make note of the three Tessatore. The first you know well, your great Aunt Demora Villanova. She resides on the isle of Dionna and is an ancient hag, also known as a great breeder of spiders. Her tower is full of the poisonous creatures and best avoided unless invited. The second Tessatore is Bianca Falisci, a devout Vaticine. She resides on the mainland having fallen out with the decadent ways of her family. The last of the mistresses of the strands is Lucita Mondavi, the longest serving of the Witches but still the youngest looking of them all. She lives in seclusion on Mondavi Island and rarely receives guests.

All three of these women are immensely powerful Strega. It surprised me that Beatrice Caligari never ascended their ranks, however I expect even the Tessatore were fearful of her power.

So there is an end to it my lord. I have called in many favours and sought the council of those ladies who share my bedchamber. This is all there is to the Witches, and ladies of such power as the Tessatore had little to do with your wife or the devious whore she had been working with. So having discharged my duty I humbly request you allow my son to return to his family and be assured you have my loyalty and devoted service should you choose to spare my life.

*Yours,
Anatoli Bernoulli*

That is what the men of Vodacce believe; that the Tessatore are led by three powerful women, who keep to themselves and stay out of men's politics. Under those women is a network of lesser Tessatore who see to local disputes, but only under the direct control of the three women who rule. The detail in the Vodacce sourcebook (p 52) offers the male perspective on the Strega community; the truth lies deeper underneath. The men assume that the women of Vodacce organise themselves in a similar way to themselves, with councils and hierarchies. They are very wrong. It is arrogant and foolish of the men to assume that the ladies of Vodacce are any less devious than they are, or to assume that they will organise their affairs in the same way as their menfolk. The



Tessatore is in fact a powerful network of sisterhood, and watches over many of the secrets of Vodacce.

However, the best lies are hidden amongst the truth. So while it is true that three powerful Strega rule the Fate Witches, and that three women always sit in judgement of those who break the law, the whole truth is a little different.

The Tessatore really refers to whoever is placed in judgement over a Fate Witch. It may seem that there is this powerful watchdog keening an eye on the

Strega, but that is far from the truth. Many Fate Witches assume the duties of the Tessatore for short periods, but only the Godmothers hold the rank on a permanent basis. The illusion of an organisation watching the witches is simply there to make the men feel more comfortable. If they realised that just by being part of the Fate Witch community, every Strega was effectively part of the Tessatore, they wouldn't sleep at night.

Much like jury duty, any Fate Witch might be called upon to sit in judgement as a Tessatore. These councils are put to-

gether specifically to hear a particular case, and disbanded soon after. Fate Witches themselves group and organise themselves in circles of sistership that ensure information passes from one circle to another and around the community. In such a way all the secrets a Fate Witch learns pass through the web of sisterhood and ultimately to the ears of the Godmothers. While this holistic system generally works, and binds together the Strega community, there is sometimes a need for someone to enforce the judgements of the Tessatore. That job falls to the 'Widows'.

The Godmothers

The most recognisable (and feared) members of the Tessatore are generally referred to as 'The Godmothers'. These three women are usually the most powerful and experienced Strega of the time, and they are privy to many dark and terrible secrets. The position is held for life, but in very rare cases a Godmother has retired. Electing a new member is a quiet affair, and usually the new candidate has distinguished themselves long beforehand. The choice of the replacement is completely in the hands of the two remaining godmothers, and few have the temerity to question their judgement.

There are only two stipulations for the selection of a new Godmother. The first is that she is unmarried, although she need not be a widow. A Godmother has a duty only to herself and the Fate Witches, never a man. It is not unknown for a woman to leave a convent to join the council. The second stipulation is that the three Godmothers must come from different families. This is the one and only concession the Tessatore has ever made to the Gentlemen of Vodacce, and only because it made sense. To have two or even three members of the same family ruling the Tessatore would potentially grant that family immense power. It is not unknown for a woman to turn down an offer to join the Godmothers. Beatrice Caligari and even 'Mad Queen' Marietta are rumoured to have done just that. They were busy with their own research and had long surpassed any secrets the old dames could teach them. However, in general the immense power and secrets offered to a prospective Godmother is something few Vodacce women would turn down.

The remit of the Godmothers is quite simple; they are the final authority on the actions of any and every Fate Witch.

Few have the power to challenge their rulings. No man would have the temerity to even get involved in their affairs. The worlds of men and women are very separate in Vodacce and few cross the divide without consequences. The Godmothers can make their will law for the entire Strega community. They can overturn judgements, order punishments and generally do as they please. Only the other Godmothers can overrule the actions of one of their own. Any disagreements between them are voted on (with no right to abstain) and the disagreement is considered settled. However, such votes are rare, as are the Godmothers interference in everyday life. Generally things tick over nicely, the bonds of sistership keep the community together. Occasionally a Godmother will take an interest in a particular Tessatore council. Every Tessatore that is called to meet must have the sanction of one of the Godmothers. However, it is rare for the Godmother to do more than agree that the council is needed. Only rarely does the Godmother take an interest, and even then she usually watches from the sidelines. After all, she can overrule the judgement if she feels the case has been misheard. Sometimes a Strega commits such a terrible crime or is so highly placed that only the Godmothers themselves are qualified to sit in judgement. The three Godmothers offer judgement just like any other Tessatore council, and only nine times in the history of Vodacce have such cases occurred. 'Mad Queen' Marietta was one of those times, tried in absentia when her castle vanished, but mostly to ascertain the damage she had done. Usually such important cases have dire consequences and each time at least one person has paid a terrible price. Few people ask for the judgement of the Godmothers lightly. The three Godmothers currently are:

Demora Villanova

This wizened spider breeder is the newest member of the council. She was content to while away her days with her pets, and is one of the most experienced and renown spider breeders in Vodacce. She proved a logical choice when the former Godmother died and Beatrice Caligari refused the post. Demora didn't really want the job, but was not one to shirk her duty. She resides in a twisted tower in one of the quieter parts of Dionna, all the better to keep an eye on her Grandson Giovanni. Her tower is infested with all manner of spiders that roam free in a fantastic interior garden. Demora



is a very old lady, slow moving and twisted with age. However her eyes betray the sharp Villanova nerve and wit that few decide to challenge.

Bianca Falisci

Bianca has served the council for many years, shortly after the early death of her husband. Bianca is a devout Vaticine and is known for her piety and dedicated faith. She is usually seen wearing the habit of a nun, and has taken many similar vows to a full sister. It is well known that she disapproved of the hedonistic ways of the Falisci family. These days she resides in an Abbey on the mainland to be far from their debauched ways. It is probably coincidence, but the Abbey has a rather disproportionate amount of 'ex-Strega' in residence. Bianca is an attractive and warm women just on the cusp of her beauty fading. She has a warmth that draws many people to her and is regarded as a mother figure by most people who get to know her.

Lucita Mondavi

Even though she appears to be the youngest Godmother, Lucita is in fact the oldest and longest serving member of the council. She was one of the youngest Strega to be offered membership in the council and she readily accepted, if only to avoid marriage to an old merchant. While she has never married, it is rumoured she has taken many lovers, not a few of which have ended up floating down the canals come the morning. Lucita takes what she wants from men, and it is a fool who thinks he can do the same to her. Even though she has served the council for so long, Lucita remains a stunning and darkly attractive woman. Her command of the black strands is renowned and borders on obsession. She constantly seeks ways to extend her life and beauty and is rumoured to have made many connections to the Caligari and Vincenzo's secrets. Lucita maintains a large and elegant villa on Mondavi island, but rarely receives visitors.

The Lash

As they are considered beyond their families, the Godmothers have their own guardian family. These men and women are called 'The Lash' and rather than being a family themselves, they are picked from the elite of the usual guardian

families. It is a great honour to be offered membership in The Lash, as only the best of the Strega guardians are chosen. Those who distinguish themselves as especially loyal or skilled guardians often receive such an offer. Sometimes it may be for a single act that gets the warrior noticed, but more than a few are rewarded for quiet and honourable but undistinguished service. The Godmothers have the power to know true potential when they see it in the strands. However, to join the Lash is to give up everything you have ever known. The new member pledges their life and service to the Godmothers, casting aside all previous bonds of family and loyalty. Few people refuse the honour for fear of insulting the ladies in question. The Lash serves all the Godmothers equally, allowing no one Godmother to control her own small army. The organisation supports around sixty to eighty men and women, a high proportion of which are fully unbound. While none of the Godmother's require that many bodyguards to see to their protection, The Lash is often used to support 'The Widows' and provide security for other functions of the Tessatore. Their power to resist the wiles of Sorte makes them the perfect people to both guard and punish the Witches.

The swordsmen and women of the Lash live very well, residing in barracks that many nobles would envy. Each member is also gifted with a twisted blade from one of the Godmothers that (rumour says) will turn to dust if the lady should die. Finally, to show the permanent nature of their new association, the new member is marked by one of the Godmothers. This mark is a form of Sorte blessing that creates a spider web design covering the left hand. As the Lash serves the tattoo grows, creeping up the arm, and the left side of their face, until the whole left side of the swordsman's body is covered. So the amount of tattooing on a Lash member is a visible mark of his or her experience and power. The tattoos are a warning, for not only are The Lash expert swordsmen (that even a Lord's Hand would be nervous of) but they are also blessed by the most powerful Strega in Vodacce.

The Tessatore

Many believe that below the Godmothers lies a secret order and power structure to the Fate Witch community. While this is the case, it is not the organisation known as the Tessatore as so many believe. What is detailed in the Vodacce



sourcebook is simply the world as the men see it. The fact that they have trouble identifying individual members of the Tessatore just convinces them the ladies are very good at keeping secrets hidden. To the Gentlemen, it is inconceivable that those given power would just give it away, but that is exactly what happens.

Tessatore councils are formed only where there is need. They are formed by the mutual assent of the older Strega in the area. There is no real system of voting, the ladies with the power to choose simply take tea together and the right names get picked. Who the 'ladies with the power' actually are is just as informal. Only those who have reached at least Adept but more usually Master level in their sorcery can even be considered. If you are deemed important enough, those who currently sit in power offer you an invite to such a gathering. Getting one invite doesn't mean you will get a second, so you had best behave until you are the one offering the invitations. For all their lack of formal titles, the women hold onto power just as rigorously as the men. However they prefer a system where everyone seems united and equal, even if some voices carry more weight than others.

Tessatore councils are created to deal with particular problems. So the problem itself determines much of the choice of council member. The council is made up of three Strega, who can be of any mastery level. The three are chosen for their relationship to the accused. One is their friend, one their enemy and one does not know them. In such a way there is balance on the council. When the council is chosen the offer is sent to any Strega outside the 'inner circle' who are chosen. A Witch is allowed to refuse to sit on a council, but it will not bode well for her future if she does so. Service to the community is the only way to rise in the circles of the Strega. However, sometimes a Strega may have to refuse, as the 'inner circle' does not always know everything. For instance, the accused may secretly be your friend. In which case there is no honour lost for being honest to your sisters.

When the council is called and those called have accepted their place the Tessatore hear the case. From the moment they sit together they are the only power in the case. Even the oldest Atropos will bow to their judgement. The elders have picked the right people for the job, so arguing with

them is to suggest the elders don't know what they are doing. Before the case itself is heard, word is sent to one of the Godmothers for permission to form the council. This is usually a formality, but occasionally the Godmother will decide to take a hand. However, even a Godmother will rarely interfere with a Tessatore council.

