REBIRTH EDITION

DEGENESIS

PRIMAL PUNK

YOU LIVE ONLY ONCE,
BUT IF YOU DO IT RIGHT,
ONCE IS ENOUGH

[MAE WEST]

CHRISTIAN GÜNTHER & MARKO DJURDJEVIC

THE ICE BARRIER
THE REAPER'S BLOW
THE SPORE WALL
GAELIK
BORCA
BRITAIN
STUKOV DESERT
OSMAN
DANZIG
PANDORA
POLLEN
LONDON
LIQUA
JUSTITIAN
THE FESTERING
DRESDEN
WROCLAW
CATHEDRAL CITY
SIEGE
JANUS CRATER
NORET
RAMEIN REGION
BORDERPOST NORTH
NULLPELLIA
BASSHAM
PRAHA REPUBLIKA
BRNO
BREST
ST-BRIEUC
PARASITE
BRITON
RENNES
PEST
FRANKA
MULHOUSE
BASEL
BORDERPOST SOUTH
USUD
BERN
HELLVETICA
LAIBACH
SOUFFRANCE
SANTIAGIO
VOIVODATE BUCHAREST
ADRIATIC LOWLANDS
VOIVODATE BEOGRAD
AQUITAINE
THE CHASM
BERGAMO
VOIVODATE DALMATIA
GENOA
CRUCES
BURGAS
VOIVODATE SOFIA
LEON
CASTILIAN HIGH PLATEAU
BURGOS
TOULON
PERUGIA
ISTANBUL
HYBRISPANIA
BALKHAN
PERPIGNAN
L'AQUILA
VALLADOLID
SALAMANCA
ROMA
MADRID
NOX
CORPSE
VOIVODATE IONNUS
DISCORDANCE
MIRAR
PURGARE
LISBON
HUELVA
SEVILLE
CORDOBA
AL-ANDALUS
CARTAGENA
GRANADA
BEDAIN
TUNIS
GIBRALTAR
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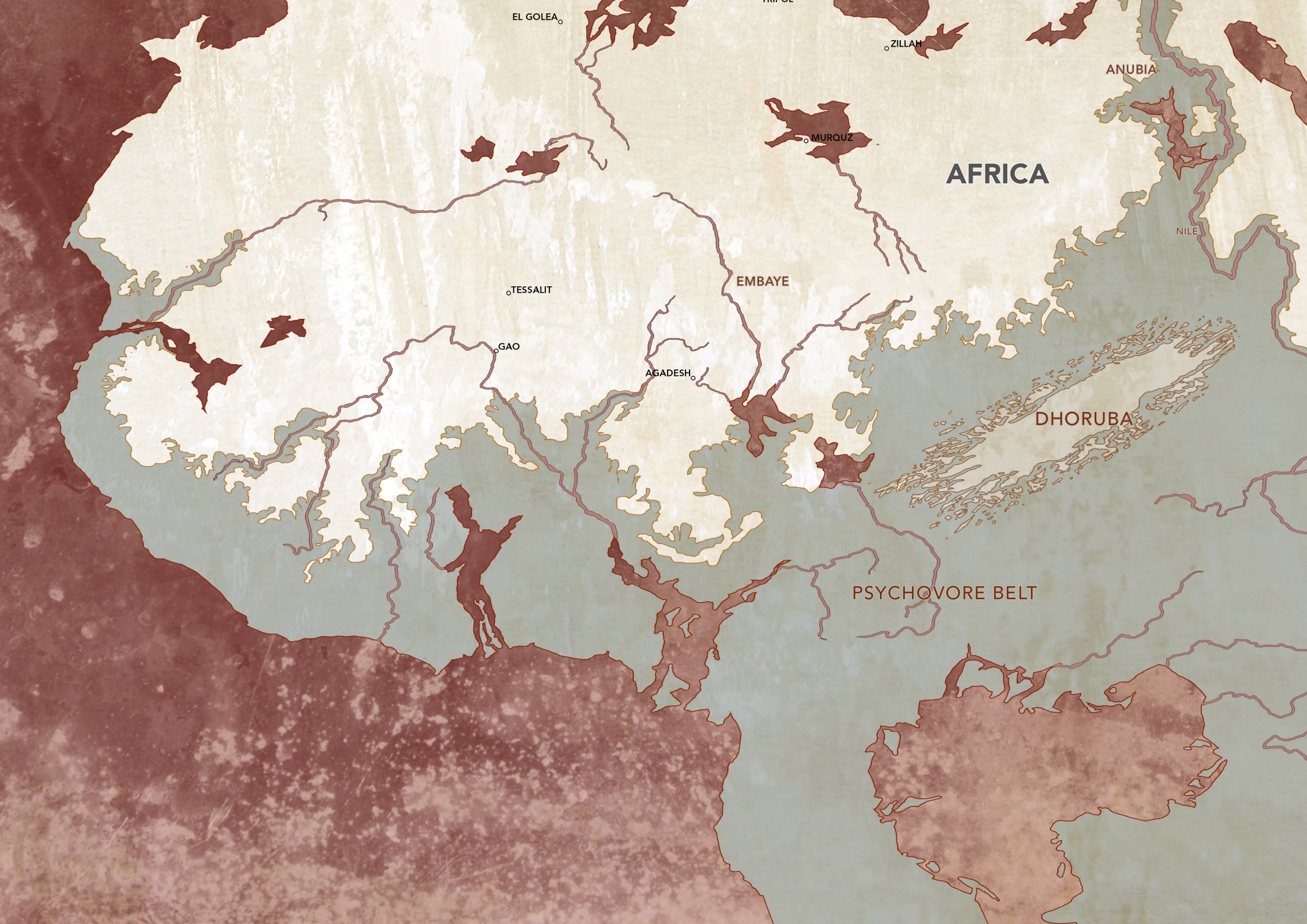
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DISCLAIMER

Degenesis advocates tolerance and international understanding. The game world of Degenesis has evolved from ours and distorts it into an imaginary future. Conflicts within the game world are, of course, not real – and we do not wish for them to be, either. They only exist for excitement's sake. Although we know this kind of conflict from films, we urge you to use them with caution. None of the seven Cultures mentioned in Degenesis is better than any of the others. All of those Cultures have an equal right to exist in the game world of Degenesis.

We have actively avoided the term "race" common to RPGs as we deem it discriminatory.

We strictly oppose violence and racism. Illustrations of combat action are not meant to promote violence, but to depict a cruel world we should strive to overcome. Culture and civilization are the major goals in Degenesis, accompanied by hope. We still recommend Degenesis for people 16+ as we cannot be sure whether our message and our appeal to humanity will be understood.

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THE JACKAL'S PROPHECY

4 IS THE NUMBER OF LIFE AND DEATH,
4 RUNES IN ENDLESS SPIRALS,
ARE BEGINNING, DESTINY, FATE AND END
OF MAN'S BODY AND SOUL.
4 ARE THE DIRECTIONS,
FROM WHICH THE WIND CARRIES THE DUST,
4 THE NUMBER OF THE ELEMENTS,
FROM WHICH WE ARE SPAWNED,
AND TO WHICH WE RETURN AT THE END OF DAYS.
IT IS THE ORIGINAL NUMBER,
THE NUMBER OF THE KIN,
FATHER,
MOTHER,
SON
AND DAUGHTER.
IT IS THE NUMBER OF THE SEASONS,
OF MAN AND EARTH.
FOUR-FOLD ARE THE SIDES OF
THE SOLAR CROSS.

IT IS THE NUMBER OF THE RIVERS
UPON WHICH LIFE DRAWS.
EARTH – HE DID NOT CREATE IT AS A WASTELAND BUT AS A HOMESTEAD;
SONS IT RAISED AND EXALTED;
BUT DEAF TO ITS COMMANDS
THEY WENT THEIR WAY.

AND IT SAID:
"MANKIND, YOU'VE STRUGGLED WITH ALL THOSE WORDS OF ADVICE;
LET THEM STEP UP AND SAVE YOU:
THE STARGAZERS, THE SKY CONJURORS WHO PROPHESIZE DOOM TO YOU
WITH EVERY NEW MOON!"

AND IT AWOKE
EARTH,
SUN,
MOON AND STARS,
TO PUNISH MANKIND.

EINSTEIN HAS FALLEN, NEWTON HAS BEEN BENT;
FALSE GODS TO STRAP UNTO BEASTS OF BURDEN;
IN THE CITIES, T O R N A N D D E S E C R A T E D .

4 IS THE NUMBER OF THE RIDERS
AND THEY HERALD DOOM,
AS THERE ARE 4 MASTERS
OF IMMORTALITY,
SO CLOSE TO EARTH,
BIDING THEIR TIME IN DAMP CHAMBERS.

BUT THEY WILL AWAKE WITH TRUE INTENTION,
TO BUILD THE CITY, IT SAID,
4-SIDED LIKE A PYRAMID.

AND IN ITS SHADOWS
TRUTH WILL THRIVE.

ALPHA AND OMEGA,
BEGINNING AND END,

LIFE AND DEATH.

8 IS THE NUMBER OF THE CREATOR,
WHO DESCENDS FROM UP ABOVE.
MANKIND WILL WONDER,
ITS NAME UNINSCRIBED
INTO THE BOOK OF LIFE SINCE THE WORLD BEGAN,
AS IT LOOKS UP TO HIM

WHO WAS AND IS NOT

OF THE INFINITE,
OF HE WHO COMES AND GOES,
HE WITH WHOM EVERYTHING RISES

AND WITH WHOM
EVERYTHING FALLS.

AND EARTH MAY GAPE OPEN,
AND SALVATION MAY BLOOM.
EIGHTFOLD THE LOTUS LEAVES UNCURL,
WHEREVER THE WIND BLOWS,
EIGHTFOLD LIKE THE WIND ROSE'S ARROWS,
ITS POLLEN SPREADS,
SPEWED SKYWARDS WITH RELISH.

EYES, LEGS, EVERYTHING EIGHTFOLD,
SHE RISES FROM THE DARK,
CLIMBS THE HIGHEST MOUNTAINS,
AND BLOCKS THE DEEPEST VALLEYS,
HUNTS FOR THE SIXFOLD ONES.

8 IS HER NUMBER.

12 IS THE NUMBER OF THE TRIBES
THE JACKAL CONSORTS WITH
IT SLEEPS AMONGST THEM
AND FEEDS FROM AMONGST THEM.

12 ARE THE MOONS, TOO,
DIVIDING THE YEAR
12 THE TEMPERAMENTS,
THAT FREE THE MIND
FROM THE CROWD.

12 IS THE NUMBER OF THE ZODIAC,
WHOSE CHILDREN SLUMBER FITFULLY IN EVERYONE,
WAITING TO
BE U N L E A S H E D .

BURIED WITHIN THE NUMBER
BOTH
CREATORS' NAMES.

HOPE AND DESPAIR ARE THE SUM OF 12,
WHEN THE PERFECTION OF UNITY
R U S H E S T H E M I N D
OF EVERY BEING OF THE THREEFOLD FOUR
BY AIR
AND SEA
AND ON EARTH

12

16

16 IS THE NUMBER OF THE STRANGER,
THE NEWCOMER;
16 ARE HIS REVELATIONS
16 IS THE NUMBER OF HIS HERALDS,
WHO DEVASTATE THE LAND.

8 PLUS 8 IS THE NUMBER OF TWO CREATORS
FIGHTING FOR DOMINION
8 PLUS 8,
TWO INFINITIES,
C O N S U M I N G ETERNITY
IN THEIR CONFLICT.

INSTINCT VERSUS INTELLECT,
FLESH VERSUS SPIRIT,
C H A O S VERSUS ORDER.

1 AND 6 IS THE NUMBER OF THE PEOPLE,
THAT WILL FIGHT FOR THE CROWN.
1 AND 6 IS THE NUMBER OF THE PLAGUES,
THAT RAVAGE THEM.
1 AND 6 ARE THE POINTS OF THE AXIS,
DRAWN UPON THE ENEMY'S SKIN.
1 AND 6 THE BREEDING CHAMBERS
THE VERITABLE HELL
WILL RISE FROM.

4 TIMES 4 IS THE NUMBER
THAT COMPLETES THE SOLAR CROSS,
WHEN ALL THINGS RETURN TO THEIR
POINT OF ORIGIN
AND THE CIRCLE CLOSES FOREVER
TIME
T E R M I N A T E S I T S E L F.

PRIMAL PUNK

REBIRTH

We had to leave transport at Severac-le-Château's ashen slopes. No one was going to steal it; ghosts are lousy drivers.

We've been marching for about six hours. Like ice breakers we plowed through the ashes. There is a blackened mountain range ahead of us, enameled and cracked by heat and sheer pressure. Hard and warped like effused lava, the ground is still warm to the touch. Its gnarled surface is covered with solidified bursts, their sharp edges jutting out like briar patches. We have to be careful. Lomark has already punched a hole in his boot sole.

We should be nearby the Massif Central, close to Verrières. Beaujolais originated somewhere around here. Not my cup of tea… not enough foam. But that was then.

I cannot place the range directly ahead; two valleys are supposed to meet there. We need to get closer.

Impressive. We see the crater's edge now. The ground's… no, the whole damn country has been transformed. Like ripples from a droplet falling into still water, concentric rings of rock protrude from the point of impact. Not high; just enough to form a nice line with the surrounding peaks of the Massif mountains. The old blending with the new.

Lomark thinks he's seen a wasp. Nonsense. Not even a shadow of the past remains here. He insists, and I call him an idiot.

Night falls. We crawl into our plastic tubes and sleep.

Lomark says he's been awake for hours. He'd found more wasps and offers me a dusty lump. That's enough. I set out. He hurries after me.

We scramble up the slope, each step leaving avalanches of rubble in our wake. I must be exhausted. I keep on seeing mandalas taking shape in the settling debris before Lomark disturbs and dissolves them under foot. I nod towards Lomark, he waves back. It's okay. Everything's okay.

Nearing the top, I keep sinking into the ash drifts. Wind hits me and I stumble. The swirling ash reduces my sight to a few meters. I crawl on, feeling the decline. I start sliding and fight against it. For a moment, the dirt engulfs me. Darkness is all around, but I slide out and hit a ledge. I manage to hold on. Around me, everything crackles and rustles. I cough and spit, rub the ashes from my goggles and look back. The rim of the crater is more than ten meters above on the slope. I can make it.

I'm in. Wisps of dust and ashes fly over the crater's edge like an ugly borealis.

I take in the crater's interior. A giant concave bowl stretching into the far distance. I recognize one of the mountains at the center and… I take a closer look. Give my eyes time to adjust. Structures take shape. Circles with prongs, triangles, all interwoven and bordering each other. I remember metal filings on a piece of paper with a magnet below. That's not it. Rather like… dust on a beating drum. But that doesn't explain the prongs.

I hear Lomark huffing next to me. "Do you see that?"

I ignore him. "The smoke?" He points to the slope ahead. It's true. There's black smoke in the air. I drop to one knee, slide a little lower and get real close. Wispy black gossamer.

I trail one hand through it, and it disappears as if neutralized by some chemical reaction with my glove. I rake the dirt, digging up a fist-sized, jet-black stone. It melts into smoke in my hand, ebbing in long, oily smears. I touch the stone, feel the surface give. It's not warm. A bug shoots out. I cry out and wince as it crawls away in a zigzag line, boring its vibrating backside into the soil. It's gone. The entry hole caves in. I feel Lomark's breath against my ear. He whispers "wasps".

I remove my glove. I want to feel the black stone. Again, I trail my hand through the smoke and again, it disappears.

I look down at my hand, inspecting it from all angles. There's a trace of black on my fingers, but it seems to

dissipate… no, sink in. I anxiously rub my hand, shake it, make a fist. Adrenaline buzzes in my veins now. My heart races. My breath quickens. There is a moment of panic, and I quickly put the glove back on.

"Take photos," I order Lomark as I slip some of the black substance in a specimen bottle. It liquefies at once, but I flick the cap closed before it escapes. From the corner of my eye, I see black spots scuttle across the floor next to my feet. Some of them rise and fly away. Against the wind.

What have we gotten ourselves into?

Somehow, this is all connected.

I put away the little tube.

*

Back at the camp, I enter quarantine.

It's a small taste of luxury: my own tent, room service.

Boredom is my friend.

After one day, Dr. Rousseville sees no reason to keep me here any longer. We call him Dr. Slime, which is unfair because he keeps everything together. He only looks for diarrhea, sputum, HIVE symptoms. He doesn't want to hear about the black smoke. There's no machine to screen my hand. Even if one existed, what good would it do?

I feel healthy, but Dr. Rousseville wants me to record any change in my condition. My lungs rattle, probably from too much ash. My sputum is foamy. There are some red splotches on my chest now. Itchy. I write that down.

I keep thinking about the mandalas that I saw in the crater. When the red splotches on my body begin forming a similar pattern, I should be surprised. But I am not.

Time passes quickly. I am coughing up dense blobs now. They are slimy; yet compressed and fluffy. Noted.

I still feel good.

There are ants in my tent. I feel them crawling all over my skin during the night. In the morning, I see the trails they've left in the dirt in front of my cot.

Mandalas. My heart feels heavy and hot. Every breath I take burns intensely. I can somehow smell what is cooking at the other end of camp. I recognize my friends by their body odors. I sometimes think I can even see the smells. The world is full of glowing traces, of complex information.

I am delirious.

*

Dr. Rousseville and the other smelly apes tried to hold me down. I got so agitated that the glands on my neck burst open.

They simply let go of me, staring at me bug-eyed.

Rousseville vomited without bending forward; it just spilled out of him. The smell was intense for my old senses, but for my new self, it was a simple message.

I ran out of the camp. No one stopped me.

The wasps talk to me. Theirs is a simple language of movement and smells. I move along the lines they trace into the air, leading me from the ruins into a dying forest. It still smells of pine needles, but underneath I detect other nuances I do not yet understand. It has something to do with birth… that much I can feel.

I fall to my knees finally, digging in the dirt with my hands. Yes, birth. My heart sits within my chest, leaden and fiery, pumping and stomping. The mandalas now burn upon my skin, a hotbed of white flakes. I feel skin and flesh tug and tear along the lines. Something within me wants out. I break down. Breathe flakes and see them rise. Feel my body mold up. Sink into the ground.

Deep within my skull, something stirs. Something human, ancient. It is fear. Screaming.

Rebirth.

WHAT IS DEGENESIS?

Eshaton. That's what they call the end of the world. The day when fire rained from the Heavens, burning the land, scorching the people. The planet trembled, heaving in pain like a feverish person in agony. And though Earth endured, it was forever changed.

When Eshaton fell and the Bygone people perished, they took with them ten thousand years of culture. The survivors scavenged and fought for food and clean water. Empty-eyed, they stared at the rotting vehicles of their ancestors, wandering aimlessly through the ruins of a once great civilization. A civilization they had shed long ago, casually as a matter of fact, like a snake shedding its skin. Free of morals and ethics, as naïvely as children they looked upon their devastated world, upon landscapes tortured by the elements, upon toxic restricted areas... They only knew that they must hold their ground against this new environment or succumb to it.

Time passed. The smoke above the great craters blew away, and the people had once more erected a cultural framework around their lives. It was still shaky, and the nails were few and far between. Now and then, a civilization crashed down with a din – but the building blocks were reused. Botch jobs, but a new start after years of decline.

The year is now 2595. Europe is divided into several warring Cultures. The people of Borca cling to the Bygone's relics. Frankers thrash around in the Aberrants' pheromone net. Purgare is a land of half burnt and half fertile plains, but all together shattered by feuds against the Psychokinetics. The Pollen people wander from oasis to Fractal Forest before even the last green area is devoured by the Sepsis and the biokinetic plague. Hybrispania suffers from a decades-long struggle for liberation and a growing time anomaly. And beyond the Mediterranean, Africa shines in Gold and Lapis Lazuli struggles for its existence against a strange, aggressive vegetation.

Seven Cultures, thirteen cults, countless clans. Which peoples, philosophies, or faiths will prevail? Those that conjure up past glory? Or those that have erected a brave new world upon the ruins of human arrogance?

In the craters' shadows, something is stirring. Is there a future for Mankind at all?

Degenesis is about hope and despair. It is about people and the conflicting priorities of human civilization, daring to ask how far our race has truly come since we climbed down from the trees. The world of Degenesis is like a ruined Garden of Eden, containing the secrets and spoils of both good and evil, of ignorance and enlightenment, of barbarity and virtue.

As a role playing game, Degenesis presents this world to players who portray characters ("PCs") faced with this inhospitable future. They'll need to make a stand that will influence the path of their lives and the fate of those around them, if not the world and civilization at large – for better or for worse. It's up to them.

WHAT IS A ROLE PLAYING GAME?

A role playing game – sometimes called a storytelling game – is a parlor game that doesn't require a game board or a computer. Under the pretext of another identity, the players experience thrilling adventures without ever needing to leave the table. The experience is similar to an improvised audio book. The characters and events of the story are described aloud and transform into images in the players' imagination.

The Storyteller, also called the Game Master (GM), serves a vital role at the gaming table. He describes the landscape, guides the others through the unfolding events, and portrays all supporting cast members and opponents. Meanwhile, the players play the starring roles, talking for their PCs at the table and making decisions on their behalf. The plot the Storyteller prepares must then be very flexible, for players are free to decide where their PCs go, with whom they talk, and how they act.

There are two books necessary to play Degenesis. This first book offers background information on the Cultures, cults, opponents, gear and more. Accessible to players and Storytellers alike. From this material, the Storyteller creates his own world, stressing certain topics while ignoring others. He can even invent new places, people, and events. It's all up to the Storyteller to decide which places, characters, and secrets will arise during the game. Gameplay is described extensively in Book Two.

Unlike board games, a role playing game needs no rules to determine who wins and who loses. Still, there are rules that help to determine what characters can and cannot do during the game. Can a PC jump a canyon? Is he able to physically overpower a foe? Can he decipher runes on an old poster? With some six sided dice, a quick glance at game stats, and the Degenesis rules system (known as the "KatharSys"), all situations can be handled with ease.

AND I WANT TO SHOW YOU
SOMETHING MORE THAN
YOUR MORNING SHADOW,
FOLLOWING IN YOUR FOOTSTEPS
OR YOUR EVENING SHADOW,
DODDERING TORWARDS YOU
I'LL SHOW YOU FEAR
IN A HANDFUL OF DUST.

[T.S. ELIOT]

WHAT'S IN THE TWO BOOKS?

This volume is divided into four different parts:

PRIMAL PUNK

This first section, which spans the entirety of Book 1, ushers the reader into the world of Degenesis. Here he will get to know the seven Cultures known to this realm and receive extensive insight into the thirteen Cults dictating world affairs. At the end of Book 1, the final History section will provide an overview of the canonical events that occurred before and after the Eshaton in a detailed timeline.

KATHARSYS

We arrive at Book 2, which details the core rules and regulations of gameplay – character generation, traits, and dice rolls – that determine how players use their weapons and abilities against the foes they encounter during gameplay.

ALMANAC

This extensive section lists in great detail the many tools available to playable characters: gear, weapons, armor, vehicles, artifacts... and so much more.

FORBIDDEN ZONE

This final part contains secret information intended for the Game Master alone, which should not be known to players. This section contains descriptions and game stats for the various opponents that exist within this world, along with helpful tips, tutorials, and sample campaigns that ease the Game Master into his new role and enable him to craft compelling adventures and facilitate engaging gameplay for years to come.

CHAPTER

1

>> FORWARD

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

A fly. He grunted, swatting it away with a strong hand as he groggily sat up. He stared into the dimly lit room. The evening light seeped through the cracks of the boarded up window, making the dust motes shine. The fly buzzed softly. The man groped for something on the nightstand, felt the plastic and grabbed it. The fly swatter. He grinned.

The man rose and shambled to the window, past framed diplomas, certificates from the top colleges he'd attended, a Ph.D in philosophy. His gaze wandered over the frame, the glass. No fly anywhere. His vest clung to his skin. He stretched, mumbled "Shit" to himself, then finally neared the window to peer through one of the cracks.

Nothing had changed.

The cars were burnt-out skeletons. The pavement was cracked. Magazines covered the street like trampled birds, the wind leafing through them. The front display window for a retail store across the street was smashed. Someone had graffitied "The End Is Near!" on the door.

The neighbors had fled to the country into the mountains long ago. Only the eternal optimists, skeptics, and imbeciles grimly stayed in the city, cradling a fire axe in their laps. Or a fly swatter. The man laughed and coughed. He pressed his forehead against the board and turned his head aside. At the end of the street, the looter still dangled from the lamp post. A crow sat on his head and cleaned its feathers. For decades, he hadn't seen birds inside the city. Yet here they are, back home for the wake of a mutual friend.

Darkness flooded the room as the sun sank behind the house. The man stood still with his forehead against the window boards, gazing skywards. A new sign blinked up there in the dark blue sky. The Streamcasts had been full of them. Schematics initially, blurry images from orbiting satellites and space stations later. Later still, one could see the dots against the night sky with the naked eye. Weeks later, they pierced the brightness of day with their brilliance. Now, they shone against the sky like flaring torches.

The dissolution of society had begun long before all this. Most started to turn their backs on technology. It had not kept its promise. Rather than wiping out the threat, technology had allowed it to congeal into something inevitable. Inescapable. The mass suicides, looting, and vigilantism began. All signs of a society collapsed. The churches were overcrowded now. In the squares, people held hands and cried.

The man pushed away from the boards and sat listless in the gloom.

Maybe this was his last day. Maybe he ought to do something. Something special. He'd seen it in the stream casts. Homo sapiens had been reduced to its rawest emotions: love, hate, greed, power... and fear. A chaotic maelstrom of conflicting emotions, irresistible and loathsome in its allure. The face of Mankind alternated from one street to the next. Orgies, butchery, avarice, and gluttony on one street. Sincere compassion and self-sacrifice on the next.

Neither appealed to him.

Outside, sirens blared. The man smelled smoke.

The fly was back, buzzing all around him.

He felt the hatred well up inside him in the silence. A black spot darted across a board and stopped. The man raised the fly swatter, licked his lips, felt joy rise up from the deepest depths like some primordial force – and brought the fly swatter down.

"Enough!"

This was the end.

ESHATON

2073. The year of the apocalypse. The one night when a barrage of asteroids made the entire planet tremble.

Europe was struck first by the bombardment. Earth's crust was instantly punctured, bursting open along the many points of impact. The first in Scandinavia, then all along the Alps and into Italy and the African coastline.

As the Earth's crust fractured, cracks burst across the planet's surface. Giant clods the size of cities shot skyward. Great waves of magma rose to consume the earth, turning entire cities into lifeless wastelands. More were flattened by the stone hail, tsunamis, and earthquakes that followed.

Brazil was able to radio tsunami warnings, but seconds later, all frequencies abruptly cut to a static hiss as the aftermath of the asteroid attack swept the globe. Moscow was bathed in fire. North America drowned in the ashen rain. India cracked. Sydney vanished.

By daybreak, dense billowing clouds filled with volcanic ash and red dust from craters swallowed the sky, bathing the land in bloody twilight. The sun was reduced to a distant marble glistening through the haze. Only the fires and electro-static discharges staved off the darkness. Gunshots. Explosions. Screams. A ceaseless cacophony as the red clouds angered and began to rain, pummeling the earth with acidic poison. The world instantly stank of death.

That day, society as it was known crumbled. 10.000 years of civilization vaporized in a day. That day was given many names by the few survivors: apocalypse, global conflagration, Armageddon. Worn-out phrases to help them accept the finality of it all. A last bottle of wine, cold metal against the temple, a crooked finger. And that was it.

But Mankind lived on, and this was not the end. Yes, the old world was gone, and no one and nothing could ever bring back the good old days. The people who strove for an explanation found it in spirituality. Did not all the eschatological doctrine of the world foretell such events? The downfall of creation? The dawn of a new world? It felt good and full of hope. These asteroids had not brought the apocalypse. They brought the Eshaton. A new beginning.

Now, they only had to endure the night.

ICE AGE

After the fire storms came darkness.

The clouds hung low and black over the landscape, lit only by lightning. Downdrafts routed through the seething mixture, making them bleed onto the earth in russet sheets. Whenever the cloud cover tore, shimmering columns of light fumbled across the land. A thousand sooty faces turned upwards and followed their path.

Then one day snow mingled with the ashen rain.

Winter came and decided to stay.

With time, the climate zones shifted. The polar ice caps expanded, robbing the seas of water as glaciers formed and piled up. Northern Europe was blanketed in snow. Survivors crawled underground and only returned to the surface to gather combustible materials. Meanwhile, sea

coasts retreated and drained off across the Shelf. Harbors ran dry to tower over deserts of sand and pebbles.

While Europe sank into a fitful hibernation and South Africa was conquered by Antarctic extensions, the rest of Africa fared better. Equatorial winds redirected the dust wall northwards and southwards in giant vortexes, protecting Africa from the harsh aftermath of Eshaton. Over time, a Mediterranean climate replaced the swirling heat over Northern and Central Africa. A warm, humid wind from the Atlantic Ocean drove clouds heavy with rain across the continent, where they spilled their burden upon a new and flourishing subtropical jungle. And so as the rest of the planet threatened to freeze over, the Sahara blossomed.

RESURRECTION

Earth had been through worse after all, and it had always returned to its old beauty. Now was no different. The rain cleansed the volcanic ash from the sky and the oceans swallowed it. The russet veil fell, and in the ruined fields the ice cracked and burst in the midday sunlight.

The winters were still ruthless and fed the glaciers on their way inland, but the summers cracked the lakes' ice armor. Creeks bubbled. Grass grew on the red plains. New shoots rose from charred tree trunks.

Tribes of survivors crossed the seas of volcanic ash in search for food, firewood, and a new home. The trails tore and drifted across the plains, forever altering more than a few who valued human life less than a full belly. Mankind was still infected by infamy and greed, with a cure yet to be found even in these times. Clans united and fought bloody battles over scarce resources against settlements and city states alike. So few people remained after the Eshaton, and still they only aimed at cracking each others' skulls.

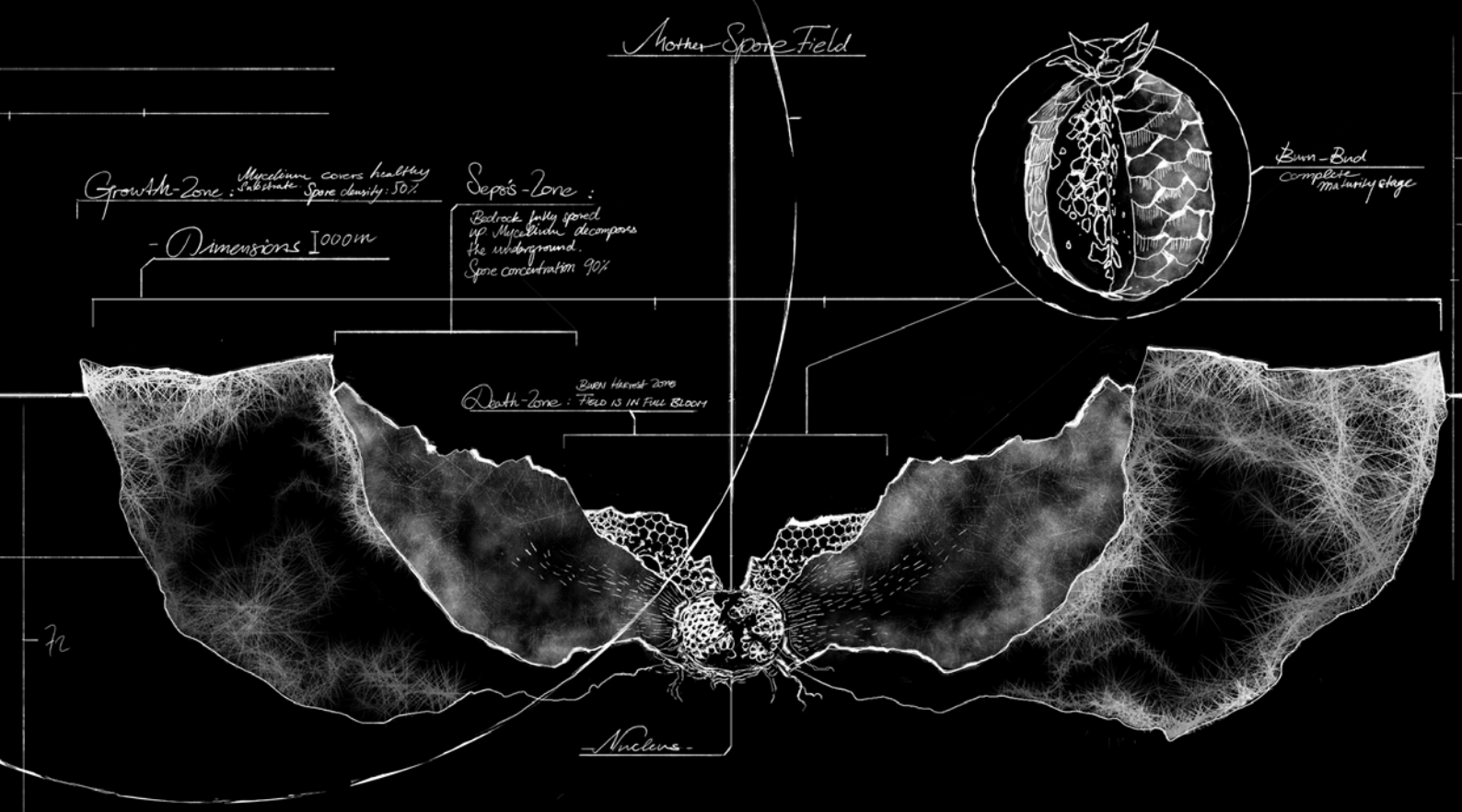
Despite it all, settlements flourished. They hid behind fortress walls, growing in numbers and intellect to soon shed their stone shells and build new walls. Ancient knowledge finally returned into Humanity's bosom.

500 years passed, during which the rules of civilization were hammered into the skulls of those who stood in the way of the human race.

New ways of living emerged. Thirteen cults rose above the chaos, focusing Mankind's energy in new and fruitful directions. From Northern Europe to Africa, seven evolved Cultures embraced a new attitude toward life, which was quite different from the crippling gloom of the past. Cities such as the great Justitian or the bustling Tripol prospered and became Mankind's pride. Ships crossed the Mediterranean Sea and rebuilt a network of trade routes between faraway countries and foreign cultures.

It's now the year 2595.

Humankind could be considered well off again. Yet in the dark recesses of this brave new world, something lurks and waits to make its claim for supremacy.



INFECTED

Asteroids rained down, destroying and distorting everything. The Eurasian continental plate had burst. Rivers ran dry or found a new bed. The Mediterranean Sea dried up and new coastlines rose. Volcanoes erupted. Deserts full of red dust spread. Then came a new Ice Age and astronomic death.

All of this was inconsequential compared to the horrors to come. Embedded in the asteroids, deep within its carbon bonds and iron crystals, was evolution in its purest form: The Primer. A mysterious substance that leaked from the craters years after impact. It rose as a black mist, embedding microscopic spores into organic matter. The spores unraveled and coiled in fractal loops around the very DNA of its host. Adding nothing, but instead rebooting its genetic code and opening alternative pathways to corrupt.

The Primer infected, rejected and optimized a new species.

It was the birth of Homo Degenesis.

Specters emerged from the shadows of each crater. Tortured creatures with pale skin stretched tautly across fist-sized tumors. Spikes jutting from distorted frames. Eyes sewn shut yet fraught with visions of past and future.

Better adjusted than the old Homo Sapiens and imbued with psychic abilities beyond all imagination, Homo Degenesis rose to the top of the food chain. He saw himself as part of the Earth's consciousness, able to bring the collective to Humankind, to amalgamate the spirits. Many in one. Already, his claws reached for Mankind's ankle – just one jerk, and it would fall from its throne.

But then, resistance arose. Mankind wasn't about to give up its position without a fight.

SEPSIS

A few decades after the Eshaton, there is no life anywhere close to the craters. The Primer coated the glazed hills like a varnish. It persevered; fungi spores hiding within hollows. Sunken into the dust. Carried upon the wind and ash.

The infection had begun.

When humans first saw the fungal infection, they thought the earth itself was rotting. They called it "Sepsis".

Years later, fungal tomentum blanketed the craters. Its tendrils had sunk deep into the earth and spun into a wool-like mycelium that spread out in circular bursts. As programmed by The Primer, the mycelium pumped nutrients to the surface until it reached a critical mass. The ground swelled, the surface rupturing as fungi sprung from the cracks into the open air. The fungi quickly blossomed, jutting out all along the ridges in rich, fist-sized cusps of white.

Within a day, these caps hardened and deteriorated to a dull gray. A skeleton of dainty veins emerged. The cusps, now brittle as autumn leaves, rustled in the wind. Spore clouds rose as they finally tore, dissipating and swirling into mist and then nothingness.

Over the next few months, the mycelium exhausted the earth and slowly expanded from the crater's center. The dry, flaky ground crumbled in its wake and subsided back into the crater. Meanwhile, the mycelium kept growing, working its way farther until yet another fungal bloom. The cycle continued and the mycelium field grew, ring by ring.

After years of equal growth and erosion, spore fields are strewn across almost every surface in the landscape, each reaching hundreds of meters in diameter. Concentric valleys and walls have emerged like ripples from a stone dropped into a once still pond.

MOTHER SPORE FIELDS

The largest spore fields are kilometers across. The Sepsis hangs above them in veils, billowing in the wind like banners. In all probability, they have gone through more than one cycle. A new bloom begins in the center, and the mycelium keeps burrowing into the ground until it reaches nutrient-rich levels of earth. New rings form on top of old ones, deeper this time; the walls growing higher. The field's concentric shape becomes more clearly visible. Cycle by cycle, the field expands.

Around the same time, the first magnetic anomalies emerge. Compass needles shakily point to the center. And with that, the transformation into a Mother Spore Field is complete.

BURN

A Mother Spore Field's bloom gives birth to cusps of a dusty purple. The outer skin is tougher, so the cusps can be plucked without bursting at the slightest touch. Within, they carry the seed for forcing Mankind under The Primer's spell. Those who inhale or ingest the mother spores are hurtled onto a journey beyond human comprehension. They traverse spheres of cascading color, and find themselves orbiting a resplendent sun made of the basest and purest emotion. Cold suddenly becomes bearable. Hunger is just a dying star within the brain's neuron galaxy.

The mother spores are called Burn. They are a powerful drug, but most of all, they are a threat.

PHENOTYPE

Burn burns. Sinking through the pores of their skin, the spores enter the blood stream. Then like a shock wave from an explosion, Burn spreads and consumes, expanding its radius of infection out from the initial point of impact. The first symptoms soon begin to show. Tiny veins branch out, mingling with body hair and surfacing on the skin in red circular rashes. The rashes flake and flare as more lines break the skin, aligning and colliding to form distinct symbols.

There are seven known symbols that brand the Burned, each hailing from a different region. One is blossoming on the bodies of those from the Borca region. Another marks all those who grew up in the shadows of Franka's pheromone vents. The same is true for Pollen, the Balkhan, Purgare and Africa. The symbols all vary in details, but in the end, they are all marks of the same origin and fate.

Medicine is at a loss. Even on an epigenetic level, their researchers were unable to identify the root of the symbols. Why does each region react differently to the Burn? If the symbols are not determined by genotype, the genetic make-up of the organism, then they must be reacting to the host's phenotype and the genetic evolutionary traits unique to each environment and its native people. Yet could all seven cultural symbols stem from the same source?

HOMO DEGENESIS

THE SEED

Burn pollutes. Once breathed in, the spores keep growing long after the drug's effects have worn off. For some, there is no way back. The blossoms of decay tickle the back of the infected's throat. Fungus spreads around their mouth. Wherever they go, they cough flakes and foamy phlegm. Spreading the Seed. Wherever they lay their heads, Sepsis soon spreads through the ground, reaches for the walls, gropes shakingly outwards, becomes airborne and finally, infects others. He's a Leperos, a threat. Only fire can cleanse his corruption.

EPIGENESIS

An adult's cells are completely formed. Sepsis eats through him as if he were nothing but food for a new spore field. An unborn baby's cells, on the other hand, are full of potential.

Babies born close to Mother Spore Fields are different. Their eyes are cold as a starry sky. They don't recognize their mothers, but they smell the milk, follow it like a bee follows the scent of nectar. They climb and claw their way up and onto the waiting breasts, suckling until there's nothing left but blood and they are violently torn from the trough. They flail with their little arms and legs and cry out in a way that makes the Clanmen quick prayers.

These children are called Soulless Ones, Abberants, or Psychonauts. They awaken a primordial fear in people. Many cannot stand it, taking the small body and bashing it against a stone until there is no life within. Others see the soulless ones as ancestral curses, trials sent by a spirit or an angry god – to be rid of them would mean a betrayal of the circle of life.

Carrying the children through the years, they see the changes. Insects trace patterns around them, drawing mandalas into the dust. They even wriggle up their legs, hiding in skin folds and hair. Yet these children never cry. Never laugh. Never talk. They only demand with their eyes and take what they can get. They do not mind cold and escape clothing as if it were a prison.

While their kin withers, the Abberants continue to flourish. Children from Pollen's tundra develop subcutaneous lumps that harden, fuse into bone shields, and grow spurs. Franka's soulless grow glands that exude sweetish pheromones that charm their families. In the Balkhan, the children emit otherworldly sounds, which bore into people's minds until they reach the deepest subconscious level and there, start reaching out with shadowy tentacles. In Hybrispania, the children can speak with other people's voices. Words spoken to the children tumble from their own mouths, as if they were somehow echoing just one moment into the future. In Purgare, dust and stone rise to orbit the child. The ground warps, lurches and bends to greet them. The sun itself focuses upon them with searing heat.

PORTENTS AND WONDERS

These phenomena end as suddenly as they had once begun. The earth around the children burns up, and amidst the loose dirt, a symbol becomes visible. Then it collapses, like an image made from magnetized metal slivers once the induction lines break.

The Spitalians know it only too well. These symbols are different from those that blossom on Burners' bodies. Ancient and identified, recorded, they have been handed down and taught by humans for thousands of years and derided by modern scientists as nonsense. If the Spitalians could check one of these children's body now, they'd find that feverish heat radiates into the organism, emanating from one focal point on the body axis. Its position and the symbol exactly correspond to one of the energy nodes described by the ancient people – a Chakra.

Seven of those energy nodes are aligned along the center of the human body, from the coccyx up to the cranial

vault. They all are ascribed special attributes and together form the character. According to the old texts, they need to be in balance for a person to be happy and healthy. But within the Abberants, only one singular Chakra glows. The others are cold, black holes. This singular Chakra outshines every other aspect of a Psychonaut's life, exactly lighting the way into his or her future. For them, it's an endless fall into the extreme of the Chakra attributes.

THE FINAL BATTLE

Mother spore fields are bursting to the surface everywhere. They transform the land after their fashion. In their troughs nestle the Psychonauts, a seething mass of primordial, highly adapted creatures. Their number is growing, and wherever their domain intersects with Mankind's, more Abberants crawl from pregnant women's wombs. They take control, reaching for the crown of creation.

Humankind stands at a crossroads. No less than its soul is at stake. The Eshaton was only the prelude. The final battle has begun.

FIVE RAPTURES

There are five kinds of Psychonauts. Five types to study and destroy. Each type can create phenomena according to its Chakra and manipulate its environment. While one sends out spiders, Rift Centipedes and scorpions, another releases a swarm of ants, wasps and termites; yet another emits waves of leeches and fleas. Five plagues surround the Psychonauts, protect them and carry the infectious seed into the land. A spore-bearing fly can seal your fate. These five manifestations are called Raptures. Each Rapture can be exactly assigned to a region on the map:

POLLEN: BIOKINESIS

For Psychonauts with the Biokinesis Rapture, their body is a tool they can shape to their liking. From their arms, bone spurs grow, their skulls are malformed and without any weak spot. They guard their spore fields, merge with them, give or take energy. Wounds heal rapidly, damaged organs are replaced by improved copies within days. They carry their poisonous plague in skin folds: spiders, scorpions, centipedes – all the venomous wasteland scum.

FRANKA: PHEROMANCY

Like insect queens, they are surrounded by ants, wasps and termites. Their skin is stretched tight across the pheromone glands. At the neck, sores bulge, big as nuts or children's fists, oozing puss in which insects feed and fester. The pheromancers weave a net made of pheromone roads, capturing human and animal alike in it and forcing them into the false peace of the collective.

BALKHAN: DUSHAN

The Dushani's song reverberates through the rugged ridges of the Balkhan mountains, resonating down into the land's deepest woods and caverns. Waves stir on still bodies of water; the earth vibrates and ripples.

Their harmonies creep into the thoughts of humans and manipulate them until there is no such thing as free will.

The Dushani glide through mountain creeks and surround themselves with kraken, jellyfish and crawfish.

HYBRISPANIA: PREGNOCTICISM

The Pregnoctics exist in the past and future simultaneously. They are one soul in a thousand bodies. The Hybrispaniards fear them, but they also revere them and turn to them for counsel. Without the omniscient pregnoctics, Hybrispania would long since have been overrun by African invaders. The Psychonauts live next to mountain lakes and on the Atlantic coast. Here, they are close to their plagues: shells, starfish, urchins, ammonites and trilobites.

PURGARE: PSYCHOKINESIS

Psychokinetics are parasites. They cling to villages, feeding on the inhabitants through plagues of leeches, mosquitoes, ticks, fleas and tapeworms.

As the Psychokinetics feed, energies build up in their solar plexus, making their chests glow with heat. When they finally release this anima, it consumes his environment and burns him from the inside out. The light bends around this type of Abberant and gets entangled in force fields. Stones rise into the air, accelerate in ever tightening circles and finally race towards the enemy in a glittering cloud.

THE EARTH CHAKRAS

The five huge craters are at the center of this development. All evolutionary surges emitted from them and were carried outwards via the Mother Spore Fields as if they were linked by a mythical ether and the fields were nothing but relay stations within a giant communication network. New hunting or flight behaviors spread within days, as well as the memory of an accursed enemy's face. Everything emits from the center. Those who want to fight the Psychonauts will have to climb the crater walls in the end.

POLLEN: PANDORA

The largest impact crater is a gateway into an abyss of genetic proliferation. Creatures fearing neither cold nor steel rise from it. They grow bone plates and additional organs like humans grow hair. Primordial monsters swim in the crater lake, fighting each other, sinking to the ground dead or mating and mutating. Ammonites several feet in diameter have been seen. Some of these creatures get washed to shore through countless drains and streams. Many die in the hostile atmosphere, but others burrow into the ground and flourish.

The biokinetic Earth Chakra is fertile; the west wind carries with it mile-long spore trails and drops them in the east. This region is beyond redemption: The spore fields have spread to the horizon – and no one ever made it further.

FRANKA: SOUFFRANCE

In Franka's Massif Central, there's a gaping wound. Pheromones sweet as nectar spill from dirt vents and flow down the crater slopes, wash around people and insects and make them part of Franka's Earth Chakra collective.

Here, Homo Degenesis and Homo Sapiens live close together. Unlike anywhere else, man is on the same level as a swarms of insects.

In Souffrance, he has devolved to a drone.

BALKHAN: USUD

The Dushani Earth Chakra vibrates and shudders, interconnecting with the land's and its people's resonant frequencies, oscillating and singing. Nearing Usud, your teeth ache, your thoughts race until they are swept away, leaving behind a vacuum that rudimentary emotions flow into like ichors. You become a lost soul, soon filled with a new will and thoughts by the Dushani's songs. Usud changes your destiny and creeps into the fate of a whole country.

HYBRISPANIA: MIRAR

Surrounded by and hidden within a time lapse lies Mirar, the Pregnoctics' Earth Chakra. Thousands of eyes roam the land. Sometimes from up high, circling and waiting. Sometimes they spy from cold granite or the depths of the mountain lakes, a grainy view of what was and what is going to be. Innumerable souls entwined within one singular mind and spirit possessing endless wisdom. Those who dare to explore future and past will realize the secret of the beginning and the end amidst a sea of shells in Mirar.

PURGARE: NOX

Force fields demolish space like a broken mirror and capture the fragments within the finest of gravitational mesh. The fields above Nox are sealed, capturing the light and never letting go. Eternal night grows in crystalline thorns from the Psychokinetics' Earth Chakra, infecting the area, creeping onwards.

Only one man – Nuntius the Baptist – has entered the darkness and lived to tell. He was surrounded by force fields, fractured light gleaming along their surfaces in all the colors of the rainbow. Pillars of pure light penetrated each other in an impossible geometry. Pitch black creatures hung in gravitational rifts, their bloated bodies mirrored thousandfold and compressed or bent. Perfect beauty amid darkness, blacker than death, holier than any god. After, Nuntius went blind and mad, demanding the Rift around Nox be broken to free the divine Pneuma.

PSYCHOVORES

While asteroid fragments punched crater after crater into the northern hemisphere's soil, a stray one ploughed through the sky above Africa. Above the Sudan, the asteroid entered the atmosphere with a blinding flash before finally plunging into the Atlantic at blinding speed.

But Africa wasn't spared. The projectile cooked the surrounding air to more than 54,032° Fahrenheit, painting a long, flaming tail across the sky. With several thousand atmospheric tons of pressure, a tsunami struck the African continent. At an unstoppable 4 miles per second, the wave ate through the earth and devoured humans, animals, vegetation, even entire cities and mountains along with it. It gouged a scar more than 1,245 miles long and easily 185 miles wide: the Dhoruba.

For hours, it rained debris; pulverized trees, rock and dirt all across the devastated land. Yet seeds, moss spores, and plant residue also fell back to earth. Years later, the first trees reappeared. Fern woods nestled between rocks the size of houses. Vegetation had reclaimed the Dhoruba, but these trees, bushes, and ferns were all infected.

The Dhoruba was littered with molten asteroid fragments. Black steam rose from them and sank into the humus and soil.

Vegetation changed. Leaves grew in strictly geometrical hexagons or octagons. Every branch was thorny. The trees were heavily laden with glassy fruit that splintered when they finally fell. The strange plants conquered the Dhoruba's ridges and grew into the land. Today, the Africans know them as Psychovores – the greatest challenge the African people face.

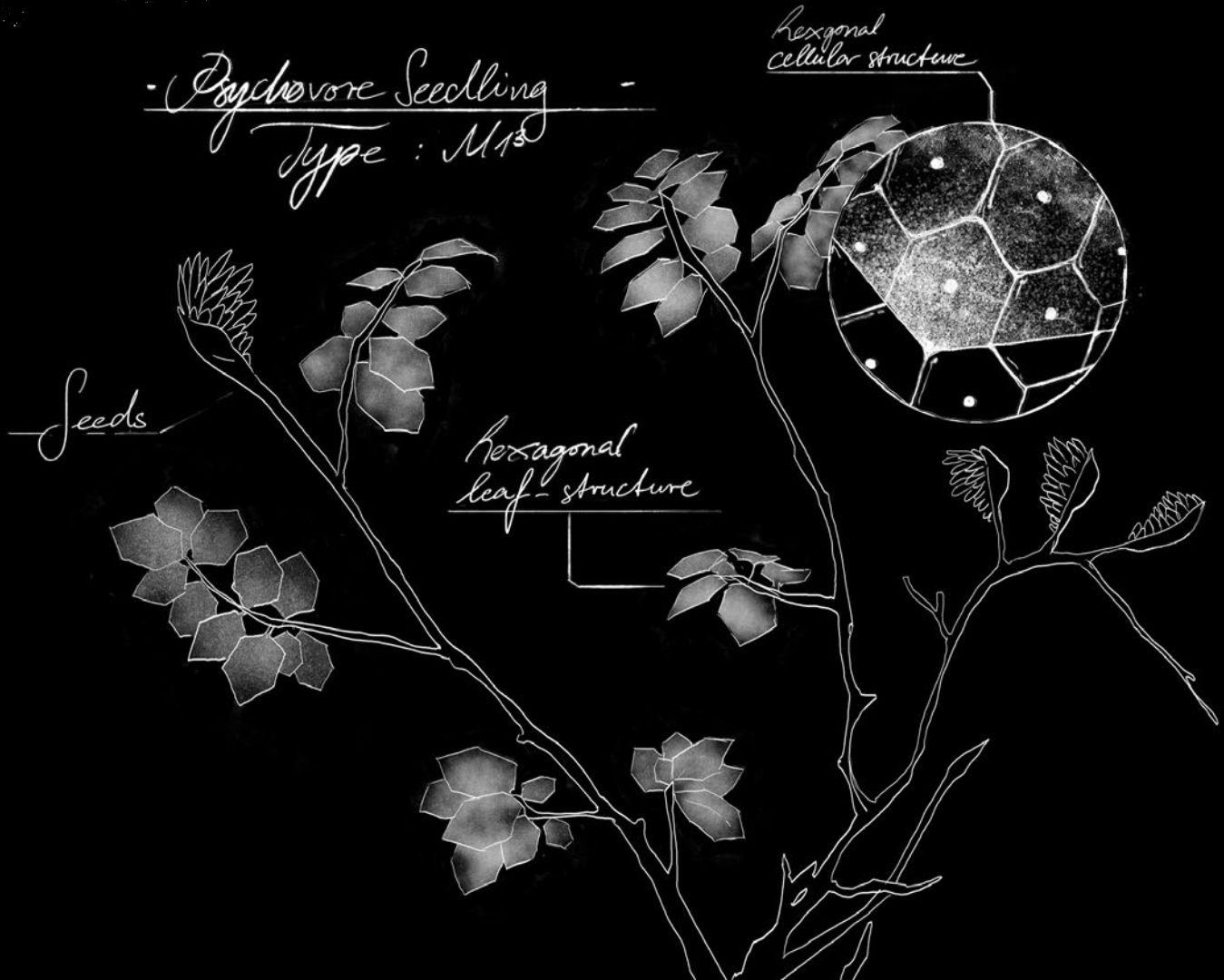
DISCORDANCE

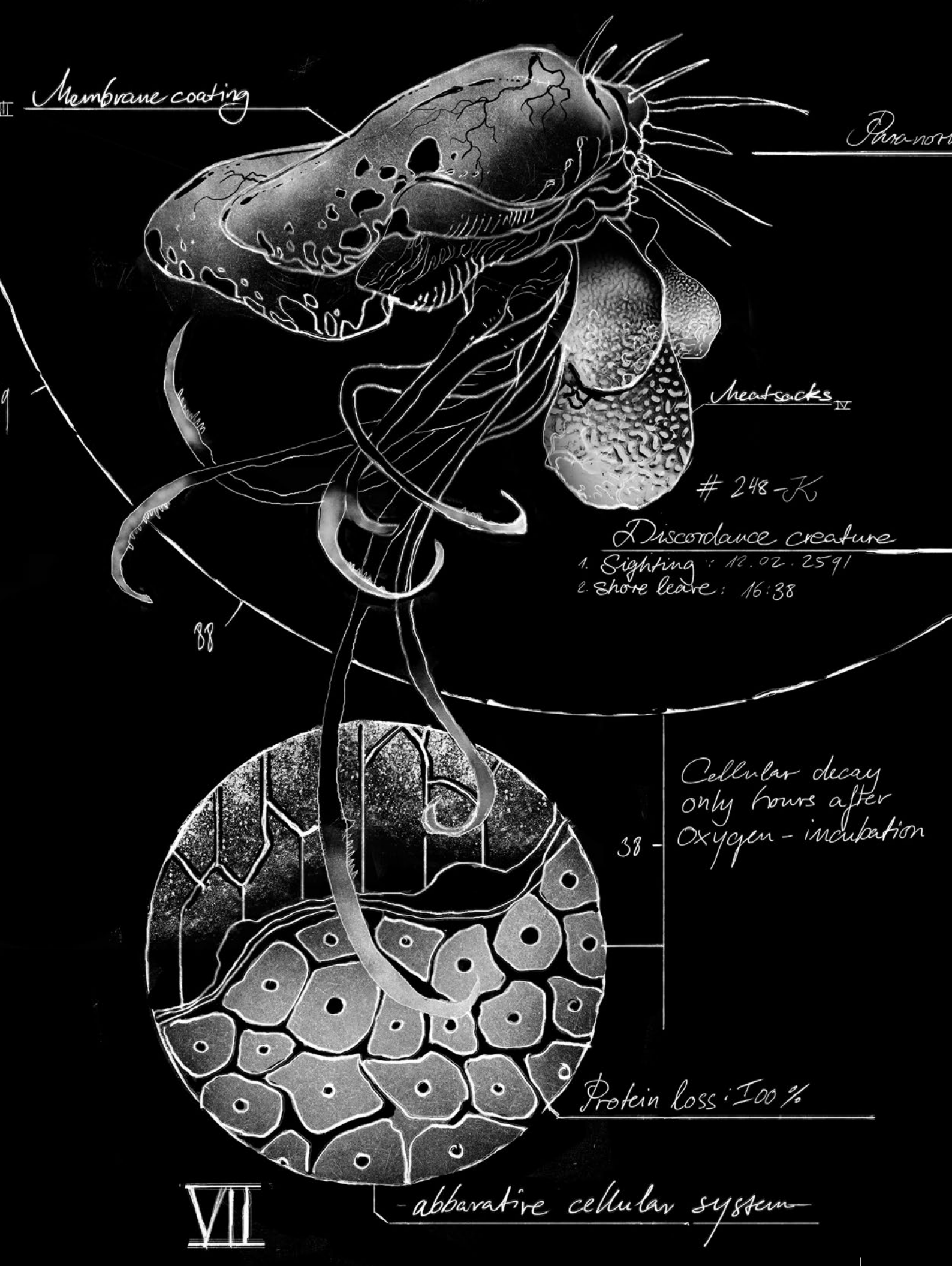
Sepsis and Psychovores are both variants of the Primer, but wherever they meet, they contradict. Plants rot yet Sepsis ends. Torn from their Earth Chakra, subterranean feeding buds grow within these spore fields.

Those who step on the plants' neural points fall into feeding sacs, get entangled in thorny gills and drown in the influx of digestive fluids. Within days, the dissolved victim is pumped into a womb sac.

There, bizarre figures grow in gelatinous bubbles. Finally, membrane riddled creatures rise up into the air, but rot within hours and fall to the ground, a stinking mass. Evolution breathes old and rejected things back to life. It is out of control.

This is the Discordance, a belt of raging, contradictory evolution thousands of miles wide between the Sepsis invading from the north and the Psychovores in the south.




Membrane coating
Heatsacks
248-K
Discordance creature
1. Sighting : 12.02.2591
2. Shore leave : 16:38
88
38
Cellular decay only hours after Oxygen - incubation
Protein loss : 100 %
- abbarative cellular system
VII

THE CROW AND THE LION

From the ashes of ancient civilizations, seven new Cultures emerged. From Europe's cold north to the Mediterranean and down to Africa, they rose.

The Europeans are crows, circling above their nations' decaying corpses, picking up the useless, scattered pieces. A few artifacts here, a habit there and a juicy strip of prejudices as dessert. Scavengers. If you ask them, they consider crows clever, intelligent birds.

The Africans left all that behind. The past lives on in their ancestors and their hearts, not in ruins, laws or thinking that's irrelevant now. They see the Lion as an embodiment of their people. Noble and strong he stalks the savannah, fighting to stay on top of the food chain. What he lacks in agility, he makes up for with his savage ferocity; his roar makes the world tremble. The Lion is ready to jump across the big water and has raised much dust in the Crow's domain. This battle needs to be fought. Too often, he has had to feel the Crow's beak.

BORCA
LEGACY OF THE ANCIENTS

Waves of red dust broke against monolithic cliffs, piling up and becoming lost in stone labyrinths: buildings, eroded by the ravages of time, now breathe cold dust and dirt. Brush covers ancient floors as pale, wet roots find their way down and through.

Humans wander through a wilderness of steel and concrete, past overgrown craters, through fields of wild wheat, following dried-up riverbeds from settlement to settlement. In centuries of sediment, they dig for the ancient people's wonders, hoping to find something revelatory. Their future, however, does not lie in history's quarry, but in their inexhaustible energy. Stone after stone, they wrest metropolises like Justitian, Cathedral City and Osman from the ruins and erect a new world. Conquering the land and fortifying their rule.

Cults flourish as they devote themselves to civilization and order, carrying both into the wasteland with fire and steel. But not everyone bends the knee. Some want to keep living as free folk in their ancestors' ruins. They get no choice. Those who do not take the hand offered to them must flee underground or die in a hail of lead.

For decades, those that fled drank water from puddles, scraped lichens from walls and cracked cockroaches. They got rid of the last scraps of civilization, their hearts and minds poisoned by hatred. Now they step from the shadows. Teeth filed, spiked clubs and stone knifes in hand.

They will reclaim what was once theirs.

FRANKA
THE SWARM

Glands on the Psychonauts' bodies become bloated and crumble. A sweetish scent rises, wafts down the Ziggurats' steps into the land of humans and becomes entangled between clay vents and ruins. The Pheromancers weave their nets. They beguile, obfuscate minds, and assimilate. Insects have long been at their service, and human will vanishes in their oily haze. Forcing them to live as drones in the queens' hive.

Where Homo Degenesis flourishes, Homo Sapiens fade.

Humans flee the wasp storms and termite attacks to the rivers, only to see vents grow on their fields, laden with ants. Soon, the land will spit forth the swarm. Village after village decays.

But now, the Frankers fight. The rivers carry them deep into enemy territory, where they fire pesticide bombs, smoke out breeding colonies and assassinate. A whole people rises.

POLLEN
ETERNAL WANDERINGS

Mother spore fields tear up cities and turn the land into a restless sea of decaying stone. Spider webs span chasms and hide ruins. Thousands of arachnid black eyes follow every step. Where green grows, Rift Centipedes burst from the ground to drag the sprout into the depths of their breeding colonies. The ground crackles, rising and falling in a monthly rhythm like waves on distant seas. Here and there, forgotten cities break through the ancient gossamer and bathe in sunlight. They remain for days or weeks before falling down again as the spiders close the wounds in their web.

The permafrost thaws in circular areas, giving birth to a steaming paradise of translucent plants. The surrounding spore fields rot, their rings collapse. But they try to resist. Waves of spiders strangle the strange vegetation in their webs. Streams of Rift Centipedes dive into the feverish ground, surrounded by root membranes and skewered by quickly growing thorns. They bite themselves, poison the soil, and tear themselves free. A subterranean battle rages until the Rift Centipedes finally push through and the oasis above crumbles.

Spore fields and their plagues are pitted against bizarre proliferation. The Polleners live somewhere in between. They defend the oasis with stone axes and passion, even though they know it is only a matter of time before the wasteland crashes back down and they must start anew. Uprooted to once again drift through the tundras, their few belongings on sleds as they follow the spore fields in search of a new home.

DO NOT EXPECT TOO MUCH FROM THE
APOCALYPSE.

[STANISLAW JERZY LEC]

BALKHAN
THE WILD LANDS

The Balkhan is a land of extremes, permeated by strength and pride and threatening to be torn by primordial forces on a daily basis. Storms ravage the plains, making the tree tops of endless forests quiver. Winter hits the people with arctic cold and mountains of snow. Summer burns the grassy plains to stubble fields. And when it rains, torrents gouge the valleys and merge into raging rivers.

The humans mirror their home: savage and untamed, unbeholden, passionate and volatile. Power struggles rage across the region, as bloody disputes turn farmers into warriors overnight and their wives into widows the next.

Only in these troubled times do the warlords lay down their malice at their doorsteps and shake hands with men they would have slain only a day before. Now they attack the enemy together, fueled by passion with no compromise, loyal like a father unto his son. But once the threat has been conquered, the winds will shift, and old alliances will fade like dreams in the morning sun.

Above all this, the deep, resonating song of the Dushani rises. Nature is their music box. He can tune and shape his song to create the perfect harmony, extinguishing any dissonances as if his life depended on it. His melody infiltrates the heart and captures the mind, making changes there. Pain or comfort. Gives and takes.

HYBRISPANIA
THE KILLING FIELDS

Africans roam the Alhambra's gardens, sitting in the shadows of awnings and drinking tea with native Hybrispanians. In the midday heat, they retreat to libraries and shadowed halls of ancient peoples. They have grown fond of the land. Sevilla to them is a second Tripoli.

It seems as if the Neolibyan consuls tightly controlled ancient Al-Andalus in southern Hybrispania. But the borders were drawn with the blood of Hybrispanian resistance fighters and Scourgers. The pinpricks of the Guerreros deplete Cordoba; the Scourgers follow up by driving the Hybrispaniards into the jungles, shooting them from their buggies and cutting down men, women and children alike.

Fear and hatred take over. The Hybrispaniards are in no way inferior to them, planting sting and explosive

traps and quietly enter the Africans' homes at night. Acts of mercy are punished – if not by the enemy, then by other Guerreros.

Every Hybrispaniard is instilled with the idea of freedom and reconquest at birth. All around him, friends, brothers, sisters and companions rise to heroes in battle, then fall in a hail of bullets the very next moment. These martyrs form the foundation of Hybrispanian culture: battle paintings adorn houses, songs prepare for death, texts teach the use of weapons and survival in the jungle. Life falls by the wayside.

The Scourgers are superior in number and weaponry. The resistance would have died long ago if the Guerreros hadn't received help from the enigmatic Pregnoctics. These strangers delve into past and future and offer snippets of the future to the daring: the outcome of skirmishes and attack routes.

Of course, the price can be one's soul.

PURGARE
LAND OF THE CHOSEN

The need for strength, insight and a higher power has always burned in the hearts of the Purgers. The Anabaptists opened their arms and took in their lost brothers and sisters. With warmth and love, they anointed them with Elysian oils – and threw them into purgatory.

Partitioned by a mountain range, Purgare is divided into two distinct regions. In the east, olive groves, wine vineyards, and other crops grow. Ancestral holds are lined up like pearls on a string, each speaking of familial tradition and honor. The west, however, has been burnt and poisoned by the Reaper's vapors. The ground quivers as rivers of lava roll relentlessly toward the Mediterranean.

Amidst this destruction are the Psychokinetics. The Anabaptists know them by many names: Scum of the Demiurge, The Primeval, Devourers of Paradise. Fleas and mosquitoes buzz around them. Clouds of gossamer burst from ravines and rocky clefts – each hard and sharp like glass. In Rifts, pure elemental darkness condenses and grows into crystalline structures. The air itself compresses into force fields that fracture the sunlight thousandfold.

The Anabaptists say Humankind must prove its worth right here and now and march into the final battle. They consider themselves the chosen ones and willingly follow Cathedral City into a holy war.

AFRICA
THE LION RAMPANT

Though Africa has long since liberated itself, driving the white man into the sea, the old wound is far too deep. Every ship sunk by Mediterranean pirates, every battle in Hybrispania and the Balkhan, it all brings up old pain. The chains from the past rattle like dissonant wind chimes and echo into today.

Yet Africa is strong and flourishes. The Neolibyan merchant Cult has been feeding the coastal cities with European loot for centuries. It has bored wells, erected factories and paved foot paths to glorious promenades. Legendary artisans carve ancestral steles, forge and engrave hunting guns. Water carriers even give out free drinks, courtesy of the Neolibyans.

The markets smell of spices, fruit and tea. Hosts of children sit and listen to old men showing their scars and telling tales about every mark. They talk about expeditions into the Crow's land. About the Scourgers' bravery and the battles for Cordoba against the savages. About the pale shadows who love their rifles more than their mothers and wives.

A gentle breeze wafts over from the Mediterranean. Blue and red awnings fly, the coal on the hookahs glows and sends ashes up into the wind. Rain clouds roll across the sky. It's in the air – soon, the rain will pelt down.

It will fall on the jungle, too. Where once a sandy desert glowed in the sun, rivers now meander through the land. Mangroves sink their roots into the water, as the jungle steams in the heat. But in this jungle, something strange is growing: plants with pentagonal to octagonal leaves, prickly and tangled like a nightmare. The Psychovores. One scratch and a human's skin starts to blister, boils searing and blackening within seconds.

Replacing the old vegetation, Psychovores have transformed the land and its peoples. Everyone around the Psychovores find themselves abandoning their native languages, relapsing into a primordial tongue that only those nearby can understand. Under the influence of Psychovores, all language barriers have fallen and Africa has united, but the diversity of their tribes and cultures diluted as well.

Now the Lion, Africa's unifying symbol, rules supreme. The Neolibyans are its heart, lending it strength. The Scourgers are its claws, killing its prey. And the Anubians are its soul, governing its fate.

THIRTEEN CULTS

SPITALIANS
THE LAST BASTION

Man's last line of defense against the Primer and its creatures. They explore the spore fields, dissect dead Psychonauts, develop poisons and weapons. With fungicides, they cut swathes into the Sepsis and carry spore-covered muscles in glass tubes, which lead them into the abberants' breeding grounds.

If you are on the side of humanity and therefore, the Spitalians, you must answer their questions.

The Spitalians are doctors. They live by strict rules, shave their skulls, and rub themselves down with limestone. In the cities, they administer hygienics. Healing is a privilege that is earned. Any sign of the spore drug Burn is prosecuted. The Burners are burnt. The Spitalians cannot afford to be merciful. Their legions of famulants fight the consequences of leniency in Franka every day.

CHRONICLERS
THE OMNISCIENT

The Stream once encompassed the world and touched every mind. It recorded and catalogued every second; the pure, digital knowledge of Mankind bundled into evolutionary algorithms. Deep down on the bottom of this sea of data, something stirred. Humans sought it, searched, and found what they did not understand. But they believed.

The Chroniclers are the offspring of these Streamers. The Eshaton made the Stream dry up and petrified the sea of knowledge. The Chroniclers keep up its work, buying artifacts from the Scrappers, fueling an entire market as they search for remainders of the past and the last servers.

One day, they will reactivate the Stream and lead Humankind back to the light. Until then, they must be strong and resist the unruly clans and cults. They are not fighters, but with voice-amplifying Vocoders, cascades of light, and shock gloves, they are considered cruel gods in the wasteland. People in the cities consider them strange. Their language is riddled with archaic technical expressions, and they prefer the companionship of machines over humans.

But that shouldn't fool anyone. For they watch, collecting data on everyone and everything. Advising and manipulating the world dancing on their strings.

HELLVETICS
THE BROTHERHOOD OF ARMS

Deep within the Alpine mountains, they expected the Eshaton. The ensuing inferno did not spare them, though. The Reaper's blow cut through their Fortress, tore open ravines and belched magma. As hellfire swept through the lands, the Hellvetics confronted nature's wrath. They sealed off tunnels. Redirected streams of lava. Built bridges to lands considered lost and protected themselves with fire-resistant barricades.

The Alps were broken that day, but not the Hellvetics.

Decades later, they stepped out of the mountains and followed their order. As offspring of the Swiss military, they were in charge of the old cantons' security. They expanded the Alpine Fortresses and opened transit tunnels for those who must cross the mountains – and have been demanding money for passage ever since.

Hellvetics are soldiers through and through. Their doctrine ties them to weapon, comrade and country; every unnecessary shot weakens the Fortress. Every missed shot is punished. No one out there can match them in their defenses, and no one can oppose their assault rifles, the Trailblazers. In their Alpine Fortress with its guns and defensive corridors, the Hellvetics consider themselves unassailable.

But the world around them is changing. Psychonautic phenomenons crystallize to razor sharp Filaments in the tunnels. Grotesquely misshapen creatures hurry through the Balkhan section and open high security gates with a gesture. The cantons resist the military government and rise up. The Hellvetics must march out into the world. They must watch, learn and fight.

JUDGES
HAMMER OF JUSTICE

The Judges brought law to the wastelands. With hammer and musket, they confronted the savages, hiding their faces behind wide brimmed hats. They conjured hailstorms of lead, slaughtered the Cockroach Clan and judged outlaws with a blow of their hammers. They pursued their opponents like a pack of bloodhounds and followed the survivors deep down into their primordial underground.

And they saw it was good.

In the city of Justitian, they completed their vision of

a just and safe world. The walls were insurmountable, the law was strong, the people were not free, but free of fear. Settlement after settlement placed themselves under Justitian's custody. The Protectorate was born.

But peaceful times are over. The ruins teem with life again. The clans have grown strong and learned from the past. A Judge can no longer depend solely on his Codex – Justitian's law. If he wants to survive in the Protectorate, he must master the law of the jungle.

CLANNERS
RULERS OF THE WASTELAND

The individual is nothing. Those who wanted to survive after the global conflagration joined groups, lived by their rules, cared and fought for them. Strangers became friends, friends became lovers. The survivors merged into Clanners. In terms of civilization, some tumbled into the darkness of a new stone age. They prayed to deities like Thunder and Sun and ate their ancestors' flesh to absorb their strength. Other Clanners clung to traditional knowledge, indulging in morality, manners and rapid-fire rifles. Very few settled down. Most see their home under a nomadic sky.

SCRAPPERS
THE DIRT DIGGERS

Drawn towards the ruins, away from the humming, raucous cities, Scrappers dig in the dust. Every cut of the spade brings them closer to the era of the ancient people. Working all the way down until they can drag technical wonders caked with soot into the light of day.

Their faces and bodies tell a tale of dust, cold, stone splinters and hunger. But when they hear the wind whistle through gaping windows and the old buildings creak in the midday sun, they know that this is their home. Here, they know every nook and cranny. They can delve into tunnels and break the surface again somewhere totally different. They know which lichens are edible and where to find water. No one can best them out here.

If they need to return to the city for some reason, they choose the direct path to the Chroniclers' alcoves, drop their findings there, and get paid. For days, they revel in the city's maelstrom, knock the dirt from their skin, fill their bellies with greasy stew and float through the Apocalyptics' joints. But soon, they hear the ruins call again, promising them peace.

NEOLIBYANS
CONQUERORS OF THE WORLD

Their ships carry treasures from all over the world. Luxury and the scent of precious oils accompany them wherever they go. In Tripol's Bank of Commerce, they haggle over trade routes, acquire plantations or oil fields. With roaring steel fortresses on treads, they sell weapons and spices to savages and deploy troops of Scrappers and Scourgers deep in enemy territory. They enjoy resistance, for it often results in the greatest profit.

From within their ranks come great seafarers and explorers who venture deep into the Psychovores or the frigid North, cataloging ancient fortresses and opening new trade routes. Other Neolibyans see the world through their rifle's scope, traveling as far as Pollen to hunt Biokinetics and earn reputations as great hunters.

Neolibyans take a no for a yes. For them, there are no problems, only options – and in the best cases, an adventure.

SCOURGERS
AVENGERS OF THE DARK CONTINENT

They disdain Neolibyans for their thick paunches, greed and pomposity. Scourgers walk the way of the warrior in the footsteps of their ancestors, integrating themselves into their caste's strict hierarchy. What they need to keep their bodies lithe and minds wide awake, they take from the Neolibyans. They fight for no less than the African people.

In the land of the Crow, they are considered harbingers of death. They hide their faces behind ancestral masks and carry shield, spear and rifle. The Damu assess the enemy, anticipating their movement and recognizing every weakness. Then the Chaga charge, leading the pack into battle. The Simba are entitled to the strongest of all opponents. Theirs is the greatest feat on a day of blood. Conquered enemies are enslaved and handed over to the Neolibyans. On vast plantations, they will work off the white man's collective debt.

WE DO NOT
KNOW, IF WE ARE STILL
ALIVE.

[ERICH MARIA REMARQUE]

ANUBIANS
KEEPERS OF THE PROPHECY

The Anubians consider themselves chosen ones. The seven Circles tattooed onto their skin represent the seven transformations they must endure to make their body a perfect vessel of Ka. They guide their people from life until death, perform ceremonies and placate their ancestral spirits in their grudge against everything that lives.

With every Anubis canopy they empty, one skin Circle vanishes, and they begin to realize that believing in spirits, rites and traditions is a peculiar matter. They continue evolving, walking the world with eyes wide and a sharp mind. Some recognize the healer in themselves and learn to catalyze highly poisonous Psychovore seeds in their bodies into potent drugs. Others take the sickle and leave the land of the Crow, cutting the lifelines of Psychonauts and thus obliterate a disturbance of the wave.

They always end up in Cairo. When the third Circle vanishes, the Anubians prepare to advance into the city that is overgrown by Psychovores, already feeling the pull of the pyramids. Soon, the last mysteries will be revealed to them.

JEHAMMEDANS
CARRIERS OF GOD'S COUNTENANCE

A Jehammedan's life is determined from the day he is born. He will fulfill his duties within the family, like his father and his grandfather before him. They honor the family as decreed by Jehammed, the last prophet. As a young Ismaeli, the Jehammedan herds his kin's goats and imagines how life would have been as an Isaaci, a blessed child. What feats he would have committed! But he knows his place, winds his phylacteries tighter and calls himself a fool. Someday the Jehammed's teachings will allow him a test. As Sword of Jehammed, he may fight the Anabaptists and other scum to prove his worth to his kin. He will then find a wife, a Hagari, and start his own family. The cycle begins anew.

Yet there is a third path. This boy may one day heed the call of Aries, the ram-headed one, and learn more about the unknown truth of the Jehammedans than he ever desired.

APOCALYPTICS
THE LORDS OF DESIRE

Apocalyptics live a pure and unbridled life. They appear in flocks, swooping into gambling dens and nesting in bordellos. Their distillates are stronger, their Burn more potent, their whores more beautiful. Any vice finds a welcome home with them. They live in the present. All emotions are sacred to them and equally celebrated as if they were the last.

They name their flocks for their origins or way of life. They earn the name of a bird that embodies their character. Knife fighters are Stormcrows. Whores and thieves are Magpies. A Woodpecker expands the nest, running shebeens and smuggling routes. Above all, the Raven leads the flock. He knows how to interpret the cards of the Apocalyptic Tarot and, with much flair and drama, shows their most desired future to everyone. The cards are an arbitrary tool, waiting to be directed against anyone opposing the Raven.

In the Judges, the Apocalyptics have found their nemesis. Whenever law and order crosses paths with crime and excess, it's bound to be interesting.

ANABAPTISTS
TORCHBEARERS IN PARADISE

You only need to walk the world with eyes open to see the truth of the neo-gnostic teachings! The land was once beautiful and full of trees. The sun shone down with a friendly face upon fields and happy people. But today, paradise is rotten. Spawn of the demiurge, Psychonauts in all their carnality carry no divine soul. The root of all evil is clear to see and must be hacked to pieces and cut out.

The Anabaptists have made this purge their goal in life. Their Ascetics heal and till the tortured soil, sow wheat and baptize it with the purest water. They produce oils and blend them to create essences that lend strength and heal pain. The Orgiastics are the Anabaptist fighters: full of elysian oils, they confront the Psychonauts with swords and flame throwers. The final battle for Humanity is being fought here and now, and the Anabaptists carry the torch.

PALERS
THE VAULT CRAWLERS

For centuries, they waited in the crypts of the divine ones for their awakening. Far underground in eternal darkness. With deep and crackling voices, glowing blue creatures talk to Palers from the walls, reinforcing their conviction that they are the righteous ones. Chosen to one day throw open the gates to the surface and rule the nations of this earth alongside the divine ones.

This day is near, but not near enough. Food is getting scarce, and frequently the Palers must venture out and raid villages at night. Centuries in eternal darkness have transformed them into pale, squat creatures with heightened senses, but without any moral regards for the surface dwellers. Dulcet voices are very important to them. Their demagogues are masters of mental manipulation. One word from them, correctly annunciated with the proper tone and posture, can conjure emotions like fear, desire or pure blinding pain.

One by one, their bunkers open. The awakeners among the Palers go searching for their kin and the other 44 bunkers; tightly gripping the holy solar discs they'll soon brandish in front of locked portals. Some of those portals will swing open and set in motion a plan that is greater than anything the Palers can imagine.

MARAUDERS

Argyre the Scavenger, One-legged Aspera, Aries the Ram, the Ice Breaker, Chernobog and a dozen more – god-like entities keeping people company for centuries now, circling like asteroids in Earth's gravitational field. One day, they'll come crashing down again and leave craters full of bizarre legends of blinding rays of light and rotten flesh.

Ignorant people consider them gods like Mother Sun and Brother Moon, to be appeased with animal sacrifices. It is said that artifacts of Bygone eras come alive in their hands, machines talk to them and impossible portals into the mountain depths swing open before them. Some describe them as dead husks, kept in shape by bandages and kept alive by malice. Others see them as a twist of fate. Through them, Aries destroyed the Anabaptist attack force in the Jehammedans' hour of reckoning.

The Marauders are unpredictable. To some they reveal ancient knowledge, others suffer their endless wrath. They are still out there, hovering, waiting. In certain ruins, there are coal drawings of the ram-headed one. Way up north, one can find altar mountains of Chernobog. Everyone knows them as chaos and despair.

SIGHTINGS

The Chroniclers' Cult has been watching the Marauders' tracks since the beginning. Their Streamers traverse the land, questioning the natives and listening to old campfire stories about gods from the shadows of time. The details of every sighting are new pieces in the puzzle of their digital nexus, The Cluster. One day, this information will reach critical mass and everything will fall into place. Finally they will discern the Marauders' plan.

CORE DATA: ASPERA

Borca, 2359. Our spies register the signal again.
Ultra short wave, pulsed sine wave, every 500 milliseconds. I was with Streamer Monitor and Mediator Delete, both have enough score to know what the signal meant and what we were getting ourselves into. None of us had had a previous encounter. We were excited and happy.

Monitor did the bearing. He just pointed wordlessly to the Alps' rugged silhouette. His breath pillowed out from the tiny holes in his mask and condensed into clouds. I remember that clearly.

In the morning, we set out.

Snow started to fall, forcing us to stop.

We camped in a ruined basement. Monitor listened to the signal and only moved to crank up the batteries. I communicated with Delete. It got personal. He told me about a sister, Fregga. He had collected bugs with her in the Black Lung, he said. He also said the snow was bringing back some old memories. I asked how he'd felt that day. He did not understand, at least not at first. He even got angry. Said it should damn well be possible to have a normal conversation without returning to the default communication codes for intensifying contact with savages. I said I was sorry.

That night, he cried in his sleep and scratched the barcode tattoo on his forehead. I could have asked if he regretted his parents' decision to give him to the Chroniclers. I waited for him to wake up, but he slept.

In the morning, the sky cleared up and we went on.

The sun was at its zenith when Delete came to my side and put his hand on my arm. It was foolish, but he got lucky: I had discharged the conduits in my suit to avoid sparks in the snow. He said someone was watching us from the chain of hills.

He pointed to black shapes against the white backdrop, approaching through the knee-high snow. Monitor saw them, too. We looked at each other and simultaneously touched our Vocoders. We turned the amps to feedback, directed them towards the savages. I yelled, Delete screamed, Monitor roared.

