



SECRETS KEPT FROM THE SUN

BY CHAD WALKER

SPiRE
THE CITY MUST FALL

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The background of the page is a light blue surface with a network of dark, jagged cracks, resembling a broken stone or ice. The cracks are most prominent at the top and bottom edges, with some extending across the middle. The overall effect is one of a weathered or damaged surface.

THE PRIMER

Congratulations on surviving your trials, Minister. You've proven yourself to be skilled and resourceful enough to enter the fold and be trusted with our secrets. Here and now, I will be giving you the resources and information you will need to execute your sacred duty. If you heed my words, you will evade the hateful gaze of the Solar Guard long enough to do them irreparable harm. If my words fall on deaf ears, you'll be neutralized by myself or another magister unless our enemy gets to you first. We do not suffer liabilities to our cause, and our structure, our web, is more important than any individual spider who dances upon it. We've invested much in you, but you can and will be replaced. As will I, if I am found wanting. And with that caution, let us begin. Take this; it is your codex.

THE CODEX

This leather-bound tome is small enough to fit into your pocket, and for good reason. If you are caught with this tome, your life is forfeit. A codex is perhaps the single most illicit piece of contraband in Spire. Possession of one is a capital offense, as it indicates your affiliation with the Ministry. You must not be caught with the tome on your person under any circumstances. Despite the immense risk that comes with ownership of a codex, you will want to keep it handy. It is your lifeline to the Ministry and you will need it to communicate with your magister.

We use the codex to mask the messages we write to one other in the form of private letters or public ads or articles in one of Spire's many newspapers. If an adversary intercepts our letters, or reads the classified ads we have submitted for publication, they will not be able to discern our meaning. Allow me to explain how it works.

Your codex is not unique. There are hundreds just like it. Every cell has at least one, as does every magister. Some have even fallen into the hands of the Solar Guard. That is no matter, and you'll learn why very soon. Open it up and look upon its contents. Every codex is exactly 100 pages long. On each page, there is a cipher, which is a set of rules that instruct you

how to transform a message from one thing to another. Look at this page, for example. It says:

Move every verb in the message to the location of the verb that follows it. Move the last verb in the message to the place of the first verb in the message. Adjust conjugation as needed.

Then it gives an example:

"Dridane hunts in the forest to benefit a family that hides from the Solar Guard," becomes "Dridane hides in the forest to hunt a family that benefits from the Solar Guard."

With this subtle shift, the meaning of the message has changed dramatically. Dridane has transformed from a subsistence hunter providing for a family of refugees into a murderous stalker laying in wait for his enemies. This example is only the tip of the iceberg.

There are 100 ciphers in the codex, each providing unique instructions of varying levels of complexity. Some instruct you to move words around, as we just discussed. Some provide lists of words that should be exchanged for other words (e.g. *coin* becomes *dagger*, *prayer* becomes *arson*, etc.). Some provide rules to obscure identifiable names (e.g. *Dridane* becomes *Esjebobf*). Some instruct you to add extra words or phrases as padding. The end result of every cipher, however, is a message that has had its meaning obscured, but still appears to be a valid message (i.e. complete sentences instead of a nonsensical string of letters). When an adversary reads a transformed message, it will not be apparent to anyone but a trained analyst that the message has been transformed by the codex.

The process of transforming a message with a cipher to hide its original meaning is called *masking*, while the process of reversing a transformation to discover a message's original meaning is called *unmasking*.

If you know which cipher was used to mask a message, you also know how to unmask it. It only takes a few minutes to mask or unmask a message. The Solar Guard, possessing their own copies of the codex, know every single cipher we know. That is why we always use three ciphers. We mask with one cipher, then mask the result with another cipher, and then mask that result with a third cipher, until the transformed

message looks almost nothing like its original. Our intended recipient, knowing exactly which three ciphers we used and in what order, unmask the message using the same three ciphers but in the opposite order. All others will struggle in their attempts to unmask the message.