The hearing itself is a clandestine affair as well. The Witches do not sit down in a big room with pomp and ceremony. The defendant's accuser goes to meet the Tessatore and offer evidence and plead their case in front of the defendant. The defendant is then allowed to refute the claim or provide evidence of her innocence. After that the Tessatore officially retire for deliberation, although that takes three days. During this time, anyone can offer evidence to the council in support of either party. They do not offer this evidence in front of either the accuser or the defendant, so that their evidence is offered without influence. Only if the evidence is offered by a Strega is it presented to the Tessatore in person. If someone outside the community has something to offer, their evidence is brought to the attention of the council by a Strega. That person is then ordered to 'appear before the Tessatore' where they face three veiled women who hear their evidence. In this way the myth of the ruling council persists outside the community. When someone is called to appear, it is sent as a polite request, but anyone with any sense knows that they had best not refuse.

When the case has been heard the council retire to make a decision. A unanimous vote is the preferred option, but two votes to one is acceptable. When they have voted the Tessatore inform one of the Godmothers of their decision and what the vote was. The Godmother decides on the sentence and dispatches a group of Widows (with some members of the Lash if need be) to carry out the sentence. It is important the Godmother knows how the voting went, as the less unanimous the Tessatore are, the more lenient she will be. After all, if they couldn't agree, the evidence against the accused can't have been absolutely convincing.

When the council has made its decision it is final, and with that word they are disbanded. The three stand down together after their proclamation has been made to the community in general. The Strega who serve on the council earn no special



merit or title for their service. However, how well they carried out their duties and the wisdom of their judgement is noted by the older Strega. If they are pleased they may find other tasks for the most adept and dedicated of those who sit in judgement.

Compared to the population at large, there are few Fate Witches on the islands, so there are comparatively few crimes. However, even then, with there also being less qualified women to judge such crimes, most Strega find themselves serving as Tessatore sooner or later. The Godmothers try to see that those who serve on a council don't do so again for a while. However, when a young Witch has chosen the wrong friends and enemies, she can often find herself sitting in judgement.

The Hidden Sisterhood

In Vodacce, it is important to choose your friends very carefully. The women have a tradition to ensure trust between themselves that has lasted for centuries. Since the oldest days of their oppression, the women of Vodacce have shared their secrets among those they trusted. To ensure they can truly trust those they confide in, they offer the bond of 'Nascosto Sorella' or 'Hidden/Secret Sister'. The bond of Nascosto Sorella is a deep and serious one, it is neither offered nor accepted lightly.

If a woman decides she trusts another woman deeply enough to offer her everything about herself she might offer the bond. There is no magic involved, the woman simply looks in the eyes of her friend and says the words "Nascosto Sorella" to her. If the other woman accepts, she repeats the words herself, retaining eye contact. If she refuses the bond she simply looks away, and nothing more is spoken of the matter. There is no stigma to refusing such a bond, but it is a sad thing for the woman who has offered so much with those two words to discover the feelings are not mutual.

To be Nascosto Sorella is to be almost one with your new sister. You have no secrets between you, although like normal sisters you can argue and disagree as much as you like. The point of the bond is that you can trust your hid-

den sisters with anything, absolutely anything. Women have died to protect the trust between their Nascosto Sorella and themselves. Often, women affirm a new Nascosto Sorella bond by telling each other their deepest secret. However all women understand the bond well enough for it not to be necessary. While this may seem a system open to abuse, oddly it works well. To betray or take lightly the bond of Nascosto Sorella is one of the worst crimes a woman can commit. There are tales of legendary vengeance that has been taken out on such criminals, and not only by those they wronged, but all Vodacce woman as one. The ladies of Vodacce have little they can trust and rely on, without Nascosto Sorella many of them have nothing, and they will protect it at all costs.

The bond of Nascosto Sorella transcends all boundaries and levels of Vodacce society. It can be made between a noblewoman and a servant, between a Strega and a Courtesan. Mostly it is shared between those of the same station, but only because friendships between different social strata are harder to form. It is never, ever made with a man, for it is a woman's thing alone, one of the few things they have that men cannot be a part of. A woman who feels this sort of trust for a man can take him as a husband or lover, but not a Nascosto Sorella. Rarely, the bond has been offered to women of other nations outside Vodacce. This is rare not because Vodacce women trust the women of other nations less, but because few women outside Vodacce understand just how serious the bond is.

Over time, most women collect more than one Nascosto Sorella. The Nascosto Sorella that surround a particular woman are referred to as her 'first circle'. These women need not all be bound to each other. Sometimes, some women in the same circle won't even know the other women that make up their friends first circle. Either that or they may know of them (even be their friend) but not realise they share a bond with the same Nascosto Sorella. The bond is one between individuals, not groups; the women do not gather into small tribes. Every woman is the centre of her own first circle, but that doesn't make her the leader of some sort of group. Between the women of Vodacce the circles overlap and cross each other. In-



formation flows between trusted friends but still passes through a network that covers every woman in Vodacce. Some women have wide circles, others have only a few friends they trust that much. However everyone is connected to the wider circle of womanhood to some degree. This vast circle also ensures that sooner or later, everything makes its way into the spiders at the very centre of the web, the Godmothers. There are tales that the Godmothers are so powerful, they can detect the web of the sisterhood itself, knowing which cup strands to follow to trace the lines of sisterhood. Those who believe this is true often believe they have ways to drawing down information through the network. However, it is more likely they are simply very good at what they do and supported by a dedicated circle of their peers.

Another reason that the bond is taken so seriously is that any woman can call on it. If a woman asks one of her secret sisters to do something for her 'in the name of Nascosto Sorella' it is a favour she cannot refuse. There is no magic to this, but if the task is refused the bond is over. After all, the whole point of the bond is to offer complete trust to another person. There are no rules or guidelines about what the favour can be, and it need not be reciprocated. The bond says 'when you need me, I will be there; no matter what, and I shall ask for nothing in return'. Every woman that accepts the bond understands what she is taking on. In the same way, no woman invokes the bond lightly. Such calls for aid are usually saved for the direst need, and so are not common.

The Widows

The secret organisation known as 'The Widows' is universally feared by everyone who knows of its existence. The group is made up of powerful Strega who act as enforcers for the Godmothers. Only the Godmothers know how many widows there are, and who they are. While two or more Widows might work together quite often, there are no secret gatherings where everyone gets to meet each other. In fact, individual Widows often find themselves working with the same people, to restrict who they know and promote individual partnerships within the order.

The remit of the order is quite broad. They spend their time like any other Fate Witch, keeping their eyes and ears open and passing what they discover onto the Godmothers. When a Fate Witch needs to be punished or brought before a Tesatore, a Widow (or more than one) is sent to do what must be done. Usually one of these women is enough to get the job done, but some of the many secret Sorte rituals they know require assistance. Widows often work with 'The Lash' when physical force is needed.

Becoming a widow is by invitation only, and only the Godmothers can appoint them. Many people believe that the widows are simply the Nascosto Sorella circle of each Godmother. However while many are, it is not always the case.

To become a Widow, a Strega needs to be two things. First, she must be a master fate witch, because the job is not for amateurs. Secondly, she should also be an actual widow. To be married grants a woman respectability in Vodacce society and allows her to create her own position in society. However, having a husband can be a distraction and possibly a security risk. Given that most Strega outlive their husbands, this is not a problem. It also helps that Vodacce men have a tendency to get themselves killed in duels of honour as well. So not every widow is an old crone, and those who are familiar with poison are often a lot younger...

If a Strega satisfies the two conditions, she may be offered membership in the widows. There is no set amount, so there is potential for any woman who shows dedication, skill, loyalty and good judgement to be offered such a position. However the Godmothers don't need to surround themselves with enforcers so usually only look for a new recruit when there is a need.

If a woman is offered a position with the widows, she need not accept the role. The offer is only ever made by one of the Godmothers who the women will serve and report to directly. She had better have a good reason to refuse the offer, but the Godmothers have no time for those who don't want to be there. If she does refuse the offer the Godmother may listen to the lady's recommendations of other qualified women. However, she will never know if these recommendations are taken up. Should she question those she recom-



mends later to see if they were offered anything, they will get a less polite and sociable visit from the Widows or the Lash.

Upon becoming a Widow, a Strega embarks of a period of intense training. The first thing she is taught is the Widow's secret hand language. This language is extremely complicated as the hand gestures are subtle and change their meaning depending on what the woman is saying at the time. So to use the language you must be able to have what appears to be a normal conversation and make the subtle gestures. The hand language is called 'Segreto Mano' (secret hand) and is learnt just like any language, just without a reading and writing component. It does have one disadvantage in that to understand what the hand signs mean, both conversants must speak and understand the same language. However, there are few Fate Witches who don't have a command of spoken *Vodacce*.

Once she has learnt *Segreto Mano* the new Widow is initiated into the secret rituals and abilities of her position. The Widows jealously guard a number of ritual *sorte* powers which they train all their members in. This training is often carried out in *Segreto Mano* to ensure the new Widow practices.

If the woman accepts service in the Widows she is part of the organisation for life. There is no retiring or stepping down. As the job is one of investigation and judgement, it can be performed just as well by an older woman. However, those who become infirm in body or mind are simply given less exacting tasks to do. Sometimes a Widow becomes too feeble or mentally infirm to perform at all and there is a risk her reduced mental capacity will cause her to reveal secrets. In which case another Widow goes to visit her and administer a gentle but fatal poison. It is a sad duty, but all Widows accept they may one day receive such a visit. All accept the necessity of such poisonings and embrace anything that ensures they never betray the sisterhood. Many look forward to it being one of her beloved sisters that will end her life with love and dignity.

New Twists on Old Strands

Sorte is a strange and complicated power, often difficult for a player to use effectively and for a GM to adjudicate. So in this section we will revisit and expand some of the powers, and hopefully offer some suggestions to make more sense of them.

The Greatest Power

The power of the Black dress and veil should not be underestimated. The reputation of the *Sorte Strega* can often prove more useful than the power itself. Especially as they all look so similar the victim has no idea if he faces a master *Atropos* or an inexperienced *Clotho*. A Fate Witch who meets the eyes of a target and quietly says, "That was a lie, I recommend you don't try to lie to me again" can often inspire a confession. Few people are happy to risk the potential horrors that await should they offend a *Strega* and resolve that it is a more sensible idea to tell the truth. To inspire this fear, the Fate Witch can rely on her power, but many learn the simpler trick of 'Barnum statements'. These statements (known to most fairground fortune tellers) are insights that are true for just about everyone. However, as few people realise this, they often hit their mark very well. They don't work all the time, but used cleverly and sparingly, it is easy to convince your target you have far more insight than you do. Here are a few examples:

"I know what you did last week" – He must have done something he is ashamed of in a week

"Your fear is transparent to me." – Of course he's nervous; a Fate Witch is interrogating him

"That was not the whole truth; do not lie to me again." – His first offering is not going to be the whole truth, or you'd not be trying to interrogate him.

"You have a great need for other people to like and admire you" – who doesn't?

"I can see you have serious doubts about your decision." – When was the last time you were a hundred percent happy with a major decision?

A fate witch who masters this and the techniques of 'cold reading' (eliciting information with subtle prompting) can often learn more than even her power can tell her. With



Sorte to offer additional information and confirm guesses, very little escapes such a skilled Strega.