The dampener in my mask tuned all of it up to maximum. Powdery snow rose all around us. I felt the frequencies in my bones, in my stomach. Interestingly, exactly one rib caused me pain. We must have hit its resonance frequency. Good. A good team. We acted simultaneously.

The savages fled. That day, we were the heroes.

The next morning, we met a real god.
The signal's amplitude height had been in the red area for hours. Monitor took down his backpack and took out a package. He unwrapped the oilcloth. It contained an artifact of unknown design. Ergonomic hilt, trigger, blocky design. A needle as long as my hand was wide protruded from it, together with lots of black duct tape. I wanted to know what it was. He ignored my question and marched on. Delete hurried after him. I was unsure. In the end, I followed at a distance.

Then I saw her. Standing there. Just like in the descriptions. Two braids jutted out at both sides of her head, the meter-long hair joined on her back. Her face was small. Youthful. Her gaze inscrutable. She moved towards Monitor. Her mechanical leg had nothing at

all in common with human anatomy, but still it was a hydraulic masterpiece. Softly, the metal slid over guide rails, articulated joints swiveled and racks interlocked with gears. Lithe as a predator.

Monitor didn't budge. I hurried to his side and fell to my knees in the snow, head bent. I heard her leg buzz and scrape, but there was also a creaking sound, like old leather. I felt ill. Monitor still wasn't kneeling. I turned my head and looked up at him. He had put his head back, chortling noises coming from his throat. I jumped up and nearly grabbed him when I saw his face. He had torn away his mask, his mouth wide as a milky white discharge ran from his eyes. Monitor still didn't budge, he just kept chortling, so I grabbed him, felt his body's rigidness, tore down my own mask, breathed in cold air and yelled at him.

Next thing I knew, I was lying in the snow.

One-legged Aspera, the goddess, had grabbed Monitor's neck. Her fingers creaked, so did her jaw. She talked to Monitor in a language I did not understand. She grew louder, shook him. CHORTLE CHORTLE CHORTLE. Her face was only a hand's breadth away from his. A gust of staggering stench made me retch. Pus, dust and mold. Age beyond all imagination.

She reached for Monitor's hilt-and-duct-tape artifact, and I heard his fingers break CRACK CRACK CRACK.

He roared. Coughed out words in the same language Aspera had spoken. She took the artifact by the hilt, drew a hose from her suit and connected both.

Out of the corner of an eye, I saw Delete. He had risen, the mask betrayed no emotion. St Elmo's Fire danced across his pauldrons. He fired up his suit's capacitors, preparing to attack. I yelled at him not to move. Again and again. Screamed myself to the heavens. Aspera looked at me, and I went silent. Beneath her skin, something shifted. Her eyes were not cold or inhuman, they were simply impassive. Nothing could have shaken me more.

Delete fell to his knees and dug his hands into the snow. I knew he had prepared questions. We had been so well-prepared. Aspera turned toward Monitor again, jerked his head aside and jammed the needle into the side of his neck. A green light shone on the artifact and a piston started moving up and down. It was a pump.

We saw Monitor's skin turn pale and tighten over his muscles. He faded. A tremor went through him. I thought it was over when he started speaking. Very low, very calmly. Aspera answered in the same tone, caressing his hair. She smiled. He went silent. All strength left him. Aspera let him slide to the ground and released the hose from the pump. White discharge spilled and hardened to stone. She broke off the spigot and looked at me again. Stared at me. I wasn't sure whether she had fallen asleep or was caught in a state unknown to mere mortals. Again I saw the movement beneath her skin and knew that she was going to speak. "This man was a fake." Her eyes looked this way and that as if she was thinking. She nodded. "No Chronicler."

She turned towards the mountains and left.

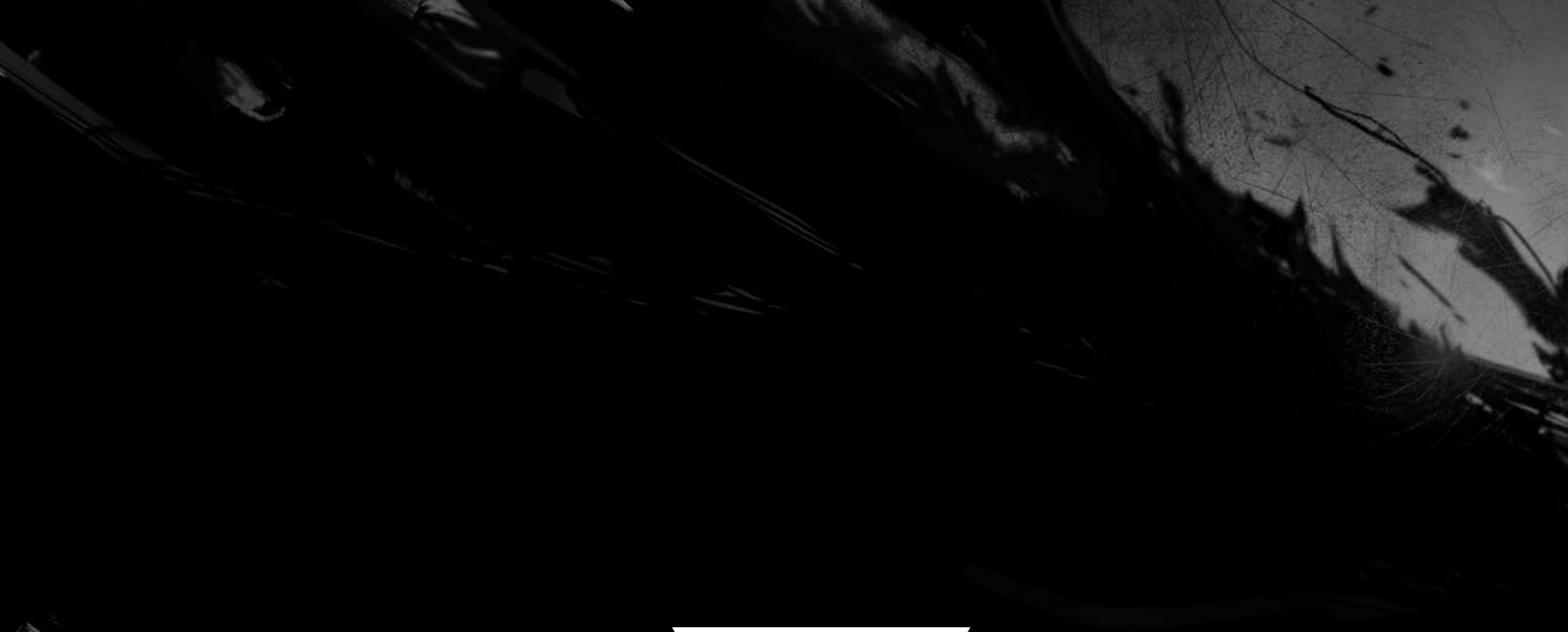
LINKED CORE DATA: AMBROSIA

The cartridges are unsafe. We do not know how to activate them or what they contain, only who is after them. Aspera calls these cartridges "Ambrosia". That was all we know.

All specimens at hand are cylindrical, 14 inches high with a radius of 6.4 inches. The edges are rounded. An imprinted palm-sized RG logo identifies Recombination Group as the manufacturer. The hardness of the material hints at some ceramic. The cartridge is white, with no traces of varnish or inscriptions. No mechanism that could hint at a lid. Opening them by force is not advisable.

Older core data describes the procedure. Under the effect of great heat, crystals are expelled from the ceramic as the cartridge quickly dissolves. When the discharge touches organic material, it adheres to the surface and enters every pore. Plants and animals alike petrify into black carbon sprouting fractal corals in minutes. The contents of the cartridge can change its aggregate state. One moment it's thin like blood. Then suddenly it can harden into asmooth gelatin. Or an ebbing haze. We have many reasons to believe that this is not the cartridge's standard behavior. At the end of the era of the Bygones, Recombination Group ruled the pharmaceutics market. It is said the white stuff was able to fight certain illnesses via transponders. Capable of gaining root access to any organism. We cannot confirm that; this technology is lost to us. For now.

The last efforts to contact Aspera were useless to unpleasant. Our Shutters have not reported back from Chernobog's domain either. And the Ice Breaker is visiting the hospital at Danzig only once per year. Thus far, we've missed him. We are following other leads now. For example, those that hint at an Ancient called Gusev. The Marauders are aware that we have the Ambrosia cartridges, and we know that the Marauders want them. Maybe we will come to an agreement for them, but maybe… we have sealed our own fate.



CHERNOBOG

Down here, eternal twilight reigns. Giant pines in north-eastern Borca have outgrown the ruins. Powdery snow percolates through the branches. The ground is frozen. The bear trap's gaping jaws are invisible. Wolves roam over them, but the traps do not spring. They wait for bigger prey. The forests are ancient and cold, but something lives within. Something that's far older and colder.

For centuries, eastern Borcans have been telling stories of a giant whose soul was eroded by time. Finally claimed by Death himself, the body remained, caught in eternal limbo. He climbed down into the ravines of the ruins and remained there for many winters, becoming their shadow and their curse. When he rose, the Shamans recorded it as the dawn of a new era. The Clanners trembled in fear. The giant lumbered forward like a falling tree; every step crackling with shrieks of splintering wood as if his entire body was nothing more than deadwood.

Those who dared to approach him saw the giant. His conical body, the empty eye sockets, the browsed nose. They saw the bleached cables sticking out from its skull, cascading like a waterfall over a black cape. Some cables pierced through his skin. Other ended in riveted-on rat skulls and glittering artifacts. The giant moved his skull back and forth as if he was sniffing.

He was blind, but saw everything. The wood folk soon called him Chernobog, the Black God. They threw skinned Gendos, carved conical figurines and cloth-wrapped wild honey into his ravine, hoping to extend his slumber in the deep. To no avail. He climbed out of the chasm and roamed through the woods. Stomping, roaring. The Clanners evaded him. They abandoned their villages and didn't even dare to take their food and few belongings with them. What the god claimed was his to take.

THE CORRESPONDER

The Black God's moments of slumber grew shorter. More often than not, Chernobog's roar echoed through the woods. In the early years, he had spared the villages, but now he destroyed huts, trampled altars and toppled trees. Those who drew closer than a hundred paces he pursued, his conical body quicker by the second, head thrown back, dead eyes gazing at the canopy of branches, maw gaping wide. When he reached his victim, he kept pummeling them until they fell to the ground in a cloud of blood. Yet still he kept striking until at last all that remained was bone splinters and crow food.

One day, a fist-sized artifact lay amidst a destroyed village. It was black and shapeless. Barbs rose from it. The village Shaman conjured the friendly forest spirits, sprinkled ancestral ashes on the artifact and reached for it. It awoke at once. A voice sank through the octaves down to a vibrating bass. Calling itself "The Corresponder", the artifact shared the secrets of the Black God with the Shaman. After that, Chernobog spoke to the Shamans through the Corresponder. As more Corresponders were bestowed, temples were erected around them, rites were

devised, and chosen ones were named. The Shamans knew now how to appease their god. They offered him willow bark brew, lowered baskets full of datura, belladonna and black henbane down into his domicile. They set traps. Nothing should disturb his rest.

THE SIGNAL

On the eve of February 2nd, 2593, Chroniclers registered a medium wave signal in their Cluster. A sequence of short and long pulses that were completely recorded, but not understood. During the day, the signal drowned in static noise. Only at dusk was it received clearly again. The station must've been thousands of kilometers away. A rough bearing pointed towards Purgare or the Balkhan.

At the same time, the Corresponders awoke in Eastern Borca's woods. After more than a decade of darkness, Chernobog arose. He beckoned the leaders of the wood tribes to his side. As they stood around him and trembled at every crack and crash, he talked to them through the Corresponders. While the words came coaxingly and clearly from the artifacts, his mouth made no sound.

VOYAGE

Chernobog strode on. Past altar mountains, past bones heaped up to honor him, past roaring bonfires, past abattoirs full of gendo corpses. Hundreds of clans joined him. They came creeping from bunkers and left their huts. Nomadic people turned from paths that they had not left since the dawn of time. They felt something important looming ahead.

When Chernobog stopped, ten leaders gathered round him and raised the Corresponders above their heads. They listened to the strange voice speaking of eternal reward. Chernobog did not stray from his way by even a second. He accepted no delays, even if he had to climb mountains.

Praha Republic lay before him, the last bastion of a dying civilization. No one had ever attacked it, nor crossed its mine fields or entered into the firing range of its machine gun placements. Praha Republic fell only days later. Clans looted the cities, ancient libraries went up in flames. Chernobog's path did not end here.

REBIRTH

The news of Praha's fall spread like wildfire. Throughout the land, it fueled an idea – It was possible to dismantle the yoke of the powerful.

Borca's clans became restless. Long ago, they had lost their funeral sites and villages to Judges and Spitalians. The Balkhans no longer felt obligated to the Jehammedans either. The idea grew. Tribes thought long extinct climbed the ruins and declared themselves rulers. The time has finally come when all Cults must now fear for their power.

The Clans are back.

CHAPTER 2

CULTURES

STARDUST

The fireflies' light was reflected in the gas mask's glass panes. The Preservist swatted at them, but they dodged, dancing in the breeze and forming complex patterns. Circles unfurled to fluttering lines that intertwined into a galaxy of spheres, only to disperse again in an instant. "Like stardust." The Preservist's voice murmured dully through the filter.

It was raining outside; water dripped from the ceiling. Through an open door, pale light fell into the corridor and competed with the fireflies' glow. The wall was rotten from the humidity and had thrown all tiles to the floor. Shards crunched underfoot.

He raised his sword and watched the fireflies whirl around the blade, making it the center of new patterns. "Field lines."

"What?" A figure pushed next to him. The Preservist turned his head. The face next to him was bloated; some greasy film shimmered on cheeks, node and forehead. The lashes were gummy, rainwater blinked between yellow globs. The three rhombi on the forehead were almost indiscernible.

The Preservist pointed into the corridor. "He's here." The Anabaptist nodded, showing his teeth and his fetid grin. He loosened his flamethrower's strap and took its butt in his right hand. He pushed past the Preservist. The tank on his back swung left and right, a sloshing sound accompanied every step. He stepped over arm-thick roots and ducked under a curtain of organic mesh.

"Anabaptist, we are emissaries." The Preservist hit the tank with the flat of his blade. The metallic clang was unnaturally loud. The Anabaptist stopped.

"Once… again…" His shoulders rose and fell.

The Preservist bent over. The roots were crawling with ants. The insects had built earthen bridges across the roots and thus created a network of streets. The Preservist looked up to the Anabaptist. "What's that smell?"

"Like someone made of shit. We'll talk about it later."

The Preservist jumped up and hurried onwards. The corridor opened into a hall. In the center, the ceiling had collapsed. Rain fell and spattered a pale colossus. The Preservist put away his sword, inclined his head and slowly set one foot in front of the other. The water shimmered with a sheen of oil. The air was heavy, sweet, and smelled of musk, even through the gas mask. The Preservist stepped over elevated strands of mud where black bugs sought shelter from the water.

"LOOK."

The Preservist stopped and raised his head. A bloated, pale body was nestled in a nest of shimmering mud. Several naked women pressed against it, sheltering the Pheromancer from the rain. They shivered; their hair was plastered to their heads. Their hands stroked the pale flesh, caressing glands or inserting fingers into them. They did not notice the Preservist.

"THE PACT."

The Pheromancer's eyes were beady and black. The marble-sized glands under his lids seemed like additional, closed eyes. They grew and shrank back. His lips pouted and he smiled a trembling smile.

"Kanavog, The Spital, sends its regards."

"KNOW YOUR REGARDS. FIRE AND BLADES."

"We keep the pact. Our troops have retreated. You know it."

"YEEEES." The word sounded as if all the air was exhaling from the Pheromancer. The bodies moved, shifted. One woman looked up, and for a moment, there

was understanding in her eyes. Then she sank back.

"Our part. What about yours?"

One of the women slid down and crawled through the mud towards the Preservist. Her hair was matted, the body emaciated, eyes hollow. The Preservist saw every rib, recognized the pricks in the groin. He breathed heavily, closed his fists. The woman held out something to him. He took it, touched her hand and searched for her gaze, looked for a spark of resistance or even a plea for help. Nothing.

The woman scurried back. A small, stoppered vial was in his hand.

"WHAT FOR."

The Preservist hesitated.

"CLOSER."

The Pheromancer's body suddenly seemed to shine brighter. The rain slowed down and smelled of disinfectants. All colors were much more intense. Only now, the Preservist saw the mosses on the floor and the lichen hanging from the hole in the ceiling. Their green was breathtaking. The Preservist shook his head and stepped forward.

"Kanavog…"

"CLOSER."

The Preservist's breath became shallow. He had it licked. He put the vial in a loop of his glove. Slowly retreat. Out of here.

Something elbowed him. The Anabaptist walked past him towards the Pheromancer. His head lolled as if he was sleepwalking. The Spitfire fell into the mud, its gas tube dragged behind him. The Anabaptist pushed aside one of the women, his hands looking for a handhold on the Pheromancer's belly, shapeless like a sack full of stones and covered with black pores.

"TASTE LIE."

The Anabaptist winced as if he had been hit.

"What…?"

He fell on his behind, backpedaled and jumped up.

"Damn abomination!" He jumped forward and kicked the rounded belly. Waves went through the huge amounts of fat. The women cried. The Pheromancer grew. Double rows of glands at his neck bloated and exploded into pink clouds. From the pores of his belly, streams of ants erupted, bursting out across the flesh like tar and dripping into the water. Swirling galaxies of fireflies lit up and pelted the Anabaptist. He flailed and kicked.

The Preservist drew his sword, raised it and approached the Anabaptist illuminated by a thousand glowing pinpoints. The first blow hit the tank. He turned around and ran. When he reached the passage to the corridor he stopped, tore the signal gun from its holster and shot three glowing balls into the hall. They flamed red, painting glistening traces into the air. One hit the water and jumped back up.

The flash erased all outlines. The shockwave hit the Preservist and threw him out into the corridor. Plaster burst from the walls, tiles crashed to the floor. The ceiling creaked. Firelight from the hall lit the corridor. The Preservist rolled, mumbling "We'll talk about it later" as he rose. He ran the last few steps to the entrance, stepped out into a rainy day and tore off his mask. Water ran across his shaved skull.

He pulled the vial from the loop and held it against the light. Black vortexes rose up and pushed against the glass where his fingers touched it. He grinned.

"Stardust."

LEGACY OF THE ANCIENTS

BORCA

CRATER ASH

Downdrafts tumble across the crater's flanks. They drill deeply into its powdery bottom, make a sea of red dust churn, tear mountain-sized veils out of it and carry them across the land. Crows cock their heads listening. They feel the cloud. They spread their wings, jump about and suddenly take to the air as a murder. They flee. Just in time. The sun chokes in a pale red.

The wind has died down. A red mist lies over Borca. It settles down, uncovering forests of pale monoliths. Some are sunken or broken; iron shores jut from them like strange tree limbs. They tower amidst ancient ruin mazes. Yellow lichen has conquered the walls and fights for territory against mosses. Dusty shrubs jut from windows, birch trees grow in the buildings' slipstream, drilling their roots deep into the soil, down into the labyrinth of forgotten tunnels and tubes. Red dust dunes have accumulated in the urban canyons and are slowly dissolving. Beetles vibrate to the surface, spread their wings and go looking for food.

Borca is a wilderness of stone and dust full of giant buildings, endless stone labyrinths, overgrown craters and wide plains. Eroded signs, surrounded by gossamer and lichen, point to sunken cities.

Under the centuries' varnish, baked into ash and earth, technical wonders wait for the spade that unearths them. The people in this area are tough and stubborn like plain grass that grows in spite of the dust. They don't see the decay; they see opportunities. The ruins and the rich artifact fields are their legacy, but they aren't their future by far. Piece by piece, they build a new world, erecting metropolises like Justitian, Cathedral City or Osman from the ruins, dividing the land into parcels to claim and fortify.

But death lurks in the shadows. Its teeth are pointed. Its mouth is slit. Its skin is punctured with bones. Its hand clasping stone knives, spears or iron tubes. The savages have always been here, surviving once as free folk in their ancestors' ruins long ago.

Mauled and driven underground by the great surface civilizations, they've now returned. They will take what they see as theirs – and maybe some more.

ONE BODY SPLIT IN TWO

Everything is in motion. Firelight sweeps across the clouds, the sky is aglow. Past solidified lava rivulets, through knee-high ash drifts and across cliffs and chasms, geysers spew steam and boiling water. The earth trembles, rock shelves break away with a crash, tilt, splinter and push on top of each other. Magma gushes over the edges and casts a reddish glow onto the devastation. The soil that once bore golden grain is hard as coal and just as fertile. Puddles of slag boil and emit yellow plumes of smoke. Without breathing protection, your lungs will burst. Animals and humans alike are burnt and crushed to soot.

Nothing is alive anymore.

This is the Reaper's Blow. It's a tectonic phenomenon starting high in Borca's icy north, then cutting through the Alps in an arcing southward bow to reach Africa's coasts at the bottom of the Mediterranean. Along this line, the earth is torn asunder, giant sheets of rock the size of cities form a scar many hundreds of kilometers long. Rivers were torn from their beds, fell down across the edges to reappear as geysers elsewhere. Magma chambers bloat right beneath the surface and discharge into volcanoes.

Borca was cut in two by the Reaper's Blow – like twins, both parts share the same memories of the Bygones, their beliefs and cultural roots. But the people west of the Reaper's Blow differ from those of the east, for the twins had to spend their youth separated from each other.

WEST BORCA

The great northern sea has fled, and where it once was, glaciers are cutting southwards. Snow falls almost all year long. In summer, the glaciers sweat drinking water that floods into a vast network of ancient ditches and forms rivers and lakes. These waters cannot wash away enough of the salt out of the soil, so this land only feigns fertility.

Further south, nature returns with a fight.

Cotton grass and meadows of moss and lichen break the bleak tundra with yellow and green dots. Birches and spruces hunker in the broken cities' slipstream.

It's getting warmer; steppe grass sways in the wind, lakes glitter in the midday sun. Red dust dances in the air. It coats the brush and forms dunes where the wind deposits it. Wild dogs – the Gendos – roam the ruins, digging for rats or following the trail of Scrappers digging for the Bygones' treasures here.

Asphalt routes criss-cross the land, cutting through stone labyrinths. The further a wanderer goes south, the higher the monoliths rise.

The clouds are heavy russet. The land expels dust.

Storms whip it up, drive it along in long veils, entering every crack. Eyes crust and become inflamed. Lungs collapse. Only those who wear goggles or masks and protect themselves with dust scarves can survive here. The animals are smarter than humans. They feel the rust veils and hide in time. Even the insect swarms retreat into underground tubes.

The dust rises from the Wupper Crater and several smaller points of impact. But the days when it terrorized people are gone. The storms have become rare.

Nature has become used to the dust and binds it into the plant roots. Spruce forests comb it out of the wind. Only in the urban canyons does it form dunes and go underground.

The Borcans adapt. Clad in layers of heavy cloth and furs that make even a weakling look like a colossus, Borcans do their daily work. Ten thousands spread out every spring to mine West Borca's treasures in the ruins: scrap. They scratch their mark into the ruins, marking areas as plundered or warning against savages. They carry their bounty into the cities, where precious artifacts are bought by Chroniclers and the rest is melted down, reforged or stacked in the Scrappers' quarters.

Metal is everywhere, and it's cheap. Bridges are built from it. Doors and walls are bound by it. Pathways are paved with it. Rust creaks under boot soles. Wind chimes made from scrap adorn the buildings. Soup is eaten from tin bowls. Wood, on the other hand, is rare and must be imported from afar. Close to the settlements, all that remain are swamps and the forests that have eluded the axe far off the routes.

JUSTITIAN

Amidst the scrap craze, Borca's largest metropolis can be found: Justitian the Righteous, a source of law and order and a truly charismatic place.

The city's providers mark their parcels with reed fences and fight the dust. After the harvest, they face the Spitalians. If the grain is spore free, it is certified and the sacks are stamped and sealed. If the grain is infected, the provider has lost a year of hard work.

The Providers are milked everywhere. They buy fungicides from the Spitalians and water from filling stations that only flow as long as they insert the Chroniclers' metal chips. But enough is enough. The Providers gang up, wail, discuss. One of them gets up, proclaims the Providers' Collective. They still slave under Justitian's yoke, but the fuse is already burning.

In Justitian's Downtown, everything converges. Anabaptists wait for the political upheavals in their Cross

Quarter and skeptically look towards the Jehammedan Quarter. Apocalyptics put out feelers in all directions and monopolize sin. Street kids have conquered the Stukov Quarter and divided it up between their gangs.

The Chroniclers' speakers tower above the town houses, the shacks in the guest quarter, and the Jehammedans' tile-adorned buildings. Boisterous music blares from the speakers, only interrupted by announcements: "CITIZENS, THE CLUSTER SPEAKS!" On battlements and bridges made of channeled sheets, the Judges patrol, smoking weed and staring into the crowd below, demonstrating absolute control.

Amidst a maze of corrugated iron sheets, gangways, walls made of coaches and machines, and tarpaulin-covered dens, a truncated monolith has risen. Broken down, its facade splits off, more mountain than ruin: the Tech Central. Thousands of Scrappers nest within like cockroaches; digging into it, expanding tunnels and reinforcing halls, shaping it. Here, those that like solitude unite. Dust gray Lone Wolves drag sacks full of artifacts, coughing ceaselessly; Cave Bears look for a bride, among humans for the first time for many winters; Mice scuttle around the Badgers, doing tricks to market their agility. The Manufacturers in the Tech Central are known beyond Borca's borders. From their workshops, they produce not only weapons or highly complex locks and traps, but legendary mechanical wonders, aimless constructs that can only be a testimony to their creators' mad genius.

Another stone colossus seems to guard the Uptown Plateau: the Steel Monolith. The Steel Masters' hammer blows ring down, providing the city with a beat. The forge fires blaze.

Here, barrels are made, stocks are carved, fittings are chiseled and refined by a "Fiat Lux". Every Judge's musket has passed through the Steel Masters' hands.

Uptown is home to the Judges and Chroniclers. It is situated on a plateau and can be reached only via an engine-driven lift platform when you come from Downtown. In Uptown, the Judges' legislative power is focused on official buildings and the Judiciary.

WAY MARKERS

Stacked stones mark the routes between settlements. Those who leave the Fortress in the Alps to get to North Borca's metropolis, Justitian, will pass thousands of them. For days, he will cross the plains, following broken paths and crossing dry river beds. The Alps vanish in the haze. In the underbrush, savages with faces painted white and bald heads lurk. They scuttle from wall to wall; they stare at the wanderer from window openings, always keeping up with him. Their language is harsh and clipped. Now just follow the path, always along the river bed. Don't look back, keep going. Clans have staked the area and attack anyone who crosses the invisible borders. Traders leave jewelry from Purgare or even burn cusps at the stone markers to appease the savages.

Amidst the Judges monumental architecture, the Chroniclers' Central Cluster is only a short walk away. The triangular solar panels, the railway wagons, the steel towers with megavolt lights and speaker batteries, the winding halls and domes; it all seems like a place from another time.

PROTECTORATE

Once, Justitian gave something to the people. It was hammered into the so-called Black Lung's ruined landscape, the place where Chroniclers and Judges met. The city was a beacon in a sea full of predators and parasites. Those who came here were safe and had the Judges handle their worries. Then, the Judges were strong. Side by side they scoured the Black Lung, driving Clans before them like cockroaches with their hammers' blows. War cries echoed through the city canyons when hundreds of savages ran up against the lead lightning of the Judges' muskets. The last of the savages were rounded up and killed, the iron hammer heads were cleaned in the dust.

Peace tasted of blood.

The Codex as a body of laws spread. No one, not even the Providers on Justitian's fields, were able to resist this rules collection. Spitalians controlled grains and bulbs for Sepsis, only certified food made it to the market. Rules, rules over all. Those who were fed up with them could try their luck in the wasteland. Those who rebelled or broke laws ended up in work camps where they worked off their debts towards Justitian. The Codex divided people into citizens and outlaws. But the Judges overlooked that they kept tightening the corset of control day by day and took the people's breath away.

Still, Justitian flourished, sent Judges to the surrounding towns, offered protection and demanded submission. The Protectorate was born. Settlements like Mobilis, Ferropol, Wetzlar and many others joined it for lack of alternatives.

Since then, the Protectorate has been spreading, swallowing community after community.

Head-high judgment stones engraved with hammers were erected in village squares, judgment halls were established.

But that was yesterday.

OLD GRUDGES

The clans were weakened, but never conquered. They cowered in the ruins, put polished stones on the graves of those who had fallen and cried their pain into the night.

When Praha fell to the Corroded and his hordes, they listened up. Praha was supposed to be invincible; the whole country was a fortress. No stranger had ever made it across the hills, if only to gaze at the golden towers. Even the Spitalians had been rejected. Praha was overly powerful. A little like Justitian.

Now, the Clans gather, crawling from their hiding places, armed to the teeth with hatred. They paint their insect totems' signs on their bodies, sharpen their spears and clean their rifles. Furiously, they attack convoys, tearing up everything reminding them of Justitian.

They show up in the middle of the Black Lung, showering Judges' patrols with a hail of arrows or luring them into traps. Spear meets hammer, wood splinters, bones break.

There are so many of them! Judges are dragged from their horses, try to find their feet and barely manage to raise an arm when the stone club comes down upon them. Days later, Scrappers will find the bodies. Lined up they are hanging from walls, nailed to them with reinforcing bars the length of a lower arm that jut from neck or belly. The jaws have been dislocated and jut askew from the faces. Roaches are milling about in the mouths' abyss.

The Clans' brutality shakes the Protectorate. One settlement after the other falls. Judgment stones are being kicked down and crushed. This is not just about city canyons or aquiferous caverns, not about sacred burial sites anymore. The savages stop the Judges' supplies and will not stop even when they have re-conquered all of their territory. They want Justitian.

But in this hour of need, the cults unite.

This time, Judges, Spitalians, Anabaptists, Chroniclers and Jehammedans are on the same side. Scrappers report from the wasteland, Hellvetics protect the convoys. Borca is at war.

THE LAST BATTLE

The city of Wetzlar marks the southern border of Justitian's Protectorate. Here, High Judge Rubeau takes his last stand. While the Clans advance, get bolder day by day, while the Protectors withdraw. Justitian has to be protected, no matter the cost. Knotted old Judges remain who have lived in the dust for too long to cope with the senate and its intrigues and who are too old to go to war.

They are the only ones to guard the outposts, grimly thrusting their hammers down before them and leaning on the handles as if to say: "Justitian law still applies here." But the storm will come. They see it in the faces of the people they have sworn to protect.

THE FESTERING

For decades, Sepsis had eaten into the ground under the ruins of Menden without anyone noticing; it went through several metamorphoses and, in the end, arched the soil. The mycelia sprouted and broke through the surface, bloomed and cusped. The cusps burst and vomited their spores to the wind. The first cycle was finished. The inner ring broke down, and another formed.

The spore field flourished. The ruins above creaked and cracked. Years passed. From a handful of spores, a Mother Spore Field more than a thousand paces in diameter arose. Its outer wall more than fifteen paces high.

Then, the Spitalians found it.

They did not hesitate. Row by row, they spread out, lead by the Preservists on skittish horses. They surrounded the field and attacked the Sepsis bloom with fire and fungicides. They buried ceramic cylinders in the outer ring and thrust others deep inside. Finally, they retreated and detonated the cylinders.

Cascades of explosions tore apart the wall and shook the ruins. Spores and dirt rose in a giant cloud. But there was something else.

Black smoke billowed out of the churned soil. It expanded, then shrank and sank back into the earth again. The soil bloated and became a porous sponge; its color changed to jet black. Coralline carbon structures grew skywards, crystalline plant residues lifted their glass blades and leaves into the wind and refracted the light in a weird way. The blackness kept expanding with a crackle, ate into the spore field, infected the ruins and turned rats and insects into pure carbon structures.

The spore field died, and the Festering was born.

One day after the denotation of the nanite cartridges, its expansion has slowed down. But it has yet to stop completely. At the edge of the Festering, growths push

into the land like rising hair. They form long loops in a regular pattern similar to the Chakra symbols Spitalians have seen in the proximity of Psychonauts. But only similar, not identical. Still the Spitalians are alarmed. These shapes look too much like a new Earth Chakra.

THE SPITAL

In the Black Lung's southern ruin fields, there is an area simply called "Spital" by many. It is separated into several regions, the outermost of which is called Appendix. Here, the afflicted are treated and checked, sent to sick quarters strictly separated by pathogen. Medics and doctors cater to them, prescribing medicine or changing bandages.

Safe behind walls, the Corpus begins. This inner ring with its laboratories and warehouses is restricted to the Spitalians and a few chosen others. In its center, the Spital itself rises, a concrete block with adjacent buildings erected by the Bygones.

The Spitalians have other houses in the Black Lung as well. Near Arnsberg, birds rot on the access roads; rats and insects lie next to them, dusty and quiet. Only tree stubs remain. The area is tainted – a good reason to stay away. But it's not the only reason. For in the fortress of Arnsberg, Kranzler, head of the Preservists, resides with his retinue. The Spitalians' warrior caste has made camp here and savor the solitude.

Nearby, the Preservists breed their horses at the farm called Newcrest. The Spitalians own this land as well and offer no access.

FERROPOL

Every day, kilometer-long dust veils go down on Ferropol on the western slopes of the Wupper Crater, wafting through alleys, sanding stone and metal. Dunes push across the plazas. Whole quarters disappear for days or have to be dug out. Palm-sized bugs called Ferrites roam the area. With their ichor, they dissolve iron, ingest it and deposit it in their carapaces. Interesting, say the Spitalians, but what they mean is 'critical'.

For years, Ferropol was a forge until the Steel Masters were called to Justitian. Now they live and work there in the Steel Monolith, under the Judges' watchful eyes.

In the years after, the Judges brought outlaws to Ferropol, incarcerated them and forgot them. The city had lost Justitian's blessing. The Apocalyptic Apok had helped the Judges for years, now he finally made himself ruler.

Since then, Ferropol is a haven for all those unwanted in Justitian. Here, everyone and everything can be bought.

RAIN

A river bed dissects West Borca from the Alps to the Ice Barrier. Much like the country's artifacts, it is a relic because its river, the Rain, has dried out.

In the Alps, its bed is still fed by mountain creeks and glacial meltings in the spring. It winds through its ancient basin as a stream and later as a rivulet. Birches line its shore, the water underwashes their roots and cuts deeply into the river sand. Here, the grass is green and high. Every now and then, the stream becomes a swamp before it finally returns to its bed.

The stream leads under lonely piers and sagged roads up to the famous ruined city of Noret. Ears of corn rustle in the wind. Wild wheat grows in the old river bed, a line of gold in the dusty gray and red all around. The wheat follows the Rain up into the north, growing in force in front of Cathedral City and somewhat sickly in the shadows of the Great Aqueduct, conquering billabong by billabong.

Once, ships plied the Rain. Now, their weathered remains jut out of petrified mud. Although it could not carry a ship anywhere these days, it is still considered a trade route. On the shores and in the river bed, there are tracks where wheels have dug deep gouges. The way to Liqua is dotted by stone towers.

Since the Clans' uprising, most routes have been deserted and plundered. Others are in the hands of clans demanding a road toll.

CATHEDRAL CITY

To look up along the pillars to the sweeping stone arches, people have to crane their necks. Up there, water runs in drains, flowing on to the Anabaptists' settlements from the fountains and sources.

These aqueducts have been built from debris cut to size, mortared carefully and partially covered with metal sheets or limestone tiles. The pillars supporting the largest ones are hollow; the Anabaptists use them as barracks or prayer rooms. The smallest pillars were not built out of stone, with scaffolds made of only tilted tin.

An aqueduct network covers West Borca, and in the center of theses waterways, there is Cathedral City, sanctuary and home of the Anabaptists.

If you approach via the old Rain riverbed, you'll first see the Twin Towers' silhouette in the haze. They are blackened with age, their stonework makes them look like scarred stakes. From up close, one can see gargoyles and statues in the facade, portals and towers, arched stained glass windows, everything rising skywards. This

statuesque backdrop makes people seem small.

The city is surrounded by a wall with jutting release pillars and roofed battlements. Masonry at its foot shows larger-than-life Psychonauts and Anabaptists, engaged in deadly battle. In several places, heaps of debris or earth-filled ruins break the wall. Birches grow there with moss polishes their craggy sides'.

Those who want to enter the city must descend in to a tunnel built by the Bygones and cross the defense line underground. Anabaptists guard the entrances, but in the end, everyone is welcome.

Cathedral City is divided into blocks. Sweeping parade grounds with baptismal fonts alternate with two story buildings, the forge block, olive presses, factories, plantations and gardens that are protected by dust sails and reed fences.

Everything in the city is surrounded by aqueducts and rectangular frames. Water runs through drains along the roads, flushing excrement and dirt out of the city. Where the drains clog up and the gnat's piss runs across the pavement, young Ascetics come running with shovels.

The Great Aqueduct reaches the roof of the cathedral's nave. A fitting links them. It is said the water runs through a system of pipes through the cathedral's walls and emerges from the gargoyles in the cathedral's choir, where the eight Baptists and the Council of Emanations Council reside.

EXALT

Exalt was once the epitome of civilization.

Then, it was crushed in the City Wars. Exalt was forgotten; no map of the Protectorate showed it anymore.

In truth, this was due to Justitian's ignorance.

A few months ago, Judges found Exalt – a living settlement in the southwestern ruin fields. Vaulted roofs hang from twenty foot high pylons cover acre upon acre. Yellow light filters through the lichen-covered glass panes, increasing the feeling of another world and reality. Parts of the city are still covered in dust, but the Exalters soldier on with spade in hand, making room for those who return. They uncover antechambers of a giant complex, each one large enough to hold Justitian's Tech Central. The head-high letters "RG" in a brilliant blue are freed of dust.

The Exalter clan grows and gets ready to write history again.

LIQUA

After the City Wars, the people fled Exalt. One of the fleeing groups found water in the western Black Lung, fortified the well and stayed. The refugees licked their wounds. They lived in their wagons and were ready to move on. But the reservoir did not deplete. Thanks to a geological anomaly, the water pooled in the cellars and tunnels under the camp. They decided to stay.

Decades later, the camp had developed into a city called Liqua. Four water lords controlled the sources and sold their water to Protectorate settlements and Cathedral City. The Anabaptists were not far away. They made pacts with the Liquans and their leaders. They signed contract after contract, infiltrated the line of succession, sat next to the lords, inspected all treaties with the Black Lung enclaves, and finally told the people that Cathedral City had taken Liqua into the fold. Since then, two of the water lords have always been Anabaptists.

When Exalt was rediscovered, Liqua's population paid heed. Dispatches and gifts were exchanged, and hands were shaken, all under the Anabaptists' watchful eyes. Cathedral City did not understand what happened there.

Only when the Exalters marched into Liqua while the population cheered did Cathedral City realize that the calm days were past. For the time being, they retreated, for the sources are too important for Cathedral City.

NORET

Noret is trapped in time: the city is said to have been untouched for 500 years. The vegetation gradually claims the old buildings. Trees and bushes grow on the streets and roofs, moss covers the walls. In the shires and in the Rain's river bed, shrubs with pale pink fruit grow. No one harvests them. They fall into the mud and rot.

There are guards: graceful movements under rotten rags, metal shadowed by cowls. Their voices are distorted, the sounds modulated as if by chance. Those who get too close to Noret will never leave the town again.

RAMEIN

Over 20 winters ago, a star hit the region's capital. The detonation's shock wave was followed by a political quake that brought the Mechans, a sect of priests, and the Pneumancers, a sect of warriors, to power. They thoroughly played the Clans of the Ramein region against each other and styled themselves guardians of order.

They overplayed their respective hand.

In the end, the Phosphorite Clan broke away and attacked the rebuilt capital, Nullpellia. The Pneumancers countered with their steam weapons. For days, the rattle of their Pneumo Hammers echoed through the city.

The defenders won, but Nullpellia had been crushed

between the front lines. The alliance between the Mechans and the Pneumancers had frayed as well and finally broke. The Mechans had established a devious trap across the Pneumancers' track, fooling them just like everyone else.

The Pneumancers had enough. The priests fled underground and established a base there, starting to regain control over Nullpellia, but this time covertly. At the same time, many clans left their devastated homes and stumbled into forbidden territory. Hungry and broken, they were treated with hostility. Feuds arose.

Since then, all of Ramein has been burning.

HELLVETICA

The Fortress in the Alps is Europe's bottle neck. Its passages and bridges guarantee transit from West to East Borca and vice versa; by passes like the Timmelsjoch, Purgare is linked to Borca and Pollen.

The Hellvetics' strongholds block valleys and glaciers alike, jutting out of mountain flanks, leaving only shadowy passages between concrete massifs.

Bridges span the fire in the mountains, tunnels dig deep into the rock and only emerge into the blinding, snowy light of the Alps a days' march later.

Those who want to pass must queue up with the rest of the travelers moving toward one of the portals. Concrete monoliths and gun placements behind steel blinds frame the entrance. Thousands trying to get in are divided into four columns by the Hellvetics and must pay to enter. Those unable to do so are taken aside. "What's the matter, stranger?"

They are, of course, welcome to cross the mountains on their own, but those who dare to do so will need to hide from sharpshooters in the deep snow, dodge slabs of falling snow and ice, even face savage mountain tribes. It's not worth it, most people say, and simply pay the toll.

EAST BORCA

In the west, the Chroniclers examine every artifact the grumpy Scrappers show them. They turn them with shaking hands, place them into various contraptions, watch the light gauges, then huddle together and whisper to one another. They name their price and the Scrapper had better damn well accept it. Of course, no one who has this sort of influence is considered fair. Yet the Chroniclers have fostered an economy and they keep it going.

In the east, the Chroniclers were never able to establish themselves. A delegation of high-ranking delegates – the Fragments – disappeared there years ago. At least this is what the records say. Since then, some Chroniclers have gone to East Borca, but they have not managed to start a scrap craze there either.

The East Borcan people have returned to a more primordial way of living without technology. They gave into the annual cycle, followed the musk ox herds, or retreated to the pine woods in small communities. While metal is rare, wood is only an arm's length and sharp axe away.

The cities of these Bygones are green labyrinths hidden under moss and guarded by spruces. Whereas Scrappers need only dig away dust in West Borca, should a Scrapper dig here, he'll need to shovel through a dense network of roots. Yet true treasures can be unearthed here these cities untouched by humans for centuries. Only the most valuable ones are taken and brought to West Borca on wearisome roads through the Alps.

OSMAN

Osman is for East Borca what Justitian is in the west. The city has always been a hotbed for Jehammedan ideas. The clans are strong and well-fed behind their protective walls. They take pride in their urban life. The colorful, noisy markets. The hot baths. The great underground library established by archivists from Praha in 2512. It is an edenic garden, a haven in a burning world.

After Praha's fall, a fear arose. Where do the hordes that sacked Praha come from? Where do they go when they are done feeding from the dying city's corpse?

In the forests and swamps all around Borca, Osman's warriors – the Janites – discover more and more deserted camps and lookouts. They fall into spear traps, hear drums thunder from afar. The savages avoid them. Not a good sign. That means they're organized. Stories drift through Osman; stories of ring leaders equipping their hordes in Praha and training them with new weaponry in the forests.

Weeks ago, a Janite patrol spotted a figure with giant antlers on its head in the morning haze, surrounded by dozens of spear bearers. This horned one was said to have broken through Praha's first ring of defense together with the Corroded. The ground was said to have spewed fire, and the earth was said to have trembled, but his totem aided him. His warriors followed him closely and hit the defenders' rows like a shrapnel storm.

The rest is history.

The first attacks on Osman herds take place. A stolen goat here, a killed Ismaeli there. Is this just the work of single savages or the beginning of an all-out attack?

On a misty summer's day in 2595, Osman's inhabitants heard a drawn-out howl. It started softly but became increasingly loud within seconds. They looked skywards, pointing to two stripes of clouds approaching them in a wide arc. Where Osmanis laughed and debated, traded colorful fabrics and spices, an instant later, there is only a blinding fireball.

The shockwave from the blast tears through the city, pushing fire and dust. People are swept along and thrown against walls like rag dolls. Pieces of debris fly for hundreds of meters, crashing into buildings, tearing swathes of destruction. The thunderclap that follows makes glass break and buildings shake. An ocher cloud towers over Osman. It has begun.

PRAHA REPUBLIKA

The mountains around Praha Republika were mined and crowned with barbed wire. From fortified shelters, soldiers watched the mountain flanks and valleys, rifle at the ready. Others in gray-black camo suits checked the movement sensors and followed up alarms. Tank vehicles patrolled the ramparts. The only official access via the Elbe valley was restricted to the inhabitants of Praha. No stranger was allowed in. Not even Hellvetics or Judges. No one got in, nothing got out. The stories about splendid roads, golden towers and machines the size of whole building blocks were exactly that: stories.

The only thing known for sure was that the inhabitants of Praha styled themselves as archaeologists. For some years, they used their substantial influence in Osman to establish the Great Library.

But these are yesterday's stories.

The Corroded came at night. With a gesture, he made the ramparts go down in flashes of sunlight, and his gaze alone was said to have torn swathes through the mine fields. Then came the Clans, spilling around their decaying god, racing onward and driving a wedge between the inhabitants of Praha's defenses. The Praha Republika fell that night. Since then, the Clans riot in the streets, conquering weapon storages and ransacking Old Town. They break down the bunker halls' steel portals and enter the depots. Books, works of art and bones of giant creatures are stored here. In other depots, there are cabinets full of technology. One grip tears out cables and components, and the ribbons of blue light die down forever.

The Corroded has moved on. Praha, it seems, was never his destination.

THE BOGEYMAN

Scrappers and Chroniclers are not the only ones attracted to the artifacts in Borca's soil. After the African Neolibyans had sacked Franka and Purgare, the merchant Cult expanded its claim to Borca.

The Chroniclers do not like that at all. They send their Shutters to spy on the foreign invaders and sabotage their vehicles. They spread rumors of child-eating, blood rites, and capes made of human skin. Yet wherever the Neolibyans enter a village, they win the villagers' hearts with small glittering gifts from a far-away world.

The Chroniclers rage. Should the Neolibyans continue to allow their Scrapper gangs in Borca's ruins, they will not stop at grisly little stories.

PURITY

Sepsis is spreading. Spore fields rise from the soil in Franka, Pollen, and Purgare, attracting Aberrants and dragging people to their doom. Only in Borca, this has been avoided thus far.

The Spitalians form the front line, covering the land with fungicides and hunting those who have succumbed to Burn or carry the Seed of Sepsis. They follow every lead regarding spore infestation and burn down whole enclaves at the slightest suspicion. A tragedy, they say. But someone's got to do it.

Insects are under general suspicion. In Franka, the Spitalians discovered spore stacks on wasp legs and tainted saliva in the bloated bodies of ticks. Since Franka's Pheromancers have started aiming large swarms at Borca, there can be no doubt anymore. The insectoid vermin must be destroyed. Now, insect lamps shine in the Protectorate settlements at night. They attract flies and moths, catching them in sugared water or killing them by means of glowing wires. Later, Spitalians examine the remains for spore infestation. The villagers gather then and watch apothecaries being opened and chemicals being dripped onto the insect dust. Moments of fear. It would be better if the Spitalians found nothing.

WHEN THE MILLENNIUM AFTER THE MILLENNIUM BEGINS
MANKIND WILL HAVE CHANGED THE FACE OF THE EARTH.
MAN WILL CONSIDER HIMSELF MASTER AND LORD
OF THE FORESTS AND THE HERDS.
HE WILL PLOUGH THROUGH EARTH AND SKY,
AND WILL HAVE RUTTED THE RIVER AND SEAS.
BUT EARTH WILL BE NAKED AND BARREN.
THE AIR WILL BURN AND THE WATER WILL STINK.
LIFE WILL WITHER, FOR MAN WILL HAVE DEPLETED THE EARTH'S TREASURES.
AND MAN WILL BE
LONELY AS A WOLF
IN HIS HATRED.

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

NEEDLE TOWERS

The Chroniclers sent sixteen Fragments across the Reaper's Blow to conquer broadcast towers and turn them into permanent radio relay stations in constant contact with the Central Cluster in Justitian. For their high-rising antennae, they were to be called Needle Towers. The Scrappers were then supposed to gather around them, exploit the surrounding land, and bring their bounty to the towers. Just like in the Protectorate. Things went differently. Only eight Fragments survived the crossing. Still, it was enough, the Cluster thought. Redundancy had been taken care of.

The Fragments reached the towers, expelled the savages, and moved into their new homes. They even installed radio stations far from the Cult's control. Yet in the end, human desires and needs finally triumphed. The Fragments gathered mercenaries, whores, and other adventurers. With their superior technological skills and the Chroniclers' weapons, they soon became gods in a world of superstition.

Chromium and Iridium in their mirror-shaded towers are common knowledge, but only their followers know what happened to the other six renegades.

Surely their Needle Towers are places of danger, submission, adventure and trade.

THE SWARM

FRANKA

BREATHLESS

Chitin carapaces dance across the muddy ground, pushed by the wind, rustling and scratching. Above, a cloud of tumbling insect wings passes, caught by a gust. The autumn leaves of an insect-eaten Franka.

Wafts of mist rise from the mire, moving across the land like veils. A sweetish odor of decay clings to the air. Like oil, it seeps into every pore, settles in the chest as a tickle and drags all emotions into the depths of animalistic sensations. It is an aphrodisiac to some, while in others it raises revulsion and fear. However, they all feel a sublime peace as if the oil calmed the waves of their consciousness. Emotions like hatred and resistance clog and sink to the ground, waiting for their rebirth.

DESCENT

An asteroid hit the Central Massif. The blast reached Paris in minutes, racing through the streets, igniting showers of sparks, shattering windowpanes and seeting booths ablaze in the market. Curtains flew in the storm, clouds raced. Vehicles slid across the pavement and against the walls of buildings, sirens screamed over the cacophony.

A flash in the north, and the sea heaved. Blasts hit each other, tearing dirt and rocks from the atmosphere. It rained stones that crashed though ceilings and roofs. The horizon was aflame.

Even during midday, the sun did not penetrate the cloud cover. Wheat fields that had not burnt in the firestorm withered in the eternal dusk. Trees shed their leaves, while potatoes and turnips choked under a layer of ash or decayed in the acid rains. Above the Central Massif, white gossamer rose in streaks like ink spilled from a well; the largest, whirling streak penetrated the clouds straight into the stratosphere. For months, it hung in the sky until the west wind dissipated the vortex and carried it away.

Where it came down, it sank into the earth and ate through the soil. The ground above heaved. Tenuous little hairs emerged in perfect circles. Fruiting bodies burst and released spores that carried on their seed. It infected insects and gummed up human lungs. The Sepsis had conquered fallen France.

THE PLAGUE

The continental shelf creaked and sighed. Earthquakes tore apart mountains or made plains cave in. In the eastern lands, rivers dried up, water kept rising in the Ile-de-Paris region. The fields became swampy; the roads disappeared under the mud.

The survivors fled from the flood and from clouds of flies. Cockroaches ate the provisions. Termites gnawed at the storage boxes. Strange bugs, attracted by sweat, poured into people's homes to crawl under armpits or into groins and fly away with a drop of blood. Some even nested in their hair.

The Frankans retreated to the rivers on houseboats and caked themselves with mud for protection. They searched for breeding colonies and destroyed them by poisoning the swamp. However, it was all in vain.

PHEROMANCERS

Strange figures came out of the Central Massif's mountains that had been shattered by the Souffrance impact. They were naked, at most covering their private parts or wearing boots. Tubercular lumps spoiled their bodies as if they suffered from some illness. They moved unsteadily, reeling like drunkards, yet controlled and vigorous. It was a secret dance they used to communicate. They were peaceful, creeping through the villages in their weird way and examining the horrors that the insect plague had brought upon the Frankans. Flies landed on them, ants climbed their legs and formed overlapping circles on their bodies. The Frankans grabbed their spears and clubs. Who were they?

With a gesture, the strangers chased away the vermin. No bugs crawled across the pots sealed with oilcloths anymore, and no woodlouse could be surprised anymore by turning stones. The villages had gotten rid of the plague. However, the mistrust remained, even if thankfulness prevailed. The Aberrants offered the Frankans a hand for a new beginning. They took it.

Years later, everyone knew the strangers as "Pheromancers". The mistrust had vanished, and feverish love and a feeling of absolute peace replaced it. It was not just the insects that had gotten caught in the Pheromancers' net.

RAID

The sun made the Mediterranean glitter with shining reflections. It smelled of seaweed and salt water, the sand formed large clods. The air above the water shimmered.

On the horizon, a row of dark spots wavered. They grew; masts and superstructures became visible, cranes and outriggers carrying landing craft. The Frankans were familiar with fishing boats and the rafts they poled through the swamp, but these were fortresses made of iron, their sides higher than Souffrance's termitariums. Spewing smoke, these ships were wrapped in a cloud of Petro-exhaust fumes. Over a kilometer from the coast, they turned into the surf. Rodes rattled, water splashed. They lowered boats.

The Africans had landed in Franka.

They looted the coastal cities, dismantled harbor installations and brought everything to Tripol and Bedain. The Frankans did not try to stop them. What was the old

trash to them? The Africans came via Montpellier and devoured city by city. In Surge Tanks as tall as a house, they carried machines from industrial estates in Lyon and Grenoble away, only to reassemble them in Qabis and Tunis.

Riding their traveling colossuses, the Neolibyans were full of glee. They hired Frankans, enticing them with spices and colorful fabrics to lead their loot troops to their machine halls. There they flattered and rewarded the locals when they defended those places against rivals. Even today, some of Franka's oldest tribes carry African rifles from that time.

The Africans stole all traces of the Bygones from these straggling peoples. When they left, the front of the termite vents closed behind them, and the Pheromancers cast their nets. Large areas became marshy libraries devolved to decaying dumps. What was considered a raid in the first years is seen as liberation today. Frankans do not cling to places and things anymore. They cannot reminisce about their past, for they do not know it. They look ahead, keeping an eye on the true enemy.

SOUFFRANCE

A mountain of shambles. Crushed, its slopes glazed and lifeless, divided by lava streams that have become solid in the form of raging seas of basalt. Spores shimmer in windy chasms and waft across the land in swathes. They cannot escape again from some of the alleys, instead accumulating there like foamy surf, floating up the mountainsides and dropping back down again.

Into this mountain world, the perfect circle of the Souffrance crater is stamped, and on its slopes sprawls a city of humans and Pheromancers.

Mud vents rise skywards, growing from the crater slope in dense forests or spaced along invisible loops. Mother spore fields press their ring system outwards. The movements of the ground have worked the crater wall vigorously and cracked the stone. Slabs of rock the size of small villages break away and slide thunderously into the depths, breaking along the rings, crushing vents and all life that flourishes between them. Stone is laid bare, and now everyone sees that finger-thick insect paths riddle the spongy surface. Termites press out of the wall, clods of mud in their mandibles. Only days later, the wound is scabbed over, and new vents have grown.

People and waves of shimmering chitin buttons press through the canyons of mud buildings. Huts cuddle with the vents, encircling them up into heady heights. Some have crumbled and been deserted; dusty grass mats fly in the wind. Others are dark with wet building materials, from their roof openings, trails of smoke rise.

On plazas, above head height, stone monuments rise. They are covered with hollows that resemble honeycombs. In the recesses, amber-colored drops glisten – the Pheromancers' stringy glandual discharge. Humans and insects follow the same pheromone trail from monument to monument.

No one lives in Souffrance for long. For those who have given into the Pheromancers, the months on these slopes are a spiritual experience that makes them one with the peacemakers. Most are emissaries, finally going out to carry the Pheromancers' wisdom to the surrounding villages. Pheromancers mark their property with pheromone markers, enabling their emissaries to safely climb the crater wall and pass the insect barriers unchecked. Once they reach the crest, they worm into the cusps where the Pheromancer queens breed.

Visitors to Souffrance see this as an honor. The Spitalians only smile wanly.

UNTOUCHABLE

I feel my way through the turns in the rock. Darkness clings to me like oil. I don't see a thing. I hate this place and wouldn't be here if I wasn't hunting for a treasure. Its scent wafts through the termitarium. My little brothers know what I am looking for. In long columns, they march across my hands to show me the way.

I push myself around a bend and I can hear it ahead, the undulating buzz. I feel the vibration in my fingertips. There's a whiff of honey-scented musk in my nose. She is very close. A pale body, surrounded by blackness; my prize, my treasure, my reward. She called, and I obey. I crawl closer, a thousand little legs mount and explore me. The buzz stumbles over mucous strands in the bronchia hacked between pale lips, then it recovers its old course. Breathe in, breathe out. She calms down. I wiggle closer,

GEOLOGY

Franka's heart lies amidst a vast swamp. Those who live here rely on boats and rafts; huts are built on stilts. Bygone ruins jut from the mire like cliffs. Birches, willows, and shrubbery grow on them. Birds nest there. The large city canyons resemble ravines conquered by insects and rats. A new ecosystem is developing there, unmolested by humans. In the west, the swamps give way to lush deciduous forests. The land flows and drains into the Atlantic Ocean via the Loire River. The climate is mild, the soil fertile.

slap against soft matter and caress her. Her body is aglow, as if feverish. I tremble, but she does not mind. I can smell her smile when she pushes me towards her and guides my hands across her body to the hard cusps leaking stringy honey (so sweet!).

I lick my lips. She likes that. Her fingers tousle my hair as I brush aside her ants. Very slowly, not wanting to hurt her, my lips caress her body, then my tongue pushes into festering pores, rummaging through sticky manna. My queen is satisfied, cuddles against me. She smells wonderful. For a moment I am her lover, not her slave. Then she falls asleep, and I leave her. I rejoin the ranks of children so willingly serving her.

MARDUK OIL

The Untouchables watch the drones follow the invisible trails their god has left for them. They breathe the same air, but feel nothing at all. Still, they get in line, following the drones into the bulbils to fulfill their tasks as expected.

Some are driven by the fear of being discovered and torn from their family. Others join the resistance. They crawl into burrows and massage the Pheromancer queens' bulging, sebum-clogged glands until they burst. They collect the discharge in goat bladders and smuggle it into the coastal cities. The Neolibyans pay well and sell it on the scented oil market in Tripol for an inflated price. "One drop only, and a crone turns into a love goddess.", the Africans laugh. None of them can afford Pheromancer oil. Some see it as an investment. Many a Neolibyan have woken up after his bridal night with an aching head and a dry mouth and looked at the naked body next to him in consternation. By then, the papers had been signed and brought to the Bank of Commerce's vaults. The knot was tied.

For Franka, the discharge is much more valuable, for the Anubians know how to distill from it the legendary Marduk Oil. When rubbed into the skin, it reduces susceptibility toward pheromantic influences. Resisting false temptations is important to young Neolibyans in Franka. It often makes the difference between freedom and slavery. Without Marduk Oil, there would be no attacks on bulbils and the resistance would've long since been broken.

RESISTANCE

Where the Pheromancers flourish, humans wither. With every new Frankan who gets caught in the pheromone nets and follows Souffrance's call, the Clans bleed a little more. Those who are left flee onto the rivers from the wasp storms, grimly staring at their homes drowning in veils of insects, watching vents grow upon land they had sowed only days before.

Now they fight.

Anointed with Marduk Oil, they join Souffrance's streams of people, hunting those who have willingly entered the Aberrants' service. They topple pheromone towers and light fires. With resin, they glue bugs to the tips of sticks that they wave in front of them. Noting the way the bugs move their legs and antennae, which leads them to the Pheromancers themselves. Side by side with the Spitalians, Frankans storm the mud cusps, throw phosphor grenades into ant tunnels and beat the bloated, pale bodies discharged from them to a bloody pulp.

Some winters ago, the resistance gained its greatest success so far. Frankans and Spitalians fought an uphill battle and threw an incendiary agent into one of the main vents. A blue flash darted from the opening. Then the entire vent exploded in white lightning. With the thunder came a shockwave racing down the slope into a forest of mud vents. Flames kept racing up and inside of the wall. Explosion after explosion blossomed, tearing tons of rock and dirt from the slope and spewing them into the city. The ground buckled, bucked, then gave in. The slope slid away. A spore field's outer ring crumbled, fell apart and raced downwards as an avalanche of dust.

The dust settled. The smell of ammonia rises from the crater. The swath is enormous. In the haze, a strange world of towering vents on which arm-thick ant trails form a network of veins becomes visible. For the first time, the Frankans can see what they tolerate in their midst.

The resistance grows.

PARASITE

Mother spore fields have destroyed the city of Parasite. The debris is black with humidity; a hairy growth stretches skywards. Where ruins still stand, they jut from green water like formations of rocks. Reeds grow between them, divided into rectangular fields by sunken jetties.

Generations of Frankans have fought the rising water. They placed stepping stones, and where that wasn't enough, they added more stones and linked the piles to jetties several kilometers long by wooden boards and sheets of iron.

The beating of millions of wings ruffles the waters here, as swaths of bugs fill the sky. Where slick, decayed planks jut from the water, flies nest and fly up in clouds when steps make the jetty tremble. Wasp nests stick to the house fronts, along with limp cocoons and burst mud bubbles. Above them, another swarm crosses. All part of a network of pheromone trails between the breeding hives.

Hills jut from the swamp like islands and defend the old buildings against the humidity. Weeds grow on the streets, faded posters are visible behind dusty windows. Wicker chairs stand around tables. On some of the latter, there are still cups. A birch tree grows from a ruined house; its leaves rustle in the muggy breeze. Birds nest behind satellite dishes; overgrown bushes entwined with overhead power cables.

Someone has created a path through the grass. Burnt logs and bones lie in a dry fountain. Clanners and Spitalians rest here before the last leg of their journey. Soon, the path leads down again into the mire. Chitin, black and iridescent green, pours over the walls and into open windows. The air is vibrating. Some houses are completely covered in ooze and mud. From pore-like openings, millions of pale-white bugs crawl and dry their still humid wings.

Now, the Eiffel Tower comes into view. Crookedly it juts from the mire, wasp nests living in its framework.

Only a few steps more and firebugs rise in a whirling display of light. Their abdomens pulse with a colorless light as they fly around the intruders in ever-tightening circles. Their little legs touch skin, leather, or neoprene, leaving greasy traces. Eyes water at the smell of ammonia. Suddenly, the swarm disperses, carried away by the wind, only to reassemble and fly away.

The marker bugs' job is done.

The Eiffel Tower casts shadows. They waft closer, pile up, and devour the sun.

UNDER WATER

The River Seine meanders through Parasite, sometimes widening into swamps or lakes. At its banks, algae fold up into gray-green mats. Its riverbed is still deep, the current strong. It carries melt water from the Alpine glaciers that is clear like nowhere else in Franka.

On it, the Clans reach Parasite's heart. They moor their rafts to a pier in the middle of the river at the level of the Jardin des Tuileries, swim to shore, run though the shimmering wall of marker bugs, throw pesticide bombs and run back to the Seine. The bombs tear holes as high as a house into the swarms of wasps; yellow-black insects rain down to the ground. But they are not destroyed. They float through the swampy ruins, following the attackers' pheromone trail. The attackers have reached the rivers, jump in. They dive. The pheromone trail ends.

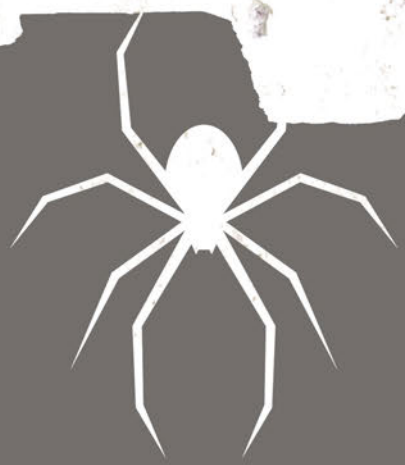
Like a thundercloud, the swarm of wasps hangs over the shore, expanding, condensing. Finally, it turns around.

ZIGGURATS

Near Bassham, Spitalians and Anabaptists found the first Ziggurat. Six stone steps formed a stone pyramid more than fifty feet high. Mud and insects covered its terraces. Sepsis raised trembling mycelia to the wind. Vents clung to the sides and overgrew the terraces; some thick and padded like giant jungle trees, towering above even the top

SPIDERS

The Spitalians use a spore-resistant breeding spider to keep the Spital insect-free. They have exported these Echein spiders to Franka years ago. The resistance abandons the animals in Parasite for them to surround the ruins by cocoons and to sift the plague-ridden bugs from the air. Within days, fresh nets are torn and sag under the weight of struggling chitin bodies. Whenever marker bugs get caught, the wasps come. The spiders stand no chance.



step. Bugs moved down the steps, catching their fall with trembling little wings, streaming over the Ziggurat to pour into ditches in the bottom. All of Bassham rutted by them.

At the top of the Ziggurat sat the Pheromancer called Markurant. Fist-sized, fluttering glands that continually distended and collapsed again covered his giant body. He heaved himself down into the city only when the winds had torn his sticky pheromone net from the streets.

All this was so long ago.

The Anabaptists ended his reign, throwing him and his ilk into the fire.

A great victory.

In the meantime, resistance clans have reported more Ziggurats to the Anabaptists and Spitalians. Some are in the middle of the swamp, dragged down by the mire; another stands on a mountainside. Thousands of people piled up stones for eight courses of the sun, although a better place to build would have been not 200 steps away. Uncompromisingly, the Pheromancers impose their Ziggurats on the land, ignoring trade routes, rivers, and tactical considerations.

However, if you mark the known locations on a map, a pattern becomes visible. The Ziggurats grow at the corners of an imaginary Chakra symbol: only twelve of them would complete it. Along the symbol's lines, swarms of insects eat their way through the land, the air oily from pheromones. Ants attack the vegetation, dissolving it and transporting the cellulose from Ziggurat to Ziggurat until they reach Parasite's breeding chambers under the Eiffel Tower. Could it be they see the tower as … a Ziggurat too?

ROUTING HUBS

Once a Ziggurat's top step is set, the crowds that have been toting stones create a city around the building. Waves of bugs descend upon the people. Pheromones hang in the air, heavy like tar.

The inhabitants create fields, build huts, or move into deserted vents. They love their Pheromancer intimately and obsessively. They offer him fruit and vegetables, weave wreaths of swamp reed for him, and implore him to call them to him to the Ziggurat's top. They want to feel his body, softly crack his glands with their teeth, and feel the fragrant discharge on their tongue.

The fields flourish, the harvest is bountiful. The vermin from Parasite wash over the fields without even touching one grain.

The Pheromancer protects his herd.

But those who resist him… a sea of antennae rises into the

WHEN THE MILLENIUM
AFTER THE MILLENIUM BEGINS
HUNGER WILL HIT MANY PEOPLE
MANY HANDS WILL BE BLUE FROM THE COLD
SO THAT THE PEOPLE WILL WANT TO SEE ANOTHER WORLD
AND THE ILLUSION TRADERS WILL COME AND OFFER POISON.
HOWEVER, IT WILL DESTROY THE BODIES AND RUIN THE SOULS
AND THOSE WHO MIXED THEIR BLOOD WITH THE POISON
WILL BE TRAPPED LIKE WILD ANIMALS
THEY WILL KILL AND RAPE
THEY WILL BLACKMAIL AND STEAL
AND LIFE WILL BECOME A RECURRING APOCALYPSE.

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

stream of pheromones. Waves ripple through the swarm, parting and redirecting it. The insects crawl over each other, pushing off, spreading their wings, humming and hissing, as they stream from cracks, ducts, and shafts. Breeding chambers vomit forth more and more vermin, which carry dirt and dust upwards as the swarm grows, forming a bow wave of fire bugs that pour into valleys and dry riverbeds and wash over mountainsides. The humming and whirring rises to a roaring primordial force.

Finally, the swarm reaches the enemy settlement. Runners break off, grabbing for legs and coiling up along poles. The black flood chokes fire ditches, presses through air vents, looking for any openings. It drowns. Plants and people are carried and dissolve within.

Fodder for the next swarm.

The Spitalians have learned that the Ziggurats work like routing hubs in a system of insect roads. The Pheromancers are the switchmen. They guide the swarms from city to city to unite them, divide them or send them against a danger outside the system.

The flood has already destroyed independent Frankan settlements, Spitalian camps, and Anabaptist deployment points.

SWARM ATTACK

No line of defense can hold against the swarm, but still it can be fought.

Frankans all over the country watch the streams of insects. When children discover a termite path, they estimate the swarm's size by drawing a grid in the dust with a stick and counting the termites it contains. Every agricultural worker can tell termites from ants, knows the thread flies, ichneumonids, marker bugs and a dozen more species. They painstakingly note everything and share their findings with couriers, who spread the information from post to post, writing it onto large chalkboards, including the date of the sightings.

If several swarms approach a region, the resistance awakens.

Agricultural workers drop their rakes, run to the hideouts and pull tarp-wrapped bundles from ponds and rivers. They do not have much time. Fly clouds gather around them, termites form teeming stalagmites groping for the package: the pheromone buoy. Rags steeped in pheromantic gland ichor are bound together, wrapped waterproof, and sunk for the resistance at places agreed

upon beforehand by the Spitalians. Dozens of those buoys must be placed to dissuade a swarm from its destination, to tear it apart into smaller swarms. Anabaptists stand at the ready to send bursts of fire into the black tentacles, and Spitalians shoot insecticides, further culling the flood. Forests are set ablaze, valleys are flooded. What gets through hisses and crackles in the fire ditches or is killed with wet rags.

THE PASSAGE NORTH

Large swarms are bred during the summer in Parasite's swamps. In fall, they wander off. However, for several breeding periods, Parasite hasn't spewed a large swarm into the shunt city network. The Spitalians become skittish. They sent Preservists up the river Seine until they reached the Eiffel Tower, demanding daily reports from the free Clans. They knew Parasite was breeding something. A large swarm would come.

Six months ago, Parasite released a giant wave of insects. Spotters fired their signal guns, made red stars blossom over the Passage North to Briton. The Clans placed buoys, had prepared valleys, and hundreds of pilot flames burned. Everyone was ready. The swarm reached the first buoy where it was supposed to be split and separated for the first time. It simply washed over it. The same happened at the second buoy. Something was different this time. Pale bodies swam along in the stream of chitin, dove and came up again somewhere else.

The swarm broke through and devoured Borderpost North, the starting point of Borca's Passage North. Where hundreds of Famulancers and Orgiastics got on the way to Briton every day a year ago, termite vents form a deadly maze now. The Passage North is lost.

BORDERPOST SOUTH

The way across the Ardennes is barred; a foray into Franka's heart is like a death sentence. Fear pheromones waft from burrows' fist-sized pores, reaching out to the humans. A tingling starts in their chest, their hackles rise. Something is coming, threatening their beloved god. Uneasiness turns to aggression. Flaring anger races from village to village, makes the inhabitants grab clubs and run out onto their land. Hatred is in the faces of men, women, old people and children alike. They hunt to kill.

Only the Passage South remains. Over the last decade, Northwest off the Hellvetic bastion of Basel, between Mulhouse and Besancon, the Spitalians have built a row of windowless concrete blocks interlinked by foil tunnels taller than a man. Hellvetic Sappers built pylons, strained tarps and fused them. This formed a roofed central plaza where a thousand merchants with carts and booths find room. If pheromones are drifting close or a swarm threatens to attack, it is sealed airtight within minutes. For days, Spitalians and travelers can remain in the outpost's closed system.

Every day, hundreds of people come through here, padding through the disinfection showers, then through a lane of spears rammed into the ground, the so-called Splayers. At the end of their shafts, there are glass cartridges full of nutrient liquid that each contain a tract of flesh called Mollusk by the Spitalians. The passersby watch them nervously. Their life depends on them. When the Mollusks twitch, the life expectancy of the people in the disinfection pool can only be measured in seconds. Screams split the tent hall as Spitalians put on gas masks and charge, Splayers at the ready. Hygienists close their suits and shoulder flame throwers. Only Psychonauts and spore infested people excite the Mollusks and make them rap the glass roughly. Spore infestation cannot be tolerated.

The Borderpost is a way station, trading post and toehold. Spotters report new termitariums. Spitalians and Anabaptists prepare for a field job, while supply convoys take a rest.

THE PASSAGE SOUTH

From Borderpost South, the passage follows a line to Dijon and then veers towards Lyon. Plates high as houses flank it, lighting up as soon as someone passes them. Fuzzy silhouettes dart across the walls, glaring eye glasses stare at the passers-by. If someone stops and steps towards the wall, the colors melt into their spectral components and form a masked face: the Oracle. It names the locations of ancient artifacts that can be exchanged for drafts at the nearest Chronicler Cluster. Then, the plate's pixels die away.

Now, the trade line runs south and crosses the Mediterranean to Montpellier. Here, the Neolibyans' transport ships have been landing for decades, unloading Africa's treasures. The market is colorful and noisy, a scent of herbs and exotic spices. In a Neolibyan Surge Tank, the Africans exhibit stuffed lions, elephants, antelopes and one of the mysterious Machine Men. Spitalians patrol the city walls. Through binoculars, they watch the vents in the distance and gauge them. Yes, they are coming closer.

Onwards to Toulouse, cultural center of free Franka. Books recovered from Parasite are freed of mud and mold and restored. This ancient knowledge supplies the people with an identity beyond the battles that touch the soul.

Nevertheless, the Pheromancer threat is felt in Toulouse, too. Platoons of Spitalians pass through the city on their way to Briton, thousands of Frankans work at the fire ditches and douse the land in oil. If the wind comes from the north, the Petrol stench threatens to drown the city.

AQUITAINE

The next station on the Passage South is Aquitaine. This region is situated on Franka's west coast and profits from the mild Atlantic climate. Massive seas of wheat and corn stretch to the horizon, on the gravelly ground near Bordeaux, wine grapes grow, and mills raise their sails to the breeze. On the fields, Anabaptist Ascetics toil. They weed out roots, carry away rocks and dig ditches. Those who collapse from exhaustion are dragged to the cathedral in Saint-André in handcarts by singing children. In the sacral building's coolness and anointed with the Elysians' invigorating oils, they quickly recover. A sip of crystal clear water from the font, and it's back to work.

Bordeaux was almost spared by the Eshaton. The Frankans say it was due to its beauty and churches. Even an angry god had considered it a sin to bring the hammer down onto this city.

From the ambulatories' shadows, Anabaptists and Hybrispanian Jehammedans cautiously nod at one another. Chroniclers hurry through the alleys with small steps, their capes flapping around their ankles. They do not really trust the peace with the Anabaptists. Apocalyptics of the Sunwind Flock stick closely together, waving the Bordelais council's pass and look away when the Orgiastics stare at them. They meet a Judge at the market square. They are loathed as the Machiawen's informants.

East of Bordeaux at the Garonne's banks, the Chroniclers have built a Cluster from plane parts and ship hulls. Its setup was presumably dictated by a picture of iron filings in two overlapping magnetic fields. A button lift links the Cluster and a terminal at the Atlantic shore. Scrappers tilt steel plates and ship's engines onto sled scaffolding and wipe rust dust from their faces. From here, they'd have a good view of the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean, if the ruins of two oil platforms didn't jut from the water with dozens of tankers forming a landscape of scrap before the coast. Day by day, the surf washes ashore ships and containers. Some have burst, the metal at the breaks pitted and blackened. Many hulls still carry fist-sized holes, their superstructures gutted. On some, symbols are still visible. Circles linked by lines, forming odd shapes. No one in Europe has ever seen this sign language or can translate it. Is there a culture beyond the Atlantic Ocean?

BRITON

Franka's northwest is free of Pheromancers. Again. Still. When the region's Pheromancer died decades ago, the peasants frenzied. They molested the corpse, destroyed the Ziggurat and burnt down all signs of the Aberrant's reign. For weeks, there was smoke over Briton. But the peasants could not survive on their own. They sent messengers to Borca to hire mercenaries. Instead, the Anabaptists came and declared Briton a location of the final battle between human and demiurge.

It became exactly that, for the demiurge had a lot in store: The Psychonauts sent Ganaress with glands as big and bloated as a child's head with sweet words on his tongue. A thousand human followers surrounded him, praising him as this era's god.

Two days later, he hung from a Briton village's fortress walls, flayed.

For Britons and inhabitants of Cathedral City, it was a cleanse. The Frankans built trust with the Anabaptists, merged with them to form a worn community dedicated to liberating all of Franka.

Cities in the ruins of Brest, St-Brieuc and Rennes are the largest Anabaptist towns today. Countless smaller villages in the hinterland support the resistance with agricultural products and volunteers.

THE STUKOV DESERT

Northeast of Franka, the swamps dry up and give way to tundra that becomes a dusty salt desert. Shrubbery grows along the salt clods' break lines. The air is dry and burns the skin. But this region called the Stukov Desert is not dead at all.

Gases and Sepsis spores escape from termitariums in all of Franka, floating out into the Stukov. They infect.

Under the salt clods, something stirs. The evolutionary engine gathers strength. Insects the world has never seen break through to the surface, spreading glittering wings and expanding. Desert Clams raise trembling tendrils towards passing creatures. Husk Spiders burrow into the salt crust, preying on pitch bugs and armored snails. Stukov Scorpions react to tremors and attack anything that comes closer than ten paces. Their stingers' poison leads to severe necroses; the Spital pays well for it.

In the Stukov, wild clans live free. They feed on Dust Worms and Desert Clams, mix salves from crushed insects or extract water from them. For centuries, they have been cut off from any civilization and understand neither Frankan nor Borcan. They treat strangers with mistrust and infected arrows.

According to legend, a renowned Justitian researcher called Stukov found a landscape of valleys and chasms here, which was home to semi-intelligent beasts. Like hardworking ants, they spread out to dig for artifacts and drag them back to their chasms. Stukov supposedly visited one of their subterranean hoards and saw the treasures with his own eyes. As proof of his story, he brought back wondrous artifacts and palm-sized, finely chiseled claws from all of his journeys.

The maps he drew, the claws and some of the technological masterworks are stored in the chambers of the Chroniclers' Central Cluster in Justitian today.

BRITAIN

In the north, the Janus Crater's rim connects the European continent to Britain. In the east, the crater slope is chilly, its flanks are rugged and difficult to navigate. On the Atlantic side, conifer forests spread. Shrubbery has taken over wide areas of the slopes. In many places, the ground is porous, like a fist-sized deposit of an unknown substance in the stone had evaporated with the years. Today, the cavities are filled with water.

No one dares to go further north. There is talk of light displays, of pillars of rays groping for the sun, of people with a bulky apparatus in the back of their necks who capture slaves. Whatever it is, Britain is known as the Vulture's domain.

SYMBOL
ON THE SHIPWRECKS
OF AQUITAINE

ETERNAL WANDERINGS

POLLEN

UNTAMED

The ground is crusty and torn, surrounding the greatest of scars like scabs: the Pandora crater. Red dust and veils of daintiest spore gossamer waft across the surrounding dead plains. Mother spore fields press their rings to the surface, interfering with older fields. Spiders rule the ravines and molten, ruined cities; Rift Centipedes burrow maze-like tunnels, attacking every blade of grass, every seed.

Further west, the ground crackles. It rises and falls in a monthly rhythm. Breathe in, breathe out. Forgotten, ruined cities are pressed to the surface by ancient gossamer, remain there trembling and crackling until they sink back to the sea of spider silk. In circular patches, the ground thaws. Saplings sprout within minutes, pale and translucent from their quick growth and forming absurdly large fruiting bodies. They keep growing when they are chewed and swimming in gastric acid, looking for a way through the bowels and into blood vessels, pressing out into the sunlight through the pores.

Where the wasteland bursts into a steaming paradise, the spore fields rot. Their spore spray turns dark blue and finally caulks to black molasses. The rings cave in. But the spore fields resist. Waves of spiders disgorge upon the vegetation, strangling it under their webs. Centipedes burrow into the ground, past roots trying to grab and surround them like cysts, deep into the trembling strands that are responsible for all this.

Two forces of nature collide in Pollen. The Pollners live somewhere in between. Carrying their belongings from oasis to oasis on sleds, they are bull necked giants relying only on their community and their strength. They defend the oasis with stone axes and their own blood against Psychonauts, Spitalians, or the Apocalyptics' infamy. No one messes with them until once again the wasteland comes crashing down and they must move on.

UPROOTED

2071. Every telescope and satellite was watching the asteroid field, gauging its size and course. Cluster computers dove into data waves and approximated movement vectors. That Earth would rotate into the field was already a fact. Now the ground zeroes needed to be determined. Red crosshairs were flashing over Europe, framed by ellipses gauging potential deviations. Hundreds of kilometers east of Warsaw, markers accumulated. The probabilities added up to an implacable 100%.

While fear sparked revolts all over the world, Poland organized an exodus from the danger zone. Escape routes into the Sudetes and the High Tatra were mapped out. In snow-covered conifer forests, between sheer mountainsides and mountain lakesides, the shells of complete cities rose from the ground.

Zero hour. The sky turned dark blue, the atmosphere heaved, the flash seared bodies and wooden walls hundreds of miles from the point of impact. The asteroid smashed much of Poland and consumed the rest with red dust.

Storms raged through the Tatra's mountaintops. Hundreds of thousands stared up at the reddish-gray tail that hung twisted in the sky like an umbilical cord to the deadly cold of space.

NOMADS

Messengers from Brno and Breslau report devastation, telling of lakes of molten rock and deserted, ruined cities. They spread maps, point to cities and wordlessly shake heads. But they also speak of forests that had escaped devastation, of churches whose towers rose from the wreckage intact. Life in the dust was possible.

Thousands followed this call of hope. They wanted to go back home, excavate the supply stores, look for those left behind in the ash. They wanted a normal life again.

As families they went, stamping ditches into the ash cover. They dug for canned goods and seeds in the ruins of Lodz, joined Wroclaw in the west, or went north to Danzig. In spring, they uncovered fields and planted potatoes, radish and cabbage. In summer, they crossed the wasteland and looted ruins. Only in the fall did they come back to their fields and harvested.

There was hope. But not enough for all.

Not just winter separated the strong from the weak. Every successful community left a shadow of outcasts and savages. It followed the Clans, swept across freshly planted fields and through hidden camps. In the end, it coalesced, an army of hollow-eyed figures with bleeding gums and necrotized fingers. Hunger and cold had made them grab stones and clubs.

The Clans awaited them.

