

ON THE DANCE OF THE WICKED

Early in my exploration of Cathay I had taken up travels with a large caravan of merchants who banded together under the premise that there was safety in numbers. We had traveled for many days through the plains of Tiet Dei on our way to the land's capital, Heng Na. The nights had become long and bitter, and members of our caravan had taken to building large bonfires where everyone would gather to eat and tell stories in order to help stave off the discomfort.

One night, while I sat soaking in the warmth of the fire, I was witness to a most spectacular display, a dance of sorts, unlike anything I had seen in all of my travels back home. Two young men who had joined our company earlier that day were engaged in what seemed at first a battle. But upon further observation, it turned out to be an exercise. The two men twisted, twirled, and flipped about the grounds, their highly polished swords moving in sweeping arcs at blinding speeds, flickering in the moonlight. I asked one of my fellow onlookers what exactly it was they were doing and was told that it was the dance of the Iron Lotus, an exercise of Sword Dancers from the training school of the same name. After their exhilarating display one of them, whose Name was Kei Kei, joined our fire and I was able to learn the following tale.

• DAYLEN JAGARO, HUMAN MERCHANT OF BARTERTOWN •



he art to which I have devoted my life requires total commitment of body, mind, and soul. The sinews of the flesh, the reason for the action taken, and the passion behind the motion all must strike a perfect harmony. The saber is the brush that paints great masterpieces on canvas. The saber is the quill that scribes unending tales of heroism. The saber is the instrument of whirling grace, meting out death in beautiful arrays of sweeps and arcs. In my hand the saber is the physical embodiment of death, though it is not wanton. Every movement of my blade has a purpose, wasting no stroke. At any given moment my blade is precisely where I want it to be, striking whoever or whatever it is that has had the misfortune of finding itself to be the subject of my latest artistic endeavor.

Even though Kei Kei prefers the saber, not every Sword Dancer uses that blade. I've seen adepts with daggers, the dew of the lotus, and even two-handed blades. But all have been both deadly and beautiful when using their magic.

—Weng Daa, Elf Illusionist

No other weapon that has been crafted by Namegivers, past or present, can touch the untainted grace of the saber. The axe can fell the mightiest of trees or cleave the strongest men. The axe in the hands of a battle-maddened troll, as fearsome as it can be, can destroy any foe that crosses its path, leaving the enemy a bloodied, crumpled heap. But there is no passion or thought behind that, no grace. Thus the axe is useless in my hands.

The bolt can strike at anything that the archer desires, though in order to be effective the archer must remain at distance from his target. The archer can emphasize no emotion into the streak of a bolt and cannot enforce the bolt's strike with the essence of his heart and soul. After the bolt is fired it is no longer his, and he has no further involvement in the tale of the bolt's flight—it is always the same. Whether it arcs, flies straight, or ricochets to strike the target, each archer's discipline is alike. You cannot read an archer's passion, for his art is passionless; you cannot see into his soul, for the bolt is a dead thing. Once the bolt strikes its target its story is over and it becomes a mere object of little importance. The bolt in my eyes is little more than a tool, not unlike a knife to a butcher, or a blacksmith's hammer. The crossbow and bolt in my hands would be wasted, as I have no desire to hold them.

My sword will still be in my hand upon the ending of the tale that is my life, and perhaps will again be picked up by another who will continue its story and further its legacy.

ON THE TRAINING OF THE SWORD DANCER



he life of the Sword Dancer is one of rigorous training and observation. In my beginnings I fought with sticks against my brothers in the fields of my home village. Later I became involved in intense training under the tutelage of Grandmaster Po Zhou in the halls of *kwoon* Iron Lotus, learning the arts at the expense of my blood, sweat, and tears. My life has always been about the sword and how to manipulate it to my needs. Learning how to carve legends from the air, spinning tales times past

while scribing new tales for future generations. Whittling out these tales with a swing of the blade, my intended target is the medium on which I write, be it the air, a tree, or some unfortunate who has confronted me.

But I digress; I was speaking of training. The training is rigorous and it focuses on the mind even more so than the body. The body is a tool, just as the sword, to be bent to the will of your mind and spirit.

Does every Cathayan adept have to undergo strict training and lead a harsh life? That land is strange...