The problem and boon of Sorte is that it has no obvious effect. Porté sorcerers tear great holes in reality; Glamour mages create sparkling effects and strange illusions. Anyone seeing a Fate Witch stare at them has no idea if she is twisting or observing their strands. You may wonder later if you are doing what you want or what she has twisted your strands to make you do. It is very, very scary, just to be around one of these women, who could be divining your darkest secrets at any time. Imagine the paranoia you would feel if you were just sitting in a room with a telepathic mind controller. You may not believe in their power, but you still don't know what might be going on. Would you take the risk of upsetting them?

So when things happen around a Strega, she usually gets the blame. After all, if you won the lottery just as a woman in black passed by, would you really believe it was just chance? The same applies when bad luck happens, and people are often quick to find a target to take their frustration out on when fate has gone against them. The truth of things is that Fate Witches play with fate about half as much as everyone thinks they do, they know the dangers after all. Still, it does nothing to stop the paranoia and superstition that surrounds these women.

New Apprentice powers

An apprentice Strega can just see the strands. While this can be very powerful when used the right way, it isn't quite as useful as some other sorceries. So we offer a few new powers for the apprentice, and a few adjustments to their current abilities.

Curses and Blessings (revisited)

While the system for this is fine, it does seem a little unfair. Strega should certainly suffer a few curse dice, but not more than their victim. So we recommend you reverse the system so the Strega suffers a curse dice for every 15 points on the roll and the target gains a blessing/curse for every 10 points made on the roll. The GM may also allow the Strega to say someone's name without eye contact twice. This way the

witch can prepare her target secretly, then say their name one time and kiss them.

Fates Attention

A more subtle way to curse someone is to grant them 'Fate's Attention'. This power curses someone with bad luck for a day or two. To use this ability the Strega needs only to meet the gaze of her target for a moment. She then rolls one of her Sorte knacks (+ Resolve) and the target is cursed for 1 day for every 20 points she gets on the roll. The curse manifests as small amounts of bad luck related to the strand the Strega cursed. Those suffering a Cups curse find themselves in arguments with loved ones and friends. Coins strands curses deprive people of their money, uncovering old debts and inspiring robbery. Staves curses make business dealings go badly and swords curses make combat harder. The curse is never very major. A coins curse won't leave a victim penniless and a Cups curse won't destroy relationships. However, things will just go badly for the duration of the curse. For instance, a swords curse might mean the victim takes an additional flesh wound for each wound they take. This ability is another one of many reasons that few people will look a Fate Witch in the eye.

General Scan

There are plenty of times a Strega will want to get a quick picture of a person's strands without rolling for each strand. This is where Strega can be a nightmare in the game, as many players will interrogate the strands of important NPCs, requiring lots of rolls taking up the GM's time in the adventure.

This can all be cut short using a 'General Scan'. For this ability the Strega rolls Resolve + their lowest Sorte knack. For every 15 points they get, the GM tells them something about the NPC. If the GM doesn't volunteer information the player can ask a question. However, the Strega can only know something that the strands can tell her. You can be told their strongest cups strand leads out of this room (interesting if their spouse is in the room), but you cannot know who the strand attaches to unless you can see the person there too. This ability is useful to determine the more potent strands and the basic relationships for a target without



having to make many, many rolls.

Sorte Tracking

Fate Witches may use Sorte to track. If they can find the strand which links two people they can follow it to locate either person. However, it is often guesswork, and the GM is the final arbiter of where (and to whom) the strand leads. Just because a girl is in love, her strongest cups strand may not be to her lover. The only exception to this is when a Fate Witch is trying to use her own strands to locate a friend or enemy, because she is very aware of where her own strands lead. Following a strand requires a Wits + Sorte knack roll each hour (TN 15). If she fails, the Witch loses her grip on the strand and must find it again. To do this she must start at one of the people linked by it.

New Adept Powers

When she has the ability to adjust the power of strands, a Strega can truly call herself a fate witch. While this power alone is good enough, there are a few more tricks that will come to a new Lachesis.

Weaving - The Art of Sorte

When an adept learns to twist and pull the strands herself, there is a temptation to weave interesting patterns in the web. Many fate witches use their ability not only to manipulate those around them, but as an artistic pursuit among themselves. The strands reveal themselves in different colours and textures, and many adjust them for purely aesthetic reasons.

When attempting to weave a person's strands in such a way the Strega uses Panache and her lowest Sorte knack. The usual results for manipulating strands still apply, so fate lashes can often be the result of this artistic pursuit. A Strega can work gradually on a subject, and gains an unkept dice following each attempt for every 15 points she got in her most recent attempt. In such a way she can while away the hours creating art that only other Strega can see.

Unfortunately, as you'd expect, it can go very wrong. If the Witch gets a fate lash while attempting to 'weave' her carefully built cat's cradle suffers damage. The target automati-

cally gains a curse dice for each of the four strand types. Until the curse is worked out of the design his strands become twisted and frayed, utterly unsuitable for weaving. However, there are some witches who love to keep twisting and fraying strands to create their own form of twisted art. Sadly their targets don't live very long.

If a weaving attempt goes well, it can be beneficial. The target gains a bonus unkept dice to all social rolls for every 20 points the witch got in her most recent weaving attempt. This is because there is something strangely attractive about the person, even though only a Strega can truly see what it is. The GM may allow this bonus to apply whenever the person performs to an audience or does something artistic themselves.

Clutching

When a Strega uses Clutch, she reaches out and grasps as many of the target's strands as she can get her hands on, and pulls. This never does any permanent damage to the target's strands, but it does produce an incredibly disorienting sensation as loves briefly turn to hates and loyalties get mixed up with desires. To make a Clutching attack, the Strega rolls Resolve + her lowest strand (not including the Black or Arcana strands) against a TN 15.

If she succeeds the target is dazed and confused, losing their next action dice in that round. If the target is not in combat the effect lasts for 3 or 4 seconds. The Strega may attempt to raise on the roll, making their target lose an additional action dice (or 3-4 seconds) for every raise. To ensure she gets a decent grasp on the right strands, the witch must be within 5 feet or so of her target.

Black Strands

Given the enhanced powers of a master (see below) the GM should allow Adepts to gain the Black Strands knack as noted in the Vodacce sourcebook (page 88). They can only perceive the stands at their level, but can build the knack to whatever level they like with experience.



New Master Powers

Many of the new master powers here deal with black strands. As these are extremely powerful the GM is free to restrict some of these abilities to npcs or insist the character find a true master (like Beatrice Caligari) to learn them.

Hastening

The strands of death don't work the same way as the other strands. They are the one type of strand that a witch cannot create or destroy. However, adepts can see the strands and masters can use the power of Hastening. Essentially this power allows the witch to adjust the strength of a strand, which works differently to other strands in this regard.

When a black strand appears it gradually gains in strength until the time of death approaches. Using this power a master Strega can improve the strength of the strand, hastening the demise of the victim. Unfortunately, weakening a black strand is even harder, requiring the ritual of the Black card spread. To hasten a strand the witch must roll Resolve + Black strands against a TN of 20. A success adds one to the level of the strand. The Strega can raise to add an additional level to the strand for each raise.

Locking

One terrifying secret that only the Strega know is that black

strands are forming all the time. Every time the potential for death occurs a strand begins to form. So when you climb a cliff without rope or enter a duel, a weak black strand begins to grow. The good news is that these strands rarely develop into anything at all. After the duel or when the cliff is

climbed they quickly fade away. Using locking, a Strega can take advantage of these occurrences and ensure the strand doesn't fade away. This is the closest a Strega can get to actually creating a black strand herself.

To lock a black strand the Strega must know it is there. She must see it first, although knowing where to look isn't too hard. She just needs to ensure her victim engages in some reasonably dangerous pursuit where death is a real possibility. Just walking down the stairs isn't enough; the strands only form when there is a significant chance the person might actually die rather than just get wounded.

Locking a strand is very difficult as the nascent black strands are extremely hard to see and manipulate without breaking them. To lock a strand the witch must first see one by making a Wits + Black strands roll against a TN of 15. If she succeeds the Gamesmaster will tell her if a black strand is forming, which

will not always occur and is at the option of the Gamesmaster alone. If a strand is found the witch may then attempt to lock it, but this requires a Resolve + Black strand roll against a TN of 50. If that roll is a success the black strand is locked



at level 1. The witch cannot raise to improve this, but may then use hastening to improve it later.

Tuning

Black strands can represent more than just death. If their power is balanced carefully the end can be postponed. When a strand is so ‘tuned’ the imminent death is converted to several ‘near misses’. In short the person becomes dogged with a really foul bad luck. Plenty of people who have a tuned black strand would prefer the fate witch had just let it kill them instead.

Tuning a black strand is extremely difficult and is likely to generate many fate lashes. The Strega must stare at her target for a good minute, and plenty of people have run from such a lady’s gaze long before then. Then she rolls Resolve + Black Strands against a TN of 50. If she makes the roll the strand is tuned. The person it is attached to will suffer one near miss with death or piece of horrible bad luck every day for each level of the strand that was tuned. One of the near misses may well kill them anyway, that’s sadly the way fate goes. Death hasn’t been defeated, just postponed.

Killing with Sorte

There seem many instances in 7th Sea fiction where a Strega has killed someone using her Sorte magic. So it seemed about time there was a system for doing so. However, it isn’t pretty, and it can just as easily destroy the Fate Witch herself.

When using sorte to kill, a Strega rips apart a persons strands and slices them to death with the tattered ends of their own strands. To do this she intentionally produces fate lashes that she uses to attack her victim. Needless to say, this is extremely dangerous, and it can easily go wrong, with the Fate Witch herself getting cut to ribbons as well. The GM may also rule that this sort of attack plays heavily on the practitioner’s mind. Certainly in the 7th Sea fiction such attacks have been the result of moments of insanity or unspeakable rage. So any Witch who uses this method of attack should have to make a Wits check against a target number of 20.

The GM can decide the effects to her mind from the result of the roll as he sees fit.

To make the attack the Fate Witch must be in range to attempt to manipulate strands, and be capable of doing something that will provoke a lash (such as twisting or cutting) which means this is an ability only useable by Adepts and Masters. Having said that, although Adepts can create fate lashes, the GM should assume that only a master can rip strands apart in this way and use them to kill.

As usual, each lash is produced from an active Sorte manipulation from any roll yielding a result of 20 or more, as specified in the Player’s Guide. Now it gets dangerous. To avoid taking the damage herself the witch must direct the lash at her target, who must be the one she was manipulating the strands of. She must make a Finesse roll, adding the appropriate Sorte knack in unkept dice. If this roll beats a difficulty of 20, she avoids the lash and it lacerates her target instead, doing the same damage it would normally have done to the witch. If the witch generates more than one fate lash, she may use all of them to attack her victim. However, she cannot throw them at anyone other than the person whose strands she was pulling at the time, and the difficulty for avoiding them all becomes 25, rolling for each lash.

Needless to say, this kind of manipulation is very risky and very dangerous. The GM may allow Witches to use this roll when a Fate lash appears normally, but add 10 to all difficulties. After all, here she is consciously trying to generate lashes! When they occur during the usual manipulation of strands the Fate Witch is concentrating on the strands a lot more and thus is not expecting a lash. Remember that even if she avoids it, her target cannot. No fun if she was manipulating a friend. Anyone, witch or target, who is hit by a strand takes the usual damage from a lash. They can’t avoid the blow with Footwork or the like because they can’t see it coming. If the target is another Fate Witch, the GM may allow her to redirect the attack against her opponent, adding 5 to the difficulty each time the lash is thrown from one witch to another. Although when two witches attack each other using this power, the flailing strands are bound to slice both of them to ribbons.