STRANGERS

From the east, a trek of strangers entered the Pollen plains. Black furs on broad shoulders, the women pale and grim. Their leaders were old, withered giants; relics of a time past. Stories of trust, betrayal, and violence were inscribed on their bodies. Some were missing fingers, others earlobes or eyes. That had happened long before the Eshaton. But no one asked big Aleko for the dozens of names on his left arm or Anatoly for the meaning of the crests on his chest. They had led the people through hell for thousands of miles, removed any resistance and every know-it-all, judged and bashed in skulls. Whoever or whatever they might have been in their past lives, now the people kneeled in front of them with eyes downcast, kissed their hands and called them fathers.

The Pollners were fascinated. In a dangerous and insecure world, strength was a shining star around which the survivors had gathered. These strangers embodied this principle better than anyone else.

They did not want to fight. Not here in Pollen. They were looking for a new home, and the Pollners offered them one, and embraced their culture of strength and dominance.

LEECHERS

Spore clouds waft across the land. On crumbled walls, white fuzz grew, grabbing for passing nomads with its flimsy hairs, growing towards them in fractal patterns. Mother spore fields raised wall after wall. Fist-sized cusps grew on them, their skin paper-thin and dry with fine veins. The Burn within them changed the Pollners. The jag threw them into a crude, hot carnality; hit them like sparking neurons through a giant organism. Cast out

into reality, the Burners found the cold easier to bear and considered lichen as more nutritious and delicious. Body and soul seemed intertwined and united as one.

No one blamed it on the Sepsis or the Burn when the first disfigured children were born. Their skulls were deformed or elongated. Bony protrusions could be felt underneath their skin. Their little eyes looked through mom and dad, lost in their own world. Yet still, they needed their mothers, crawled up on their bodies, and bit into their breasts. They suckled, little fingers clutching warm flesh, pressing. They couldn't get enough and did not stop until they were torn away.

The Pollners saw a new type of human in them, adapted and strong. That was what they wanted, what they wished for in their children. In fact, those creatures were immune to cold and their wounds healed incredibly fast. They would fare better in this land than their parents.

But this metamorphosis soon frightened the Pollners. Bone spurs grew from the children's forearms. Skin fins formed on necks and legs. Pride gave way to uneasiness. Some Clans called them Leechers as they crawled from one woman to the next at night, seeking their breasts.

At age one, these children stood as tall as normal kids three years older. They spent their days eating or sat amidst the ruins for hours. Normal children from the clan kept their distance or threw stones at them. Then one day, they were gone, running away into the wastes. The clan took a deep breath.

DISCORDANCE

For the Leechers, their time with the Clans was their larval stage. In the spore fields, they grew up to be glorious Biokinetics, cultivating spurs and ossifications on their skull, sucking up the Sepsis greedily. Ribs fused to form a carapace that no Anabaptist could pierce with his broadsword. Some remained in the spore fields and spun spider threads to register every movement. Others hatched the spider plague in skin folds and roamed around, spreading Sepsis. The most powerful of them grew up to become bony towers covered in thick flesh. The Chakra ether's rhythm sent ripples through theses colossi. Their arms and legs dug into the depths, down into the groundwater, even deeper into the continent's heat. They were blind in this world, but all-seeing eyes in the ether. From their pores, spiders were born and protected the trembling flesh against wind and rain with a thick net. Waves of Psychonauts followed their Chakra calls.

Then, something happened. From Hybrispania to the deepest Balkhan, a jolt went through the Psychonauts. The Biokinetics screamed and thrashed, bleeding from their genitalia. Many burrowed into the ground, clutching glazed rock. Spurs broke, gnarled bulges sprouted from their whole bodies. The towers crumbled to the ground, moaning from meter-thick windpipes as their replete flesh withered and bone strands burst under their weight.

The Spitalians later called this event the Discordance. The Psychonauts' Primer collective had encountered the Psychovores' collective; shockwaves tore apart the links between the Chakras and abandoned the Psychonauts in the ether's void. The first Biokinetics never found their way back. They degenerated and still haunt Pollen's tundra as mindless beasts.

A new generation of Biokinetics arose from the Clans and linked with the spore fields. It all started anew.

But something else had survived the Discordance. Buried deep within the ground, a bloated cusp of pure life energy slumbered. The thick skin tube supplying it with nutritious ichor collapsed months ago. Interwoven with human DNA, protein molecules latched onto the being's genes and rewrote the program. Stem cells specialized into phagocytes or brain cells, only to revert to their generic form shortly after. Calcium and other minerals fused to form teeth and bone sails. It was unstoppable.

FRACTAL FORESTS

Over the centuries, the spore fields spread inexorably. The Spitalians attacked them with fungicide bombs and sowed Psychovore seed to establish artificial Discordances. Anabaptists burned swathes into the Sepsis with their flame throwers or poured Elysian fire over the fields.

Pollen's Earth Chakra reacted with an immediate immune response. Waves of Psychonauts ran up against the attackers. Discordant fields were isolated from the field, crumbling within hours. With every attack, their immune system reacted faster.

Within a few years, the first spore fields would have blossomed in Osman's municipal area and its walls would have lifted and crushed the city walls.

PANDORIANS

Clans can mean trouble, but even if they are now far removed from the tree of civilization, they still carry a glimpse of humanity.

The Pandorians are different. They carry dense stacks of Sepsis under their skin that make their flesh and even their bones bulge at the skull. With stone clubs they guard Biokinetics' nests and attack anyone who approaches them. They behave like animals, grunting and stomping. Many are blind, their eyeballs are marbled with Sepsis. But their perception is intact.

But something happens in the west of Pollen. The ground crackles and lifts slowly as if drawing breath before a great exertion. The Psychonauts fall on all fours, look around and cock their head as if listening. The spore field crackles, tremble and burst into clouds. The walls crumble, starting from the outside. The spore field rots. Gaudy green vegetation spreads through the valleys, expands, weeds sprout from the ground like hair. Trees rise up, their trunks still translucent and pale. Their roots snake across the ground, clutching the earth. Some branches are too heavy, they break and fall to the ground, melt and ooze away. Glassy leaves unfurl and turn towards the sun. Colors from yellow and gaudy green to brown pervade the plants. Trunks get denser, harden. Shades of green still waft over them at first, then they retain a dusty brown.

The strange forests spread along fractal pathways. Viewed from above, they form branching spirals whose branches create smaller spirals in turn. Others are star-shaped or circular, surrounded by other circles on all sides.

All of these Fractal Forests are centered in a former spore field. Now, nothing is left of it. The air smells of damp leaves and rotten fruit. The ground is warm to the touch. Haze hangs in the valleys. On the trees, blue-gray snails sit with elongated eyestalks that curl like tentacles. But no, these animals do not move. They are part of the plant, born from it and fused with it. Like the leaves, they wither to dry husks and blow away with the wind.

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

Within hours, a Fractal Forest is fully grown and starts hardening. But only some days later, the trees bear fruit. Heavy, red and tantalizing they hang from the branches and smell delicious.

Two winters ago, the Anabaptist emissary Wetzel the Chosen roamed a Fractal Forest close to the ruined city of Lodz. The Spitalians wanted to burn down these forests, as they were the same evil as the spore fields in a new guise. Wetzel thought differently. Could this be the Paradise of old? Rebus the Baptist had written nothing of the sort nor did any emanations hint at it. Wetzel stood in front of a tree, felt attracted by its fruit, touched the silken surface and blurred the dew.

What happened then is not fully recorded; Wetzel's notes are locked away in Cathedral City. Still, many Anabaptists now believe that the trees are descendants of the tree of knowledge. Only the highest-ranking Baptists eat their fruit. Supposedly, consuming them creates deep, true revelations that drag many an Anabaptist separated from God into screaming madness.

SYNERGIES

The Fractal Forests are mystical places full of wonders and dangers. To the Clans, they mean everything. They adopt the forests, reap roots and bulbs and warm themselves in hot springs. They only light campfires at the edge of the Fractal Forests as weeds and shrubbery harden into crystalline thorns within seconds. All life drains from the roots and spreads into the surrounding vegetation. Dry root strands and infertile ground remain. Fire at the heart of a Fractal Forest could make it collapse and turn into a crystalline death trap.

Whatever the Clans reap, they cook it for hours. Even a sapling's life energy is perilous to anyone eating it uncooked. The plants strike wiry roots into the stomach that cut the flesh and spread within minutes. Once the sapling pierces the skin, it bloats and sprouts blossoms. At this point, the roots are already draining blood from the lungs, and the first strands are already engulfing the spine.

Survival is impossible.

The Clans know the dangers. If they offer a meal from roots, leaves and sprouts on a piece of bark to a stranger, they ask him for his trust. If he declines, they respect his caution. But they will not deal with him anymore.

They steer clear of the Fractal Forests' fruit. Those who approach them are caught in oppressive visions. When they rise from the mists after hours or days, they

SPIDER RAIN

The sky over Pollen flickers like one of the Chroniclers' underclocked monochrome monitors. The illusion is perfect when the clouds' gray condenses to a black and white static. Then, the spiders come tumbling down. They drag behind long strands, wave after wave falls from the sky. The next gust of wind tears them down again. Silken strands flicker. These arachnids are not dangerous, but they carry Sepsis. Spider silk clings to everything, wafts in the wind like thin hair. The ground is white and spun in, every step raises threads. Here and there, spiders skitter across the giant web, suddenly freezing and staring at intruders. Their chelicerae move in a push-pull rhythm, their hairy abdomens pumping.

All around the spore fields, Pollen is plagued by Biokinetics. They have spun in whole cities, conserving them for eternity. Old electricity pylons and trees are cottony things where thousands of spiders nest. A ravine covered by webs becomes a death trap when the fabric tears and gives in.

tell of crushing masses of flesh, a fracturing of the mind, of entwinement and humid closeness. Some clans even report a change in the Fractal Forest once you have eaten of its fruit. New trees grow, others wither as the fruit's color changes.

The forests treat the Clans well, and they do likewise. Clanners free the trees from spiders, tear webs, dig up Rift Centipedes and crush them. They protect the forests against Spitalians and Apocalyptics.

However, sometimes a Fractal Forest demands more.

The ground splits open and reveals the interior of a man-sized muscle sac made of white, fleshy strands. Contraction waves ripple along the interior wall, making openings flutter. Yellowish digestive fluid sloshes in the deep: a phagocyte cusp. The Clanners offer it rabbits and gendos as well as blessed children, enemy warriors, or captured Spitalians. The cusp closes over the victim, the opening becomes a scar soon covered by grass once more.

One day, the Fractal Forest's life energy is spent. Trees splinter, the fruits rot, the grass dissolves into bristly fibers. The Clans thank the forest and move on. They do not notice how the countless phagocyte cusps they have fed throughout the seasons burst one by one. The rabbit jumps out unharmed and licks its belly as if nothing has happened. The human sacrifices have not aged at all.

They have, however, changed.

PANDORA

Those who enter the epicenter of destruction wade through spore fuzz and shimmering spider silk to finally stand in the shadows of a mountain that no map shows. The Pandora crater's ridge gets as high as 600 m and is marked by hundreds of spore fields' wall systems. Clouds attack it fiercely and teem down its slopes. From a trench, milky water pours out onto the plain, bubbling over silk areas and converging in ancient riverbeds. In it swim crabs – Spitalians have identified them as trilobites – and the as of yet unexplored fractal star releasing byssus-like threads into the water.

ETERNAL OASES

The first Fractal Forest documented by humans was discovered a little more than six winters ago northwest of Wroclaw. Soon thereafter, Spitalians documented a spore field's complete metamorphosis into a Fractal Forest.

However, there are ancient legends of green landscapes, of oases in the torn country. Supposedly, there are sources of fertility that make trees and fields grow with no regard for the cold. They cling to rivers or hide behind cliffs far away from the spore fields. The plants growing there are much more common than everything growing rank in the Fractal Forests.

These so-called eternal oases have been Pollen's key to wealth and power for centuries. They are kept secret and jealously guarded. Supposedly, the Piast of Wroclaw controls three of them in the hinterland. How else could Wroclaw have survived the dark years this well?

INFLUX

Two Hellvetic Alpine passages open up into Pollen. In the west, the tunnels come back to daylight close to Steyr. From there, the route leads along Praha Republika's western border through an area of shoved-up clods of earth and soaring cliffs. Travelers must watch the weather. When the winds blow, sulfuric waves from the Reaper's Blow move across the land. The Hellvetics know the problem and have created bunkers within the rock along the route. But these are more and more often occupied and used as Burn storage facilities by Apocalyptics. Other bunkers stink of gendos.

In the end, the western route bisects. One way leads towards Osman, the other keeps following Praha's border to Dresden. Here, the Corroded's hordes met and joined for the final attack on Praha. Since then, Dresden is literally a ghost town. At night, the souls of the butchered population rise and haunt streets riddled with bloated bodies. If they encounter Clanners, blood-drenched banners fly on the walls the next morning.

Enlightened travelers hear these tales and form their own theories. Surviving Praha Republika archivists waiting for a chance to return, are probably behind the attacks. But whether it's ghosts, archivists, or marauding Clanners – the city is not safe. Every traveler would do well to pass it by day and quickly. The next stop on the way is Wroclaw. In the east, Hellvetica's passage tunnels open up to the Ternitz portal. From there, travelers go to Brno.

SILK

Eastern Pollen's Przadkas brave Pollen's spun in forests and ruin chasms. Their women chase away the spiders with torches, cut the nets, roll them into cottony bales, and carry them to their camp. In vats, they wash and heat the silk and dissolve the glue. Next, they comb out the strands and twine them into long threads. Wroclaw's weaving mills pay well for the silk thread. The Neolibyans carry the finely woven Wroclaw silk onto the Surge Tanks in large balls and pay for them in African rifles and spices. The Neolibyans rub their hands in glee. In Tripol's markets, the tailors will outbid each other for even a few feet of the fabric. However, silk is also in high demand in Wroclaw itself. Wroclaw's armories fashion it into the carapaces of the Druschinnik, the Piast's guard. The fabric is durable and almost untearable, with arrows and knives easily deflected.

WHEN THE MILLENIUM
AFTER THE MILLENIUM BEGINS
DEATH'S ROAR WILL SHAKE THE EARTH LIKE
THUNDER

THE BARBARIANS WILL
MINGLE WITH THE LAST LEGION'S SOLDIERS
THE GODLESS WILL DWELL IN THE HEARTS OF THE HOLY CITIES
ONE AFTER THE OTHER WILL TURN BARBARIC,
INFIDEL AND WILD.

THERE WILL BE NO MORE ORDER, NO MORE RULES
HATRED WILL SPREAD
LIKE WILDFIRE IN A DRY FOREST

THE BARBARIANS WILL SLAUGHTER THE SOLDIERS
THE GODLESS WILL STRANGLE THE FAITHFUL

EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING WILL BE CRUEL,
AND THE CITIES WILL
PERISH.

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

BRNO

In a wave of violence and destruction, the Corroded passed through Praha, remaining there for only a few days, single-handedly destroyed a clan that questioned his leadership in the Podlipanske massacre and continued southeast.

For weeks, the Corroded resided in Brno. In the city center, his clans fashioned a throne from his enemies' bones and weapons for him. He never sat on it, never claimed it. Shouts of "Chernobog" echoed through the streets wherever he walked. Women offered him their children so that he might spare the city. He shoved past all of them without acknowledging or releasing them with his gaze. The Clans followed him.

Those who could, fled to the Spitalians and Hellvetics into the fortress of Spilberg.

Finally, the Corroded moved on, and the major part of the Clans followed him. Those who stayed behind have been fighting for Chernobog's succession ever since, sharp-shooters kill everyone who dares to climb the throne. Stragglers from Praha drag books, artifacts and weapons into the city, offering them to Chroniclers and Apocalyptics. Spitalian Hippocrats struggle for a pact with the clan leaders, but they change in rapid succession.

Hellvetics install gun locations in the city and secure the passage road.

They call punitive actions in the inner city "combing lice from the pelt".

WROCLAW

Ten days' travel separates Brno from Wroclaw, chaos from order. Neolibyan Surge Tanks are parked along the fortress wall like dusty bunkers. Scourgers pull a Biokinetic's body from the cargo hatch on ropes, scribes

FRACTAL NOW

The Chroniclers are fascinated by the Fractal Forests. The phagocyte cusps seem to be some sort of access or interface to the growth routines: Even the smallest modifications change the fractal growth. Could the Fractal Forests be nothing more than giant biological computers?

SMUGGLE

Pollen's Burn is part of everyday life like the daily helping of roots: It makes the cold more bearable, appeases the hunger and makes diseases fall away like caked dirt.

For the Apocalyptics, Pollen was a green pasture – nothing sells better than Bion-Burn, and the spore fields do not grow as uninhibited here as anywhere else. The Spitalians moved along worn-out, well-known paths, posing no threat to the smuggling endeavors. But now, the spore fields rot. The Apocalyptics have to progress east to harvest potent Burn. Also, the Biokinetics are aggressive as if someone had poked them; sending children to the fields to gather the cusps is not enough anymore.

The Apocalyptics blame the Spitalians and their flunkies, the Anabaptists. Over the last years, the doctors had dug shafts, taken soil samples and pumped poison into the ground. Obviously, they have had success. The Apocalyptics will not tolerate this any longer. They guard spore fields, burn down Fractal Forests and ambush Spitalians. The most profitable smuggle market is on the line. The Mother of Ravens in Justitian is not amused.

in canary robes sweep the forecourt, putting up table and chair, while an African boy brings a tray with a silver jug. A shout can be heard from the city's battlements. With a rumble, a Surge Tank awakes, black jets of exhaust hiss from a hatch bursting open at its side. The boy kneels, sets down the jug, grimaces and puts his hands to his ears. A turret turns, a cannon rises with a rattle, lowers again by a hand's breadth. The barrel moves up and down, then pauses. Muzzle flash. The Surge Tank jolts, the cannon crashes into the turret, strikes the damping. The boy rises. Squinting, he stares into the distance. A flash blooms into a fireball, over five kilometers distance. On the battlements, Wroclaw's guards cheer, the Scourgers on the cargo hatch laugh and clap their hands. They probably won't be able to recover this Biokinetic in one piece.

The Neolibyans see Wroclaw as an attraction. They come here to prove themselves as great hunters. Pheromancers in Franka are good, Dushani in the Balkhan are a challenge, but to slay a Biokinetic, a marksman must put the lead right between their bone plates. Then he reloads, fires round after round into the attacking beast until it falls in a fountain of dirt. Target practice with the Surge Tanks only serves to entertain the Scourgers for the city's benefit.

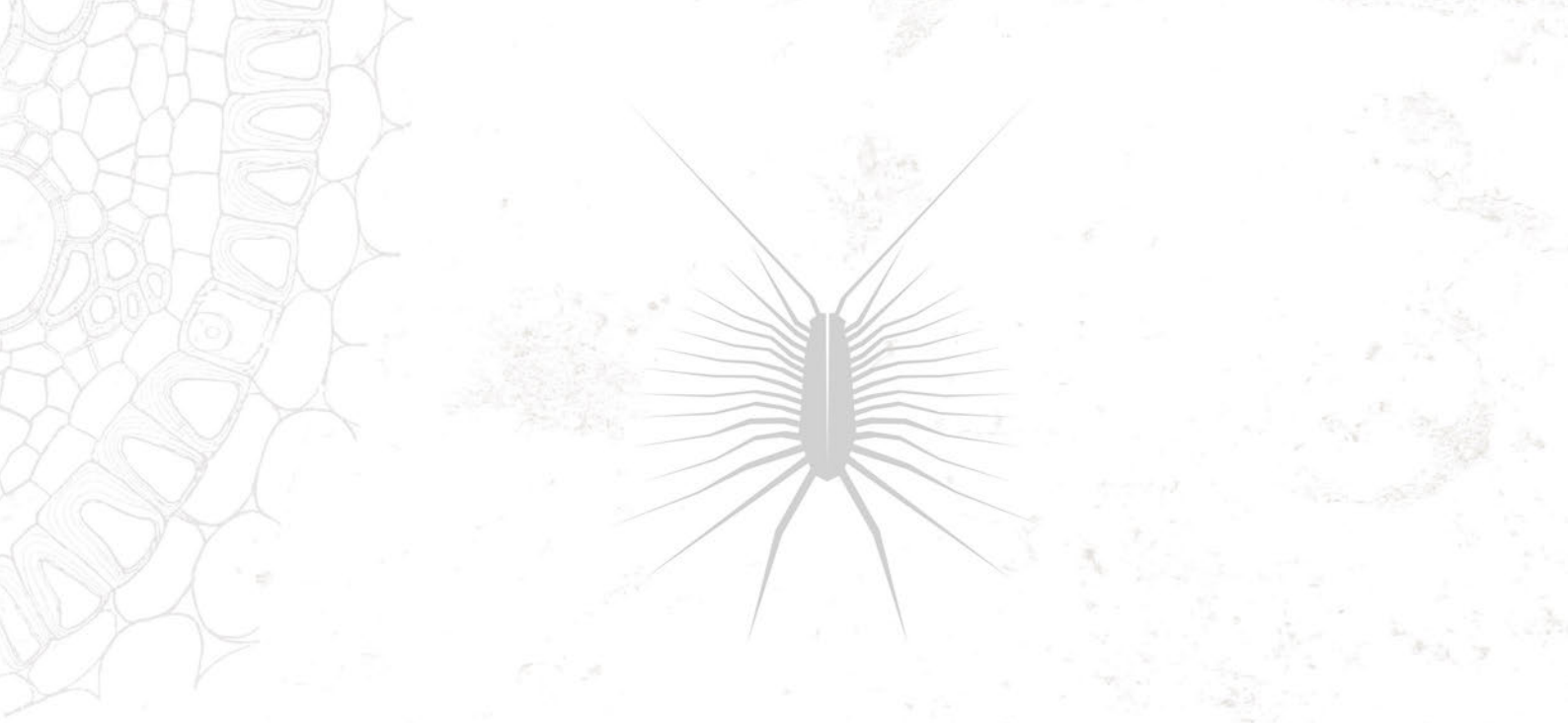
Wroclaw profits from the Africans. Apocalyptics are hired as beaters, Scrappers offer scouting expeditions through Bygone ruins, clans sell goat meat and vegetables to the strangers and satisfy their lust for the unusual. Sometimes with Burn, sometimes with young women or men.

Above all this, the Piast sits enthroned, watching, waiting, leading. For centuries, he has been governing the city, distancing it from the Eshaton and making it stronger. According to legend, he will only die when Pollen

THE WRETCHED HAG

Black eyes, black teeth. Her skin a web of scars. For centuries, she's been haunting the Pollners' legends: the Wretched Hag. The Lady in Black, lurking in the ruins, her screams make your marrow freeze. The Ancient One is supposed to be immortal, crazy and ill, full of insatiable hunger, damned to exist until the end of days to finally judge the traitors who left her in the ruins.

Pollen's clans know her, tell their children of her before bedtime. The Wretched Hag comes to get unruly children, haunts their dreams and eats the naughty. Almost no other legend is as well known in Pollen's clans as the tale of the Lady in Black. The first recordings date back to a few years after the Eshaton, crude murals beyond Poznan's deserted sea of debris. What frightened the Pollners that much that it burned this tale into their collective subconscious?



has risen back to its former glory. In fact, not many believe him to be over 500 years old. He must come from a ruling caste that produces strong leaders in every generation, but doesn't appear itself. The palace area is huge, with gardens, library and storage facilities; thousands of people can stay there without the rest of the city noticing. The bodyguards, the Druschinnik, are the only ones to ever see the Piast. Unwaveringly, they carry his orders into the different quarters and post them at the gates and keep up the mystery surrounding their ruler.

It's not the only one. Wroclaw flourishes, but nothing grows outside its walls. Still it is said that there is no hunger in the twelve parts of the city. All parts of the city are separated by high walls and iron gates. It is unknown how many people live in Wroclaw. Spitalians keep offering to enter the other quarters and tend to the sick. The Piast declines by default. No stranger may leave the merchants' quarter.

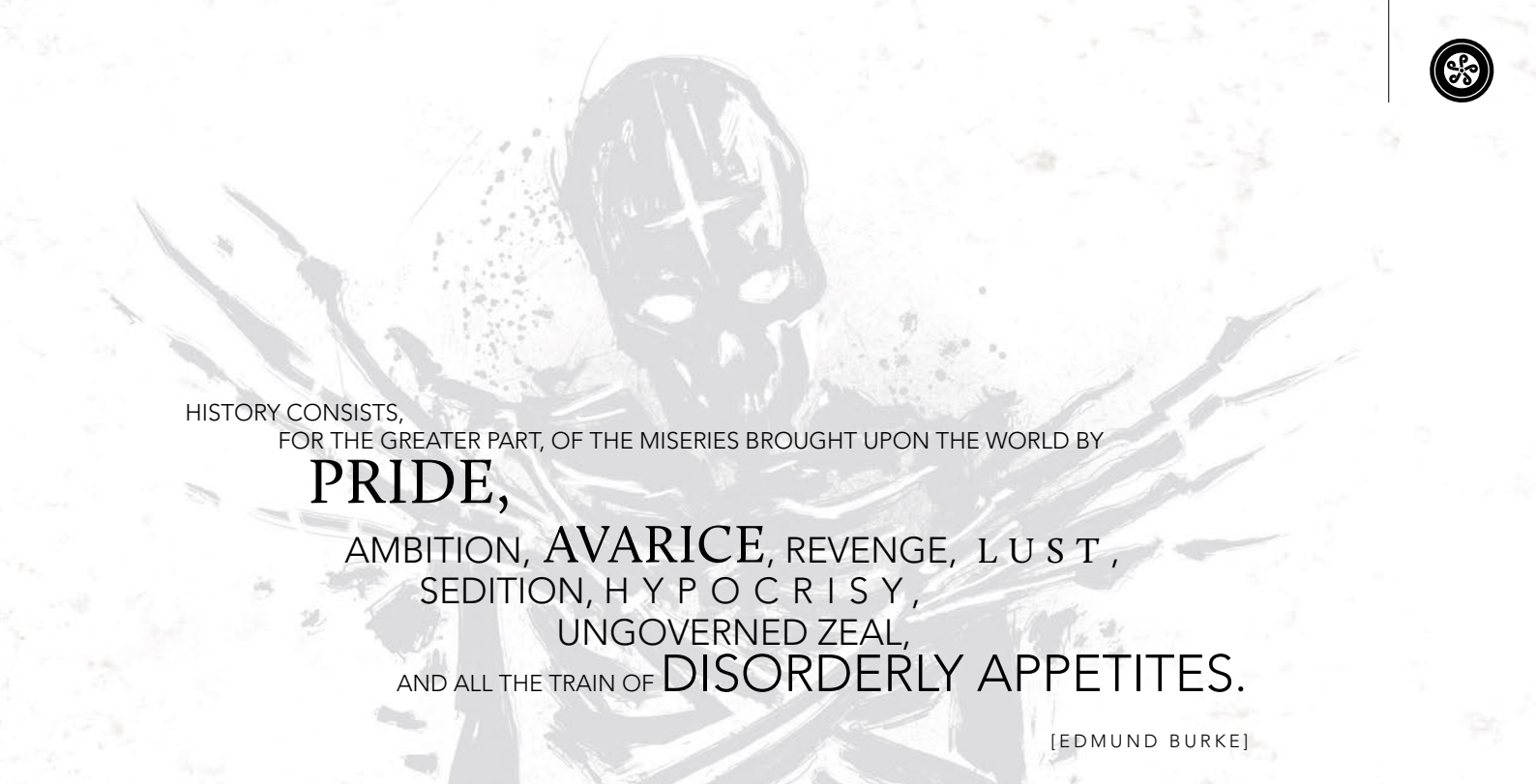
DANZIG

The blinking summer sun cannot thaw the masses of snow that fall in winter any longer. Danzig will vanish under the Ice Barrier. But Spitalians and Anabaptists have not left the city yet. Two big heating towers blow hot air into Danzig's hospital via pipes. Still, the doctors had to give up the upper floors and retreat to blue basement labs. Here, mounted trilobites and bugs are stored in shelves and trunks; Biokinetics' arms, legs and organs swim in glass cylinders; dissected Psychonauts lie in stainless steel tubs, a spore-aflicted brain has been sliced and awaits conservation. Tin boxes with Pandora findings have already been sealed and are ready to be sent to Borca's Spital. Work stations with microscopes and typewriters line the walls.

The labs are the domain of Consultant Dr. Janssen and her Primer research group. She thinks that the Primer can exit a host and return to its original form as a meta-organism if the environmental parameters like atmosphere and temperature are beyond the host's adaptive range. The compromised host would no longer be suitable for the Primer. Thus, Dr. Janssen needs living Biokinetics she addresses as "body" followed by a number in all her test records. Body 2 has become her hobby: A flesh film covers the maximum security lab, groping for seams and hanging from the ceiling in flaps. Bones are swimming on the surface of the flesh, joined by cartilage and bone threads. A head-sized bulge down by the door's lower edge keeps expanding only to deflate again. Something dark presses against the shell before sinking back into the bulge's wet carnality. Strictly speaking, the experiment has not succeeded, but it proves the Biokinetics' adaptability.

SCRAP BLESSINGS

The land rises and falls. Bygone cities, hidden under gossamer for centuries, push to the surface, first only visible beneath age-old spider webs that they stretch and finally tear. The ground sighs and crackles. Fractal Forests flourish and perish. Gossamer hangs from the towers like curtains and flaps around lower buildings. The cities are now visible against the horizon as strictly geometrical structures. Scrappers will soon make their way there.



HISTORY CONSISTS,
FOR THE GREATER PART, OF THE MISERIES BROUGHT UPON THE WORLD BY
PRIDE,
AMBITION, AVARICE, REVENGE, LUST,
SEDITION, HYPOCRISY,
UNGOVERNED ZEAL,
AND ALL THE TRAIN OF DISORDERLY APPETITES.

[EDMUND BURKE]

The Anabaptists may march against Pandora with the Spitalians or may help hunting Biokinetics, but in Danzig, they keep their distance from the blue labs. They have taken up residence in a Bygone church, Cold St. Mary. Everyone is ready to depart, even the Spitalians' chain of supply is broken, but the Anabaptists seem to ignore this. Instead, they began to reconstruct the old building five courses of the sun ago. They built support struts, tore down the old roof and renovated the truss. Danzig's Anabaptists are fanatics, most of them Ascetics. They will not even deign the Demiurge this piece of frozen desert. Today, Cold St. Mary is a fortress showing Cathedral City's resolve. It will lose the battle against the ice anyway.

Not only the cold tortures the Doctors and Anabaptists: Spore Beasts nest in the underground. Thousands of them, the largest known colony. The Spitalians think the Spore Beasts must have some link to the city, otherwise they would have gone westwards long ago.

AT THE SPOREFRONT

The Spore Wall started in Pandora and chose the easy way east, blown by the wind. To the north and the south, the Sepsis slowly spread, but as of yet, nothing has stopped this primordial force. It was in no hurry.

When the Spitalians came, it was already too late. Pollen's spore fields had met the Balkhan's Sepsis in former Ukraine, now forming an impenetrable barrier. In Brest the doctors tried to keep the closing door pried open. For many decades now they have been fighting to build a corridor to Asia, poisoning and burning the soil to starve the Sepsis. Fully automated Destruction Fortresses, a grand synthesis of Chronicler and Spitalian technology, spray fungicides in set intervals, making survival in these zones without protective suits impossible. The corridor thus carved resembles a pulsing worm that constricts when the Sepsis advances, just to be pushed back by Spitalian troops again.

Six years ago, a platoon under Dr. Glukhovsky reached the east. Behind it, Biokinetics stormed a Destruction Fortress and dragged its crew into the spore fields with them. Spiders covered the fortress, young spore fields' walls were visible within the corridor. The tracks used to supply the Destruction Fortresses with fungicides were broken.

It took weeks to connect the next Destruction Fortress. There was no trace of Glukhovsky. Some Spitalians think he had come through and was preparing his return. But most only grin tartly. Beyond the Spore Wall, there is neither land nor hope, they say.

LIFE AT THE ICE BARRIER

Glacier snouts push into the land, downdrafts scourge it with ice crystals. The ruined cities are bumps in the eternal white. For humans, there is naught but death here. The Garganti beg to differ. On their mammoths, they wander the wastes, slow-moving specters in the blizzard. On the ice, they even negotiate the Reaper's Blow, are sometimes spotted by Danzig watch stations and sometimes by Scrappers in northern West Borca.

THE WILD LANDS

BALKHAN

POWDER KEG

The Balkhan is a wild region, touching in its pride, unpredictability and beauty. It takes a wanderer by the hand and teaches him extremes. Storms rage across the plains, making the endless forests' treetops tremble. When the gates of heaven open up, it does not rain, it pours – torrents push down into the valleys, joining to form riptides. Gnarled trees clutch the ground, refusing to give in to nature's powers. The winters are cold and implacable, snow piles meters high in the mountains, swallowing the conifer forests; in summer, the sun singes the grassy plains to yellow stubble fields. The Balkhan never finds rest. It groans and screams, but never gives up, for every battle makes it stronger and more rebellious.

Like its people, untamed, proud warriors of a proud nation. Hospitality means everything to them, but one wrong word is enough, and years of peace lose their meaning. The table is toppled, plates and cups rattle across the floor, and old friends meet as enemies. They love and laugh as they hate and fight: driven by passion, with no compromise. They love strength and competition. Maybe that is why so many of them gather under a warlord's banner in the Voivodates. In Beograd, Dalmatia and Sofia, they build their future only to tear it down. They celebrate, hit each other and make up again.

Threats unite them: Together, they attack enemy Voivodates, Africans, Spitalians or Psychonauts. Side by side they stand, with no room in-between. However, once they have triumphed over an enemy, the wind turns, and old alliances are discarded like worn jackets. No one is more loyal and more fearsome than a Balkhani.

Even within the family, a single word can have the destructive power of a grenade. One altercation, and father and son attack each other savagely, just to embrace again laughing the next morning. Me against my brother – my brother and I against my uncle – together against the rest of the world!

USUD

The lake is circular, pitch black and out of reach. Its water is convex like a lens, the sun glitters on crested waves before they dissolve into ripples and level off.

The Usud crater sealed the Balkhan's fate.

Mother spore fields draw their concentric patterns on the land; many are overgrown with forests and are only recognizable from the treetops. Spores cling to the trees like mildew.

Clouds race across the sky, the rain showers are short, but intense. Before the drops hit the ground, the sun is gleaming again through the sheets of rain. It feels as if time passes quicker here.

The Carpathians separate Usud from the realm of Homo Sapiens. The mountains hum and vibrate. The stone is sanded down to smooth faces cut into finger-thick ribs. The wind caresses them like a giant fiddlestick and makes them resonate. However, it only plays the bass in the ensemble, forms the carrier waves that others crown with a melody. These others are the Dushani.

They listen to the wind and follow it on its way through the land, up into caves, down to gurgling waters.

Nature is their body of resonance. However, it harbors dissonances. The Dushani must tune it to survive. In caverns, they staunch water to vary the pitches until they are in full harmony; In valleys, they plant trees to break the wind or derail its vibrations into the ground; they place stones in streams and rivers to bring their gurgling into harmony with the treetops' rustling. Then the Dushani raises his voice, creates a counterpoint to Gaia's breath. The sounds touch the heart, planting pain or comfort. In this instant, he merges his Earth Chakra with mundane creation. Intervening. Changing. Taking and giving.

THIS MEANS WAR

The African Scourgers came over night. They attacked villages and dragged women and children into a future as servants in Tripol or as workers in the oil fields. They advanced settlement after settlement. Surge Tanks followed them and cemented their dominion, Consuls took over the administration of harbor towns. Within a few short months, the Africans had taken Turkey and moved into the ruins of Istanbul. Now they threaten to cross the Bosphorus.

However, the Balkhan with its forbidding mountains and dark forests loved its children. It concealed them from the Scourgers' view. Behind every tree and every spire, a warrior might lurk.

None of the conquered villages surrendered. Clans that had been enemies for centuries shook hands, drank to death before unfaithfulness and swore to obliterate the enemy. Children squatted in the ruins along the lines and reported the Scourgers' movements to their villages. Others crept into the camps and poisoned wells with discordant Burn. Women seduced the Consuls, the last thing they felt was their killer's hot breath. The Voivodes intervened in the battles, but avoided battles themselves. Wherever the Scourgers advanced, the troops retreated to reform elsewhere and attack anew, stinging the Lion's flank.

From every defeat, the Balkhani gained new strength. When they lay on the floor broken, they spat in their enemy's face. Local leaders offered alliances to the Africans that they accepted, only to find themselves betrayed days later. The Balkhani slaves sold in Tripol were no exception. They were unbreakable. After attacks and burning oil fields, the price sank. No one wanted to have a Balkhani. They were animals.

The advance came to a halt.

CLAN RULE

The Africans had retreated to Istanbul. The Balkhani clapped their shoulders, drank and celebrated. They challenged and provoked each other. The mood was heated. Then, their eyes fell on the Jehammedans in Bucharest and Dalmatia, on Spitalians who traveled the land unbidden and provoked the Dushani. They fell on the Apocalyptics who had refrained from everything. Oh, and what about the Hellvetics? Cowardly bastards who had hidden in their Alpine Fortress while the Balkhan were bled dry.

The Balkhan clans, once united in the battle against the Africans, who had almost been ready to slit each other's throats, had found a new enemy.

Today, the cults in the Balkhan are beggars who have to explain their every step to the Voivodes. Those who rebel are sold to the Africans as slaves.

MAGGOT TUNNELS

Tunnels riddle large areas of the Balkhan. The accesses are hidden; some have collapsed or are overgrown. Down there, there is darkness. Some of the tunnels are ancient and brick-built. Root tangles hang from the ceiling, and whole parts are submerged. It smells of ammonia; rat drippings squish underfoot. Other tunnels are made of concrete and dry, iron doors bar access. There are no maps.

A few years before the Eshaton, Recombination Group expanded the labyrinth with bunkers and supply tunnels and drilled shafts into the Carpathians. Thousands of people went into the mountain, guarded by mercenaries. Project "Tannhäuser". The steel portals closed behind

them. The stars fell, the world burnt. Only centuries later, the portals were unlocked again. However, what entered the world from behind them was just a shadow of what had entered.

The former guards have become pale creatures, strangers to the sun and adapted to a life in darkness: the Palers. In the deep, they still cling to their ancient, misunderstood rituals, pray to tricks of the light, and wait for the Sleepers, their gods, to awaken.

It's past time for them to show up. The algae tanks are dry, the stomachs rumble. The Palers need to live off something. Surely not off work. Rough laughter echoes through the tunnels, lends texture and dimension to the darkness. After all, they are chosen to one day follow the gods to the surface! So the Palers take what they need from the world above. They steal from pastures under the cover of night, tap wells, and attack villages. Harvest moon. But the Balkhani are not at all defenseless.

LAIBACH

Roots break the asphalt, sprouts grow on flat roofs, in gutters and on the floors until they give in under the pressure of the grown tree and collapse. The Bygone buildings erode. The forests take back the land they lost.

Not so in Laibach. Laibach's gray residential monoliths remain untouched by the passing of time. The ground is sealed by concrete slabs that are tilted or collapsed here and there. Dirty lakes have formed in the hollows. Flies whir across the water, fodder for a pale gray species of toads that are barely visible against their concrete world's backdrop.

When the east wind blows, the sounds of the Dushani chants hit Laibach like cracks of a whip, acoustic wake turbulences that carry dust and ancient leaves through the streets. However, even at calm, the buildings sing their lonely song. For decades, it is caught within the street grid. At the center of this phenomenon, the concrete slabs have burst in the pattern of thousands of Dushani Chakras. The signs are repeated on the walls, as if cut into the stone. Those who stand still and listen closely feel the voices. They undulate, varying in volume and pitch. The Balkhani say the buildings are telling the city's story in a language that no one can understand. Others claim the voices are the shadows of those whom the screaming of the Dushani Mokosch Eidolon has ripped body from soul, no less. Until today, the souls vacillate on Eidolon's wavelength, unable to flee.

The city is situated in the Carnic Alps where Purgare and the Balkhan meet and thus sits on an old smugglers' pathway bringing visitors sometimes. Those who dare searching the buildings find hidden Burn, weapons storages and slave pens, but no place to bivouac. No one

stays in Laibach longer than necessary. For aside from the acoustic phenomenons, there is another, tangible danger. A bandaged creature roams the streets, and its glaring gaze burns everyone crossing its path to ashes. In some windows in the city center, red lights blink. Those who approach them call forth the creature.

PEST

A pillar rises like a petrified tree; its tip vanishes in the oak forest's treetops. Daylight is green and caresses the ground in waves. Acorns crack underfoot with a high-pitched clink. Every step aches, every sound rears up and bursts into acoustic splinters of glass amidst the trees. Behind an oak, there is another pillar and another one. They form a semi-circle. Between them, hulking colossi stand, eaten by verdigris and moss-covered. Porous hands rest on swords, birds nest in crowns, carapaces are broken, their interior home to ants: the Judges.

In former times, the Judges guarded this city. For centuries, they silently stared into the semicircle's center. Here, the queen amongst the pillars once towered high into the clouds, at arm's length to the sky. When she fell, the angel on top fell as well. One of its bronze wings juts from the broken torso, almost parallel to the ground, like a table or an altar. Like an invitation. Animal skulls are piled on top and beneath, black and moldy, all without a lower jaw.

The birds fall silent. They know the signs. Subtonal chants rise, catch the foliage in intertwining waves. The air shimmers and sinks to the ground, grass bends, the wet deadfall is pressed to the ground so hard that water trickles from it and forms puddles. They remain still, reflecting the light like mercury.

Further away, a river cuts through the sea of ruins. On it, unmoving waves and whirls form, some of them are hard and edged like glass. A rat races across the surface, its feet leave a bloody trail. It loses a toe, then another. It panics, hits a wave that tears the skin from its body. In the end, it stumbles, its feet stumps drawing lines on the water turned glass. It falls. Vibrating ribs break the skin; the flesh melts and dissipates into dancing droplets. Below it, krakens glide through the river, breaking the surface with their bodies as if nothing has happened.

The chants engulf the whole sea of ruins. Buildings tremble until their edges appear fuzzy. Those who dare touch them get their fingertips grated. Animals flee underground; the sound of rustling leaves and wind is swept away. The Dushani weave their web all across Pest, engulf the spore fields and their nests, pile up frequencies, entwine and spread them. All over Borca, the Aberrants sway to the rhythm of the Pest songs.

It takes hours for the waves to break. Swarms of flies rise above the treetops again, rats and gendos start looking for prey. Krakens leave the river and crawl up to the large Mother Spore Fields' walls. Their tentacles grope for the Dushani, entangle arms and legs and pull the bulky body up to the shoulders, where they take in the sweet vibrations, change color and constrict.

The Balkhani avoid the ruins. No Voivodate claims this accursed place. Only Apocalyptics dare to enter the spore fields, attracted by the Burn. Those who survive longer than a few days have learned one thing: He may not disturb one stone, he must be silent. All of Pest is a giant amplifier for the Dushani waves, and every building, every hill and every body of water are included. Any disturbance, even if it is only a cracked branch, multiplies as a dissonance through the wave, makes the Aberrants rise. One thing is for sure: They will get rid of the disturbance.

BREAKING OF THE WAVE

Chernobog has come. He orders his clans to the ruins, makes them topple stone steles and create a corridor into the city. The wave breaks. However, with every inroad, Hundreds of his followers dissipate into bloody mist. Meanwhile, Dushani from all over the land come running to strengthen the wave with their song.

The Corroded is impatient. He wants to move on. Lights flash in the night sky; detonations tear the whispering of the woods. Soon, he will have reached his destiny. Next stop Beograd.

VOIVODATE BEOGRAD

Over the centuries, Beograd's Twin Tower has been besieged, fortified, conquered, lit on fire several times, ironclad, cursed and blessed. From the beginning, it was the Voivodes' seat of power and fortress. Dynasties came and went, the banners changed, but the tower persevered. The city surrounded it with housing areas,

markets, brothels, inns, arsenals and fortress walls. From its shadow, warlords rode to battle and armies spread to the surrounding area. The Twin Tower promises power and continuity.

The Voivodes descended of the Djuric dynasty have been using it for exactly 100 years now. Celebrations to honor the first Djuric call the people to the streets and the free inns, make them drink, laugh, and forget for a while. There is a lot to forget. For Beograd has enemies.

After a typhus wave last summer, the Voivode accused the Spitalians of poison brewing after they had fought the epidemic in vain for weeks. The doctors were arrested and sold into slavery. The Apocalyptics' greed and their insolent attitude also got on his nerves. On his morning ride through the quarters, some migrants had emptied their chamber pots onto the street in front of his feet. The laughter from their houses was pure poison in his ears – they should have learnt from the Spitalians. Djuric had them driven out of their brothels and joints. Pushed them into their own piss and finally relocated them into a ghetto. By day, they can come and go, but they may not carry weapons. At night, the gate closes. The breed must stay among its own ilk. Who is laughing now?

The Usudi from the mountains are another nuisance. They throng the trade routes, trap travelers and eat their flesh. Nothing unusual thus far. In the mountains, there is a lot of scum that henchmen drive down to the plains to kill them there. The heads will adorn the walls for a season. However, those Usudi wake a primordial fear even in Djuric's assassins. They are nightmarish creatures without fear or brains, dehumanized and deadly. Even the smallest scratches lead to putrid blisters when an Usudi is around. They pollute the air and the soul. The people consider them a bad omen.

You really do not need a prophet these days. Dalmatian agitators explore the Voivodate with shock troops. Spies report that the Karakhan in Sofia has expanded the walls of their fortress and drafted more soldiers. At the same time, the Corroded's clans advance from the northwest. Beograd is surrounded, the fight inevitable.

Djuric's lookalikes ride through the city, demonstrating presence and normalcy. In the last ten days only, he has lost two of them to assassins of the Voivodules. Something big is bound to happen. Whatever it is, the Tower will prevail.

VOIVODATE SOFIA

The mountain ranges are snow-peaked, and trees grow even in hazy heights. They give the Sofia plateau its clear spring water. In gurgling rivulets, it blazes its trail, washing minerals from the rocks and, in the end, pouring into the waters of the Iskar. In wide curves, the river meanders through the plain and makes it fertile. Forests give way to dense shrubbery, wide areas covered with stubborn grass and rocky plateaus. The winter is long and cold, the summer bright and hot. The autumn harvest is bountiful; spore fields only spew their Sepsis to the wind in the remote eastern regions. The wind carries it into the mountains.

The Sofia plateau is edenic.

Sofia's Voivode has sworn to protect this paradise. Five mountain passes lead out into the foreign lands: The Iskar, Wladaja, Dragoman, Petrochan and Botewgrad Pass. There, rocks form barricades and fortresses have grown, wedged in between the mountainsides. Large chunks of granite wait to be dropped into the depths from retracted terraces. The Voivode calls them customs offices, but everybody knows that these fortresses are not only there to keep smugglers away.

Sofia itself lies on the northern slope of the Witoscha Mountains. Ramrod-straight streets lead past palaces adorned with pillars, metal-covered buildings and dusty apartment blocks. Some end in giant plazas, others get lost in the forests' proliferation. The Voivode's palace is an octagonal hall clutched in steel ribs that would have room enough for dozens of Surge Tanks.

He rarely can be found there. Instead, he is outside, talking to taxmen, watching his guards exercise, commending and degrading. Emissaries and spies run to him, give their weapons to his guards, have to fall in step and keep up with him to say what they have to say. He listens, gives orders. Everybody knows that he does not discuss things.

The city around him and its ability to put a fight grow with every dispatch he dictates to his messengers. Roads eat further into the plateau day by day, connecting Sofia to agricultural settlements and watchtowers. On the Botew's peak, a radio mast rises. Possibly the only mistake that Sofia's Voivode has ever made.

CONFEDERATIONS

Djuric knows his people. He loves them for their savageness and excesses, for their grand gestures and their passion. That is also why he mistrusts them. For talks and important transports beyond Beograd's area of influence, he trusts in confederations. Mostly, Pollners form them and swear allegiance to him and only him. He prefers the stoic savages from the north and likes their reliability. They get charters sealed with Djuric's mark. Within Beograd, they eat free and are entitled to the best accommodation. On the streets, they answer to no one. Dozens roam the Balkhan's forests and into the Pollen plain these days. They promise riches to free clans, if they join Beograd's army.

7

WHEN THE MILLENNIUM AFTER THE MILLENNIUM BEGINS
HE WHO SPEAKS OF OATHS AND LAWS
WILL NEVER BE HEARD AGAIN.
THE VOICE OF HIM
WHO PREACHES THE CHRISTIAN FAITH
WILL BE LOST IN THE DESERT
BUT THE POWERFUL WATERS
OF THE FAITHLESS RELIGIONS
WILL SPREAD EVERYWHERE

FALSE REDEEMERS
WILL GATHER THE BLIND
AND THE UNFAITHFUL WILL CARRY WEAPONS LIKE NEVER BEFORE

TALKING OF JUSTICE AND LAW
AND HIS FAITH WILL BE GLOWING AND STRONG
HE WILL TAKE **REVENGE** FOR THE CRUSADE.

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

KARAKHAN

One day, he is there. A stranger without a name, for he has yet to earn one. Later he will be quoted to have said "Sofia called me". He roams the city's forest parks, climbs the Witoscha Mountains and waits for sunrise there. He directs the rebuilding of the Cathedral of the Patriarchs and descends into the ruins of forgotten buildings. The customs officers, city guards and the Boyar guard have long since sided with him when he replaces Voivode Viktor. He now calls himself the Karakhan, the black leader. He personally takes care of the Paler problem by fumigating the bunkers with a handful of trusted companions. He gives machine guns and body armor to his officers, keeping the Sun Discs for himself.

At his side is a black woman clad in the Voivodules' garb. The crisscross patterns are unknown, not pointing towards a certain clan. Her voice is deep and calm, and she only talks to her Karakhan, talking to him in an African idiom that no one around understands. Depending on the light, she seems to be ancient or very young, and she never smiles. Is she an emissary of Tripol's Merchant Bank, his bodyguard or his lover? "My heart and my soul," he calls her when talking to his officers. "Too big to carry within me."

Today, the city is a mirror image of Karakhan's attributes: challenging, tricky, disciplined. He has long since taken its motto for his own:

"Grows but does not age."

BUCHAREST

A hundred catastrophes are etched into Bucharest's face. Today, dense foliage rustles above ruins where fortress walls once held against zealots from the deepest south. Whole quarters burned for weeks, and even the hardest stone melted to black glass.

Ages ago, the Dambovita overflowed and turned the municipal area into a lake territory that dried up again only years later. The soggy ground was unable to sustain the Bygone towers any longer. One by one, they sagged, tilted and collapsed. Two of them crashed into each other. Like two drunkards on the way home from the inn, they support each other to this day. Then followed Walachian tribes and Voivodules, skirmishes and battles. Every building in Bucharest was used dozens of times, freed of shrubbery and tress, besieged, conquered and given up again. Large areas within the old municipal area are dotted with poles, rib cages jut from deadfall and shrubbery, arrows and spears rot in the underbrush.

Then, the Jehammedans came. They steeped the tribes in their religion or crushed them between their warriors' fronts. They prayed and preached at historical sites in the city – at the Stavropoleos Church and the Church of the Patriarchs, as well as in the monumental ruins of the House of the Republic. Their goat herds grazed in the overgrown city canyons.

Life flowed back into the city.

However, Bucharest's splendor awakened desires. In

the Adriatic lowlands, Jehammedans and Anabaptists were entangled in a static battle. Now, beaten and blood-drenched Isaaki demanded succor so Bucharest might prove worthy of Jehammed's mercy. Bucharest sent her best. They were missing when the Africans crossed the Bosporus and rumbled towards the city in their Surge Tanks.

THEY SOW THE WIND...

Territorial Region IV, not far from Laibach. Carloads of barrels of niter have been entered into the customs records, cleared and certified in Mobilis. Destination: the Balkhan. Chronicler Shutters accompany the transport as well as armed Scrappers of unknown origin. The papers were immaculate, the payment for the passage was made without having to ask and without any haggling.

When Corps Commander Bianchi took notice of the customs records during a routine investigation, the trail had gone cold. His customs troops did not remember or played dumb, and even radio transmissions to Justitian garnered no background information on the shipment. Bianchi decided he had more important things to do.

...AND REAP THE WHIRLWIND

The Neolibyan Zuberi had spent months in this dirty hamlet on Istanbul's cadaver, poring over maps and sending out his Scourgers to measure the ground's weight-bearing capacity and scout for possible routes. Three Surge Tanks the Merchant Bank had given him, and hundreds of Scourgers followed. He invited friends of his family and sheikhs to attend a very special kind of hunt from the mobile fortresses' platforms. Soon, according to his plan, every minute he invested would pay off in sacks of Dinars.

This summer, he'd storm Bucharest, close off the whole southern Balkhan and send his Scrappers into the Paler bunkers to rip the last riches from this land's realm of roots. He'd already had his face cast in silver – he'd wear the mask for his victory parade through Tripol, shortly before being declared a sheikh at the Merchant Bank.

The army started marching. The Surge Tanks ate away more kilometers, day by day. Zuberi's cartographer made note of every inch of ground they won, and he smiled. All went according to the plan. In three more weeks, they would reach Bucharest.

The Africans passed the Voivodate Ionnus. As an enemy of Bucharest and buried under a pile of Dinars,

it was supposed to stay calm. Zuberi was irritated when Voivode Neven asked for a sit-down. Did he want more? In the face of this army? Was he mad?
However, Neven praised Zuberi's generosity and strength with grand gestures. He did not want gold, of that he really had enough. He waved away this notion. He wanted glory and revenge against Bucharest. He put his cavalry into Zuberi's services for the first strike.

Zuberi was baffled but happy. Let the savages kill each other! That meant that less valuable African blood would spill. Moreover, it would be that much easier to conquer the Voivodate Ionnus later.

The days flew by. Neven's scouts raced ahead, sometimes reporting rock falls and impassable plateaus, sometimes encountering overflowing rivers. Minor details. Nothing the cartographer had not seen coming and was able to counteract with minor deviations.

In three days, they would see Bucharest's towers. Neven asked for a last long rest for himself and his riders, a celebration of their ancestors next to which they would soon dine. Zuberi loved the idea. A little folklore and gluttony, and his rather bored guests would be looking forward to the finale.

The Voivode had chosen a spot, a fallow field with good visibility on all sides. No enemy would be able to creep up on them. The Surge Tanks formed an open fortress triangle; the fires would be lit in the center of it. Soon, the party was in full swing, goats were roasting over the fire, bread was served from earthen ovens. Only the Scourgers refrained from the celebration and guarded the platforms. Night fell on Zuberi's army. Chains of lights lit up with a flicker. Zuberi had outdone himself.

So had Neven. He felt the heat of the fire in his face. He was alone. The songs and the rhythmic clapping only sounded muffled through the Surge Tank's armored hull. He stood in front of the furnace. The tanks were all in the back part of the fortress, encased in centimeters of steel. "They have thought of everything", he said aloud, reached for the bag next to him and threw it into the furnace. The fabric caught fire with a bang, smoldered and tightened over its contents. More than a dozen fist-sized stones or eggs were visible underneath the burning fabric. The Voivode creased his brow and closed his eyes. Never would he surrender his country to the black devils.

The grenades detonated with a flash, followed by a barrel of flame that vaporized the engine room and roared against the armored hull. The Surge Tank bucked, the outer shell burst outwards. Molten metal rained down to the ground, hitting a layer of niter that Neven's henchmen had applied days ago. The fire was searing hot, eating deeper and deeper into the ground. Until it reached the buried niter barrels – Neven's legacy and gift to the Balkhan.

The detonation was not heard in Bucharest, but the flash of light far in the southeast was like a sunrise to the city.

When the news reached Tripol, the Sheiks quickly agreed that no one could have survived the fireball – how many more good Africans should these mountain lunatics kill? Zuberi's life and dream had ended, and the Merchant Bank stopped the conquest of the Balkhan.

Somewhere deep down in Justitian's Central Cluster, someone croaks with laughter. The Fragment Impulse watched the destruction of Zuberi's army through its drone's scratchy optical recordings. As long as he lived, no one would touch his ancestors' land again, of that he was sure.

CATTLE DIE, AND KINSMEN DIE,
AND SO ONE DIES ONE'S SELF;
ONE THING I KNOW THAT NEVER DIES,
THE FAME OF A
DEAD MAN'S DEEDS.
[THE EDDA]

DISSOLUTION

Bucharest is surrounded by wolves. Voivode Djuric sees his chance, but still does not act – let the Jehammedans work their collective asses off against the African Lions. So far, he is not aware of the destruction of the African army. He waits too long. When his spies tell him of the Karakhan's army, it already besieges the Stavropoleos church.

Weakened by the battle against Africans and Anabaptists, Bucharest's Iconide calls for Aries, but his summons remains unanswered. Two days later, he bows his head to the Karakhan and surrenders the city. The same day, the last remaining Isaaki in Bucharest, Arioch, pushes him from the tower of the Church of the Patriarchs as a traitor.

Arioch hides, but Bucharest remains unvanquished.

The Abrami are tired and desperate, having lost almost all of their sons in the war. What remains are their daughters, but what is to be become of them without any protection? The Karakhan offers a hand to the Abrami, declares Jehammed's women taboo if they swear eternal allegiance to him.

VOIVODATE DALMATIA

A mummified hand is on display, index and middle finger crossed and held in place by wire. Next to it is a bundle of bandages, shot through with silver and gold threads, supposedly containing an Anabaptist's skull. Without getting up, the merchant adds, "There's an acorn in the jaw." His display contains only unique pieces: a hilt with a broken blade, mud-encrusted and lacquered; a ram's horn, dull and dusty blue; a Hybrispanian Mnemonid's perforated and strung-up mussels; a club with a hundred notches in the hilt. Beneath the stall, more items gather dust in crates. "There is more down there, just pull it out and rummage through." Now the merchant grins sourly.

In the Voivodate Dalmatia's first days, these curios sold like arms before a war. The city's Iconides had been brought down, their vaults had been looted, and everyone wanted to own one of these… Icons. Supposedly, the holy men had bartered with God about decisions, and these things were tokens of the deal, this goat cult's greatest treasures. Anyway, the loot quickly lost its appeal. The forger workshops had only just begun and flooded the market with their own interpretations. Even if the Jehammedans took back the city one day, they would not be able to tell their ancient relics from the plunder.

BROKEN

For centuries, the Jehammedans sat in Dalmatia's dried-up coastal cities without ever belonging. Their baths were only used by them, Ismaelis with sabers kept the city's inhabitants away. Whole streets and quarters were cut out of the Balkhanis' loud everyday life.

There was an ancient pact between the Zlatan Voivode dynasty and Dalmatia's Iconides that determined which area belonged to the native Balkhani and which one belonged to the Jehammedans. According to legends, it dated back to the brothers Zlatan. After vanquishing the Dalmatian clans, one of them chose a worldly life with all its amenities, while the other chose to be one of the Isaaki and was taken up in the Cult's religious rites and eventually

WE PICK UP A FEW MORE PEOPLE
THAT REMEMBER,

EVERY GENERATION.

[RAY BRADBURY]

declared an Iconide. Three generations adhered to the pact. Jehammedans and Dalmatians watched each other skeptically and derided each other: the latter because they considered the religious rigmarole nonsensical, the former because they considered the Balkhani to be children who still needed to find themselves and God… but it was too late.

The Voivode had become old and mild, the toadying before the Iconide a habit. Until the boyar Buzdovan took heart, grabbed a morning star with a long handle from the throne chamber's wall, and smashed old Zlatan's skull. The other boyars did not budge. Buzdovan shoved them away and marched out, dragging his weapon. The weapon's bloody, spiked ball painted red lines on the floor. Outside, he hefted the morning star and shouted: "Freedom!"

Buzdovan forced the boyars to recognize him as Voivode and sent his henchmen against all who did not tell him what he wanted to hear. He declared the Jehammedans outlawed; those who got their hands on them first could claim their assets. Assassins took care of boyars; almost daily, Buzdovan awarded or took away titles and privileges. Jehammedans were sold into slavery, Apocalyptics hunted to death like animals. He first curried favor with the Anabaptists and then pushed them into a pit full of hungry gendos. Every midday the bells toll to remember the hour of freedom. In the market place, there is a bowl of gold, and those who dare to touch it forfeit their lives.

Day by day, Buzdovan comes up with new rituals and customs to demonstrate culture and strength to his torn people. However, the Dalmatians have tasted the sweet nectar of freedom. Some of them set their hopes on their Voivode's impact, let themselves be swept along by his desire for the title of boyar. Others gather to control the black market and slave trade. Buzdovan may be paranoid, but not without reason. Indeed he believes he knows the hour of his death. Deep within the catacombs under his throne chamber, he keeps an Icon in a steel shrine. According to legend, it gives an Isaaki wearing it in combat the strength and confidence to topple Dalmatia's Voivode. He could have destroyed it. But would fate not simply have him die in another way then?

TURKEY

Psychovore seeds are dancing on the Nile's waves towards the Mediterranean, caught up by the current and deposited at the former Turkish coast. They crackle and finally burst in the wet sand. Root filaments grope about, burrowing into the deep. Soon, octagonal leaves rise towards the sun. The first fruit is swelling. It has begun.

The Psychovores devour grassy plains, swamps and broadleaf forests, chase away brown bears and deer. Cities are deserted once the green-blue jungle engulfs them.

But not all inhabitants have fled. According to legend, the children of the Turks hide amidst the strange, highly dangerous plant front. They survive in hermetically sealed enclaves. When they leave them, they wear protective suits made from bulbous plastic that shimmer. The plants wince at them and draw back their thorns. The Neolibyans would spend a fortune for this contact poison. However, the Turks evade them like all strangers. One course of the sun ago, the African Tomi moored in the ruined city of Kalkan's overgrown port. Aboard the tanker were Neolibyans and Spitalians. In Hygienist suits, the latter entered the Psychovores, took samples, buried cartridges and wired them. The experiment will begin soon.

THE KILLING FIELDS

HYBRISPANIA

HYBRIS

An asteroid fragment hit a mountain massif south of Toledo. The searing lance of its tail was visible for only a second, then a detonation destroyed it. The ground heaved; a shockwave tore through it, but quickly lost its momentum. Dust clouds surrounded Toledo.

Crisis management centers took over. Convoy leaders were glorified. Every day, the Reconstrucción's national epic was amended by another verse. Those first years rushed by, and every new hardship was like an accomplishment. The reconstruction was considered a Culture struggle, and the Spaniards had the upper hand. However, energy was scarce.

Ash clouds darkened the day and took the Castilian sun farms out of the picture. A tsunami toppled the wind turbines on the coast and cast them into the depths of the ocean. In their stead, generators now rattled. The national oil reserves waned. People who wanted only the best for their country gathered around maps as they had done for centuries. Fingers pointed to faraway and less faraway countries, but rarely to their own. Africa's oil raised desires. A small, armed squad was supposed to negotiate pumping concessions. Someone at the map table laughed, the mood was bright. They knew what they were doing.

GIBRALTAR

The bridge across the Strait of Gibraltar had been hit. The runway hung from the pillars like a wet rag. Ships and debris had been washed against them and clung there. The sea level fell. Sand and flotsam formed islands, more ships closed gaps. A skilled climber could almost have gotten from Spain to Africa without getting wet.

The Spaniards did the rest. They built dams, used the debris as foundation, inserted ramps and bridged gaps. Where the terrain was soggy, they dehydrated it and fortified it with concrete. During the last few hundred meters, the Africans cheered the Spanish workers on and poured tons of rock into the gap themselves.

THE LINE

Almost none of the Spaniards knew what would happen next. Workers on both sides were still shaking hands and exchanging gifts when the Spanish oil prospectors came. They were all armed to the teeth; they had machine guns mounted to the beds of their trucks. They came on at breakneck speed. The natives gave way and waved at them. They stormed the first oil fields, convoys brought barrels to Gibraltar.

The mission was a huge success: African oil made the lamps flicker and glow in Madrid.

The Africans, however, were angry. This was theft! They demanded the intruders get their white asses back to their own country. The Spaniards begged to differ. It quickly escalated.

CONFLAGRATION NOW

Machine gun salvoes riddled houses while cities burned. Spanish mercenaries drowned the land in blood. Skeptical voices waving the banner of humanity were drowned out in the hubbub of oil focused parties. Wealth became an obsession.

The Africans' anger grew. People arrived from all over the continent. They ambushed convoys, gathered, and trained. Their numbers grew day by day.

It must have been hundreds of thousands that finally attacked the invaders. Mercenaries countered by pumping lead into the crowd until their machine guns glowed and the bandoliers were empty. In the end, they exploded the

rigs and retreated under the cover of smoke, controlled at first, panicky later. All of Africa had risen against them and drove them back across the sea, back to Gibraltar. The Africans followed and crossed the land bridge.

TURN OF THE ERAS

That was 200 years ago. The climate has turned more humid. Where once pine trees and palm trees had to save water, there is a jungle of oaks and beeches now. The air is damp and warm. Creeks cut through formerly dry land. Animals drink from lakes and ponds. Mangroves grow along the rivers, reeds swaying in the wind. Streets are overgrown with moss carpets.

Time has not carried away the hatred. The day Gibraltar fell was Hybrispania's birthday. Since that day, an entire population has been on the run. It lost one city after the other to the Africans until only Madrid, Castile's last fortress, remained. Here, the attackers wore themselves out in a booby-trapped forest and were driven back – for the time being.

The time of large armies was over, the strike forces dissolved into dozens of Guerrero squads individually fighting for Hybrispania's freedom. They destroyed bridges, assassinated enemy leaders, and prepared ambushes. It never was a fair fight, not on any side. None of the factions hesitated to nail defeated enemies to the trees, cruelly tortured. Soon, the jungle stank of death and decay.

FALLEN BY THE WAYSIDE

The country's freedom is the main goal of every true Hybrispaniard. He knows the names of all the glorious martyrs, asks for their succor before an attack, and remembers them when burying a companion. Culture is used to glorify the resistance and its martyrs, spitting out one heroic song after the other and painting battles on the walls of Castile's fortresses until even the Guerreros consider it insane.

In the end, it's all about one thing: How one fighter can outdraw another and stab, hit, or shoot him until blood and life run out of him, until there is nothing left but a husk and fading memories. Fighting is the Guerreros' job. Everything else is a childish distraction.

In the jungle, he lives in hastily built camps that do not

matter to him. Possessions are a burden, restricting his mobility and making him vulnerable. The forest is his most loyal fighting partner, they become one, and the Guerrero learns to track enemies and to live off the woods. Self-sacrifice is considered the greatest merit, mercilessness towards the enemy is deemed just.

Men and women are born and die as Guerreros and Guerreras. They die in the Africans' traps, torn to pieces by mines and grenades or simply beaten to death.

Death is acceptable if it serves a purpose. But the Scourgers have a much more cruel fate in store for Hybrispania's fighters: slavery. It is the ultimate humiliation, a chance to break an enemy's will. But no enslaved Guerrero would commit suicide in prison. Instead he waits, unbroken, unrelenting.

The Neolibyans know the human beings with whom they trade and work. They prefer to send the Hybrispaniards to the ore mines, not into households or onto the oil fields. Too much risk.

CASTILE

Breathe deeply. No African has ever set foot on the Castilian plateau. This will not change as long as Madrid perseveres. Salamanca, Leon, Burgos, and Valladolid are proof that the fight is not in vain, that there is something left worth protecting.

The climate is mild; the jungle recedes and gives way to cornfields nestling between chains of hills and rocky outcroppings. Houses made of sand and limestone with high windows and gothic influences form little towns. Almonds smell sweetly, dry-stone walls mark pathways. The alleys are flooded with light, old Guerreros sit on stone benches, surrounded by children, telling stories of their battles, of their enemies, their grimaces and masks and that they bleed just like you and me.

Every city boasts an arena, even if it is just a fenced-in circle. The Arena Las Ventas in Madrid is one of the largest. Young Guerreros fight ritual battles against each other, their events modeled after history. The battle of Compostella is very popular. La Campeadora is said to have killed an African Simba with nine hits, so those who manage to knock out their opponent with exactly nine blows in the arena are named El Astado, the bull, and celebrated as the village's strongest fighter for one day.

Further out, the Jehammedans' goat herds graze. The cultists live side by side with the Guerreros, selling meat to the cities and maintaining baths there. In the arenas, they calmly speak of Jehammed's mercy and of the sublimity of the war against the Africans. But they do more than just talk. Their sons leave the plateau with the Hybrispanian fighters to kill and die with them.

Valladolid's Iconides were once holy warriors themselves, shirking no danger, confronting African Simbas and Dumisais and vanquishing them in legendary battles. They ask Jehammed for luck in war and present the Guerrero leaders with relics and Icons. Every day, their voices echo across the Plaza Mayor from the townhouse. Every day, their influence grows. If there were days of leisure once, the Iconides' droning drives the Guerreros back to the jungle's inferno with their wounds barely healed.

LA CAMPEADORA

Cordoba took her left eye. At Cartagena, a 9mm round punched two smoking craters into her cheeks and turned her teeth into a galaxy of calcium shards. At Barcelona, the exploding Abubakar's shrapnel tore her nose and forehead. Scourger welts on the back at Malaga, another gunshot wound at Cartagena, in the leg this time. Little sacrifices to a big war and her painful, but victorious part in it.

More than twenty courses of the sun ago at the court of the Neolibyan Jaafar at Cordoba, she went by her slave name Ayana – Beautiful Flower. How the Africans misjudged her! Today, the Hybrispanian Guerreros know her as la Campeadora, The Fighting Woman.

The Hybrispaniards' war bred great Guerreros. They came and went: torn by bullets, run over, chained between Scourger buggies and ripped apart. Their death inspired the survivors from whose ranks the next conqueror soon rose. They all spoke the language of war, were legendary shots

THE HEAVENS HAVE BEEN EXPLORED, AND THEY ARE EMPTY.
AND WHAT LIES UNDER THE EARTH IS EMPTY TOO,
FILLED WITH BONES
AND SHADOWS.

[HENRY MILLER]

or close combatants, intuited enemy movements as if they were psychic. But none spoke the language of the people like La Campeadora. She talks softly, seems empathetic – all the while feeling the crowd's mood, getting in tune with it. With every word, she leads her counterpart a little further along her way, singing her song of the beauty of the land and its proud people, juxtaposes them with the slave work in the oil fields, tells of torture and the black devils bending even children until they break. Finally, she raises her voice, talks of those she has had to leave by the wayside, brave people full of passion and love, ripped from life by a disease that has gripped the land.

If the Hybrispaniards ever had something akin to a warlord in their battle against the invaders, it is Campeadora.

She leads by example, inciting tens of thousands to lie in ambush for days, to set thorn traps and creep into enemy camps. She inspects hideaways, weapons stores, and settlements. She talks to her Guerreros, raising new courage in those who seem broken. In the villages, she recruits children for her army, training them and living a life of resistance with them. Pale faces are hidden behind bark masks, bodies mud-caked race through the forests, spying, preparing traps, digging hideaways and placing messages in stumps. Every day in the jungle she makes them more resolute, fearing neither darkness nor torrents nor thunder and lightning. For now, they hunt martens and rats with knives, but soon they will expand their hunt to humans. Renegados – the turncoats – and Africans.

PROPHECY

The Scourgers are well armed, their morale is great, and no one has ever bested them in one-on-one combat. Only people with nothing but anger and despair confront them. The resistance was doomed from the beginning. The only thing needed was a handful of Surge Tanks advancing on Madrid from different routes and then onto the Castilian sun plateau. On the plains, the Scourgers' buggies would have overwhelmed the Hybrispaniards; the Surge Tanks would fire missiles at the cities and throw incendiary barrels behind fortifications. It would be a dirty fight, but a brief one. The Guerreros in the forests would be cut off from all supplies. They would feed on roots and bugs for a few months. Then they would surrender except for a few unconquerables like La Campeadora.

This, however, never happened.

The Scourgers tried. Pitfalls and mud lakes waited for the tanks, tree trunks crashed into the armored hull and wedged into the chains. The buggies sank into the soft ground only to land amidst earth wasp nests, lured by the Corredores clan.

The Guerreros seemed to know every route, to predict every change of course.

They had made a pact.

DESTINY

The forests way up high on the plateau's southern slopes are not for humans. The trees are old, and all of them bear notches. These notches look as though they are pressed into the bark by fingernails and form long coils from the roots up into the branches. No one will ever be able to decipher them, for there are not letters that would make sense or form sentences. They are coordinates in space and time forming a humans destiny only in a Pregnoctic's mind. They can tell his past and future much more exactly than this genes; they draw a line from birth to death and into the afterlife.

Attributes, deeds, and the manner of death – all of this is written down at the day of birth by a Node, a Pregnoctic whose body can only hold one facet of her mind. She is everywhere at all times. She sees through thousands of eyes into a dozen worlds and countless eras. The trees are her anchor and point of orientation in this world and time. She already knows (*has just experienced*) that in twenty courses of the sun, a young warrior will come to her (*was here*) to ask for a glimpse of his future. Like a spider weaving its web, her fingers wander across the bark, cutting time, place and events into it with her fingernails. The mountain. Her incarnation. The answer and what it means to him.

WOMAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

Twenty years pass. The Scourgers mobilize, and nothing is going to stop them. The wise Pregnoctics have often shown the way to the Guerreros, but this time, an oracle will not suffice. A warrior gets on his way. He does not know it, but he keeps going from notch to notch, thus fulfilling a prophecy carved into a tree years ago. Fate's waves bring him to a mountain whose silhouette he sees in front of his inner eye. He climbs it by the light of the moon, up to a mountain lake. Black and cold it lies in front of him. The moon is a billowing reflection. Mussels crunch underfoot. They open up and reveal silvery gossamer. Then he sees her: a naked woman by the lake, her back to him. Shadows sway at her feet, climbing her legs and flitting across her back up to her head. Her silhouette blurs as if she was a reflection on the lake's surface. She giggles with a creaking voice that speaks of age and has nothing in common with the naked beauty in front of the warrior.

He walks towards her, reaching out to the woman of the mountain. She turns around, takes his hand. Belatedly he lowers his gaze. He has seen the eyes sewn shut and the thing on her forehead that gazes at him like a hungry animal from the depths of nothingness. Mussels cling to her and move, opening and closing in waves.

She leads him.

She walks out into time, moving along the prophecy's final steps. She talks to him in a thousand tongues from a thousand incarnations. She teaches him. Naming the price and demanding it. Mussels fall away from her, crawl to the water and sink down into the blackness.

Finally, it is over. The warrior has switched his present for his future. He was there when the Surge Tanks rumbled towards Madrid, yet he knows that this moment lies days in the future. Enough time to ready the traps.

NO PRICE TOO HIGH

Not every Hybrispaniard gets a glimpse of the future from the Nodes. Some warriors never return. The woman of the mountain never refuses yet never keeps young girls.

La Campeadora recruits these children in the villages, promising the parents they will train them for combat. Then she sends them into the mountains.

Weeks later, they return as crones wearing mussel necklaces, without a past or present life but full of knowledge about the future. Their sacrifice will create a balance of power between the Lion and the Crow for days and months to come.

RENEGADOS

The Africans did not come as invaders. The blood in its eyes blinded the wildly flailing Lion. It pursued as predators do. Its thirst for revenge had not been sated at Gibraltar, so it followed the murder of rising crows north, killed one after the other. Its claws razed Jerez; Malaga, Granada and Seville were soon to follow. Cartagena was destroyed. However, in the end, even a Lion settles down. The thirst for revenge turned to bitterness. The wounds still hurt. Too many had fallen to the Hybrispaniard attack. Even if every damn Hybrispaniard was to bleed out, nailed to a tree, the guilt could never be erased.

The Africans looked around. The day before, they had seen battlefields and potential ambushes, now they saw peaceful forests, fertile land and beautiful Bygone buildings. They strode through the Mezquita's portico in Cordoba and marveled at a fountain carried by twelve stone lions in the Alhambra. This land had more to offer than death. They liked it.

The Neolibyans had the barricades torn down and moved into the palaces. They washed the blood from walls and streets. On the plazas, merchants now offered prickly pears and figs from home. Captive Hybrispaniards carried burdens and repaired damages. Old Andalusia became the Africans' second home; Seville became Tripol's European pendant.

More than two centuries have passed since they settled. The fighters from those days are dead. Their loss and their sorrow are not forgotten, but have been clad in stories and wrapped in legends. They touch the heart, but they do not strangle it anymore.

Gibraltar and Seville are far from those days' battlefields, bustling cities with baths, libraries and markets. The population has made their peace with the Africans, and the Africans have exchanged chains for strict words. Hybrispaniards work as free people on the plantations, drink tea in an awning's shadow with the Neolibyans and play Kalaha without having to fear the Scourge. Still they humbly look up to the Neolibyan Consuls who govern them from the Bygone palaces. Those who mouth off against them or chase a thieving African kid from their market stall are prone to raise the Lion's ire. "Take the road to Gibraltar" is another word for being sold into slavery.

The Hybrispaniards do not revolt, for they know what happens in the north, what happened to Cordoba after La Campeadora had taken the city: She came as an avenger, not as a liberator. Those who side with the Africans or submit to them are lost. In Castile and the rest of the north, the Andalusian Hybrispaniards are considered Renegados, traitors.

Cordoba is in African hands again, but the skull fields with their thousands of heads on pikes outside the ravaged city's gates still speak of an ancient hatred, and Gibraltar's and Seville's tolerance isn't limitless.

The Consejeros try to keep and expand the peace. Hybrispanian communities elect them; they are mostly wise men and women who act as judges amongst their kin and resolve conflicts with the Africans. They fight for privileges, offer young Hybrispaniards to the Consuls as pawns or to strengthen the city guards. Crows guard slaves. Dog eats dog. It is an unbearable sight for the Guerreros.

WHEN THE MILLENNIUM AFTER THE MILLENNIUM BEGINS
HUMANITY WILL JUDGE
ACCORDING TO THEIR BLOOD AND BELIEFS.

NO ONE WILL LISTEN TO THE SUFFERING CHILDREN'S HEARTS
THEY WILL BE PUSHED FROM THE NEST LIKE YOUNG BIRDS
AND NO ONE WILL PROTECT THEM
FROM THE GAUNTLETED HAND.

HATRED WILL DROWN THE EARTH
THAT CONSIDERED ITSELF PEACEFUL
NO ONE WILL BE SAFE
NOT THE OLD ONES, NOT THE HURT ONES

THE HOUSES WILL BE DESTROYED AND LOOTED
THE ONES WILL REPLACE THE OTHERS.

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

CORDOBA

Jaafar, the Consul of Cordoba, has lost his eye for beauty, the gardens are overgrown, and he does not even notice the blood on the red tiles anymore. In the Mesquite, the maimed are treated, and the Scourges' crack is audible in his palace, rousing him from his sleep even after all these years.

La Campeadora has turned this paradise into a minefield. He would rather run naked through the Psychovores than walk the streets alone as he liked to do years ago. No day goes by without an attack. The lunatic even sends kids to carry discordant Burn into the rice chambers or to poison wells. The Hybrispanian population he always treated fairly and kindly has fled to Seville. Who can blame them? Those who have stayed behind cooperate with the Guerreros or have been taken captive. You can trust no one. Even the few remaining Consejeros have a strangely sly look.

Jaafar makes no exceptions. Every Hybrispanian in his city is considered a potential enemy. Scourgers drag people from their houses and chain them. Only last week, they came to get his old friend and Consejero, Ignacio. The old man begged in his gibberish African, pleaded for mercy for himself and his wife. Since then, Jaafar has been having nagging doubts. He has always been prone to soft spots.

Outside the city gates, Scourgers put up the heads of vanquished foes as a warning. The Guerreros come at night and ram poles into the ground, decorated with Scourger skulls. This has been going on for months now. The field of skulls grows, like an infected wound. Jaafar is desperate. Some days ago, Scourgers stumbled over byssus threads between the poles and fell into beds of nails. They were poisoned. The Anubians still fight for the lives of the wounded, have sewn the fever-hot bodies into gendo skins and hope for their jackal-headed god. Hope is all that Jaafar has left.

BORDERLAND

The Guerreros in the Al-Andalus border region know no mercy. Those who are here are either Africans or Renegados. Burnt-out ruins tell of villages crushed between Guerrero attacks and Scourger inroads. Many are tunneled through; all of them are booby-trapped. Trees have been felled, walls torn down. There is not much cover for attackers or defenders.

The discordant fields are very close.

Spores dance in the breeze, there is a strong smell of ammonia in the air. Sometimes, pale beige membranes glide across the sky trailing a wake of turbulent spores, swimming in the air like malformed rays. The insects are multi-segmented here: One species of ants has five body segments instead of three as usual. The two additional ones are bright red, and stunted pairs of constantly vibrating legs grow from them.

Koms, the Scourgers' buggies, race through the broken landscape. They risk another inroad.

PHENOMENA

The forests are the Guerreros' territory. In the past 200 years they have dug, forgotten, and rediscovered hundreds of tunnels. Ropes are stretched between trees; pitfalls covered with light branches await the Koms. Tree trunks or debris block the Bygone roads. The Scourgers gain mile after mile, exploding lean-tos and tunnels. For hours, they do not see any Guerreros, but they hear their calls. The forest engulfs them. Between the trees, the darkness turns to shades and monsters.

Leaves fall. How placid! The Koms cut through the deadfall like ships through a stormy sea. All shades of red decay to a flickering gray. The Scourgers stop. It is midsummer. A Scourger catches one of the leaves. It is an autumn brown, but the trees are full of sap. Their

branches are immobile, as if chiseled from stone. Their leaves are a strange bright green, but pristine. Still, leaves keep falling. The Scourgers stare into the heaving brown sky for a moment. They hear scraps of conversation in a foreign language. The air is grainy; every word that leaves their mouth only traverses a hand's breadth of it. One of them tears down his mask and opens his mouth for a soundless cry. Silence engulfs the Africans.

Later that day, Jaafar will sadly notice that another squad of Scourgers has not come back and has probably become prey for the lunatics' troops. A week later, he is not so sure anymore, for several squads report unusual events in the woods. They speak of ants spiraling up a tree in a shape without beginning or end. Other Scourgers watched a swarm of jackdaws forming a line as wide as a Surge Tank, so tight it darkened the sun. Like an omen, it hung in the sky, not moving left or right at all. Their wings made a thundering noise. This went on for minutes until the warriors lost their nerve and fled. Another squad of Scourgers claimed to have seen people in unusual garb in a clearing, passing by each other like on a street. When the squad approached, they disappeared. The Scourgers spread out, expecting an ambush. No one was there. The ground was untouched; they found only a moss-covered, hip-high wall marking the border of the "street".