With three transformations chosen from 100 unique ciphers, there are 1,000,000 possible ways to mask a message. If it takes an enemy analyst 1 minute to unmask a message that was transformed with a single cipher, it will take her nearly 700 days to unmask a message transformed with three ciphers. If 100 analysts are working on the same task, it will take them a full week to reverse all possible transformations. This is why we do not worry about the Solar Guard's compromise of our codex. We do worry, however, about them compromising our *triads*.

THE TRIAD

Both the sender and recipient of a secret message must establish agreement on what three ciphers they are going to use. For example, you and your magister might agree to use the ciphers on pages 12, 89, and 63 of the codex. If your magister wants to send a message to you, he will use the codex to mask his message with the cipher on page 12, then mask the result of that with the cipher on page 89, and then mask one more time with the cipher on page 63. Once you receive the message (perhaps it was published in the Silhouette's classified section), you will use the codex to unmask the message with the same ciphers, but in the opposite order; first unmasking with the cipher on page 63, then page 89, then page 12.

The most important secret of our communication method, then, is not the codex, but three ciphers that any two participants have agreed upon. We call these three ciphers a *triad*. We must protect our triads from the Solar Guard at all costs.

There are two precautions we take to protect our triads. First and foremost, we *never* communicate our triads in print, even print that has been masked. We must always assume that by luck, skill, or patience, our enemies will eventually unmask our messages. If they unmask an old message that says "Our triad might be compromised, so here is our new one," you can see how problematic that might become for a cell that trusts their safety to the new triad. Second, we change our triads frequently, relying on *triad engines* to do this for us.

The triad engine is not a machine nor a device, but is simply a reliable and somewhat random phenomenon that occurs regularly somewhere in Spire. For example, one triad engine might be "The first

three verses of scripture quoted by the blood priest at mass" or "how many candle-lit windows you can count on the eastern sides of these three buildings at midnight," or "what are the ages of the dead in the last three obituaries in the Silhouette, and if they are over 100, subtract 100." There is a near infinite number of natural and artificial phenomena in Spire conforming to the mysterious rule of three. So long as their manifestations can somehow be used to point to three of the 100 pages in the codex, they can serve as triad engines. We seek them out and then establish agreement on how we use them. You and your magister will establish agreement on a triad engine and then defer to it for your daily and weekly masking and unmasking tasks. For example, you may know to look in the obituary section of yesterday's Silhouette in order to determine the triad your magister used to mask a secret message published in today's Silhouette. Alternatively, one of your cell members might attend the evening mass every night, to determine what verses (and thus, ciphers) should be used to mask tomorrow's report.

Triad engines are immensely powerful founts of secrecy. They permit two or more parties to rapidly change up their triads without either party needing to meet up or discuss it. They are also somewhat resilient against Solar Guard attempts to compromise them. For example, assume that you and your magister were using the blood priest's verses as a triad engine, but the Solar Guard discovered this fact by interrogating one of your cell members. Going forward, they might be able to unmask all of your future communications, but they would not be able to unmask all of your historical communications without knowing what verses the blood priest was quoting on those days (which no one was writing down). The same could be said of the "candle-lit windows" example I just mentioned. Documented triads, like the "obituary" example, are not as resilient, but they still make historical unmasking more laborious to our enemies.

THE CHANNEL

The codex was first developed to assist in protecting written political and military intelligence from the prying eyes of the couriers delivering it, or any adversaries intercepting said couriers. We could not use it in that fashion, at least, not for long. To deliver a letter to someone, you need to know their given name, or at the very least, their location, otherwise your courier will be unable to assist you. However, if a minister knows the location or even the given name of his magister, this information can do the magister

serious harm if it is interrogated out of a captured minister, or if the courier is followed by agents of the Solar Guard. We had to find a channel that facilitated secure communication between minister and magister, but also allowed them to do so without forcing them to ever be in the same location, or even know the true identity of the other. Spire's many newspapers were the answer we were looking for.