Sorte Rituals

Sorte is much more than the ability to work with strands. Strega have a power that touches and manipulates fate itself. While even a Strega cannot even treat fate as her plaything, with time and assistance she can manipulate fate on a far deeper level. Sorte rituals are manipulations of fate that go beyond just tweaking strands. Their effect and power can be more dangerous and far reaching, so require more time and expertise. These rituals are not usually taught to the young, and are more usually learnt by experimentation. The strand spreads are examples of Sorte rituals that most Fate Witches do get taught. Many older Strega know others, and it is not uncommon for a Strega to be called again to her old teacher for some additional instruction when she is ready. A few Fate Witches experiment and discover these powers on their own, or even create new rituals. However, there are many dark and terrible abilities that the Godmothers and the Widows have not only banned but tried their best to destroy completely. Unfortunately, fate has a perverse tendency to occasionally reveal these secrets to these who are dedicated and hungry for power.

The Sorte rituals detailed below are not widely known by every Fate Witch. Some are taught to Strega (such as the Widows) as a reward for their service. Sometimes the secret may be revealed to a Witch during her experiments. Few are written down, for the obvious reason that most Strega cannot read or write. If a player character wants to acquire some of the powers below, it is up to the GM about how generous they want to be. With time and experimentation they can be gained with the expenditure of at least five experience points. Alternatively a teacher might pass on the secret to a student, and it is up to the GM if such instruction should cost any points. It is recommended that the GM doesn't allow a Strega to begin play with a ritual. However, if the player really begs and promises vast bribes the GM should allow rituals to be bought as 5 point advantages.

The listing below is not exhaustive by any means. Players should be encouraged to create new rituals and expand the list. These powers are simply the most commonly known rituals; many more secrets await the dedicated and the reckless.

General Sorte Rituals

These rituals are quite commonly known. Well, by commonly we mean most experienced Strega will know a few of these. Whether or not they are willing to admit to knowing them or teaching them is another thing entirely.

Hunter's Binding

This ritual is reasonably well known, and even most men know of its existence. The ritual is designed to allow someone to track down their enemy. So the Strega first needs to identify the strand that relates to the enemy. How this is achieved is up to the player and GM. However, it is often one of the strongest sword strands the person will have as this ritual is only usually used when a duel to the death is on the cards.

To perform the ritual, the recipient must offer some of his fresh blood to the witch in a bowl. She washes her hands in it and then takes the strand to the recipient's enemy in her hand. Working the blood into the strand and using her power the strand gradually becomes visible to the recipient and his enemy. What they see is not the strand itself but the blood that coats it. In this way they can see the direction of his enemy, and as he gets nearer, the blood coating on the strand gets thicker and longer. Unfortunately, the blood also begins to coat the other end of the strand. So it won't be long before the recipient's enemy himself sees the strand sticking out of him.

To coat the strand the Strega must make a Resolve + Swords roll against a difficulty of 25 minus the strength of the strand to be coated. She and the recipient must then both spend a drama point.

Identify

Using this ritual the Strega identifies a particular strand of her own. The player can assume they are aware of where their most powerful strands lead to (3 for an apprentice, 5 for an adept and 7 for a master). However, if the target of one of the other strands isn't nearby to verify where it goes it is very hard to work out. So, using this ritual the Strega focuses on the strand and closes her eyes for a few minutes. If she spends a drama dice she gets a brief vision of the person the



strand leads to. The vision is of the person the last time the witch saw them, so no other information about the person can be gained.

Marking

Some Strega have occasionally found it useful to mark an item as unquestionably theirs. Items marked in such a way show other Strega the item belongs to someone else so they dare not touch it or meddle in its affairs. By rolling Resolve + Arcana against TN 20, a Strega can inscribe a seal or personalised mark on the Arcana of an inanimate object. This mark is visible to all Strega who look at the item's Arcana, and leaves no question as to the importance of a given object to a particular Strega. It is also possible to mark a person a Strega is 'working on' although this carries a TN of 30.

Strega who see the mark know nothing of who actually put it there, just that the item or person belongs to someone else. However, they can detect the mastery level of the person who made the mark by rolling Wits + Arcana against TN 20.

Stone Weaving

This ritual allows a Strega to enforce the structure of a building as it is crafted. Using this power the Strega have helped to build the impossible spires that litter the Vodacce island cities. When a building is being crafted the Strega use this ritual to grant them extra drama dice for the building's construction. Many Strega can Stone Weave together to strengthen the building even more. In fact, for the thin tall spires that Vodacce architecture is famed for, it is essential.

To use Stone Weave the Strega must stand at the foundation of the building and roll her Resolve + Arcana knack. For each ten points she manages to roll she can invest the building with 1 drama dice from her own supply. If several witches work this ritual at the same time they can pump many drama dice into the foundations. For every 3 drama dice the Strega invest, the building gains 1 more drama dice as well. So if 2 Strega both score 30 on their roll they can invest up to 6 Drama dice in the building, if they do the building will have a total of 8 Drama dice.

The ritual can only be cast once for any building. To cast it

again disturbs the weave of fate laid around the stones which grows like ivy in and through the bricks as it is built. As the building is built the architect and builders can use the drama dice for any skill rolls they make in designing and constructing the building.

Spider in the Web

Using a strand she already has to a fellow Strega, the fate witch can attempt to communicate with her over any distance. To use this power the Strega must first find a strand of her own that connects her to the person she wishes to communicate with. This must be another Strega as no one else will be able to receive the signals. When she has the right thread, the witch must concentrate on it and beat on the string to send a pulse the other witch can hear. That witch must make a Wits + strand knack (appropriate to the strand being beaten) against a TN of 15 to detect the call. She must then sit down and concentrate to receive the communication. This means both witches must be undisturbed and do nothing but concentrate for the duration of the conversation.

The nature of the conversation is very strange. Each witch can send a mixture of images and feelings as well as a few words down the strand. However, the strand can only relate what is appropriate to its nature. So words and thoughts of revenge can pass down a swords strand, but to talk about trade you must use a coins strand. This doesn't mean the witch is unable to think of anything else, it is simply that the strand will not carry anything else. A witch can speak of business over a cups strand as long as she likes, but the other witch will hear nothing. To change subject you need to pick another strand and begin the process anew.

Such conversation is wearing on strands. When the conversation ends, both witches must roll Resolve + appropriate strand knack with a TN of 5 for every 5 minutes they were in conversation. (So a conversation of 20 minutes yields a TN of 20.) If either one fails the roll the strand between them is weakened by one point.

Widow Rituals

The widows and the Godmothers keep a certain amount of forbidden lore for themselves. The following rituals are only



known to the Godmothers and the widows and never taught outside that elite circle. No exceptions, no excuses. Much of this lore is as dangerous as it is powerful. No one in the upper echelons of the fate witch community wants this power to escape their control. It is possible that an exceptional Strega (such as Beatrice Caligari) might figure some of this out for themselves. However, in such a case they may well be forced to join the widows or even be in line for a position as a Godmother. Mad Queen Marietta's reign may have been a while ago, but no one has forgotten what happens when this sort of sorcery gets abused.

Binding

This ritual temporarily denies the Witch the use of her powers. In the lower form of this ritual her hands are bound and she is denied the ability to manipulate strands. For greater transgressions her eyes are blindfolded and she is denied the ability to see the strands. In some cases, both punishments are visited on the transgressor.

In both cases the system is the same. The punishing Strega must roll Resolve + Arcana and beat the victim's result on the same roll. As one Strega may not be enough to properly bind the victim, the ritual is usually performed by several Strega. Each Strega gets a roll to beat the victim's single roll and all get a bonus of 1 unkept dice for each Strega attempting to perform the ritual. For example, if Valentina is being punished by Fiora and Henriette she rolls Resolve and Arcana getting a result of 19. Henriette and Fiora both get an additional 2 unkept dice, and Henriette rolls 12, but Fiora rolls 20. Because of Fiora's roll the ritual succeeds in binding Valentina.

The punishment lasts for a year and a day, but can be lifted by one of the Godmothers in a ritual only known to them.

The Crowning

Occasionally, a Strega is too free with her shears, and needs to be brought back into line without causing embarrassing deaths or disappearances. Instead, the unruly Strega is often subjected to the Crowning. When subdued, for few women submit to this ritual voluntarily, a trio (or more) of Strega weave a complex web of strands around the offending

Strega's head, which settles on top of her and creates an afterimage on the punished Strega's Arcana. This image can be easily perceived by any Strega looking at the offending Strega's arcana. The sight of this mark will not, however, cause fear to those who see it, but rather pity. A Strega who has been subjected to the Crowning cannot raise any of her Sorte knacks above four, and has any Sorte knacks above four reduced to four. This, of course, neatly caps the Strega's mastery level at Lachesis. After the Crowning, few are willing to try the patience of the Tessatore again.

To cast the ritual each Strega involved must make a Resolve + Arcana roll against a TN of 10 +5 for each point in the Arcana knack the victim has. At least three successful rolls must be made to cap the victim, so should only 3 witches be present and one fails the ritual collapses. When all the rolls have been made, each participating Strega (except the victim) must expend 2 Drama points.

It is said there is a cure for this ritual, but that it is something only the Godmothers ever learn. As this punishment is reserved for some of the worst crimes, few can make enough amends to petition for its removal.

Curse of the Sisters

Using this ritual the target can be cursed in the same way as the basic apprentice power. However, this ritual allows several Strega to work the curse (or indeed blessing) at the same time. It is still useful to a single Strega, who can also use it to curse the target from a distance.

To enact the ritual the Strega must have something personal of the target's. It might be a lock of hair or a fingernail, but a piece of clothing or personal possession is good enough. The Strega then all roll Resolve + Strand as detailed in the Players Guide (page 221). The Strega add up the result of all their rolls, allowing them to reach a higher number without risking Fate Lashes (which can be brought on using this ritual). The amount of curse and/or blessing dice received by the witches and the target is determined as in the Player's Guide (not in the kinder system noted above). However, the amount of curse dice received by the Strega is divided between them in whatever way they wish. One of the witches could take all the bad luck if she agreed. Usually the curse



dice are divided fairly, but any other division should be negotiated between the players and the Gamesmaster.

Soul Tearing

This terrible ritual is saved for the worst of crimes. It takes three Strega to cast and utterly destroys one type of the victim's strands. Worse still, the victim cannot create new types of the purged strand.

To perform this ritual the Strega must have something of the victims (as in 'Curse of the Sisters' above). To succeed in casting the ritual the Strega performing it make a Resolve + 'the appropriate knack' roll. Their individual results are added up and if they come to 100 in total the ritual is a success. For this reason the ritual is usually performed by around 5 Strega.

If the ritual is a success the effect depends of the strands destroyed. If cups strands are destroyed the victim loses all their friends and relations. They fade from society, unable to create the links that create friends and lovers. They can still be seen and dealt with; but they are quickly forgotten or not considered as friends. Those who are stripped of their coins strands can never find money. Not only will it never come to them, they can never keep what they gain. What they steal is stolen from them and nothing they offer in trade will ever be accepted. When the Staves strands are torn the victim loses his authority and his ties to those above him. No one will ever do what he tells them to, but he will never have another order given to him again. Finally, those who have their swords strands shattered can never stand in conflict. This has a good side in that they will never be challenged to a duel and no one will ever try to claim revenge on them. However, they cannot oppose anything that stands against them. No matter what they do, any combat action they make will always fail. So most die in the first fight they get involved in.