—Belphegor, Elf Scout

Take this instance for example. I was traveling alone on the plains north of here when I was waylaid by two thugs who wished to take what little money I carried. It was just after the sun had set and the air was becoming frigid, freezing my breath as it escaped my mouth. The two circled around me on the trail, hoping to gain an advantage, though when you have trained in my Discipline as long as I have, there is no such thing as an advantage for the undisciplined.

My mind reverted to my teachings, scanning the volumes of my memory in search of a story that could be applied to my situation: possibly the story of Diang Sho and his heroic efforts at the frontline of the battle of Bei Wu. Diang Sho was outnumbered by enemy Sword Dancers ten to one in the middle of a chaos-stricken battlefield and was ultimately defeated, though the last man was so wounded that he would later die on that same field. No, that one would not do; I did not face enough opponents. A great tale, though it would not be a proper choice for my predicament.

Then my mind drifted to the tale of Mount Xan. The story of two warriors engaged in a struggle for victory on the frozen slopes of the Dragon Spine Mountains. The two were fighting for the love of a woman, who had told them that her undying love could be found at the peak of Mount Xan, and they would have to climb the mountain in order to retrieve it. Near the summit the two men encountered each other and engaged in a sword duel. During the course of the battle they had both taken serious injuries, their blood flowing like crimson rivers through the icy snow. As it became more of a struggle to stay conscious in the thin, frozen air, their breathing became labored gasps, filling the air with a bitter mist. After a while neither of the two could stay on his feet any longer, and both men collapsed into the bed of snow. Both warriors had succumbed to the icy grip of the cold winds, and perished where they fell.

The winner of this duel was not either one of the men maddened with love, but the mountain itself, the third element to this tale. This tale would fit the matter at hand perfectly: two against one, the one being victorious in the end. I swiftly enacted the *Dance of Mount Xan*, my blade becoming a blur, sweeping in the cold night air, cutting and slashing. My body conformed to the dance of the story, my feet alive with legend, my arms the conductors of the music. The brigands were doomed before they realized fate had come for them. Within mere moments both men lay dead on the trail, their blood returning to the soil, their warmth quickly escaping into the cold night air.

TALENTS AND ABILITIES

INITIATE

Talent Options: Avoid Blow, Detect Weapon, Etiquette, Search, Sense Danger

FIRST CIRCLE

Discipline Talents: Air Dance, Blade Dance, Karma Ritual, Melee Weapons, Parry

NOVICE

Talent Options: Acrobatic Strike, Conceal Object, Durability (7/6), Great Leap, Kip, Surprise Strike, Swift Kick, Wound Balance

SECOND CIRCLE

Defense: The adept adds +1 to his Physical Defense.
Discipline Talent: Anticipate Blow

THIRD CIRCLE

Discipline Talent: Riposte

FOURTH CIRCLE

Karma: The adept may spend 1 Karma Point on Dexterity-only Tests.
Discipline Talent: Thread Weaving [Sword Weaving]

JOURNEYMAN

Talent Options: Cobra Strike, Disarm, Life Check, Lion Heart, Performance, Second Weapon, Spot Armor Flaw, Sprint

FIFTH CIRCLE

Bladed Supremacy: When fighting an opponent who is armed with weapon that is not a sword, the adept may establish his sword's supremacy. Taking 1 Strain, he makes a Perception Test against the target's Spell Defense as a Simple Action. If successful, he adds a +1 bonus to Damage Tests made with one sword he is wielding until combat ends (he may repeat the procedure for other swords he wields or changes to).
Discipline Talent: Duel

SIXTH CIRCLE

Karma: The adept may spend 1 Karma Point on Perception-only Tests.
Discipline Talent: Shadow Step

SEVENTH CIRCLE

Karma: The adept may spend 1 Karma Point on Damage Tests with a sword.
Discipline Talent: Engaging Dance

EIGHTH CIRCLE

Defense: The adept adds +1 to his Physical Defense.
Discipline Talent: Blade Blur

WARDEN

Talent Options: Champion Challenge, Critical Hit, Defense, Mind Blade, Tiger Spring, Trace Missile, True Sight, Weapon Breaker

NINTH CIRCLE

Cut to the Quick: After Wounding or dispatching an opponent in melee combat, the adept may take 2 Strain to demoralize opponents he is currently in close combat with. They can only attack him this round if they succeed at a Willpower Test (or test for a similar ability resisting fear or intimidation) against the adept's Sword Weaving Step.