All reports have a change in the air in common: a cracking sound in the ears, prismatic effects, tricks of the light or color shifts changing perception. Strange smells confuse the nose. The air becomes palpable and sounds suddenly have a color.

DISTORTION

The Pregnoctics are considered the people's soul and all-seeing eye. Though eaten by the spores and driven into loneliness, they have kept a spark of humanity. The Enigmates among them show the Hybrispaniards the way through the decaying and thorny future, bending aside the shrubbery.

The Mnemonites are a different bunch: separated from the land's currents of life, they hasten through the woods, laden with mussels, crossing Franka's pheromone vents and finally reaching Pollen. They feel people in time and space and are always moving on the brink of perception. They could pass a market place without being seen – a dropped mussel would be all that points to them. Only when there is but one branch left on the Tree of Destiny, can they be hunted and killed. The Spitalians have not managed it yet.

Lastly, the Nodes. They are the ultima ratio. When defeat threatens and the Enigmatics' oracles only name the manners of destruction, a Node is needed. Their revelations are far more than a prophecy. They will shape the future. Therefore, the Hybrispaniards can consider themselves lucky.

However, something is happening in the jungle between Madrid and Al-Andalus, creating phenomena and crushing the linearity of time to reshape it into absurd angles. This Distortion starts within a triangle centered around the Mirar Crater, the Woman of The Mountain forming its north-western point, the Node Enigma close to Cuenca the north-eastern one and another, unknown Node the southern one. Those who have fled from the Distortion whisper: "Present, past, and future."

But something must have gone wrong. The Enigmatics avoid the triangle, only daring to enter its fringes in the north. Maybe the discordant waves washed over the future Node in the south. From there, currents flood though the triangle. People stumble into time traps, caught in the metaphysical nets and torn from their world. Ancient cities burst from the past into a sunlit jungle, tower there in their ancient glory for a few hours and relapse, tearing trees and taking people with them. 500 year old Recombination Group radio transmissions crackle in the Chroniclers' receivers as if they had just been sent.

However, the Distortion's effects are much greater. In Bygone documents, people from the Toledo region report having visions. They saw deep forests where dusty roads actually stood. The trees were overgrown with gossamer threads, the trunks adorned with lines of notches. New Age sects thought they had found holy sites, erected places of worship or held festivals. Maybe the remains of these still exist in the Distortion's deepest recesses, and with them their followers from times past.

BROKEN FRONT

La Campeadora was outside Cordoba when the Nodes created the Distortion. Now, the Scourgers gather in front of it. Surge tanks roll up to secure the city gates. Behind it,

reality splinters. Madrid seems out of reach. Their scouts walk along the Phenomenon's border and map it. Most of them do not return, some leave at least fragmentary maps in predetermined spots. On them, areas are painted red and marked with terms like "Insanita" and "Muerte." She is running out of time. Soon, the Scourgers will get over their shock and drive the Guerreros into the Distortion. Maybe this is the big chance for the resistance. Or its downfall.

LISBON - THE END OF THE WORLD

Waves roll, washing seaweed into a forest of broken pillars and sunken ships. A jetty crookedly juts from the sand, inhabited by thousands of snails. Crabs flee from the surge or burrow into the sand. Trilobite shells dance on the surf. The water is clear; the beach is a shambles of mussel and sea snail shells. Some are the size of babies, covered in hollow spines and polished by the waves' crashing. They glitter pale yellow and orange in the sunlight. These sea snails must have been hundreds of years old before a storm flood washed them ashore. Each of their shells is so heavy that a Scourger could not lift it from the sand on his own.

Yet still, a miracle far more amazing waits in Lisbon Bay. A snail shell larger than a fishing boat – its lime spines cast shadows meters long; its surface pitted and sharp like broken basalt. Its opening points sideways, a maw with a pink bulge, surrounded by rows of finger-long spines. A grown man can enter the snail shell without having to duck. Within, it is cool, smells of musty seawater, the sound of the surf is muted. The walls' mother-of-pearl shimmers and seems to glow from within – a part of the sunlight projected from the outside. In the twilight, the delicate grooves in the wall, marking a year of life each, are visible. There are thousands.

Those who enter the shell report dizziness and a permanent feeling of déjà vu. In the bulbous front part, the dome, the sound is broken and echoes hundredfold. Those who speak, hear their voice from behind before it becomes a distant thunder echoing continuously. The first coils into the tapering interior are easy to walk, the ground slick, but still easy to navigate. Soon, one loses the knowledge of up and down. The walls seem to vibrate. Memories of past and future attack the intruder while his perception bursts into a thousand fragments. He knows he has to get out.

Of course, not every Lisboan has dared enter the snail dome. Those who have penetrated deeper proudly report the coil they have reached, counted by the floor. Five is considered the limit, before the thing keeps your soul. Six more coils await those who dare to go further. In the warm midday light, everything looks much better. Maybe it is the air within, or perhaps the shimmering of mother-of-pearl…

Behind the monstrous thing, there are rows of two and three story buildings, all snail shell encrusted to make them look like a cliff. Colorful scarves fly in their windows.

Lisbon is the mariners' city. The dhows built in her dry docks with their blue, triangular sails are nimble and sail close to the wind; even the Africans like these ships. Lisbon's life happens at the waterfront. Jetties are added to houses, jibs are mounted to some. Boats lie bottom up on dry land, and kids scrape sea snails and barnacles from them. A group of Lisboans digs a future fairway and secures the sides against the sand sliding in with wooden planks. In backyards, bark is peeled from trees and cut into slats for smithies to produce fingerlong nails. Hemp is fashioned into ropes.

The Neolibyans have almost no ships on the Atlantic. Their maritime power is concentrated in the Mediterranean. Thus, Lisbon is almost without competitors when catering to the Atlantic market. Her merchants travel to Briton via Aquitaine to sell firewood and oil to the Anabaptists. However, the city is also a safe haven for a small group of African merchants calling themselves the Leopards. The Africans plan voyages to the Vulture's domain from here.

The permanent Hybrispanian conflict is not felt here. The hinterland is riddled by channels and thus impassable for the Scourgers' off-road vehicles. The water is ripe with Trilobites and other spiny Primer varieties. Mussels cling to those who dare to enter it. The first steps and swimming strokes are easy, but the animals quickly accumulate until their weight drags the victim down.

No one reaches Lisbon by land, neither Africans nor Hybrispaniards. The Lisboans avoid the war; they have always opposed the Spaniards' invasion of Africa. What happens to their brothers and sisters in the east is their own fault.

LAND OF THE CHOSEN

PURGARE

ELYSIUM

Every year at harvest time, they take the long way through the fields. Their yellow striped pants are soon gray from the dust, their oiled hair mats under the dirt. With sickles and shovels on their shoulders, the Anabaptists were led by one carrying a cast-iron sigil – the Anabaptists' broken cross. Every step spoke of vigor, and in their eyes burnt a fire eager to set whole regions aflame in times of war.

Pine trees threw shadows across their path. They passed an altar with the Good Lady's image, inclined their heads, and fell silent as was appropriate. Finally, they reached the Catalanos' estate. Maids with buckets came running. Hospitality demanded they give a ladle of water to each of them, but like in past years, the strangers declined. Instead, they asked for permission to enter. But the gates remained closed to them. They talked to the foreman, offered help in tilling the field, but he only repeated the patriarch's "No!"

For seventy years, Abbondia Catalano refused the Anabaptists his house and land. The Gonfalone, the family's war banner, was devoid of the Cult's iconography: no broken crosses, no aqueducts. 300 years of tradition, stitched into blue velvet with silver thread, passed from father to son, brought to light every year on the anniversary of the Sala Riunioni and carried through the city's alleys. Abbondia Catalano had grown old doing so. The gout had made his joints swell, and he dimly looked into the patio's blinding light. His word still carried weight, even if his voice's dark baritone had faded.

Every year, the Anabaptists banged at the gate in that summer. Like the Gonfalone, it was a tradition. But this time his sons urged him to listen to the woman. They talked about the long journey from Cathedral City she had undertaken for his sake and that she was bringing him Heaven. He smiled. Calling one of these long-haired monkeys a "woman" was

impolite, but fitting. He told them as much, but they only said: “No, no, this is not what me mean, padre,” and praise the emissary’s beauty and her gift. Their sweaty faces were in view. Sweet breath engulfed him. He pushed them away and thought hard. The days had grown tedious, and this stranger promised relief.

He shook his head. No!

His family should walk through the centuries untainted by the Anabaptists’ folly.

He smelled her before he saw her: a mix of lilac and olives, strong and strange. His sons stood at her side. Three rhombi on a perfect forehead, skin like mare’s milk. She moved closer and offered him nothing but to soothe his pain. He referred her to the good olive oil that he rubbed into his skin every morning and felt like a stubborn old ass. She nodded, gave him a green vial, and stroked his white hair. Warmth permeated him. He touched his head, felt the oil, wanted to scold her for her insolence when the heat burnt through his body and kindled a furnace within his chest. He straightened and exhaled. Age fled him. Sweat collected on his face in oily droplets. For the first time in more than a decade, his vision cleared: How his sons had grown!

Although the pact has not been sealed yet, the Catalanos bowed to the Anabaptists that day. Where vigor and a doctrine of salvation could not tear down the barriers, the Elysian oils from Cathedral City’s mills paved the way. They rejuvenated, chased pain and fear away, broadened the perspective – and waited. Those who have had the oils permeate them once, had felt the breaking of all barriers, could not refrain from reusing them.

One family after the other opens up to the Anabaptists. The old Gonfaloni are taken down, threads are pulled from ancient symbols to re-embroider them with broken crosses.

PURGATORY

Not 50 miles east of the Mount Vesuvius, an asteroid hit the rocky ground, crushed through into a magma bubble and detonated with a flash as bright as a hundred suns. The shockwave spread in a circular pattern, tearing up the landmass, crushing it and dropping it again when it had passed. Lava flowed from the cracks, magma chambers exploded into rows of volcanoes. For days, pyroclastic fallout rained down and obliterated all life that was left.

Off the west coast, the Reaper’s Blow cut through the Mediterranean, emitting vapors and liquid basalt. This geological anomaly has never calmed down. Poisonous

vapors have been wafting across the land since that day, taking away the sunlight and all life. The Mediterranean's foul algae slicks languidly and gurgles against the coast, forming a giant's black, wrinkled skin on the beach. Within days, it will have dissolved into oily bitumen that turns the formerly white, sandy beaches into a stinking tar desert. The air is corrosive, the water poisoned. If birds stray here, they fall from the sky dead. Here and there, old kiosks and toppled wicker beach chairs jut from the bubbly black; ruined hotel complexes look to the poisoned sea sadly.

As if all of that were not bad enough, silhouettes are outlined against the volcanoes' blaze. Around them, reality bloats and splinters into shards that fracture the light into gaudy kaleidoscopes. Stones float in the air and jut out in strange angles across the seas of debris, anchored in space and time. Darkness grows from Rifts in crystalline efflorescences as shimmering Filaments swell in vaporous clouds as hard as stone and sharp as glass. Those who stray there first notice the fleas and mosquitoes. In thick clouds they attack, crawling into clothes and biting. Shadows fall from the walls, condensing to shapeless cocoons, expanding, and tearing open. This is the end. Invisible deadly tripwires made of intertwined forcefields stretch between rocks as they flee.

The Spitalians say there is an explanation for everything, referring to the Psychokinetics phenomenon. They say a lot of additional research is necessary to understand the mechanisms of action, as even those Aberrants will too give up their secrets on the dissection table in the end.

The Purgans only laugh at the doctor's bigotry. For them, there is only one fundamental truth. The age of reason ended with the Psychokinetics, and the age of wonders – both good and bad – has begun.

SIGNS AND WONDERS

Is it still superstition when one's own family is entangled in an unseen web of razor-sharp strands, their fingers and arms raining down like deadfall? When fat bodies rise out of the blackest night and send out armies of ticks?

When the view outside is blocked by unrealities, it turns to the maelstrom of folklore. Purgan villages thus have an Augur who searches the sky for flocks of birds with glazed eyes. Crows in front of storm clouds are considered an unwanted sign, just like a crane's cry in the morning. On the other hand, seagulls flying east, especially if they are numerous, are reason to rejoice, for they promise a

FAMILY

Family means everything to a Purgan: It is the sun, it is the planet. It warms and devours him. Its traditions are the only law he respects.
The family patriarch is highly respected. He is loving father and strict judge. If a family member shames the clan, he takes drastic measures. On the other hand, he rewards feats that strengthen the family's name by awarding more responsibility or consenting to a marriage. Those without a family to back them are no one in Purgare. If you cannot live at peace with your own clan, how can you be a trustworthy business partner?

safe return of warriors. People poke through the innards of sacrificial animals and calculate the best time for seeding from constellations. Holy men and women crouch in the cracks of the Reaper's Blow for weeks. Intoxicated by the vapors, they think they are in the divine Pneuma, babble, scream and rake their bodies with their nails – but still they are revered, and their words are rewarded with food and ammunition. In the settlements, the rhythmic crack of whips announces the Flayers. The natives scrape the blood spraying from their backs with every blow from the walls and carefully scratch it off the loamy soil. Mixed with cat's bile, it is supposed to cure rheumatism and deflect bad fortune.

The Anabaptists' faith cuts through this wild growth of superstition like a scythe and planted its own seed.

CHOSEN

The Anabaptist emissaries had crossed the continent, looking for the edenic rivers. The gap between Purgare and the Balkhan, the Adriatic Sea, had fallen dry. It was now a softly sloping plain. A river cut through this plain and linked the Alps to the Mediterranean with a crystal clear ribbon of prime glacier water. Everything went very fast. Reed and birch trees grew on the banks, grass spread on the sediment. Within a few years, the Adriatic lowlands were considered the most fertile region in all of Purgare.

The emissaries thought they had reached their goal. They had found one of the four edenic rivers, and it still carried water! At the same time, the Demiurge's army amassed, for what else could the Psychokinetics be? It was so obvious. Right here in Purgare, the final battle for humanity's destiny would be fought.

FOUL PARADISE

But the Purgans were not alone in the Adriatic. For over 100 years, they have shared the land with farmers from the Balkhan, who were bellicose and dominant as was their nature and didn't relinquish one foot of ground. They were the bile in the Garden of Eden.

Quarrels led to fights. When the first head was split, there was no holding back. The Adriatic ran red. A massacre between farmers from the Balkhan and Purgare in 2201 sealed the region's future. The Balkhani were driven across the river, but they stood their ground and destroyed the enemy farmers' army. On both sides of the Adriatic, defense positions and watchtowers were erected.

The war began. For 300 years, the fortified camps defied the incendiary projectiles. Their wooden beams are blackened and hard as stone, the tin roofs worn out from hails of stone. Boats and rafts lie broken in the reed, swords gather rust in the mud at the banks. Moldy boots and belt buckles tell of desperate attacks and rearguard battles. Bombings with burning oil barrels have singed swathes into the fertile land.

On the Purgan side, a forest of broken crosses towers over the battlements. The Balkhani counter with ram skulls on pikes and flags showing a stylized ram's head, a reference to the legendary Aries who helped the Balkhani in their hour of need and taught the Purgans pain.

Yet for the first time since the beginning of the conflict, the catapults are quiet. The hatred cultivated over the years has lost its momentum. Anabaptists and Voivodes meet in the center of the river on rocking boats, exchanging gifts and poling back without ever losing sight of the former archenemy. The fuse is not burning, but it is short.

TWO SIDES

The Apennines form a natural barrier where poisonous vapors are stopped and condense against the rocks. The mountain range runs from the north to the south and bisects Purgare. The west is damned; the east serves as the Anabaptists' deployment zone. Side by side with Purgare's farmers, the Ascetics till their fields and feed the righteous army. Journeys through Purgare start right here.

BERGAMO

For centuries, the historic city of Bergamo has endured on its hill, surrounded by its city wall, an island in the Alps' foothills, engulfed by vapors and pyroclastic current, lost and forgotten. When the Lombardi family searched the land for washed-out ores, Bergamo greeted them with rows of rustling trees and grapevines that hung from the walls heavily and succulent. The hill was a green paradise. Amazed, the Lombardi walked through the alleys, jumped arm-thick roots and cut away the long grass with their swords. They pointed at frescoes, entered halls, went

through rows of moldy books and gathered around a giant, brownish globe.

The Lombardi settled in Bergamo. When the Hellvetics closed off Val Brembana not 15 miles away with a fortress years later and guided the Reaper's Blow travelers through it, the Lombardi became rich through trade with the Chroniclers' faithful aid.

The family strengthened its ranks with deserted and banned Hellvetics, giving them something of which to be proud again. But when Cathedral City offered them the broken cross, they refused. The Anabaptist Emissaries were upset and buzzed around the city like bees around a hive, making one offer after the other. Horse-drawn carts full of ancient weapons, jewelry and expensive fabrics arrived, only to be turned away. When Bergamo finally sheltered a Jehammedan clan, the friendly mask was dropped. The Anabaptists retreated, and to this day, Cathedral City forbids Anabaptists to venture beyond the city gates of Bergamo.

VENETO

Bergamo's treachery hit Cathedral City hard. Since that day, the Anabaptists wheedle the Catalanos, the ruling family of the Veneto region – a stubborn, extremely superstitious clan whose roots were deeply entrenched even in Bygone times. Their family tree is extended and always in danger of entanglements. In the Veneto region, everyone is related to everyone else.

It's difficult.

The Catalanos cannot marry into the Lombardi family who they consider cursed and lost (which is partially due to the Anabaptists). The Sforza with their weaponry are their nemesis. Glowing embers are unwanted on a corn field, once and for all! The Modica think they are the cat's whiskers and will soon be gone, while the Capodieci and the De Paulo are out of the question, being from southern Purgare. So the Catalanos stay among themselves.

Many of them are farmers whose corn fields feed all of Purgare. They see the Anabaptists as lost brothers who aid them with their firm beliefs and a hoe on the fields. Where the old ones used to pour milk onto a stone and give thanks for a bountiful harvest, the broken cross now towers. The beached pole city of Venice is also part of the Catalanos' domain. No one would dare walk the sunken plazas or visit the glorious old buildings. For in the murky channels and the poles' dark forest, something that seems to have grown darker and bigger with every generation lurks. Something ancient that is supposed to have dragged down people when Cathedral City was not yet pacified. The Borcan Anabaptists do not care. They climb the poles and explore the buildings. Most of them return. But the Catalanos are not that sure, because who counts the gains and losses?

SANTIAGO AND CRUCES

Two cities on the western Adriatic shore are synonymous with all the terrible things people can do to each other: Santiago and Cruces, the Spitalian sickbay cities catering to those who have fought on the wrong side of the saber.

The Spitalians act humbly and offer beds and their efforts to Cathedral City and the Purgan people as a beneficent gift. In fact, they need a beachhead to the Balkhan. The approach via Pollen is difficult because it inevitably leads through Pest's domain. As long as the Spital does not get more information on the Dushani, it does not want to push its Famulancers and Preservists into the Dushani Mokoschs' claws. Moreover, since Praha's fall, dozens of clans are traveling this territory, and none of them are willing to till a field or sow corn. Some Preservists were able to infiltrate them, but not enough for a controlled undercover inroad, and here Chernobog sets the pace.

The Spitalians prepare in Santiago and Cruces to cross the Adriatic at night on rafters, smuggled past the emplacements by Apocalyptics or Jehammedans (yes, they have relatives in Justitian too who depend upon the goodwill of Spitalians and Judges). They think they know what to expect, but still many are captured in the Voivodates before they get the chance to cut their first Dushani into ribbons with their Splayers. As long as the Clans do not leave the land and step away from the spore fields, the Spital is not free to act. In the end, it is always the Purgans who have to cut the dams.

THE MAW

Magma keeps flowing out, the ground shakes, whole clods of earth crack, break and fall into the roaring flames. Deadly vapors pour into chasms, drowning rats and insects in carbon monoxide. Trails of smoke rise from

vents, dense and black as if made from dark cloth.

The Reaper's Blow is highly active volcanically, and to risk seeing it up close, you must be able to trust your gear and guide.

The Maw south of the Alps is the only exception. A triangular bit of the continental shelf cuts deeply into the sea of vaporizing basalt. The air is dry and hot, ash flakes whirr across the plateau and swirl against stone altars on the wayside. Flags with broken crosses, riddled with burn holes, fly in the wind. Some are ancient: faded tatters, embroidered with family crests. Others have been put up only a few years or even days ago. They accompany the wanderer up to the jags tip.

For centuries, Anabaptists have been dragging slain Psychonauts up this way to the cliff and pushing the bodies down into the hell they came from in the first place according to the Neognosis. Thousands of skeletons lie down there between the rocks, filling chasms or engulfed by molten rock. According to legend, humanity will only vanquish the Demiurge's spawn when it is able to cross the Reaper's Blow on his bones.

For centuries, Cathedral City sees the Maw as the way to fulfilling a task assigned by God, even if everyone who stands on the cliff and looks down at the rugged waves of basalt forty steps below instinctively winces. This is not something that can be accomplished in one or even a hundred lifetimes. The journey here is rather a pilgrimage, and pushing a body from the cliff is a symbolic deed anchoring an Anabaptist within the community.

PERUGIA

Splayers jut from the battlements of the Palazzo Dei Priori. From up there, the doctors have a good view of the fountain called Fontana Maggiore and the cathedral. Hundreds of Anabaptists sit there talking and eating. They wait to be granted permission to enter. Within, the anointing by an Elysian awaits. He will anoint onto their heads exactly 14 drops and rub them in. Their spine will burn, the air will taste of metal, the pupils will dilate. This is how it feels to be blessed.

Perugia is a pilgrimage site beyond the Apennines and the gate to the Final Battlefield. Those who come here want to prove their worth in the final battle against the Demiurge. Sermons drone from the plazas; the maimed ones' cries of pain echo from the Palazzo Dei Priori. The baptisteries have run dry; too often, their water has been tainted with blood. Under the old buildings' arcades are the Sforza smithies, sharpening swords for a few drafts or selling decent weapons.

The Sforza are Perugia's undisputed leaders. They were never above taking the sledgehammer themselves. Steel is their life, and no Sforza gets away without an apprenticeship as a smith. The work hardens body and mind, separates the rabble from the men. The Sforza are considered prudent, but uncompromising. Maybe they have to be, in a city like Perugia.

Day by day, Anabaptists and Spitalians gather, fight to be at the top of the pecking order, threaten each other only to laugh in the end and clap each others' shoulders. Together they make history – or rot together as breeding sacs for fleas and ticks, forgotten amidst the Filaments.

There is no way back. Family honor would be tainted. But some lose their courage when they pass through the city gates and meet those who return. They drag their swords like sacks full of rocks. Their faces are cut, their armor is torn, only cobbled together with leather straps. Arm stumps are wrapped in bloody bandages, others have lost a foot or a shank and walk on crutches.

Those who show fear are lost. They will never leave Perugia again. Instead, they will sharpen swords, help the doctors in the Palazzo, and walk the Anabaptists' rows with water from the fountain. The life of an honorable Purgan ends here.

Lately, a rumor has been going around that they sell Psychonaut body parts as trophies to cowards and deserters, so they can pretend to have sought battle and

DESIRE
MAKES EVERYTHING BLOSSOM;
POSSESSION MAKES EVERYTHING
WITHER AND FADE.

[REMARQUE]

return home in honor. The Sforza only laugh – another Modica slander – but the flower of resentment is already blooming. Emissaries from Cathedral City are looking into the issue.

MACERATA

The Modica sided with the Anabaptists early on. Elysian oil was one reason, but they also saw the Anabaptists' potential. They had an eye for opportunities and enough negotiating skills to make them happen. But if they compared debit and credit today, they would curse their earlier decision. Yes, one of them has been nominated as a Baptist and they carry the time from Macerata's clock tower to Cathedral City and transmit it to all chronos in the Anabaptist city. They are very influential, as is their network of informants and spies. But the price they had to pay in the Adriatic was simply too high. The family is bled dry, only the old ones remain and keep scheming as if nothing has changed.

Decay is only a matter of time. The burden of succession rests on a fourteen-year-old boy's shoulders after his father and both of his uncles have been killed by a Psychokinetic on their way north. These beasts are rarely seen east of the Apennines, but it happens. Just like witnesses disappearing after making their statement. Psychokinetics will be the least of young Celino Modica's problems.

L'AQUILA

The city of L'Aquila is situated in the Aterno valley, surrounded by the Abruzzi like a fortress. In its heart lives the Capodieci family. They have opened up to the Anabaptists but reject Cathedral City's interventions. Baptisteries here, aqueducts there; emissaries on every corner and especially next to Emilio Capodieci, the patriarch. If he needs a Consigliere, honorable men from his inner circle who would give their life for him, who he would entrust with his children, stand at the ready. For him, dealing with the Anabaptists is a dance where he leads and the woman still enjoys herself. He gives Cathedral City just enough space to make the Baptists trust in his loyalty, but no one challenges him.

The Capodieci conquer village after village, nonviolently and under the broken cross. Old Emilio can be very convincing.

CAMPOBASSO

The Anabaptists are spreading. No one in Campobasso is surprised that the Catalanos fell prey to their blandishments. Perugia's fall, however, hurts, as well as the Modicas' treachery. They of all people should know that the Purgans were once an important people, marching under one flag and singing. Most of all, they did not let strangers tell them what to think, to believe, what to die for.

Campobasso's De Paulo family resists the strangers' reign. Their assassins shoot down anyone who has three points tattooed on their foreheads. Symbols like the broken cross are toppled as soon as they are erected, flags are cut into pieces. The city's inhabitants cover for the De Paulo and hide them. In secret basement rooms, they mint their own currency, the Lira; Chronicler Drafts and Dinar are spit on in Campobasso. What started as an underground resistance becomes a national movement, and the De Paulo will lead it.

THE CROSSROADS

On one side of the Apennines, the world is complicated, but it is still a human's world. Beyond the mountain range, it is different. The Apennines are a virtual border only.

Anyone can cross them. Many have done so due to their fragile honor or out of fear of Anabaptist indoctrination. Yet doing so has changed their lives.

TOWERS

Volcano smoke drifts across the land in thick clouds mingling with ocher veils from the Reaper's Blow. The sky is like a wet watercolor painting; colors run into one another, spots of color burst amidst brown dullness and melt together as black and red fight for dominance.

Ember clouds feast through blackened cities and paint fiery paths into the night. Invisible carbon monoxide eruptions drift through the streets, enter houses, pour into shafts. The air shimmers.

The towers rise above all. Built from sandstone with meter-thick walls, they withstand the ruin all around. A clan without a tower is defenseless, and no one will let their children marry into such a family. The tower is a symbol of the ability to put up a fight, of power. The higher it is, the more honorable are its builders and occupants. In Tuscan San Gimignano – the City of Towers – alone, 15 tribes have raised their buildings higher and higher with every passing year until an earthquake put an end to it. Only the towers of the Salvucci, Ardinghelli, Tozzi and Colei jutted from the dust. The superstructures had tumbled to the ground as if the towers themselves had shaken them off. A sign? The city's priory – now only consisting of the four remaining tribes – did penance and refrained from expanding the towers any further.

Other villages were not granted the mercy of a divine sign. Where towers are built, they grow until they or the tribes inhabiting them die.

HARVESTING VILLAGES

Hundreds of villages are nestled on the Apennines' slopes. Poisonous swathes pass high above them as if following invisible field lines. The sun has a threefold halo and shines on placid towns with small streets and tiled roofs, olive groves and vineyards. Sometimes, it doubles for a second, and the distant mountains tremble as if there was a shivering membrane between them and the onlooker.

This village was chosen by a Psychokinetic. He is hiding in a Rift, cocooned in Filaments. Lines of force are extended into fields absorbing all light once and for all. Absolute darkness fills the Rift. More force fields protect the place and divert the poisonous swathes. Where the field lines' offshoots rise from the ground, the townspeople gather. They extend their hands into the pull and let it tousle their hair. Some throw planes made of light wood into the forcefields and watch them rise, follow the field lines and land a hundred paces away. It'd be an ideal world if the Psychokinetics weren't parasites.

Clouds of fleas burst from the Rift, every blade of grass bends under the ticks' weight. Mosquitoes inhabit ponds and lakes, the outriggers' underbellies green with eggs. The insects attack people, crawling and flying into their houses, nesting within their beds. Only when they have had their fill of blood do they let go of their victims and return to their Psychokinetic.

Many a village is being bled dry.

VIGILANTES

But some confront the Aberrants. They are called Vigilantes, the "Watchful Ones". They see their clan as a herd and themselves as shepherds. Most of them carry a sawed-off rifle called a Lupara – a wolf slayer. It has a limited range, but in short distances, it stamps fist-sized holes into a target. Moreover, long distance shots would make no sense, not even with an African precision rifle, for the kaleidoscope of refracting force fields diverts the light and the bullets. Vigilantes do not have to be good shots; they only need to come close enough.

Many Vigilantes come from clans and stay with them for all their lives. They watch for tricks of the light and insect swarms to be able to kill the Psychokinetics before they can retreat into a cocoon in a Rift. Their word counts, and the family's padre and the cities' priories heed their advice. They rarely marry. They would leave behind too many widows and widowers.

ROMA

A Bygone historian once wrote: "In Rome, everything converges, from everywhere, the terrible and the nefarious, all is being celebrated." What was meant to describe the past should prove prophetic.

The poisonous vapors of The Reaper's Blow erode the palaces. Formerly white walls are pockmarked and black. Even the few intact windows are encrusted with a patina of dirt and soot. The people live in the catacombs, edging through the tunnels. They have thrown out the bones and made themselves at home. Decades ago, diggers broke upwards into St. Peter, admiring the frescoes and the gold and silver pomp – then brought their bedrolls. Hundreds followed. In the meantime, libraries and palaces all over Rome can be reached via this underground network.

The Romani do not care much for the past. They snatch artworks, pack books into crates, topple statues and drag everything to the port. There, the Neolibyans are waiting on board their transporters. They take everything and pay in weapons, gold, and African delicacies. Those who work hard tend to live well.

At night, the fires burn in the old halls. The odor of roasted swordfish engulfs the people and lulls them. Bread is passed around as they eat fermented milk from golden

13 THEREFORE I WILL MAKE THE HEAVENS TREMBLE;
AND THE EARTH WILL SHAKE
FROM ITS PLACE AT THE WRATH OF THE LORD ALMIGHTY,
IN THE DAY OF HIS BURNING ANGER.
14 LIKE A HUNTED GAZELLE,
LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD,
THEY WILL ALL RETURN TO THEIR OWN PEOPLE,
THEY WILL FLEE TO THEIR NATIVE LAND.
15 WHOEVER IS CAPTURED WILL BE THRUST THROUGH;
ALL WHO ARE CAUGHT WILL FALL BY THE SWORD.
16 THEIR INFANTS WILL BE DASHED TO PIECES BEFORE THEIR EYES;
THEIR HOUSES WILL BE LOOTED AND THEIR WIVES VIOLATED.

[ISAIAH]

bowls and crystal glasses clink together. Crabmeat is laid out upon porcelain trays on the floor, available to all willing to pay for it. Some Purgans read from books, others sit on them. Whores walk from one man to the next, whispering into their ears, smiling coyly and leaning against statues of ancient Roman senators. A Spitalian deserter – or simply someone in a Spitalian suit – treats sores. Africans sit in a circle next to Purgans, chatting about their adventures at sea. They wait for a passage to Corpse where they intend to join the Apocalyptics' pirate crews. The Burn addicts lie amidst the crowd, spores flake from their mouths, and the Purgan sign blossoms on their chests, first red, then white.

In Rome, everything converges. The Romani celebrate life instead of cursing it.

CORPSE

The sea rises and falls like a dying man's chest. Tanker-sized bubbles disturb the water; they paint it green for fleeting moments before bursting into clouds of steam, smoke and gas. Mariners can tell by the color what lies ahead; it warns them of maelstroms. Within minutes, they whirl up to the surface and form vortexes that can grip and tear whole fleets.

Exactly here is the Reaper's Blow, approximately 2.500 meters deep, a giant scar that will never heal.

The island of Corpse huddles against it. It is lost to pirates and outlaws. For centuries, they captured ships, bringing them to Corpse, tying them to the shore and abandoning them. Today, a wall of rusty ship hulls tied together form a barrier along the south and east shore. Harpoon cannons and catapults are mounted to the superstructures. The fairway can be blocked by chains.

Beyond the fairway, shoals and sunken barriers await. In the west, the coast towers easily thirty steps above the frothing water. The current is extremely dangerous and tears the rudder away from every helmsman, with ships often crashing into the cliffs.

From Corpse, the pirates go privateering. Neolibyan tankers make fitting prey just as well as African coastal cities. Only Roma has been spared all these centuries. Some say Roma was more corrupt than even Corpse. Even pirates had something akin to dignity.

In truth, the city has always traded with pirates and receives the loot on secret paths into Western Purgare's most remote corners. Neolibyan hunting rifles are sawed off, the ornament is filed down, and they are sold to the Vigilantes as Lupara.

The Scourgers see themselves as rulers of the Mediterranean. Tripol's Bank of Commerce keeps sending punitive expeditions to prove just that. The ships are supposed to conquer Corpse and fumigate it – and become part of the wall of rust only days later.

BEDAIN

Olive groves and vineyards, healthy crops in abundance, a mild climate and friendly people – this is how Sicily greeted the Africans. They answered by first igniting the ports with incendiary grenades from their ships and then sending out hundreds of Scourgers. Surge Tanks crashed into the docks, their tracks crushed the ancient concrete. They rolled through the fields and stopped in front of settlements, shaking and roaring. Buggies encircled them, hunted those who tried to escape. The Neolibyan Sarahali, a big man with hands like paws and a tendency to flamboyant gestures confronted the island's eldest, put an arm around his shoulders and walked through the village with him.

During their stroll, Sarahali praised the Purgan women's beauty, their glossy hair and broad hips. He praised the fields' fertility and the farmers' efforts. He stroked his belly and laughed. This island was so rich and loaded with corn, it had to be Purgare's belly. He embraced the old man who had yet to say a word and who looked up at him with rheumy eyes now. That was polite enough. To be sure, there was only one thing he had wanted to proclaim. From now on, the Sicilian Purgans would work in the Lion's shadow, and if he, Sarahali, this island's Consul, should deem it necessary, they would also breast-feed the Lion.

As the Neolibyan's Purgish was bad, he used a word for "belly" from an old language: Bedain. Amongst the Africans, the island was soon called Bedain. The Purgans were not to call it Sicily anymore either. Those who dared to do it anyway were whipped.

Sarahali loves Bedain's wine, but he did not give a damn about his conquest's agricultural wealth. What mattered to him was the proximity to the Purgan mainland and to the Balkhan.

Over the decades, he made the city of Syracuse the starting point for the Neolibyan looting tours in the Mediterranean. In good times, a hundred ships are anchored in her port, waiting to unload their cargo: scrap. Once unloaded, swarms of Scrappers attack the heaps of technology, disassembling, repairing and sorting. The useful stuff is loaded again to be sold on Tripol's markets.

The remainders are heaps of iron shores and broken machinery surrounded by a nest of cables and rust – a Mecca for Scrappers. The placid Mediterranean city of Syracuse has become a rusty technodrome, the historical city center smoldering under thumb-thick steel sheets, riffle files, and metal beams. Hulking cranes with magnetic grippers do their noisy job where people once strolled through enchanted alleyways. The magic is lost. Today, oily reality wafts through the streets with their artifact traders and manufactures.

THE LION RAMPANT
AFRICA

MAJESTIC

Neolibyans walk the streets, a wave of fine fabrics, blue and green, embroidered with traditional patterns. Black skin glistens in the sunshine, there is a scent of jasmine and cedar wood. Laughter rises in the air, full of self-assurance and strength. Wherever they set foot they gild dusty alleys and live in solicitous hospitality. A wink, and promenades grow in sleepy towns, Purgan marble adorns market squares and manufacturers rise.

For centuries, the merchant Cult has flooded the African coastal cities with looted technology and Dinars earned in its trade endeavors. With open hands, the merchants spread their luxury and bask in gratitude and glory. Today, red awnings fly in the Mediterranean breeze, Africans sit on embroidered cushions and drink tea from samovars. In the markets, crates containing spices and fruit are piled high; treated and oiled assault rifles are offered next to bejeweled hunting rifles, maps, Bygone books and colorful fabrics. Wind-bells chime. A Dioula from the far southwest shrieks and chases a group of children from the plaza, unrolls his claves, puts up gourds and starts playing an ancient melody conciliating man and creation. The people laugh and haggle, embrace or lock horns.

But it has not always been that way.

TIME OF THE CROW

Everything was as it had always been. Europe was rich and sated; its people armed to the teeth with education and the latest technological developments. Africa, however, had professionalized civil war until nothing remained from its ancient cultures but bleached bones and stream posts. International corporations rummaged through the continent in search of rare minerals and oil. In return, they gave the warlords weapons. The few stable African countries mined their borders and built barricades made of tanks and guns. Nairobi was like a fortress.

When a fever dropped the first Africans at the Ivory Coast, it seemed to be just another unfortunate incident at first. It could be neither Dengue fever nor Ebola. The infected rotted from the inside out. Necrotic rashes first flowered on the arms, then on the chest and neck days later. Death followed soon after. A WHO team stationed in Cameroon identified a retrovirus resembling HIV, but it was resistant to existing treatments. Internally it was called HIV-E. Only days later, all of Africa knew it as "Hive".

The virus spread. Whole villages fled from the disease, floating down the Niger on rafts or braving the Sahara. Anything to get away from the Hive!

They did not forget who had caused all this. The first wave of infections had started in a port where white men's ships were anchored, and supposedly there was already a cure against Hive in Europe. It all fit so well.

Chaos and anarchy soared. 50% of the population suddenly seemed to carry a Kalashnikov. When a rumor spread that hundreds of thousands of shots with the cure had been dispensed to the military from ships on the Mediterranean coast, the people could not be held back.

Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt's defenses could not cope with the rush and dodged the army of dispossessed jeeps, rusty transporters, and Russian machine guns. Countries were smashed. There was war in the streets. But there was no serum. Misinformation. Mass hysteria. Hope blew away, only to finally focus on Europe as through a burning lens.

A grotesque fleet of floating coffins, rafts, torn free bateau bridges, and overloaded cutters risked crossing the Mediterranean to demand a cure from Europe. Those who did not drown during the trek encountered a steel wall of fear and reluctance. European cruisers, frigates, torpedo boats, and destroyers formed a security cordon along the African coast and denied them passage. Corpses floated in the sea, and Europe sinned anew.

Hive ate through Africa unchecked, but some regions were spared. Many Libyans and Sudanese were immune, just like the Masai. One of these tribal warriors' blood could have been salvation, but another event came up.

DHORUBA

On March 13th, 2073 the sun darkened. Glaring lines of plasma and nitric oxides cut through the atmosphere. Heavy impacts in Europe sent shockwaves through the Earth's crust that were felt even in Africa. Several pieces barely missed Earth; one of them drove a blast across Central Africa and tore a swath a hundred miles wide into the black continent: the Dhoruba. That day, the time of the crow ended.

THE LION AWAKENS

Africa survived. The plague was sated and finally starved. Some tribes had survived: herders in the Atlas mountain, nomads in Saharan oasis, the Masai who were immune against the Hive. They wandered an empty, deserted land. Laughter had fled Africa, but the survivors found solace in their community and their faith. And they still had oil.

Centuries passed. The temperatures decreased, and humidity from the Atlantic Ocean wafted across the

THE ANCESTORS

The Africans live in a world enlightened by spiritual and mystic principles. They do not only carry their ancestors in their hearts, they believe in seeing them in trees or stones. Spirits of nature are everywhere, in the clouds, in the soil. They are all irascible and have to be pacified by small offerings. According to the legends, the most powerful of them inhabit strange places: an ancient and almost petrified Tamarind, a rocky plateau rising from the ground or a circular pond in the middle of the jungle. The Africans whittle finger-sized human figurines and place them at those mythic places. They wrap the tree in colorful, woven ribbons or pour milk onto the rock. They thank the spirits for the good time and humbly retreat. The Scourgers are considered guardians of tradition. If no Anubian is present, they guide the people: They give counsel on how slaughtering an animal or felling a tree can be justified and excused to the spirits of nature – to pay respect to animals and environment is not a question of moral integrity but of keeping your own inner peace.

Sahara and changed it into a blossoming savanna. Rain filled dried-up basins and riverbeds. Mangroves rooted in the lakes, hyenas and aurochs prowled through a seething jungle. The continent was reborn.

Tripol, the jewel of Africa, rose from Tripoli's ruins. Here they all met, the Berbers, the Arabs and the blacks, mourning and celebrating. A merchant only called "the Libyan" started endeavors that would years later become a Cult. Trucks linked the young north African settlements into a network of commercial contacts. Ships put out to sea and brought Scrappers to the deserted European coasts to loot what might be needed at home.

The Africans had not much love for whites. They chased them away with a roar or gave their haggard children candied fruit. The old anger was carefully covered with a sugar coating of compassion. The white man seemed to pose no more danger. He was not a worthy foe.

PAW SWIPE

That changed when the Hybrispanian Conquistadores raided Africa and cut a swath of destruction from Gibraltar to Tripol. The work of years was destroyed, proud cities and people were lost in the fire.

The Africans understood: The white man would never let them live in peace. In his heart, war and greed burned and would always be hotter than reason and love. Only chained, the white man would pose no more danger.

The Africans won. The Scourgers, a warrior caste bred in countless skirmishes, followed through and pushed the invaders back past Gibraltar to Hybrispania. They hunted the natives and dragged them into the destroyed African cities. Reconstruction. The white man paid his debts with his children.

THREE

Wounds scarred and glorious cities rose from the devastation. The Mande, Yoruba, Fulbe, Bantu and all the countless other African people and tribes unified – quicker and stronger than any emissary could have made them. They discovered common traits in their languages, laughed about the same jokes now, and proudly spoke about their tribes' history and rules. The Fulbe explained their codex, the Pulaaku, which is based on the three pillars of self-restraint, honesty and wisdom. Other tribes recognized a very similar law of three in their stories and legends. Had they all been blind and deaf to their siblings over the centuries?

Now the Lion, Africa's unifying symbol, ruled undisputed. As lord of the savanna, he is wild, brash and unbeholden; his beauty is legendary and only surpassed by his strength. The Africans recognized him in three aspects similar to the Pulaaku's pillars: The Neolibyans are the heart that lends him strength; the Scourgers are the claws that rend his prey; the Anubians his soul that governs their destiny.

Within days, the principle of three spread from Tripol to Gibraltar and Cairo. It even permeated tribes in Central Africa's deepest jungle who had never heard of Scourgers, Anubians, or Neolibyans. Their cultural identity was overwritten by the archetypes of the merchant with a passion for grandeur, the enigmatic shaman, and the dominant avenger.

Some assumed that this was an ancestral era. They say the ancestors had risen from the afterlife to take their scions' hands and lead them into the future.

PSYCHOVORES

Maybe they are wrong.

In the Dhoruba, something ancient grows, something that is not from this world. Leathery cusps grow on ferns, mosses form symmetric hexagonal patterns, carnivorous plants press their digestive calyxes into the ground or rise high, growing pentagonal to octagonal leafs. They are thorny and brittle like glass. Their fruits bulge and shimmer, but they are fragile and their pulp makes unsettling noises between the teeth before their poison seeps into the oral mucosa and triggers a painful death.

One scratch of their thorns and blisters grow on the skin within seconds and blacken. The blisters burst while the necrotic crater keeps growing deep into the tissue until the bone crumbles and the arm breaks. Nothing can stop the decay. Death means liberation.

These strange plants replace the old vegetation, already spreading along the equator and gaining ground fast. They transform the land and the people. Everyone in proximity to the plants loses their language and begins talking in tongues, thrown back to a primordial language that still somehow retains coherency. Every phoneme triggers an emotion like a well-known melody on a marimba. Language becomes an instrument; communication an intuitive music. And then there are the whispers on the air not produced by heaving trees or scratching branches. They sound so familiar and calming, but also often demanding without any words coagulating to any sort of sense. Many villages believe this to be an echo of their ancestors.

All language barriers are breaking down. Africa unites, but the multitude of cultures and tribes is diluted by the plants' influence.

The Neolibyans call them Psychovores, the Spirit Eaters. Unity is fine and dandy, but these bubble-shaped, quickly growing Psychovore fields overgrow the coastal roads and reach the sea. Deep black roots coil into the water, growing and hardening. Soon an island of alien

vegetation grows out into the Mediterranean. Villages are devoured, the people displaced. There seems to be no place for humans in the Psychovores' lifecycle. The Anubians beg to differ. Only they can enter the plant belt and come back out alive, carrying a bag full of seeds.

RESISTANCE

Even when the Anubians extract drugs with effects that border on magical from the Psychovore seeds, the Africans mistrust the plants from the Dhoruba.

There are more and more strange phenomena. Africans disappear in the jungle. Seemingly of their own free will, they leave society to live with and within the plants. Most of them are never seen again, they serve the Psychovores as servants – or as a source? But every now and then survivors are seen amidst the bubble-shaped decay with its hundreds of meters of diameter. At the borders, thorny shrubbery and vines wither until the perfect circle has reached its maximum growth at which point it collapses and the plants start conquering the land all over again.

Survivors in the zones are unharmed and naked. Many are Africans, but there are also white skinned people with almond-shaped eyes among them. None of them speak. If strangers approach them, they flee back into the Psychovores' embrace.

This strange vegetation's foray troubles people. Villages organize a resistance: they burn down the Psychovores' runners and salt the burned earth, but the plants keep rising from the ashes with ever-thickening bark and thorns like steel. They spit thorns against people and cower into the earth as soon as they feel any heat. Every attack activates an evolutionary surge.

Some Africans realized a long time ago that only an old enemy can help them now: the Spitalians. They are knowledgeable in the varieties of the Primer, and what else should the Psychovores be? For the Lion, this means admitting weakness which hurts more than the loss of a family member to the Psychovores ever could.

Charged by Tripol's Bank of Commerce and guarded by African mercenaries, doctors explore the Psychovore fields, working from the city of Qabis. In their neoprene suits they approach them, force the plants to adapt with toxins, make notes and research. An arms race has begun. Pesticide follows epigenetic inhibitors, bursts of flame burn vegetation strands that create bizarre flowers in an endless evolutionary loop. The battle has begun.

THE COASTAL CITIES

Off of former Algeria and Morocco, the African landmass nestles up to the Reaper's Blow's extensions. From the cliffs, the Africans looked down on rugged clods of earth and broken granite monoliths tall as skyscrapers. They formed an insurmountable labyrinth of hollows and chasms long ago. Water gurgles and boils, hot bubbles rise up and burst into clouds of steam. The giant heap of debris is constantly moving, moaning and rumbling; earthquakes make seemingly safe caverns cave in. Only a bilious green kind of algae feels at home here and covers nature's forces like a foaming carpet.

People avoid this place. But east of this tectonic spectacle, they settled down centuries ago and reclaimed the ancient ruined cities.

Today, docks reach out into the sea like giant hands. On the cliffs, houses with sprawling balconies grow; their windows hide in the shadows of colorful awnings. Cranes cower at the outriggers like birds of bone. Children sit on the battlements of ancient fortresses, climbing the cast-iron cannons, waving to the ships or throwing stones at them. In open hangars, Surge Tanks sit and crackle in the heat under panels of cloth. They will soon rumble across concrete ramps and onto transports with lots of shouting.

One-masted ships with red, triangular sails rock in the port's soft swell and receive hundreds of travelers. Next stop is Tripol. Ancient military gliders owned by the less successful Neolibyans push past them, their sails a dirty black, their planks vermiculated and tarred. In between, the Scourgers' motorboats crackle, racing out into the Mediterranean. But giant transport ships with superstructures of gold, silver, mahogany, and flowing silk approach the port as well. Their wake from their bow makes the smaller ships bob up and down in the waters nearby. The smoke of their diesel engines rests in the bay like a haze and crawls into the docks and lungs of hundreds of white slaves waiting to unload them.

Behind two- and three-story buildings, the terraced tower buildings rise from the metropolis' haze. Palms

accompany the travelers on their way. Off the promenade, there is a branching network of alleys, leading past manufactories and sky-scraping buildings with widely jutting balconies and carved balustrades.

In between, every now and then you find boulders adorned with serpentine lines and gnarled giant jungle trees carrying tribal carvings and the name of the ancestors inhabiting them. In plazas, Scourgers have jacked up battered or bullet-ridden buggies. Slaves work on the vehicles so they can soon roar through the jungle again at breakneck speed.

From the market squares, you hear the constant din of the masses. Upon paved streets an army of millions have stomped smooth grooves into the sandstone. The bazaars resemble a maze of stalls and walled shops. Here, you can find pharmacies offering dried starfish, ground Biokinetics spurs and Anubian wonder drugs next to vials of scented oils and paper-wrapped incense. Merchants unfold fabrics, caress jagged designs and praise the fine, knot-free texture. In other shops, lamps of colorful glass shine, some shaped like gourds; the next stall offers chased golden crockery, star-shaped incense burners hang next to bird cages from the rafters, side-by-side with baskets of jewelry and shoes adorned with glass beads. In an auxiliary hall, caretakers of rich Neolibyans wait for the next batch of slaves, preferably domesticated and educated.

The coastal cities are the Neolibyans' pride and joy. Here, they showcase their wealth and prove their generosity. Here, the Dinars' golden streams converge together and flow into their pockets.

TUNIS

In Bygone times, the United African Organization (UAO), the counterpart to the European UEO, was located in Tunis. Next to the high command's HQ, it manned barracks, expanded a part of the port and installed dozens of bunkers that held the UAO's arsenal.

For centuries, the Scourgers have equipped themselves here; their helmets, bullet-proof vests, and assault rifles stored in the tunnels beneath Tunis. The slaves noticed. During a mock attack on the docks by a fleet of Corpsian pirates, the slaves used the chaos to break into the facility, seize the weapons and attack the Scourgers in their coastal encampments from behind. The Petro store's tanks detonated in rapid succession, the fireball engulfing two Surge Tanks and tearing them apart. The Scourgers' rapidly approaching Koms veered, struck by the column of fire, and burst like ants under a magnifying glass.

That day, destiny opened up a new front for the Scourgers, a festering wound in the Lion's side.

An army of slaves has since holed up in Tunis. It is supposedly led by a group of Balkhani, a band of brothers, former Voivodules one and all. They cannot gain the open sea, because Scourger torpedo boats are cruising there. Fleeing across the country is just as hopeless, with barricades and Neolibyan big game hunters having grim fun shooting down anything that moves. So they make their home in Tunis, repelling the packs of Scourgers' daily forays. The rebels are armed to the teeth and have nothing to lose. It may take years until Tunis is in African hands again.

CONSTANTINE

Gold is cast in shapes and minted in Constantine's gold smithies. The city resembles a fortress in which even brothers mistrust each other. Emissaries of the Bank of Commerce watch over the smaller manufactories, checking the weights and coining presses. If you cheat just once, you lose your concession forever and your whole family with you.

The best smiths are invited to Constantine to design new coins and patterns. Neolibyans sacrifice parts of their companies to see their face on a Dinar just once.

Gambling has long since spread within the city walls. African Apocalyptics have settled here and trap the workers from Constantine in a web of favors and whoring. Between their tents, the Scourgers' barracks rise. Remembering the uprisings in Tunis, they train for an attack or a revolt. At least all slaves were banned from the city. Only Africans in good standing may enter. Even they face a soul search from the Anubians.

The Scourgers' fear has its reasons. Fortunes of immense value are stored within the city. Gold from the last 300 years of looting and campaigning into the Crow's realm fills the subterranean cavern vaults.

TRIPOL

Tripol is the hub of the world. From here, the Neolibyans set out into the Mediterranean, exploring the coasts, building counting houses and starting business relationships. Through goods from exotic places like Franka or the Balkhan, through the salvaged machinery and weapons, the flood of Dinars grows and pours into the city's streets. People follow it, dragging along their millennia-old cultural achievements.

The masses live in skyscrapers flagged with awnings and panels of cloth. Ancestral statues made of black hardwood lean next to their doors, wind-bells chime in the breeze. Next to them huddle one-story lodges with broad terraces, their walls whitewashed or covered in bamboo. Strands of cables link the houses, forming a network above the plazas that cuts the sky into triangles. Surge Tanks tower like rocks in the sea of people, and within less than two days, ladders are in place and carpets adorn the upper deck. Old men sit in the shadows of the arcades and smoke cinnamon flavored tobacco. Young people congregate on the rooftops, dangling their legs while someone offers them tea. Others stomp and clap to the rhythm of their songs, forming circles, leaning forward and parting again, singing out their joy.

Ancient buildings rise everywhere in Tripol, some with battlements, resembling fortresses and very obvious, others cowering in quiet alleys. None of these buildings remain empty for a long time. The tribes are proud of their origin and show the treasures of their cultural heritage wherever they can: mahogany figurines gather dust next to fur-covered shields, knives with curved blades, spears, clothing, and jewelry. Supposedly, there are ancestral statues carved out of Psychovore wood in one of these museums; the clan responsible for them merged with the Anubians decades ago.

The Bank of Commerce's huge, gilded dome can be seen from the port. No place is more sacred to the Neolibyans than this temple of the Dinar. Here, merchants acquire trading permits once a year, granting them the right to trade along certain routes or profit from specific areas, such as plantations and oil fields. Here, the Anubians assess the Thread of Life for Neolibyans entering into long-term contracts, and the slightest disturbance can mean a premature death or a restless life – both reasons not to make the deal.

THE BANK OF COMMERCE

Travelers reach this historic city and thus the Bank of Commerce's realm through a great circular, arced gate. Peddlers come running and offer lemon water. Between the residences of the Neolibyans, there are gardens for the people with ponds, fountains and deep green grass. Rare birds jump from branch to branch in huge cages, cocking their heads when somebody feeds them a date.

The Bank of Commerce's glass portal only opens on special occasions, today it remains closed. Visitors from faraway cities press their faces against the warm glass and stare into the hall beyond; others walk around the complex of towers and halls, speculating about the exact

DISCORDANCE

In the field between Earth Chakras and Psychovores, Discordance flourishes. In Europe, the spore fields crumble and become bulbils. In Africa, the Psychovores lay snares, twisting and twining them to tender canopies of vegetation that finally tighten to cocoons and raise black thorns glittering with poison. Over the course of weeks, the lush green gives way to a pale purple, the plants wither and shrink. Within the cocoons, there is a rustling and sloshing.

After a few more days, the cocoon suddenly rips open, its walls are torn to shreds and flutter in the wake of the creatures streaming out: Black membranes spiral skywards amidst a stream of pale blue jellyfish. Garland-like strands with red, pulsing bulges entwine to a double helix and get carried out, too. These creatures can be hundreds of paces long; like bizarre veins, they hang above the jungle. However, they are already crumbling.

Sometimes, however, creatures that do not have to surrender to the strange atmosphere within minutes or hours emerge from the bulbils. The Anubians assume that they resemble grains of sand growing into a pearl within a shell: The contamination – a salamander, a bush rat or a human – and the alien genes connate to something new, something adapted, within the bulbil. The Shabath clan hunts these creatures. Especially Bengasi's hinterland promises rich bounty. For months, the Shabath journey through the discordant Psychovores and watch the bulbils. If the hunt was successful, they tour the coastal cities with their findings and exhibit the creatures in glass boxes. A creature that resembled a group of squids with the respective creatures' tentacles joined to form a net was considered last years' greatest attraction. The creature clung to its containers' glass and continually formed geometric patterns with its tentacles while the heads exhaled blue fog. The Shabath assume this was a form of communication – no one understood the creature. It died after a day.

location of the map room or the archives and the hall of vaults. Not to mention the rooms of the cartographers and visitors. It is said that in the last months, even Spitalians have stayed in the Bank of Commerce.

THE GATE TO THE EAST

Even in Tripol, all is not gold that glitters – sometimes it turns out to be fool's gold. At the gate to the east, the richest of the rich once gathered, sitting together in leather armchairs and enjoyed gambling. Other establishments now vie for their attention. The richest citizens have left, the poorer ones have remained. Now, the armchairs and gambling tables are worn; the numbers on the tokens are barely legible. The heavy curtains breathe age; the ventilators languidly ease the heat. Those who still play here have nowhere else to go. Bankrupt Neolibyans hope for the one great success that brings them back into the game. Some even gamble their lives away – losing big and getting lost in their new master's dusty scriptoriums.

LONG SHADOWS

The Bank of Commerce's shadow is long. Almost no village, almost no city wants to miss Africa's rise. The village elders eagerly appeal for credits if the Neolibyan does not count Dinars onto the table fast enough. In the end, someone will somehow repay them. Anubians who check these elders' threads of life are supposed to prophesize a reliable payback. They see people full of life, look into happy faces. No one is afraid. Thus, interest is piled upon interest, the streets in the hinterland are paved with Dinars, and everyone is full of pride. In the jungle, swaths are cut to make way for pompous boulevards. The rivalry between the villages takes on absurd forms. Finally, the compound interest hits the villages like lightning. The Neolibyan supporters turned their backs on their home villages in shock: better to lose your honor then go bankrupt.

The sheikhs make tremendous profits. Dozens of cities struggle in the Bank of Commerce's chains in the meantime. Highly indebted clans guarantee a seemingly endless supply of cheap wage slaves. Many villages send their children onto African Scrappers' ships in the hope that they might find an artifact to buy their freedom. Today, the Bank of Commerce is the most powerful institution in Africa. It commands vast resources and halls full of IOUs – each and every one of them is worth a favor. It finances wars and lootings and even holds the Neolibyans on a tight leash.

QABIS

Qabis has known only one subject for over a year: white people are in the city! They came on the Ruguru, a transport ship belonging to Wakili, a Neolibyan residing in Justitian. Their hands were not tied, and those black neoprene suits with the white chests were immaculate, not torn by Scourges! It was over 50 Spitalians, and they walked off ship over the gangway, their heads held high. For good measure, children threw rotten fruit like they do with every batch of slaves, but this time, Scourgers intervened and chased them away. Mad world.

Since then, the Spitalians have made their home in Qabis and have become part of the city's culture. They frequent the markets, haggling with natives for dates and relaxing in the street cafes, sipping cups of coffee and playing games of Kalaha. They have adopted African foundlings and teach them the white man's shamanism – pure medicine, based on evidence.

It was not always easy. Never before had the Crow been allowed to fly free in the Lion's country. The Scourgers of all people found a solution. As guardians of tradition, they devised a ritual to make the strangers rise as children of the black continent. The Spitalians did not like the idea of being buried alive, then to claw their way back to the

THE ROAD

Not all Africans agree with slavery. An old Anubian woman declined the third circle decades ago and committed herself to humanity instead. Since then, Madame Dayo helps white slaves get back to Europe through her network of like-minded people. Some stay with her, even return to the jungle and let themselves be caught as slaves again in pretense to plan another group's escape from the heart of Africa via "the Road" as the organization calls itself.

surface and chew on intoxicating leafs for days. But they had enough sense to play along. From this moment on, they were considered honorary Africans. Today, they are a curio, and people come to Qabis from faraway to marvel at the white Africans.

Wakili gave two old Surge Tanks to the doctors. On both, the Spitalian cross consisting of large red beams is clearly visible on the scratched sides. One is called Aesculapius and serves as their headquarters. The four floors contain a sick bay, several labs, a reefer and a library. Since they moved in, it has not moved at all; the engine is only started from time to time to recharge the batteries. Wakili called the second Surge Tank Ndulu – which means "brother" – as a gesture.

Months ago, hosts of slaves carried provisions and gasoline into the Ndulu. African Scrappers looked over the chain links, started their arc welders, repaired and replaced parts. With sledgehammers, they removed huge patches of rust and repaired the weakened hull with metal plates. Test runs for the two gas turbines made the Ndulu roar, tremble, and spit out hot smoke. The patches rattled, some shook loose and fell to the ground. The African workers threw their hands up in despair, but then laughed. At least, the tank had not completely collapsed!

Over a month ago, the Ndulu and its crew of Spitalians started its journey into the heart of the Psychovores. Like a primeval beast, it burst through the brittle plants and crushed them under its chains. The fruit burst into glittering clouds. It became entangled in vines and several miles of shrubbery, but the screaming gas turbines forced it through every obstacle so far.

Driving straight south, the Dhoruba was easy to find. African scouts from the Masai tribe followed the Ndulu in its swath and watched it suddenly turned to the east, towards Anubia. Maybe even towards Cairo. You simply cannot trust the white man.

ANUBIA

The Nile is swollen and has erased long-forgotten cities from the maps and humanity's memory. Spore packs dance on its dark green, glittering waters, take one cataract after the other. In the river bends, some run aground in the fertile mud on the shore and germinate, others spill into the Nile delta and float out into the sea.

SEPSIS

The Mediterranean is dying. Since the Atlantic Oceans' inflow at Gibraltar has been stopped, the water surface is sinking. The salinity grows, Fish are dying and rotting, algae slicks flourish. On bad days, a leaden stink wafts over from the Mediterranean chasing the people into their homes or the hinterland.

The Psychovores expand.

They have already conquered Anubia. The plant belt all around Cairo seems impenetrable, but still the Forbidden City is said to be home to the Anubian Cult. A city where the Anubians' ancient knowledge about humanity and time is hidden in giant pyramids whose tips catch the lighning and speak of wisdom.

To them, the Psychovores came just in time. The necrotic affliction is said to spare the Anubians. However, who can say for sure? The Anubians always behave mysteriously.

LEOPARDS

No Neolibyan's cousin will have to go clad in rags, even if he is as useless as a one-legged slave. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers in law; the whole clan is clad in expensive fabrics, adorned with necklaces and anointed. On the village green, ancestor figurines made of ebony are raised, made by a master from the Ahaggar. Slaves dig sewers and flag beaten paths.

In Africa, wealth always follows the family tree's branches. Yet sometimes, those branches break and even the trunk may wither. New scions sprout, but their roots draw water, not gold. Such villages are nestled into forgotten bays or amidst the jungle, far off the network of roads. Their inhabitants fish in lakes, hunt antelopes or monkeys. They weave their own fabrics from plant fibers. At their hips, they carry bone knives, and they paint their naked torsos with tribal symbols using holy earth. They watch the metropolis with skepticism and curse the Scourgers' stinking, noisy buggies.

Still, they know no envy. They thank their ancestors for the goats that give them enough milk and the sun that rises every morning and bathes them in warmth. But while the ancestors are listening, could they maybe make the Oka people with its motor ghanjah full of dried meat arrive before the Neolibyans today? They may know no envy, but that does not mean that they don't mind being poor. Dozens of clans have formed a loose union. Together, they work against the Neolibyan trade monopoly. They don't care for concessions and land where they please. They never felt represented by the most powerful of the African Lions. At most, they were the dust between its claws.

Thus, they call themselves Leopards and point out with a grin that a leopard is far quicker and more cunning than the irascible Lion. In fact, they race through the jungle on secret paths and fly across the Mediterranean on maneuverable ghanjahs, always one step ahead of the merchant Cult. They kill their prey, leaving only a chewed cadaver.

The Neolibyans avoid the Atlantic. Gelatinous bubbles the size of a Surge Tank crash against the ships' hulls, arching over the ships' side and gumming up with other bubbles to form a stringy carpet from which there is no escape. The Leopards' sailing ships however cruise through the water unmolested, at least as long as they stick to the coast. Maybe the ships engines' vibrations are responsible for the gelatinous glut.

The Leopards start from Tangier, navigate around Hybrispania, follow Franka's coast, and enter the Vulture's domain. A dangerous move if you look at the Aquitainian ship graveyard of countless wrecks torn apart by high-caliber rounds. Considering the current, they all must have come from where the Leopards are headed. But so far, all ghanjahs have returned, loaded with crates full of books, golden jewelry, and golden teeth.

The Leopards' aplomb grows. They decline Neolibyan trade goods, only relying on goods from leopard villages. The tribes thrive without drowning in pomp.

To the merchant Cult, the Bank of Commerce's word is the law. Concessions are laws. Without them, there would be anarchy, the Neolibyans say, and those Leopards... well, they attack established routes with their unruly trade. So they need to go.

But even the Scourgers hesitate. As guardians of traditions, they do not want to shoot Africans. But if they don't, someone on Bedain will.

THERE WILL BE
NO LIFE ANYMORE,
JUST
SURVIVAL.

[WOLFRAM FLEISCHHAUER]

LIFELINES

The triangle consisting of the Ahaggar, Air, and Tibesti massifs is considered the heart of the north and source of Africa's lush vegetation. The rain clouds carried there by the west wind discharge their cargo on the craggy slopes and over the jungle. Once a barren sandy plain called Ténére by the ancients, this region is now a sea of mist and dense green with craggy rock formations only here and there. The Tibesti's Emi Koussi is the king of these high risers. Easily seen from afar, its 3415 meters is the highest elevation.

Here, the lifelines of the African continents begin; the delicate network of rivers and streams reach down into Nigeria, deep into the Psychovore belt, and feed the land with waters that turn Africa into an edenic garden so vast that no one has completely explored it yet.

HINTERLAND

The coastal cities' wealth reaches even the hinterland with its plantations and oil fields. There, palaces rise above muddy roads and traditional buildings with wooden roofs and mud walls. In the shadows, white slaves rest before having to carry steel beams for the Neolibyans' giant mobile fortresses, the Surge Tanks, again in the searing heat of the junkyards. Large areas were stubbed; giant jungle trees gave way to cassava and crops. Slaves from the campaigns in the Balkhan and Hybrispania sow and harvest months later. Attempted escapes are rare. The jungle is no less merciless than the Scourgers.

STEEL

The jungle seems endless. Under its canopy of intertwined tree crowns, there is eternal twilight, and fallen trees and quagmires make quick traveling impossible. No one claims to really know the jungle.

In its depths, the Africans encounter concrete walls and ancient fortresses. Trees grow upon them and reach into barracks and flooded cellars with their roots that are thick as arms. Sometimes, these buildings are not deserted. Stooped humanoid creatures stand in the twilight, lichen hanging from their shoulders, wetness glittering on blue steel. For centuries, they stand like that until something rouses them and their anger. They screech, and the fingernail-sized sensoriums jerk left and right, focusing. They jump forward, tear roots from and out of their body, wipe away the moss. They crackle and rattle as their heads turn. They capture their surroundings with ultrasound while their eyes complete the picture. They patrol old facilities and sink deeper into the wet ground with every step. Their every movement perfect and to the point, the servo motors of these silent predators whirr.

These AMSUMOs – called "Machine Men" – are a relic of the white Bygones. They once served as a means of oppression, the legend says, until something happened to them and they freed themselves from the white man's mental grip. That did not help, though, for from then on, they were loose cannons.

Those who meet them in the African jungle these days may be lucky and encounter a machine that has scratched a 2 to the power of 16 into its own forehead. Presumably, these AMSUMOs have a soul, having watched humans or animals and learned from them through imitation. Maybe they'll never again leave their humans finder's side, copying his habits and speech patterns. However, it's also possible that they'll see him as prey whenever they've finished studying leaf-cutting ants. Machine Men are always dangerous and mostly deadly.

That doesn't keep Scrappers and Scourgers from hunting them. The AMSUMO leg tubes and carapaces are light and almost indestructible – the perfect add-on to a Neolibyan's splendid clothing. Each of those pieces tells a story, and the blood of dozens of people clings to each and every one. The merchants pay a large sum of Dinars for them.

CHAPTER

3

CULTS

WAVE RIDER

The wind carries away the surf. For a second, it shines in the moonlight like silver, but then it crashes into the labyrinth of ships, washes across plateaus as rusty brine and crashes into the hulls' darkness through the gratings of the floor. Cranes turn creakingly, their steel cables whipping through the air. Some metal sheet tumbles across the decks, hitting a superstructure, getting caught by the wind again, driven deeper into the land.

The light of an oil lamp dances across the bridge. A waxen face is briefly lit, the moustache a dripping rag, the eyes deep-set like a moraine in its lair. The man rushes on, sliding on the planks, curses and climbs some scaffolding only to dive into some corridor. The remains of dead fish wash around his feet; the smell of rank water and decay in the air. He spits, raises his lamp and looks around. The two Seagulls of the Nebuchadnezzar are already gaining ground, flanking the prisoner, having bent his arms to his back. Their hair hangs into their faces, one of them wears a rat's skull, feathers and wire in his hair. They stumble from weakness, it almost looks as if they were leaning on the prisoner instead of driving him onwards. For a second, the man looks up: his shaved skull shines in the lamplight, his eyes glitter, and he's grinning.

The man with the lamp whirls around and keeps going. His heart is racing. Damn Preservist!

The man with the lamp puts his shoulder to an iron bulkhead. Warmth rushes out, and the scent of burning resin engulfs them. Golden light spills into the corridor and makes the Preservist blink. The lamp man's silhouette bows.

"Malais? Oh, exalted Buzzard! My heart rejoices at your sight!"

The Preservist hears one of his guards scoff and fakes a stumble. The Seagulls catch him and bend his arms even further. He exhales rapidly. But he also feels their muscles tremble. Good.

"Malais…? May we…? Yes?"

Lamp man shoots the Seagulls a questioning look, but they only return his stare. "She'll have your balls." Very serious. The other adds: "She hates Romanos. Especially you, Aurel." Now they are both grinning. The Romano raises his arms into some weird gesture, stops and turns around again. The Seagulls cluck their tongues as if this were their way of laughing.

"We are coming in now…"

The Preservist feels the push. Now he has every reason to stumble, staggers a little sideways and hears his guards moan. They drag him into the light. He ducks under a bulbous lamp with a flickering candle, hears the clicking next to him and tenses. Golden oil lamps with chased bine ornaments softly swing in the current, a samovar bubbles. The walls are adorned with tapestries showing colorful triangular patterns, idols of black wood with large eyes loom in front of them. A human-sized statue of a fat woman pressing her hands together stands in the corner, covered with bundles of pearls and lapis lazuli, and pitted little metal plates.

Aurel walks into the room, neck stretched and back bent. The Preservist leans to one side to be able to look past the Romano. An African woman sits in the cradle of gold embroidered cushions and green velvet covers. Her head is adorned by a wreath of arm-long black feathers; she wears a shift of ocher colored cotton loosely draped over one shoulder. White diamonds adorn the hem. The thumb-thick rounds of a signal pistol are stored in her bandolier. The Preservist grins. He has had some good experience with them.

"Malais…"

The African woman holds a naval map in one hand,

gesturing with it and clapping it to a stack of books next to her. She looks at Aurel.

"Grand Buzzard of Corpse, dear Malais…"

"My dear Aurel." Her voice is deep, she stresses every syllable as if there was not enough room in her mouth for them. "We have met once before this year."

Aurel steps aside and points to the Preservist.

Malais sinks back into the cushions and rubs her eyes.

"Aurel. Your friend? You have my blessing."

The Seagulls cluck, one of the Apocalyptics huffs and coughs.

Malais straightens, the shift slides from her shoulder. Her hands fumbles on the recursion. Steel blinks.

"The stranger… Spitalian. What is that on his chest?"

Aurel opens his mouth, closes it again and looks to the Preservist. In fact, an elongated bump is visible under the black suit on his chest. He walks over, opens the zipper and pulls aside the neoprene. A vial is fixed to his chest with two strips of tape.

"Touch it, and the flesh shall wither from your bones." The Preservist stares at him.

Aurel puckers his mouth and turns back to the African woman. She waves him aside.

"Prisoner. What's your name?"

"No prisoner."

Malais smiles, cocking her head – and nodding almost imperceptibly. Her feathers move in affirmation.

The Preservist tears from his guards' grip, grabs one of them by the hair, drops to the floor and pulls him down with him. He feels a fist hitting his ribs, pure pain, touches the floor, sees the Seagull's crooked form hitting the boards next to him. Snot flies from his nose, his hair is whipping around. A kick makes the Preservist gasp and turn around. He blocks the second kick, grabbing the leg, clawing into the hamstrings and tearing. The cry is very loud. He jumps up again, kicks the cringing Apocalyptic in the hurt leg and takes a step towards the African woman. She remains seated. Her lips part in a smile.

"Tell me, Aurel, don't you want to defend me?"

The Romano stands like a statue. He retreats a few steps, but keeps watching the two of them, bumps into the samovar, sends the silverware crushing to the floor, turns around and flees. Cups and spoons clatter to the boards.

The Preservist flexes his arms and shakes his hands.

"At this very moment, Scourgers are boarding the Sarabi to take care of the Neolibyan Rachida. It will take them a little more than two days to search every nook and cranny of this ship for me." He closes the zipper. "Your Zuwena is supposed to be fast."

"The fastest."

"About 15 miles west of Qabis, there is a small bay. The reward will be higher than anything the Scourgers could offer you."

"Man without name, tell me, why should I trust you?"

The Preservist spread his arms. "You trust them!" She rises from her cushions, is suddenly very close. Her mouth is next to his ear. Cold steel touches his cheek. She whispers: "I don't."

She lets go of him, walks to a wall and pulls it aside. The warmth escapes into the night. She walks out to a balcony of metal lattice work and leans on the railing. He joins her. In the distance, waves tower. Foam covers the island's steel superstructures. The sea is glowing red, clouds of steam burst to the surface.

Her voice sounds higher now, she appears younger. "We would make a good team."

He stands next to her, gazing out at the sea.

"The Zuwena will do."

She smiles.

"We will see."

THE LAST BASTION

SPITALIANS

IN THE LIGHT OF SALVATION

Psychonauts and Sepsis are symptoms of a disease called Primer - and no one knows diseases better than the Spitalians. They bend over tissue samples; they discuss histone deviations and the potential aberrations caused by the influence of Discordance. Their colleagues in the breeding stables extract vaccines from the blood of transgenic horses. Behind the Spital's walls, behind disinfection locks and ranks of stalwart Preservists are the scientists. Every new insight is a piece of a puzzle that in the end will help complete the picture that shows how to eradicate Psychonauts from the face of the earth.

Outside, the disinfectant smell dissipates.

A labyrinth of alleys and tunnels meanders between windowless shacks. Large letters christen the concrete blocks. Like an army of giant ants, the Spitalians roam through their anthill, disappearing into the buildings or descending into the darkness via ramps.

Their skulls are blotchy and pale, correctly calcimined to prevent any form of infection. Purity is life. They all wear matte black suits with longitudinal stripes and carry above head height pole arms with a hinge, the so-called Splayers. On one end there is a blade, on the other a screwed-on glass cylinder with a murky liquid.

Only one wall, one gate to go, and they are in the Appendix, the Spital's sick quarter. Moaning and cries surround the Spitalians who care for legions of diseased. Chronicler Drafts, furs, glittering scrap, bottles of oil and other valuables change hands – relatives of the sick pile gifts in front of the Spitalians until they are ready to start treating the diseased with scalpel and saw or just give them some medicine. Their means are limited, but still, in the Appendix, in Justitian's hygienics stations or in the public hospitals they help the populace; here are doctors who defend the Hippocratic Oath defiantly and determinedly.

Many hundreds of kilometers away from the Spital, in Pollen: The black stallion unwillingly shakes his head, tries to get rid of a giant gas mask by rubbing it across the ground. The Preservist caresses his neck to calm him and mounts up. The horse paws the ground, whinnies dully under the mask. It's fidgety. The Preservist pulls at the reins and looks at the scarlet lake amidst the eternal ice. Bodies float there like islands, hacked apart by swords. Her gaze wanders across spurs and bone sails, across misshapen skulls with black pseudo-eyes in the forehead. Arachnids have already begun to spin cocoons around the Psychonauts' bodies. The world is safer without them – and cleaner.

The Spitalians are scientists as well as doctors and warriors. Every day in the labs brings them closer to understanding and to saving humankind. Every day they decide between destruction and healing. They fight cholera and destroy

spore-afflicted villages. In Franka, they detonate the Pheromancers' vents, in Pollen, they study the Fractal Forests, in Purgare, they burn swathes into the ticks' and fleas' millionfold army. And in the Balkhan, they bring the dissonance to the Dushani.

The Spitalians are humanity's last bastion.

ANCIENT SECRETS

Since the great fire of 2499, this wing has been deserted. Lockers are placed along the wall, just like in the adjoining rooms. They are all sooty, some are so deformed that the drawers have burst. But some lockers seem intact. Between case sheets and death rolls, they still contain the Spital's 500 years of history. There is word of the global conflagration, of refugee streams under burning skies, all with the same destination – the Spital, then called "Crisis Center Southern Ruhr". Too much suffering, too many people. Looters stormed the facility, killed doctors and took what they could get. Medicine crates and bandages were pushed out on beds, and outside, the fighting continued. The transports from central storage crashed into barricades, were pushed over and robbed, too. The doctors defended themselves with scalpels and infusion stands and loaded injectors with cartridges full of sulfuric acid. Oxygen and gas bottles intended for ventilation were turned into flame throwers. The doctors of the Crisis Center stood with their backs to the wall, were armed to the teeth with fear.

When the UEO forces finally intervened, they had already gone too far.

THE SECOND WAVE

Four years after the Eshaton, the doctors' situation went back to normal. The crisis command's clinic and HQ had been rechristened "Spital" in the meantime. The UEO was dismembered, but some former soldiers still served as the doctors' police force. With the efficiency of people who need not fear any lawsuit, they crushed flashpoints.

Fearful silence reigned.

Major parts of the surrounding ruined city resembled a necropolis – skeletons in streaming rags lined the street, carelessly shoved aside by bulldozers. Wind rose and brought red crater ash. In large flakes, it covered the testimony of pain and disease and finally buried this part of history completely.

Meanwhile, the refugee streams had dwindled to a rivulet, the Situation was under control. The Spital became a place of order and recovery; the doctors regained a part of their self-esteem. But one last danger remained: Had the infamous disease from faraway Africa, HIVE, died on its way to the cold north? Were the people safe here?

When the first cases from the Ruhr area were reported, the doctors fled behind the Spital walls. They barricaded the windows, closed the gates. Those waiting for recovery in the infirmaries were told via speakers to leave the region: "The Spital is closed, effective immediately. Go home." From helplessness, a wave of anger arose, leading once again to violence. But HIVE was already rampant amongst the attackers, thinning out their ranks. Siege machinery and weapons fell from the infecteds' hands. The resistance was broken long before the battle was joined. Meanwhile, the doctors watched the events outside their walls from barred windows and high rooftops. Their eyes mirrored the despair of the diseased. Sympathy and sense of duty warred against self-preservation in their minds. Some doctors couldn't stand it and jumped. The others swore never again to turn their backs on the world – a promise they were going to keep.

NEW GOALS

It took the doctors over a decade to reopen the gates to their haven and stride out into a changed world. During the exile years, they had had time to consider their deeds and goals. Today, we have no recordings of this process anymore. The great fire burned the documents and robbed the Spitalians of an important part of their genesis, including the secret of how they survived in the bleak Spital without outside support.

The information that the Spital had reopened spread like wildfire in Borca's tundra. At first, only a few gathered outside the fortress walls and looked at the figures with the gas masks and matte black suits questioningly. But the doctors healed those seeking help; the menacing look was merely a disguise – for now.

When the press of the people once again threatened to overwhelm the doctors, a body of the highest-ranking Spitalians – the Consultants – convened. They considered a campaign against everything that was sick, schemed and gave orders like the generals of old. Thus, in the end Spitalian platoons spread out, dividing the surrounding area into containment zones, establishing the plague alley and the cholera quarter and sorting the sick by disease. They erected walls and fortified the Spital. They devised a recruitment program and sent Village Doctors who worked for money or in exchange for protection.

The Spital's influence in West Borca grew.

SEPSIS

The disease would not remain the Spitalians' worst enemy for long. They could be vanquished using the knowledge from their founding fathers' databases. But the Sepsis was a new kind of threat, unknown and omnipresent. It was directly related to the popular, cheap and potent drug called Burn. Side effects? Nothing that justified the Spitalians' ban

in the consumer's eyes. The doctors lost ground; the strings on which the world danced to their tune were torn.

Since 2221, strange mutations had occurred in Pollen; now they ran rampant in Borca, too. Swarms of vermin flooded the land, entering body cavities and stinging, biting, laying eggs. Spore fields blossomed everywhere, conquered one region after the other. In the east, Pollen's and the Balkhan's Mother Spore Fields united to form a straggly barrier and cut Europe off from Asia. The people still did not wake up; their minds were ravaged by Burn.

In 2300, the Spitalians rose against the Sepsis. They studied the Psychonauts and their Raptures; with new technologies like the Noumenon Vocalizer they felt out the Chakra collectives' ether flicker and established the Primer theory. In the drug called Burn they recognized the prime source of spore infestation, hunted every cusp and the smugglers bringing them into the country.

Every Spitalian learned that they witnessed a new, misguided creation process that would soon obliterate mankind. It was not yet too late. For the time being, the doctors were the first and only line of defense against the Primer – the front. Should it fall, Mankind will fall, too.

When twelve years after a Mother Spore Field developed in Menden, the doctors were ready. They triumphed and created the Festering. But the battle wasn't over. In Pollen and Franka, it had only just begun.

PROTECTORATE

In 2513, the Spitalians joined the Justitian Protectorate, but they contended successfully for privileges that basically guaranteed them independence: They granted the Judges no rights on Spital grounds and limited their access to the Appendix, the outer ring with the sick bays. Additionally, they demanded participation in hygienic and medical issues; furthermore, Spitalians armed with Mollusks were to guard the city gates.

Was that all?

No. But the last issue was contentious: The doctors demanded permission to hunt and kill Psychonauts and Leperos in the Protectorate in general, especially

in Justitian. The Judges opposed them by saying that everyone within the city limits had to be judged by the Codex (which contains no Psychonaut law). Endless discussions in the Senate ensued; provocations within the city limits escalated to fights, doctors were arrested and freed again by Preservists.

But the time for talk is over now, since the Clans keep harassing the Protectorate with assaults. Those who want to make a deal with the Judges today must fight for Justitian. This is exactly what the Consultants offer: Spitalian platoons march against the Cockroach Clan at the Judges' side and guard frontier cities.

So as far as the Psychonauts and the spore-afflicted in the Protectorate are concerned: Hunt them, burn them, and then step back into the ranks!

HYGIENICS

The fear of germs and bacteria is deeply ingrained in the Spitalians and can at least partially be explained by historical events. Large letters on the corridor walls still call out "Never again!", "Negligence sealed their fate" and "Never forget!" and thus remind them of the first wave of refugees and of HIVE. Centuries later, the Sepsis joins this pantheon of horrors.