Wrapping

This dangerous ritual allows the Widow to suppress her own strands, making her fade from reality ever so slightly. Playing with fate in this way can be extremely dangerous, and many believe this is a variant of the ritual that destroyed Mad Queen Marietta. Some shiver when they consider her

family may not be gone, just impossible to perceive.

To cast this ritual the Strega must roll Resolve + each of her strand knacks (Arcana, Cups, Staves, Swords and Coins, but not Black strands). For the first roll she must beat a TN of 15, but the TN increases by 5 for each successive roll (20 for the second, 25 for the third etc). Which order she rolls in is up to the Strega casting the ritual. The ritual lasts until the next sunrise. However each raise the Strega makes extends this time by another sunrise. Unfortunately, the amount of raises is added to all the rolls. Adding a raise to each roll yields 1 raise, not 5.

If the ritual is successfully cast the Strega is effectively invisible. Anyone she makes a point on interacting with can see her, but only for as long as they concentrate on her. Anyone she attacks will be surprised, but otherwise able to join combat effectively.

Escaping the Game

For the noblewomen of Vodacce, life is a gilded cage. Despite their power and sorcery, they are prisoners in the glittering spires of the islands. They are among the most interesting characters in Seventh Sea, yet the very reasons they are intriguing make them almost unplayable outside Vodacce. For all the magic of the Strega they are trapped in Vodacce on pain of death. So how do they leave, and how do they stay free? More interestingly, why would they stay, and who comes after the runaways?

The Seven Sided Board

Each of the families treats their women a little differently. Such embarrassments as runaways are kept in the family. So it is from the family that retribution will ride out. In this section we'll also revise and adapt some of the family bonuses from the Vodacce book (p28-32). It is recommended that the GM make any character with Sorte magic pay twice as many hero points at character creation for the scholar skill and the ability to read and write any of their languages. While such skills may be available to player characters, they are rare even for Strega heroes.



Bernoulli

With so much scholarly reading in the family, it is no surprise if a little spills over into the shuttered ladies quarter. The loophole in the law that allows women to be read to (such as at the Dilantente – see the Vodacce sourcebook p51) is often taken advantage of. As long as a Bernoulli wife remembers to follow Vaticine virtues, she can quietly get away with much.

Instead of the usual bonus for being Bernoulli, women of the family need not buy the scholar skill, but also do not get the free raise. However, they may buy the skill at the usual cost (for a Strega). Instead, they gain the Missionary skill for free. Male characters may opt to buy the Missionary skill instead of scholar, and gain the free raise to one of their Missionary knacks instead.

Caligari

The Caligari obsession with the Surneth does little good for its ladies. However, the feud with the Villanova does. Any woman who advances their cause can command great reward. Rumour has it that Caligari has even 'freed' women who have done him special services. Their love of artefacts has also sealed ties with the Explorer's Society. The stories visiting explorers tell give the ladies a good knowledge of the world outside Vodacce. Such news is essential for a lady who hopes one day to travel. Now the family has fallen, these attitudes are even more prevalent. Unfortunately the remaining Caligari are fiercely protective of their Strega as a dwindling resource and keep a very close eye on them. However, with the family holdings scattered it is more likely a Witch will be allowed to travel so to work for the family. Many Caligari have to keep moving simply to avoid the array of enemies looking to finish off the line once and for all. If you should meet a Caligari Strega on the road, however, you can guarantee there will be several of her Caligari kinsmen only moments away.

Falisci

Among the vineyard family, the bonds of loyalty are strong. So the bonds of sisterhood are even stronger. Information in the form of gossip slips easily around the women of the family. The connections with Montaigne bring in gossip on in-

ternational situations, along with the latest fashions. This makes the Falisci women well versed in international politics and court affairs. But while the family may be the centre of the party world in Vodacce, it is a world the noblewomen are denied. Although they get to meet many guests, the hedonisms present at the parties themselves are not considered suitable for noble ladies. They are expected to politely retire early in the evening. Falisci witches and Senzavista are among the highest proportion of runaways, as they watch through shutters the merry making below. They see the freedoms of the courtesans and visiting ladies of other nations. With the bars of their cage pressed so closely to their face, is it any wonder they get jealous of the lives of the Falisci guests?

Falisci Strega can opt not to share the family's compulsion for gambling. However, if she does she has an intense curiosity for gossip and must roll Resolve against a TN of 15 not to listen to conversations she shouldn't.

Lucani

Although their witches are among the most powerful, the Lucani Strega were among the worst treated in Vodacce, as their gifts cannot be used for the family. Their leverage was almost nonexistent compared to other Strega. Lucani ladies would usually sit quietly in their wooden rooms practicing their needlework, hoping to be married into a better family. Now that has all changed with the fall of the Lucani. Taking refuge among the Falisci and Vestini, the Strega suddenly became very valuable indeed. Unfortunately this does mean the family is even more fanatical about watching over and 'protecting' its daughters. Now their potent talents have become recognised, they have also become currency. The remains of the Lucani have little else to bargain with for support and protection. However, the Lucani curse still applies, and many wonder if with the Lucani family almost gone the curse may fall upon those who take them in. Most consider this silly superstitious talk, but in Vodacce, such talk has a way of manipulating politics.

Mondavi

If there is a norm in Vodacce, it is the Mondavi. Their quiet ways extend to their women. Those who run away can only



expect repercussions from the Mondavi themselves. They like to keep things in the family. Rarely do women run from the Mondavi, as they more than most 'know their place'. Much to the chagrin of Sophia's Daughters. With the recent success of Mondavi's grab for power, life has become very good for members of the family. Both the men and women of the Mondavi line have been rewarded for their loyal service. While the Strega have been rewarded with many gifts, a few extra freedoms have come their way if they prove they can be trusted. For many women the thought of running has never been further from their mind as times are good.

Strega cannot take advantage of the cheaper cost to the Mondavi for the Ambrogia school. However, their quiet ways grant them a free raise when trying to remain unobtrusive.

Vestini

The Vestini are a study in irony in regard to their women. The cleverness of the line combined with the power of Sorte would easily allow escape. However, so few witches are born to the family, they are carefully watched. In this family the Strega and the Courtesans get on far better than any of the other families. Many fate witches have been spirited away in the guise of a courtesan, and often a courtesan will teach her witch friend (or even Nascosto Sorella) to read. With so many lovely women in the libraries, what is one more? The 'Dance of the Spiders' is famed among the ladies where the girls also play a dangerous game. Witches often join the dance as courtesans in disguise. More is hidden in this grand masquerade than the men folk know.

Villanova

To suggest there may be a norm or an average for this family would be a mistake, and mistakes can be deadly. The lies of the family are propagated as much by the women as the men. Villanova women often run to make contact with other run-aways. Then they bring them home to shame their family or allow the Villanova to add to their power with blackmail. The only hope for anyone in the darkest island is to prove his or her talent. Ability is richly rewarded, as long as it has equal measures of loyalty. However, many women still manage to escape the grasp of Villanova, perhaps due to the presence of two of the cleverest of Sophia's Daughters. More

than any other family, the Villanova women are no victims. It is a fool who considers a Villanova Strega as anything other than a Villanova.

Making an Opening Move

Even in Vodacce, women are at least half the population. So why do they take this entrapment with such grace and servility? The threat of death aside, who could truly stand against them should they arise en masse? The answer to that lies in numbers. Not all the women in Vodacce are ready to leave. Peasant women are forbidden from reading, in case they are the result of some noble's dalliance. However, education is difficult to come by for any peasant, so her husband may be unable to read too. Anyway, who would feed the children when she left? The concerns of the peasant class are the same for every nation.

The middle classes have all the same issues as the nobles, but only to the degree that their wealth can afford. The rich non-noble does not fit well into the old feudal structure. So their social position defaults to their wealth. The more they have, the nobler they are, so the more the rules apply. So the daughters of the well off (but not too wealthy) merchants are in the best position. These ladies are provided for, but no one notices if they leave. They may even marry well, often to a foreigner who will take them away from it all. Of course if by some tryst they have been born with Sorte, they are instantly promoted to the cages of the nobles.

So escape is only really an issue for the noble classes. You would expect them to be more aware of the cage than their lower sisters, but this is sadly this is not the case. Often the gilding can be very appealing. If the prison is comfortable then there is less desire to escape. The men know this and see to their wives whims and desires. Fate Witches are at the top of this feminine food chain. While a courtesan's beauty (and power) will fade, and a Senzavista is almost no consideration, a witch's power increases as she trains and ages. Even the Senzavista, the sightless daughters, rarely run. They are in the worst position of all, but unlike the peasants they have food, a roof and riches. Their lives could be harder and far more meaningless. Sometimes in Vodacce all anyone can hope for in the great game is to be ignored.



There is also a certain attitude that needs to be addressed. When Victorian Suffragettes fought for a woman's right to vote, not all womankind was united behind them. Many women were too comfortable where they were as wives and mothers to want to rock the boat. However, in the main, after so many years of propaganda, many believed they really did occupy a lower place in God's order than men. So it is with many of Vodacce's ladies. In the shuttered light of their houses, they feel they are in the right place. That it is the proper place for a woman, at least a virtuous and honest one. Only reading changes them.

Learning to read does not just allow you to be aware of current events. It is a key to considering your universe. With knowledge comes the realisation that you have an opinion, and that leads to self-determination. So the runaway, whatever her class or ability must learn to read, if only to see the bars of her cage. Needless to say, this is almost as dangerous as trying to run away, but it is the necessary first step to escaping. Sophia's Daughters are at the forefront of the education of women, but they are not the only ones trying to change attitudes. Given the large families of Vodacce most women have a sister somewhere. Many women learn to read secretly from a courtesan sister or friend, all the time believing they may be the only one.

Queen's Gambit

Having established the desire to leave, how do you go about it? The easiest and most popular way is ironically to take your husband. A married woman accompanying her husband on tour raises no questions. This is how most Fate Witches and even Senzavista get away from a while. It is in a husband's interests to indulge his wife's wanderlust for a while to get it out of her system. After all, a few tugs on the strings can cause a need to travel. The only problem is that it can't last. The more powerful the noble, the more business he will have in Vodacce itself. No one can take a holiday from the great game without consequences.

Sadly, to make such a holiday more permanent requires more dramatic action. Some women try to run while outside Vodacce, but they are quickly tracked down. The men are ready for such an attempted flight. The best way to run is to leave without anyone knowing you are gone. Getting a head start

is essential, which means picking your moment very carefully. Some women are lucky enough to meet up with Sophia's Daughters. They already have a number of plans and safe routes out of the cities. Just knowing there is a helping hand is often all a woman needs to decide to run. However, many women make it out without their help. The favourite method is faking your own death. This takes a lot of planning and can often raise suspicion, however many brothers have 'born witness' to the death of their sisters. While only women run, they often have the assistance of sympathetic men inside their family. The men may rule their women, but these are still their sisters, mothers and daughters. A growing number want a better life for them. Ironically, getting out of the country is not as difficult as you may expect. The real difficulty for the runaway is staying away, and avoiding recapture.