Karma: The adept may spend 1 Karma Point on Recovery Tests.

Discipline Talent: Legendary Blades

TENTH CIRCLE

Defense: The adept adds +1 to his Physical Defense.

Initiative: The adept adds +1 to his Initiative Step.

Discipline Talent: Whirlwind

ELEVENTH CIRCLE

Defense: The adept adds +1 to his Social and +1 to his Spell Defense.

Discipline Talent: Pin

TWELFTH CIRCLE

Defense: The adept adds +1 to his Physical Defense.

Recovery: The adept adds +1 Recovery Test per day.

Discipline Talent: Feather Light

MASTER

Talent Options: Echo Location, Gain Surprise, Infuse Blade, Missile Twister, Multi-Strike, Spirit Strike

THIRTEENTH CIRCLE

Dancer's Tale: Mastering the sword dance, the adept weaves his own tale into his fights. When combat is imminent or in the first combat round, the adept may take 2 Strain and make a Sword Weaving Test, noting the result. Whenever a melee Damage Test he makes during that combat has a lower result than that of the Sword Weaving Test, he may take 3 Strain to substitute the Sword Weaving Test Result for the original Damage Test Result.

Defense: The adept adds +1 to his Spell Defense.

Karma: The adept adds +1 to his Karma Step.

Discipline Talent: Wind Slash

FOURTEENTH CIRCLE

Defense: The adept adds +1 to his Physical Defense.

Initiative: The adept adds +1 to his Initiative Step.

Discipline Talent: Ethereal Weapon

FIFTEENTH CIRCLE

Defense: The adept adds +1 to his Social and +1 to his Spell Defense.

Recovery: The adept adds +1 Recovery Test per day.

Discipline Talent: Vital Strike

ON GAINING ACCEPTANCE INTO THE KWoons

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hile at the *kwoon*, the Sword Dancer learns the language of the blade and how to perform stories through the dance.

The language is very complex and those without formal training in the Sword Dancer arts cannot understand the intricacies of the movements. The language itself is only taught to the select few from across all of Cathay who are able to meet the requirements of the enrolment tests. These tests cover all things pertinent to sword fighting, such as the ability to wield the sword in a poetic manner, the ability to identify proper strike points and targets, and the ability to focus one's thoughts and energy completely to the dance. The tests also ensure that the initiate is capable of learning all other aspects that will be introduced later in his training, ranging from personal etiquette to self-discipline. If an applicant fails in any of the requirements, he is declined entry into that *kwoon*, though he may attempt to enter other



kwoons, though not until the following year. I myself am a member of the Iron Lotus *kwoon*, which is by far the most difficult of all the *kwoons* to gain acceptance into. The Iron Lotus has produced the greatest Sword Dancers that the lands have ever seen. The most students that have gained admittance into the Iron Lotus at one time during the one month out of the year dedicated to the tests was three, and that year I was one of them.

After an initiate has gained permission to be a member of the school, and his training has begun, he will always be a student of that school, until he passes on to the next existence. No matter what he chooses to do in life, he will always be a student seeking to be a master of his art. Though most students of the *kwoons* find that their skills can be best put to use by enlisting into their kingdoms' militaries, fighting on one of the many fronts across Cathay, I have chosen the path of the traveler. The *Dance of Kei Kei* will not be of military service, but of exploration. It has already grown long—45 movements! But it will grow longer still. For the Sword Dancer, the dance does not end until the music stops.

GAME INFORMATION

Sword Dancers live and die by the blade. They utilize quick, circular motions combined with acrobatics and kicks to defeat their opponents. Their graceful movements always lead seamlessly into the next maneuver, and even in the midst of life-threatening battles the Sword Dancer is a testimony of calm, looking as though he is simply performing a carefully choreographed dance.

Important Attributes: Dexterity, Perception

Karma Ritual: To perform his Karma Ritual, the Sword Dancer fences against imaginary opponents. He fights the first few duels as silent, simple exercises. In the final duel of the ritual, the Sword Dancer provides yells, acrobatic moves, and even high kicks. The ritual is complete when the last foe falls.