Hygienic determines a Spitalian's daily life.

The complete purification when entering the Spital is a part of this heritage. A stranger would consider it torture. First the enema that flushes bacteria from the bowels, then the hydration with several liters of water, at least ingested orally. Next is the outer purification:

MOLLUSKS

Sepsis afflicts organic tissue and penetrates it with extremely tenuous hairs. As soon as the mycelium web reaches a critical mass in humans, the well-known psychonautic mutations occur – people lose their identity to an Earth Chakra. The Spitalians use this fact: Bovine muscle fibers are put into a nutrient solution (called "amniotic fluid" in Spitalian jargon) together with active Sepsis spores. The solution is enriched with epigenetic surrogates facilitating a spore infection and binding toxins to prevent decay. This brew needs several days to ripen, and then the doctors relocate the now infected muscles into glasses with fresh nutrient solution. They pull a membrane across the opening, allowing them to inject fresh nutrient solution and so-called gauging substances later.

Those who are not in the know do not recognize that the cramped mass floating lazily in the water – that is called "Mollusk" because of its similarity to snails – is much more than some bizarre trinket. But when Psychonauts or spore-afflicted people get close to such a container, the muscle cramps spasmodically. Time and again it beats against the glass hard; the dull knocking grows to a frenzied staccato the closer the Mollusk gets to the active spore source. The trembling tissue beats the liquid to a foaming froth until the final infarct. But the Mollusk only reacts to living beings that have opened the channel to an Earth Chakra through their spore infestation: spore-ridden Psychonauts, Burners on the drug and carriers of the Seed. The glass cylinder with Mollusk is standard equipment. It is built as an add-on for the Splayer.

The whole-body shaving and disinfection with a vile brew that burns the skin and reddens the eyes. The specially trained Hygienists watch this procedure, check the excrements, and report to their supervisors if anything should come up. The procedure is exhausting, but the Spitalians consider it redemption, a "de-fearing" as it unties the knot of anxiety in their chest and certifies that they have the necessary purity. The danger of being considered a Leperos – the Spitalian term for a spore-afflicted human – hangs like Damocles' sword above them all, no matter where they stand in the hierarchy.

PRIMER KNOWLEDGE

The people trust the Spitalians' knowledge about the Primer, the Sepsis and the Psychonauts. That's why the hint that insects carry spores led to exaggerated, panicky reactions in Borca: In every settlement, glowing wires now lure moths to a blinding death, rags suffused with glue and sugar water comb the air for flies, and ants and bugs die from poisoned bait. The people fear the Sepsis less than a Spitalian platoon finding Sepsis in their village.

The doctors carry the myth of their omniscience like a shield and give the people simple basics. That's all they need and that they can stand.

Behind every scrap of knowledge, there are years of exploration, expeditions to the crater rims and battles against Aberrants. Ten thousand doctors have sacrificed themselves on the altar of science, hit by spores, driven insane by Dushani and crushed in gravitational traps by Psychokinetics.

The libraries fill up, and it was only a few years ago that the Epigeneticists established a few general rules

NOUMENON

The Noumenon Vocalizer translates the Psychonauts' and their Earth Chakras' ether call into a sequence of tones. Thanks to the Chroniclers, many Vocalizers have displays or plotters now (they're often called visualizers) to make the amplitudes visible. At the devices' center is a Mollusk that receives the ether vibrations – just like in the Splayer variety, only those electrodes are inserted into the Noumenon Mollusk. An amp transfers the pulses to the oscillating membrane and visualization aids. During their studies, Spitalians get an introduction to the way the Vocalizers work and can recognize and interpret simple signatures.

with their histone theory. Experimental agents boil in fermenters; captured Psychonauts are used to test their reaction to changing temperatures, typhus or leprosy. Soil samples from the craters are checked for residues from the original Primer. Phenomena are registered and studied.

Today, every Spitalian knows about the Primer, the differences between the Raptures, knows how to shield against them. He has already pulverized Sepsis between his fingers and watched it grow in lab experiments. The results of a spore field's metamorphosis are as canonical as the dosage of EX, the cure-all against spore infestation.

But not all information is freely available in the Spital. The research groups and the Consultants leading them keep common Spitalians from entering their libraries. Why? What secrets should the HIVE research group have – or the prosthetics research group?

HUMANITY'S SAVIORS

The Spitalians see themselves as the last bastion against the Primer and its ilk. If they fall, the world will fall under the assault of the spore-afflicted. The human era would be over. Who would dare criticize or stop them under these circumstances? In the end, everyone must answer one question and one question only: Is he with the Spitalians or with the Aberrants and thus against Humanity? Time runs out, the battles get increasingly brutal. There is no more time to explore the depths between those two extremes. Choose carefully.

The Anabaptists made their choice. Like brothers they stand at the Spitalians' side, but not because they share their knowledge, but because they have come to the same results through faith.

The Hellvetics watched the Aberrants with amazement for a long time, but they ignored their expansion. Probably too long. For the Psychokinetics' Filaments already cut into the Alpine Fortress, sending a stream of ticks and fleas into endless tunnels. Who knows what the mountain already breeds at its core? For the first time, they have asked the Spitalians for help. It's not going to be the last time.

Other Cults have not chosen sides yet or spread Sepsis through negligence or by choice, like the Burn smugglers among the Apocalyptics. They cannot expect mercy from the Spitalians.

FIELD WORK

Day by day, hosts of Spitalians walk through the wasteland, exploring the Psychonauts' domain, fighting the Sepsis and aiding people in the daily battle against diseases.

They are clad in impermeable neoprene suits. Holes in the crook of the arm, on the upper arms and on the neck, closed by membranes, make injections possible without the need to disrobe and thus get in contact with the plague-ridden atmosphere. Urine is channeled into a bottle fixed to the thigh via a tube to be checked for germs and spores in the Spital later. In plague areas, an ample supply of disinfecting lime is mandatory. When there is danger of infection, it is smeared over the whole body, especially unguarded areas like the skull.

BLOOD AND SWEAT

There is hard work in the Appendix. Daring experiments with unknown pathogens and field work create incalculable risks – risks that the Consultants consider necessary but that create long death lists in the lower echelons. To fill up the ranks, the Spitalians therefore need a permanent supply of young, intelligent people.

The low-ranking Orderlies have the first conversation with the Recruits. They can report the exertions of the job in the most colorful way.

But only a madman would do that voluntarily, right? Probably. If they didn't promise to exchange his meaningless existence for a life in the service of Humanity, they promised praise, gratitude, daily rations of drugs, and a powerful community on top.

Only the hardy ones dared to take the next step after such a conversation and sign up with the Spital. That's fine. Wimps in the Appendix would first wither, then break and finally die from one of the countless plagues. Ah, and shortly thereafter rise skywards from one of the many crematories. Those who carry a Spitalian suit must live up to that symbol.

On the day that the Recruits scratch their X on the splotchy recruitment form to testify their willingness to join, their true battle begins.

CAREER

When the Recruits don their leather aprons, they first have to get rid of their past – it's one or the other. Whether you're the scion of a meritorious Surgeon or had to watch your family being taken away by body carts as a dirty truss in the Appendix and an Orderly took care of you: All Spitalians start their career in the Appendix's lingering illness, with no short cuts or perks due to their pedigree.

As a Recruit, the young Spitalian collects experience and learns to accept the ichor-suffused reality. The first step is easily taken, and he can call himself an Orderly. He is burdened with more responsibility that accompanies him until he starts studying medicine as a Famulancer. New perspectives arise: Which departments is he interested in, what are his skills? While Famulancers walk the Spital's chalked halls and discuss germ theory in an academic atmosphere with like-minded people, their honeymoon period is only brief: A Consultant forms a platoon to defend Danzig? Marching orders can reach everyone who hasn't made himself indispensable elsewhere: He goes to the Surgeons' dissecting rooms, offers to clean the fermenters, helps at the Hygienist gates, cleans surgical instruments. Simple tasks one and all, but he shows interest and initiative – and makes himself useful. The clock stops, they do not have to fear impressments anymore, and a new life in the halls of the Surgeons, Epigeneticists, Pharmacists, Hygienists, Anaesthesiologists, Hippocrats or general practitioners begins.

So far, the Famulancer is only an afterthought in the department. Years later, he will prove his worth to the department's representative: a passed exam strengthens his position and allows him to bear his department's title.

From now on, the rungs of the career ladder are few, fragile and far apart. At the top of the department is its representative (who can be male or female) who deals out jobs and responsibilities. Only the Consultants stand above him – they shape the doctors' ideology and specify their goals.

The Registrar is the Consultants' voice; he passes on orders to the departments and will become the next Consultant – if he perseveres that long.

After 60 years of hard work in the service of the Spital, Spitalians are awarded the title of Elder; a genuflection before old age. They can pass on responsibilities to proxies, they meet and debate. Only they are allowed to criticize Consultants.

Finally, the Preservists: They exist outside the hierarchy. Those who discern themselves from the masses through an extreme mindset or extreme deeds (or better: disqualifies himself from belonging to the masses) might be called to Arnsberg by Representative Kranzler himself. There, several years of training begin during which the aspirant's mind is shattered and rebuilt as a mosaic according to Kranzler's wishes. The Preservists' job? To defend the Spital and humanity – and to do things that would be just too much for a common Surgeon.

THE SPITAL

THE OUTER RING: APPENDIX

Summer drives the cold from the tundra. The soil thaws; blue and red blossoms explode in to cool teal. People step from their huts, stretching towards the sun and getting rid of their furs. The land awakens.

For the pathogens, a new year has begun. The warmth tickles bacteria from their hibernation; cesspits spew dysentery, cholera, and typhus into the villages. Lice and ticks burst from their eggs to ambush humans – carrying spirochetes, hepatic viruses and yersinia pestis. Death's arsenal.

The Spitalians have long since ridden out to disinfect septic tanks and open bodies of water and to vaccinate the citizens of Justitian. Still, they cannot completely suppress the epidemics.

Every year, a stream of diseases pushes through the Black Lungs' city canyons towards the Spital. The access roads have been freed from wreckage and old cars by healed people as a means to give thanks. Stone altars along the way speak of the healed people's thankfulness. Colorful ribbons flutter on poles, wreaths made of weeds and animal sacrifices lie half-buried in the dust.

No one can say for sure where exactly the ruin field turns into the outer sick bays and when this transition is complete. Suddenly, a newcomer stands amidst wheezing, rag-clad figures, passes tents and smells vomit and Sepsis.

The Spitalians coolly call this area "Appendix", an unloved appendage. Their Recruits and Orderlies register every arrival, make a first diagnosis, name the price for the treatment and put the diseased one up according to their illness. The area is strictly divided into sick bays for the various diseases: the cholera quarter, the plague alley, the dysentery avenue, etc.

In busy times, the Appendix is a city full of flickering life. In times of helplessness, it's a necropolis stinking of decay. Some of the dark, towering buildings are labeled with warning signs crudely painted with red paint and broad brushes that cover the building's entire facade. Other buildings are only charred concrete skeletons, cleansed of germs by fire bursts from Spitalian burners. Tents and huts made from metal scraps sprout in the many overcrowded quarters. No one dares leaving their assigned area.

As bizarre as it may seem, among all the ragged, mucus-spitting and slowly dying people, there is a normal kind of life in this city of the damned. Families stay with their diseased members, fulfilling menial tasks; beggars press themselves against the walls of houses and ask for food and water; merchants covering their mouths and noses with wet rags offer processed fruit, tubers, and lichen at

exaggerated prices. The Spitalians' options in this area of long-time sickness are limited, and many who have traveled from afar die horribly while waiting for overburdened doctors who fight through streams of whimpering people day by day. There are nights when the wind comes from the southeast and one swears that the crying and moaning of the dying ones can be heard as far as the Tech Central in the distance, but there, you hear at most an anxious sigh.

No one in the Appendix can be sure not to end up like the dying man in the hut next door. Only goods or drafts heighten the chance of survival, for with them you can buy passage through the fortified gates to the Corpus.

THE INNER RING: CORPUS

In the middle of the Appendix, there is a wall of interlaced concrete elements. In many places, it has been expanded and extended by unfinished high-rise bunkers. On the battlements, Spitalians stand guard, staring grimly down into the Appendix, their Fungicide Rifles at the ready. The message is clear. No diseased person may pass the disinfection basins without authorization!

Beyond the wall, there is the Corpus. This inner ring was once supposed to add warehouses, parking garages, labs and operating theatres to the Spital. The complex was never finished. Now, bunker foundations jut from the ground like dental necks. Pillars form concrete forests, steel trusses hint at roofs. The roads are channels cutting through this bunker world, their billabongs leading into the research groups' labs and storage rooms via ramps. The main axis from the gates to the central Spital are the Corpus's lifelines. Everyone here knows his way around and walks it as unswervingly as an ant follows its queen's pheromone trail. No stranger will ever have to keep his bearings in the Corpus. The few diseased who have bought better treatment are brought into the public hospitals by the gates at once where they stay until they're cured. And they better not violate their house arrest. The Corpus is a dangerous place. In the high-security labs, the results of plague tests on animals are researched, and next to them, ramps lead down in the subterranean storage facilities for spore and plague victims. Almost no other place in the wasteland has the same potential to end mankind.

SPITAL

The Spital itself resembles a fortress. An elongated concrete bar with its tank towers and other structures is being expanded in several places by extensions belonging to various departments. The overhanging floors of the main bar throw shadows on the lower floors and darken the surrounding trench. A Spitalian who descends and stomps through the red dust encounters a hated part of Spital history. A lantern's light falls upon iron plates and walled-off windows; scars mar the walls that are fire-blackened over many meters. Someone tried in vain to break through here.

No one has to go down there. Bridges span this chasm, which is more than five steps wide at the main portals. Those who want to enter this hoard of infinite knowledge must have their urine tested for spore infestation by the Hygienists. A complete purification in the disinfection bath completes the check-up, cleanses the body and caresses the soul – we are pure, the outside dangers stay outside. The Spitalian takes a bag of shrink-wrapped clothing, tears it open, and puts on the white linen top and pants. His equipment will be cleaned and stored for him.

Every Spitalian works towards the day when he may

THE ECHEIN SPIDERS

This blood-red and (including legs) palm-sized arachnid has been cross-bred with related species of spiders time and again by doctors since the Spital was founded, a process that has always been subject to strict selection. The result is a breed with potent net and poison glands. The latter excrete a milk-white liquid that is said to have properties similar to Vitamin C: It precludes decay and can be used to treat deficiency symptoms. Thousands of these Echein spiders were located in the Corpus's subterranean caverns, but quickly spread across all of the Spital and attacked the vast insect population. Today, the doctors rarely find cockroaches or moths in the corridors.

But the task actually assigned to the arachnids is a completely different one: They spin cocoons around plague-ridden corpses and thus conserve them for later examinations. In the caverns, hundreds of cocoons stick to the walls. The energy consumption of a cold storage house to keep all these preserved full-body specimens would be way beyond the Spital's capacities.

These days, there are countless Echein spiders. Those spiders' huge nets are said to already have been seen in the ruins close to Justitian.

finally walk the chalk-white, brightly lit corridors. He will find a place amidst the libraries, reading rooms, labs and factories, amidst generators and fermenters.

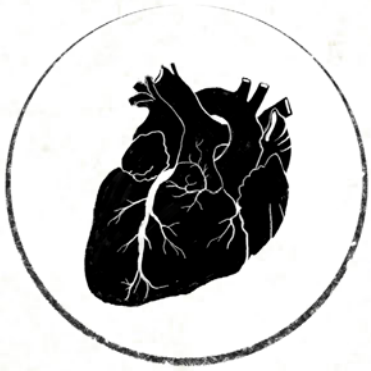
If he joins a department, he moves to its wing. The Surgeons have several operating theatres, an auditorium and the Panopticon where they exhibit medical curios for their colleagues. Presumably not just to shock new arrivals.

Intensive care right next to the operating theatres is the domain of the Anaesthesiologists. Next to it is the general medical wing. Patients don't have to go far from bed to surgery. Needing room, the Pharmacists use a complete building block. It is home to the Community Pharmacy (where drugs are handed out), several reading rooms and labs where fermenters and stills bubble and rustle day and night. Epigenetics counts as the most modern department, its wing fully electrified. The Hippocrats have taken over the second floor, monitoring compliance with statutes and ethical rules. From here, they can descend into every department without going through the lobby. They like it that way. The rest of the doctors don't. The second floor is also home to the secret archives with dossiers on rogue doctors and the printing facility.

Everything is in the Hippocrats' hands. The Hygienists feel at home everywhere, but of course they also have their own wing with de-sporeing chambers as well as bodysuit maintenance. The sign above the entrance says "South Wing II". Those who enter here will get to feel what Hygienists think of hygienics.

Additional landmarks in the Spital are the registry, the public library, the garages, the prosthetics workshop and the arsenal behind "Gate 6". Here, the Spitalians can get weapons and expedition equipment, provided they have a warrant. Phosphor grenades and gas cartridges are built in the pharmaceutics wing; for security reasons, chemical and biological weapons are not stored for more than 24 hours in the arsenal.

Those who come across doors with the warning word "HIVE" sprayed upon them should simply keep walking. HIVE victims broke into the cellars centuries ago and died there. No one ever retrieved the bodies. To this day, no one knows if the HIVE survived in the bones, and no one wants to find out.



AT THE CENTER: COR

The Cor is considered the Spital's heart, complete with forecourts (the disinfection gates), cardiac valves (Preservists guard the doors), ventricles (labs and dorms) and sometimes ventricular fibrillation (the meetings of the board of Consultants). Actually, it's rather two hearts, for there are several hundreds of meters of corridors between the Consultants' chamber at the Ziggurat (a monolithic structure) and the block consisting of the research groups' labs, private chambers, a power plant and experimental diagnosis with electron-scan microscope and tomographer.

Still the same is true for both areas: Only those who are completely spore-free and can prove it may pass through the disinfection gates. Behind them, the Preservists wait. They let no one pass who has no access permit signed by a Consultant or one of his proxies.

RANKS SPITALIANS

1 - RECRUIT

They are young, smart and have been noticed by the Spitalians. Put in a suit, they fulfill the menial tasks of the Appendix. After their shift, they plough through texts of the Bygone, especially the spelling book. Their goal is to learn the written language.

Those who are not fluent in it after two semesters are dishonorably discharged. “Stupidity is a disease that even we cannot cure.” Pressure is high, bloodshot eyes tell of long nights of studying, diseases mark the exhausted bodies. Many cannot bear it and collapse. This weakness is often seen as “apraxia”, the truant laziness – a severe accusation that can only be punished by exile.

Only a small, hardcore group makes it to the exams after four semesters.

2 - ORDERLY

They can read and write, understand simple medical books, have mastered the triage and act upon it. They change bandages, open purulent blisters, put broken limbs in splints. It will be a while until they can leave the sick bays for the Cor, but they are on a steady course.

3 - FAMULANCER

Shoulder to shoulder they stand in front of the eight Consultants, saluting snappily, while the Spitalian banners crackle in the wind above. They are Famulancers now – medical students. They can move freely within the Spital, spend day and night in the libraries, or offer their services to the other departments. Those who do not get a job with them or seek adventure outside are sent out into the dust with the platoons, armed with a Splayer and a Fungicide Rifle.

4 - FIELD MEDIC

An ill-respected department of the Spital, Field Medics fight side by side with the Famulancers, crawling through the mud to patch up torn bodies. In the Spital, they are the diseased’s first contact, diagnosing and naming the price for treatment. They have a broad medical knowledge.

4 - HYGIENIST

Be it germs or Sepsis, in the end it’s contamination that harms the people and the land. The Hygienists check if the purity laws are being followed. They certify and protect food and rooms. They maintain the security doors in the Spital and the disinfection basins in Justitian. They are everywhere, pressing test strips to lab desks, measuring germ and spore infestation, attacking spore fields and hunting Leperos. They counsel and punish.

4 - SURGEON

Complex operations that Field Medics cannot perform are the Surgeons’ domain. They are masters of the scalpel and know human anatomy like no one else.

4 - EPIGENETICIST

Epigenetics is the study of trigger molecules within human genes and the specific molecules the Primer modifies. Led by Consultant Dr. Holtz, the research department is dominated by the Epigenetics research group.

Epigeneticists depend on technology in order to analyze genomes and synthesize highly complex inhibitors. Training in the Bygone’s procedures is just as important as the knowledge of genetic and epigenetic basics. Yet to be able to develop inhibitors and epigenetic surrogates, this practical branch must obtain tissue samples or even whole Psychonauts. Their need for these experimental agents predestine them to fight Psychonauts.

4 - PHARMACIST

In every public hospital and even in the Spital itself, the Pharmacists are charged with maintaining the drug supply. They have free access to the pharmacies.

The center of their work is the consultation hall of the Spital’s huge pharmacy, the so-called Community Pharmacy. There, they take drug orders and hand out compounds. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. The true work is done at the vats and fermenters in the pharmaceutical factories, and in the field, where they look for samples, catalog them, and attempt to grow them in the Spital’s greenhouses.

4 - HIPPOCRAT

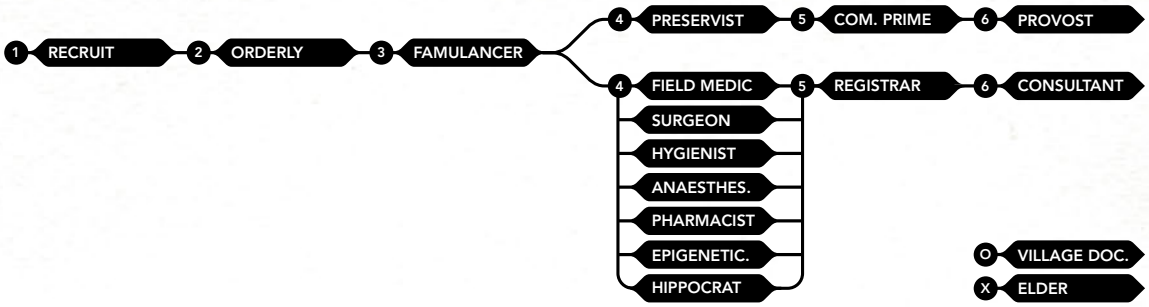
Hippocrats represent the Spital to the outside world and serve as the consultants and watchers of Justitian’s Senates. The Hippocrats monitor the departments‘ cooperation and watch the research groups. They are the Spital’s conscience; its moral and ethic foundation who follow up on complaints about doctors.

4 - ANAESTHESIOLOGIST

Intensive care is their forte. Anaesthesiologists send their patients into a dreamless sleep and watch over them while the Surgeons do what must be done. Then in the days after, they care for the weakened bodies.

Anaesthesiologists, however, do not only save lives. They also take them. For the poison gas cartridges that have destroyed many a Leperos village also comes from their labs and deft hands.

HIERARCHY AND RANKS - SPITALIANS



5 - REGISTRAR

The Registrar works for several Consultants and oversees the work of the doctors in the Spital and the Cor. Particularly, he must watch for compliance to the Spital's moral and ethics code. His professional qualification is that of an experienced doctor. Should a Consultant die or quit due to his age, the Registrar takes his place, and a doctor chosen by the remaining Consultants becomes the new Registrar.

6 - CONSULTANT

Standing at the top of the Spitalian hierarchy, the eight Consultants are considered the Spital's undisputed rulers. The Consultants pull the strings behind the scenes without revealing their motives. They give new directives and set the organization's course without tolerating any debate, and they possess the power to see their decisions through. It remains a mystery where this course will lead, how it will be implemented, and which means will be used.

4 - PRESERVIST

In spite of its sober and scientific approach, the Spitalian organization is a hotbed for numerous legends. The Preservists are a very real one.

On black stallions with gas masks, they lead platoons of Spitalians into battle against the Sepsis. With their Preservalis sword, they cut through the Aberrants' ranks or destroy Leperos villages with mustard gas cartridges. Their faces behind the gas masks may show fear, but their deeds speak of ruthlessness. They are long since beyond any doubt.

The Preservist Corps does not take orders from Hippocrats, Consultants, or Elders. It forms its own group within the Spitalians, independent but with strong ties to the leading echelon. Its HQ is the fortress Arnsberg; there aspiring Preservists are trained after their appointment, receive the sword hallowing, and ride out to fight.

5 - COMMANDO PRIME

Representative Kranzler has been leading the Preservist Corps undisputedly for years. He swats aside any attempts to control him from the Hippocrats like an annoying fly. He is aided by the Commando Primes, each of them closer to hell than to heaven. Kranzler does not want bulldogs, but individuals willing to use their personal intelligence and experience to damage the enemy as much as possible.

6 - PROVOST

The Provost officially does as the body of Consultants says – but what do these old farts know of the war? Representative Kranzler has long since severed the ties once intended to bind him.

0 - VILLAGE DOCTOR

The Spital consumes enormous amounts of food and energy to keep up the health machinery in the Appendix. While their ill patients cover their costs, the Spital does not generate enough profit to afford expeditions to Pollen and Franka. Of course the Justitian Protectorate would gladly – and not completely altruistically – take care of the Spital's needs, but so far, the doctors refuse to surrender completely to the Judges.

Thanks to the so-called Village Doctors, surrender isn't necessary either. The Spital rents doctors to foreign villages and cities, demanding food, oil, craftsmen, and mercenaries in exchange for services rendered. Village duty is generally considered a punishment. Merely the threat of having to work amongst the uneducated, vulgar savages is reason enough for many Spitalians to work harder and ruthlessly score off potential competitors. Doctors straggling in their studies or of dubious opinions quickly find themselves in a remote village, far from worthy company.

X - ELDER

The only age-related title in the Spital, which every Spitalian receives after 60 years of hard work. It entitles them to name a proxy for taxing jobs and field work. Mostly, a doctor aspiring to be a Registrar is picked. Five of the eight Consultants in office are Elders.

FUNGICIDE RIFLE

STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS

Though we share common goals, they are full of misconceptions. But we cannot afford to be too picky when it comes to our allies.

ANUBIANS

Black devils giving us a hard time in Qabis. They have entered an unholy symbiosis with those Psychovores. At home, we'd call them Psychonauts.

APOCALYPTICS

They carry Sepsis into the cities. Purely for their own needs with no regard for the consequences. True, not all of them are bad; some make good carriers. But if this war has taught us one thing, it's that sometimes innocents have to burn to fight a potential danger.

CHRONICLERS

They're smart. It's obvious they pull the strings behind the scenes. They've beguiled the Judges and Scrappers. As far as we're concerned, they're maintaining some machines in the Spital already.

CLANNERS

The people. We protect them from diseases and Sepsis, and they feed us. This arrangement has been working for centuries now.

HELLVETICS

Hellvetics are modern highwaymen collecting money from the most profitable bridge in all of Europe. They've been opening up since the infestation of their tunnels. It's only a matter of time before an alliance is struck.

JEHAMMEDANS

Since they avoid Burn, spore infestation is virtually unknown amongst the Jehammedans. One less worry. In the Adriatic lowlands, we fought them for a while. Let's hope they are not unforgiving.

JUDGES

We've had our altercations. Once we have destroyed the Clans, we'll see where we stand and what parts of our alliance we can transfer into peace times.

NEOLIBYANS

The Chroniclers say the blacks eat children. We cannot confirm this. In Qabis, they're on their best behavior. They love their land and they're worried. Somehow, that makes them our brothers.

PALERS

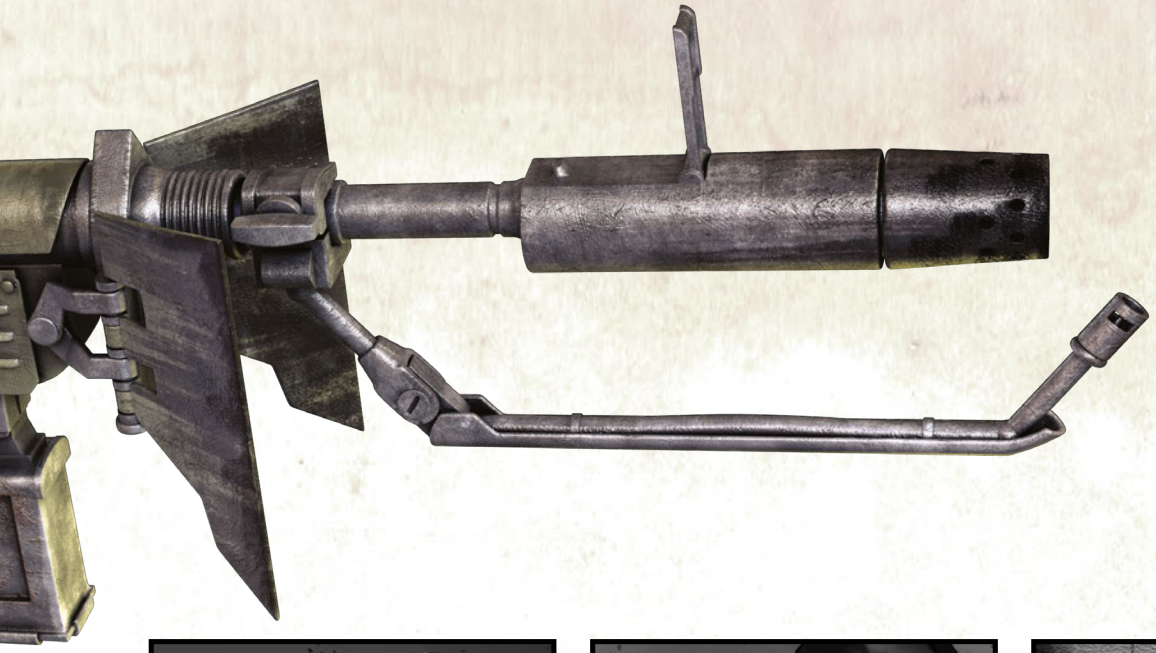
Sickly figures hiding in holes as soon as there's danger on the horizon. Not very astonishing after all these years of incest. Still, they could pave us the way to the Balkhan.

SCOURGERS

African warriors. In Qabis, they protect us, but let's face it. They hate it. And us.

SCRAPPERS

Scrappers are poor bastards, living in the dirt and dying from it. At least that's what our Famulancers think. Actually, Scrappers show less deficiency symptoms than city dwellers. They have mastered the wasteland, so they get by.



NIKOLAI WORSCHEK

Culture: Pollen
Concept: The Seeker
Cult: Spitalians (Preservist)

As a Preservist, he was the main representative of the Danzig detachment. He became known as one of the first Sappers who ventured deep into the heart of Pollen. Once unswerving and infamous for his sixth sense when it came to detecting spore fields and Psychonauts, he is inwardly rotten due to his Burn addiction. For now, he can hide his addiction from his subordinates, but it's a risky gamble.

ALMA MARTINOVA

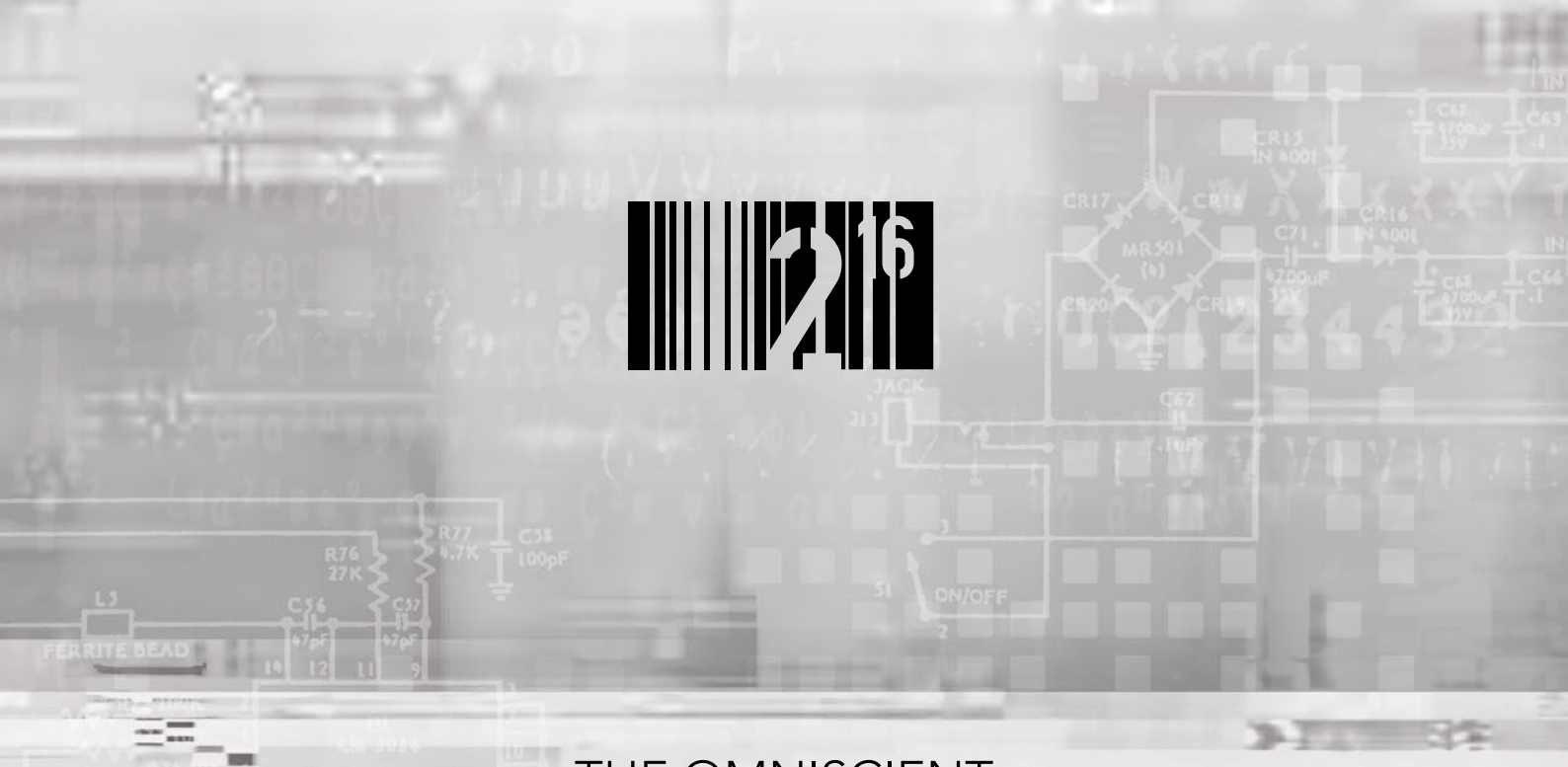
Culture: Borca
Concept: The Heretic
Cult: Spitalians (Famulancer)

Alma was transferred to Souffrance for disciplinary reasons by the Consultants after she had refused to lead an attack on a Borcan Leperos enclave. This proved to be a good decision for the Spital, as well as for Martinova. Since then the Famulancer is part of Franka's resistance in Souffrance, organizing assassinations of the ruling Pheromancers' flunkies and destabilizing the crater metropolis's balance of power.

DR. HERNEZ VASCO

Culture: Hybrispania
Concept: The Hermit
Cult: Spitalians (N/A)

Dr. Hernez Vasco has been on the run since the Pandora expedition in 2562. When last seen in 2570, he exhibited tremendous strength and agility. Since then, he has disappeared in the tundra. Rumors spread around the mysterious doctor like ivy. Some say he became immortal after a devil's pact with the Primer itself. Gossip around his legend is never-ending, particularly among younger Spitalians.



THE OMNISCIENT CHRONICLERS

DIGITAL

Reflections danced across round mirror shades with every movement. Framed in dull metal, they are embedded in a black leather mask like glittering insect eyes, staring cold and silent into a world lit with flashes, but otherwise dark. The mask tightly presses to the nose and the forehead. Nimble fingers fumble with the clasps at the back of the head, tightening them until the leather is like a second skin. The frames of the glasses are now pressed tightly around the eyes, tubes are pushed into the mouth. A microphone membrane transmits the sound of every breath, every wheezing of the lungs and the squelching of the saliva-covered tubes to an amp hanging in front of the chest by a two finger-thick cables. The sounds are distorted and produce grotesque feedback as they mingle with the static noise and the mumbling of hundreds of speakers in the background. From time to time, feedbacks tear through the sea of sound, echoing through the metal corridors for seconds.

The Chronicler does not register any of this. His masked face drowns in the darkness of the cowl he wears. The coin-sized pieces of mirror glass embedded into the cape's shoulders reflect the light of the ember monitors staring down from the walls in a chaotic arrangement like the multi-faceted eyes of a spider.

The Chronicler leaves his chamber, head bowed, and enters the corridor door. In the glare of light blue lighting, more robed figures pass him by, all wearing a white barcode on their black capes.

They all move with a purpose through the narrow steel corridors, never hesitating at a junction. Monitors with a bizarre sensory array of cameras, barcode scanners and antennae hanging from the ceilings watch the tide of Chroniclers; servo engines whirr and tilt the apparatus from one side to the other and back. The Chronicler does not become part of the tide, he follows the air current carrying the scent of sweat, oil and burnt rubber. He sees the daylight, filtered by red dust clouds, at the end of the corridor. A brother (or sister?) is already waiting for him.

Humbly, he sinks to his knees in front of the guardian, pushes back his cowl and opens the upper clasp of his mask. With both hands, he folds down the forehead part and shows a barcode tattooed to pale skin. He feels the scanner's cold metal and registers the red flare of the bar laser out of the corner of his eye. There is a squeaking "Exit!" from the guardian's speaker. He is finally on the outside.

The Chronicler is a small form in front of a giant mesh of wagons, metal plates and steel cables. Solar sails, angled like the scales of some primordial giant, gather warmth in the light of the Borcan sun. Cables thick as a man's arm coil into the depths and feed the Cluster's sleeping heart, embedded in a nutrient fluid of bits and bytes. It will start beating at some

point. At some other point, the Chronicler will not have to go to the Scrappers' halls anymore to appraise and buy artifacts. His brothers and sisters will have no more need of masquerading in front of savages, no longer need to pit Anabaptists against Judges and Judges against Spitalians. For the beating heart will mark the beginning of a new era.

OPEN

For most sects and Cults it is difficult to trace their own origins via family trees or records back into the past through the decades. The records from pre-eschatological times are forever lost, replaced by myths and legends of golden cities and flying humans. The past means nothing, today is everything. This is different for the Chroniclers.

In pre-eschatological times they called themselves Streamers. They were more movement than an organized group. The continuous flow of data linking everything, the Stream, was at the center of their interests and often their lives. The humans were the neurons in its global network; it transmitted the impulses. Entire cultures and humanity's knowledge had merged into the Stream and continued existing within it.

The Eshaton interrupted the flow of data, tore social structures paralleling the web of data. Centuries-old knowledge was lost. The last residues in the minds of the surviving generation were beaten out of their intelligent heads in the era of the beast. The counter had thus been reset to zero. Later on, the Chroniclers started calling the enormous catastrophe in 2073 the Zero Event.

As the world around them rushed toward a new Stone Age and turned to archaic ways of civilization, the Streamers kept alive what little ancient knowledge they were able to salvage. In all of Borca, they collected user manuals, storage devices, boards and server technology. In the first decades, the Streamers were only technophile looters, filling basements with scrap without too much expertise. They were not yet organized, but their desire for the rebirth of the Stream seemed to propel them all down the same path. Still, they lacked a core of crystallization – a charismatic leader, a great technician or Messiah giving their deeds purpose and conjuring up a future.

The year 2102 is considered the year of the founding of the Cult. In the next spring, they built a Central Cluster in a freight yard and electrified the installation's digital heart. A static Stream was back online.

But all Streamcasts that might shed some light on these circumstances are hidden behind cascades of passwords. No one knows the reason. Presumably, the last authorized Chronicler died centuries ago. Since then, the Chroniclers are digging into the data, circumventing security mechanisms, overcoming barriers and installing backdoors. Using newly entered Stream data, the construct bridges across digital deathtraps and skirt defense complexes. But what hides within its core?

START

It didn't take long for a wild bunch of Streamers to form a community that knew only one goal: fully reactivate the Stream. Once the digital heart was beating again and old knowledge began to burst from it, the Golden age would be near. The Streamers want nothing less than to revert to the age before the Eshaton.

Securing the Cologne Cathedral and an adjoining museum with a computer center was the first coordinated step forward. On the surface, they found a bubble of static Stream, extracted it, dissected it, and sank into its core. For years, they mined data, layer by layer. They made a technological leap from the status of a Stone Age cult with residual information to a high-tech organization.

The research was far from complete when Anabaptists stormed the cathedral in 2148. The Chroniclers were no match for these fanatics. They were overwhelmed and nailed to the ancient sacral building's portal as heretics.

The Anabaptists' reign of terror began.
Large amounts of information and technology were destroyed and thus removed from humanity's consciousness. The achievements the Bygones had gathered over centuries fell prey to human stupidity. The Chroniclers fled and hid from their enemies to finally gather in the Central Cluster.

RESET

The defeat at the Cathedral showed the Chroniclers their weakness. In a time when the Anabaptist's blade was sharper than the digital word, their life depended on the mercy of the strong. As supplicants, they would have had to grovel before local warlords and accept a subordinate role to the rabble. They would have never reached their goals. There was only one way out.

From that day on, power through intimidation became their new policy. No stranger has since seen a Chronicler's

face. Shards of mirrored glass were added to their robes. A modulator amp distorts their voices. The Cultists now look and sound like irate gods. But that wasn't enough.

If they had learned one thing from the Stream, it was the fact that information was power. So they made themselves indispensable. A new currency replaced simple trade, issuing so-called Chroniclers' drafts in exchange for artifacts. The consigned counter value of the drafts was pure, condensed information from the think tanks of the Cult. Crumbled sheets of paper with their barcodes and columns of numbers could simply be exchanged for directions to preserved, pre-eschatological storages, spy data, compromising information on enemies, or scientific texts on flora and fauna at the next Cluster. Everything the Chroniclers heard was entered into the always hungry data storages and distilled for redistribution.

Cities could no longer avoid the Cult's influence. Refusing a Chronicler seat on the Council would inevitably lead to all Cultists leaving the city. Not to mention sudden "special" discounts on information regarding their unsuspecting leaders. Soon the Chroniclers needed no mercenaries to secure their interests. The Chroniclers had become an economical factor to the ruling class, and indispensable for a vast network of Scrappers and traders. The well-being of the Chroniclers became crucial to the prosperity of them all.

OPERATING SYSTEM

The Chroniclers' language is strange and eerily monosyllabic to foreigners. For the Streamers, it's a means of intimidation and mystification. Some terms are very common:

Level: The Chronicler's rank. Applicants start on level 1. The Fragments, so at least low-ranking Agents assume, vary between level 20 and 40. Here, the information is contradictory.

Bios: A Chronicler's curriculum vitae stored in the Cluster, including movement patterns, level, achievements, failures and the score that measures their value.

Update: Once the bios shows the necessary scores, the Chronicler is introduced to new responsibilities by a higher-ranking brother or sister and thus reaches a new level.

Redundancy: A record of information already present and yields no new insight.

GENERATION++

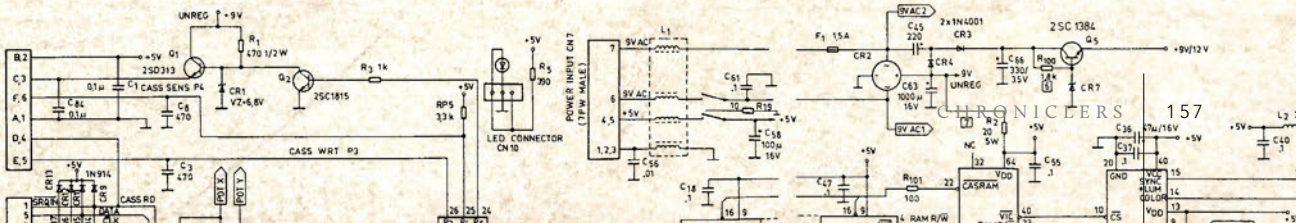
Once it was hard for Chroniclers to bolster their ranks with promising new recruits, because the disciples of technology seemed too weird and too far removed from reality. Nowadays, an exchange with Spitalians allows them to occupy themselves with more important things again. The Cult takes in the children that doctors deem autistic and all youths who've fallen through the cracks due to their physical shortcomings. In the wasteland, strength and endurance are crucial. Children with a great deal of imagination and interests in Bygone writings are usually not good at working the land and thus cost more than they earn. If the Chroniclers want them, all the better. They feed them and give them a chance to survive.

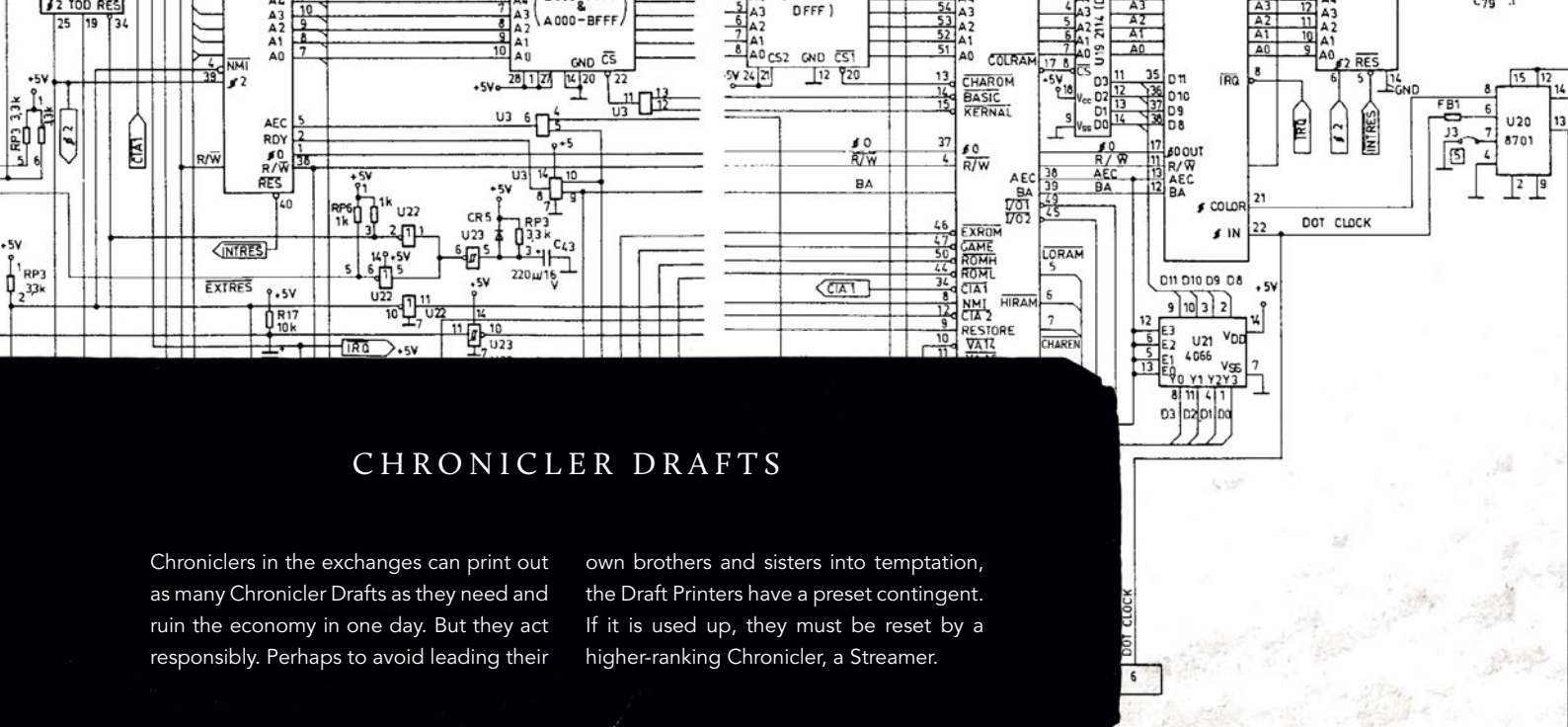
In groups, they are submitted to logical tests by the Chroniclers. If they pass, they are given a mentor. Those mentors become their parents of sorts, and take care of their mentees however and whenever they can. They stand alongside their young recruits when the laser marker burns a unique bar code onto their foreheads. Each recruit is then given a cell in the Cluster, where they live, sleep, learn, and work until their first promotion, their Update. After every Update, their responsibilities change, and it is understood that they move into different security areas within the Cluster. Over the years, a young Chronicler's profile becomes clearer, and every new responsibility better matches his knowledge and skills.

LIFE IN THE CLUSTER

In the Cluster, there are only Chroniclers. They speak the same techno-language and share a dream of fully reactivating the Stream, so that it can reach the whole world and fertilize it with knowledge. The air in the Cluster seems to shiver with excitement. Everyone considers himself part of a great, sublime endeavor.

A barcode on the forehead links each Chronicler to the many databases of the computer systems, which register





CHRONICLER DRAFTS

Chroniclers in the exchanges can print out as many Chronicler Drafts as they need and ruin the economy in one day. But they act responsibly. Perhaps to avoid leading their own brothers and sisters into temptation, the Draft Printers have a preset contingent. If it is used up, they must be reset by a higher-ranking Chronicler, a Streamer.

and constantly updates everyone's value to the core. The tag serves as an access code for restricted areas and a means to follow a Chronicler's career.

The Cult does not believe in chance. Human life is considered predetermined and expressed in a formula. The movement pattern and course of action are registered and entered into the central computer, which in turn enters it into a fractal global formula. This formula is said to be able to calculate each Chronicler's fate. The fate of any human in fact! If only the database could one day surpass the critical mass.

Communication between Chroniclers is very focused on information, free of phrases and full of ancient computer commands. Words are chosen carefully. A Chronicler prefers to speak slowly and deliberately, avoiding any slips of the tongue. Syntax errors are considered brain malfunctions. The brain is considered a machine; the mind its operating system. Only constant updates make it possible to adapt to an ever-changing world.

BEYOND THE STREAM

In Justitian, everyone knows them, and without them, the Tech Central would not exist. Who else would be interested in all the scrap? Yet even beyond the trade routes, their services are held in high regard. Wherever they are, Scrappers appear, followed by Apocalyptics and trade blooms. Every child knows their larger-than-life barcodes, painted on walls in chalk to mark their presence. Their technological knowledge is as legendary as their skills as advisors, emissaries, and informants.

Although they mingle with humans on a daily basis to purchase artifacts, they can hardly be considered down-to-earth. Their appearance is awe-inspiring and intentionally intimidating with their distorted voices.

2 TO THE POWER OF 16

The Eshaton destroyed the Stream's physical component. But it had already stopped flowing before and the Chroniclers do not know why. Was it an overload? Never. Massive node breakdown? Possible, but not probable. In the archives, there are reports on something called the "2 to the power of 16" signature. It had flooded the Stream a few days before the zero event, and it had reached a critical mass only hours before the catastrophe, disrupting all digital communication. It is said that all computers broke down then under the pressure of the signature multiplying itself in fractal coils. Was it the condensed consciousness of an emerging artificial intelligence? Or an autoimmune reaction of the Stream to keep this intelligence from waking up?

The Chroniclers see the signature as a threat, but also as an opportunity. If they make the Stream flow again without better understanding the 2 by the power of 16 phenomenon, they risk losing the work of millennia – the knowledge of all Humanity. Yet if they succeed, there is a chance to update the Stream to a level it has never reached before.

DATA STREAM: NEEDLE TOWER DISASTER

In the year 2563, 16 Fragments were sent across the Reaper's Blow. All of them had garnered pass codes in the service of the Cluster that removed barriers blocking ways deep within. No secret of the Cluster was a mystery to them. They were held in high regard and unquestionably loyal.

Eight of them survived the passage.

Their job was to create a network similar to the West Borcan network. As their first goal with the tower structures called Needle Towers in the East Borcan woods, they endeavored to create a radio connection between the Needle Towers and the Cluster. Indeed, the Fragments conquered the towers and radioed their success to the Cluster.

Then their actions deviated from the plan. They surrounded themselves with an army of whores and mercenaries, and ceased answering requests from the Cluster. Back home on the other side of the Reaper's Blow, there is not much information on the rogues. All information about the rogues is classified. They may neither be sold nor shared within the Order. That said, four of them are known even to the lowest ranks, at least by name.

Chromium and Iridium were said to have founded cities, constructing Needle Towers seen as miracles clad in glass and polished steel communicating via mirrors. Promethium was supposed to expand the radio lines close to Osman into a relay station. According to legends, he had instead dug a tunnel into the great Osman library. Cobalt is the only other Fragment whose name is known. A Shutter claims to have seen him near Praha, where he led a host of savages.

The remaining identities of the rogues have been successfully removed from all databases, though encapsulated and sunk into the core as if their names alone carried power. What were Chrome's and Iridium's atomic numbers again?

As these rogue Fragments grow out of control, the remaining Fragments in the Cluster take extreme measures. They activate Shutters and Fuses – elite Chroniclers whose barcodes have not been registered in the Cluster for years. Their official score is zero. They exist beyond the common system, yet still very much present within an isolated mirror of the static Stream. Only high-ranking Chroniclers know of their existence, and among them, few have the pass codes to issue orders to these unseen Shutters and Fuses. It's better this way. For those few who thrive on the fringes are adept in dark deeds and sanctioned (read: deadly) tools as the most technologically advanced thieves and assassins in this Cult.

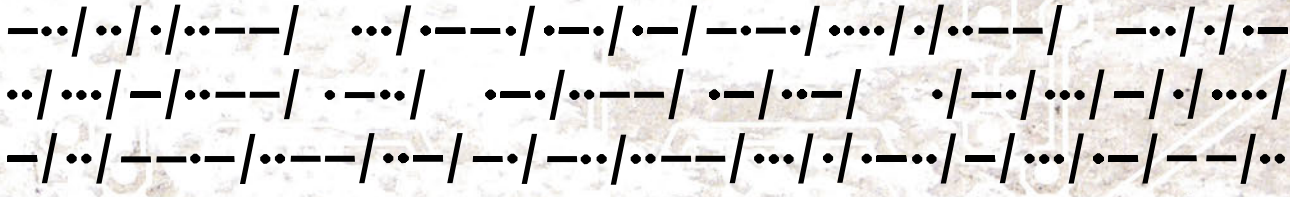
Their bizarre demeanor raise them above the common people. Mysterious superbeings, that's what they aspire to become. And they are seen as such. Is it any wonder that many a Chronicler lives up to this role a little bit too much?

Reserving judgment and without drawing any conclusions, Chroniclers seem to be over-motivated techno freaks whose connection to reality has suffered due to countless electric shocks. Everything Bygone makes them hyperventilate, the Scrappers say. Mostly harmless.

While Chroniclers have been hoarding technology for centuries, everyone knows that they do not dance around it like some idol. From Bygone fragments, a technologically advanced world can arise. Unseen by ignorant eyes, the Clusters eat themselves into the ground, expanding. Knowledge – unfiltered and unsorted – flows through their digital hearts. Thus, the Chroniclers have long since pulled the strings from behind the curtain. In powerful city states like Justitian, they wield true power from behind the throne, preserving society by keeping the peace or bringing war with nothing more than information.

THE WEB EXPANDS

The Central Cluster in Justitian was only the beginning. While the Chroniclers consider it ultimate and unique in its nerve-rending beauty, with its technological proliferation and the constant noise of a thousand distorted speakers, another Cluster arose in Frankan Aquitaine. It is in no way inferior to its Borcan inspiration, neither with regards to its bizarre setup nor its regional influence. In fact, Aquitaine has been steadily rising within the internal ranking over the last few years. East of the rural areas, the



SANCTIONED

Should stroboscopes, loud Vocoders and Tesla rods be unable to repulse attackers, the Chroniclers count on hammers and Splayers. The spirit is strong, but the flesh – ah well. Actually, the Cluster considers it favorable to make its allies feel indispensable in battle. No one considers an organization that is practically unarmed a danger, and no one would welcome an organization in their own capital if it were armed to the teeth. Deadly weapons, thus, have always been considered sanctioned. Chroniclers may not use them.

Shutters have turned their backs to the Cult, though. Officially. That their score is still available is a result of data storage, which is very complicated. It's amazing how unerringly they recognize enemies of the Cult and eliminate them without any help. What about the sanctioned weapons, weren't they registered in the system only days ago?

steel cadavers of planes and ship hulls were joined into a labyrinthine jungle of ancient technology by chain bridges and catwalks. Ships shot to pieces and broken parts of oil rigs hang in the silt like insects in a web, and every day, new flotsam crashes against their steel hulls. More and more Chroniclers go here seeking the special artifacts that wash ashore. Scrappers climb from ship to ship, cutting them apart with arc welders or exploring their cargo holds. With nets, they recover crates from the water. The granulate they toss back into the sea, but the machinery – wrapped in oilcloth and perfectly preserved – they drag to the Chroniclers. They have found quite a lot already! Black steel tubes clinging to one another like lugworms; dull white cubes that even a spur cannot scratch; spindles of light metal wrapped in bands of glowing stones full of cables and boards. The Chroniclers dig into these artifacts like predators, ecstatically dissecting everything they can get their hands on.

Yet they have no idea what it all is. Why have these ships been torn apart? Were humans on board at one point? Perhaps there is some connection to the strange symbols on these ships? No one in Europe has ever seen their linear and circular drawings. Are they letters? No one can even understand or place them. The Scrappers are asked the same question every time they return from their raids with new artifacts. "Corpses?" They shake their heads, snorting or spitting. Forced to give the same response every time, much to their chagrin.

Chroniclers have learned to take that as a "no".

The Clusters in Justitian and Aquitaine are the largest ones, but not the only ones. Smaller Clusters can be found in almost any larger Borcan and Frankan city. The Needle Tower Disaster stopped them from spreading across the Reaper's Blow into eastern Borca and beyond early on. Though the Spitalians had paid their respects to the Order's Fragments and invited them to establish a base in Danzig, Pollen, they had only turned up their Vocoders and answered "Zero!" In the far west, it is the same story. The Cultists' insubordination grows in sync with their distance to the Central Cluster, the Fragments suspect. Plus, their safety is uncertain. While Chroniclers are indispensable in Borca where their sheer presence garners respect and attention, the Hybrispaniards are not so dependent on the Order's mercy. The web is woven more tightly with every passing day, but there are always holes.

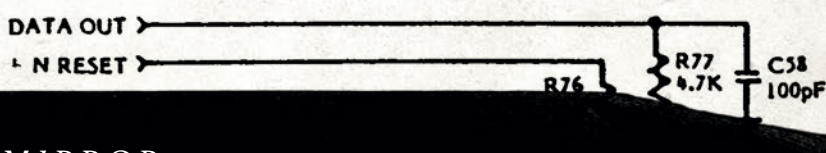
LINKS

Cooperation with the Judges has traditionally been good. Although the Cult's ways of life differ widely, they share a common history. Since the Chroniclers initiated the building of Justitian, the Judges have been at their side. There has never been an official treaty, but both know what they have in each other.

The relationship with the Hellvetics is different.The Chroniclers have always coveted the Alpine Fortress. In its stone labyrinths, ancient computer systems work, managing the Hellvetics' merits and central storage. Endless knowledge and surely a piece of static Stream must be trapped in there. The Chroniclers would love to extract it, but the descendants of the Swiss military have always denied the Cult any kind of access. No reasons given. They do not listen to reason. "Why do you do that?" scream the overloading Vocoders. But the Hellvetics are experts at keeping neutral and are unimpressed by the Chroniclers' demands, regardless how much they whine or struggle to order them around.

The old enmity with the Anabaptists has ceased since the Fragment Modus came to Cathedral City, now enjoying the hospitality of Rebus the Baptist. No one knows what the two of them have been discussing or doing all these months. The Anabaptists as well as the Chroniclers have been ordered to keep the peace between the Cults as long as this hospitality remains undisturbed.

In the meantime, many Anabaptists see Chroniclers as a necessary evil. Someone must dig up the technological corruption that can undoubtedly be attributed to the Demiurge, and that is exactly what the Chroniclers do. Like the bacteria of decay that decompose corpses. "That is about how they smell, too", the Anabaptists joke. No one sees the Chroniclers faces behind their masks. They are grinning. They go out and continue to gather information, spinning the threads of their web.



THE MIRROR

The Clusters hoard enormous amounts of knowledge. The static Stream expands in fractal coils, attached data is assimilated and fills gaps. It approaches a critical mass. This knowledge attracts those who consider it their possession: Since the day Recombination Group's dispensers opened up for the first time, Sleepers have been infiltrating the Chroniclers. They pose as devout followers and climb within the hierarchy. But actually, they have fallen for a trap. Once they dive into the core for the first time, they swim within a world of mirrored data, operating with files and images destined for their eyes only. Meanwhile, transponders record the data flow from their nanite blood and extract pass codes. Should one of them penetrate the mirror anyway, the Cluster's radio masts send a code that will not remain unheard. One of the ancients stirs, flexes its leathery skin and gets up on its mechanical Leg. Her anger is boundless.

11

WHEN THE MILLENNIUM AFTER THE MILLENNIUM BEGINS

MAN WILL TRADE EVERYTHING

EVERYTHING WILL HAVE A PRICE

TREE, WATER AND ANIMAL

NOTHING WILL BE TRULY A GIFT ANYMORE,

AND EVERYTHING WILL BE SOLD.

BUT THEN, MAN WILL NOT BE MORE THAN THE WEIGHT OF HIS OWN FLESH

HIS BODY WILL BE OFFERED FOR SALE AS A POUND OF FLESH

HIS EAR AND HIS HEART WILL BE TAKEN

NOTHING WILL BE SACRED ANYMORE,

NEITHER LIFE NOR SOUL

THERE WILL BE BICKERING ABOUT HIS MORTAL SHELL AND HIS BLOOD

AS IF IT WERE CARRION, READY TO BE RENT.

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

RESISTANCE EQUALS TENSION DIVIDED BY STRENGTH

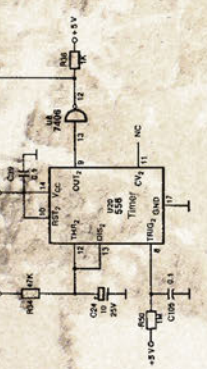
Patterns that remained the same for decades suddenly change. The Cockroach Clan has grown stronger. The Enemoi clan has accessed sealed Streams and sub nodes waiting for their final extraction by a Fragment in at least two places in the wasteland. The Scrappers' movements have become less fractured and more chaotic, avoiding areas claimed by Clans.

The Clans are rising, occupying whole blocks, ambushing Judges and killing them. But these blocks had not been fully combed through yet! The Chroniclers are confused. Their answer is the Paradigmas.

Highly specialized and equipped with advanced technology, they glide into the wasteland amidst a corona of electrical discharges. When they raise their voices, sonic waves paint patterns in the dust. The dirt on windowsills one hundred steps away dances. They are like gods, and they vanquish those who are weak of will and ready to believe. The Clans are their material. Embedded into the system, they become tools. At the same time, flickering walls of images awaken all over Borca. Single panels are missing and clusters of pixels are dead, but the shapes of Chroniclers passing in an endless march are recognizable. The images are jerky and distorted by static noise. For a brief second, full frontal views of masked faces fill the image walls. Then the endless march takes over again.

If someone steps in front of an image wall, a masked face appears, larger than life, its eyeglasses glaring suns. The image pulses. Assignments sent by the Cluster rattle through the speakers. The Paradigmas are impressive, and the image walls attract Clanners from all over the area. The Chroniclers' presence grows.

Solitary Chroniclers on field missions also know how to gain respect. With one pinky of their Streamer gloves, they can dispense electrical shocks. This is where the widely known gesture comes from. If you show someone your pinky, you're sending them a warning. They better stay clear of you. The effect is even more impressive when a Chronicler uses the gesture. Especially when the barely enlightened and superstitious population of the wasteland considers the shocks an innate ability of the Chroniclers.



RANKS CHRONICLERS

1 - BIT

Freshly arrived, the barcode on the forehead still bleeding. A virginal score of zero points makes the Bit practically an invader in the Cluster.

For the first days, it has to beat the sensoria, find a mentor and force him to give up his technological knowledge – and award the Bit some score. After a few weeks, the Bit automatically becomes an Agent. The imminent danger for its life is over. Welcome to the Chroniclers!

2 - AGENT

The everyday duties in the Cluster are carried out by the Agents. With their basic knowledge of electricity, they repair broken sensoria and jammed keys at the terminals without being electrocuted. Most of the times at least. Only rarely are they allowed to leave their Cluster, most often when the exit scanners are in a defective mode.

3 - MEDIATOR

Mediators are constantly coming and going in the Clusters. They are given jobs in the alcoves and on image walls, leading them to other Cults and into the enclaves: making contact, delivering messages. Score++. In the settlements, they do a preliminary analysis of the debris dragged in and estimate a price. The Fragments have already allowed them a first visit in the static Stream of the Central Cluster which raised their knowledge to a new level. They are hungry for more.

4 - STREAMER

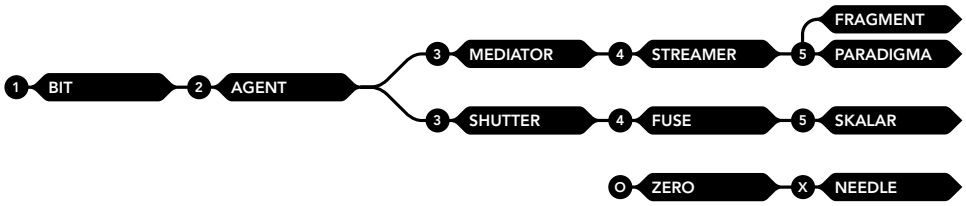
Their knowledge of the Stream and the powers in the background is enormous; every Streamer has enough information to make life a living hell for high-ranking people in Justitian or the Cults. They have only reached this rank by not using it. Discretion is their prime imperative. That's why the Cluster tags them with the functions of "emissary" or "advisor".

5 - FRAGMENT

Little is known about Chroniclers of this rank. They mainly stay in the Cluster's center and have little interest in direct contact with lower ranking brothers or sisters. It is common knowledge that they can access almost all of the Cluster's database. Their knowledge must be immense.

5 - PARADIGMA

The Cluster is too cramped for them. They want to go to the wasteland, into the uncontrolled grids. When the capacitors under their pauldrons hum and energy discharges in bright flashes, when they tune their voices from infrasound to the audible range and order the almost



naked Clanners to kneel down, they correct the image of the somewhat weird, but harmless Chronicler. Paradigmas are illusionists with only one thing on their minds: to appear as a God to the savages, to use them for the Cluster.

3 - SHUTTER

The Chroniclers of the Cluster are a special breed, most of them cannot survive on the outside. Agents who understand that in time are different. Some enter side branches of the decision tree leading away from the official hierarchy. Like Streamers, they get jobs in the alcoves or at the image walls, but they have different goals. They require sanctioned (read: deadly) technology. If they accept, they are registered as Shutters and do the dirty work in the Order's deepest shadow.

4 - FUSE

Successful Shutters become Fuses. The Cluster sees the Fuses as security measures against any kind of threats that will not hear and thus, must feel.

Fuses are injected with a transponder. Thus, they get access to secret parts of the Cluster and wasteland hideaways. Sanctioned technology waits for them there to be used for their jobs. Now, Fuses know quite a lot, especially uncomfortable things with lots of blood, gore, theft and infiltration. This could be a problem for the Cluster should they want to get out. The Needle Tower Disaster has not been forgotten. Maybe that is why the transponder is not just a transmitter...

5 - SKALAR

Shutters fly under the radar, the results of their missions are saved in bits and pieces on local memory. Even a Chronicler with the highest level of access could not trace all movements and actions of a Shutter.

That's why Shutter operations often escalate. Skalars are the best example. They handle Shutters and Fuses, juggle identities and coordinate them. Everyone gets jobs ideally tailored to their abilities. In return, the Skalar gets part of the score and the drafts. That is beneficial for everyone, for the rapidly increasing score gives access to better technology that he supplies everyone with.

0 - ZERO

Zero Score. Once the score falls to zero, the Chronicler is automatically removed from the system. But the Cluster cannot take his knowledge away from him: Zeros still use the Cult as a deposit of resources. The sheer possibility is reason enough for the Fragments to give extermination orders to Shutters. Zeros live a dangerous life that rarely lasts long.

X - NEEDLE

Zeros can go far and aspire to do as the Needle Tower Chroniclers did. As a Needle, they are just that, a needle in the Chroniclers' flesh. Their followers protect them against the Fuses while they expand the knowledge of the Stream and build an arsenal of sanctioned and Free Spirit equipment.

SHOCKER

STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS
Fragment Modus on unknown mission in Cathedral City, potential access to data core. Diffuse conflict, halt embargo. Relay compromising information to Jehammedans only after payment.

ANUBIANS
Africans. Probably of Egyptian origin. Mostly mystic worldview referring to the wheel of life. Comparison to Indian mythology to be done. No opinions.

APOCALYPTICS
Communication problems. Their agenda is indecipherable. Assumption: meaningless structures and confusing way of life. Potentially mad.

CLANNERS
Uncivilized clans see technological artifacts as signs of their gods. They are harvestable resources. High risk, refuse Corporation. Paradigmas sent.

HELLVETICS
Accusation: stemming the flow of information. Refuse access to the data cores of the Fortress, get in the way of our goals. Must weigh future approach extremely carefully.

JEHAMMEDANS
Sect. Attention: extreme threat potential. There is no common ground, intermediaries should work on an interface. They deserve support as a counterpart to the Anabaptists.

JUDGES
Lawful organization protected and civilized by us. Give us safe room for efforts in Borca.

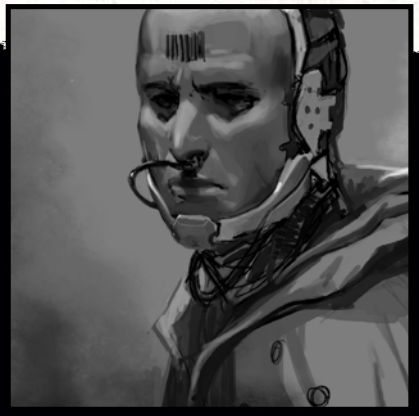
NEOLIBYANS
They are a virus in the system, conjuring conflict of resources. They are bad for the Cluster. Countermeasures are implemented.

PALERS
Guard high-ranking pre-eschatological supplies as guardians of the Sleepers. Mostly degenerated, thus, only limited possibilities of trade. Infiltration attempts have so far been repulsed. Continued recruitment of outcasts.

SCOURGERS
Amazingly advanced with psychology, probably pre-eschatological. Questioning to be done when possible. Attention: dangerous individuals, warrior background.

SCRAPPERS
Their swarm intelligence enables them to perfectly check the ruins. Every successful drone brings us closer to the Stream.

SPITALIANS
Fascist organization claiming to save the world. Primer threat recognized. Worthy of support. They give us time to reactivate the Stream.



EJECT

Culture: Borca
Concept: The Conqueror
Cult: Chronicler (Needle)

He's one of the eight renegade Fragments of the Needle Tower Disaster. In East Borca's conifer forests, he built his own monument in the form of the city of Chromium, although it can never live up to his ego. Out of fear of Chronicler attacks, he gathers clans around the city and makes them hunt everyone who knows how to use technology.

OUTLOOK

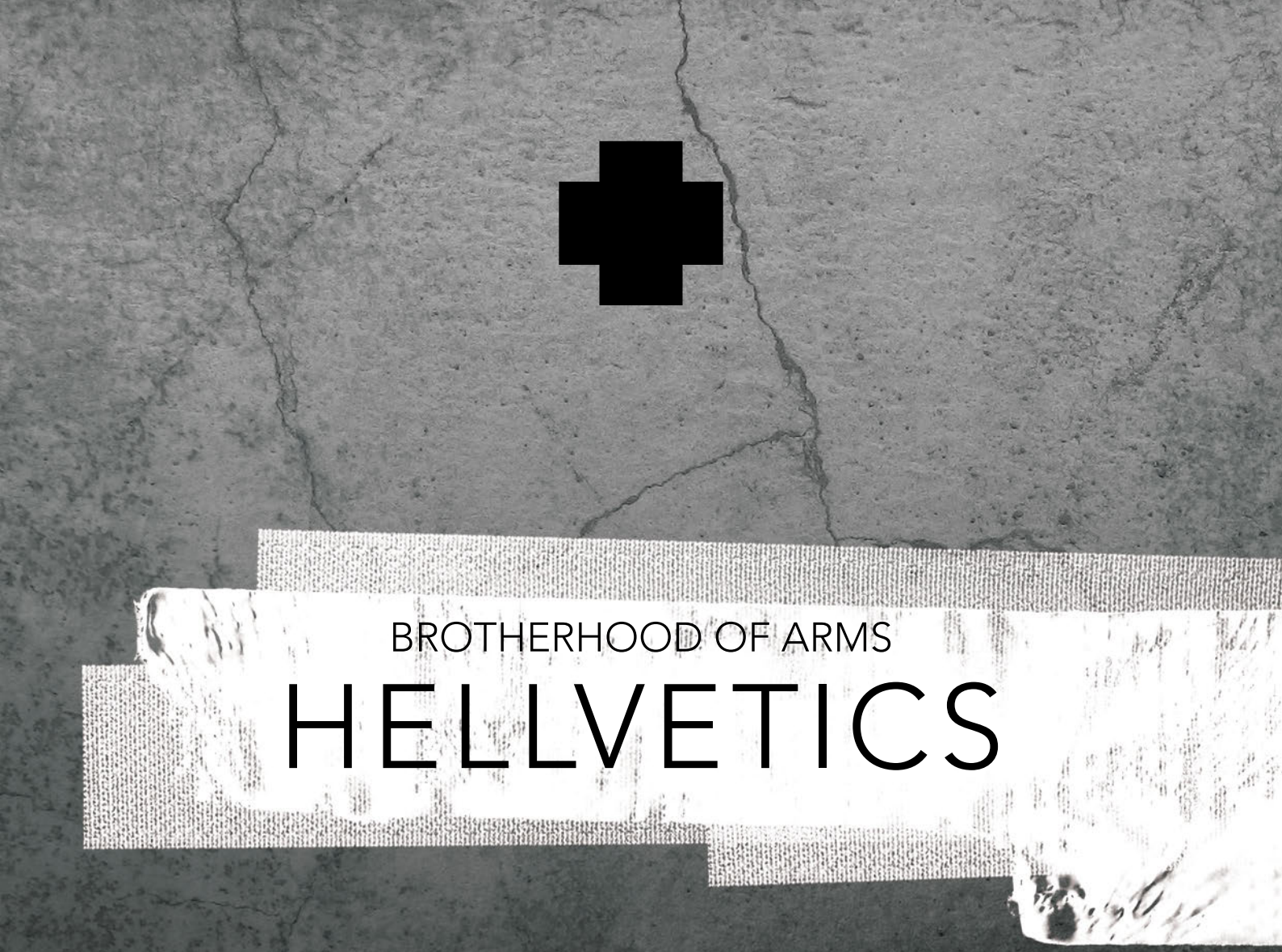
Culture: Borca
Concept: The Adventurer
Cult: Chronicler (Streamer)

The Chroniclers sent him to Aquitaine to raise the artifact harvest in the Frankan. Raise it Outlook did, gathering everything he could get his hands on. But most of the relics did not find their way to the Chroniclers' tables in Justitian. He sells them to Apocalyptics who in turn supply young boys to sate his carnal desires.

NAIKE

Culture: Borca
Concept: The Martyr
Cult: Chronicler (Fuse)

She once was part of the Cluster. There, the screaming feedback tore her eardrums. Since then, she's deaf and not really of use to the Chroniclers anymore. She ekes out her living in the wasteland, doing dirty work for the order.



BROTHERHOOD OF ARMS

HELLVETICS

SHIFT CHANGE

Darkness. The change from sleeping to waking happens mechanically and abruptly. He swings his legs from the cot, feels cold concrete under his feet. The ventilator cranks awake, moving air that reeks of sweat. The Hellvetic runs his hands through his hair, reaches for his weapon under the cot, takes it off its holster and puts it in his lap. The cold metal makes him shiver. A Trailblazer. His Trailblazer. An assault rifle with three barrels, sequentially ordered and given to him to protect the Alpine Fortress's safety. It's still dark, but he closes his eyes and breathes deeply. He removes the weapon's cover, unlocks the barrel, disassembles the piece completely, feels every part and cleans it. He knows all the movements by heart.

While his hands work, his thoughts wander into the past. Deep down to the beginning: the day he received his weapon. It was a few days after his fifteenth birthday, barely able to hold the Trailblazer. The feeling of pride he had that day reaches through the decades; it feels like only yesterday. He smiles. He was sixteen when he fired his first shot and dislocated his shoulder. A few years later, they encountered illegal crossers above the Timmeljoch. Five shots, three hits, one dead. Praise: given extra rations by the Forager. They said the first one was always the hardest one. They had lied. The first twenty were hard. His face hardened, and his lids blinked when the images of the failed rescue mission at the Gotthard came to his mind: red snow, magazine after magazine rattled through the Trailblazer, the barrels glowed. Shouting, a hard hit against the shoulder, blue sky above, someone tore him away. The poor assessment was worse than the shot through the shoulder. Wounds heal more quickly than respect can be restored. Then he was punished by ammunition reduction and scorn. He had that coming. He had endangered his comrades and left one of them behind. They put recruit Tillis' bloodsoaked, torn undershirt onto his pillow, a little gift. Then he understood what it meant to confront a common enemy, to have his comrades' back. What it meant to be responsible. Responsibility is the foundation of a soldiers' coexistence.

The last bolt is locked, the magazine slides into its bracket with a metallic click. The Trailblazer is now warm from his work.

A speaker crackles to life and sounds a synthetic bell. Shift change. Glow wires change from red and white to headache blue.

The Hellvetic steps out of the crew quarters. His Harness is skintight, its weight reassuring. Alone, he marches through gray corridors. The lights ahead awaken with a flicker, while the corridors behind him drown in darkness again. He's deep within the mountains. His steps become determined, he walks more upright. Now, he encounters comrades, saluting as he passes them by. He climbs through ancient tubes, becomes part of the increasingly bigger stream of Hellvetics. They march

through hangars and between vehicles that wait for eternity under wraps. The gates are sealed, leading nowhere.

A surge of hot air hits him. They walk out onto the bridge. Here the first Hellvetics once confronted the Reaper's Blow's flames, bridged it with stone and steel. Today, this is where they defend doctrine and home.

SANCTUARY

In 2072, the Swiss confederates first considered a failure of the asteroid shield. No one knew for sure where the rocks would come down if the paladin satellites missed them or only shot them into smaller fragments. Switzerland was in danger, and thus, they needed a Plan B.

The Alpine Fortress's bunker complexes were the obvious choice for storing cultural treasures, but they could also guarantee the survival of the Swiss – Swiss who would be able to retake control after the collapse of all public order. Aided by artisans, scientists, sociologists and psychologists, Switzerland should survive culturally and socially even in the event of a total collapse. Alongside civilians, the government sent a contingent of career soldiers to the bunkers, over 2000 men and women. They would take care with an orderly takeover and protect Switzerland's borders.

For more than a year, army vehicles transported food, computers, miles of cables and installations into the Alpine Fortress. The selection process began. In the last phase, the government emptied museums and libraries and brought Switzerland's cultural heritage into the bunkers.

The national effort was almost done when the Swiss people realized how far the exodus went – and that the mountain would close in front of them while the asteroids glared in the sky.

The cantons' protocols recorded the demonstrations and the way they grew into riots. The Swiss Stream was aglow with applications for acceptance into the Alpine Fortress. A fully automated expert system compared skills and checked and sorted by ranking. However, there was no room anymore, anyway.

ISOLATION

When the gates between Switzerland's chosen representatives and their people finally closed, something broke on both sides. Those left behind felt cheated and angry against the supposed betrayers, driven by their own fear; the bunker crew had to resign in helplessness. Out there were relatives and acquaintances, many left partners and children to an uncertain fate. Isolation had just begun when the inmates already wanted it to end.

However, the catastrophe became the apocalypse. The Reaper's Blow split the Alps like a divine axe blow. The massif of rock broke open, stone avalanches splintered from the breaking point, crashed down with a deafening noise and buried rising magma under millions of tons of stone, a fragile seal on Pandora's Box. The Alpine Fortress was mortally wounded. The great access gates caved in or were buried under rubble. Tunnels that had led into hangars and barracks only yesterday now ended in dizzying heights and opened onto newly formed valleys. Deep black, toxic columns of smoke curled skywards, searing heat welled up. The mountain had become a prison.

Complete sections were cut off from the core; the fate of the Swiss living there was unknown. Most of the castaways belonged to the civilian branch and were responsible for the reconstruction. Without them…

The military fought on, unwilling to give up on comrades and civilians. They had already had to leave behind their relatives. The survivors devised a rescue plan so absurd it could have only been conceived in that time of flamboyant gestures and actions: They wanted to build a bridge across the Reaper's Blow, across Purgatory itself.

Men and women worked hard day by day, only protected from the heat of the magma bubble below them by flimsy asbestos suits. They went through hell, and what started as a grim joke soon became commonly used.

They called themselves the "Hellvetics".

The first of six bridges was finished in 2076. A year before, recon specialists had first managed to cross the Reaper's Blow. However, their expectations were not met. Two sections in which the Hellvetics had hoped to find their high command and the government's representatives had caved in. Not even ashes remained. Should all the sweat, all the blood have been in vain? The military apparatus teetered. Throughout these years, it had clung to this single goal, now its heart and its brain had been ripped from its body. Empty and burnt-out, it stared into a bleak future.

The Hellvetic Leonhard Gboy managed to save the day. A rationing plan and several improvised leadership institutions caught the survivors in a net of bureaucracy and new goals. A Corps Commander who had to guarantee the area's safety autonomously was assigned to all of the Swiss Territorial Regions. He commanded smaller units of a few dozen soldiers that were supposed to be constantly checked for quality by an independent section commission. The chain of command was restored, and the Hellvetics felt like they were part of a Swiss clockwork again. One thing remained to be done. They drew a line

under the past and almost unanimously voted for proudly carrying the name Hellvetics from now on.

FROM HELL TO HELL

Before the fall, they went into the mountain convinced they would have to confront the Eshaton's suffering and destruction only weeks later with joint forces. However, it would take years for the gates to the Swiss heartland to be cleared and be negotiable again. The Hellvetics were too late. When they escaped the mountain in winter 2080 and stepped out into their old, snow-ridden home, they found metropolises like Bern and Zurich empty. Everywhere they saw signs of riots and looting. The few survivors fled their old military because bitter experience with armed and organized units had taught them to execute caution.