The newspapers Ambrosia, the Furnace, the Silhouette, the Chronicle, the Torch, and even the taboo Liberate! all provide avenues to publish masked messages for the consumption of other members of the Ministry. So long as a message, and payment for publication, finds its way into the hands of a courier by midnight, it will find itself immortalized in print by dawn, no questions asked. The recipient of your message will be able to see it, so long as they know where to look. This leads me to the topic of what newspaper you'll be reading, what sections you'll be focusing on, and what type of articles or advertisements you will be writing to communicate with your magister.

As you've surmised, each magister directs the activities of multiple Ministry cells. Some have a hands-off approach, trusting in the independence of their cells, while others are very involved in orchestrating their cell's daily activities. Each magister, however, uses a specific newspaper to establish communications with her cells. For example, one magister uses Ambrosia exclusively, another uses the Torch exclusively, etc. Then, that magister uses different sections of each paper to communicate with the cells under their control. For example, the magister that reigns over the Chronicle might use reader-submitted consumer reports to communicate with one cell, ads for fake products or investment opportunities to communicate with another cell, and ill-informed market predictions to communicate with a third cell. So long as the paper's editors allows the content to go to print, all is well. A user submission can be entirely masked (which is easily done in a free for all section like classifieds), or the masked content can be buried in a legitimate looking entry (like an obituary for a fake person) to ensure it finds its way to the intended section of the paper.

When you meet your magister, she will discuss what paper falls under her domain and what section of that paper you'll be working with to receive instruction and report back to her. I don't know what paper is her channel, nor does she know mine. This is the will of our exarch, the one who manages the magisters like a magister manages ministers. That is likely the first and the last time you will hear mention of an exarch until, our Mistress willing, we topple the aelfir. Just know that we magisters are bound by conduct

and strictures as well. The entire Ministry is built on structural secrecy and segregation. We assume that some cells will be devoured or turned by our enemies, so we keep them separated to protect them from each other. We assume that some magisters will betray our cause or be drawn into the danger of daylight by treacherous ministers reporting to them. Should this happen, the separation between magisters contains the damage. We have learned these lessons the hard way, for our enemy is ruthless in his pursuit of us.

Given that many of the papers publish once per day, your communications will need to account for this constraint. Be thorough in your reports and requests to your magister, spreading the information across multiple ads or articles if necessary. However, there may come a time when you need to contact your magister immediately because of a dire emergency. Perhaps someone in your cell has been captured by the Solar Guard or has proven to be a spy. Perhaps you've stumbled upon intelligence regarding a major operation against the Ministry that will transpire hours before tomorrow's newspaper hits the market stands. We have a method for such occasions, but it must be used sparingly.

THE UPLIFT PUSH

We have assets among the "Uplifted," as they call themselves: those members of the Brazacott Technical Institute who have magical crystals implanted into their heads to be part of a living neural network. While their "gift" permits them to rapidly share knowledge and insights with others like them, acute levels of stress or concentration allow them to transmit sensations to their entire population. If one of the Uplifted reads a written message over and over, either with intense deliberation or held at knife-point, all others who are Uplifted will hear this message rattling at the very edge of their consciousness. Most will dismiss this as a side-effect of their gift, but there are a few who are trained to grab quill and ink when they feel this sensation and scrawl down the words coming to them. They will then deliver this written message directly to the magister that recruited them. It is through this method that a cell of ministers can send an urgent message to their magister within an hour or less. However, it is imperative you mask the message before making one of the Uplifted read it, lest you wish that entire population to know of your plans. And not just with any triad, but a special emergency triad that your magister will communicate to you.