Half-Magic: The Sword Dancer uses half-magic to maintain his sword and to recognize and rate different types of swords. He may use half-magic for Knowledge Tests pertaining to different *kwoons* and to recognize at which *kwoon* a Sword Dancer studied. Sword Dancers also employ half-magic for Knowledge Tests about famous swordsmen and their exploits, whether from history, tales, or legends.

SPECIAL RULES

Sword Dancers are limited to sword-like weapons by their Discipline's philosophy, and abilities original to them usually require a sword to be used. The exact definition of "sword" is left for the gamemaster to determine. However, it should not be made by name alone, a weapon does not need to be called a sword to be considered one. The prime example is the saber, the sword most widespread in Cathay. But daggers can be considered swords too, and even a club could be considered a wooden training sword the Sword Dancer is in the habit of using.

At the gamemaster's discretion, some special and optional rules of the Swordmaster Discipline may be applied to Sword Dancers, although they should always be interpreted more narrowly, as being limited to swords is part of what allows some Sword Dancer abilities to be powerful. For example, the Weapon Masters rules (*Player's Companion*, p. 70) could be applied to add flavor to play, allowing a player to call his saber-wielding Sword Dancer a Saber Dancer. Similarly, the Sword Dancers may know Soul Swords or Chosen Weapons (*Player's Companion*, p. 71), though the latter should be more specific than the Swordmaster's, for example be limited to exact styles within a weapon type (e.g. "a dew of the lotus sword measuring 27 inches, weighing in an ounce short of three pounds, without tassel").

ROLEPLAYING HINTS

The Sword Dancer's speech, like his movements, is often graceful and poetic, and nearly as often enigmatic. The Sword Dancer prefers to speak in riddles and dance around topics before suddenly arriving at the point with thoughtful precision.

Sword Dancers learn early on to control emotions as part of their training, so it is rare to ever see one lose his temper or succumb to fear. Many Sword Dancers often appear aloof, like eccentric artists seeking to paint their masterpieces upon the canvas of the world.

DISCIPLINE VIOLATIONS

Most Discipline violations occur among Sword Dancers if they begin to use any weapon other than a sword. Even in the direst of situations the Sword Dancer believes that using any other weapon is beneath him.

Sword Dancers always suffer a discipline crisis when they cannot uphold the standards of their *kwoon*, when they repeatedly and knowingly challenge Sword Dancers of lower ability to a Duel, or do so just to gain Karma Points (see the Duel talent, p. 84). They may suffer a crisis if they refuse too many Duels by equal opponents.

RITUALS OF ADVANCEMENT

The Sword Dancer's advancement rituals involve proving his prowess with a blade.

Recruitment: Unlike recruits of most other Disciplines, a potential Sword Dancer seeks entrance to a Sword Dancer school, known as a *kwoon*, by taking and passing a recruitment test, and thereby gains a master to instruct him. This test is given during only one month each year.

Novice (2-4): The adept must perform a complex dance, telling the life story of a famous Sword Dancer. The dance becomes longer and more difficult the higher in Circle the adept rises.

Journeyman (5-8): The adept must spar with blunted blades against multiple opponents at the same time. At Fifth Circle it is three opponents, at Sixth Circle the number rises to four opponents, at Seventh Circle the number rises to five opponents, and at Eighth Circle the number rises to six opponents.

Warden (9-12): The Sword Dancer must perform the counterattacks for an arbitrary dance decided upon and performed by his tutor. The Sword Dancer must quickly maneuver into place, perform the correct strikes and blocks, and feign death as appropriate, at times jumping and flipping into position. The difficulty and obscurity of the dance chosen increases as the adept rises in Circle.

Ghost Master Ritual: The Sword Dancer performs the dance that tells his own story, but he must perform it in reverse and with no errors. Once completed, the ghost master arrives and the ritual continues as normal.

DISCIPLINE COMBINATIONS

Because of the high standards expected from a Sword Dancer to even be initiated into the Discipline, Sword Dancers easily pick up Disciplines that incorporate similarly high standards, such as the Air Sailor, Messenger, Monk, Scout, Weaponsmith, and Wizard. Sword Dancers deepening their relationships with tales and legends often follow the path of the Troubadour.

Sword Dancers shy away from Disciplines that lose control over a part of their magic or the tools of their trade or share their magic with someone else at any time, such as the Archer, Beastmaster, or Cavalryman.