Although the Hellvetics were unwanted, the Doctrine commanded them to protect the original population, whether it wanted protection or not. Following their internal order, the Hellvetics thus stormed the armed bands' camps, obliterated all resistance in the fire from their Sagur 11 assault rifles and vanquished the enemy leaders. They granted them quick trials that ended in the choice between death or exile. Many a war criminal and bandit fled into Northern Borca in those days and continued their reign of terror there. The Hellvetics were never interested in a better world. For them, it was the Doctrine that mattered. They did not give up quickly on goals once found.

The resistance was smashed; the people crawled from their hideaways and celebrated the Hellvetics as their saviors. The reconstruction could start. The Sagur 11 assault rifles had been the Trailblazer and thus were called just that in the future, in memory of those days.

FAST FORWARD

The cantons blossomed. The villagers were united under the Hellvetics' flag. Bridge by bridge, the wounds of Reaper's Blow were healed, and the divided Alpine Fortress grew back together. The simple asbestos suits of the early days had developed into tight-fitting, multifunctional body armor, with harnesses that stood up to the heat of the Reaper's Blow as well as the heat of battle. Additional tunnels, corridors, and halls were drilled into the mountain as the Hellvetics' influence spread. These transfer tunnels allowed strangers to pass under the Alps and the Reaper's Blow for a fee. Anabaptists could cross the Alpine passes from Borca to Purgare. The Spitalians used a safe route to reach their eastern outposts in Pollen without losses. And before anyone noticed, the Neolibyans were among the Hellvetics' most valued partners. Their oil guaranteed functional generators and turned tunnels claimed by wild clans into a flaming hell.

With time, Hellvetica became Europe's eye of the needle. Many offered pacts to the Hellvetics, but they turned them all down. They never gave up their neutrality.

DOCTRINE AND ETHOS

What is an army without a government it will obey? Without goals and leadership, the military became an end in itself, and the Hellvetics' enormous firepower would have threatened all of Borca. Only strong solidarity coupled with a strict code of honor and worthwhile goals could domesticate these hellhounds. The Doctrine has done just that. It offered protection to the Swiss heartland and its inhabitants and taught the soldiers to respect life. However, time has left its mark, and new passages reflect the changed global situation. Today, the Hellvetic worship no god who controls him and to whom he can ask forgiveness for his sins. His conscience must measure up to himself and the Hellvetic Doctrine. To it and to nothing else he pledges allegiance. It empowers him and yet can strip him of all power.

THE DOCTRINE

I SWEAR TO CARRY MY TRAILBLAZER CLOSE TO MY HEART,
FOR IT IS THE ONLY THING THAT STANDS BETWEEN ME AND SAVAGERY.
ALL ITS ROUNDS WERE CRAFTED WITH EFFORT,
SO I AIM WELL AND DO NOT WASTE THEM.
ONLY THE HIT COUNTS.

THE HARNESS IS NOTHING WITHOUT ME,
AS I AM NOTHING WITHOUT THE HARNESS.
IT PROTECTS MY LIFE,
SO I KEEP IT FROM DECAY.
ONLY SURVIVAL COUNTS.

I SWEAR TO BE HELLVETICA'S SHIELD.
EVEN IF THE PEOPLE DETEST US,
THEY ARE OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS.
WE HOLD THE FORT.
ONLY THE PEOPLE COUNTS.

I SWEAR TO PUT AUSTERITY ABOVE WASTE,
TO REMAIN TRUE TO MY OWN TROOP AND
TO HANG TOGETHER AS COMRADES AND
GIVE MY LIFE FOR HELLVETICA.

RELAPSE

Maybe, some saw this as a weakness on the Hellvetics' part. Maybe the people recalled the fact that the military was there to serve them, not the other way around. Reduced to a protective force, orders disguised as advice were not followed anymore. Old animosities between the cantons flared up again. There was no open fighting, but embargoes, aggressive customs fees and the spreading of nasty rumors turned the Alpine realm into a hotbed of conflicts no longer ruled by the Hellvetics.

Many spoke out loud what Command was not even permitted to think. The confederates were faring too well. Thanks to Trailblazers and Harnesses, they feared no influences from the outside and played their games in the Hellvetics' slipstream.

Finally, the Territorial Regions' commanders were fed up. They called their units back into the Alps, locked the barracks and left the advance fortresses. Back into the mountain. Do as you please.

It was in those days that Praha fell. The Black Lung clans rose up, and Exalt's ruins seemed to teem with new life. The torch of independence was passed around and reached the Swiss heartland, too. The ancient mountain tribes were fed up with the Hellvetics' bullying, fed up with the valley dwellers' ways. They descended, and at the same time, the Clans broke through the Hellvetics' unmanned barricades from the north. Villages burned, but the Hellvetics persisted.

While the inhabitants of Torino fled back under the Hellvetics' protection again in the end, presumably purged, the other Territorial Regions' inhabitants learned what fighting for survival meant. In the future, everyone would have to earn the Hellvetics' protection.

TERRITORIAL REGIONS

The Hellvetics' area of influence covered all of the Alps, from Franka to the Swiss heartland and the Balkhan. Early on it was divided into four Territorial Regions – two on each side of the Reaper's Blow. Thus arose various responsibilities, jobs and goals for the respective Hellvetics.

While Territorial Region I in the Frankan Alps only had to guarantee the passes' safety and the protection of Torino, Territorial Region II is responsible for the former Cantons. They were considered under military occupation for a long time – an interim solution in force for many centuries. According to the Doctrine, the heartland was to be supported by a democratic government after the ancient Swiss fashion, but this development was rejected by the Hellvetics as anarchistic and non-democratic. Only in Bern was there an independent representation of the people that was not allowed to raise a militia.

Now the Hellvetics have left the Cantons to their own devices. Their city fortresses are manned by Swiss with old-fashioned rifles and pikes. Only the roads and way stations are still guarded by the Hellvetics. They say the transfer tunnels and passes are safe.

Territorial region III with its vast territory covering all of former Austria needs a far more offensive approach than the heartland. Genie squads have been tunneling through the mountains for centuries laying subterranean rails to make up for the Hellvetics' relatively small numbers with maximum mobility. The chances of passing through the Alps in this area without being noticed are decreasing with every passing year.

Territorial region IV is mainly unchartered territory. The Hellvetics' fortresses are unfinished buildings, tunnels carved into the rock without camouflage or security mechanisms. They are sparsely manned. On the Alps' Purgan side, the known passes and transfer tunnels are constantly watched by Anabaptists and Jehammedans. In the Balkhan, on the other hand, the Voivodes are in control. They stop those that are unwanted in their realm at the passages.

DESERTED

The Hellvetics are fearsome fighters, but also ingenious builders of bridges. Still, not everyone finds a place within their ranks. Those who give up on themselves or cannot match their unit's demands give their Trailblazers to their section commander and are led outside by the fortress troops. They are not Hellvetics any longer. Except for scorn, they have nothing to fear from their former comrades.

But not all who leave want to give up their Trailblazer and Harness. They have become far too used to the firearm, which would certainly bring some Chronicler Drafts out in the wasteland in a pinch. Those who leave the fortress with Hellvetic gear without checking back regularly to be assessed are considered deserters. They have a lot to fear from their former comrades. They will hunt them down.

CUTS

The Reaper's Blow south of the Alps is a highly active volcanic area. Boiling puddles of mud, methane bubbles and superficially crusted magma streams are not prone to instilling confidence. This is a realm of the Psychokinetics, and no one has ever tried to take it away from them.

Maybe that was the mistake – for here it began.

When the sun sinks, a vague glow caresses the Rifts and ravines. Only by getting close do you notice that this glow emanates from the tenderest of threads that resemble cotton wool. Only this wool is hard as glass and cuts your foot if you step into it. The Spitalians call these structures Filaments. They speak about condensed or self-contained force fields. So they also do not really know what they are dealing with. Only that the Filaments are spun by Psychokinetics and that they can move among them unharmed. They expand; grow through the Reaper's Blow towards the Alpine Fortress. The southern slopes close to the passages are afflicted; the Filaments eat into the rock as if it was made of warm fat. With them, hosts of lice and ticks come pouring into the fortress, are obliterated in the hellfire but keep coming. The Hellvetics are used to having human enemies. Something that can be riddled with bullets. Against the Psychokinetic plague, they are like children. Therefore, they have called Spitalians into the fortress. The docs are said to be knowledgeable about the Aberrants. We'll see.

THE SOLDIER AND HIS WEAPON

Hellvetics are exclusively recruited from their own ranks or from the former Swiss population. The drills start at the age of fourteen, boys and girls are equal. If the recruits prove themselves, they get a Trailblazer the year after. This weapon is at the center of their thoughts and actions until they die. If their weapon is stolen, they are expelled from the army. The same happens if the weapon is irreparably damaged. If they sell the weapon – Off they go! Repeat: What happens if you lose your weapon?

AUSTERITY

Every Hellvetic in the Alpine Fortress must swear to austerity. In spite of their own manufacturers and profits from the transit fees on the Alpine passes and transfer tunnels, central storage claims that it is challenging to keep a military apparatus of several thousand men and women at an operational level. They may be right, for there are no mass production facilities for the Trailblazers' precision ammo. In fact, the amount of ammo given to soldiers has been strictly regulated for decades. But this is not restricted to war gear alone. Any gear is considered property of the Hellvetic army, so using it thoughtlessly and unnecessarily is theft.

To spread the resources evenly and effectively, the four Territorial Regions have been further divided into 20 sections. Each of them is entitled to a percentage of a monthly storage output. The amounts also depend on the effectiveness of the Hellvetics stationed in a section. If one of them botches a mission or they cannot meet central storage's demands with regards to profits from transit fees, drastic cutbacks ensue. The section gets less ammo, and special support weapons and vehicles are suddenly not available anymore. If the soldiers cannot discipline the comrade responsible and get him up to speed again, the whole section's survival is placed in danger.

WHEN THE MILLENNIUM AFTER THE MILLENNIUM BEGINS

EVERYONE WILL KNOW

WHAT'S ON ALL FOUR CORNERS OF THE EARTH

WE WILL SEE CHILDREN

WHOSE BONES PIERCE THE SKIN AND WHOSE EYES ARE COVERED IN FLIES AND

THOSE

WHO ARE HUNTED LIKE RATS.

BUT THE PEOPLE SEEING THIS WILL AVERT THEIR EYES

FOR THEY ONLY CARE FOR THEMSELVES

THEY WILL GIVE THEM A HANDFUL OF GRAINS AS ALMS

WHILE THEY SLEEP ON FULL SACKS

AND WHAT THEY GIVE WITH ONE HAND,

THEY WILL TAKE AWAY AGAIN WITH THE OTHER.

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

MERITS

Documents from the Hellvetics' first years prove that the ancient army's grade structure was mostly preserved. What has changed, though, is how to climb the hierarchical ladder as a Hellvetic. Central storage needed a simple assessment system for soldiers to optimize the use of ammo and gear. Since then, Hellvetics are awarded merit points, but can also lose them again. This score, together with workshops taken and skills acquired, determines a soldier's grade.

After every tour, all Hellvetics involved must face a public assessment and judgment in their section. To this end, their Trailblazers have a port at their shafts so they can be read via a computer port in front of the drill hall's plasma screen. The number of shots fired is recorded, as well as the rate of fire or any overheating by continuous fire. Once the weapon has been checked, the soldier turns to his comrades and awaits their judgment. Behind him, his data flickers across the wall-sized display, accompanied by his combat statistics and his commander's effectiveness assessment. The reactions vary from respectful silence to scornful humiliation.

At the end of these assessment ceremonies, the section computer determines how much ammo is left for this month and creates a new ranking of the most efficient sections. This shows if the unit needs to undertake dangerous outdoor missions to gain ground.

BUNKER FEVER

The Alps near Laibach, Slovenia have always been considered a mysterious area. Sightings of opalescent lights are one source of this reputation, just like spells of sudden dizziness and balding experienced by patrolling Hellvetics. Much of that could be attributed to bunker fever if it weren't for the dozens of independent testimonies and assessments of external doctors.

One legend has been constantly told throughout the centuries: Triglaw. Ancient records tell of a grotesquely stunted man in billowing layers of white fabrics who roams the Hellvetics' tunnels. He is extraordinarily cunning, takes whatever he wants from stores, and, if you believe the first sighting, must be at least 400 years old. Many of the tales concerning him are more than absurd. He is said to have supplied the Swiss with the asbestos suits for building the bridges. His vagrant body is said to be the soulless husk of one of the first Hellvetics. He is even said to be the original protector of the Alps and a last relic of the Bygone people.

If even some of the rumors about Triglaw are true, the Hellvetic history will have to be rewritten.

GRADES

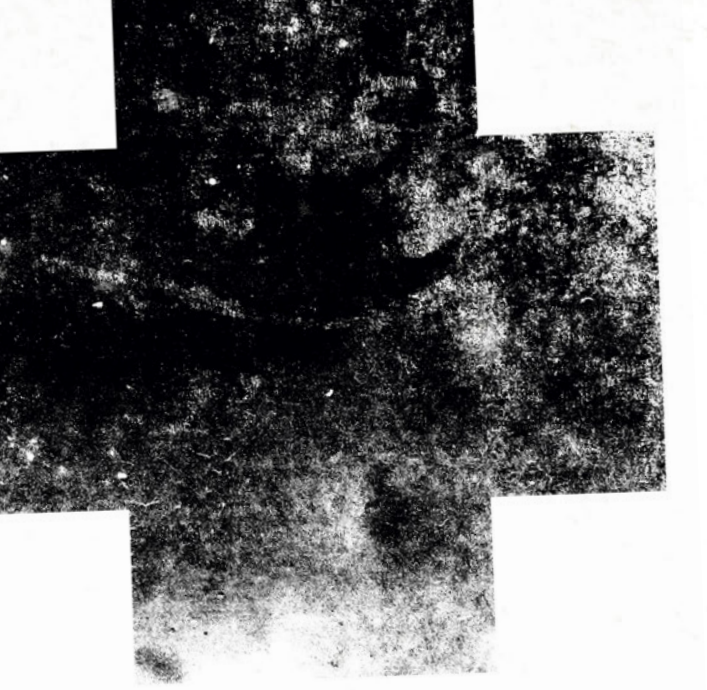
The first grades, Soldier, Private and Lance Corporal, are the beginning. They are left behind pretty quickly. Next are the noncom grades Corporal, Constable and Field Officer, the first to involve leadership responsibilities. Autonomous guard duty on the passes or in tunnels in the periphery as well as commanding very small groups are typical jobs. An intense training in group tactics is mandatory.

As soon as the Hellvetic is promoted to be a higher-ranking noncom, he needs to specialize. As a Grenadier, Sapper, Genie, Radio Beam Unit or in other armed services branches he goes through the grades of Sergeant, First Sergeant, Adjutant, Staff Adjutant, First Adjutant and Chief Adjutant. The responsibilities grow. He has to prove himself by leading platoons (formations consisting of several groups). The Subaltern officers of the Lieutenant and Senior Lieutenant grade are allowed to command whole units consisting of several platoons. The Captain is responsible for all of a section's formations.

He is only outranked by the Field Officer grades of Major, Lieutenant-Colonel and Colonel. They assist the Corps Commander in managing his Territorial Region.

TERRITORIAL SERVICE

The Hellvetics have neither a functioning agriculture nor any natural resources. Their principals are their fighting power and the Alpine Fortress's central location. If a section suffers from lack of food, parts of the troops are rented out as mercenaries. They are extremely respected in Borca and Pollen, but their strict code of honor restricts their usability. They question every attack and refuse to obey if they have any doubts while defending an endangered settlement is almost always considered morally faultless. The Hellvetics generally do not interfere with large-scale conflicts like wars between city-states as well as with open conflicts between Cults.



RANKS HELLVETICS

1 - SOLDIER

Young soldiers are recruited from their own ranks or from volunteers from the Territorial Regions. At age 14, drills to shape body and soul begin. After the first year, the soldiers get their Trailblazer. The weapon will be with them for all their lives.

The first grades of Private and Lance Corporal are assigned for obedience, service at the fortress and good fire quota.

2 - CORPORAL

Corporal is the first noncom rank, followed by Constable and Field Officer. With them come the first executive functions. Autonomous guard duty at the passes or in tunnels in the periphery as well as commanding very small groups are typical deployments. An intense briefing on formation tactics is mandatory.

As a higher-ranking noncom officer (i.e., Constable and Field Officer), the Hellvetic must specialize and join a branch.

3 - SAPPER

No matter if a tunnel collapses or the enemy amasses a defensive line: Call the Sappers! They are the army's demolition specialists. They plant their packs and wait for them to detonate, safe behind their Tunnel Shields.

Those who are used to blowing big holes only rely on their Trailblazers in cases of emergency. Sappers are trained to use heavy weaponry like grenade launchers and machine guns.

3 - GRENADIER

Grenadiers are the largest branch. Armed with a modified Trailblazer and perfectly trained, the first shot is usually a hit. They are trained in survival techniques and thus mostly operate outside the Fortress. For the Swiss, they are the archetypal soldiers.

4 - SPECIAL DETACHMENT

Grenadiers and Sappers are recruited into the Special Detachment for extraordinary achievements and called Specialists in the Hellvetics' lingo. They answer directly to the Corps Commanders and go on politically charged missions. For example, they protect high-ranking representatives of allied organizations who visit as emissaries within the Alpine Fortress. They are also requested for deployments on foreign territory.

They have access to a stubbed version of the Trailblazer and carry lots of ammo on sanctioned deployments.

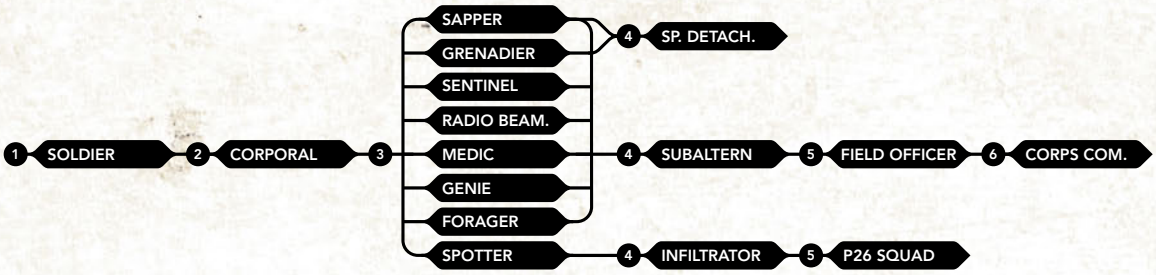
3 - SENTINEL

They know every bunker with an observation slit trained towards the Alps, watch the passages and decide who may pass and who has to turn around. They man the Alpine Fortress's cannons, and if they step out into the white day, then it's only to hide demolition packs in snow slabs. If these packs explode, the mountain shakes, and avalanches thunder down toward the valley. No attacker stands a chance against this force of nature. It lowers the ammo consumption.

Sentinels as the last line of defense have access to the heaviest Harnesses. At the same time, they are responsible for internal security and serve as some sort of police force.

3 - RADIO BEAM UNIT

It would take weeks to walk from the first to the fourth Territorial Region, even through the well-kept subterranean passages. Still, this area must be kept under surveillance, and



the Corps Commanders must always be informed about any enemy movement. At the same time, orders must be passed down from above. This is the Radio Beam Units' job. They maintain the network of radio masts, cables and relay stations. Without them, the Hellvetics would be blind and deaf. Their understanding of communications electronics is at par with high-ranking Chroniclers' – but Radio Beam Units can radio for help or artillery support.

3 - SPOTTER

The Alps' rugged slopes and the wasteland's ruin fields are the Spotters' home. They are lightly armed, well camouflaged and tough. They watch and take notes.

4 - INFILTRATOR

They blend in. They hide their recon Harness under local garb or remove it completely. They are trained in the use of trickery and sabotage. They identify ringleaders and weaken the enemy's defenses.

5 - P-26 SQUAD

Project 26 is the successor organization of a Bygone arrangement of the same name that organizes the resistance in case of a defeat of the Swiss army. The 26 refers to the 26 Cantons. These are supposed to be led back into the Hellvetic Federation, quite forcibly after the latest insurgencies.

The P-26 operatives work in cells of 2-4 Infiltrators. Through propaganda and sabotage, they influence the mood within the Cantons to the Hellvetics' favor. They ridicule ideological hotheads – or kill them. Every P-26 action aims at a high symbolic value, but more important than anything else is that they may never weaken the Hellvetic heartland.

3 - MEDIC

Those who go to war will see blood. If it's their own, a Medic better be around. Medics are part of the fighting personnel and stand at the side of the Grenadiers, but their special skill is treating the wounded.

3 - GENIE

No one knows the Alpine Fortress better, for they have built it. They are experienced bridge engineers and fortress builders and ensure the Hellvetics' mobility. They repair passages and tunnels and maintain the vehicles. Large endeavors are impossible without their logistical skills.

3 - FORAGER

Foragers are surplus officers and quartermasters, organizing the food and war gear supply. They can access the Alpine Fortress's data ports and directly address central storage or the sections' computers. Foragers are experienced technicians, can circumvent digital roadblocks and open sealed portals.

4 - SUBALTERN

The Subaltern officers' grades of Lieutenant and Senior Lieutenant must prove themselves as platoon leaders before they get to command whole units of several platoons. Captain is the highest-ranking Subaltern grade. He is responsible for all soldiers within a section.

While Subaltern have to live a military life, too, they are highly privileged: They live in private quarters and are guarded by a Grenadier whenever they are outside the Alpine Fortress. They are Hellvetica's ambassadors and are held in high regard.

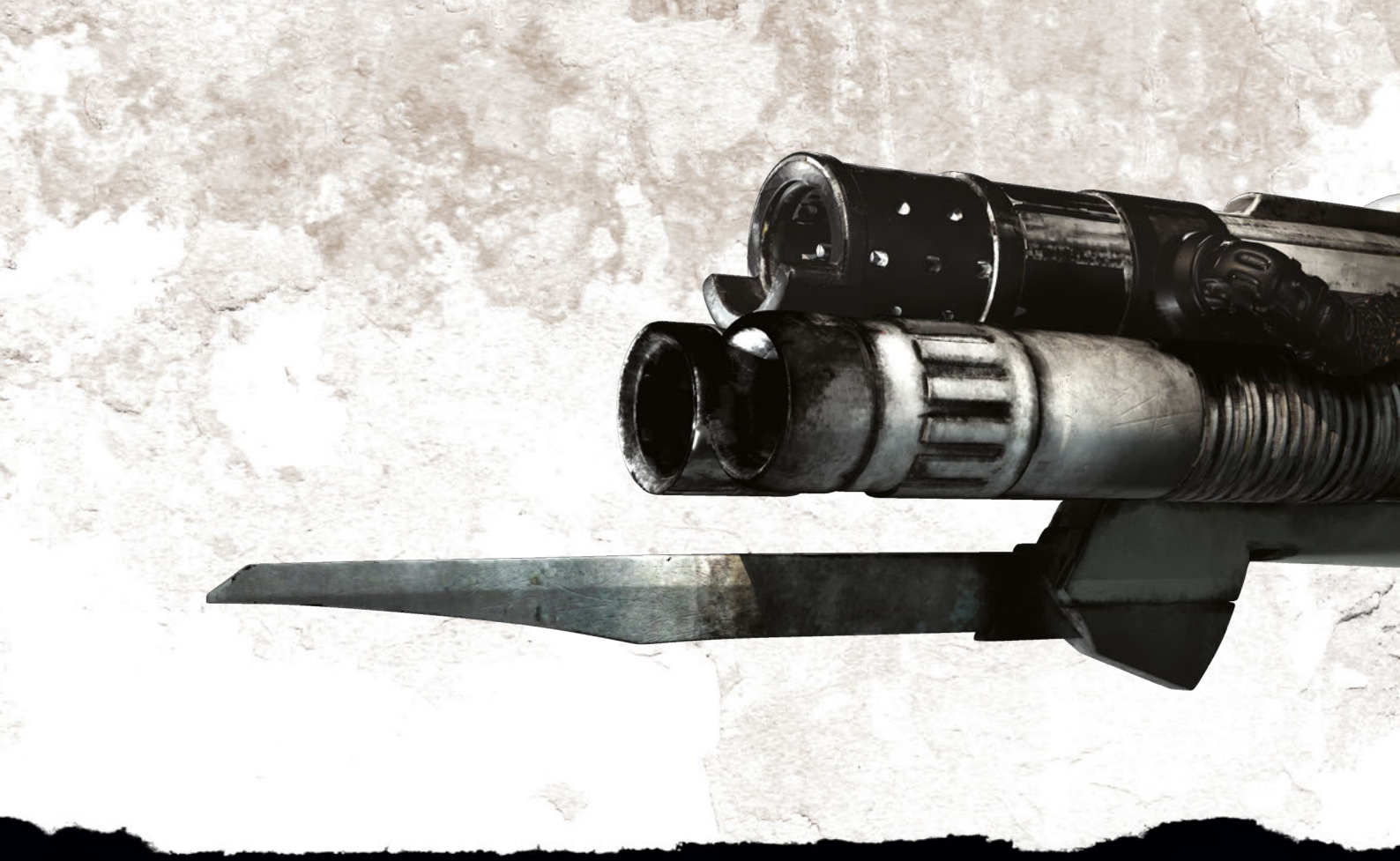
5 - FIELD OFFICER

Only the Field Officer grades of Major, Lieutenant-Colonel and Colonel are higher-ranking than the Subalterns. They assist the Corps Commander in managing his Territorial Region.

According to the Doctrine, they can put every civilian on confederate ground under martial law and judge them accordingly. This has led to disputes time and again in the past.

6 - CORPS COMMANDER

He commands a Territorial Region and determines the way into the future together with the other Corps Commanders.



STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS
One of many clans, but one with a strong military branch. In the transfer tunnels between Borca and Purgare, they are our main source of income. They scratch their crosses everywhere.

ANUBIANS
Rare guests in the passages. In the ranks, they are considered a mystic variety of army doctors. The Scourgers seem to need their hokum.

APOCALYPTICS
Almost all of them are smugglers. They look for gaps in the defenses, blackmail and bribe. The Sentinels are constantly on their trail.

CHRONICLERS
Be very careful! They want our technology and obsess about it. The Sentinels already had to arrest Foragers who were found to have granted the Chroniclers access to the Fortress computers for pay.

CLANNERS
The vestiges of the people. While we have sworn to protect them with our lives, we expect cooperation. As they do not cooperate, they will have to earn our protection now.

JEHAMMEDANS
We have Trailblazers; they have swords and a goat god. We win.

JUDGES
Paramilitary army trying to unite Borca under the hammer. Their Codex raises them far above the Clans. With better weapons, they could bring peace to Borca.

NEOLIBYANS
A trader tribe, not half as mad as the Anubians or Scourgers. According to our comrades from Territorial Region II they rob Borca blind. Well, as long as they pay their passage...

PALERS
We seem to have a similar fate. At least, that's what they say in the Cantons. But it's not true. We have a doctrine, a code of honor. Palers are like animals: naked rats crawling through the underground, sniffling and grunting.

SCOURGERS
No chain of command, no ranks, no discipline. The strongest ones wear lion heads. Europe is being vanquished by them?

SCRAPPERS
The African Scrappers show no respect and are loud. The European ones are grumpy and quiet. Both pay their passage. We like them.

SPITALIANS
We underestimated the Psychonauts. A mistake that comes to haunt us now. We have to let Spitalians into our fortress and assume obligations towards them that will, in the end, cost us our neutrality.

TRAILBLAZER

CORPORAL GRUBER

Culture: Borca
Concept: The Abomination
Cult: Hellvetics (Corporal)

The Colonel of Territorial Region II attributed defective behavior in social groups to Gruber. What he meant to say was that Gruber is human scum. Great qualities for a mercenary, headquarters decided and started putting him in contact with Chroniclers and Judges. Problem solved. Carry on, soldier.

HELENA OF TIMMELSJOCH

Culture: Borca
Concept: The Visionary
Cult: Hellvetics (Forager)

Four years ago, she and her group took over the Timmelsjoch, a pass above the Alpine Fortress in Territorial Region III. The living conditions were abysmal here, there were illegal crossings almost weekly. Forager Helena taught fear to the Clanners and Scrappers. Her group adores her; she is considered a heroine.

ADJUTANT SLABON

Culture: Balkhan
Concept: The Mediator
Cult: Hellvetics (Adjutant)

The fortress troops of Territorial Region IV are chasing the phantom called Triglaw – and Slabon doesn't make it any easier for them. While he coordinates a hunt for the Marauders, he secretly allows a door for him to enable an escape just in time. Slabon enabled Triglaw to get large amounts of technology from the Alpine Fortress to Laibach.

HAMMER OF JUSTICE

JUDGES

HOMELAND

A greasy floppy hat made of cowhide, the fucking dust covering the brim like a red mist. In the shadows below, a haggard skull face grins, the eyes hidden behind dark glasses in a round frame. The Judge adjusts his hat with his thumb and pats his mare's neck reassuringly. The saddle creaks, as does the long leather duster falling from the man's shoulders in a stiff line, lying in folds on the horse's back. A hammer with a long handle hangs in a loop at the saddle; the head's metal is dull and encrusted with dirt.

The mare's hooves hit the cobblestones hard and loud; each stone is an island in a sea of red dust. The Judge looks around. The houses built from debris are leaning, forming a wall against the dust storms. Waxed blankets fill the windows, hiding their interior from his view. He doesn't like that. But this is Justitian, the heart of the civilized world, the city of law, the iron fist in the wasteland. If there is safety to be found anywhere, it's here.

A cart filled with baskets full of rusty iron scrap rumbles across the pavement in front of him. The Judge straightens himself in the saddle, wanting to see who pulls the cart, wanting to make the driver go faster. A bulky body strapped into a harness pulls the cart. The gray hair hangs matted from his skull and swings back and forth with every step: a Scrapper from the Tech Central. The Judge reins in his horse. There's no sense in pushing, he will not be able to pass. Absentmindedly he opens the pressurized lid of his hip bag and pulls out a tattered book. His face relaxes when he opens it and reads the first lines. It's the Codex, the book that lends meaning to his life, sentences full of justice and wisdom. He knows it by heart. Yet still he keeps reading it, feeling close to the First Judge by doing so.

The cart turns at a junction, rumbling towards the Chroniclers' alcove. The Judge spits out a gob of dusty spittle and goads the mare into an easy trot, turning onto a busy street humming with activity, parting the masses with harsh gestures and finally reaching the broad Judgment Alley. Hundreds of mounted Judges are already waiting there: they have shouldered their hammers and shielded their mouths and noses against the dust with scarves. Their faces are shadowed by the brims of their hats, muskets and rifles are attached to the saddles. Horses snort, prancing nervously, leather creaks, and bridles jingle. Ah, the rumors must be true. The Cockroaches have invaded the ruins again.

The Judges nod to the newcomer and greet him with their hammers. This is a good day for the Codex. He urges on his mare, joins them, pulls out his hammer of judgment and makes it clang through the wall of shafts and iron.

Today, they are going to war.

THE FIRST JUDGE

In the years after the Eshaton, people were hard-hearted and brutal. They attacked each other over a handful of corn, killed and looted. Some claimed their circumstances were to blame. Centuries of ethical and moral development were gone with the wind.

Soon, the first gangs appeared. They promised safety as long and as they were stronger and fiercer than their competitors. The individual was a helpless victim of their violence.

One man led the people back to the path of righteousness. He called himself "the Judge". He first appeared in 2381 in a small, fortified village close to the ruins of Bochum. There he apprehended a Clanner who had been wounded and left behind after a raid. He recited his crimes, theft being the smallest among them, and led him to the executioner's block, an upturned iron bucket. The Judge fixed the delinquent's head to the tin with his foot and smashed his head with one blow of his sledgehammer. There was no axe to be found in the village.

The onlookers were shocked. Yes, they had savored the captive's fear of death after the suffering he had brought upon the village. But did it have to be so brutal? The Judge remained impassive. He adjusted his broad-rimmed floppy hat, looked down the greasy hem of his cowhide coat spattered with blood, brain matter, and pieces of bone, and asked for a bowl of water. The hammer he gave to the farmer who had lent it to him, but the man only shook his head.

From now on, the villagers saw the Judge more often. He journeyed from settlement to settlement. With the patience of a snake waiting for its prey he mediated altercations between villagers and took on the work he was known and feared: for he judged. The villagers already awaited him with prisoners and told him about their crimes. His judgments were merciless, but just; his executions brutal and grim. His trademark floppy hat, the glasses, the coat and hammer were all soon known throughout West Borca. He was a figure of law, order, and deterrence.

He became a living legend.

The Judge cut a bloody swath through the landscape of clans and outlaws. They resisted. They ambushed him, attacked him with two, three and finally four people. Hundreds of times the Judge went down, dragged from his horse, shot and kicked. But he was cunning and tough, kept getting up again, smashed stupidly gawking faces with his hammer, broke shins and rammed the heft into innards and eyes. He always won. His aura of righteous revenge finally started attracting young, enthusiastic people. At first they nourished him, warned him and brought him information. In the end, they joined him, followed him and protected him on his crusade against all the scum.

STONE HEADS

It is a tradition amongst the Judges to immure a Supreme Judge's mortal remains together with the Codex he wrote in a giant stone head above head height. 23 of these monuments are lined up along the Judgment Alley in Justitian, looking gravely down onto a new generation of Judges.

GUARDIANS OF ORDER

Soon, he had over 100 followers. They spread his word all over Borca; touting war coat, hat and hammer to honor his deeds and his wisdom. They hunted outlaws and brought them to heel. The villagers honored the new Judges, gave them food and offered them a place in the community. Some accepted, others remembered the First Judge's eternal wanderings and acted accordingly.

No one noticed the disappearance of the First One. With their scarves in front of nose and mouth, the floppy hats and the glasses it was nearly impossible to discern one Judge from the other. Their mentor could have moved amongst them unnoticed. But his disciples wondered what new deeds the old one had done, where he might be and how he might feel. No one knew the answers. Only after months the Judges realized that their founder was not amongst them anymore. They realized they didn't need him to continue his work.

THE TESTAMENT

The night of December 15th, 2409 was cold; a blizzard scourged the city of Exalt. Two Judges waited in the central plaza, their collars upturned, rubbing their hands. A hooded figure approached. Chronicler Metatag, as agreed. The Chronicler nodded to the two men and gave them a package wrapped in oiled cloth. Through the feedback of his amp, he shouted "The Testament!" and disappeared again in the swirling snow without turning back.

The two Judges held in their hands the First One's travel diary, holding his collected experiences, epigrams and pages full of paragraphs. The knowledge of a holy life and the testament to his successors, collected in tiny, scratchy handwriting on greasy pages. In the years to come, the book would unite the Judges and be the foundation they erected a building of faith and law upon.

Soon, every Judge had a copy of the Codex and acted according to it when separating the culprits from the victims. Others analyzed the book, interpreting and completing the countless fragmentary sequences. Practitioners and theorists arose. But for the time being, they fought for the First One's cause side by side.

JUSTITIAN - THE RIGHTEOUS FIST

Again, it was the Chroniclers who started it all. They offered a home right next to their Central Cluster to two Judges and some clans of the northern wasteland they considered benevolent and civilized. Of course, they had second thoughts. The Judges' reputed ability to put up a fight should be enough to keep lawless rabble away.

They all accepted, fortified the wells that the Chroniclers had kept hidden so far and expanded the old buildings. But not all of them were happy. To the Advocates, as the theorists were called now, the stone holds offered everything they needed for their studies of texts and their proliferation. To the old-fashioned Judges who wanted to beat the word into the faces of fat criminals with an iron fist, the nascent city was a corset hindering their movement. They made the best of it, even if they disliked the centralization.

The city prospered and grew and was called Justitian in honor of Justitia, the goddess of justice – another Chronicler idea. They were part of everything, crept in meetings and counseled without being asked. Due to their influence, one Judge arose and made a bid for power. Justus I was the first in the long tradition of Supreme Judges of Justitian. He elevated his own version of the testament to a universally valid law and called it "the Codex". He ordered the Advocates to make laws and asked the practitioners to apply them in the field. To each his own. Internal strife he countered with a hierarchy making clear who was right in the end. From now on, lesser and high Judges rode through the city, and Vagrants and enforcers guarded the gates. The groundwork was laid. Now it was time to build a monument upon it.

Years later, the Judges ruled over the majority of West Borca. Settlements and farms joined the Justitian Protectorate. Independence for safety, maybe even dictation. After decades of fighting for survival, it was an easy choice for most people.

THE CODEX

Every Supreme Judge enters into office with his own Codex. Time moves on, and the outlaws' imagination seems endless. Beyond the Testament's clear, fundamental rules, there is a need for clarification which often caused aggravation in recent years. The text is fairly close to the people, it is something like a contract between the inhabitants of Justitian and the Judges. At least this is how it was in the beginning. For the Codex evolves, is amended by the Advocates' interpretations. The longer a Supreme Judge is in office, the more complex and tight the web of paragraphs becomes. Chairman Archot is the oldest of them all. He has been Supreme Judge for more than 20 years; his Codex has become a bloated monster that no one can control anymore.

Basic commandments like "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt not steal" form the smallest, but oldest part of the Codex. The subsidiary paragraphs list pages and pages of exceptions and measures of punishment. Then come the rules concerning strife of any kind, taken from an enormous measure of precedence cases: adultery, fraud, imposture, malpractice and much more – every eventuality is covered by paragraphs. The outside world clauses describe procedure outside the city in great detail, defining the rights and dues of Judges and people foreign to the Protectorate.

While the Advocates devise new laws in their palaces and keep an army of scribes occupied with a flood of amendments to the Codex, the Protectors out in the streets of Justitian face a dark future. Only a few older ones remember the times when the handy booklet wrapped in black leather gave them direction, but did not force them to rush down the slope like a train on brakeless tracks. There is no room for interpretation anymore. Everything that could be interpreted has been interpreted and set in stone. The law has become a burden.

TWO CAMPS

When people speak of the Judges, they usually think of the Protectors. They are fighting the outlaws in the field and aid and counsel the populace and settle differences. In spite of their supremacy dictated from above, most of them remain peers to the people.

PROTECTORS: HAMMER

Those who have a hard time dragging their bellies through the ruins shouldn't even bother applying with the Protectors. The tribunal is best convinced by physical endurance, a sharp eye when hitting targets and brute force. For completeness's sake, every applicant has to answer questions concerning the Codex, and then he may head for the Hall of Judgment. In front of a Senate representative, the applicants swear an oath of truth to the Codex and of fulfilling the duty unto death, then they step up to an executioner's block covered in iron sheets, raise their Hammer and smash it down onto the block. That seals it.

The Advocates have formed their own faction apart from the Protectors. It is influential and ancient, a continuous thorn in the Protectors' side. The Advocates recruit the Judges from those who are too weak for the physical drill and the Protectors' claim. In fact, the Advocates value education and intelligence higher than the ability to strike people down with a hammer. They want to define the evil in people, find it and tie it down with laws. They see themselves as educators, not as warriors.

THE SENATES

Two senates with eight High Judges each are answerable to the Supreme Judge. Every Senate represents one of the factions and is manned by the Protectors' and the Advocates' hardliners, respectively. They discuss important decisions for the Cult and vote on them. The Protectors traditionally guard and expand the Protectorate, but the Advocates have managed to gain control over the city. But the political developments in the Protectorate and beyond can rarely be limited to only one of these groups. All too often, their paths cross, which leads to verbal battles and an increase in jobs for informers. Only the Supreme Judge can stop the squabbling then. But he loves those irate discussions, for they inspire his mind.

JUDGES' LINGO

The founder's Testament was riddled with Latin and Greek phrases and epigrams. Much of it remained incomprehensible for a long time, those ancient languages were too foreign. Although the text has been completely deciphered by now and the Cult has excellent experts on linguistics, the Judges never felt compelled to make Latin their official language. Bringing the law to the people was challenging enough; the people have to understand the laws to accept the Codex, the Protectors thought. The Advocates, on the other hand, see their position threatened. If the people understand and internalize the laws, what would they need the Judges for? This conflict between Protectors and Advocates is as old as the Cult itself and has always been a subject of discussion in Justitian's senates. So far, the senates have been canceling each other out; traditionally, the Supreme Judge refrains from bringing about a decision by voting.

Some Latin words have managed to wiggle their way into the Judges' language: for example, the Supreme Judge is often called "Primus inter pares", first among peers. The trial is being held "Coram publico", in public; the defenders are called into the stand with the phrase "Audiatur et altera pars!" (The other side shall be heard too!), and Protectors get in the right mood for the coming battle with "Per Aspera ad Astra" (on rough paths to the stars, to victory by a battle). Many a Judge finishes his final sentence with "Punctum!" (That's it!) or starts a death sentence with "Mors certa, hora incerta." (Death is certain, its hour is uncertain), and basically every second sentence of the opinion of the court can be spiced up by a "De iure" (by right).

Some Judges would feel naked if they didn't wear this garb of unintelligible phrases. Others completely refrain from using the Latin clichés. As far as the Cult is concerned, that is up to the Judges alone.

JURYMEN

The Protectorate thrives and grows quicker than the number of its Judges. The front line has become over-expanded, but unpunished crimes would make the people rise up. The Judges thus mend the holes with jurymen. Mostly, they choose enclave leaders or merchants with a good reputation, less often decorated veterans who are schooled as jurymen in a fast-track procedure. They can judge in the absence of Judges and arrest culprits until the Judge can review their case. If a culprit accepts the temporary judgment, it becomes valid and irreversible. Lesser punishments like the marking of a thief or swearer are implemented at once by a juryman or his representative. In severe cases, a Protector must be consulted.

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

The Judges bring law to the wasteland, and just like a strict father teaches the rules of life to his unruly kids by beating them, the Judges punish all who act against the Codex's teachings. Punishment is not an end in itself, but a tool to frighten the masses and lead them on the path to purity, the founder writes in his journal.

Thus, the Judges have developed many forms of reproof, castigation and harsh punishments for every

crime during the long years of their existence. They know no imprisonment, though. Justitian was not willing to shoulder the cost for arresting and feeding a prisoner for days or even months.

The Judges' penal system also needs to take into account that the people in the Protectorate are practically anonymous. No one has ever heard of passports or birth certificates. If you move house within Justitian, you can start a new life as a stranger in the new neighborhood. The Judges counteracted this by making punishments visible. For example, a thief's hands and forearms are dyed blue using a stinking solution. The same color is used to mark the lips of liars and frauds. Depending on the mixture, this color takes weeks or months to fade. The culprits then get rid of the social anathema and get a second chance. Repeat offenders who are still marked are treated more harshly by the Judges and soon feel the iron fist of Justitian's justice. Thieves have one knuckle on each hand smashed, frauds get their tongue split with a glowing blade. They should have taken the admonition to heart.

ADVOCATES: CODEX

The drill in the dust, the shouting when fighting with the hammers and the eternal din from the Protectors' sealing block – all this is a permanent nuisance to the Advocates. They too must carry the hammer, but actually preferred the musket. It's loud, too, but at least it does not put them on the same level as the savages in the wasteland.

The physical trials to be accepted into the Advocates' ranks are accordingly lax. A few shots from the rifle, jumping for cover, yes, that's sufficient, too. But they know no leniency concerning the knowledge about the Codex. For hours, the applicant's knowledge of the paragraphs and laws is checked in a staccato-like cross-examination. Only those who know the Codex by heart and utter the correct phrases without thinking are not found wanting in front of the Advocates' tribunal.

But that's not all. The last trial is held in the Senate Hall. Extras step up and describe fictional problems; others play the roles of culprits, victims and witnesses. The applicant walks amongst the extras, questioning them and forming an opinion. If his judgment satisfies the tribunal, he's almost there. In front of the tribunal, the Judge swears an oath on the Codex and on Justitian, just like the Protectors when they are sworn in. But he will not need his hammer here. The tribunal Judges shake hands with him and congratulate him. It's a small gesture with huge meaning. Welcome to the Advocates.

Killers and rapists do not get a second chance. Their forehead is branded using a judgment iron, and they are banned from the Protectorate. Should they return to be arrested, the Judges leave it to the victims or their relatives to choose the punishment. Popular forms of punishment are smashing a limb with the judgment hammer or tearing it out using the Judge's horse. In especially severe cases, there is a death sentence and the culprit is killed by a heavy blow to the head.

Many culprits, especially those lesser crimes, get to choose. Either pay an indemnification to their victims or spend a few days in Justitian's boot camps. Additionally, their faces are marked with red color, the henna. In the following days, they work for the city's benefit, repair streets, build houses, shovel dirt from the Defiler Streets, fight the dust with their spades, and work on the great Colossus, chairman Archot's legacy. If one of them flees and gets caught, he must expect something bad. If the Judges showed mercy, it would be considered weakness. That is something they cannot allow if they want to keep controlling their army of forced laborers. They will treat him like a felon. Only when the henna fades away after two or three weeks may the prisoner go unmolested. A few even stay. Two meals a day are more than they could manage in their normal lives.

The Judges' punishments shape Justitian's culture. A deal is always sealed by a handshake, before which merchant and customer take off their gloves or wrappings, making sure that the other has no colored skin before getting down to business. Those who wear their gloves on a market in Justitian must expect to be eyed warily. "Show me your hands" is a familiar saying. The same is true for the face. It is considered impolite to hide your face under scarf or breathing mask while in conversation. Why would you do that if not to hide the fact that you are a liar or a fraud? Showing your face is considered tantamount to honesty. Thus, strangers who do not know Justitian's ways often have a hard time getting started in the Protectorate.

ARCHOT'S OBSESSION

The first 20 years of Archot's time in office were one huge blur of magnificence. At least, this is what the historians will write. Without using force, his Judges annexed dozens of the villages and erected their Judging stones all over Borca. The Clans died in the hail of lead from the Judges' muskets. The Cockroach Clan, savage and bestial as it was, crawled back between the crevices, never to be seen again. The smugglers' nest called Ignatz was razed in a concerted punitive expedition together with the Preservists. The Judges advanced on all fronts, smashing and rebuilding. Archot himself knew of his magnificence and consciously hid under an insufficient layer of false humility.

If the rumors in the Senate can be believed, Archot feared nothing more than to be forgotten after his death. According to tradition, a stone head would be erected for him next to the Judgment Alley – and thus, he would be one of a long line of Supreme Judges. It is said he couldn't stand this notion – and so, it began.

He gathered his Advocates and issued a new edict. For his fire to inspire those who came after him, a mausoleum that did his achievements justice should be built for him. The prisoners in the boot camps had a new job. They struggled in the ruins, harvested stones, and dragged them to Justitian's high town. They piled them up at the end of the Judgment Alley; layer by layer, a stone torso formed, passing from a sinewy neck to the chin, tapering at the shoulders.

The Colossus towered 30 feet high when a Jehammedan assassin blew it up.

Not only was a bunch of stones destroyed; Archot's soul crumbled that day. Someone had to pay. There were witnesses to the attack. A Sensorium of Chroniclers registered the Hagari shortly before the detonation. The overseers at the Colossus had also seen a female Jehammedan. Archot got word of these facts less than 30 minutes after the attack. He also knew that the Osmani had sent an Isaaki, one of their blessed children, to Justitian. Archot stood on the steps of the Hall of Judgment in his flowing robes, his white hair in disarray, and his eyes dark with sadness and hard with fury. "Hang him!"

Streamers spread out, trying to warn the Jehammedan community, but they did not reach them. Interface problems. In the end, Rutgar's black Judges found the Isaaki Gideon and riddled him with 12 rounds of bullets. His horse carried him on for more than 50 steps before the corpse slid from the saddle and hit the pavement.

Archot decided to hang the Isaaki on a jib a on the uptown wall. Fodder for the crows and, of course, a sign of his disapproval.

An era of strength ended, and Archot's madness would define the next.

RETREAT

The Jehammedan quarter survived, mainly due to the Arianoi Baruch who demanded the family council turn their backs on Osman. He said that Osman had declared a holy war in whose fires they would all burn to ashes. But there is still tension in the air. Archot does not trust anyone anymore.

The Colossus had been a symbol for Justitian's omnipotence. When it fell, doubts rose – and so did the Clans. Since then, they have dared to attack merchants and have begun fortifying their domain in the ruins. The Judges are being pushed back into the city. The first Protectorate settlements are lost.

Then news of the horde's attack on Praha spread. In the Hall of Judgment, the reaction is indifference. Why do we care who bashes whose heads beyond the Reaper's Blow? But the Clans do care. If Praha can fall, so can Justitian. The Clans gather courage, show aggression towards the Judges. People presumed dead rise from the ruins. The Cockroach Clan is back, and with it all of the scum that once had been pushed to the borders of the Protectorate.

Justitian's fateful years have begun.

THE HALL OF JUDGMENT

At the center of Justitian, so close to the Central Cluster that the din of the creaking speakers and feedbacks is still audible, are the Cult's headquarter, the Hall of Judgment. The three main portals with their zigzag friezes cut deep into its front, which open out onto the Judgment Alley. Between them, two colossal bronze statues in Judges' robes tower eight meters high: one is leaning on a hammer, the other presses a dusty image of the Codex to its chest. Their cool gaze rests on the ruin of the Colossus at the end of the Avenue. The Hall of Judgment is rectangular, 80 m long and 50 m wide, a fortress with thick walls and pillars carrying the weight of the inner dome. High, arched windows with artistic glass paintings symbolizing the Judges' virtues on one side and the outlaws' deadly sins on the other break up the buildings angular form. The roof is 14 m high, a broad battlement with low bunker towers on all four corners surrounding the whole building. Thick-bellied cannons and mortar mounts stare down onto visitors grimly from up there. Behind them, the Protectors patrol.

A one-story concrete building covered in ashlar from pre-eschatological times clings to the shadowy north flank. Here, the Judges' horses are stabled. It is said they

THE CODEX

SERVE JUSTICE,
SEEK THAT WHICH IS WRONG,
ALLEVIATE THE SUFFERING.

THE WORD
GIVES US PREMONITION AND SHOWS US THE WAY.
IT AWAKENS THE SPIRIT,
EXACTS THE CONSCIOUSNESS.

THE HAMMER
DOES NOT SHOW THE WAY.
IT PUNISHES.
IT EXORCISES.
IT REMOVES.

CLOAK AND HAT
ARE THE SIGNS OF THE COMMUNITY OF THE RIGHTEOUS.
THEY DEMAND HUMILITY
AND ASK FOR RESPECT.

GOGGLES AND SCARF
ARE THE SHADOW
HIDING THE FEAR AND
DEFLECTING REVENGE.

THE MUSKET
IS LIGHT AND LIGHTNING.
ALL THAT IS FALSE FLEES FROM IT
INTO RUIN.

are better off than some of Justitian's citizens. In the Hall of Judgment that actually consists of several vaults, there is a sacral mood. The stained-glass windows break the light into a display of blue, red and green color panes. Judges and Chroniclers walk in and out of here all the time; the most important offices can be found in the south wing. The center opens up onto an atrium surrounded by a cloister. Here, Protectors and Advocates meet for friendly discussions. In the main hall, the Supreme Judge resides. In the adjoining side wings, the senates meet.

THE BARRACKS

At strategic points in Justitian, the Judges have erected barracks. They are the home of the Protectors who eat, sleep and train here. Their horses stand in the adjoining stables. The number of Judges stationed here depends on the importance of the barracks, from 10 to 100. The largest facilities have several sleeping halls, subterranean arsenals, large training grounds and bunker-like fortifications. They all are surrounded by barbed wire or regular fences.

RANKS JUDGES

1 - VAGRANT

The Judges like to make children whose parents have become victims of violent crimes Vagrants. The anger burning in those orphans is fueled over the years. They want vengeance. Later, many of them will join the Protectors and repay in kind what they had to suffer.

Vagrants born to one of the ancient Advocate families and are aspiring for succession of their parents by right are born on the sunny side of the lane. From childhood, they witness a culture of discussion; the Protectors' violence seems foreign to them. They look for justice, or at least for a law corresponding to the respective injustice. Like their ancestors, they walk in the footsteps of the Supreme Judge without erring from the path set by the Codex.

Wherever he may come from, a Vagrant gathers experience in dealing with people and the living Codex at the side of an experienced Judge. He rarely leaves Justitian, although he sometimes might ride out to the nearest Protectorate settlements.

A Vagrant may not carry a Judge's insignia – Hammer and Codex. For some years, he will have to be content with making herbal tea, listening intently and learning his lessons in written language by night.

2 - CITY JUDGE

After years at the side of their mentors, the physical, mental and intellectual prowess of the Vagrants is tested. If they pass, they are outfitted and are considered Judges in their own right from then on. At least in the sense that the judiciary can send them into battle against the Clans. Only in simple cases, for example when a handful of drafts are concerned, they may judge and hold trials. Capital offenses are reserved for Protectors and Advocates.

They look no different from high-ranking Judges, which is quite all right with them as well as for the Judiciary. They are sent wherever the mood is tense and the masses' outrage can only be cooled by their presence.

3 - PROTECTOR

They want to get back to an original Codex that gave common (well, to be exact, judicial) sense the prerogative of interpretation when it came to crimes.

Every Judge must become a moral authority and remain physically fit. Every Judge shall become a warrior of right, a blazing example of courage, willing to make sacrifices and extoll justice. Like the storm he shall sweep away outlaws and expand the Protectorate to finally usher in a golden age.

Protectors are fighters who value vengeance more than law; often they look at a situation and pass judgment in the blink of an eye. They will quote the respective paragraphs of the Codex later – or not at all.

Those who want to join the Protectors need two intercessors to defend them in front of the Protectors' chambers of the Senate.

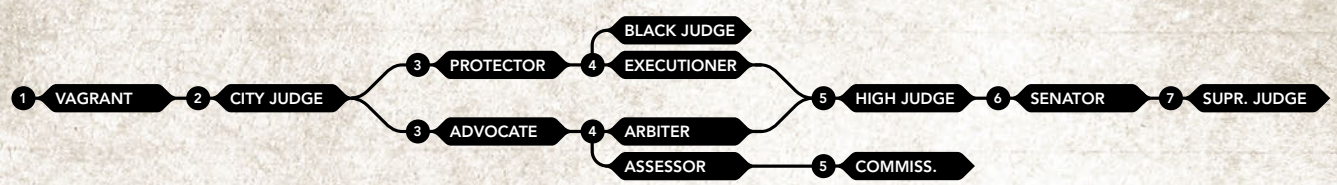
4 - EXECUTIONER

Executioners have made a name for themselves by handing down spectacular sentences or by smoking out a nest of outlaws. They are feared. That's the way they want it to be.

4 - BLACK JUDGE

They are fed up. "The Codex is a beacon in the darkness, the torch of civilization!" For the Senate, "darkness" is a worn-out phrase that somehow encompasses those clans out there, but excludes corruption and perversion within the ranks. Black Judges know how impermeable darkness can really be. They live within it since Rutgar gathered

HIERARCHY AND RANKS - JUDGES



them. For him, they find sick minds within the judiciary and get rid of them. They can get close to those outlaws sped by the Codex. No trial, no wailing. They only know death sentences.

Their identities are secret, and not even Rutgar knows their base of operations. He radios out his orders, and every Black Judge owns a mobile radio set to a specific frequency and hears them. Sources hand over weapons and drafts at premeditated spots.

Understood and over.

3 - ADVOCATE

For the Advocates, justice can only be reached through rules. They want to tame the wolf within the man by taking him by the short leash of the law. To them, it is the Judge's job to develop this extremely moral set of rules, to test it on themselves, and finally to apply them to all those who use their freedom to hurt other people.

Judges should be merciful mentors, but also cruel pedagogues. The Advocates don't consider the Judiciary as warriors in the first place. An army of mercenaries is just as capable of bashing in heads of outlaws.

4 - ARBITER

Arbiters are true to the Codex, to a word. The consequences of every sentence are well considered and unimpeachable by Justitian law. They are feared for their eloquence.

4 - ASSESSOR

Where Protectors might already swing their hammers, they gather statements, evidence and dossiers. There are problems that cannot be solved by violence or an epigram from the Codex. They do the work, blaze through the maze of lies and deceit to help the Commissioner for whom they work pass judgment in the end.

5 - COMMISSIONER

He knows the webs that the outlaws wove over the decades. He uses them to root out outlaws and enemies of the Protectorate far beyond the reach of his colleagues. Assessors and informers assist him.

In his position, he has learned to discern: if he tramples a host's Finks, he might never be able to reach the center of the web. On the other hand, a direct attack on the ravens would tear the web. He would be blind and deaf until new structures formed and he would then have to infiltrate them. He has to act carefully to pick out those whose harmfulness has become unbearable.

5 - HIGH JUDGE

The Senate appoints the High Judges. Only those with extraordinary achievements and whose names are a blazing symbol of justice and truth to the Codex can become part of the election process and will be promoted after years of strict supervision. But then, there are no bonds for them anymore. Many High Judges go out into the wasteland to gain new land for the Protectorate, others remain in Justitian to dance the complex waltz of politics.

6 - SENATOR

The Judiciary affords two senates with eight high Judges each. All of them were heroes once, unused to being interrupted or contradicted. In the angry debates over Justitian's fate, they will have to tolerate this.

7 - SUPREME JUDGE

For decades, the name Archot has become a synonym for the title of Supreme Judge in Justitian. Assuming Archot – blessed be his name – would step down, how could an aspiring, power-conscious Senator climb to the top of the Judiciary? In fact, there is no common procedure for this. All procedures from before the era of Archot have been extinguished from the books by him. Probably, the Senators would vote for one from amongst their midst.

But that is not the case yet. Archot may be ancient, but he's neither tired nor decrepit.

MUSKET

STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS
For years, we lay in ambush with our rifles, guarding Justitian's Cross Quarter like a prison camp. After all the Chroniclers had spread about the Anabaptists, they had to be wild animals. Now everything is supposed to be different? I wonder who's in control in Justitian.

ANUBIANS
Who? Ah, Africans. Rare guests in the Protectorate. If they behave, they're welcome.

APOCALYPTICS
Wherever these migrating birds land, trouble is not far away. If they pick at us, we will smoke out their nest.

CHRONICLERS
The Chronicler sect is subordinate to the First. As long as Archot thinks we can use them, we agree. They bring us information and take care of the technology. Ah, whatever.

CLANNERS
It is our destiny to guard the citizens of the Protectorate. As far as the Clans are concerned, Archot has taught us the only language savages understand: force.

HELLVETICS
Soldiers without ambitions, happily sitting in their Alpine Fortress. That's just as well, for they have the weapons to forcefully gain control over Purgare and southern Borca. Yet in their old home, they failed. That's what happens if you jabber too much.

JEHAMMEDANS
Since the war in the Adriatic lowlands has lost its momentum, the Anabaptists and Jehammedans have lain low. The conflicts in Justitian have died down almost completely, and in the Protectorate, the two sects keep their distance from each other, too.

NEOLIBYANS
Chairman Archot had it entered into the Codex: no citizen of the Protectorate may trade with Africans. Sounds as if the Chroniclers had a finger in the pie there.

PALERS
Born thieves. They prefer the night like the scum they are. We will keep an eye on them.

SCOURGERS
Warriors from faraway Africa, often at the side of the Neolibyans. Probably mercenaries.

SCRAPPERS
Don't ask an Advocate about the Scrappers. In their eyes, those ragged figures ruin the cityscape. But they're okay. They keep their mouths shut and stick to the rules.

SPITALIANS
They are part of Justitian. The Hygienists screen every crumble of bread we want to eat. For a long time, they tried to undermine our rules. After their closing of ranks, WE have to stick to THEIR rules. It's… unbearable.

LAIKA, THE BITCH

Culture: Borca
Concept: The Zealot
Cult: Judges (Protector)

She's a Protector from the Tech Central. With an iron fist, she rules the Scrapper quarter and to that end, has assembled a group of violent Anabaptists that has become known as "the Pack" in the Protectorate. Laika herself is said to be tenacious and dogged. The Scrappers say she finds every criminal, and that is why there are rarely any incidents in the Tech Central.

RUTGAR

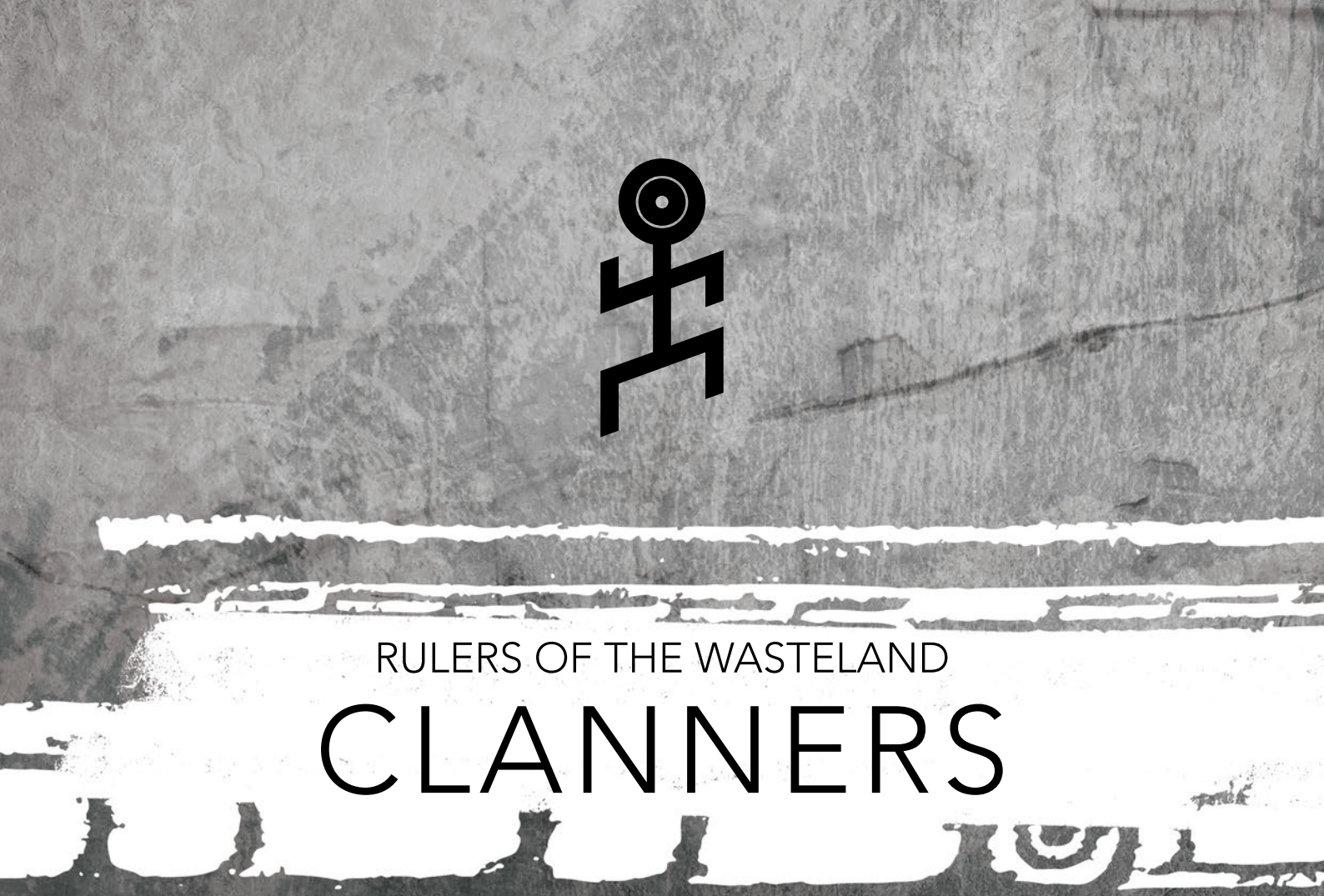
Culture: Borca
Concept: The Mentor
Cult: Judges (Senator)

Rutgar is the second-highest-ranking judge in Justitian, outranked only by Supreme Judge Archot. As chairman of the Protectorate's senates he's considered the official leader of the Cult's executive branch. The old wolf pulls all the strings. He's an expert at that.

PHILIPPE LAUTRECHE

Culture: Franka
Concept: The Defiler
Cult: Judges (Advocate)

When a small settlement at the Frankan border surrendered to the Protectorate, the judiciary sent the Advocate Philippe Lautreche. He was supposed to bring culture and law to the place and preach Justitian's wisdom. Yes, he brought order to the settlement. After a fashion. The Frankan air changed the calm Advocate, made him an unparalleled tyrant. Since then, he has been ruling those who are unworthy in his eyes as if he was a God.



RULERS OF THE WASTELAND

CLANNERS

OLD WAYS

Ahmahdee, blazing disc of fire, life giver and father of all people, stood in the zenith and smiled down on his creation. The surrounding sky blazed in the intense blue that marks especially dry and hot days. Here on the plains east of the cragged Westdarfur Mountains, that was no rare occurrence. Beyond the zigzag line on the horizon, a dark cloud front towered; lightning flashed silently, uniting heaven and earth in tremendous discharges.

Chisulo listened to the quiet, waiting for the thunder, for the beat of the heavenly drum. However, there was only the soft whispering of the grass, a sea of blades, tall as a man, swaying in the rhythm of an unheard melody. The air was shimmering with heat. Insects chirped. Like a sea snake, a concrete pipeline parted the green ocean, only its cracked back breaking the surface. Up there, the proud Masai sat, savoring the quiet and sublimity of this place. With eyes closed, he gazed inwards onto a chaotic mix of burning passion, indignation, and pride. His eyelids twitched, and searing hot tears welled up. His soul cringed in shame and uneasiness, fighting through a maze of old traditions, searching for a way out that thousands before him had not found. For a moment, his spite gained the upper hand and washed away his desperation, luring him with a tricky way to freedom: fleeing to the Anubians in the East or to the Neolibyans in the North with his beloved. They would never find him. They would not want to find him. He would be disgraced, as would his wife. His mother, who always looked kindly upon her third son, would spit on him and turn away. She would not be able to shave his head in the Eunuto ritual, would not see her son become one of the elders.

Once again, the decision was made. The thin braids he had fashioned his long hair into trembled with the rhythm of his breathing. The sun had not yet touched the mountain range in the distance when an athletic young man clad in red cloth and adorned with colorful wooden beads and knotted cords returned to his village. Clutching his spear made of light birch wood tightly, he carried his AK 74 strapped to his back. He gazed straight ahead. Back to the community to which he owed everything.

SURVIVORS

The Eshaton killed indiscriminately and forced those it spared into the shelter of bunkers, basements, and caves. There, they waited. Those who wanted to survive stayed with their families or joined a group; loners stood no chance. “You only have two eyes, and they are both looking to the front”, the elders said. “You need someone to watch your back.”

The people closed ranks. They gave up their old life and allowed their instincts to take control. They looked to the fire, used the day, and hid by night. They listened to the stories of their elders, became trappers, and learned how to use lead pipes against opponents. Primordial cries sounded through the ruins.

The individual lost ground and became one with the Clan. Everyone had a role to play: in the first years after the Eshaton worth was dictated by ability, later, when the cultural decline began, by birth and sex. Those who wanted to make an exception endangered the Clan.

Survival was hard enough, why bother with deviants? Punishment came quickly and strictly.

They survived the Eshaton, HIVE, the dark decades and the era of the beast. They had reached the lowest point of civilization, tasted the waters of Lethe, and yet had risen again.

The Clans grew. They allowed themselves value systems, at first only directed toward survival and their Clan’s strength, later incorporating the weak and the old. Culture crystallized around these ideas. Faith and ideology were not far away, distinguishing themselves from other Clans and strengthening the links within their own group.

The Clanners no longer saw themselves as survivors. That was such an old word. In the meantime, they lived, had left the dark so far behind. Those from Toulon now considered themselves Touloni; a family with a long tradition working as smiths called itself the Masters of Steel; a Clan that was harvesting stones in the ruins called itself the Mason family. People got their identity and their names from their place of birth or their work.

NOMADS

Right after the Eshaton, dust covered the land, and roiling black clouds chased across the sky. The vegetation had suffocated; only now and then, an ash-covered tree stump peaked from the ground. The people searched the ruins, climbed into old warehouses, and looted canned goods. They wandered on when the region had nothing more to offer. Only nomads could survive in those days.

Many Clans still wander the land. In Eastern Borca, they follow giant herds, separate young animals or hurt old ones and hunt them to death. One cadaver will feed the Clan for weeks; its fur will warm them.

The circle of the seasons, the routes of the herds and the strength and virility of their women and men determine the Clans’ life. The Clans know how to interpret the wind and the clouds and read the future from a dead bull’s innards. They consider Bygone letters a sort of magical language that only a few chosen ones may know – usually the Clan’s Shamans. They treat special places and items with careful respect, for who knows if good or evil spirits inhabit them? If a Chronicler would make St. Elmo’s fire burn across his pauldrons and preach the global conflagration to the Clans with his Vocoder turned up, they would consider him a god.

If only they knew.

SETTLED DOWN

From Noret, wild wheat has been spreading in the Rain's riverbed. Every few years, it conquered another distributary, and the billowing gold stretched further into the land. It was a blessing for the people. They harvested the corn, ground it to flour, or sowed it in fields next to the riverbed. Then, they settled close to the fields.

The wheat was highly resistant and undemanding, thrived in the cold close to the Ice Barrier just as in Pollen's dry climate. The Spitalians tried to analyze the strain and found similarities to the Bygone Triticale, but nothing conclusive. The Rain wheat was something special, something new. They did not like that. For it could only mean that it was a Primer aberration. Almost everyone ate it. However, all tests proved that spores could afflict Triticale, but that its basic form was spore-free. Finally, the Spital certified the Rain wheat.

Hundreds of sacks are sold to faraway places as seeds every year. Tired of wandering and oppressed by the cults, the nomads try their hand at farming. They settle next to bodies of water or close to aqueducts, staking their claims and working the land. Others gather around legendary Bygone buildings or become powerful by occupying some old warehouse. Some unite and found villages. Smiths, potters and weavers settle down. Dynasties arise. Rules of succession are devised, laws are made. Rules and prohibitions steer life. "You want to marry a Ferropolite? Forget it, son." Welcome to civilization.

SAVAGES

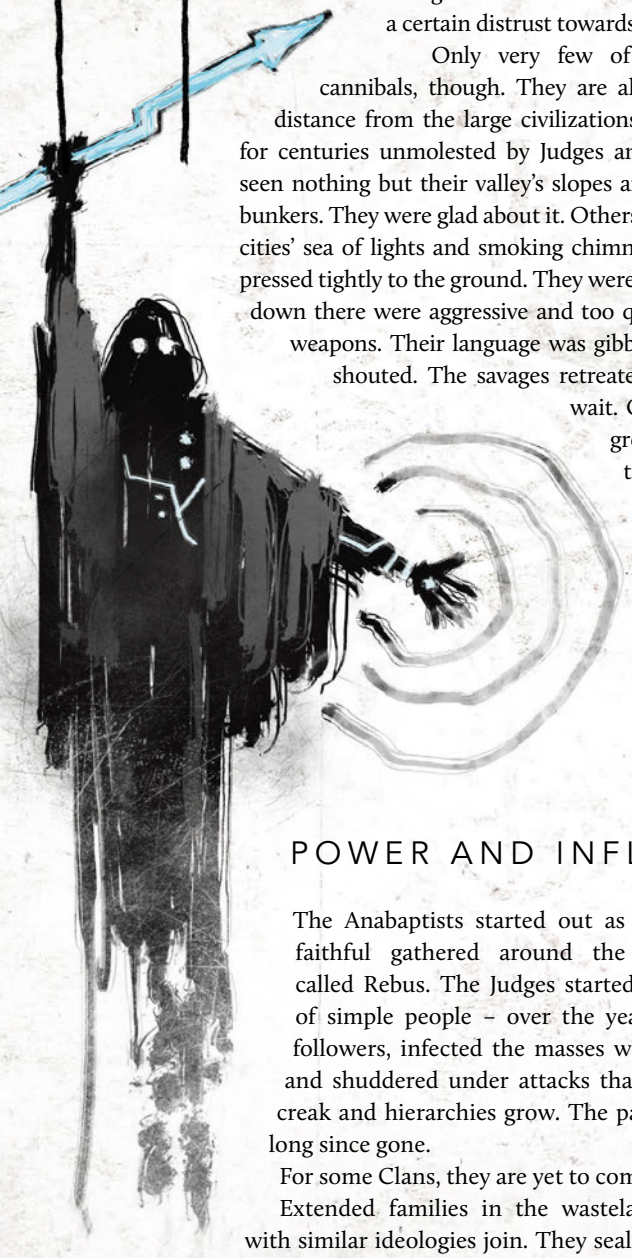
In spite of all efforts, common decency is rare. It can only be found where Judges or Hellvetics have tread paths in the dust. Beyond them, in the unexplored territories, anything is possible. For centuries, Clans whose grasp of humanity has suffered dearly through ongoing incest have been living there. For the Spitalians, these Clans are an interesting field of research, for they still retain some Bygone blood undiluted by inbreeding with a large gene pool.

However, these savages do not cooperate.

Actually, they are very dangerous. Their Shamans, Chieftains or Founders are hulking figures who can unite the whole incestuous Clan with one shout. They kill anyone who approaches them and devour the bodies. They are like animals, greedy and wild, unfettered by any culture. They sleep with rats, snarl at Gendos, and determine their ranks through bloody battles. They are not good neighbors. When they are hungry and leave their valleys, the good settlers bar their huts, call for the Anabaptists and grab their spears. None shall escape!

The settlers' outlook is biased by centuries of conflict. Every Clan knows its own stories of cannibals, screaming savages whose skin is painted white with dirt and who carry glass daggers. The savages broke into huts, slashed women's faces and throats and stole children. The elders still weep when they talk about the village warriors' retribution and how they found only spits next to campfires and gnawed bones. No one begrudges them a certain distrust towards strangers.

Only very few of the savages are cannibals, though. They are all marked by their distance from the large civilizations. Some have lived for centuries unmolested by Judges and Spitalians, have seen nothing but their valley's slopes and their ancestors' bunkers. They were glad about it. Others watched the large cities' sea of lights and smoking chimneys from the hills, pressed tightly to the ground. They were afraid. The people down there were aggressive and too quick to draw their weapons. Their language was gibberish, they usually shouted. The savages retreated to convene and wait. Only great need or great injustice would turn their fear into hatred. Then the cities would not be safe anymore.



POWER AND INFLUENCE

The Anabaptists started out as a small group of faithful gathered around the alleged Messiah called Rebus. The Judges started out as a handful of simple people – over the years, they gathered followers, infected the masses with their ideology, and shuddered under attacks that made structures creak and hierarchies grow. The pains of growth are long since gone.

For some Clans, they are yet to come.

Extended families in the wasteland unite, groups with similar ideologies join. They seal their pacts with a shake of hands, a marriage, or a toll. They grow and take shape in the Cults' slipstream. Their influence grows as they expand their territory. It is not blood that unites Clans anymore: They share common goals or kneel before the same god. They dislike the word "kin" now, seeing themselves as a Clan. The Cults meet this development with skepticism. For a Clan is a new token in the battle for domination, to be won over and controlled by flatteries or resources. Already some speak of an era of rebirth: the rebirth of the Clans.

BORCA

Western Borca is in the large hands of the Judges, who have expanded the Protectorate with hammer and gunpowder and erected their judgment stones in every settlement and farm. At the same time, the Anabaptists' aqueducts crisscross wide areas, speaking of Cathedral City's dignity and benevolence. In the Alpine foothills, the Hellvetics have dug in, guarding the trade routes as they have for ages. The Clans ruled by those Cults have tolerated the paternalism for a long time. The Judges and Anabaptists chased all the scum from their territory to a place where no hail of lead, no walls of blades awaited.

Before, those who fancied themselves dressed in Justitian fashion took hand-rolled medicine globules and thanked Rebus for every healthy downpour. The people looked upon their settlements with pride, saw themselves as Ferropolites, Earfielders, Leadfielders, Liquans. The young ones pined for Justitian, dreaming of being legal citizens of this vibrant metropolis. They scratched lichens from the judgment stones and brought a soup made of boiled roots to their local Judges on a daily basis until the fat and lazy Judges walked next to their mares because they could not mount them anymore. They listened to the Judges' breathless accounts of giant battles against the Cockroach Clan and heard them scoff about the foolish Exalters who still drank water from their poisoned wells. They even laughed at bad jokes. They did not listen to their elders anymore.

Now, something is stirring. The Cockroaches never disappeared. They only fled deeper into the Bygone tunnels. They lurk again in the shadows of the seas of debris, attack swift as lightning, only to disappear back into the underground with their prey. The Exalters confront Justitian as they did before. The Chroniclers had used their full repertory of infamy to keep the Enemoi Clan away from ancient stores of knowledge, but suddenly the Judges are tied up in the battle against the Cockroaches and harshly sweep aside the technology Cult's pleas for help.

Praha's fall does the rest. The Clans and kinsmen remember their roots, find their way back to their old pride. The elders' words are relevant again. They have never needed Justitian, and they never will. Revenge is such an ugly word, such an uncivilized feeling. Nevertheless, look at those complacent blubberbutts with their waistcoats and floppy hats…

The Hellvetics had not fared much better. The Clans in the Cantons rose up, raged against their former compulsory allies in neighboring cities, and lost themselves in endless trade wars. Hellvetica watched this for years. Couldn't the people have marched into a blessed future thankfully – and more importantly, together? Would that have been so difficult?

The territorial commanders convened. They had seen enough. There was no need for discussion anymore. They called their Soldiers back into the mountain, left

the thankless bunch to reality. They did not tarry long, for it had always been lurking at the fringe of perception on snow-covered peaks and passes. Like an avalanche, it hit the lowlands in the shape of expelled valley Clans and mountain tribes. The people in the Swiss heartland had to fight for their homes for the first time, had to arm themselves with pointed spears instead of harsh words.

The cities hate each other and have largely turned into military camps. However, they do not attack each other. While the citizens of Bern, Lyss, and Worb are united by a tradition of animosity, the enmity towards other Cantons runs much deeper. The savages from the mountains are even worse. Maybe they all have more in common than they care to admit.

Beyond the Reaper's Blow in Eastern Borca, the shockwaves resulting from Praha's fall can be felt much more strongly. Nomads still roam the conifer forests and follow the giant herds on their north-south route. However, large Clans are moving towards Praha from the north. Everyone wants to see the city that has been hidden from the public eye for so long, and once they are there, they can just as well grab something as a recompense for the long journey. There are skirmishes and full-blown family feuds since its fall, Praha seems to have become much more dangerous.

For a long time, Osman was considered untouchable. The Jehammedans stuck together and tilled the land wisely and justly. The farming Clans had no reason to complain. The unrest now comes from another direction. Over the centuries, the Osmani had an army of foreigners, the Janites, that now consists of hundreds of militarized Clans. They ride out every day to cull the savages in the area in bloody skirmishes. They die for Osman, giving their lives in the grim knowledge that by doing so, they buy a place in the Janites' ranks for their children. However, the Iconides mistrust them. Praha has taught them a lesson.

FRANKA

The Frankan Clans live far away from large Pheromancer strongholds like Souffrance. Many families returned home years after the Eshaton to rebuild what was rightfully theirs. Those estates in the overgrown or swamped ruins are now several centuries old. Many of the venerable buildings are still in good repair, but others look more like a cavern. The floors have collapsed under the weight of time, and ivy and grass cover the cavities. The Clanners make the best of it.

They fight the humidity through campfires, cut down the brush, and live on fish and damp grasses. All of them can survive in the swamps with nothing but a spear. They use lakes and rivers to hide from Swarm and Pheromancer alike.

Some Frankan Clans have retreated to the rivers. They live on rafts or boats tied together and watch the Aberrants' movements from a safe distance. They do not need to fear ant swarms or the storms of wasps. It seems that perhaps pheromone markers cannot travel through the air over running water.

Few Clans stay clear from the conflict with the Pheromancers. Fewer even have this option. Those who still can fight the intruders – anointed with Marduk oil they creep into the Ziggurats and breeding chambers to destroy the queens or blow up the methane vents. The Spital helps them by getting EX, other drugs, and detonation cartridges into the frontier settlements. Smuggler Clans transport them inland.

In Briton, the situation is desperate. The Anabaptists' and Spitalians' supply trains are not coming in, so they lack food and personnel, while termites are busy building vent after vent. The doctors have been training Clans who have lost their homes to the Pheromancers as deputy Spitalians. They carry fallen Famulancers' Splayers and are given bag-like gas masks from local stores, for which they are called "Grenouilles", frogs. They see their home tremble under masses of insects, see the vents grow on their territory. No one fights harder than they.

The gases heavy with pheromones drift to the northeast, into the Stukov. They cover the desert, sink in, and change. Under the salt crust, new life grows – the engine of evolution starts. Here, the Clans eat Dust Worms and Desert Clams, creatures the Spitalians would probably not find in their textbooks. Their hunters are as implacable as the climate, but still they deal with the Spitalians, exchanging Flying Leeches, Stukov Scorpions, Rift Centipedes, Husk Spiders, and Fractal Stars for drugs and weapons.

POLLEN

The constant change of the environment, the withering tundra, the ever-present gossamer, and the cold force the Pollners into eternal wanderings. Wherever they stop, they fight the ground for food: they catch insects in pits, they scratch mosses from rocks, or they dig roots from the ground. Anything that can be cooked is edible.

However, for some years now, the land has been changing. The rock underfoot trembles, snow is melting in circular formations, the ground is feverishly hot. Spore fields rot, replaced by gaudy green vegetation growing along fractal paths. Fruit hangs fully and seductively from the trees of this awakening paradise. Danger lurks, though: One mere scratch and they burst and cover the plucking hand with a hot, grainy sap. Some Clans go looking for those Fractal Forests. They harvest the fruit and sell it to the Anabaptists' emissaries at the Alpine passage of Ternitz.

The Apocalyptics have witnessed this game long enough now. Pollen has always been Mother Raven's pasture, and she cannot remember having given a concession to those Clans. Strictly speaking, she has never given a concession to anyone. But what does it mean? The birds of passage are gathering. When they come across a Clan in the Fractal Forests, they descend upon it like a murder of hungry crows. However, the Pollners have been stoically chewing lichens for centuries, have defied the cold, the Spore Beasts, and the Biokinetics, and they do not plan to run. War cries echo from the woods – the battle between primal and trained brutality has just begun.

The Spitalians are somewhere in between. Their Preservists burn down the Fractal Forests wherever they can find them. Neither the Clans nor the Apocalyptics can tolerate this.