Avoiding your Opponent's Knights

Now you are free, what do you do? Your old life is over. After all, if you set up a strand tugging service you will be dragged home as soon as you advertise. In fact even allowing yourself to be recognised as Vodacce raises questions. Every other nation knows how the Vodacce treat their women, and are bound to ask questions of a woman on her own. Some people may even see the potential reward in bringing her home. Often a woman may ally herself with an adventuring group, pretending to be the middle class wife of one of the party. It has even been known for a woman to disguise herself as a man – who can, after all, travel freely. The hardest part of the escape is realising you can never go home, and never again be whom you were. This is the reason many courtesans end up as mere jennys and often a fate witch becomes the pet seer for some Montaigne noble. While there are plenty of people to help you get out, once out you are on your own. The life of a noblewoman does not fit a lady well for surviving on her own, which is, of course, the whole idea.

The greatest council Sophia's Daughters gives is that you must be able to survive alone. This is a hard lesson for any woman who comes from such a pampered lifestyle. Especially one taught that it is unladylike to do for themselves what others are there to do for them. It is harder still for a woman who must maintain a disguise or secret identity. Af-



ter a while it will chafe and anger her. Why should she have to live with the inconvenience and difficulty when millions of other women are free to be as they are? This can often lead to her resenting other women rather than men. Jealousy can twist the knife far better than imprisonment.

Those who don't prepare for their new life are quickly brought home. Many women are found destitute on the streets, or die from a life they are ill equipped to survive. Those who get out with help can often count on further aid. Sophia's Daughters do not abandon their sisters, but they cannot spend their time looking after idle noble women. They have to learn to stand on their own feet. It may be hard, but it is the only way to be truly free. Most of the time Sophia's Daughters give them tasks and work to do for the organisation. This gives the runaway purpose and helps out the daughters. The women who survive best are the ones who just start anew. More often than not they discover they have talents and skills they never knew about. Adara, a Knight of the Rose and Cross, is a prime example, born a Senzavista she escaped with no useful skills. When she joined the Rose and Cross she gained purpose and discovered she had talent with the blade.

Now she can stand alone and even openly declare who she is. However even then, she is in constant danger that someone will come after her. That is another hard lesson for every runaway; that the hunt may never end. The princes have long memories and don't like to be made a fool of. The future for any runaway is quite simple. She will either find a way to

survive, or perish. What the lady does with herself in her new life is of course up to her. That is a very individual story for each woman.

Recapturing your Opponents Piece

There are no official organisations dedicated too bringing

back runaways. The judges and law officers of Vodacce have greater concerns. The matter of returning an errant woman is first to be decided by the family. When it has been determined she is not returning it is often a younger son who is sent out on the hunt. With powers similar to a Lord's Hand he is sent to track and bring back his sister. It is an extremely difficult assignment; after all, the trail is usually cold and well hidden. Each runaway hopes it is a favourite brother who is following her, someone with whom she may be able to reason. There are a few brothers who 'take their time' searching, hoping never to find their sister in her new life. However, with family honour at stake, he can only return with her, or her body. The important thing to remember when a relative comes after a runaway is that the hunt is joined for love. These broth-

ers want to return their sisters home, where they belong. After all, to them it is either that or allow the poor woman to die on the streets.

If the family can't send a relative, it is usually the task of the Guardian family to bring back the lady. Given that they were



probably guarding her in the first place, it may be their only way to avoid a rather terminal punishment! The methods employed to retrieve the lady will depend on the family in question. Few Strega are happy at the prospect of a Scrivelli coming after them. If the lady is especially important (she may be engaged in an important marriage before she ran) the family may send some of the Guardian family after her led by one of her younger brothers.

Not every noble family has the services of a Guardian family or siblings it can spare. If there is no one in the family willing or able to follow the lady, the family must engage a professional. There are a number of independent hunters ready to accept commission on a noble woman. They are either hired in secret by the family, or often by a rival looking for a lever against the lady's family. What is in it for these men who bring back errant women? Not surprisingly it is usually done for money. So the hunter is defined by the worth of the woman is question. Bringing her back depends on how well she has learnt to survive. For this reason the hunters charge for two separate tasks, finding her and bringing her back. To accept one is to accept the other, but the price is negotiable. After all, if a quiet and housebound Sensavista leaves, who really cares? She is worth little, and easy to bring back, however, it may turn out that in the meantime she has become a potent swordswoman (such as Adara). So it makes sense to find out what you are up against before arranging a fee for bringing it somewhere it doesn't want to go. Another thing the hunters must be aware of is any friends the lady may have made. Just joining an organisation such as the Rose and Cross gives you a lot of support, and some women make allies among the courts of other nations. If this is the case, the hunter may face armed bodyguards, among other dangers and even if they get to the runaway, they may also find the machinery of law and order against them. They are not in Vodacce anymore, and the nobles of other nations own their own courts and lands, where their will is law.

So the hunters are often very adept at a multitude of skills. Some work in special teams. Such a group would be made up of swordsmen, but also thieves, diplomats and even forgers (ready to create the right documents for escape or transporting prisoners). It should be noted that the hunters are not always men. In fact the proportion is only slightly more than

two thirds. After all, what does a courtesan do when her beauty fades? Having learnt to read and in many cases use a blade (remember who invented Ambrogia) a certain career opportunity opens up. Often, her only other option is to fade away as little more than a jenny. Anyone, male or female given the right papers from a prince can go hunting for runaways, and it is an opportunity to travel and see the world. These female hunters are usually the most dangerous, they understand how a runaway would think and act, and they can often infiltrate safehouses. Worse is the hunter who is themselves an ex-runaway, for them it is not always about the money. They want to punish these women who think they can duck the system that has enslaved her hunter. There will be no justice for the runaways that they return, only judgement. Having said that, not all the female hunters are so evil. Some genuinely believe they are bringing back the runaways for their own good, just like the men. A few also accept the commission and then 'just don't prove much good at it'. They must be careful, as a poor track record may see their 'licence' revoked. In some cases they may even be declared runaway themselves.

Another thing for a runaway to be wary of is that her hunters may not be working for her family. Generally, the news that a woman has gone missing is kept very quiet. A family that cannot keep its daughters loses reputation and respect. However, if someone discovers that an enemy's lady has run, they may send their own agents to reclaim her. This way they can shame the family in question, returning what they have lost, and even demand recompense and favour from them for their kind services as well! While they have the lady in their clutches, she may reveal secrets about her family. It is rare, as family loyalty is strong, even for runaways. However, false (or even true) promises of help and escape can often loosen the tongue.

If a woman is returned to Vodacce, she faces trial and public execution, usually by her own family. The trial is usually fair, but the evidence that the lady has run away is usually pretty conclusive, and that is the only crime she needs to be convicted of. It is not unknown for Princes or Godmothers to intervene, but doing so sets a dangerous precedent. The horror of the punishment is the cornerstone of the oppression of the women of Vodacce, and by this the order of Vodacce so-



ciety. If 'justice' is not seen to be done the repercussions threaten to loosen the ties that bind the nation's culture and society together.

However, a runaway may find the hunter chasing her isn't quite the enemy she thinks. The punishment of burning is only for those who are seen to be brought back. If only the family (or loyal/well paid hunters) knows she is gone, they can cut her a deal. Only a tiny proportion of women who escape and are brought back are actually burnt. More often the family manages to keep things quiet. Sometimes the only reason to burn her is that it hasn't happened in a while, and justice needs to be seen to be done. More women return to Vodacce promising to tow the line than anyone would like to admit, including the Princes and Sophia's Daughters.

While this may seem a failure of the system, it is actually the best way to keep it alive. Runaways only agree to return if they have failed to survive alone. Under threat of death they often reveal their accomplices, which is valuable information for the family. But better than that, they usually never run again. They have usually been broken, seen their dreams shatter. They will quietly spread their story to other women, teaching them the futility of escape. Pity these women, whose escape only helps to cement the system they tried so bravely to leave.

Secrets and Lies (GM Section)

The Sorte Bargain

Vespasian and Alia

The origins of Sorte are as shrouded in mystery as the other Bargainer's arts. The story begins with Vespasian, one of the most powerful senators in Numa at the time of Montanus and the bargain. While Vespasian wasn't quite as personally powerful as Montanus, he had managed to control Numa, earning the title 'First Prefect' of the city. While Montanus converted the post, he knew he couldn't take it from Vespasian. So Montanus set his sights on making some other city the centre of the empire. When Montanus came to make the bargain, he naturally invited Vespasian. Only with the prefect's consent could such a thing be done in the city, and

Montanus recognised the value of Vespasian owing him a favour.

While Vespasian was as keen as the other senators to possess the power that Montanus promised, he was a lot more cynical of Montanus' motives. He decided that it would be safer to have the 'gift' bestowed on someone he could control, and so brought a slave girl called Alia with him to the meeting. As Montanus opened the portal and negotiated, Vespasian quailed in fear with the other senators but at the right moment pushed Alia forward to receive the gift he was too frightened to take. To Alia it was just one more horror in the catalogue she had suffered. Her family had more than a little Crescent blood and this had ensured they could never be more than slaves in the Numan Empire. That same blood had given Alia a stunning dark beauty that had the misfortune of attracting Vespasian. He was a brutal man, and he used Alia for everything his wife had the power to say no to. Over the few years of owning Alia he had so thoroughly brutalised her into compliance that he believed her unable to disobey him. While Vespasian didn't want the power himself, he did want his descendants to wield it. He would need to produce many children with Alia, a thought that he rather enjoyed. So, lying on the cold floor of the senate, quivering with fear, Alia became the first Fate Witch.

From the first moments of the bargain it was evident how useful her new abilities would be. However the process was the final straw that tipped her over the edge into the madness that had threatened her for so long. When the portal closed and the Senators began to raise their heads, Alia pulled herself to her feet, her eyes wild with the enormity of the power she held and she began whispering secrets. She fixed each noble with a glare and spoke their darkest desires to the assembly, until Vespasian struck her so hard she fell once more to the floor. Even so, she couldn't stop pouring out the secrets that threatened to overwhelm her. Those who listened heard her whisper about a new terror and doom the Senators had brought to the world, a secret that haunted them all as they scurried away into the night.

When they returned home, Alia was shut away again. She could not stop whispering secrets, even when alone, but Vespasian cared little. This power was his to control and



what a vast power it was. In the hands of his sons it would create a new and powerful dynasty. He would crush Montanus, knowing his plans before he even conceived them. The next day he began fathering that dynasty in earnest.

Unfortunately, for all Vespasian's attempts to father a son to carry on his name, Alia produced only daughters. She would laugh hysterically each time the midwife announced the sex of her child. Vespasian came to believe she was using her power to fix her sorcery to her female heirs, and he may have been right. After all, Alia had been abused in every way by men for her entire life. It was easy to see why she would do her utmost to deny that gender any more power to oppress her own. However, there was no way to know, and as Vespasian vented his frustrations daily on the girl, her mad laughter became more and more hysterical.

Eventually something had to give. However it was a surprise to Vespasian that it was neither he nor Alia that ended things, it was Vespasian's wife Fulvia. Fulvia had little real love for her husband, their marriage being arranged. So when he took to his new slave girl she was almost pleased to be left alone. However, Alia's new sorcery upped the ante somewhat. Now her husband rarely shared her bed, insisting instead on abusing the girl locked upstairs for 'the sake of the line'. It wasn't long before Vespasian's obsession began to be whispered about by the servants, and then the neighbourhood. Fulvia became the forgotten wife and people began to talk behind her back. Eventually she could take no more of the rumour and insult. She poisoned Vespasian over dinner one evening and ran for the safety of her family estate far from Numa. While it was obvious to everyone what had happened when the servants came upon Vespasian, Fulvia was never brought to trial. Not only was her family well placed, but Vespasian was not well liked and had made many enemies with the threat of revealing their secrets with Alia's power.

