

The Workings of Dark Souls

THE MASTER'S HOUSE

There are very few dwellings that Lasombra consider to be suitable for long-term occupation. While traveling, of course, they make do, but when it comes time to return home, Lasombra are very selective about their circumstances.

There is a significant minority among the Magisters in the holy orders. These vampires dwell within fortress-like monasteries and abbeys, often in monastic asceticism. However, ascetic does not mean foolish — these monasteries and nunneries are as grim as prisons and twice as defensible. Thick, brooding walls and heavy gates, not to mention full complements of truly faithful clergy and servants, serve as more than adequate protection. As the concentration of faith in such defenses provides a potentially fatal threat to the guarded Lasombra as well, these Magisters must burrow themselves into the heart of their labyrinthine homes. A delicate balance must be maintained between piety and avoidance of the truly pious, otherwise the Lasombra may find himself destroyed by his own protections.

Some holy ground contains such a concentration of faith that it causes agony for a Cainite to stand upon it. Such places are well known among Caine's children and are avoided for that reason. Not surprisingly, certain Lasombra have made a practice of desecrating such sites and then usurping them, trusting residual faith and long-standing reputations to keep intruders out.

Monasteries such as this also squat atop massive underground complexes of monks' cells, confessionals, storerooms, and other, less identifiable chambers. If the resident Lasombra are at all involved with the Cainite heresy, it is in these tunnels that the devotees of this deviant faith meet, far from light and life. Here is also where less savory members of the clergy come for their illicit trysts, and where recalcitrant initiates are "disciplined." What other uses these chambers see can only be

imagined, though innumerable stories have been whispered of torture and murder, even those of prisoners locked away and forgotten until their very bones crumbled to dust.

There is usually some form of subterranean path out of the monastery that can be reached through the underground complex. Many monasteries resemble fortresses in other ways as well, having large supplies of food secreted away, independent water sources and smithies that can easily be turned to armory work.

On a less martial note, monasteries also house vast stores of knowledge in the form of books and scrolls. These manuscripts, both ancient and modern, are a powerful resource, and may well be one of the reasons the Lasombra originally moved into the Church. After all, a scroll rescued from the wreck of one of the Greek colonies in Asia Minor just might contain information about a Cainite who dwelt there — or at the very least, insight into her background and deeds. Any of these might be key in understanding (or eradicating) the Cainite in question; it is a truism among the Magisters that one can never have too much information on an opponent.

Access to Lasombra-held libraries is tightly restricted as the Magisters have no wish to share their treasures with competitors. It is a signal honor for a non-Lasombra to be granted access to one of the Magisters' libraries. Furthermore, any vampire to whom this gift is granted incurs a weighty debt to the Lasombra that will undoubtedly someday be called upon. As an added matter, any and all visitors are chaperoned, usually by both Cainite and mortal guardians to make sure no materials go out on unauthorized, extended loans.

Part and parcel with libraries, however, are librarians — monks who are literate. With literacy at a premium outside of monastery walls, the advantage inherent in potential control of the largest demographic of those who can read is incalculable. (Consider this: The laws of the land are, of course, written. The only ones who know what they actually say are those who can read. Literacy by no means has honesty as a prerequisite. The rest is left as an exercise for the student.)

THE LOST VISAGE

It is well known that Lasombra Cainites cannot see their own reflections in a mirror. Some stories say that the clan was punished thus by Caine for some unknown transgression, others claim that the Devil took their reflections when they dared to call upon darkness greater than his own. (The latter explanation, while popular, is technically heresy and will greatly upset any Lasombra with religious leanings who hears it.) The theories are numberless, but there is no explanation that fits the facts.

Regardless of cause, no Lasombra owns a reflection. Once Embraced, a Lasombra's face cannot be seen in a mirror, a pool of water, a puddle of quicksilver or any other reflective surface. As a result, certain other Cainites have taken to placing mirrors strategically in havens and palaces, for the sake of identifying any Magisters present. However, the Lasombra have taken advantage of this quirk as well (see below).

Without the benefits of reflections, Lasombra tend to obsess about their appearances. Many will have manservants or ghouls whose sole function is to dress and groom them and state repeatedly how superb they look. The position of "body ghoul" to a Lasombra is one calling for much discretion, as the ghoul is the Magister's almost constant companion. A few Magisters, perhaps focused a tad too thoroughly on their images, pay Tzimisce vampires outrageous sums to alter the features of their body ghouls to mirror their own. The body ghoul then becomes a walking, talking, faux-mirror for the vampire, fussed and fidgeted over to a disturbing degree.

Even the most sensible Lasombra, however, are partial to seeing their own image, and most sit for at least one portrait every year. This practice is most common among Magisters between one and three centuries of age, who often fill entire galleries with portraits of their own image. More than one visitor has remarked upon the unnerving sensation of walking corridors lined entirely with variations upon the same face and features.

Of course, woe betide any mortal painter who is so foolish as to render a portrait of a *young* Magister that is less than flattering. While many of the clan's more practical elder members appreciate an accurate recording of their appearance, younger ones just coming to grips with the loss of their reflections often have somewhat...idealized memories of what they actually look like. When a portrait fails to live up to their euphemistic expectations, these young Magisters can get upset — with unfortunate consequences for the artist.

Islamic Lasombra scrupulously avoid this sort of portraiture and, indeed, most forms of representative art.