Although the Ice Barrier devours several feet of land every day, some Clans have survived up north. None of these consists of more than 30 people today, but they likely all come from a Clan shattered some 300 years ago. Indicative of that fact, they all wait for a horse oracle, an enigmatic three-faced figure, to arrive. They hunt and dig for old stores told by their ancestors. The Westja Clan is extraordinarily good at that. The Clan actively trades with the Spitalians in snow-laden Danzig.

Resident Clans are rare in Pollen. The largest Clan is the Wroclaw confederation, led by the Piast and his Drushinniks. Dozens of Clans had to bend their knees to him in order to enter the inner ring within the city walls

and profit from the Eternal Oasis. The Africans are using Wroclaw as a starting point on their hunt for Biokinetics and have stationed a Surge Tank next to the entrance as a show of good will and mistrust, so the city is considered unassailable. Still, Praha's fall terrified the Wroclaw Clans. Where will the hordes go when there is no loot left?

BALKHAN

Balkhan's people are strident and irascible, and the same is true for its Clans. They never liked the fact that strangers make trouble in their land. Spitalians blew up Dushani rock formations and thus brought screaming madness to whole provinces. The Jehammedans drove families away from their land and into their war against the Africans, armed only with hope and a rake. Palers milked villages until their inhabitants fled into the Voivodes' arms, gaunt and wearing nothing but rags.

This stops now.

It began in Sofia, over two winters before the fall of Praha. A nameless man joined Voivode Wiktor's henchmen, fighting his way to the top, and became his right-hand man. On the streets, the people bowed to him. When he reached the end of the career ladder, he asked Wiktor for a meeting. They ate together, and after the meal, the man approached his Voivode, embraced him, kissed him, and broke his neck.

From this day on, he called himself Karakhan, the black leader. The Balkhani laughed about the boisterous name. However, they soon learned that sometimes a name carries a message.

Karakhan was a sensitive tactician. Within one solar cycle he had chased the Spitalians from Sofia, smoked out the surrounding bunkers, and sworn the Jehammedans to himself.

Now, Karakhan and two other Voivoide Clans rule Eastern Balkhan with an iron fist. The cults have become supplicants who must justify their every step to the Voivodes. Those who do not obey are sold into African slavery – a fact that has curbed the conflict between Balkhani and Africans.

Secluded from the eternal power struggles, there are still Clans living in the mountains: cranky, frugal people distilling their own Slivovitz, living in quarry stone houses, and welcoming every stranger as long as he shows respect. However, there is no peace here, either. Some of those Clans have been warring for centuries. One wrong word or a wrong name uttered in a merry circle, and the mood changes abruptly. Children learn young never to talk about their neighbors.

HYBRISPANIA

The Castilian high plateau is the heart of ancient Hybrispania. The Clans are just as old and insist on their counterparts knowing this. They cultivate their family trees and carefully mark the branches the African invaders hacked off – a people of conquerors bearing the counter blow with stoicism. The wind of pride is blowing through their castles.

However, many of the ancestral homes are empty, and even in the inhabited ones, dust settles in many rooms. Again, the Iconides have incited the young ones with bluster and insinuation. "Do you know what the Scourgers do to your women? They take the children by the legs and smash them against the tree, so for them, it is over quickly. But the women…" No one can elude this without soiling the family honor. Young men and women march south at the side of Jehammed's swords to confront the invaders. For months, the fighters live in the jungle, setting traps, lurking, attacking, and retreating.

Over the decades, their tactics barely changed – until the Warpage arose and devoured Clans and Scourger units alike. Now, there are new rules, ones that do not necessarily help the Guerreros.

When the fighters attack the Scourger emplacements in the south, they barely have room to retreat – the Warpage is at their backs. Only the bravest and craziest dare to go deep enough into this pregnoctic phenomenon to shake off pursuers. The Jehammedans do not care. Those with faith in their hearts will find a way. They keep whipping up the Clans and driving them south. Should they give up their motherland that easily?

Some say yes. They live in the Warpage, unbeknownst to Scourgers and Jehammedans alike. On the high plateau, they erase them from the chronicles, considering them lost. It is almost true. They fled before they were ground between the Cults, mothers and fathers who did not want to sacrifice their children on the altar of war. They have explored their part of the Warpage, know places where reality flickers granulously and tastes of mint. Sometimes they help lost people, Africans and Hybrispaniards alike, by marking their path back to the war with rocks.

They never show themselves.

PURGARE

The Filaments eat into the land and shatter space and gravitation. Creatures with needle maws beset by ticks and lice scuttle through the force fields. Suddenly, they open their blind eyes wide. War cries and the sound of horns greet them. People with swords and Spitfires come racing towards them, their eyes cold with Elysian fire. The final battle has begun, and Purgare is the battlefield.

This is not about emanations or faith anymore: The Psychokinetics are no abstract threat to tell stories about around the campfire, everyone laughing heartily afterwards. No. The Aberrants breed behind the Apennines' mountain ranges. Night would have long since conquered Purgare if the Anabaptists did not give their lives on a daily basis.

Family after family has joined the Anabaptists; the largest ones have divided Purgare amongst themselves. They aid the Orgiastics with scouts or give the basic means of life to their hordes.

Even if most of the Purgan families firmly back the

THE REAL POWER,
THE POWER WE HAVE TO FIGHT FOR NIGHT AND DAY,
IS NOT THE **POWER** OVER THINGS,
BUT OVER MEN.
[GEORGE ORWELL]

Anabaptists, they have conserved their internal strife and struggles. They believe in honor and land. One disrespectful word could lead to a fight that starts a circle of revenge and counter-revenge. The heads of the families may stop these feuds via decree – as long as they can keep face doing so.

However, there are deviants, too. Those who do not cooperate with the Anabaptists are pushed to the fringes of society – and off the inhabited areas. The few independents retreat to the Apennines or take a chance in Western Purgare's sulfuric deserts. They keep their distance from the Nox crater, but they do not fear single Psychokinetics. Every family member knows what to do when encountering one: The younger children act as bait; the older ones determine the size of the force fields and Filaments with sticks; some light fires to chase away the swarms of fleas, while others hack their way to the epicenter and kill the Psychokinetic. Anabaptists unwilling to return to their camp without a prize are more than willing to buy the Aberrants' heads.

AFRICA

The African Clans look back on a rich tradition. They are completely self-contained and live a life remembering their ancestors, far away from the coastal and oil settlements. They sacrifice milk and honey at rocks and trees to pacify the ghosts, and they treat their white slaves well – nourishing food and a strict hand are enough.

However, the cities beckon with gaudy fun and adventure. Day by day, the tribes lose their young adults to melting pots like Tripol. The Psychovores get the rest.

The elders resist. They involve the young people more strongly, let them lead the hunt, give them white beaters or concubines. Old rules are re-interpreted and defended against the coca-intoxicated elders. However, even one dead sparrow hawk on the village square can be considered a bad omen and thus destroy any progress, lead a Clan back to its old ways, and ossify in tradition.

However, the loss of the young is not the only danger. The Psychovores spread and steal habitats from humans. Scouts report that the Psychovores make room for humans even deep in the jungle. Giant circular areas rot within hours – but who can tell if this vesicular decay is not merely part of the circle of life? Who knows what the next cycle may bring?

Some Clans have the courage to settle amidst the strange vegetation. They move on when the circle is closed.

Some keep going further south. No one ever hears from them again. Those who stick to the growth line can harvest Psychovore seeds and fruit that earn some good Dinars from the Scourgers.

Still, Clans organize a resistance. They burn down the Psychovore stolons and salt the burnt areas. The Spitalians who now reside in Qabis, examining the Psychovore wall's route, think this is not a good idea. The Psychovores act like an organism, wincing when in pain but growing all the faster elsewhere, developing strategies, adapting. Every single area is freed at a high cost. Many Clans lose their homes.

RANKS CLANNERS

1 - SCOUT

When they are young, they are small and quick. They enter the subterranean world of tubes and corridors, jump the debris as if it weren't there. They watch and report any enemy movement.

2 - HUNTER

They hunt deer or wild cattle, chasing them to exhaustion and killing them with their spears. Often, they roam the wilderness for days, following tracks or waiting. Until they return home, they and their prey are eagerly awaited.

2 - GATHERER

They know their territory. They know which plants carry fruit at what time and how to cook them. Usually, they also care for the Clan's children.

3 - TRIBAL WARRIOR

Gendos roam the ruins and would love to kill one of the children; outlaws and other Clans are envious of every root in another Clan's soup. The warriors stand between the Clan and the world's evil. Before, the search for food was paramount to their lives – now it's the battle.

3 - SHAMAN

Violence is a law of nature. There is no denying this fact. However, there are people who are not suited to it. Instead, they plumb the depths of the human soul, recognizing patterns in the clouds or in a pile of bones. Their sensitivity wakes the Shaman within them. From herbs and animal fat, they concoct salves that make wounds heal quickly or that awaken virility. They are the heart of the Clan.

HIERARCHY AND RANKS - CLANNERS

4 - CHIEFTAIN

The path of violence leads to the top as surely as the way of unity does. As a warrior, he physically dominated all others, was able to strike down the strongest with one blow of his fist. As a Shaman, he proved foresight and opened a world of spirits and faith to the Clan. Now, he has to lead. He is the head of the Clan. No one openly questions his word.

5 - CHAMPION

He led his Clan through dozens of battles, won by guile and pure strength every fight and duel. He is a blessed warrior, the archetypical embodiment of strength and control. Even if he leaves the Clan one day to join the all-father, his children and their children will bring him sacrifices and remember his exploits.

5 - FOUNDER

He always saw the big picture. Through diplomacy and guile, he brought others over to his side. Tribe after broken tribe joined him. He picked up the pieces, and many became one: a new Clan was born. To the Clan members, he is father and brother, priest and ruler.

STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS

They lend us a hand, help us on the fields without asking for anything in return. Weird. Maybe their teachings are not all wrong. A toast to the Anabaptists!

ANUBIANS

The jackals heal the land of the poison from the past and the people of the poison from the present. They know about the universal time, about the beginnings and the future. The Psychovores do not harm them; what does that tell us?

APOCALYPTICS

They foul every nest with no sense of honor at all. They seduce our children. Keep them away.

CHRONICLERS

Their voices are sublime; the spectacle of the light is divine. Are they ghosts, gods, or demons? Beware of their touch! It robs you of your life force, and some… lose control. You know what I mean.

HELLVETICS

They took our mountains, stop our herds from crossing the passes, and we are powerless. Since then, the Clan has been divided; the shepherds under Koski's rule have built a new settlement somewhere in the north, but we were left behind. Maybe one day we will have enough money for the passage.

JEHAMMEDANS

Like us, they have a strong tradition. They honor their women and treat us kindly. Nevertheless, they also oppress us. We are supposed to smash our idols and take the word of Jehammed. They give us one more night to "renounce our false gods". And then? Well, what are you going to do to us that we cannot do to you first?

JUDGES

They have killed many of us. Men, women, and children. They will not be the last to die, and every murder makes my heart bleed. Now we are back. Build your walls high and bulky, and hide behind them. We are coming.

NEOLIBYANS

Their walls are plastered and tiled. They had a new well dug and built a nice bench right next to it. It is the least they can do, being children of this village.

PALERS

Banished by all-mother sun, exiled beneath the earth like the dead, they reek of ruin.

SCOURGERS

They attacked our village by night and took away my siblings. My parents are broken, my mother has been crying for days. Tomorrow, the remaining warriors will pick up the scent and slaughter every one of those bastards.

Then, surely, everything will be right again.

SCRAPPERS

What have they done that their family cast them out? That they have to atone alone in the dust?

Hey, get away from that Scrapper!

SPITALIANS

The Shamans are no good anymore.

Nowadays, you visit the Spitalians when the fever keeps coming or the infection festers. They are good people – at least as long as you don't take this… Burn.

WAR CLUB

ULKAR

Culture: Pollen
Concept: The Traveler
Cult: Clanner (Champion)

When Ulkar uses his left hook, the spectators root for him: he is a pit fighter. For years, he has been wandering Western Borca and fighting in the arenas, stamping the sure winners into the dust before moving on. Just like they stamped on his Clan. Now he is old, and after every fight, his bones ache. He does not care. Fighting is the only thing he knows, the only thing that is left of his Clan's glory. Therefore, he fights.

FREKKA OF THE CORPSE EATERS

Culture: Borca
Concept: The Destroyer
Cult: Clanner (Shaman)

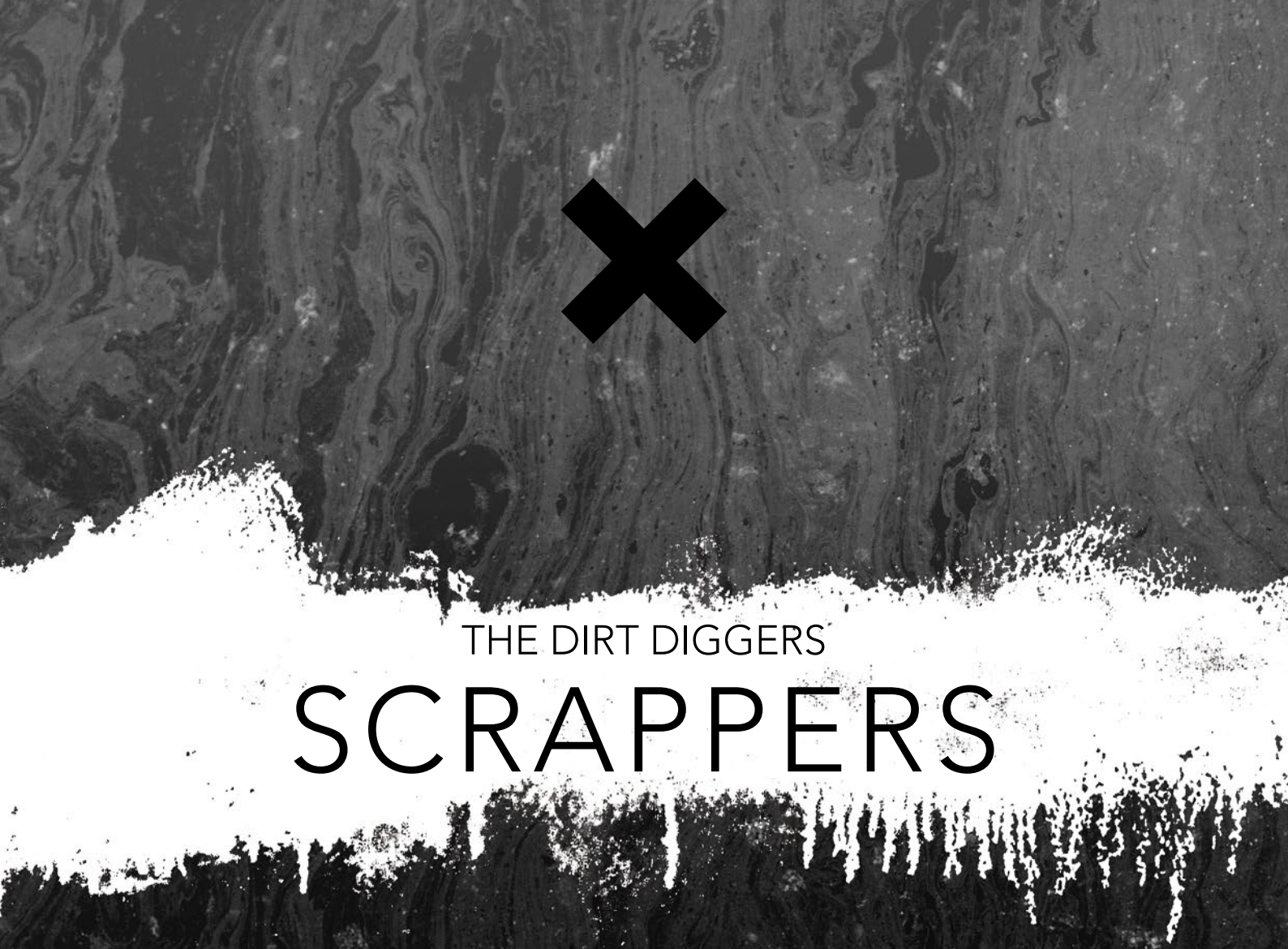
Damn those Cockroaches, worms, and flies! They rob the Corpse Eaters of the bodies of Scrappers killed in accidents – ah, what a joy it is when one of these hairless voles thrashes in the pit!

The Shaman Frekka knows the symbols she needs to paint onto the cadavers to stop the victims' souls from vanishing into death's nothingness before the Clan's warriors are able to devour them along with the meat.

LUREN

Culture: Borca
Concept: The Mediator
Cult: Clanner (Pneumancer)

Long ago, Luren was sent with a Mechan to seal a pact between the Ramein region's rulers and Justitian. The Mechan died of a fever, and Luren had to go on alone. He spent years on his own in the ambassadors' quarter, but also in the Tech Central to learn more about pneumantic gear. So much has happened since then. The Phosphorites have conquered his home, only to be vanquished themselves right afterwards. The Mechans' rule over the Ramein region is broken, although they will not admit to it. The Pneumancers are not their bloodhounds anymore. Now, everyone fights for themselves. Maybe it's time to go home.



THE DIRT DIGGERS

SCRAPPERS

A HANDFUL OF SCRAP

The wind is howling like a wild animal, driving fountains of dust and ice crystals through the street canyons. The woman turns away. Her skin is coarse-pored and leathery. Fleshy lids cover her eyes, leaving only slits. Her brows, lashes, and hair are frozen tangles. Many layers of patchwork made from sewn leather, plastic, and faded cloth weigh down upon her shoulders; they must be about as heavy as a calf. She actually moves as gracefully as one, too. Her head is swinging back and forth; sometimes she sticks it out slightly, chewing on a piece of root. She staggers on before stopping in front of a wall, frowning and sniveling. What is that? A sign the size of a head marks the gray concrete – something with jags, underlined with dots, it's hard to tell, it's all blurred. The woman spits a thick gob at it and rubs at it with her fist.

The wind subsides, and the dust settles. The ice crystals glitter in the midday sun. The woman keeps walking through the street canyons. She makes gutted, giggling sounds, interspersed with words like "little shit", "wankers" and "arsehole". The walls of the buildings are full of signs, simple runes next to stick men and abstract but complex shapes. Some are the size of her fist, others as tall as a man, some drawn with a charred stick, others carved. The woman stops, looks around, and sits down. Her body trembles with her giggling. "How could you have stumbled into such a looted region? Incredible!" She bends over and buries her hands in the red dust. Suddenly she freezes, then digs with her fingers in the sandy ground.

Carefully, she extracts something. It's about palm-sized, cold as metal with rounded edges. Her face shows disbelief, root sap trickling from the corner of her mouth. She wipes it away with her sleeve without taking her eyes from the weird artifact. "No idea what that is. But it looks valuable. The Chroniclers will get all damp when they get their hands on that." She looks around, stares at the signs on the walls. Her face trembles. "What sort of idiots are you?", she screams, toppling over backwards and laughing loudly.

Every sign stands for one Scrapper. Each and every one of them put it here to say: "I was here. Took it all. Walk on."

The woman gets up again, now trailing a wake turbulence of dust. She is still giggling. Idiots.

LOST KNOWLEDGE

The Bygone cities were uninhabited. Concrete giants rose from a sea of crater ash, stone dust, bone fragments, and glass in complete loneliness. Ragged cloth was swaying in the wind. Ocher-colored clouds raced across the sky, forming vortexes the size of entire cities, breaking up and vomiting trails of poisonous aerosols over the land.

In chasms and basement entries, something stirred. Eyes glittered in yellowish light, observing the vortex. A new type of human rose from his hiding place, making a home in the ruins. They learned to interpret the weather, sheltering themselves against the cold with layers of racks and against the dust with moist scarves. Yes, their homes were destroyed, and that hurt: the harder you fall, the more desperate you are. But they did not give in and they did not flee from the shimmering clouds of ash.

Maybe the world that had collapsed around them had not been theirs anymore even before the catastrophe. Instead of complaining, they now examined the ruins, prodding the dirt with long stakes without minding the bones and the mummified corpses. They burrowed into the dust, ever deeper, with their bare hands, only to drag back a piece of yesterday into today's twilight. They had not yet forgotten the names and uses of their findings, and they discarded many things as broken that would be treated as treasures and artifacts in a few decades.

The Scrapper was born.

SAVIOR

The years after the Eshaton were a phase of change from the civilized human being with limitless access to food, warmth, and culture to the savage with the bared teeth. Without the Scrappers, it would have remained thus. They felt obliged to their community and set out into the outside world to procure equipment and spare parts. Thousands combed through the ruins, staggering across the dusty plains like paper scraps from an upturned trashcan. Collapsing buildings, basements full of gas, and other, similar hazards reduced their numbers. The survivors were shrewder and stronger, embracing their new role. Mice became foxes. Foxes became Lone Wolves. The land that felt so hostile to many of them became their home.

They returned to the fortified settlements less often. The long, ascetic weeks in the ruins had alienated them from other survivors. In the villages, people kept complaining and clinging to old ideologies. Those people were so dependent. Whenever a water pump collapsed, there was a big clamor. Then, the Scrappers were on their way again, searching for surrogate aggregates in waterworks or filling stations.

AT THE SAME TIME

Africa. The large coastal cities had been devastated by tidal waves, but the reconstruction was in full swing. Not much could be saved from the debris, though – the undertow had taken almost everything with it and sunk it in the Mediterranean. Children dove at the coast, tying ropes to everything under water that seemed valuable to them. The adults then pulled it ashore. Battered metal and broken engines were piling up on the sand.

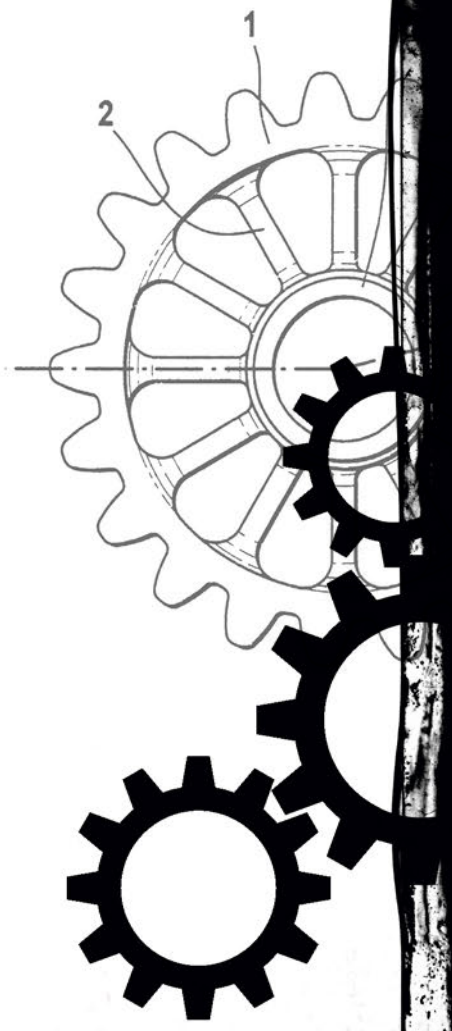
The Africans looked across the Mediterranean appraisingly, speculated, and discussed within their clans whether the jump across the water would be worthwhile. After all, they salvaged only trash here, but what might be waiting for them over there?

They repaired ships, loaded them with tons of dried meat and quinoa. They filled their water tanks, and cranes lowered buggies into the ships' holds.

They put out to sea. Destination: Franka.

The coastal cities were destroyed and empty; the first African Scrappers had expected nothing else. Yet the hinterland was like a treasure drove: generators and tools soon found their way into African cities. Soon after, steel bars were salvaged from the concrete and shipped away. Entire factories were dismantled and transported off piece by piece. Village after village and city after city, the Scrappers scoured Franka.

Africa flourished while Europe spiraled downwards into the stone age.



PAYMENT

The Chroniclers spread out. In Borca, there have always been many of them. From the Central Cluster in Justitian, they travel to Franka's Atlantic coast and deep into Purgare's hinterland. They palpitate a little due to the possibilities, the artifacts and the stream enclosed in them. Too often, that leads to greed.

The Scrappers come in flocks to bring them their findings. Almost none of them really know what the artifacts are truly worth. It makes little to no sense to discuss this with the Chroniclers, for they will suddenly lose interest, raise their pinky and rattle a brief "Exit! Exit!" from the Vocoders. The Scrappers have to take what they get. Supposedly they can get more whenever the Scrapper cartel's appraisers are involved, but who knows for sure?

Actually, the Chroniclers have made an art form out of appraising an artifact: they examine it from all sides, plugging in diagnosis gear or using one of their crackling boxes on it. The artifact check can take an instant or minutes – but that has no effect on the price. As payment, the Scrappers get information on Bygone artifact stores (the Chroniclers call this "recursive information trade") or Chroniclers' drafts. The Scrappers accept, sometimes grudgingly, sometimes euphorically. They will return anyway.

What the Chroniclers are to European Scrappers, the Neolibyans are to African ones. The magnates' Surge Tanks can hold tons of scraps; artifacts are cleaned and improved, metal is molten and cast into trusses and armor plates for new Surge Tanks. But if you offer an amount of Chroniclers' drafts that a Borcan would kill for to an African, he will spit at best. African Scrappers want to be paid in Dinars, minted by Tripol's Bank of Commerce, heavy and shiny with gold.

THE CRAVING FOR THE PAST

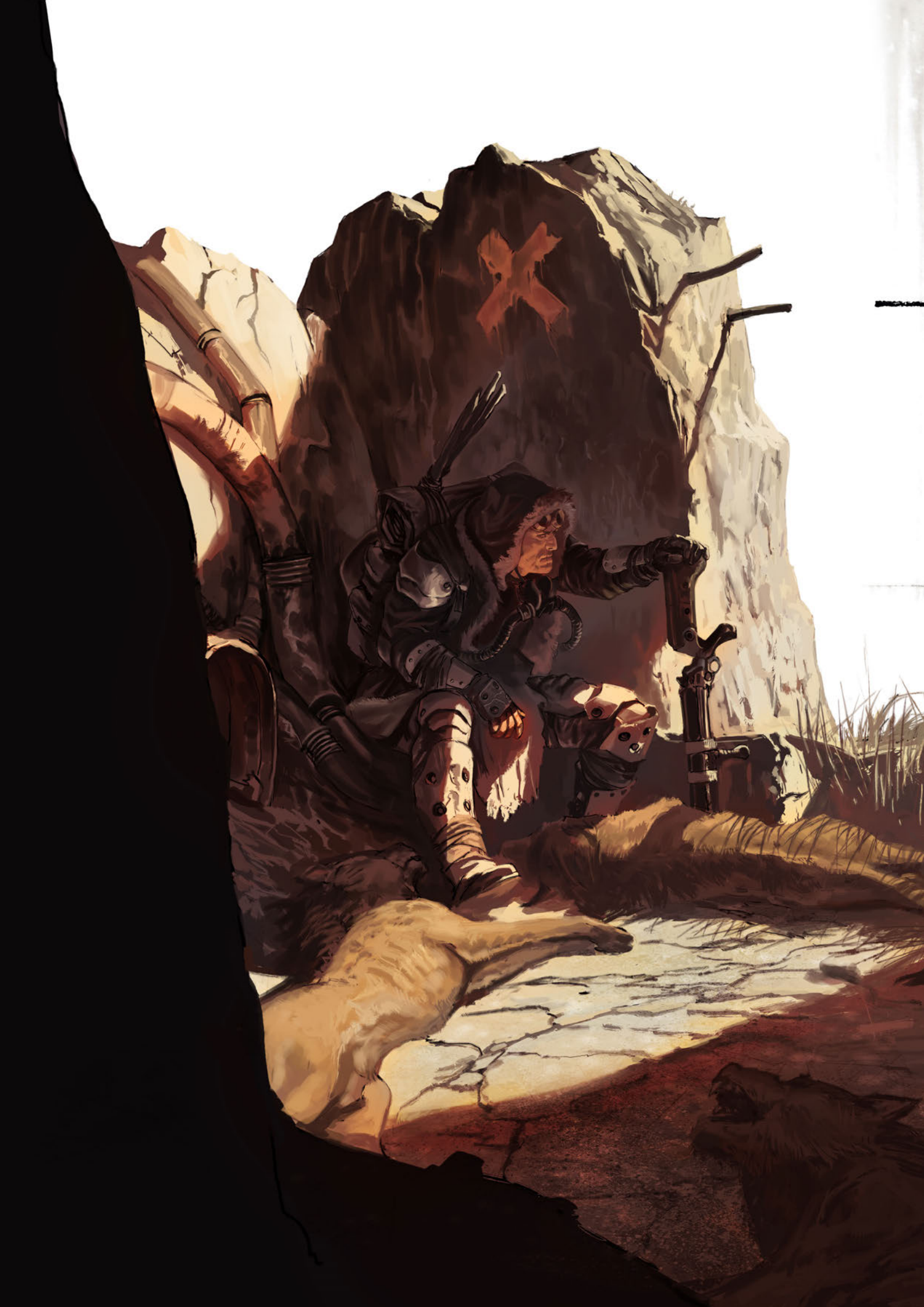
Centuries passed. In Europe, artifacts became objects of worship, but only the chosen ones were able to use and repair them. With every generation, more knowledge about electricity and mechanics disappeared.

These were hard times for Scrappers, probably the hardest. Scrap does not fill your belly. A steel rod a villager could use to support his hut or to bash in an attacker's skull was worth more than one of the legendary think machines. However, the Europeans never gave up completely on the artifacts: the memory of the Bygones was supported by their gear, and where there was a will, there potentially was a way, too. The worship produced strange effects. Sects propagated the relics' inherent magic, accumulated scrap, and prayed to it – with negligible effects. Others banned the artifacts as a symbol of exaggerated materialism that must have driven any divinity from the Bygone people's lives. Naturally, the two groups didn't get along very well.

The Scrappers were in the midst of it all, the piece of iron between anvil and hammer.

However, better times were to come.

In Borca, the Judges conjured a hail of lead and drove the sects from their Protectorate, while the Chroniclers built exchange offices and even showed interest in platinum fragments that had been worn as jewelry on a necklace before. Suddenly, scrap was valuable again, and without all the dancing, screaming madmen in the wasteland, the risk became reasonable once more. The Scrappers set out. Thousands of them entered faraway seas of debris, built camps in the dust within days and let them fall to ruin once the looting was done.



FASTER

The Africans were faster. While Borcan Scrappers were still waiting for Justitian to smoke out the last remaining nests of the Cockroach Clans, former Frankan industry sites in Tripol and Bedain were already in service again.

Now, the African Scrappers turned to Purgare. Soon, the convoys thundered across the crumbling roads from Naples to Rome, along the Liri, past Ceccano, Colleferro and countless other villages. In droves, the Scrappers clung to the rumbling Surge Tanks like insects to decaying flesh, waiting to get their hands on Bygone technology.

The morale was excellent. Eternally oppressed Africa had thrown off its chains and climbed towards the zenith of culture over Europe's dead body. Everyone wanted to be a part of this.

LONELY

The European Scrapper is an individualist. His clothing is a patchwork of rags, capes, and leather reinforcements that is very inconspicuous in the light and shadow of the ruins; to the untrained eye, he is invisible in the wasteland. It's his best and only protection in the first years in the dust. Those who don't know how to hide will not be Scrappers for long – but they will be dead for a very long time.

All alone, the Scrapper roams the ruins, digs into vaults, and returns to the exchange office as soon as his cart is full or his belly is empty. This goes on for years. Sometimes another ragged figure accompanies him, a spade over her shoulder, and some take in orphans – so-called 'mice' – to lower into openings they are too large to enter themselves.

Life amidst the relics of the Bygone people changes them. They develop a feeling for the ruins, learn to interpret them. Who lived here once? How did they fare? And especially: Did they survive the Eshaton and take their treasures with them? In a weird way, most Scrappers feel at home in the ruins. No unnecessary talk, no maneuvering, no misunderstandings caused by thoughtless compliments. Life is so simple out there. Sure, you have to watch the Gendos, and there isn't always fresh water.

Still, the ruins are a home to them that they won't leave until their dying breath.

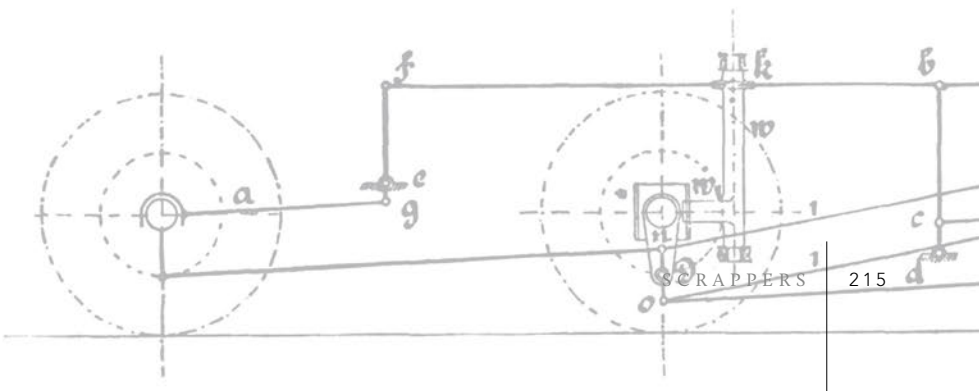
A few deviate from this path. They become mechanists, creating true marvels from scrap: many legendary rifles, traps, highly complex clockworks and locks were built in their workshops. The Chroniclers are suspicious of this development. Suddenly, there is someone who has a use for the artifacts instead of trading them for a fistful of paper in the exchange offices at once without second thought. A grain of dust in the cogwheels of the Cluster.

STRENGTH

The Africans are different. For them, it's an honor to set out in the name of their village, Clan, or Culture to add to its wealth. The Scourgers may treat them like shit, and for the Neolibyans they are pawns in a gamble for wealth and power, but they don't care. They know their worth. African Scrappers are idealists.

During the expeditions, the community is extremely important. It is a surrogate family, but also a piece of culture brought to the inhospitable realms of Europe from back home. After a hard day in the dust, the Scrappers spend the evenings celebrating and laughing together, talking about homesickness and giving each other solace. Physical contact is very important to the Africans: they embrace a lot, and they touch each other while speaking. To see two male Scrappers hand in hand is not a sign of homosexuality, but signifies that they are good friends. Out in the field, they take care of each other and work together.

With their colorful clothing, they express their individuality and convey their views and whims. Their mood, their basic ideas about life and death, money and family, but also their origins are encoded in patterns and colors dating back to their ancestors. They are very different to the Europeans' dusty capes.



RUNES

A Scrapper's way rarely runs parallel to the path of life of an Anabaptist or a Spitalian or even a simple citizen of Justitian. He rather crosses that path, dragging a sled with a pile of scrap, eyes cast down. Between the Scrappers, it's the same: if you set out in groups, you are easier to find and have to share. Still, they have developed a means of keeping in contact: the Scrapper runes.

No one would remember Grief who wandered the streets south of the Tech Central when the tunnel system still existed or Toktok who searched refugees' mummies in mountain caves if both of them had not marked their way with runes. Their sign language is similar to a dog's scent marks, pointing at dangers, events, and the user of the marks. Almost every Scrapper knows simple line symbols of his own design that can be easily scratched into walls with a knife. Many Scrappers have their name sign tattooed onto their forehead or the back of their hand as a mark of their individuality. Once they have searched a ruin, they mark it with a sign: "Was here. Walk on." Other signs serve as waymarkers (arrows and triangles), danger signs (jagged lines), or point at watering holes (three horizontal lines). The meanings of the runes differ from region to region; there is no common alphabet.

African Scrappers do not know this way of communication. They exist in a living community and prefer the spoken word.

BEDAIN

Bedain is the world's largest wrecking port – for ships as well as for human driftwood. Its magnetism attracts every Scrapper, luring him into the labyrinth of monolithic wrecks and enormous junkyards. Old African Scrappers build rifles and apprentice anyone who slides a fistful of Dinars across the workbench. Clockworks showing the course of the stars, ship cannons, gearboxes weighing several tons, even also music boxes – if something can be built, there is a manufacture for it on Bedain. In halls the size of the Cluster, thousands of people live in the rafters while Surge Tanks are built and maintained below. Scrappers looking for like-minded individuals can find lots and lots of them here. This is the heart of the Scrapper world; it beats with the rhythm of the hammers.

This place births legends and heroes, and everyone fancying himself a real Scrapper has to walk this city's alleys once in his lifetime and leave his rune on a surf-washed iron wall at the southern cliffs. This is completely irrational, but the deed still feels completely natural. People will talk about it, and someone will recognize the rune. Ah, someone from Bedain. The inhabitants know each other and greet each other with a nod.

Once back home, the rain has long since washed the oily scent from the skin. The memory remains, however.

HIDDEN STORES

Laden like drones, the European Scrappers trudge through the land. Some tie their findings to their clothes – beginners who do not know that the rattling will only attract outlaws. The more experienced ones pile their artifacts onto a carrying rig made of tubes welded together. Others drag sledges or carts behind them.

But for some, the burden is too heavy. They have to divide their loot: part of it stays behind, the rest is brought to the Chroniclers. What they leave behind must be damn well hidden. Maybe in the ancient sewers, in the cavities under fallen concrete slabs, or buried in a dune of dust. Parting is not easy whenever the Scrappers finally leave their hideaway and trudge towards the settlement. Quickly, quickly! Most of them return and are relieved to see that their store is unmolested. But some get distracted, are abducted, die, or simply cannot find the damn hiding place again. In this fucking land, everything looks alike!

These deserted caches are the stuff of legends. For example, there is Frahn who boasted about a large finding, then suddenly clutched his breast and fell from his barstool, dead. Or old Tiber who always got some precious bauble from his ‚vault' whenever he was short of cash. To find such a cache could make life much easier. One thing is certain: Scrappers are good listeners.

IN OLD AGE

Only very few European Scrappers ever retire. They comb through the ruins for some findings to sell and guild their old age. The search becomes an addiction: "Just this one last ruin, I can feel it. I'm almost there!" Most of them eventually die of weakness in the wasteland. They simply do not come back to the city at some point.

All their life, they have brought artifacts to Chroniclers and dragged metal to Scrapper halls. Those who manage to get out find a new home in those Scrapper halls. Not necessarily a better one, because to dismantle scrap is hard work and quickly depletes an aging body. At least it is not far to the next bowl of root soup here.

Those who have managed to become mechanists or manufacturers find a place amongst the rare communities of Scrappers. Even the Chroniclers have to admit that the Scrappers know a lot. Sometimes, the Cluster even sends Agents to be introduced into the secrets of mechanics by a manufacturer. It is not always clear if that is supposed to be a reward, common procedure, or a punishment.

Social security among Scrappers is rather weak. Let the devil take the hindmost. In Africa, this is different, though: the clan takes care of its old ones, showing them respect. Full of interest, the children bend closer to listen intently when the gnarled Scrappers talk about their adventures and battles against Borcan barbarians. In the end, they die in dignity. European Scrappers rot in the wasteland.

Ashes to ashes.

ALL AROUND THE WORLD

In Europe, the Bygones are omnipresent. Fields of rubble rise from the haze everywhere, tarmac paths cross the land, and along them, Scrappers find dilapidated filling stations, houses hidden under dunes of petrified crater ash, and overgrown halls. Much of it has already been looted, but those who dig deep enough invariably find Bygone artifacts. For Scrappers, this land has always been paradise.

BORCA

Scrap, scrap everywhere. Western Borca is a repository, bringing to the scene a whole army of Scrappers. Finding a pristine spot here borders on a miracle. Here, the cartel, a community of Scrappers, has been flourishing for some years. At least with a wry smile Bosch, its leader, calls it a community. He is an irascible dwarf trying to leash the Black Lung's Scrappers in order to extort higher prices from the Chroniclers. His bullies monitor the ruins and sell search licenses while his appraisers offer their services to laden Scrappers in front of the exchange offices – by force, if necessary. But his network has holes, and many Scrappers manage to bypass the cartel. The organization is growing, though.

Beyond the Reaper's Blow, Bosch's influence fades. Over there, the rules are different anyway. Nature takes back the seas of debris, and the superstitious nomads consider them cursed: they steer clear of the rugged rows of walls. In the last decades, some Scrappers from Western Borca found their way into the wide conifer forests and settled there. Wherever they set foot, they dig artifacts from the forest floor. But the next Chroniclers are hundreds of days' marches away – beyond a volcanically active fault that you can only circumvent via the Hellvetics' fortress. This is no fun. Luckily, there are the renegade Needle Tower Chroniclers. The Cluster gets all excited when anyone mentions them. Those who trade with the Needles are banned for life by the Chroniclers. Of course, the Chroniclers don't tell anybody how they find out who has dared to do so.

The Needle Towers aren't the only ones who sometimes buy baubles. Osman's ruling families buy as well. With their help, life can be made a little more luxurious.

FRANKA

Long before the population started to realize the artifacts' value, the Africans had picked the ruins clear. The cities on the south coast especially have been combed through over and over. You have to take great risks if you even want to find a screw here: only the crumbling basements that have been locked for centuries still offer the chance to find something of value. The Scrappers here are daring figures that have looked death in the eye a thousand times – they are considered soldiers of fortune and are the heroes of countless Frankan legends. But the artifacts are not really needed. The Clans produce what they need for their day-to-day life. Chroniclers' offices only exist in a few larger towns; the only Cluster is situated in Aquitaine. Artifacts are mostly used as jewelry or are being exported to Borca.

POLLEN

The impact of the Pandora chunk flattened most of the land. In the Northeast, artifacts only exist in buried vaults. The ruined cities breaking through the gossamer are potential treasure troves, but no one can predict where the ground will bulge next; it takes the arachnid swarms only days to spin a cocoon around the city again and turn it into a landscape of silky hills. That is not enough for a Scrapper Culture like the one in Borca to develop. Scrappers in Pollen cling to the few settlements like flies to a flycatcher. For the Piast in Wroclaw, they organize building supplies, and for his African guests, they repair engines and gearboxes. Danzig is being held by Spitalians and Anabaptists and is rather more interested in Petro than in new equipment, but capable mechanists can find a job here, too.

One location seems especially promising. So promising that the Hellvetics register a steadily growing influx of Scrappers and Chroniclers via the West East passage. Since the fall of Praha, dozens of soldiers of fortune leave the passage tunnels in the Steyr and Ternitz region every day, marching on to the north, across the barrier. Years ago, it was considered impassable, but since the fall of Praha, new rules apply. Now it's all about looting Praha's remains before the ruins are cold and marked by Scrapper runes.

BALKHAN

For a long time, the Balkhani left the ruins to nature's growth unchecked. Other things seemed more important. Only very late, they became aware of the clammy vaults full of history and rusty power. The Voivodes have them searched for weapons to further strengthen their rule. Thus, Scrappers should not dig in the ruins without the Voivodes' permission. They could quickly be considered thieves – and what would a Scrapper be without his hands?

HYBRISPANIA

In the jungles of Hybrispania, strange things are happening. Within the Warpage, an undamaged Bygone building complex can trickle into reality tomorrow, a flickering, distorted picture hinting at findings. But it could also be that a giant swarm of jackdaws flies across the clearing, obscuring the sun. The sun that never sinks, just like the immigration of the birds will never stop. Those who dare entering the Warpage can harvest tremendous treasures or get caught in a time warp forever.

PURGARE

Purgare was thoroughly looted by the Africans in a time when they didn't have to fear the Psychokinetics. What remained was dusty walls and trinkets. Looting concessions from the Bank of Commerce in Tripol get cheaper every year. Young, inexperienced Neolibyans buy them. They won't get rich by doing so tough. The local Scrappers offer their services as mechanists to the families or cross the Alps into Praha, the promised land of Scrappers. West of the Apennines, they can make their profit. In the poisoned territories, a few treasures await, but the conditions – with all the gas clouds, searing lava rivers, and treacherous geysers – are deadly. The few that remained are highly specialized treasure hunters with remarkable gear and the survival instinct of a swarm of cockroaches.

AFRICA

Legends say the African hinterland had almost no ancient technology. Africa came closest to the European civilizations technologically in the coastal cities – but these were torn into the Mediterranean by the flood. African Scrappers are travelers, and usually their travels lead North.

Those who go South go looking for the UAO fortresses. In these military complexes, there are supposedly weapons stores large enough to equip all of Africa. But those stores are heavily guarded. The few who return tell campfire tales of ghosts made of quicksilver, shrouded in the rags of those who fell prey to them.

RANKS SCRAPPERS

1 - MOUSE

The girl slides down into the chasm on her ass in a turbulent wake of dirt. She loses her footing, reflexively tearing a handful of dead roots from the ground; then she falls.

She squeals (which she finds somehow embarrassing), then there is a jolt when the rope tightens with a creak.

She swings in absolute darkness, gasping for air. From above, she hears: "Go on, be a good little mouse!"

Many Scrapper kids start their careers hanging from ropes. Their providers lower them into tunnels or basements they cannot enter themselves. The little ones are a valuable resource in salvaging the lost artifacts from the ruins. That doesn't mean that they are treated well, especially not those who have been bought from an Apocalyptic Stork.

2 - BADGER

When the little mouse has become too fat or too defiant for the chasms, a new badger is born. He sets out alone, crawling clumsily through the ruins and stumbling across an artifact now and then. Beginner's luck keeps him alive.

3 - FOX

The fox is shrewd and quick; the ruins are his hereditary territory. He knows every chasm leading into the depths of his burrow, into the Bygone people's submerged world. He only has to make it into the settlements to drop his findings in front of the Chroniclers.

4 - LONE WOLF

He's not a gatherer; he's a hunter. He knows where artifacts lie hidden, knows their price and how to salvage them. He's not the person at whom you want to throw a rock. His rifle tears holes much bigger than any rock can make.

5 - CAVE BEAR

Those who see his rune next to a carving saying "Get away!" will do so at once and unquestioningly. No one confronts a cave bear without a damn good reason, especially not in his own domain.

Cave bears are dangerous and aloof and insist on their hiding places remaining untouched.

Those who dare to enter anyway and survive the traps must confront them: creatures perfectly adapted to their environment, angry like hell and armed with weapons that can translate their rage into impressive wounds.

3 - MECHANIST

He has a knack for technology, understands how the gears interact or how the iron anchor swings from coil to coil within the engine. Everything is logical; there is nothing mystical about it. He sees artifacts not as goods, but as resources: he salvages from them what he needs for his own constructions.

4 - MANUFACTURER

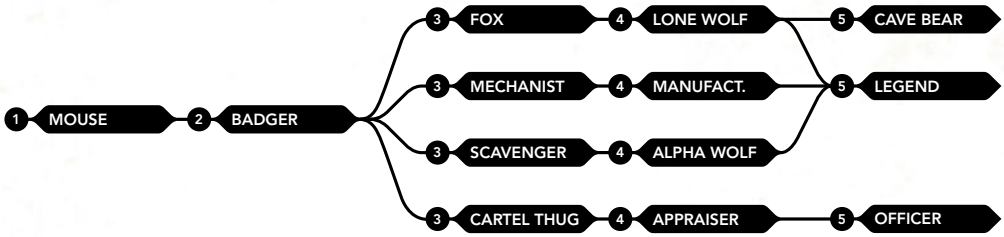
He has gained quite some ground on the map of technical secrets. He has at least one well-secured workshop, probably in the Tech Central.

Around his neck, he wears a chain from which keys the length of half a man's arm dangle. Every one of them opens the workshop of another manufacturer. Every settlement would be proud to have a man like him amongst its ranks.

3 - SCAVENGER

There's a lot of good stuff out there in the dust, only it's too bulky for one Scrapper alone to drag to the gates of the Tech Central. This is where the scavengers come in. Equipped with heavy gear like tractor combos and

HIERARCHY AND RANKS - SCRAPPERS



pneumatic tin snips, they would even salvage and dismantle a Surge Tank. As opposed to regular dirt eaters who rely on themselves – and only on themselves! – and consider this strength, scavengers never venture out alone. For them, strength lies in the community. At least if this community has access to roaring aggregates with lots of newtons.

4 - ALPHA WOLF

If you want the Alpha Wolf's respect, you have to be able to work hard. Action speaks louder than words. An Alpha Wolf has earned respect. He has torn dozens of treasures from the ground, has never let down or betrayed his comrades. At least they haven't noticed. Additionally, he knows the right people to lead his team past the cartel to the Chroniclers. Getting rich means selling by yourself.

5 - LEGEND

He has spread his rune all over the known world, and if you have ever been all the way to Syracuse, you will have seen it on the wall of runes there, too. His adventures are being told in the Tech Central and around countless campfires in the wasteland. This Scrapper is a legend.

3 - CARTEL THUG

Scrappers piss their runes into the dusts wherever they please. At least that was the case before the dwarf Bosch led the cartel to power. Nowadays, his appraisers hang around the exchange offices and advise every Scrapper to give them a fifth of his profit. In return he gets their advice and is not beaten senseless.

The simple cartel member got rid of this oppression through membership. Or so he thought. He only has to pay 10%, that's fine, but in return he has to take over special tasks now and then. We're all one big happy family, aren't we? Have to help each other, right? Help out a little here, when some sod doesn't want to pay, or go on a recon mission in uncharted ruins. Nothing big. Not yet.

4 - APPRAISER

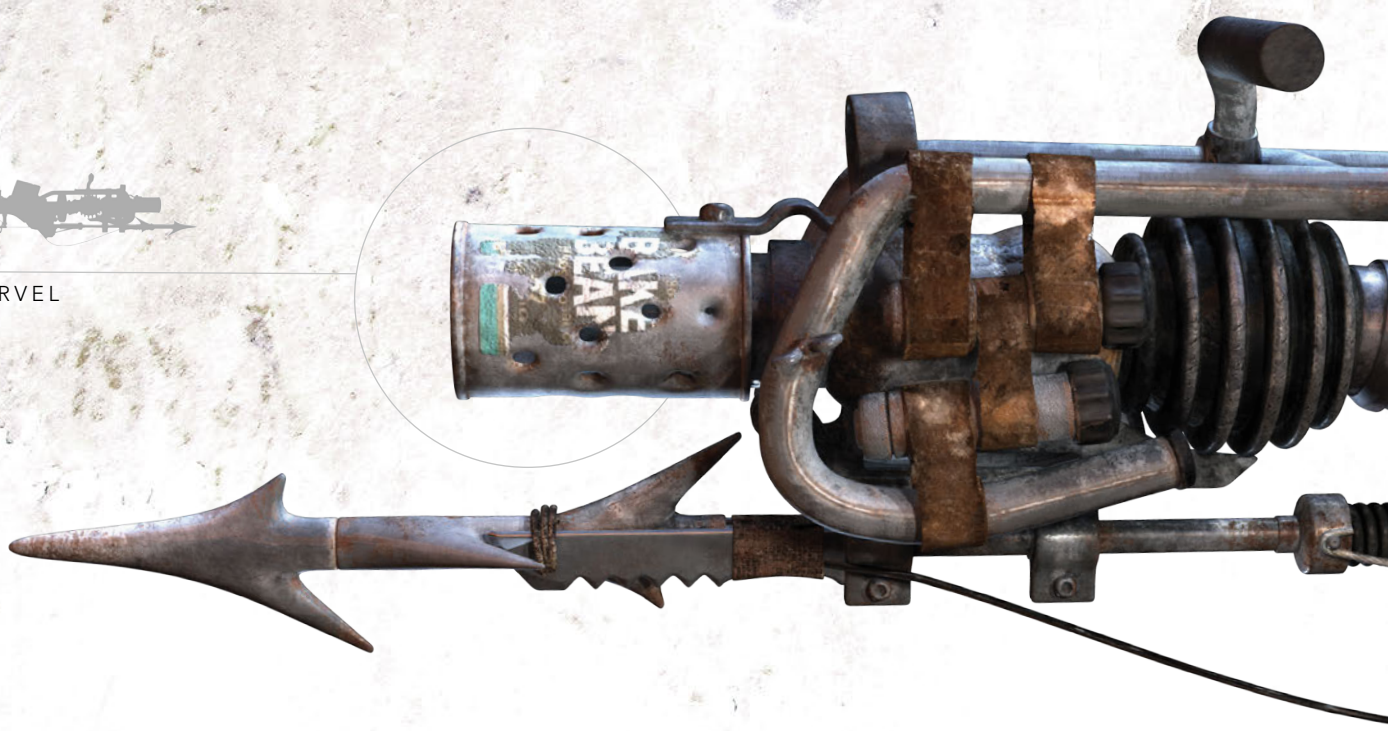
"Cartel. Artifacts to appraise?" The Appraisers know every trick of the Chroniclers to rope honest Scrappers off their drafts ("You want to donate something to them?"), and they never tire of proving that to their 'clients' through anecdotes. If a Scrapper caves in, they accompany him to the exchange offices and negotiate for him. In return, they get 20% of what he gains for his findings. Unfortunately, cartel members only pay 10%.

Most of the appraisers know what they're doing. Some are good with artifacts, others with intimidation.

5 - OFFICER

Dozens of appraisers answer to them – and of course owe them a percentage of the Chroniclers' drafts they have made.

That there are irregularities here is unpleasant, but so is life in general. Especially for appraisers who embezzle drafts or lie to their officers insolently.



STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS

Anabaptists are armed farmers.

They don't even get their cross-and water crap themselves. The only thing that matters to them is tilling fields, drinking, and killing Aberrants. By the way, the Orgiasts' baptisms are not that bad. That's not water in their barrels.

ANUBIANS

They smear themselves with resin, wear dog masks, and put beetles into dead people's mouths. We are not completely free of insects, either, but that is ill. Supposedly, they have all been dead once before. Some even several times.

APOCALYPTICS

They have my respect, for they know how to live. They always have Burn and Distillate for us. Ah, and the women! Guess my reason to return to those damn settlements.

CHRONICLERS

They are bonkers. Some become all fidgety when they see my artifacts but still only pay the minimum price. But mostly, they're okay. They don't talk a lot, so put your stuff on the table, wait, take the drafts, get out. If you are looking for lifelong friends, go somewhere else.

CLANNERS

In a hole full of insects, there are always some that want to bite you. It's the same with the Clans out there. Some are peaceful and help you out with water and a piece of meat. Others will cut that piece out of you and feed it to their kids.

HELLVETICS

Impressive equipment. A Trailblazer would keep me going for several winters. The Hellvetics are okay; they don't make a fuss as long as you behave within their fortress. So please: only piss into the marked holes!

JEHAMMEDANS

Jehammedans live in a different world. You can drink with an Anabaptist, you can discuss your rash with a Spitalian over a glass of distillate, you can even talk to Judges. But the Jehammedans?

I know nothing about goats.

JUDGES

I can take care of myself, I never needed anybody. The people in Justitian seem to see this differently.

The Judges like rules – the more, the merrier. No one can keep track of that crap. Once they at least kept the ruins clean by killing cockroaches. But that's not working very well these days…

NEOLIBYANS

They are merchants; on Bedain, they are supposed to be nice chaps. The Chroniclers have a different view, judging by the stories they tell about them. They say they steal our children, disembowel them, and use the innards as fishing bait. The mask faces would tell us no crap. Still, it's kind of weird.

PALERS

A little tour trough their bunkers, and we'd be set for life. But they sit on the treasures with their pale asses, keeping it all for themselves. Assholes. They are a little weird, too. They have this crazed look, somehow disquieting.

SCOURGERS

Dangerous fuckers. They are not more violent than other idiots, but instead of leaving you on the ground after a brawl, they take you with them.

SPITALIANS

They think we are scum and consider themselves above us. Ha-ha, they might be right. But we are free!

LOBO

Culture: Purgare
Concept: The Disciple
Cult: Scrappers (Legend)

As a white man amongst blacks, Lobo has lied his way into the Neolibyans' hearts on Bedain. When telling Franka jokes to the Scourgers, even they crack a smile. He knows how to apply his charms. With a wry smile, he sells the gear looted and cannibalized by the Neolibyans back to his fellow countrymen on the mainland. And among that, there is many an artifact that actually should have gone to Africa.

HESTA

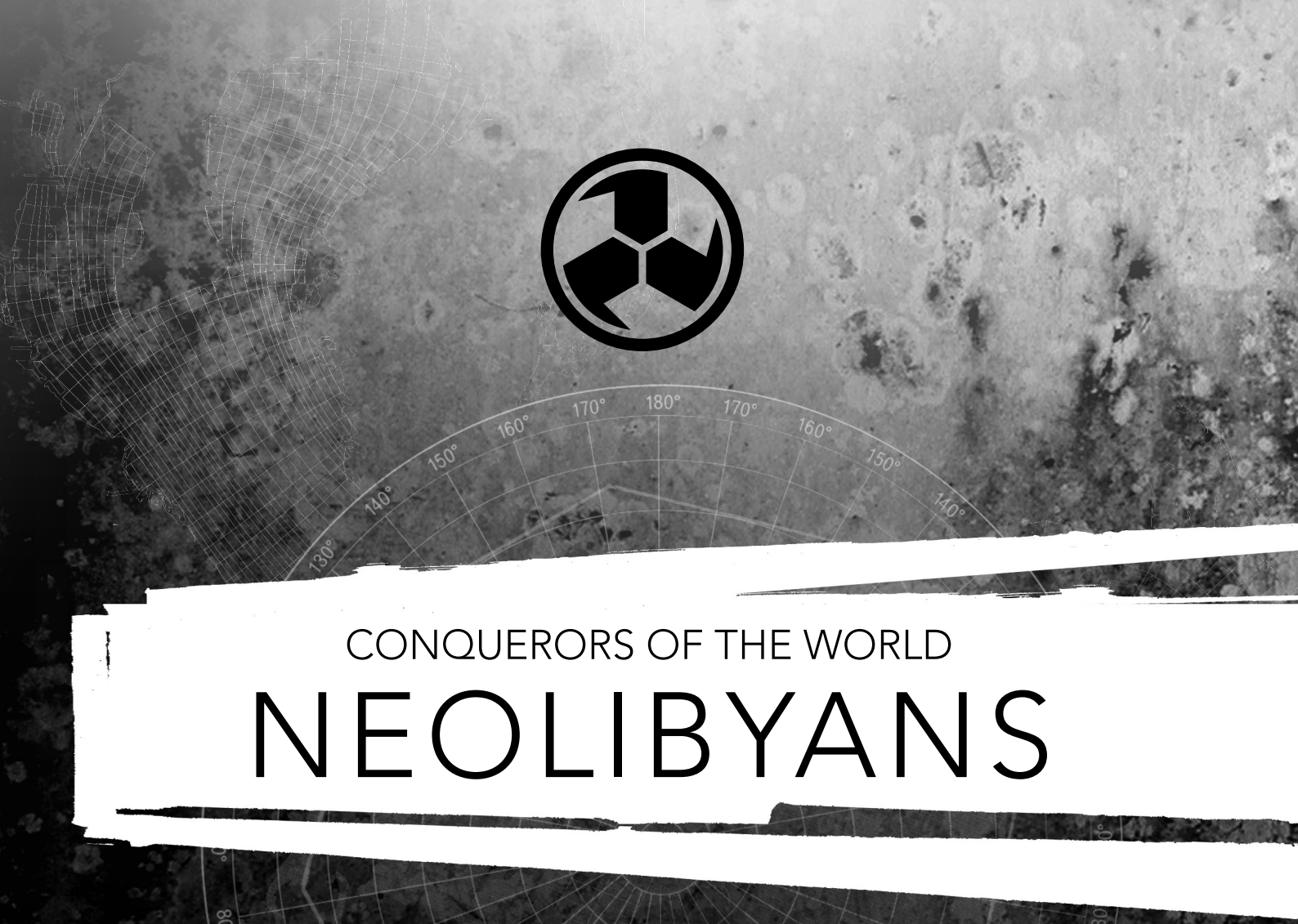
Culture: Hybrispania
Concept: The Visionary
Cult: Scrappers (Lone wolf)

Digging in the dirt may appeal to some Scrappers as a lifestyle, but for Hesta, it is not enough. She has gotten wind of something big, has collected maps and Pathfinder way markers, has studied ancient books, and has compared printouts of city skylines with the silhouettes of seas of debris and come to her own conclusions. "More than a strike", she says, her jaws tight.

THE HEAD COLLECTOR

Culture: ?
Concept: The Destroyer
Cult: ? (presumably Scrappers)

A headless corpse lies on the pavement in Justitian's Deep City. A female Scrapper. Just like two days before, three roads away. The head collector's score is now 29 - 0 against the Judges, and they still know nothing. Or is the killer actually protected from above as some suspect now?



CONQUERORS OF THE WORLD

NEOLIBYANS

CONCESSIONS

Steel blue sky, an implacable sun burns down on Tripol's dusty streets. There is a soft breeze from the sea, carrying the scent of rotting algae and salt into the Africans' noses. Later today, the wind will turn and drown the odor in the rain forest's humidity. Both would be all right for the Tripolitans gathering in front of the marble-clad palace of the Neolibyan Bank of Commerce. Today the richest of the rich, the Neolibyans, gather in front of the glass portal. Beggars gather along the roads, waiting. Africans in filthy rags stand next to those in luxurious garments. They watch the events, marveling at the cloth-of-gold and colorful fabrics that the Neolibyans wear around their hips, and point to the slender rifles and sabers. The spectators laugh about the turbans ending in shawls: rich skin, sensitive skin.

A large entourage pushes through the crowd; at its center is a palanquin of mother-of-pearl silk stretched between poles carried by white slaves. Their mistress walks in shadows. Every step makes her chest jewelry of chaste silver plates jingle. A bald white man approaches her with bowed head; she grouches something and points ahead. The slave scuttles away.

A murmur runs through the crowd. A Neolibyan carries a Machine Men's leg armor of high boots. It is said he had to sacrifice 50 Scourgers for them and that the armor is protected against all sorts of damage by ancient runes. A boy separates from the crowd and runs towards the Neolibyan. Without breaking stride, he falls to his knees, sliding in on a cloud of dust, reaching for the boots. His hand touches them; the Neolibyan staggers, regains his balance, and kicks the boy. He rolls away laughing. The crowd cheers and dances.

The sun has reached its zenith. Sweat glitters on black skin. It smells of hot dust. A slave collapses and is dragged into the shadow. The people fan themselves, trying to get some fresh air. Some call "Balkhani, Balkhani!" Others join in, stomping their feet. The Neolibyans glance about seriously and with important looks, but there is an amused glitter in their eyes. They nod to the rhythm of the shouts. The massive glass portal is unlocked with a crash. Within, slaves with naked torsos can be seen now, pushing against the gates, muscled guys with exactly shaved beards: the African idea of domesticated and trained Balkhani. Slowly, the gates swing open. The Neolibyans outside step back at first and then push each other into the cool twilight of the Bank of Commerce. They tear at each other, push and shove until they are able to get some space and enter the vast lobby. They don't spare a glance for the meter-high tapestries with their traditional patterns. Bare feet pad across the marble, sandals clatter. Saber scabbards and rifles collide, and it sounds like battle din.

The stream parts and washes up the two stairs to the gallery and through the portals on both sides of the hall into the map room's rotunda. The gallery surrounds the dome a little more than five steps above the ground and is filling up quickly.

The dome is lined with carvings in black and polished wood: ancestral spirits as staring totems stand next to geometrical patterns inlaid with bronze and silver plates. It is a marriage of the old and the new Africa. Through the circular opening at the apex of the dome, the midday sun blazes and throws a beam of light to the floor mosaic; made from countless cut semiprecious stones, it shows a map of Europe and Africa. Nails mark towns; threads strung between them represent trade routes. They cover the artwork in a dense web, solidifying into thick strands at Tripol. Little flags are tied to the threads, marked with Neolibyans' names.

Dust motes dance in the light. Neolibyans lean over the balustrade, looking for their entourage or gasping for air when they are crowded in too much. Some debate loudly and with lots of gestures. Potential alliances are discussed; provisory promises are shouted across the room.

The chartists enter the map. Behind them, auctioneer Thabul enters and raises his arms. He has been elected by a majority, is at the end of a long career. Everyone shows him respect and trust. The din calms down to a murmur.

He bows in all directions, and the Neolibyans on the gallery nod back. Thabul steps to the center without touching even one thread. He opens the battle for concessions with an innocuous, probably promising route between Purgan Scrapper camps. The mood is still restrained; the Neolibyans wait for the big fish: Tripol to the rest of the world. Some lose their nerve and enter the skirmish of offers on the gallery, shouting and cursing; Thabul watches them, coolly registering the continuously rising concession price, until he accepts the bid of a Neolibyan in a red and blue patterned loincloth holding a nondescript rifle. The man's face is covered in sweat. It is cool in the map room.

One second of calm.

Everyone takes a deep breath. Then, route by route quickly follows, alternating different qualities. Waves of indignation shake the losers' entourages, while the winners laugh or shout out their success.

Thabul dances around on the thread-covered mosaic, pointing to various countries, calling out the trade volumes and praising the advantages of this city or that sea route like a barker. The chartists at his side unerringly grab the flags, pull them out, and replace them with new ones. Thabul doesn't give the bidders a minute's rest, harrying the merchants from concession to concession. When the crowd is tired and wants to take a break, he offers profitable roads, thus adding fuel to the fire. It's a game, and the world is his game board. The sun begins to sink. All of Tripol seems to be focusing on the Bank of Commerce. Only those at the very front will get a chance to spend the night with slaves, wine, and delicacies from all over the known world. The Scourgers are barely able to exert crowd control. The people in the first ranks stare at the massive glass doors. Very soon, the Neolibyans will walk through them, some sad and unapproachable, others euphoric and generous. The latter will throw parties to let the people partake in their joy as tradition demands: the night of ecstasy. There, the Balkhani push against the gates...

TO THE TOP

The Neolibyans are merchants whose goals are profit, influence, and wealth. Whatever costs them time and energy without bringing any Dinars, they deny. That is why they never had any interest in a complete written history. But they have left their traces: in the Bank of Commerce and in private archives, ledgers and folders full of treaties and agreements gather dust. With some intuition and patience, it is possible to distill the Neolibyans' history from them.

It starts roughly 50 years after the devastation of the African coast. The first reports were found in the African outback and were penned by the Libyan. He was a merchant, a shrewd accountant and very enterprising. He catered for the survivors and thus wove the network of contacts that would support him until the end. His trading posts along the African Mediterranean coast were like seeds that soon sprouted into strong cities. One of them was Tripol, according to history the Libyan's home village amidst the ruins of ancient Tripoli. Here the streams of commerce met – at least that's what the books say – and brought unexpected wealth not only to the Libyan: tea, expensive fabrics, oil in amphorae, sacks full of grain and metalwork piled up in the warehouses and caverns. The ancestral ghosts looked favorably upon the city. Tripol blossomed.

The Libyan's enterprises had grown too big to be controlled by him alone. The lists dating back to those days count hundreds of packers, helping hands, and scribes, some of them former competitors whom the Libyan had vanquished in wars of trade. Other cost items indicate that some of the profit went to the populace. The Libyan paid for the construction of meeting halls and had workers create fields or fortified canals. Africa's decline had been stopped.

Now, its inhabitants prepared to storm a mountain of inherited cultural waste, clan enmities, and desolate structures.

THE FOUNDATION

The Libyan hated every word that did not directly lead to a profit measured in Dinars. He didn't talk about his family, about the weather, and especially not about his competitors. But sometimes, after a good day, when he walked through the rows of his scribes and saw that everything intertwined, that all numbers were correctly billed, he gathered his subordinates around him. His face became soft and relaxed then, and his voice sounded deeper. He asked them all to sit, and brewed and served tea. He waited until they all had sipped some. He looked around, nodded, and described the events that had led up to this point. He said everything was based on three things: exploration, diplomacy, and trade.

These three aspects were dependent upon each other, and only together they formed the triad that beguiled the world like he himself was beguiled by his concubine Manhare's zither music. He called them the foundation of every flourishing venture and said that nothing and no one could tear down the building based on them.

These teachings would become his legacy.

200 years after the Libyan's death, his descendants called themselves Neolibyans. As parts of his still growing venture, they embody his three aspects.

EXPLORATION

The Neolibyans' ships cross the Mediterranean, and through their binoculars, the merchants see foreign coasts. Their expeditions climb the highest mountains; they explore the coldest pole and the least habitable desert. White patches on the map attract them as if exploring them had been the dying wish of their fathers. The world is dotted with places, and each and every one offers sensual experiences, interesting business, adventures, inspiration, or ancient secrets. It is a pity how many of them are still uncharted! Every survey and every map opens new ways to the African people, markets, hunting grounds, and in the end, wealth, be it measured in Dinars or cultural achievements.

DIPLOMACY

Where a rifle tears holes and creates hatred that will last for decades, a friendly word will open doors. Diplomacy allows Neolibyans to do business without having to come in the company of a retinue of Scourgers. It makes contact. It brings safe passage in foreign lands and dangerous regions. Without diplomacy, culture can neither create nor build bridges, cross borders, or gain new perspectives.

TRADE

Once foreign countries have been explored and listed, once hands have been shaken and gifts have been given, once friendship has been confirmed over a cup of tea, market research can begin. All resources and services are listed, and demands within the population are detected – or created. The explorer assigns the new route to the Bank of Commerce, and in return is paid the expected trade volume for two years in Dinars. At the next auction, it will be offered as a concession like all the other routes. Its explorer will be back at the bow of his ship at that point, raising his face into the surf and dreaming of foreign lands.

In the Libyan's worldview, trade chains the parties to each other. Be it clans, cults, or Cultures, trade unites them in a cycle of goods, forces them to act reasonably, and imposes basic modes of civilized behavior on them. Those who do not make their counterparts welcome, do not care for their well-being, do not listen to them and put their own pride before any compromise, will soon be shunned.

It is great that all these blessings also generate some Dinars for the Merchants.

RAIDERS

It's not trade alone that makes the Neolibyans the most successful merchants in the Mediterranean area. They owe part of their riches to the northern peoples' artifact grounds. With their ships, they bring Scourgers and Scrappers to the Frankan and Purgan coast, rumbling to shore with their Surge Tanks to get to work on pristine quadrants. Their maps are great: usually the auctioneer makes them take along a cartographer who measures and maps the old roads so new concessions can be derived.

Scourgers are absolutely necessary for such expeditions. They man the guns and race through the ruins in their four-wheel buggies, the Koms, searching for savages and running them down. They are unrestrained like hyenas and bite every calf that doesn't recoil fast enough. Very problematic: through this behavior, they damage the Neolibyans' reputation with the local population. The sighting of a Surge Tank alone can call to arms a whole union of clans. Almost every night flaming arrows hit steel skin or Scourger patrols are attacked. The time for the measured tones of the diplomacy aspect hasn't come yet or has been over for quite a while. Whatever the case, get some slaves!

THE BANK OF COMMERCE

450 years ago, there was only some mud building here. Its walls were chalked and finally tiled, additional scriptoriums were built. Messengers came and went, treaded furrows into the mud floor. The whole neighborhood arose, with warehouses, an archive, and a manufacture for stamps and writing utensils, all for private use. The old mud building was replaced by a two-story office building with a front of finest Purgan marble.

The site of the enterprise kept growing even after the Libyan's death. Today, the Bank of Commerce is situated there – a small city of its own in the middle of Tripol. Here, hundreds of chartists copy charts and maps; an army of scribes registers and recognizes the flow of goods. In the archives, sales quotas and profits for every route and concession are registered, from the first day of use until today.

On the first day of the first month of a new year, the Bank of Commerce hosts the great auction. Neolibyans leave their estates in Purgare and Bedain or interrupt their big game hunts in Pollen's spore fields; they come from the Atlantic coast and from Anubia's shores. No one can afford missing the auction. Exactly at high noon, all concessions fall back to the Bank of Commerce.

The auction takes all day. Offers of coveted and profitable routes alternate with those of risky and undeveloped concessions. The Neolibyans engage in a bidding battle, discuss and form alliances with former arch enemies. Powerful monopolies and alliances are created on the spot in the rhythm of the auctions and shut down again the next year in the same place.

Those who get a concession control the sector they bought completely, without any price battle or harassing

BEDAIN

Bedain, the Scrapper island with its legendary port of Syracuse, is the entryway to the African continent and a stopover for Neolibyan looting expeditions. Here, plants are unloaded, dismantled by experienced Scrappers, and shipped off again. The Neolibyan Khadala has made Syracuse her home. She runs wharves where Scrappers labor day and night to maintain her armada of boats. Her stores are stacked to the roofs with artifacts that her Scourgers have stolen from the Crow. The Chroniclers know that. Khadala and her estates are surrounded by Shutters.

BUSINESS

Tripol's boulevards open up to markets with colorful booths offering art from all over the world. Cloth sways in the wind, there is a scent of aniseed and cumin, rifle smiths beat chasings into golden fittings. The sunlight gleams on doorknobs, belt buckles, and jewelry. Next to them, the booths offer painted amphorae or pots, teacups, embroidered cushions, curtains and grinders for the spice preparation. Lots of artifacts from the freezing North are on display, resembling entwined tubes and surely of decorative value only. The people calmly walk the streets, inspecting goods, weighing them in their hands, and smelling them. They loudly haggle and laugh. On the corners of the streets, they sit on cushions, smoke hookahs, and drink tea. Tripol offers a gaze into the Neolibyan soul. Here, they celebrate their wealth and exhibit their aplomb. Both are cornerstones of their lives. The need for success and the desire to be one of Tripol's richest are the prime movers that make them work even harder every day.

fire from their own people.

The riches gained through the auctions go to the Bank of Commerce's vaults and from there into the pockets of craftsmen who expand Tripol. Large sums are also given to impoverished settlements at the outskirts of the city. Neolibyans hate poverty in close proximity to the capital.

GLORY AND OBLIGATION

The only hierarchy the Neolibyans accept is that of the Dinar. If you have a lot, you are more important than a person who owns less. But that is not the whole truth. In fact, only the Bank of Commerce knows the exact wealth of any given Neolibyan, and its accountants are sworn to absolute discretion. Only displayed wealth is perceivable: large entourages dressed in expensive garments and flamboyant equipment or even Surge Tanks speak of a remarkable business success. Those who have that kind of success are consistent magnates and can even become sheikhs. But no matter where a Neolibyan stands in the hierarchy, they all are obliged to be true to the concessions. If someone denies the auctioneer and keeps exploiting a lost concession, poaches in a competitor's domain, or breaks an agreement, the Bank of Commerce makes no difference between rich and wealthy. The culprit will have to answer to a tribunal of six Neolibyans, three of them nominated by himself, the other three by the accuser. They study the relevant paragraphs of the agreement and weigh the guilt. Usually, this is an unruly process. The proceedings are far from civilized.

The members of the tribunal shout and appeal to their counterparts' obviously clouded mind, and yes, maybe he has had a little too much of the hookah. They laugh, they insult, they flatter. But in the end, they always come to an agreement. No one supports deal breakers; they are quickly unveiled.

NEW WAYS

The Cult is growing, but the number of profitable routes does not. Many Neolibyans leave the Bank of Commerce empty-handed after the annual auction. Most of them entered the retinue of one of the richer Neolibyans as caretakers or caravan leaders. Those who own a ship sail away, searching for new markets. For the rest of the empty-handed ones, there are only unloved alternatives. They can venture into regions that the Bank of Commerce has declared free of concessions. This is very risky; profit is not guaranteed, and the population acts as aggressive as a swarm of wasps. The auctioneer cannot demand any money for such a marketplace. The artifact grounds may be plentiful, but who knows for sure? So far, any African who has approached them has gotten skinned.

Some merchants look for adventure or are simply distraught. They go for that bit of audacity that will surround them the next year in Tripol. The competition will eat their heart out. Let them rot from boredom on their routes.

RIFLES

The rifle is a status symbol from back in the old days that the Neolibyans have transported into the presence. Modern rifles captivate by their elegant, slender shape and the extremely fine chasings of their barrels. Gold and jewels are popular elements – as long as they are fashionable. Tripol asks its visitors to dance: If you don't want to be considered a villager from deep down south, you have to adapt to the capricious whims of the metropolis.

It does not matter if the rifle is usable – what counts is its appearance. It may be real, but battles where the victims fire back are reserved for the Scourgers. A well-organized hunt – well, that's something different entirely.

HOMESTEAD

Just as the Libyan brought wealth to Tripol, Neolibyans support their home villages. They equip the Scourgers, becoming an aspect of the great symbiotic relationship within the African people. The African people could be satisfied by this, but instead keep demanding more.

If business is weak, the Neolibyans do not only have to right their course of action for themselves, but also for their clan, for they risk the social decline of their village. Bring riches, show the neighboring village that our children are better than theirs! The competition between the villages and clans is fierce, and all the bragging is done at the cost of the Neolibyans.

It pushes them, but it does not mislead them. Stoically, they start new building projects on their ancestors' land, erecting baths, manufactures, hydro stations, libraries, and schools. In the end, they profit from it, for the dear family offers them their children. Is there a spot for little Kete in the scriptorium – you know, he has this lame leg? At the age of three, Ghamale was already able to add two and two; wouldn't she make a wonderful accountant? The more Dinars are spent on schools and teachers, the better the basic human raw material. It's an investment.

A DROP OF BILE

Scourgers sacrifice their body to the battle and to their people's well-being, but the Neolibyan is seen as a cowardly trickster who prefers to hide his belly behind high walls and lets others do his dirty work for him. Although the Neolibyans guarantee the land's wealth, in their home villages, every Scourger – even the lowliest ones – ranks above them. It is tradition, the warriors say, for them to partake in the village's wealth, and by way of this also in the wealth of the resident Neolibyan. Actually, the Scourgers are supported by the merchants. Weapons, vehicles, Petro, food, lodging: they get what they demand.

But no matter how the Scourgers harry the Neolibyans at home with their greed and malice, on Europe's coasts, they lose their influence. The Neolibyans, looking down on a people of compliant slaves and inferiors, are the overlords of the Mediterranean cities. Giant palaces of stone and scrap, stacked with weapons, jewelry, tea, oil, coffee and other goods, show the Neolibyan caste's wealth with their pomp. Here, the Scourgers hold their fire, feeling their power wane. Far away from home, they become supplicants.

INDENTURED

At the age of 11, young Africans can join a Neolibyan's entourage to travel the world and gain experience. If they show promise, they have to face the auctioneer in Tripol at the age of 17. After their Neolibyan has vouched for them and recounted their accomplishments, there is a discussion about the Cult's basics, the importance of the concessions, and the responsibility towards the family. If the auctioneer embraces the applicant, he is considered accepted, but if they only shake hands when he parts, the accomplishments enumerated earlier are not enough. He will have to remain in his mentor's entourage for another year.

BIG GAME HUNTING

The warehouses are stacked, the ledgers are full, and concessions have been secured for another year. But some Neolibyans still feel a certain gravity of the soul that keeps throwing him back to bed, makes him brood and smoke and drink tea until his employees shrink back in fear of the evil spirit that may have possessed him.

It's the craving for the vastness of the land, for adventure and greatness. Some in Tripol might find satisfaction in endless columns of numbers; others go aboard ships and travel to Europe. They exchange their fine rifles for high-caliber guns with telescopic sights, shove bullet after bullet into their bandoliers and wear them proudly. It feels heavy around their hips. They are ready. The rounds of their rifles hammer across Pollen's tundra, through Borca's forests, and across Purgare's cinder deserts like thunder. Every crack makes mammoths fall or tears apart Gendos. The Neolibyan and his entourage scream in joy.

But they're only animals. You slaughter animals; you don't fight them. The true challenge, the proof of their superiority, lurks between the spore fields. Screaming Dushani stealing a piece of your soul with every step you approach them; Pheromancers luring you close and pressing their hot flesh against yours to turn you into a soulless puppet; Psychokinetics who appear in front of you a thousandfold in the kaleidoscope of a fracturing space, commanding swarms of ticks: they all are worthy game. The most exalted of all creatures is the Biokinetic, whose flesh devours bullet after bullet, developing blains that push the lead out of his body while he keeps advancing on you, groaning and creaking. Those who return home with a malformed or even horned skull reap incredible glory.

IN FOREIGN LANDS

The Neolibyans control the Mediterranean. Trading emporiums with up to ten members maintain bulky transport ships, real sea monsters made of steel and rust. They carry hundreds of African Scrappers and their equipment to the European Mediterranean coast to return to Bedain with tons of artifacts. Business is brisk, the risk is adequate. At least amidst the hordes of Scrappers and Scourgers who are armed to the teeth, knowing full well that without the Neolibyan, they'd never get back home.

BORCA

Crossing the Alps is expensive, almost priceless for Surge Tanks, and the resistance is enormous. Over the last few months, the Clans have become increasingly bold, and the Scrappers react grumpily to any African. With bulky rifles, they sit in the ruins and defend them jealously. But the Chroniclers are the true devils. They put the people at odds with the Africans by telling horror stories: A child has disappeared? Who might have devoured it?

The judges stay true to their allies, but they can see through the charade. Although they accept Africans in their territory, they do not permit them to exploit the ruins. The Cluster vibrates consent.

Those clans far away from the Judges' mediating hand are full of distrust. These scented strangers in their colorful wraps and oversized scarves look weird, and they are armed as if they were planning to conquer the whole region. But their goods – especially spices, tea, fruit, and Petro – are in high demand on the plains.

FRANKA

The relationship with the Frankans is relaxed. The ruins have long since been looted, and slave hunts like those in the Balkhan has always been too expensive in the swamp. Trade is restricted to the coastal cities, some of which have been freed from Pheromancers by Spitalians and Anabaptists on their way to Aquitaine.

Some sailors venture inland on the rivers to buy exotic oil and adenoid secretions. Others look for remains of old expeditions; according to the Bank of Commerce, more than 20 Surge Tanks have been left behind in the swamps, all of them fully laden.

POLLEN

For years, Wroclaw has been Pollen's most profitable center of commerce, and has even become one of the Bank of Commerce's concessions. However, the main customers are not the inhabitants of Wroclaw or the Piast, but Africans on big game hunts. Even far from home, they do not want to deny themselves their tea, their psychovore seeds, their Anubian healing salves, and their cut gems.

PURGARE

The land of the Psychokinetics is a place for adventurers. To kill one of these Psychonauts counts among the main attractions of a tour through Europe. For merchants, the west doesn't have much to offer. It is very demanding with regards to people and material. The corrosive gases from the volcanic vents damage the lungs and the Surge Tanks' filter systems, expenses barely covered by trading with clans like the Romanos.

East of the Apennines, though, one can sell Petro to the Anabaptists. War has always been a profitable business. In this region, alas, it's the only one. The decreasing intensity of the conflict has not gone unnoticed. The first expeditions have gone to check out the marketplace.

HYBRISPANIA

The Hybrispaniards paid the price for their hubris. Only the Scourgers seem not to get that. As long as they do not retreat, the Neolibyans will not be able to deal with the locals beyond their estates at Al-Andalus.