Interestingly it is rumoured that Alia died moments after Vespasian. She gave birth to her last daughter at the same time and it is said she stopped screaming and smiled before passing away. Whether she did use her power to deny Vespasian the son he needed for his dynasty, or even to destroy him personally, is unknown. However, she would have been

pleased with the fall of Vespasian's line. With no sons his estate was broken up as dowry among his many daughters. Each daughter had her mother's gift and there was no shortage of suitors from the other noble families. So in this way, Sorte passed into the noble families of Vodacce, and Vespasian's line vanished from history.

The Sorte Brides

Given how Vespasian's behaviour had been the scandal of the islands, every noble family was aware of how potent the new sorcery could be. They also feared how the power might be used in the hands of their enemies. Vespasian's daughters were married into the other families, and each noble family was ensured at least one Strega bride to keep the balance of power (no matter what the girl in question thought of the match!). The Strega became powerful tools for the noble families and blessed their husbands with many daughters. Some were treated very well; others fared worse than their mother. None produced a son and after a generation or two, no one believed such a thing would ever happen.

Due to the lack of sons the sorcerous wives were providing, the nobles began the practice of taking second wives. While it was common practice for the nobles to take courtesans and dalliances to their bed, the offspring of such unions couldn't be heirs. To allow them to become so would open the floodgates to a number of illegitimate children who could claim land and position. So it was decided that a nobleman whose wife had only produced daughters could marry a second woman and her children would be considered legitimate heirs if they were boys. For the nobles of Numa it was an excellent solution, and the feelings of their Sorte brides were not considered in the least. The idea of letting a daughter take control of the family never occurred to the nobility. However, this was mostly because all the families feared a sorte-blessed woman taking political power. Such a woman would prove a dangerous opponent and change the balance of power, if she lasted more than a week without getting assassinated.

Now they had secured the power of Sorte for each of their bloodlines, the great families forgot the issue. The busied themselves finding new ways to politic among themselves with their new ability to manipulate fate. Each nobleman had



a Strega wife whispering secrets in his ear, and the power and indispensability of the Strega grew. As the years passed, each noble family hoped to produce a Strega prince, but while eventually the wives bore many sons, it became apparent that Alia's curse had denied men the power. No man has ever been born with the power to this day.

Now that each noble family had their own line of Sorte Strega they thought little more of the matter. Unfortunately the Vodacce people felt differently. As ardent Vaticine's they were wary of the nature of sorcery, and too much madness and death seemed to follow in the Strega's shadow.

The Witch hunts

After the fall of Numa around 300 AV the nobility in Vodacce became more than a little paranoid. The empire was in ruins and Numa, once the centre of the world was a broken city full of faded glory. The immense power and wealth of the great families was gradually leeching away and there was little they could do to stop it. Many became very heavy handed with those who served them and worked their land motivated by a fear that anything they didn't hold onto as tightly as they could, would be taken away.

So it was not surprising that the peasants became very unhappy with the way they were being treated. Many of them turned to the Vaticine church, which quietly preached that sorcery was an evil force that corrupted all it touched. While it is not the most overt sorcery, Sorte is the most mysterious. The fact that it doesn't dissolve objects or open bleeding holes in reality makes it all the more frightening. If you cannot see a Strega working her magic, you have no idea when she is doing it. It becomes easy to believe she is doing it all the time, with the merest of glances.

So, empowered by their faith in the church's protection and outrage at their treatment by the nobles, the peasants of Vodacce became restless. It was the Strega the lower classes decided to take issue with. They came to believe that the Strega were a corrupting influence on the nobles, and their devious ways were destroying the country for the sake of Legion. The nobles, unwilling to give up the advice of the sorcerous wives tried to quell the public with words and then force, but that only made things worse. Eventually, things reached cri-

sis point when a group of Strega travelling on the mainland were set upon by 'bandits' and burnt alive to 'purify' them. Soon, more such burnings were taking place and the nobles were forced to hide their families in case the witch-hunts came for their wives and daughters.

It things had been allowed to continue, they would have led to revolution, and the nobles didn't have the resources to crush the entire populace. They were forced to offer concessions, and it was the Strega who suffered for it. The heads of the noble families gathered with a deputation from the Church (standing for 'the people') and negotiated a way for the women of the nobility to be 'brought into the light of Theus'.

It was obvious that the power of sorcery couldn't be removed, and also that the nobility had no intention of doing without the advice and power of their Strega wives. So, several compromises were reached. The first was that all noblewomen would wear a black dress and veil, so that all who saw her would know what she was. They were also expected to lead virtuous and pious lives. Only the light of Theus could save them from the corrupting influences that already tarnished their souls. Finally, they were to be denied an education, bar the skills that would make them 'good wives' such as sewing and etiquette.

Needles to say the educated and politically adept women of the nobility weren't very happy about this bargain their husbands had struck. However, they had little choice. To refuse to submit would have drawn the country into a revolution, with its first order of business being the burning of all Fate Witches. Some women tried to resist and continued to read in secret. Those who did so were often burnt or more usually blinded for their 'crime'. Over time the women of Vodacce were forced to settle with their lot, and in a few generations their lack of education denied them a way to break free. Instead, they turned to their own community and like true Vodacce, found other ways to gain power and influence, through their husbands and their own sisterhood and secrets.



Men and Sorte

So why are there no male Fate Witches? Like the nature of Theus, the answer to that is up to the Gamesmaster. However, it is worth offering a few options here.

The first and simplest answer is that Alia really did curse the line. Using powers only available to someone directly imbued, she linked the fate of Sorte with her female descendants. In this case it is impossible for a man to be born with the power; fate simply will not allow it.

If you are in a nastier mood, you can argue that male Strega are rare, but they do sometimes occur. However, given that all their power is dependant on their command of Sorte, it is a power the women will not allow to come into the hands of man. In true Vodacce style, the Godmothers and Widows ensure that all male children born with even the inkling of the gift are killed quickly and quietly. Most Strega have other Strega present at the birth of their children, and the midwife simply checks the strands of the newborn and tears away any strands that relate to sorcery. Still births are not unknown in 1668, in fact they are quite common.

If you pick this option as a Gamesmaster, there is the chance that a male Strega will be lucky enough to avoid such a fate. Such a man might wield great power if he reaches a decent age, as a Strega who has the freedoms of a man can do anything he can imagine. However, those who couldn't control him will seek his death, and even if he can find a Strega to teach him how to use his gifts, there are plenty of her sisters who will want him dead.

A final option is that men can be born with sorte, they just cannot learn to use it. Something in their make-up makes them unable to see the strands at all. So they might carry the power and give it to their daughters, but they are simply unable to wield it themselves.

The Unbound

It is quite possible that the unbound are simply men born with Sorte, and that in men the powers of the Unbound are how the gift manifests. However, there is another, lesser-known tale.

It is said that before she became a slave, there was one man Alia loved, her brother Derial. He too was born into slavery, but they were lucky enough to be bought together and their hardships only strengthened their bond. When Alia had the gift of sorcery forced upon her, the first person she used it on was Derial. She pulled strands to grant him as much money and power as she could. While she remained imprisoned in torment, he gained his freedom and set up a business that prospered. He made vast sums of money, even though nothing he could do allowed him to free his sister. It did manage to secure him a noble bride and in this way he bought himself into the nobility. His family grew and prospered and his descendants mingled with the various noble lines.

So every now and then, a man is born from the blood of Derial's line who also carries the blessing of Alia. It is as if fate long ago chose such men to do great or terrible things and will allow no mere mortal to play with what it has decreed. In such a way, these 'Unbound' cannot be meddled with or manipulated by the powers of the Strega.

Playing a Witch

Fate Witches can be among the most difficult characters in 7th Sea to play. To begin with, just bringing them into a player group is hard enough. They need a reason to be travelling where and when they like if the campaign is not in Vodacce.

Keeping a Witch in the Group

The easiest way to allow a player Strega is to have her attached to one of the other male characters. Travelling with her husband is an excellent way to get around the problems of runaways in Vodacce. However, she could just as easily travel with a brother or bodyguard. It is quite possible her family may send her on missions that take her in the same direction as the characters. I ran an occasional character (Fiora in the story above) who was a talented forger. She couldn't read, but was good at copying the strange symbols in front of her. This made her very valuable to her father. She was often taken to other courts, and during the ball taken to a side room and made to copy documents that would be replaced by her father's agents later. To have a forger who didn't know the secrets she was copying was a



great asset, until she gradually came to understand the script in from of her.

So to bring a Fate Witch into a game you really need to consider three options. Is she a runaway, married or working for someone? Each has their own special considerations. A runaway has plenty of problems already. So consider who might be after her and what she has done to cover her tracks. Are any of the other members in the party aware of her identity and trying to help? Are any of the rest of the party aware of who she is and looking to bring her home?

If the lady is married she need not do everything her husband says. If they love each other, then all the better, but there is no reason they should. The GM can easily say ‘Sarah, just so you know, I’ve decided you are married to Bob’s character’. After all, the Strega herself will have no more choice in the matter! The relationship between the married couple can be an excellent source of role-play sub-plot. Will they eventually fall in love? Do they actually love each other and are playing a game with everyone else? Does the love come from only one side, and what does the other partner feel about it? What sort of extra marital affairs might they both get up to, and do they have ‘an arrangement’?

The final option of the lady working a special mission takes the most consideration on the part of the GM. After all, when the mission is done, she no longer has a reason to stay. Also, the GM must ensure the mission takes her in the same direction as the rest of the party group. This idea works best for a party that is settled in one place. However it can work very well when the mission is an intrinsic thread of the campaign as a whole. A plot woven into the campaign can work wonderfully, but only if the GM puts the work in to see it makes sense. Don’t use this method lightly as you can end up revealing too much to one player or trapping yourself by things you set up with the Strega’s mission. However, on the upside, using the method ensures the Strega can adventure with the group pretty much in the same way as any other character.

No Victims

It is also important not to always play Strega as victims. While they are oppressed horribly, they are still Vodacce.

The lives of men and women are separate in Vodacce, and in their own world there is still much power to be had by the women. Plenty of women use their power to control their men, whether they can read or not. In one adventure I ran for my group, one of the characters (Pietro Villanova) returned home after an absence of five years. He fully expected his wife to berate him for leaving her with a daughter and insist he stay at the family home. She did nothing of the sort. First she had got the backing of Giovanni Villanova for her plots, as Pietro’s absence had brought shame to the family. Pietro was also shocked to discover she had a lover, one she wanted him to challenge to a duel. It seemed the affair was boring her and she was interested in trying another lover. Pietro’s return allowed her a way to remove her current lover and restore her reputation under the guise of an angry husband’s revenge. In the meantime she saw to it her lover’s blade was poisoned, to see Pietro was dealt with, although he survived that attempt. Finally she administered a slow acting poison to her husband in a drink. Then she refused him the antidote until he signed a document granting her sole custody and control of their 5 year old daughter. Not surprisingly she wanted him to have nothing to do with the girl whether he was back or not. She then told him to get lost and leave her and her daughter alone or there would be more consequences. Poor Pietro left Vodacce a little wiser about the nature of women in Vodacce.