There are some limitations to this technique, which explains why it is only employed in the case of

emergencies. First and foremost, it requires immediate access to one of the Uplifted, and they must be convinced (or coerced) to perform the task of reading a written message. This is not an experience they will forget, let alone forgive, depending on how you approach them. Second, it is a one-way street. You will be able to push a message to your magister with this technique, but she will not use the same channel to reply. Be sure you are clear in your directives so your magister is able to devise the most effective response. Lastly, this technique mobilizes one of the Uplifted to proceed to your magister's physical location with great haste. What is critical, here, is that this event presents an opportunity for keenly aware Solar Guard assets to tail any of the Uplifted who abruptly leave their duties for an errand after anomalous feedback is experienced by many of their numbers. It is likely that our enemies are aware of this technique and have built contingency plans for it, hoping to find and neutralize magisters contacted this way. This last item is why the emergency triad is split among your fellow ministers.

When you meet your magister, she will share one cipher of the emergency triad with each of you, and swear you all to keep it secret from one another until the very moment you must use it. This prevents one of your cell members from going rogue and working with our enemies to ensnare a magister. It is also a triad that the Uplifted messenger knows. Remember, this masked message will go to all of our Uplifted assets, not just your magisters. The assets who work for the Ministry will attempt to unmask the message with their unique emergency triads. If they are unable to unmask the message, they know it was not intended for their magister, and will take no further action.

THE OPPOSITION

The Solar Guard is a massive state apparatus, nearly as diverse, populous, and bureaucratic as a small country onto itself. I won't waste your time with this organization's history, character, or propaganda, though there are a number of resources out there if you are interested in the topic. Instead, I will briefly outline the Solar Guard's personnel and how to deal with them.

The public face of the Solar Guard is its paladins: masked brutes donning golden plate-mail, flowing robes, and weapons of war, all meticulously maintained by drow and human thralls masquerading as squires. While their appearance is grandiose, there is nothing frivolous about their capabilities in battle. With their equipment, their training, and their zeal, the average paladin is more than a fair match for even

a battle-hardened minister, if not two. A stand-up fight with these warriors is a circumstance your cell should avoid at all costs.

Paladins have two functions. The first, which you probably witness on a daily basis, is to simply be public and present, a glittering and menacing reminder of the futility of resisting our aelfir overlords. This is why they stand at the center of bustling bazaars, march down the streets in the drow districts, and form the entourage of high elf nobility. Were they huddling in a barracks, we might forget the martial superiority of our oppressors. They couldn't have that. Their second function, put simply, is to be the fist of the aelfir; kicking down doors, setting flames to drow tenements, and brutally crushing public demonstrations before they can become anything more than sideshows. Were it not for the Ministry, they would execute such violence with impunity. As it stands, they frequently do anyway, and will continue to do so until the final day of our uprising.

If the paladins have come for you, run. Always run. But remember, even these brutes need to eat and sleep and engage in vice when they aren't donning the Sun's Gold, the name they've given their impressive armor.

The bureaucrats are the financial and analytical machinery of the Solar Guard. You will rarely see them, for they are cloistered in Solar Guard facilities, toiling over tomes by gaslight, but they number in the hundreds, if not the thousands, and might be the gravest threat to our enterprise. We can outrun the fleetest of paladins, or lead them into death traps if they won't break pursuit, but we have yet to find a way to shield the gaze of the Solar Guard's analytical eye. Where other races have schemed to find magical paths to divination and surveillance, the aelfir have arrived at omniscience via the quill and notebook.

By meticulously documenting suspicious events, fugitive sightings, rumors of uprising, and the aftermaths of Ministry operations throughout Spire, then piecing these distinct events together through analytic conversation, the bureaucrats are learning our techniques and predicting our next move. They are guiding paladins to places most inopportune for Ministry cells, whether to bolster the defenses of a mark we need to kill, or interdict a shipment of supplies we need to fuel our operations, or to prevent parlay between us and potential allies. We know they have acquired a number of codexes and some of their most gifted mathematicians are working diligently to reverse-engineer our ciphers, identify our triad engines, and inject chaos into our communications. The most high-value of bureaucrats,

for our targeting purposes, are the Confessors: the ones who listen to and direct the Solar Guard's covert assets.

Assets are those who do the Solar Guard's bidding in an unofficial capacity, secretly reporting to a Confessor; they may be high elf, human, or more likely drow. Most assets have been bribed or coerced into service, though some are simply dedicated to maintaining aelfir hegemony. They mostly serve as spies and gossips, compelling us to maintain the strict secrecy and security we have become known for. Some of them act as enforcers doing work that is simply too dirty or politically perilous for paladins to get involved in. Solar Guard assets exist in virtually every social, financial, and racial strata in Spire, without exception. Whether it's the butcher, the beggar, or the blackpowder gun-maker, anyone you encounter could be an asset. That includes the Ministry. In fact, one of your fellow ministers could be a Solar Guard asset who has undergone extensive alchemical poisoning in order to erase this affiliation from his memory. With one quaff of a special tincture, served to him by a barkeep on the Guard's payroll, he could remember his mission and murder you in your sleep. Don't get too preoccupied with that possibility, though – it's only happened once. You will undoubtedly encounter and uncover Solar Guard assets during your operations, but I implore you; resist the urge to kill these traitors. The drow ones, at least. Every time a drow slays another drow because of Solar Guard machinations, the aelfir win. They wish to divide us, to make us punish ourselves. Sometimes they will out their own assets just to watch us tear each other apart and paint the Ministry as bloodthirsty. Do not give in to this ploy. Our final strategic victory is more important than a single moment of petty justice. Instead, if you uncover an enemy asset, make him a better offer, or break the yoke a Confessor has placed upon him. Turn him on his masters.

THE WEAK SPOT

Forget everything you know about hierarchy, minister. Rank and title are illusions. Your magister is not powerful because of any innate characteristics or special abilities. She is powerful because she is the broker, the gatekeeper, between multiple cells of ministers, as well as between you and other magisters. She controls the flow of information between these groups, choreographs their actions, and decides who lives and dies in the moment of truth. At the same time, that power makes her a desirable target for our enemies. If she is destroyed, you and your fellow ministers are severed from the Ministry's purview, losing all external

support and guidance. If she is compromised, she is a threat to you, her peers, and even the exarch. You now understand why we take such extreme efforts to keep a distance between you and your magister. It is to protect her, one of the most critical actors in our network. However, take this logic and extend it to the most critical actor in the Solar Guard; not the generals who command the paladins, nor the taskmasters herding the bureaucrats, nor the high priests issuing edicts of death on the enemies of the Church. It is the Confessor.

Think about it: the Confessor is the one who is gathering intelligence from his assets, the eyes and ears of the Solar Guard distributed all over Spire. He takes this intelligence and provides it to the bureaucrats, who assess it, analyze it, and use it to formulate how the paladins should be deployed in a manner that best disrupts the Ministry. The Confessor is the linchpin of Solar Guard operations. If he is destroyed, he will quickly be replaced, but not without a serious strain on the relationships the previous Confessor built with the assets in his employ. In fact, the new Confessor may have to start over, operating blind in the Spire district he has been assigned to manage. This all leads to degraded intelligence sent to the bureaucrats, which leads to a less optimal distribution of paladins.

While assassinating a Confessor may seem an attractive strategy, it pales in comparison to compromising a Confessor, either by becoming one of his assets and feeding him false information, or better yet, getting leverage on a Confessor and compelling him to poison the Solar Guard's analytical machinery with a campaign of lies. Why kill a Confessor when you can use him to thrust a hundred paladins into harm's way, or nudge the Solar Guard into doing something so outrageous it triggers the great uprising we have been pining for?

It is safe to say our enemies understand this structural weakness and staff this position accordingly. When you hunt a Confessor, or court one, or parlay with one, know you are tangling with some of the Ministry's most cunning and ruthless enemies. Remember, the Confessor wields bribery, blackmail, and intimidation alternately with the precision of a stiletto and the brutality of a cudgel. He cajoles a people who hate him into doing the bidding of the very machine that crushes them. There are people who would die for him, if only to protect their secrets from being revealed. He is formidable on his own, but surrounded by the truly desperate and fearful people on his payroll, he is a king of his district.