Having said that, just like men, women come in all shapes and sizes. They can be just as weak-willed and fallible. So don’t feel you can’t play a character who falls into the meek stereotype of the abused Fate Witch. Sad to say, plenty of abused women stay with their abusers convinced they are still in love. They often see each session of abuse to be an aberration that her husband is truly sorry for and really won’t do again. Denial is a powerful thing. On the other hand, many women in such a situation stay there because they simply cannot see a way out. A story where such a woman is offered an escape and decides to take it can be a powerful tale. Especially as she will probably not believe there is a way out at first, having to be convinced she can finally be rid of her oppressor.



Education

Plenty of players will want their Strega to be able to read. After all, they will consider their character intelligent and heroic, so why wouldn't she? Surly a PC will always be among the few who can read? Well, not necessarily. The ban against reading and education isn't just a flat out ban. If that was the case, all Strega who decided to break the mould (essentially all PCs) would decide to cross that line.

So instead of a ban, the prohibition against an education has taken on a social twist. Strega and noblewomen are brought up to believe that such things are for Courtesans and whores. Why would she want to read, when the strands tell her all she needs to know? If she cannot read the strands that well, then she deserves to be ignorant. Certainly no Strega wants to be compared to a Courtesan, they are so much better.

While that might seem stupid in a literate society such as ours, remember that it wasn't the same in 1668. Literacy levels are higher in 7th Sea than the real historical world, but even so, plenty of the nobility cannot read. So when most nobles get about without any problems, why on earth would a Strega sully herself with copying the painted whores of the islands? What does she need to know of art and science, these are men's things, something a woman only uses to impress him and seduce him. As a Strega you don't need to impress a man, he should damn well know his place and respect you anyway, and as for seducing him!

This doesn't mean it is impossible for a Strega to get herself an education. You just need to also bear in mind the social pressures against her as well as the legal ones. It is her mother who may beat her after finding her in a library, fearing that her daughter is weak in sorcery or seeks to learn the manners of a whore. Even worse, should others learn of the

girl's education, they may think the same things. This impacts on her marriage prospects and the family's reputation.

Training a Fate Witch

It is very hard to see if a girl has the power, as Sorte leaves no outside mark. There are no bloodstained hands or flaming eyes that mark her gift. So in Vodacce, all noble daughters are assumed to be Strega until they prove they are not. Usually the gift becomes apparent quite early. Many girls as



young as 5 or 6 can see the strands to some degree. However, few can really focus on them until their early teens. Should a girl fail to see the strands before her 16th birthday she will be considered a Senzivista.

However, there are stories of girls manifesting ability much later. The insane witch Lucrezia manifested her power very late in life. However her story is thankfully rare as the sort of trauma that awakens such dormant power usually drives the woman insane.

In general, those without Sorte are weeded out quite early. Master Atropos can often tell a true born Strega, even when the girl is unaware of her power. However, some Senzivista are very good at mimicking the ability of their peers and there are stories of especially clever women convincing their teachers they have the power when they do

not. Most children struggle to be 'normal' at that age, and to not have the power in such company marks you are a freak and an outsider. If a girl is discovered to be Senzivista early, she is simply removed from the classes and married off as quickly as possible. However, those who discover their lack of power late are more accurately aware of the consequences. Many teenage Senviziata have been known to throw themselves from the high towers of Vodacce when they discover what their fate is likely to be without the gift.

Girls who are gifted with Sorte, usually begin to see the strands fade into existence as they grow up. They see the thin strands gradually fade into view between people. As they grow and train they learn how to focus on the strands, so they can see the colour and strength of a strand. However, even when they are not looking for it, the strands are always present to a Strega. It is said that this constant web in their vision is what drives some mad. Some become paranoid about touching other people's strands, often ducking under or moving around to avoid the unseen wires that cross their vision.

When a girl is ready to receive proper training, she is sent to study with a master Strega. Each sorte teacher trains around ten or so girls at a time. It is in these shuttered halls where men are not allowed, the girls begin to learn how separate the worlds of women and men are. The other girls in their training circle are often the first 'Nascosto Sorella' that a young witch takes on. Friendships begin here that last for a very long time.

Training continues until the girl marries. When this happens she is expected to continue to practice her skills and get further training from her peers in a less formal way. If a girl doesn't marry she can remain in the training school for a very long time. However, when a group is down to only one or two women who are all in their twenties, they are usually released from training as long as they have reached Adept level. Having said that, few Strega ever go unwed, as their power is too valuable.

A woman will return to her old master for further training when she is ready to attain a new mastery level. It doesn't have to be the same teacher, although it usually is. Training in some of the advanced powers of Sorte is usually a case of helping the woman understand and access abilities that are already dormant. So some women need no training at all to attain a new mastery level. But as with all things, having a teacher on hand to assist makes the process a lot easier.

Madness

Madness is a common side effect of the gift of Sorte. No one knows why insanity should be so common for Sorte wielders and not other forms of sorcery. Did Alia's madness taint her

line, or did the power drive her mad too? Either way, those who manifest the gift early or late are most likely to be damaged by it. So precocious Strega are watched as closely as late starters. Those who do loose their minds are quietly locked away. The family look after their insane daughters, and listen just as eagerly to the prophesy they spout from their cells. However, the mad witches of Vodacce are considered a shame for any family. Such women never see anyone outside their close family, who usually pronounce to the world they have died.

Interestingly, this insistence on forgetting their insane daughters has served many Senzivista well. A few have managed to fake insanity before their lack of power is discovered. If they are patient they can live as a mad woman until they are forgotten, which doesn't take long. After a while the doors are not locked quite so tightly and a clever Senzivista can finally escape. However, she risks much as if she is caught, no one will miss her and she can be executed quietly.

Given how madness and Sorte are linked, the GM may impose a strain on the mind when the gift is used. Every time the Strega uses her gifts to manipulate fate the GM should roll 1d10. If the roll is over a certain target number the witch gains an insanity point. The target number depends on what the Strega was doing. For laying a curse or using a sorte ritual it is 10, for pulling or adjusting strands it is 9 and for creating or destroying a strand it is 8. If the action involves black strands the number drops by 1 as well.

The GM keeps track of any insanity points the Strega earns and keeps the number secret. The Strega and her player should never know if they have gained a point or how many they have. The GM can then use these points as if they were curse dice for perception rolls. Should these curse dice make the Strega fail to perceive something she seems something else. She might believe a person is sneering instead of speaking pleasantly. She may see people watching her when there is nothing there. How she acts on this new information is up to the player, but after a while the player may not know if they really have spotted something the others in the group missed, or if her mind is playing tricks on her.



The Unravelled

Statistics for the Unravelled can be found in the Vodacce book (p 123). However, we felt they needed a little more explanation as to what they are and how they come to be.

The unravelled are nightmares told to small children, a lesson to young Strega to take care with their abilities. These terrible half dead creatures are thankfully rare, but not nearly as rare as many would like to think

The penalties for playing with the raw nature of fate itself are high. Those who meddle where they shouldn't find fate snaps back, often with fatal consequences. At some point in her life, every Witch over extends her ability and receives a fate lash for her arrogance. Most have the sense to heed such a warning, but many don't.

When a Strega dies from wounds delivered by fate lashes there is a chance she may rise again as one of the twisted unravelled. The creature looks much a twisted version of how she looked in life. Her face contorts into a rage and madness few can understand. Her skin is pale and tight over her rigid bones. The teeth and nails become pronounced and sharp. Unravelled also walk with sharp and broken movements. Their rotting muscles stealing away all the grace and poise they may have had in life. It is almost like they are being moved by some insane puppeteer, which in a sense is exactly what is happening.

When most people die, fate has time to attach black strands to them, marking them for a natural death as part of the order of things. It doesn't happen in all cases, as some deaths come so suddenly or unnaturally that even fate is caught unaware. However, when a Strega dies of wounds delivered by fate lashes, fate itself is confused and damaged.

Sometimes, the black strands attach to her, but too late. If the lady has already manipulated black strands (such as with the black strands spread) the strands cannot attach normally after years of her using her power to keep them at bay. In most people the black strands would simply not bother to attach, but when a Strega has manipulated them, fate senses something is wrong. It works doubly hard to attach black strands to bring order to the aberration that has caught its at-

ention. Fate tries so hard to attach black strands to such a damaged and unnatural form that it often only manages to do so after the woman has died. When this happens, the black strands are denied their usual function and cannot fade naturally, instead, broken from the natural order, they begin to rot. In rotting the black strands poison all the other strands the Strega had, twisting and corrupting them.

The Strega herself, becomes caught between life and death. Her soul moves on, but her body is animated by fate itself which cannot decide where she fits, whether she is alive or dead. The only option it has is to sever what remains of the witch by cutting all her remaining strands. Unfortunately fate cannot simply cut these strands they need to be destroyed. The only way to do that is to destroy what the strand connects to. This means the unravelled uses her strands to come after those who have wronged her, those she used to love.

Luckily, most strands decay pretty quickly on the death of a Strega. Any business dealings and power relationships she had vanish with her death. However in some cases the news of her death may take time to filter through, making the unravelled come after their old business partners and teachers, especially when some dealings continue (for the sake of heirs) after her death. In many cases her conflicts fade quite quickly on her death. However, if her reputation remains and some of her enemies remain jealous of her, a few sword strands may remain. Unfortunately it is the cups strands that remain for the longest. Those who love the Strega hold onto her memory the hardest. So, with horrible irony, it is those who loved her in life that are hunted by the unravelled.

When an unravelled rises, she retains most of her memories and a decent vestige of her intellect. However, all her personality and soul is gone. She is a being of desperate hatred, looking to destroy anything that connects her to life so she can finally rest. Few can guess at the torment such a creature suffers, trapped between worlds. When hunting her connections the unravelled follows the nearest and strongest first. She isn't especially subtle, looking to attack at the earliest opportunity. However, she has the intellect to wait until nightfall or until her target is alone to be more certain of success. She certainly doesn't work out any long-term plans, as her desperation to be done with life overrules any thoughts



of taking her time. However, an unravelled is a cunning and dedicated enemy that should never be underestimated.

In addition to her ability with fate lashes, Unravelled take damage in a different way to normal. She cannot be destroyed until her strands are gone. When she takes enough dramatic wounds to destroy her, she rises again the next night on full health, but with her strongest strand reduced by one level. Many try to burn and otherwise destroy an unravelled, but the ashes fly up and gradually reform somewhere else. Another thing of interest to Vodacce is that unravelled are immune to any weapon that have ever been twisted. The black strands cannot hard her and anything touched by them directly just does not exist to her.

The only way to lay an unravelled to rest is for another Strega to reduce or sever the remaining strands she has. When this happens, or when she has finally destroyed those who connected her to life she can finally be killed. She cannot simply commit suicide as her black strands are too rotten. So instead, she goes on a rampage. She attacks anything nearby in the hope that something will prove dangerous enough to destroy her. Depending on who she comes across first, this could result in the deaths of many innocents. However, this time, when she falls she remains dead.

Suggested Reading

To gain a new perception of the way in which the Strega work perhaps you might like to see how similar groups work in other fictional worlds. In particular, look to The Dune Series (Frank Herbert) for the Bene Gesserit and also Secrets of the Jin Shei (Alma Alexander) for the sisterhood.

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