LOMBRÉ'S WEB

We need to talk about the inevitable. I have been in this trade for years now, decades maybe. I have witnessed ministers fall in bloody combat against our oppressors, or have their heads taken by the guillotine in public displays of aelfir power. I have also heard from witnesses, often petty criminals sharing the same cell as our captured brothers and sisters, of the trials of misery, pain, and humiliation we suffer when our enemies capture us, interrogate us, and torture us. The high elves are virtuosos of harm, maestros of suffering, and artisans of fear. If you are captured by them, you will be sent to their inquisitors, where you will endure pain and terror that dwarfs whatever you could possibly imagine for your worst enemy.

The aelfir still engage in torture of captured subjects. We eschewed that practice long ago, for it only yielded outright lies, half-truths, and old intelligence from desperate prisoners willing to tell us anything to make the pain stop. Sending ministers to validate a tortured subject's claims was either an enormous waste of time or a surefire way to get them killed. Fortunately for us, the aelfir still cling to the practice of torture. Their immortality and fertility has made them so soft, and so arrogant, they think they can compel a minister to turn on their own through pain and humiliation. The fools! The everyday pain and humiliation of the aelfir yoke is what birthed the Ministry in the first place. It is the very substance that fuels our resistance. So let them feed the fire, and know that there is nothing more dangerous to the aelfir, nothing more lethal to Solar Guard operatives, than the captured minister, for only he, or she, is in a position to weave Lombré's Web.

Lombré's Web is the web of lies you will weave for captors when they subject you to torture to glean information about the Ministry. If you tell them your tale convincingly, they will believe you, and send their agents tumbling into the snare of death and deceit you've set for them. Here is how it will work. I do not mean to frighten you with this knowledge, I mean to steel your resolve.

Upon capture, you will be brought to a secret location where you will be attended to by trained inquisitors. You will fight and kick and spit and defy your enemies. You will show them our true hate for our oppressors. But, oh, they will break you. Be it the

wheel, or the burning coal, or the burrowing vermin, or the mirror they place before you so you can watch the horrors they inflict on you, you will break. You will sob. You will beg for mercy. You will acquiesce to their every demand. And you will tell them everything you know.

And do tell them everything, every last detail. Tell them of the hand signal you make at the bazaar to let your magister know the coast is clear. Tell them of the weekly meetings at midnight, before the fountain, where you exchange intelligence with your fellow ministers. Tell them where your triad engine is and what newspaper you use to organize. Tell them about the hidden cache in the sewers, full of weapons and armor the Ministry has been stockpiling for our final insurgency. Tell them of the aelfir we have turned to our cause. Tell them all of these lies, and more. For once they have broken you, they will believe you, and that is your opportunity to weave Lombré's Web.

When their agent goes to the bazaar and raises the signal, he will be cut to pieces by widows hiding daggers in their dresses. When the paladins of the Solar Guard swarm the fountain, they'll find it full of kerosene, not water, ignited into an inferno by an archer's flame arrow, and howl in agony as the fire eats away at their flesh. The paladins storming the sewer cache will find a gate closed behind them, just as the tide of filth rises, and they will drown, choking on our very waste. And in a rage of paranoia and doubt, our most cunning enemies, the wisest and craftiest of the high elves who oppress us, will be implicated as traitors, captured, and subject to the same interrogative cruelty the masked ones would inflict on us.

One of your first orders of business upon establishing your cell is to discuss the details of Lombré's Web. Discuss the lies a captured minister will tell his captors. Decide which districts and locales will facilitate the perfect ambush. Architect the death traps and arrange the lethal assets to be ready the moment they are needed. Build both the seductive fiction and the violent reality of Lombré's Web, and then pray to the Mistress you never need to use it. But if you do find yourself on the wrong end of the torturer's implements, take heart in knowing that your fellow ministers lie in wait, ready to cut anyone you send their way to ribbons.