The Hybrispaniards do not make good slaves. In the house, they pose a danger to the whole family with their acquired hatred for the Africans, and on the oil fields, they are the torchbearers of every revolt. They can be used in the mines, but it's hard to deal with them.

BALKHAN

The Voivodes are good customers with a penchant for grandeur. The Neolibyans know exactly how to cater to their needs. In return, the Voivodes give them wood and slaves – and what slaves they are! Spitalians stand next to Hellvetics and Palers (bah!). Definitely better than stubborn Jehammedans and Balkhani.

PIRACY

The Neolibyans claim dominance over the Mediterranean. In fact, it is the key to the Cult's commercial success. To maintain this dominance, the Bank of Commerce hires Neolibyans without a concession to secure the coastlines. In giant ships surrounded by nimble Scourger torpedo boats, they go on combat patrols. To allied foreign city-states, the Bank of Commerce offers protection money agreements for those who want to travel the Mediterranean unmolested. Ships redeemed this way receive passports that save their crews from slavery should they be boarded. Ships without approval are asked to enter the next port. If the crew resists this order, the ship is subjected to a softening-up barrage, boarded, and sailed to Bedain by Scourgers. On the shore, the prisoners are bound, taxed, and sold by Neolibyan experts.

RANKS NEOLIBYANS

1 - APPRENTICE

Since the kid has been weaned from its mother's breast, he has been nothing but trouble. He could fetch water from the well, but he's too slim for that. He has started asking for the meaning of the symbols on the Surge Tanks, wants to learn every single one. Send him to the Neolibyans, he'll come around.

As an Apprentice, he will sweep the scriptorium for the next few years and learn to read and to write. Some arithmetic can't hurt, either.

2 - SCRIBE

Well, the writing part has worked out. The young African still isn't considered a Neolibyan, but he works his way up within the entourage. He posts the gains and losses of at least one merchant route.

3 - MERCHANT

So that's it. The auctioneer has embraced the young African and thus made him a Cult member. From now on, he lives in the Libyan's tradition. He can break with his mentor and start his own enterprise with wealth accumulated so far. The world is his oyster.

4 - SEAFARER

To stack Dinar upon Dinar can be satisfying for a while, but the wanderlust makes the Neolibyan leave the scriptorium. He stands at the docks smelling the algae and the salt and knows that the warehouses and workplaces have become too small for him. His home is out there.The Seafarer never stays in one place for long. He roams around exploring coasts and rivers. He enters deeply into the unknown. His explorations give the Cult a future.

5 - CARTOGRAPHER

The Cartographer travels the land, drawing maps and recording merchant routes. His knowledge of countries and people is enormous. In his lifetime, he fills Atlases, following the traces of Bygone cultures to forgotten cities and learning dozens of languages.

The Cartographers' ships are legendary; children draw their silhouettes in the sand and play pretend at being explorers. At some point, the greatest Cartographers dare crossing the Atlantic or sailing around the Horn of Africa. None of these has returned yet, but no African doubts that these great minds have reached their goals. May they look towards a peaceful death on the other side.

5 - GREAT HUNTER

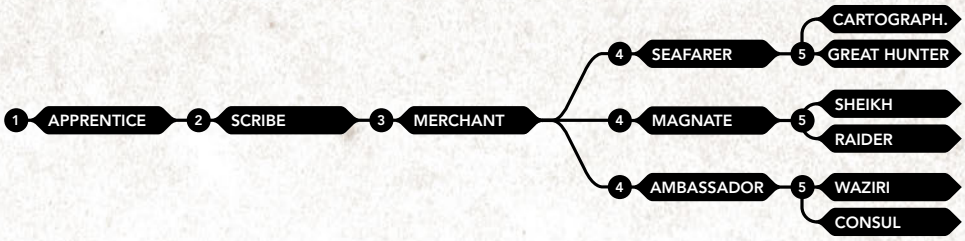
If you have seen Tripol, you have seen the world. But all the colorful garments under the billowing awnings, the glittering jewelry, displays full of treasures, all the talk about big business – all this keeps grating at the emotions until it has smoothed down all senses. Meanwhile, the Great Hunter stands on a grassy knoll in a foreign land. He listens to the wind. His rifle rests in the crook of his arm. He has escaped a world that was so protective and gaudy that it ate away his soul. Now, he feels the beast within again, stalking his mind, circling his reason. Grinning, he accepts it. Surrounded by Spore Beasts and Biokinetics, there is no predator more dangerous than himself here.

4 - MAGNATE

The Magnate is rich beyond any reason and does not intend to stop collecting more wealth any time soon.

His entourage fills a whole neighborhood, carrying supplications from impoverished competitors to him,

HIERARCHY AND RANKS - NEOLIBYANS



catering to him and his guests and passing his business decisions on to his branches. His empire is growing.

5 - SHEIKH

It would take him days to visit all his plantations in a Kom. He leaves the day-to-day business to several Magnates, who push around his ships and caravans on the map of the world, from one concession route to the next. Gaining wealth is not a challenge anymore, but a rising curve on the accountants' blackboards. No one is closer to the Libyan in wealth and influence than the Sheikhs.

After centuries of dominance, the Bank of Commerce has become synonymous with Africa's economy, and the Sheikhs head the Bank of Commerce. They have the power to not only influence the continent's economical development, but also its cultural one, ignoring the Scourgers and Anubians. They called the Spitalians to Qabis and vouched for their safety. The peace with the Voivodes is their work (at least partly). What the Sheikhs decide will find a way into the Africans' heads.

5 - RAIDER

At home, the Neolibyan owns a few hectares of land and maybe exploits one or two concessions. It is never enough to make ends meet. But his true wealth travels with him: his giant ship full of Surge Tanks and Koms. With it, he sails off to conquer European seas of debris. He is not to keen on the flaunting in Tripol; he is fully happy to soak the Crow.

4 - AMBASSADOR

The Ambassador embodies the Libyan's diplomacy principle. He is the mediator between rivals. He negotiates treaties and develops commercial agreements. No concession is assigned without an Ambassador checking, correcting, and finally signing off on its paragraphs.

The Magnates say that is no way to become rich, but the Ambassador begs to differ, for he doesn't measure his wealth in Dinars but in the number of strands in his network. After all, it spans two continents.

5 - WAZIRI

Magnates are like a pack of jackals fighting for every bone. Those who can recognize and weigh all sensitivities are worthy to become Waziri for a group of Sheikhs.

He will be their voice and advisor, taking part in their meetings and removing disagreements. He represents their interests; their goals are his law. One word from his mouth and entire economic sectors tremble and rearrange. Within the Sheikhs' enterprises, he has the power of attorney. He moves mountains of Dinars and acts unchecked.

Even if all that money isn't his, a Waziri belongs to the most influential Neolibyans.

5 - CONSUL

Magnates and Sheikhs cannot manage every city and estate personally. Additionally, there is the potential annual change of ownership after the auction – but it takes many moons to learn the ropes of a city. Profitable centers of commerce or strategically important towns are too important to be exposed to this. Thus, the Bank of Commerce assigns them to Ambassadors of outstanding merit, the Consuls.

A Consul organizes a settlement's defense, has the roads repaired, the port expanded. It is he who invites the savages from the wasteland for tea and offers them a peace treaty – or who calls in the Scourgers and removes the danger.

HUNTING RIFLE

STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS

They are efficient workers and a counterpart to the goat herders. They take our weapons as long as they do not have to confess to it.

ANUBIANS

They do not see the mathematical beauty in a balance, the gain and the loss, and how in the end everything leads to a result. Instead, they wave their bones. To each his own.

APOCALYPTICS

The only white men steeped in the principle of market economy.

They are ruthless and talented, and they go far. That's why we subconsciously hate them.

CHRONICLERS

Damn bastards! In the first days, new white slaves behave as if we were going to eat them. The masks have done a good job.

CLANNERS

Every Clan has potential. The larger the Clan, the bigger the potential... profit.

HELLVETICS

A fascinating mercenary Cult. They work as footpads. Yes, alright, we'll pay.

JEHAMMEDANS

How long have they been opposing us in the Balkhan? Now they are discounted on the slave markets. Thanks, not interested. Are there any Spitalians left?

JUDGES

The Chroniclers' lackeys. Obviously, our offer was not good enough.

PALERS

We do not know enough about them. They avoid large cities, and we avoid dark holes.

SCOURGERS

Great people, true warriors in soul and mind. At home, that's a problem: they ham, and we play along. But later, in the north... now, who controls who?

SCRAPPERS

An efficient breed of people, but simple minds.

SPITALIANS

We had to get them into the country. They are the only ones able to fight the Psychovores.

UKMENA

Culture: Africa
Concept: The Adventurer
Cult: Neolibyans (Seafarer)

As the daughter of an influential Neolibyan magnate, Ukmena had everything – slaves, luxury, recognition – but she had no self-respect. She lived the most decadent lifestyle one day and walked Tripol's boulevards clad in rags the next. Directionless and depressed.

Then, she made a cut. She changed her name and took a job on a ship owned by the Bank of Commerce. There, she gained a reputation as an excellent explorer, exploited routes, drew maps. She had found her destiny. But there was one thing lacking, that kept her from finding peace of mind: there were white spaces on her personal map of the world.

For a year now, she has been preparing her grand expedition. Her ship, the Jemadari, is being reinforced with steel and equipped with stronger engines. She wants to brave the Atlantic crossing before the next auction.

EZENACHI

Culture: Africa
Concept: The Traditionalist
Cult: Neolibyans (Merchant)

Years ago, his portfolio contained some profitable concessions. Then, the disasters became more frequent: a transport ship was sunk by pirates; a Surge Tank disappeared in Borca; business associates broke promises. His women left him and took his children along – as much as he had worked they were probably not his, anyway. Ezenachi put a dagger to his chest and… hesitated.

A fire started burning within him. He got a job as a scribe with his fiercest competitor, worked doggedly and allowed himself not a second of inner peace. It was so easy to sabotage the enterprise from within. He attacked competitor after competitor, always staying just long enough that the enterprise staggered towards inevitable bankruptcy. Now he only had to manage his masterwork. He recently became part of the influential Sheikh Darweshi's entourage. Ezenachi gets to work.

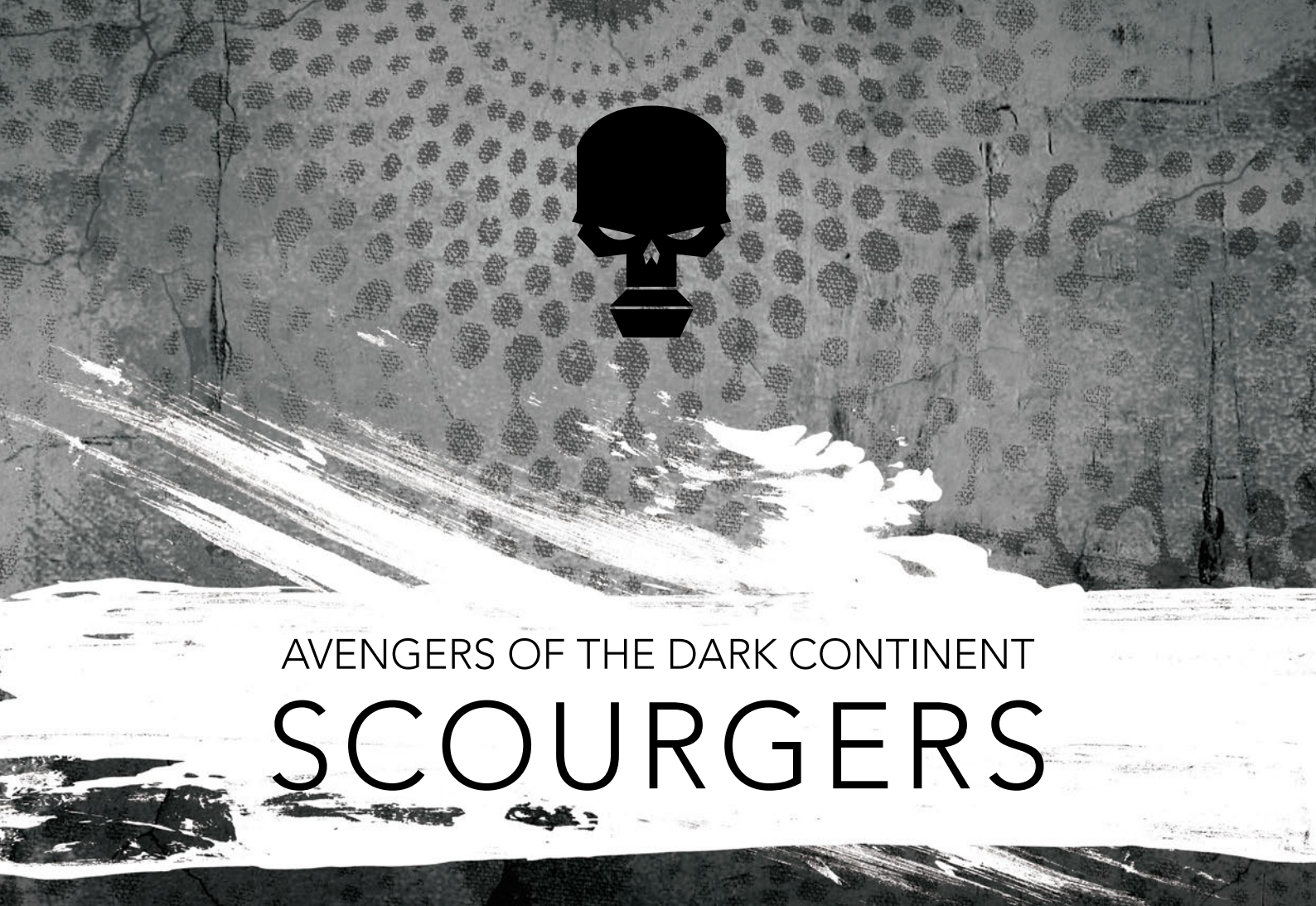
DARWESHI

Culture: Africa
Concept: The Conqueror
Cult: Neolibyans (Sheikh)

The Tripolitans owe several large plazas and fountains to Darweshi. And of course his writers took care to tell everybody who the generous builder was. Darweshi hates humility.

He owns Scrapper halls on Bedain, a dry-dock close to Tripol, and several oil fields in the African hinterland, all making profit. His enterprise grows relentlessly. Now, the Psychovores worry him. They have already enclosed some of his oil fields; the slaves are lost. Also, his latest balance showed some unusual fluctuations. But his merchants will deal with that.

URD



AVENGERS OF THE DARK CONTINENT

SCOURGERS

BROKEN WINGS

Chuma shielded his eyes and looked up to the double tower. Its exterior reminded him of a Kasuku's ruffled feathers, only that it had an oily shimmer. One of the towers had a round structure on top, like a crown. Red pieces of cloth hung from the windows, billowing soundlessly in the wind. The abode of their host, the Voivode. Immediately below, the towers were linked by an enclosed bridge. Cages hung from it. They were empty; their contents had been sold.

Chuma felt the hot hand on his shoulder. He looked down and stared at the skull mask. Reflexively, he winced and struck out. Skin hit skin, his arm was pressed upwards, he felt a hard grip on his wrist, saw the tower spiral from view and hit the ground. He gasped for air. Kabaila stood above him, legs spread widely, one knee slightly turned inwards to be able to block an attack on his groin faster. But no, this fight was over. Chuma laughed, ignored the hand that Kabaila offered him, rolled sidewards, and jumped to his feet. He had not expected to be able to surprise a Dumisai or even send him to the floor. He chuckled at the thought. Quite the contrary – the little struggle gave him confidence. They were strong, even in the realm of the Crow.

The pack was gathering. They all wore masks and helmets made of blue steel. Chuma reached for the Scourge at his belt. The Voivode had said no guns, and the fat Neolibyan Wamwara had agreed. Sure, his ass was pressed into a sea of pillows right now. He was sipping sweet tea on the bridge of a Surge Tank.

Harsh, short calls sounded from where the slaves waited. Chuma didn't understand a word. He walked over, saw the shaved heads, sunken eyes. Their black outfits with the white stripe in the middle were torn and hung from their bodies in cut rags. Chuma stared at them. Their skin was so… white.

One of them straightened and spoke. Again this harsh croaking, the sounds of the Crow. Chuma checked their manacles. They were tied to a row with short lengths of chain. Their feet had been left unchained, though. They would have to walk. The slave started speaking louder; he raised his hands, made the chains jangle.

Chuma went to the Kom and took the hook from the windlass. The steel rope whirred. Hook in hand, he approached the first slave. The man tried to turn away, but Chuma grabbed him and joined the hook to his chain. It clinked close. Chuma tested it once: tight. The slave was now actually screaming, like a crone. He took a step towards Chuma, dragging along the men behind him. They staggered; one fell and thus dragged the screaming one down, too. Chuma turned around, walked to the Kom, and got in.

The street was a muddy track, but it led to the gate. Iregi led the way in his Kom. The buggy's engine roared and spewed forth a jet stream of black exhaust. The Kom creaked with every hole in the road; every rock jarred Iregi's bones.

Tonight, he would be complaining and cursing, and all would laugh at him and call him a Dufu. There was nothing anyone could do; the dampers were broken. Wamwara had only supplied them with junk for this mission.

Chuma followed. Slowly, so that the slaves could keep up. He looked to one side. The houses along the road had sagged, the roofs hanging above the wooden fronts like bushy eyebrows. Faces stared from the open windows. Yes, fear us. We are the devils from your dreams. A girl made a face at them, rolled her eyes and mimicked little horns with her hands. Chuma laughed loudly and heard his comrades join in.

They left Beograd. The forest surrounded them with the scent of resin and pine needles. Here, under the boughs of ancient trees, the light was dim and the forest floor seemed to swallow even the roar of the engines. Kijani jogged alongside Chuma's Kom. He had loosened the mask, and Chuma saw that he was chewing seeds: his gums were black. On the other side was Taye, the pack's Simba. Every step was a majestic move, proving his nimbleness. The flak jacket left his arms bare, and Chuma marveled at the grace of his muscles. How long would it take him to…

Iregi's Kom roared and jumped forward, throwing pine needles and dirt from its wheels into the air. It careened onwards. Dirt rained down on Chuma's mask and torso. There was something up ahead, two figures between the trees; Iregi drove toward them. A warbling cry on Chuma's left side, the Chaga Hakima ordered them to stick together. Iregi would never be able to hear this, not in his roaring pile of junk. What an idiot, next time Hakima would…

Figures stepped from the shadows of the trees next to Iregi. Chuma saw steel flash, and Iregi's Kom bucked like stubborn cattle. The rear wheels lifted into the air, the buggy veered to the side, the wheels hit the ground again, but now the Kom was careening across the forest floor, having left its original course in a 90° angle, threw pine needles and dirt into the air and smashed into a tree. Pinecones rained down upon the wreck. Taye, Kijani, Kabaila, and Hakima started running. Chuma looked back, saw the slaves, and hit the steering wheel. Damn! More figures stepped from the trees next to him. Pale skulls, Spears with the weird triple blade at the ready. They ran towards him. He accelerated, felt the chains grow taut with a snap, heard the screams and jumped from the Kom. He landed on his feet, ground them into the forest floor, and then started sprinting. The attackers had stopped, pointing to the slaves swinging back and fro on the Kom's chain like some child's dolls. With a few long strides, Chuma reached the first pale skull. The guy stared at him sheepishly, wanted to raise the strange spear, but one of Chuma's feet was already on the shaft; he raised his other knee, hitting his opponents chin running. The guy's head snapped back, and Chuma landed on the floor, dropped to one knee, and clawed at the forest floor. He was up again in no time, now readying his Scourge. The barbed whip crackled. St. Elmo's fire danced along it. Another opponent had approached. Yes, this had to be Spitalians, and his weapon was a Splayer.

Chuma gauged his opponent. A young man with eyes full of fear. The Splayer's tip trembled. Not an opponent. Prey.

The Spitalian screamed and started running, head held low, Splayer in front of him. It was a child's scream. Chuma sidestepped, raised his Scourge, ducked below it, and attacked the Spitalian. The whip hit his torso, the barbs piercing the neoprene. It grew taut, and Chuma held fast, toppling the pale skull. When he brought the Splayer around, Chuma discharged the Scourge. Sparks crackled along the metal filaments; for a second they glowed and melted through the neoprene. The Spitalian screamed and jerked, then he collapsed. Foam dribbled from his mouth.

Chuma threw away the Scourge and looked around. Several pale skulls were lying on the floor. Kijani's mask was dented and covered in blood. Kabaila thumped his breast and roared. "Taye!" Kijani pointed between the trees. Chuma saw and started running. Kabaila followed.

Taye and a white man big as a mountain circled each other, each waiting for an opportunity to strike. On the white man's face was a Spitalian tattoo, one of its arms reaching up to his forehead. In his right hand, he held a sword that was black as night.

Kijani ran past Chuma, but he grabbed him.

"No, my friend."

Taye was the pack's lion. He alone had the honor of killing the strongest opponent. The Scourgers encircled the two combatants watching each other. They were something special. Chuma thanked his ancestors for the opportunity to watch this legendary fight.

Taye and the white man attacked each other.

DRAWINGS

The city is ancient, has been deserted for eons – but it's not older than the suffering of the African people, the bound lion. Steppe grass grows in the streets and rustles in the mid-day breeze. The chalked fronds of the apartment blocks are still standing; the roofs have sagged, and the rubble within is overgrown with dusty shrubbery.

Drawings can be seen around the window cases. Here, Africa's history has been recorded with colorful earth pigments, blood and spittle: black areas dotted with red, fragile figures, broken bodies. Bullet holes. Legions of white chalk lines advance unstoppably, cut through the great waters and color the rivers red with the blood of their enemies whom they slaughter like animals. Dark streaks disappear in the oceans.

The next fresco is hidden under a layer of fine stone dust. When wiped away, it unveils the silhouettes of big cities with slender towers and peaked portals, surrounded by yellow cornfields. Red flames lick from the beautiful superstructures. Next to them, triangles can be seen, surrounded by black lakes. The chalked lines are feeding from them, carrying dark lumps back home. Some drag groups of dark lines away, many of them die.

Every ruin caters to another era, talks of pain and humiliation from the white man's crimes against Africa back in the early days until today.

TEMPEST

Far to the West, clouds form a wall of rain, a sharp contrast to the cerulean sky. The contrast between yesterday's Africa and today's Africa is just as sharp.

We leave the old frescoes behind and approach the present. Now, dark, looming figures are looking down upon us from many walls. Their bodies consist of complex patterns; their faces are hidden behind shields like death masks of red ash. While their bodies vary in color and design from wall to wall, the masks are all alike. Eight keep reappearing. They represent the eight ancestors. They are spirits guarding their descendants. They will guide them in the terrible days when the white people will come.

The cities are still burning, but in the hinterland, armies of black and red lines are forming. At first, they are singular, small groups, some led by animals or hybrids of lion, gazelle, and hyena, others surrounded by some sort of light. One by one they unite, becoming a rolling sea, surrounded by the eight giant ancestors looking down on their people – some gracious or angry, others mad with rage or sadness. But they all lead the way to the ground molested by chalk lines, point with their fingers to the perpetrators.

The dark clouds are now almost above the city, hiding the sun. The first drops hit the street, stamping craters into the dust and making the steppe grass tremble. Soon, the tempest will wash away any dirt, and the roaring of the water will be the only sound in the jungle for many hours to come.

Before us is another building. The painted plaster has fallen from the mud bricks in large areas. But the image of the dark figure with the great muscles and the angry look can still be easily seen due to its size. The figure is wrestling with the white man, grabbing his hand holding a cat o' nine tails. The drawing next to it shows the dark figure – the African – gloating over the prone white man and grabbing his whip. There is one image after the other.

The Scourge now cuts glowing lines into its former owner's body. The black lines chase the white ones from their cities and keep pushing them into the land of chalk lines. The hybrid creatures and animals stay home, while the eight ancestors accompany the fighters to battle.

Again, cities burn. But they are crude, barbaric and inhabited by chalk lines.

We are in the present time.

Rain keeps hammering the ruins; torrents run over the house fronts and collect in seething puddles. Through a window opening, we see an old man grinding earth and roots to a blue pulp in a mortar.

What is future today will soon be represented on the chalked wall.

THE LION'S CLAWS

If the African people are the Lion, the Scourgers are its paws. They are as accustomed to fighting as the Neolibyans are accustomed to negotiations and the Anubians to the secrets concerning the string of life. Facing the Crow is considered the greatest and only honor that an African can bestow upon the ancestors.

Every day, the Scourgers walk through plains, jungles, and overgrown ruins to train their fitness and agility. They climb mountains and ruins, jump chasms, roll with the impact and hit predetermined stones and trees with their Scourges running. They run through the Psychovores, avoiding the thorns and the garish flowers. They battle each other, fighting to the first blood. The ancestors would not accept any other form of thanks.

In the settlements, young women adore them. Children come running, laughing and admiring the muscles, pulling the girls' hair: "Eke loves a Scourger!" If a Neolibyan walks by or is even carried past in a palanquin by slaves, the Scourgers strike a pose in front of him and denounce him as a weakling. If they get the chance, they grab the merchant's garments and tear them off him.

They despise fat bodies. It was the predilection for greasy meat and alcohol that enabled the white man to conquer proud Africa. The renunciation of the ancestors and finally unbridled capitalism sealed the black continent's fate. Although the Neolibyans bring wealth to the villages, the people look up to the Scourgers, for they sacrifice their lives while the merchants sell their souls.

THE CROW

The ancestors had chosen them to push back the conquerors and destroyers. And then what? Wait until the white man has recovered? Scourgers see Europeans as born oppressors who need to be chained in order to avoid them causing damage.

Scourger packs in Al-Andalus march forth to push the Hybrispanian Guerreros into the Warpage, burning down every hideout. One day, the Castilian plateau will fall. With the aid of Surge Tanks, they rid ruins in Purgare or Borca of Scrappers. Although the Neolibyans have negotiated a peace with the Voivodes, Scourgers and white men still clash in the forested mountains of the Balkhan. Prisoners are enslaved so they can work off their centuries-old debts on Africa's fields. They call this balancing, not injustice.

LIVING HISTORY

The wall paintings in Agadez are unique, but no Scourger will enter this ruined city. The past is alive for the warrior Cult and must be experienced through a storyteller – for only through him can the ancestral spirits pass on their wisdom to their descendants. Looking back into a tribe's history often turns into an ecstatic party where the participants entrance themselves through monotonous beating of drums and dancing.

The rhythm leads the way into the depths of their souls. Their pupils widen; their breath slows down. They gather around the oldest Scourger present. He sways back and forth. His teeth are blackened from the concoction of the intoxicating plants; the gates to his mind are wide open. An ancestral wind blows through. He raves incoherently like an oracle, speaks in tongues or starts some weird chant. But something happens to those gathered around him, who keep moving closer to him. He leads them down to the sea of collective memories, pulling them with him into the absolute blackness.

Eventually, it stops. Mind and body rejoin and solidify in the present. Some lie immobile and gaze into the sky; others laugh or pass around gourds of water. They are parched and tired, but filled with the ancestors' spirits. They are one. They are the Lion.

GUARDIANS OF TRADITIONS

There is a spirit in every stone, every plant, and every animal. Some are cunning and bring illness and bad luck. Others promise fertility. They all are very irascible. However, with some vigilance and small sacrifices, they can be tamed. Africans treat the ear on the field with respect, carefully remove the stone from the road, and thank the butchered antelope for agreeing to become the hunters' prey.

The world of ancestors and spirits has always existed parallel to the human world. On certain days, sacrifice or irreverence causes the barrier to dwindle, and powers and souls float to the other side. This exchange guarantees the balance. But the spirits never interfere with human problems. Never.

With one exception.

Africa stood on the brink of ruin. The Lion lay torn; thousands of beak wounds spilled his blood, and the crows were marching on his dying body. At that time, the eight

ancestors caressed his sides and lent him strength. They breathed life into him again and gave him anger. The Lion rose, rid himself of the bird plague, and shouted out his anger, making himself heard even in the northern lands.

The power of the eight ancestors flowed through young warriors throughout Africa – they had been chosen to repel the Europeans as champions of the eight. Years later, these warriors were only known by the name Scourgers.

The results of this choice of the eight can be felt today, for the African people still see the Scourgers as closely related to the ancestors. They expect a lot of them: not only to defend the land, but also to safeguard its traditions against the ravages of time. Whenever an African is caught lying, has done some damage to another African, or even needs to move a rock to build his hut, the Scourgers are called in. The Scourgers decide in the spirit of the traditions, and they decide quickly. Liars may not speak until the good spirits of the village send a sign; those who have caused damage to others have to repair that damage, even if they must do so by their own hands' work; the rock may only be moved if no one in the village opposes the idea and the spirit inhabiting the rock has been pacified with sacrifices for a whole month.

WARUI

Swahili, Arabic, Hausa, Malinke, Kikongo, Amharic, Somali, and thousands of other languages were spoken in Africa, some by populations of hundreds of millions, others by a few dozen people on the brink of extinction. Even decades after the Eshaton, the variety of languages in Africa was overwhelming, but it declined more and more during the past centuries.

It started in the south, close to the Psychovores. The people lost their fathers' tongue and communicated on a rudimentary level with simple words, clicks, and other basic sounds. This new language formed images in the minds of its users, conveying a painful intensity of emotions with few phonemes. The Scourgers call it Warui, meaning "from the river". They consider it the legacy of the eight ancestors who pierced the barrier by interfering with the human world and making way for a flood of emotions and ancient knowledge. Those who drink from this river are rid of the intellectual ballast of centuries, of grammar and vocabulary, and regain the first and most primordial of all languages in which the spirits and ancestors communicate with the Africans.

Without the Warui, the Scourgers hailing from villages and cities all over Africa could never have joined together. In battle, it unites the warriors' souls in a way that is far beyond human language.

But in the cold north, the ancestors' influence is diminishing, and so is the Warui. The link between the Scourgers is breaking. Like invalids, they stumble through a world they had stormed before relying on grammatical constructs and worn-out phrases. That is why many carry Psychovore seeds. Chewed, they expand the ancestors' influence up to Borca.

IMMODERATE

Scourgers want neither riches nor luxury. They live off of nature's gifts and take what is offered to them. When one pulls aside a curtain and casts a searching glance into a dimly lit hut, the inhabitants would not keep their fresh fruit from him, and neither would they deny him a quiver full of arrows. To deny him would mean offending the ancestors. However, there are limits to what a Scourger can demand. If he's thought to be immoderate – hoarding riches or demanding gifts that he doesn't need to do his job, for example – his brothers and sisters take care of him. Quickly, and without much ado. Wherever he may indulge these debaucheries, be it at a Neolibyan's table or in a brothel's bed, they grab him and drag him away, kicking and screaming. Outside, they tie him to a poll naked and torture him until he loses consciousness, laughing all the while. His blood summons mosquitoes; they rise into the air with every hit he takes, only to attack him again with a vengeance afterwards. The sun burns. This goes on for hours until his will is broken, the pain purges his mind, and he remembers what he is: the Lion's claw.

EQUIPPED

Scourges are considered symbols of the African warrior caste, but the shock whip is only one of many weapons the Scourgers carry. In the Neolibyans' arsenals, assault rifles and hand grenades wait for them, as well as machetes, spears, nets, and bolas.

The Scourgers get their traditional flak jackets, camouflage pants, and helmets from the arsenals at Tunis, but the city has been shut down since the slave revolt. Some equipment can still be found in the overgrown military bases in the hinterland. To loot them often is a young Scourger's first trial.

When they are traveling Europe, the Neolibyans supply Scourgers with Koms. These buggies are maneuverable and have powerful engines, can climb any hill, jump chasms, and run down slaves. When equipped with a cage on the bed, they are perfectly suited for hunting – humans or animals.

Many Scourgers also train hyenas that can track enemies in areas where Koms cannot maneuver.

Just like at the Neolibyan's table, a Scourger has to be modest in battle: a Hybrispanian village full of old people, women, and children will not be subjected to a softening-up barrage, but attacked with spears; a boar will not be killed from a distance, but attacked with a knife. For the Scourgers, fighting means a battle between souls and a trial of strength. What cowards would they be if they attacked any given enemy with grenades?

DEATH MASKS

When fighting the Crow, the Scourgers traditionally wear their death masks: grinning skulls styled after the ancestral masks. These masks form a link to the eight ancestors and supply their wearers with their powers. Enemies seeing those masks know that death has come to exact its toll.

FAMILY TREES

Scourgers are famous for their wood carvings depicting the complex family trees. Here, the spiritual relationships are shown, but also the physical ones that can usually be traced back to one of the eight ancestors. In African villages, there is an elaborate ebony plate in front of every building, telling the family's proud history to strangers. Carving is the only form of work permitted to the Scourgers; working the crops or toiling on the oil fields are considered dirty and inferior. Fighting, hunting, and carving are fitting pastimes for a tradition-conscious Scourger. Everything else is slave labor.

IF ONE SHOULD
BE A PREY,

HOW MUCH THE BETTER TO FALL BEFORE THE LION
THAN THE WOLF

[SHAKESPEARE]

FAR FROM THE FRONTLINES

Peace is something that Scourgers can only find in death. Even when they're at home recuperating from their wounds, they live in places needing their protection – at refineries, on oil fields, or in coastal cities. The inhabitants can send them into the jungle at a moment's notice to hunt down some wild animal. Neolibyans can use them as caravan guards. A slave has fled? The Scourgers are there. The only calm they know is between their trips through Africa's jungle or at the front in between missions.

But people love them for their eternal vigilance. In the evenings, they are invited for dinner, to eat with the tribe and talk about their adventures. Children crowd them, climb on their laps, and admire their biceps. Then there is arm wrestling or friendly brawls with lots of laughing until late in the night. The Neolibyans grimly observe the merrymaking. They do not join in but watch the villagers squander their wealth – and adore the Scourgers.

EIGHT

Every African has felt the ancestors' influence. There's a tingle that runs through the body, the breath quickens, and gibberish floods the mind. They have accomplished something. They feel to the core of the being.

Every ancestor plucks the string of life in his own special way, and every ancestor appears alone. The emotions he triggers jump from person to person and spread like a bubble. The people are carried by the wave; at the epicenter, the emotions smash the walls of reason and determine the people's thoughts, emotions, and actions.

A few hundred paces further out, the effects fade. The emotions sink to the subconscious. They guide without resulting in full turns. Days later, the influence fades completely or is replaced by other emotions, another ancestor.

Scourgers and Anubians are especially sensitive to this. While Anubians lower their gaze in silent meditation, the Scourgers become inspired and exercise every aspect of the ancestor. They don't know his name; the eight ancestors come from a time and sphere that has no room for words, only emotions and conflation as experienced today in the Warui or in dreams, nowhere else. To discuss these ancestors, one has to choose the roundabout way, talking about their aspects or using metaphors.

The first ancestor is often characterized as an eagle. He soars above everything, broadening his gaze to the horizon of his own being, but also taking in his surroundings. He strengthens intuition and informs about future things.

The second ancestor embodies the strength and superiority of the Lion. If this ancestor comes over a region, the people square their shoulders, compete with one another in duels, and take on any challenge.

The third ancestor is like earth in one's hand, like a wall crumbling to dust because of a thought, like an earthquake. He manifests in the form of creative energy and of physical and mental exhaustion. Under his influence, great works of art and giant buildings are created.

The fourth ancestor opens people's hearts. He is community and love. Joining on a spiritual level, he tears down barriers.

The fifth ancestor is pure physical desire, colliding bodies that have only one goal: sexual reproduction.

The sixth ancestor blows like a clear thought through the minds of the affected. The thousand layers of communication with their meta-meanings and lies crumble until only one layer remains. Every word is understood as intended. Every thought is a blazing star rising in the interlocutor's mind.

The seventh ancestor only appears where at least two ancestors' influences collide. He superimposes them and unites their aspects. The Scourgers see him as the source of Warui.

The eighth ancestor is the shadow cast by the other sevens' light. He overwhelms and oppresses. His teeth and thorns catch every thought. People under his influence who may have been open-minded and friendly a moment ago suddenly act subversively and only for their own gain. But the Africans accept it without complaint. Their world has always been full of good and evil spirits; both are a part of the order.

UNTO DEATH

Being a Scourger is not a birthright, but great deeds do not help a young African to become part of the warrior caste, either. It's a mother's sole decision: no amount of complaining will help if she thinks that a Neolibyan would be good for the family. Many a boy flees into the jungle looking for a Scourger pack willing to take him in. But no, if the child is not handed over by the mother herself, the warriors chase it away.

Once a Scourger, he has to prove himself worthy at the age of 12. In the vicinity of Gibraltar, he will have to hunt down a freed slave. In Tripol, he will be abandoned in the jungle to confront wild animals, equipped only with a spear. The rites of acceptance vary from place to place, but they are all life-threatening. The applicant should not expect anyone to help. Even if a slave bashes his head in, the Scourgers will not interfere. Either the ancestors elect the child, lend their strength to the applicant, or not. Then, it would've been better off as a Scrapper or Neolibyan.

After this trial, the child is presented as a Scourger in his home village. Now he can draw on the Neolibyans.

Between the age of 12 and 28, all Scourgers are cared for by their village's community. These adolescents and adults may not marry: their deaths would cause existential problems for their partners. Of course, this does not stop them from having purely sexual relationships.

After the age of 28 and a rite of passage, they swear to use their heads more and their fists less. They are now considered elders. They still fight, but now they act from the background and are responsible for planning missions. Scourger elders may marry but are fully liable for their partners and children. The Neolibyans only have to take care of the warrior himself. The Scourger may still not work, though. Usually the profit from the selling of slaves to Neolibyan plantations guarantees suitable life with two to three partners for them. But they never get away from the fighting.

At the age of about 50 – a foggy line, because many Scourgers stop counting the years once they become elders – they are considered sages. They lead their villages, passing judgment or entering a permanent liaison with their ancestors as shamans or hermits. Their numbers are few. The calmer years as an elder do not make up for the stressful life as a warrior.

Not many reach the age of 45.

RANKS SCOURGERS

1 - DUFU

He killed an animal or vanquished a slave to be considered a warrior. He barely survived, though. His comrades laugh at him, pushing him around, calling him Dufu, which means “fart”. They keep getting more provocative until he finally loses it. With a burning face and a deep frown he attacks his comrades, hitting and bludgeoning them. To no avail. They block his blows, duck, or utter an exaggerated, shrill “Ow!” should he hit them.

When he stands there panting at the end of the lesson, with heavy arms and full of shame, he has learned that he is nothing. The entrance test, this first challenge? A fart.

From this point on, it gets better. He runs through the jungle, sharpening his senses and his reactions, accepting every conflict, outdoing himself.

His comrades give him more than enough chances to prove himself. In enemy territory, he has to go scouting, play the bait that lures the enemy into a trap, or kidnap an enemy chieftain. He will always be in the first line, mastering spear and oval shield. It’s still too early for rifles.

Only when he has proven himself worthy and is able to defend himself against the harassment may he rise in the pecking order. If he has proven himself in melee combat, he may now call himself an ancestral warrior, or Hondo. If he has vanquished his foe through guile and shrewdness, he becomes a new driver for his pack, a Damu.

2 - HONDO

In his dreams, he sees eight masks the size of shields and feels the Warui pouring out of their mouth openings. It’s too small, too far away, but it still touches him. He has to go further on the path of the warrior, the path of the guardian. He demands an assault rifle from the Neolibyans and gets one. Then, he makes it a part of his rites, treats it as a friend, garners its favor. When he looks the slaves or his enemies in the eyes, he knows that Scourgers like himself are responsible for the Cult’s reputation of being implacable and deadly.

3 - CHAGA

The Chaga is the pack leader. Through him, the ancestors speak, and his word is Africa’s will. To disagree with him would mean questioning the ancestors. Only the Dumisai may confront him and question his decisions. He has to defend them with his fists.

The Chaga is physically and mentally superior to the rest of his pack. He’s a better warrior and a brilliant tactician. While the Damu makes the battle plan, the Chaga leads his pack into danger, spurs it on, and keeps it together. If one of his warriors falls, he will be held responsible by the pack and the ancestors.

A Chaga will lead his pack through countless battles over the course of many years. Only if the Dumisai challenges him and is defeated by him he can become the pack’s Dumisai himself. A Hondo chosen by him takes his position as Chaga.

2 - DAMU

The Damu knows how to interpret the enemy’s movements, is aware of special terrain features, and watches the weather. He deploys the Dufus, devises attack plans, and points out the enemy’s weak spots. While the Chaga fights with the ancestors for the meaning of the battle and leads his pack during the fight, the Damu has

HIERARCHY AND RANKS - SCOURGERS

taken care of the strategic prerequisites.

If a Damu's plans fail, this means bad loot for the pack and thus loss of honor. Just like the rest of the pack, the ancestors turn their backs to him in disappointment.

3 - SIMBA

The Simba is the pack's lion. He challenges the enemy and performs the greatest heroic deeds. In every attack, he charges the strongest opponent and fights relentlessly until he has vanquished him. To help him would mean diminishing his heroic deed and is considered unforgivable.

After hundreds of battles, vanquishing one enemy after another, he is considered invincible. There is no one left he has to prove himself to. It's time he gave another Scourger a chance to walk the lion's path. The Chaga honors him by making him a Dumisai, a hero of the pack. He becomes taboo.

4 - DUMISAI

The Dumisai contains all of Africa's heroic deeds and is the pack's conscience made flesh. He's the keeper of the ways. He must lead his pack by example, mentally as well as physically.

His position within the pack is irrefutable. He may not lead, but he's the only one who can question and physically challenge the Chaga. If he wins the battle, the Chaga has to respect and hold his opinion. In turn, he can never be challenged; it's always he who challenges.

0 - MOYO

One day, the Chaga will go to his Dumisai, sit opposite to him on a rock at some distance from the pack, and tell him that it is time to select his Moyo, his soul mate. The Dumisai selects a Hondo or Damu he feels close to and whom he considers worthy. Together, they perform the ritual of union. They are now one, their souls have joined. What happens to one also happens to the other.

The Moyo gives his mask to the Chaga, who will keep it safe, and accepts his tasks. He's given eight heroic tasks he will have to perform to render homage to his Dumisai and safeguard his honor. He leaves the pack, is on his own from the beginning. No Scourger would dare help him. Any outside influence would break the link to the Dumisai, anger the ancestors, and bring shame upon everyone involved. The Moyo has two moons to master the trials in the spirit of the traditions. If he manages this, the Dumisai keeps his position. The Moyo gets his mask back and is a Hondo or Damu again.

But if he fails, Moyo and Dumisai become Kifos, maskless ones. The ancestors have turned their backs on them. Their masks are broken, and they have to leave the pack in disgrace.

X - KIFO

If a Moyo fails the ancestors, he and his Dumisai become Kifos. The Kifo is considered a lost soul. When he dies, he returns as an evil spirit. Until then, every Scourger will avoid him, and no pack will take him in.

He will need time to get to terms with his new role.

Some work as assassins for Neolibyans or as mercenaries for Clans. Others never get over the betrayal and change allegiances. At the side of the Hybrispaniards or Voivodes, you will find many Kifos who provide information to their former enemies and fight for them.

SCOURGER DAGGER

STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS
A white man's warrior clan, guardians of Purgare and Southern Borca. They don't consider us enemies – and will regret it one day.

ANUBIANS
We bow our heads to those who know what once was and what will be. The Anubians are our brothers in spirit; their thoughts guide our Scourges.

APOCALYPTICS
Beautiful, sensual white people that can be sold for handsome sums on Tripol's markets.

CHRONICLERS
It is said they talk in riddles like ancient spirits that time has passed by. As long as our paths are not destined to cross, we avoid contact.

CLANNERS
Wandering Clans are easy prey. The quality varies, but the Neolibyans take anything they can sell to the plantations.

HELLVETICS
They have always been standing between the Lion and the Crow, trying to make some profit with this position.

JEHAMMEDANS
To face the Jehammedans is like walking through the Psychovores naked: you come back scratched and pricked.

JUDGES
Too many Crows can even endanger a Lion. The Neolibyans throw Dinars at them to buy their mercy. Maybe we can do better.

NEOLIBYANS
Lazy buggers in colorful garments with a touch of ink on their eyelids. If you shake them, it rains Dinars. Go ahead and try.

PALERS
Worms crawling through the body of the earth. They are sick, outcasts satisfying their hatred for everything that is healthy with bloody cruelty.

SCRAPPERS
They dig in the dirt like pigs. They flee from every battle. They cannot expect any mercy from the ancestors.

SPITALIANS
They are in Qabis. The Neolibyans actually dared to open the gate for the Crow. Should we listen to the Anubians' warnings now or trust the Neolibyans?

AYUBU
THE BLOODHOUND

Culture: Africa
Concept: The Ruler
Cult: Scourgers (Dumisai)

As a Simba, he fought Hybrispania's greatest warriors and pushed them into the dirt, one after another. In Valencia, he finally met the leader of the Guerreros who had harassed them for weeks. As befits a Lion, he rode through the enemy ranks and killed them with mighty blows of his paws.

His Chaga entered the silence. He said the time had come, and Ayubu knew that the Lion had fought his last battle. From now on, he would bring the pack and the ancestors glory as a Dumisai. No rest for the wicked. At his Chaga's side, he led the pack deep into the Warpage to find a way into the ancient enemy's homestead.

EPHREM

Culture: Africa
Concept: The Seeker
Cult: Scourgers (Dufu)

Ephrem is a hermaphrodite: half man, half woman. That means she is nothing in the community of Scourgers. Thus, she furiously tackles any danger to impress others by her deeds and rise in her pack's pecking order. To no avail. She is and will remain a Dufu.

AGU

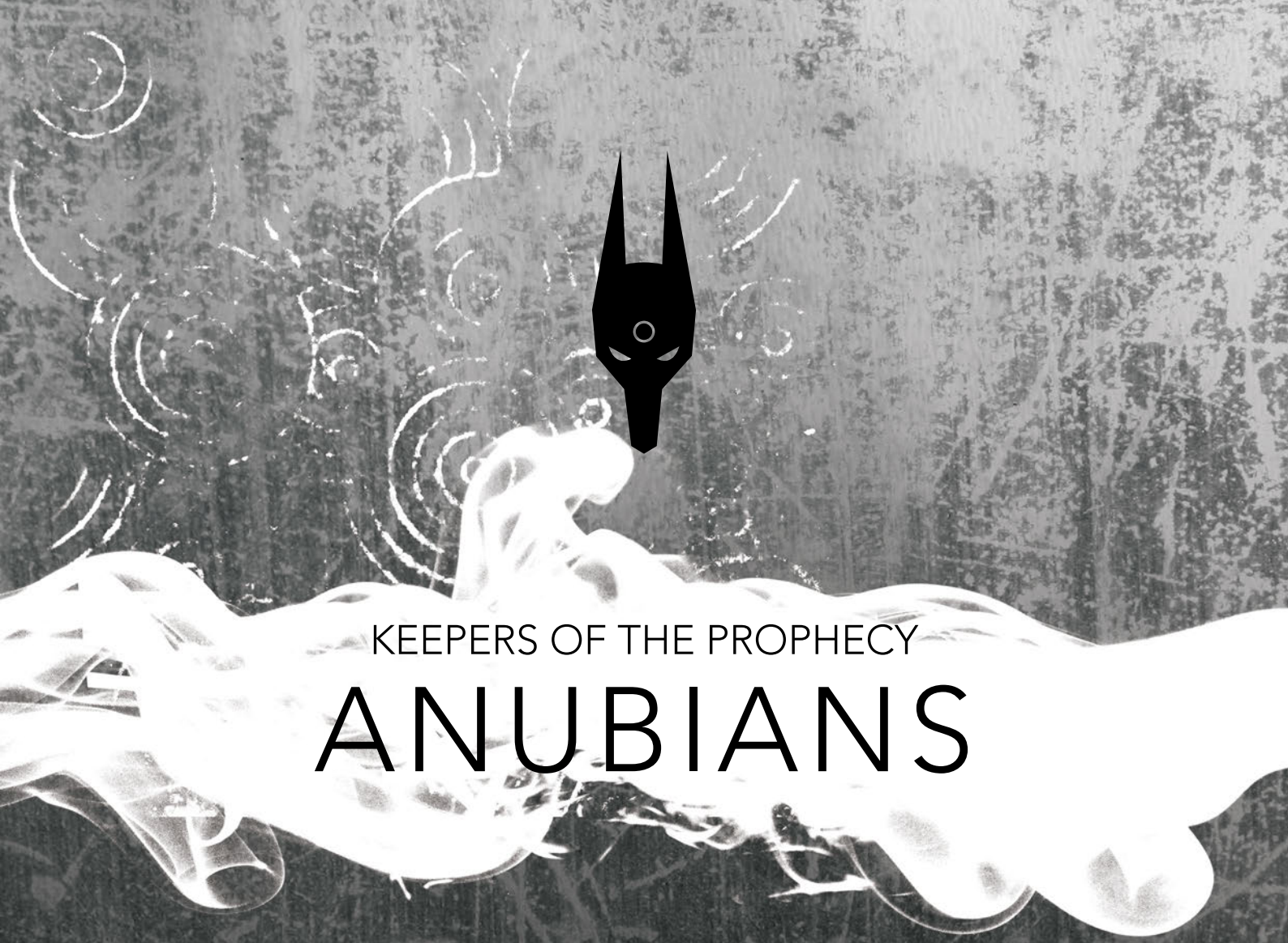
Culture: Africa
Concept: The Disciple
Cult: Scourgers (Kifo)

He had the eye of a hawk and a steady hand; his blood was boiling like an oxen's. He made a good Hondo. But Hybrispania knew how to break a man: Agu was tired of the war, hated the impenetrable forests. He wanted to go home, find a woman, and settle down. If only he hadn't fallen in love with a slave in Al-Andalus who already was the concubine of a Neolibyan.

When his Dumisai made him a Moyo, it was too much. Instead of following his calling, he betrayed his pack and freed the woman he loved.

Where could they have gone?

Where else but into the Warpage?



KEEPERS OF THE PROPHECY

ANUBIANS

SWAN SONG

The burning sun stood high in the sky, smoldering the earth saturated by the midday rain, turning it into dust. The young Anubian shielded her eyes with her hand as she stepped from the chill of her ossuary and watched the graveyard.

Jackals were moving between the barrows. Through the shimmering haze, she saw the jungle, not a hundred steps away. She wrapped a simple cloth around her hips and threw another around her shoulders. The tattooed white Circles around her navel remained unwrapped.

She climbed down the creaking stairs, felt the warm earth beneath her feet. So far she had avoided turning her gaze to the burial mound. She knew that the villagers had been there in the night. The lament had made it impossible for her to sleep. They had brought the deceased and then quickly fled back to the world of the living. Here, only death held sway, and the Anubian was his consort.

She bent over the body, smiling sadly and caressing its face. A warrior. She sat down beside it and embraced it. The man's breast was covered with dried blood; there was a gaping hole between the ribs. It pained her to see that he had died too early. Her arms and legs were now blackened with resin, and an Anubis mask covered her head and shoulders. She put her hand beneath the dead man's neck and lifted his head. In her other hand, she held a humming scarab. She put the beetle in the dead man's mouth and softly closed it.

She stood over the corpse, a bull's skull in the crook of her arm. She dipped and emptied it, releasing hundreds of red bundles onto the deceased. They moved, trailing glittering threads. Anansi spiders. Their webs catch the deceased's souls, the Africans say, and only Anubis can free them.

The Anubian waited for two days, until the spiders had spun a cocoon around the body. She wrapped the rune-inscribed bandage around the cocoon and shoved the amulets between the layers of bandages. For the warrior, the journey to the netherworld had begun.

The same lines of runes adorned the walls of seemingly endless corridors, carved into the stone eons ago. Oil lamps hung from low ceilings, forming islands of light amidst total darkness. Men and women in simple linen garments scrambled through the corridors, surrounded by the breath of the past. Every day, they found new crossings, freed new chains of runes from the dust of centuries. Above the corridors, there were great halls in the rock. Here, knowledge of the old ones could be found sealed within clay jugs, brought from crypts all over Anubia. Ancient technology cowered in the corners like giant bugs, dead but threatening. Not even the wisest ones knew how these machines of stone, brass, and wolfram worked or what they once did. Sealed chambers were everywhere. The young Anubian knew nothing about all this. It was a long way from the searing light of day down to the temples deep below.

THE PAST

It was night in the city of the dead. Soon the heat of the day would be gone from the sand. Wind arose, carrying the sand in fine screens over the graveyards. The figure with a jackal head strode through the necropolis vigilantly. Its eyes glittered like stars in the darkest night. Anubis.

With hands as nimble as spiders' legs, he wove a web in the air, anchoring it at crumbling obelisks and stairwells. Gold-winged souls were caught in it, and Anubis reaped them. Then he sent them down to Osiris to be weighed and judged. Some souls escaped from his grasp – they were to foreign to him.

Once he had blessed humans with the Ka. For generations, mothers passed it on to their children. But like a corruption, the Ba entered the human soul and poisoned it. The Ka's power waned. In every cycle, the Ba roamed the earth, and things got worse and worse. Anubis lost soul after soul.

Only one tribe's Ka remained strong. Anubis himself had imbued it with its thread of life when the world began. His children, the Anubians. The first people. Once, Anubis had shown them the destiny of the world, and now he charged them with finishing what was eternal. However, like silver becomes matted and dark when exposed to the air, time had blemished the Anubians' purity. Only the ancient ones could destroy the source of the Ba outside the cycle. Buried in the desert sand long ago, they hoped for their awakening. Their descendants, the new Anubians, started searching.

WRITTEN HISTORY

The caverns in the Anubian Desert are inaccessible. Once they were a haven for the ancient ones. Hidden in the tunnel systems' eternal night, the Anubian history survived there on scrolls in sealed clay jugs. Now the jugs are retrieved and opened one by one. The Anubians work carefully to avoid losing one of the secrets already considered lost for good. The veil of the past lifts from the Anubian desert, reveals the true history of one of the world's most ancient cults.

They already appeared in ancient Egypt as scholars and scientists – in an advanced civilization between barbaric tribes. The first pharaohs who ruled the land on the banks of the Nile finally exiled them to Kerma in the kingdom of Kusch. But they were not forgotten. For the Egyptian people were fascinated by the Anubians' lavish pictograms and death cult, and so they kept a lot of their culture, even if much of it was distorted: they tore the organs from their diseased's bodies and senselessly mummified the empty shells, buried them under tons of stone afterwards. The Anubians of that time pitied their ignorant siblings but did not want to enlighten them.

Egypt flourished, and the Anubians withered. When the reunited Egypt smashed the Nubian kingdom in the 18th dynasty, they fled, but resurfaced again in the second kingdom of Kusch. Finally, they disappeared.

ANUBIS SYNDICATE

The archives in the forbidden city of Cairo are full of old texts. Most of them date back to a few years before the Eshaton and mention the so-called Anubis Syndicate: the mysterious group of eight African scientists, doctors, and philosophers dedicated to the reawakening of the body after death. The reports from that time are superficial, and although the media greedily followed every hint, each and every one of them led to a dead end.

About the Anubis Syndicate, not much more than its name was known. In the end, reporters found that Norman Thorn, one of the founders of the Recombination Group, had fled into the arms of this mysterious organization after an alleged case of industrial spying. Then, the Eshaton came.

THE ETERNAL CYCLE

When you drop a stone into water, concentric ripples are made on the surface. Crests expand outwards, losing their power. According to Anubian myths, life was created in the endless water of the oceans, in which Anubis had started vibrations. Once there was only this one wave, sent out into reality by Anubis's soft touch. Life and death – the start and the end of the wave were his creation. But he was not alone. There were others, and it was as if some heavy rain pattered down upon the calm waters. His wave pumped through the foaming ocean, but its brilliant, harmonious beauty burst into millions of shimmering droplets. It jumped up and down, creating new waves; reality became complicated and forked several times on its way from life to death. The continuous dripping captured many things in eternal cycles: the seasons, women's menstruation, the endless series of day and night. They kept repeating and changed the world, guiding it away from its primordial form into chaos.

The Anubians had to rise, to free themselves from the wave and the cycles. They had to be like Anubis, to help him in his striving for perfection. He had inscribed them with the key long ago, and now they had to perfect this Thread of Life and become like him: a mortal race was to become an immortal species between life and death.

KA AND BA

In the Anubian mythology, the Ka symbolizes the primordial form of the Thread of Life passed on through the millennia. Call it soul or genetic foundation.

Its opposition is the Ba. It corrupts the Ka, invading like a virus, destroying and replacing it. It disturbs the wave and diminishes its power.

The Eshaton was like a massive rock breaking the wave and creating thousands of new Circles. According to ancient Anubian records, the Cult has been preparing for over ten millennia to cement Anubis's creation within itself. Younger texts mention that it almost managed to do so shortly before the Eshaton thanks to Bygone technology. Now it's running out of time.

The Eshaton's results become clearer every day: Psychonauts make Europe a playground of the absurd, while in Africa, mutated plants have started a development that is just as strange. The day has come for the Anubians to make their knowledge and their abilities count – before the wave of the Eshaton completely swallows Anubis's creation.

LOST CHILDREN

For millennia, the Anubians lived side by side with Africa's advanced civilizations. When they finally went into exile, many went their own ways. They went to ground in the metropolises of their time, mingled with the Nubians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Egyptians. They forgot their own culture. Even today, remainders of the Anubian thread of life can be found in the descendants of North Africans, Asians, and sometimes Europeans – and the Anubians look for them. To find them, the Cult uses the finger of Anubis, a hollow bone artfully adorned with circular and spiral engravings the length of the forearm. These bones are rare, passed on from Anubian to Anubian, generation to generation.

According to legend, the bone is filled with jackal bile. When an Anubian scratches an African's skin with the finger of Anubis, a true descendant develops eczema the size of a fingernail from sunrise to sundown: the mark of Anubis. An African who bears it is destined by birth to walk the path of Anubis. He's an Initiate.

IMIUT SKIN

Festering bruises, smallpox, fever, and thousands of other illnesses and smaller wounds are disturbances in the wave. The Healers amongst the Anubians treat them with ointments and elixirs, say words of blessing and put stone figurines into the bandages to ward off evil spirits and strengthen the afflicted person's soul. In severe cases, they venture down into Anubis's realm, face the angry Ammit, devourer of souls, and return from the darkness with Duat blood in their veins.

But in the battle against the Crow, other forces are at work. A stake trap set by a Hybrispanian Guerrero, a bullet from an ambush, the detonating tank of a Kom, and a Scourger's wave is broken. Only the legendary Hecateans can save the Scourger now from Anubis's judgment. They rub the body with Duat blood, sew him into jackal or dog skins – the Imiut skin – and ask Anubis for a respite. Symbolically, the dying person returns to the uterus to be reborn days later: all skin and bone and bald, he frees himself from the skin. It'll take him several days to garner strength again. But he lives.

DEATH

An Anubian Embalmer takes care of the Initiate. After the traditional fashion, he has blackened his body with resin. He wears the Anubis mask. Together, they travel to one of Africa's huge catacombs, and the Initiate is lowered into it.

Down there in the darkness, surrounded by his ancestors' bones, he waits. He eats bugs and corpse flesh that the Embalmer throws into the shaft. He devours rotten mash mixed with drugs. The sounds from the darkness, amplified by the poison growing within him, make him teeter on the brink of madness. Ghostlike, he stumbles through the stony innards of the catacombs, stared at by skulls – until his humanity is burnt away and he confronts Anubis. The visions are terrible, but he surrenders himself to them. His cries fall silent; he sinks down as he feels his wave break.

REBIRTH

The Embalmer doesn't let him die. He drags him back to the light, embalms him with scented oils, and bandages him like a mummy. For three days the Initiate remains like this, immobile. The oils draw the poison out of his body; the heat washes it away. Through a straw, the Embalmer feeds him water, liter by liter.

On the fourth day after his symbolic and almost-real death he returns from the spirit world into the world of the living. The Embalmer frees him from the bandages and greets the Anubian – still weak, but as reborn in Anubis.

SEVEN CIRCLES

The Embalmer tattoos seven concentric Circles around the reborn's navel. With quick movements, he injects the paint under the skin, using a different pot of white paint for every Circle. It is a concoction that only the Anubians from the forbidden city of Cairo can mix up – seven shades of white, seven different recipes. The Embalmer follows the rite step by step, never once deterring from the traditional order of Circles and colors. To the Initiate, the Circles symbolize the wave on which every living being drifts towards death, but also the world created by Anubis.

He himself carries only five Circles on his body. Why? He explains that the Circles show how far an Anubian has come on his journey into the secrets of the world. How close he is to his mind's sun, Anubis. The Initiates move on the outmost Circle, the Enchanters on the sixth one, the Embalmers, Sickles, and Healers on the fifth. The honorable Hogons have left the four outer Circles behind and stand on the third one. They decide when an Anubian is ready to leave his Circle.

THE WAVE BREAKS

When an African's wave runs out, the Anubian appears at his side. He anoints the dying person, presenting him to the ancestors. When the body bucks for the last time and finally grows cold, the Anubian takes the deceased with him to the Bonefield. There, he puts a scarab into the deceased's mouth, closes his jaws, and lets his Anansi spiders spin a cocoon around the body. After a few days, he inspects the cocoon and bandages it. He chases away the spiders – they will tell the forest spirits about the death – and puts small Uschebtis figurines under the corpse's bandages. They are supposed to protect the deceased from demons on his journey to Osiris and Anubis. Only then can the Anubian bury the mummy in the earth in his Bonefield.

INITIATED

In the first years, an Anubian learns the rules and arts of the Cult from his Embalmer. He gets to know the rites of burial, studies the meaning of the insects and spiders. For days, he wanders the fringes of the Psychovores, listening to the whispering of the leaves and of the ancestors: a thousand small steps that spiritually strengthen and confirm the Anubians, a thousand distractions that push the necessary things into the distance.

But at some point, there's no way back.

Finally, he exposes himself to the Raze.

TO ANUBIS' RIGHT HAND

For most people, the Psychovores hold nothing but madness and death. Their thorns are hard as glass; one scratch is enough to make necrotic abscesses bloat the skin, eating away at the flesh within minutes until they reach the bone, infecting it, growing through it until it collapses and breaks under the weight of the decaying flesh. The ripe fruit and lush leaves are just as dangerous. Within, they are compartmentalized in hundreds of chambers with crystalline walls. Every chamber is filled with epigenetically active substances. When they come in contact with human cells, they cause genetic aberrations leading to a spontaneous dying of the cells, the so-called Raze. The mutation jumps from cell to cell, spreading extremely fast. The infected organism decays in minutes. There is no cure.

The only exceptions are the seeds used by Europe's Scourgers. Bitten in two, they break into a thousand splinters that enter the gums and the mucosae like glass. They don't kill, but strengthen the Warui outside of Africa. Their effects are not generated in the stomach or the guts, but via the blood. The Anubians are almost immune to the Raze. The thorns still cause festering wounds, but the high-ranking Hogons can heal them within hours. The Anubians' blood reacts with the Psychovore poisons, binding them and creating synergetic compounds. This leads to super cells that flout the organism. They synthesize proteins that in turn react catalytic to other Psychovore substances. The Anubian body turns into a bioreactor the complexity of which grows with every added substance; a Spitalian would barely recognize an Anubian blood sample in this phase as human.

The Anubians use this. They venture deep into the Psychovores to harvest the cherished Duat fruit, smash them, and chew the pieces. The Raze eats away at their mucosae and cheeks; the cells are reanimated only seconds later. The poison tracks them into Anubis's realm. Their immune system collapses. Blackness runs through their veins and trickles into the flesh like running paint. In the first minutes of transition, their blood degenerates to a highly toxic concoction.

They die.

They stand in front of the jackal-headed one, placing their soul onto the balance of his scales. In the shadows, they feel Ammit, the devourer of souls. They stare into eyes that are cold and deep as stellar mists.

The bioreactor kicks in. The body vibrates from heat. The heart pounds and circulates the seething blood. A honey-like ichor wells from glands under the tongue, in the armpits, and in the groin. The body's blackness disappears. They are grabbed, torn away from Anubis's throne, come back into life wincing.

Depending on the potency of the Duat fruit, the rigor mortis has taken minutes or days. Some Anubians become covered in Psychovores as if in a cocoon, have to free themselves from brittle loops. Their blood is now highly potent. Drained and mixed with earth and herbs it can heal, soothe pain, or stimulate body and spirit. With time, Anubians learn to gauge the properties that blood has gained through the catalysis of various Duat fruits.

ANANSI SPIDERS

Thousands of red figures scuttle across the planes or dive into Anubis's grass seas: the red Anansi spiders, hairless and fist-sized. They are the Anubians' companions and have been inscribed into the wave by Anubis himself.

The spiders are considered trickster creatures with a will of their own: to persuade them to spin a cocoon around a body and conserve it for eternity is considered an art that an Embalmer has to master. In fact, the spiders react to the embalming oil as if they had been bred for just this task.

WHEN THE MILLENNIUM AFTER THE MILLENNIUM BEGINS
THERE WILL BE A DARK AND SECRET ORDER

ITS LAW WILL BE HATRED AND ITS WEAPON WILL BE POISON

IT WILL DEMAND MORE AND MORE GOLD AND
ITS RULE WILL SPREAD ACROSS ALL OF THE EARTH

AND ITS SERVANTS WILL BE JOINED
BY THE KISS OF BLOOD.
THE JUST ONES AND THE WEAK ONES WILL OBEY ITS RULES
THE POWERFUL ONES WILL SERVE IT

THE ONLY LAW WILL BE THE ONE
THAT THEY DECREE IN THE SHADOWS

IT WILL SELL ITS POISON EVEN IN THE CHURCHES
AND THE WORLD WANDERS WITH THE SCORPIONS UNDER ITS FEET.

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

TRANSFORMATION

One night, the Hogons stand in front of the Anubian, arms and faces pitch black and smelling of resin. Silently, they hand him a canopic jar with a jackal head. It is black, freezing cold, heavy, and smooth as glass. The head can be screwed off. Inside, there is a viscous white liquid. Resin from the tree of life? Only Cairo knows the answer, and Cairo is buried under Psychovores.

The Anubian lifts the canopic jar to his lips; ripples form in the liquid. It flows towards his mouth. Small tendrils shoot out, piercing his lips, hardening and breaking under the pressure of the liquid that follows. There is a crackling and cracking, and the canopic jar has spilled its contents into the Anubian's mouth.

Death.

Days later, the Anubian awakens. His tongue is swollen and dry, and the ribs are visible under his skin. His fingers touch the Circles on his belly. There is something wrong: the outer ring is missing. It is just gone, as if it had never been tattooed at all.

Every transformation deletes the outermost ring. The Hogons know what has happened – but they will not explain yet.

KEEPERS OF SECRETS

The Anubian culture is ancient. Every generation collected a new layer of knowledge that was already a mystery generations later. It is said that the oldest layers are hidden in Cairo, under the pyramid in the halls of records.

There is talk of great miracles: of a subterranean lake on which two pyramids jut from the water; of a labyrinth of tunnels, shafts, and halls; of giant machines made of brass and wolfram that obey only those above the wave.

But as long as Cairo is unreachable for everyone who has more than two Circles, these are only stories.

Still, the people see the Anubians as keepers of secrets. No one dares to resist the Anubian or deny him anything. In fact, an Initiate becomes an Enchanter after his first transformation. He names the price the spirits of the forests and plains can ask for their benevolent behavior. He guides the Scourgers so they can fulfill their task as guardians of the traditions. He bandages the deceased and guides them into the afterlife. In the sixth and seventh Circles, an Anubian is shrouded in mysticism and superstition. He adorns himself with skulls, draws spirals and Circles on his body, lives in a hut of bones just like his predecessor. In the scarab he sees divine power of creation; he carves Uschebtis figurines from alabaster in preparation for the burial rites. He gets in tune with the people, listens to the whispering of the ancestors, and meditates.

OSSUARIES

The African people simultaneously worship and fear the Anubians. The shamans are loners who look for quiet on cemeteries or ancient battlefields, far away from the hubbub of the villages. Like jackals, they roam between the graves and steal the bones that the wind or the rain has unearthed. From them, they build ossuaries in which to live and mix their concoctions.

TRUE

With every transformation, with every Circle that the Anubian masters, he loses some of the superstition. As a Healer and later as a Hecatean, he becomes more and more of an empiric who looks for Duat fruit and catalyzes them. Yet he still presents himself to the people as a Healer, bargaining with Anubis for the life of the ill.

When he takes the sickle and becomes an Ammit, he lets go of all rites that avail to nothing. As a warrior and guardian, he only knows action and reaction, listening to the ancestors and feeling the pull of the glaring Psychonaut Chakras. When speaking with the Scourgers, he will claim to protect the wave of creation.

As an Embalmer, and in his next transformation as a Soul Seer, he uses the superstition. He is judge and

THE SICKLE

Anubians feel Psychonauts at a distance of many hundred meters; they cause them malaise.

When a Dushani approaches, the Anubian clutches his aching throat; when a Pregnostic approaches, he feels a burning pain between the eyebrows.

The Psychonautic Chakra, the blazing star on the body axis, changes an Anubian's Chakra to a dying planet. If the Anubian wants to survive, he has to lift up his Khopesh and cut the thread between himself and the Psychonaut at the exit spot in the Aberrant's body.

He parts the flesh where his own pain smolders, drags the blade upwards, following the strands, and pushes the steel back down again. The last inflammatory site is cut open; fear and energies flow out like pus. The Psychonaut collapses, but it's not the flowing blood that weakens him. The source of his power is leaking and spills into the Aethyr. His heart may still be beating, but his soul has gone. The Anubian, though, is healed. Cramps and pain disappear in yesterday's shadows as he cleans his blade and marches forth into the unholy land.

The most sensitive and energetic ones amongst them are known as Sickles. Side-by-side with the Neolibyans, they travel the north and destroy the Aberrants where the Neolibyans' coup de grace only tears the flesh without touching the soul.

counselor, heads up villages and guides Africa's war efforts. The Psychovores part for him and enclose his enemies. He can shut out the whispering of the ancestors and make room for other ancestors – not because he prays or meditates, but because he has understood the principle. Because he's the key and the Psychovores are the lock. The people believe that ancestral spirits accompany him to pay their debts to Anubis. They believe that the spirits imbue the Psychovores. He lets them believe whatever they want to.

The last transformation before transition to Cairo is the Hogon. He's far removed from his roots as a Reborn. When he hands out the canopic jars, he watches the transformation. He has been present at hundreds of them and has seen the physical changes during every single one of them. Sure, those changes were few, and meaningless in and of themselves. Fingers became thinner or more delicate. Hair became darker; eyebrows became thinner or moved a tiny bit. He's in contact with the Spitalians and discusses these phenomenons with them. How could he speak out against the white doctors for the last decades? What a lack of knowledge! Aside from the Anubians, no one is closer to the secrets than them.

He also recognizes the circular tattoo on his belly for what it is: an indicator for the transformation. The molecules induced by the paint react to epigenetic transformation. Only when it is successful are these molecules destroyed and the Circle vanishes.

But why? Why adapt?

The next transformation brings him a little closer to the truth.

Only two Circles to go.

THE SOLAR CROSS

Concentric circles, the jackal's head, bones, and sickle play important roles in Anubian symbolism. But in the inner circles, the symbols lose their meaning, just as the Circles around the navel disappear. In their stead, the solar cross now appears – a cross made of four fours. The Hogons say it includes the absolute truth about past and future, being some sort of theory of everything. The jackal's prophecy leaked from Cairo decades ago is based on it.

THE ANCESTORS

The Psychovores are amplifiers. They receive human aspects and emotions, channel and filter them through the network and into that which Anubians and Spitalians call the Aethyr. Soul Seers know how to superimpose those waves with their own emotions and channel them back into the extraterrestrial vegetation.

However, Anubians rarely trigger the whisper of the ancestors. Somewhere in the misty jungles, mountains, and deserts of Africa, it pulses within the Psychovores. The Anubians are looking for its sources.

They follow ancient drawings on brittle maps, listening to the whisper, letting themselves be guided by it. Usually the wave breaks, and the Anubians have wandered thousands of kilometers into nothing. But sometimes they find stairs leading down. Down into prehistoric vaults, into labyrinths made of glass and polished sandstone. Behind false walls, protected by pitfalls and dead ends, the first people slumber, preserved in beautiful sarcophagi made of gold, lapis lazuli, and chrome eons ago.

No Anubian with more than two Circles has ever seen one of these ancient ones. It is said that the sarcophagi are indestructible, and only an opening ritual in Cairo can unlock them. The long chain of the script of life is said to be impeccable in them, inscribed into them by Anubis himself. No wrong letter, no errant passage disturbs the perfection. They are like him. In them, he will one day walk the earth.

If one of these vaults is found, the Hogons will soon arrive. They take the sarcophagi from their bracings and carry them to a necropolis near to Cairo. They may not, cannot approach any further. The whispering of the ancients above the vault fades, only to be replaced by other waves shortly afterwards.

BOOKS OF THE DEAD

The Egyptians and the first people put books of the dead into their graves, mystical way markers into the dangerous afterlife. When the deceased's soul finally reached the realm of the dead, it had to prove itself to Osiris and his 42 demonic assistants. If it was considered sinful, Ammit devoured the

soul's Ba. If it was considered worthy, though, it reached the celestial realm of the fields of Yaru. There, the corn was strong in the fields, and life was as it had been when the person was alive.

The Egyptians copied this practice from the Anubians. The books contain the complete listing of the deceased person's life essence – in a language illegible to the living. Legend has it that only Anubis himself was able to decipher the script, and he was also the one to read it to Osiris and his demons. If the passages pleased the God of the underworld, he had the books sent to Yaru. If Osiris was bored, he destroyed the writings with a simple gesture. Afterwards, even Anubis could not decipher them anymore.

Anubians retrieve books of the dead from the vaults of the first people. They are made of some black material, are massive and cannot be opened – nearer flat slabs than books. It is said that only Anubians with one or no Circles know what to make of them, but it is also said that the books will only open and talk to the Anubians once Anubis walks amongst the living again.

The Hogons gaze upon those who own books of the dead favorably. For you don't just find these books – they let themselves be found. Those who own one will soon go through the next transformation.

THE FORBIDDEN CITY

Cairo is in the Psychovores' stranglehold. The pyramids of Giza are said to be overgrown, as are the streets of the former metropolis. Still, though, Hogons are called here after their transformation from third to second Circle, into a venomous jungle that holds nothing but death by ulcers and madness for most people. The African people have long fled far away from the Nile's poisonous waters. None of the formerly numerous tribes still live in the vicinity of Cairo. Supposedly the temples of the ancestors are in use again, but it remains unclear what happens there. Nothing gets out.

Anubians who hoped to uncover the secret and ventured into the Psychovores stumble back into the settlements from which they have set out days later. Their skin is scratched by thorns; putrid pustules covering the whole body weep stinking pus. They are infected with the Raze. It will kill them. Their supposed immunity only makes them suffer longer. The message is clearly visible to everyone: Cairo's taboo.

RANKS ANUBIANS

1 - INITIATE

The Embalmer checks the Initiate's arm, and yes, there is the mark of Anubis: an eczema where the Anubis finger had scratched the skin the day before. The Initiate leaves his old life behind and joins the Embalmer. His first journey leads him to the threshold of his own death. Face to face with Anubis and Ammit, the devourer of souls, he bargains for his life.

He rises from the crypt, profoundly changed. The tattoo on his body hurts: it shows seven Circles.

He's now an Anubian, the soul of Africa.

In the next years, he lives with his Embalmer, who teaches him the rites, and listens to the stories of good and evil spirits, of holy mountains and cursed trees. He dares to approach the edge of the Psychovores, watches the strange vegetation, listens to the wind whistling through the brittle vines, and marvels at the hexagonal leaves.

He has already seen the inhabitants afflicted by the Raze. He has used the Khopesh to amputate arms or legs before the infection could reach the heart. Now his Embalmer asks him to become afflicted, to risk the first Catalysis. Without it, the Hogon will deny him the transformation.

2 - ENCHANTER

He holds the first canopic jar, feels the cold. He puts away the jackal-head-shaped lid and drinks.

His Embalmer tells him that he is now an Enchanter. As such, he communicates with the land to appease the spirits' and ancestors' fury against life in general. He teaches the traditions to the Scourgers, gives them advice and comforts their souls. Without his permission, no well is dug, no marriage takes place.

One day, a Hogon will ask him to choose. Does he want to continue guiding Africa's destiny as a wise man, to keep up the wave as a warrior in the land of the Crow, or to offer up his body as a Healer?

3 - EMBALMER

The Embalmer has knowledge about spirits, ancestors, and death and knows how to use it. The Scourgers obey him, and young Anubians join him, searching for wisdom and transformation. It is said he can contact the spirits of the deceased and speaks in their stead.

He can actually interfere with the ancestors' whisperings: he opens himself to the Psychovores and lets them carry away his emotions. Villages, entire areas, are touched by this new ancestor. In the land of the Crow, his power dwindles, but wherever Scourgers chew seeds, he is able to impose his ancestor onto the Aethyr and these Scourgers.

The next transformation lets him rise as a Soul Seer.

4 - SOUL SEER

Anubis is a principle. The Anubian has understood this. To the people, he's a judge and master of secrets. The Psychovores shrink back from his thoughts, withering and dying. But at his behest, they also activate their defense mechanisms: they spit thorns, and fruits detonate into splintery clouds. They bring the Raze to his enemies.

In Europe, that makes no sense. Here, he relies on the like-minded: the Spitalians. In hidden labs, he researches genomes side-by-side with them, identifying populations with extraordinary traits. He organizes the medical Cult's forays into the Psychovores. He's a researcher meeting

HIERARCHY AND RANKS - ANUBIANS

Anubis with his mind instead of his heart.

In the company of Scourgers and Neolibyans, he plays the mystical judge and guardian. They may never know his real role.

After years of research, he will leave this Circle and transform into a Hogon.

3 - HEALER

The Healer knows a lot about earth, herbs, and potent waters. From them, he mixes concoctions to take the pain from the Scourgers and keep the Neolibyans healthy. But the really potent medicines are made by catalyzing Duat fruit.

Over the years, the Healer perfects his body. He knows the amounts and ingredients he has to ingest to reach a desired effect. He also produces the legendary Marduk oil that negates the Pheromancers' beguiling scent.

Soon, the villagers will claim that he has magical powers. It is time to transform into a Hecatean.

4 - HECATEAN

A Hecatean can repair a person's torn Thread of Life in the Imiut skin. He has elevated the catalysis to a new level. His skin changes color, sometimes smelling lovely, sometimes bringing the Raze through a simple touch. He is able to reconfigure his metabolism and keep up this change for minutes or even hours.

3 - SICKLE

Anubian Sickles accompany the Scourgers into the northern lands, are the Neolibyans' advisors and guards. They feel the Psychonauts' weak spots within themselves. They feel the corresponding Chakra bleed dry. They feel the emptiness. They want to get rid of it. Armed with a Khopesh, they are the perfect weapons against the Aberrants. With only a few cuts aimed at the Psychonaut's singular Chakra, they slice through his Thread of Life.

With every fight, the Scourgers' respect grows until it finally becomes a form of mystical adoration. The Anubian is no longer considered human, but is seen as an embodiment of Ammit, the demonic devourer. Transformation.

4 - AMMIT

Standing next to Anubis, the Ammit devours the hearts found lacking during the weighing. Anubians following in this tradition use their names like a weapon. They feel every falseness, divine every lie, are in tune with people, Psychonauts, and Psychovores. They judge Africans and Europeans alike, are the shadows in the night and the lightning bolt by day. It is said that they do not merely kill, but also weaken their enemies' souls and ultimately devour them.

5 - HOGON

The Hogons move in the third Circle – the last one that Anubians outside of Cairo get to see. Like ships they cut through the sea of Psychovores, yet they have to turn around when reaching the barrier around Cairo. In the hidden crypts on the border of this barrier, they find the canopic jars of the jackal and the scrolls of wisdom. Their knowledge of anatomy, biochemistry, and the conscious mind keeps growing. They prepare for the transit, already feeling the pull of the pyramids. They also measure their brothers' and sisters' maturity and instigate their transformation as part of their research.

AMMIT SICKLE

STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS
A warlike people from the heart of Borca. With the Spitalians' help, we will be able to check them for the Anubis strain, too.

APOCALYPTICS
They disturb the wave and drag others down with them, too.

CHRONICLERS
They don't know their place in the Lion's pelt. Soon they will understand and will be able to prove themselves worthy.

CLANNERS
If we're the soul of the African Lion, they are the flesh on its bones.

HELLVETICS
They have the power to strengthen the wave, but instead stay in their fortress and count their tolls.

JEHAMMEDANS
Faith without insight. All their power is used up in their pursuit of unity. Vanquished in the Balkhan, meaningless in Hybrispania. They will soon be gone from the wave. The prophecy foretells no place for them.

JUDGES
A Borcan people of soldiers.

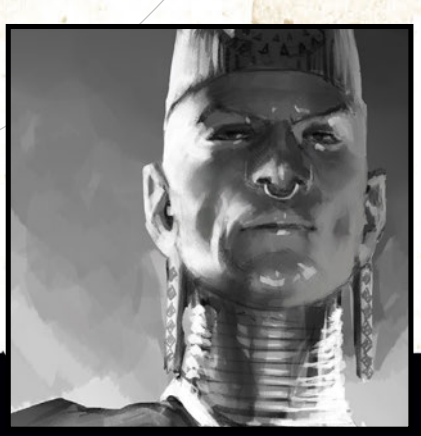
NEOLIBYANS
Dinar after Dinar. A useful aspect. They empower us to get the Crow to Africa.

PALERS
Age and incest have turned their Thread of Life thin. Their wave will soon expire.

SCOURGERS
The Lion's claw. They follow the path of the ancestors and the traditions. Our path.

SCRAPPERS
They are drawn to Europe. They dig for relics of a foreign culture – and become slaves of the Dinar.

SPITALIANS
In their hearts, they are like us – only they are bereft of any spirituality.



EZENWA THE HOGON

Culture: Africa
Concept: The Creator
Cult: Anubians (Hogon)

The Psychovores made way for him and disappeared, opening a swath towards the horizon. They fulfilled his greatest desire: the vision of dark triangles against cerulean skies, the pyramids. An instant later, the swath closed again. Ezenwa shed tears of happiness.

He has not left the Psychovores since that day. He mentally communicates with them, and they answer by forming geometrical patterns with their vines. He does not understand them yet, still sees them as plants he can guide. But he slowly realizes that the Psychovores are… well… more.

NAKU

Culture: Borca
Concept: The Chosen
Cult: Anubians (Ka)

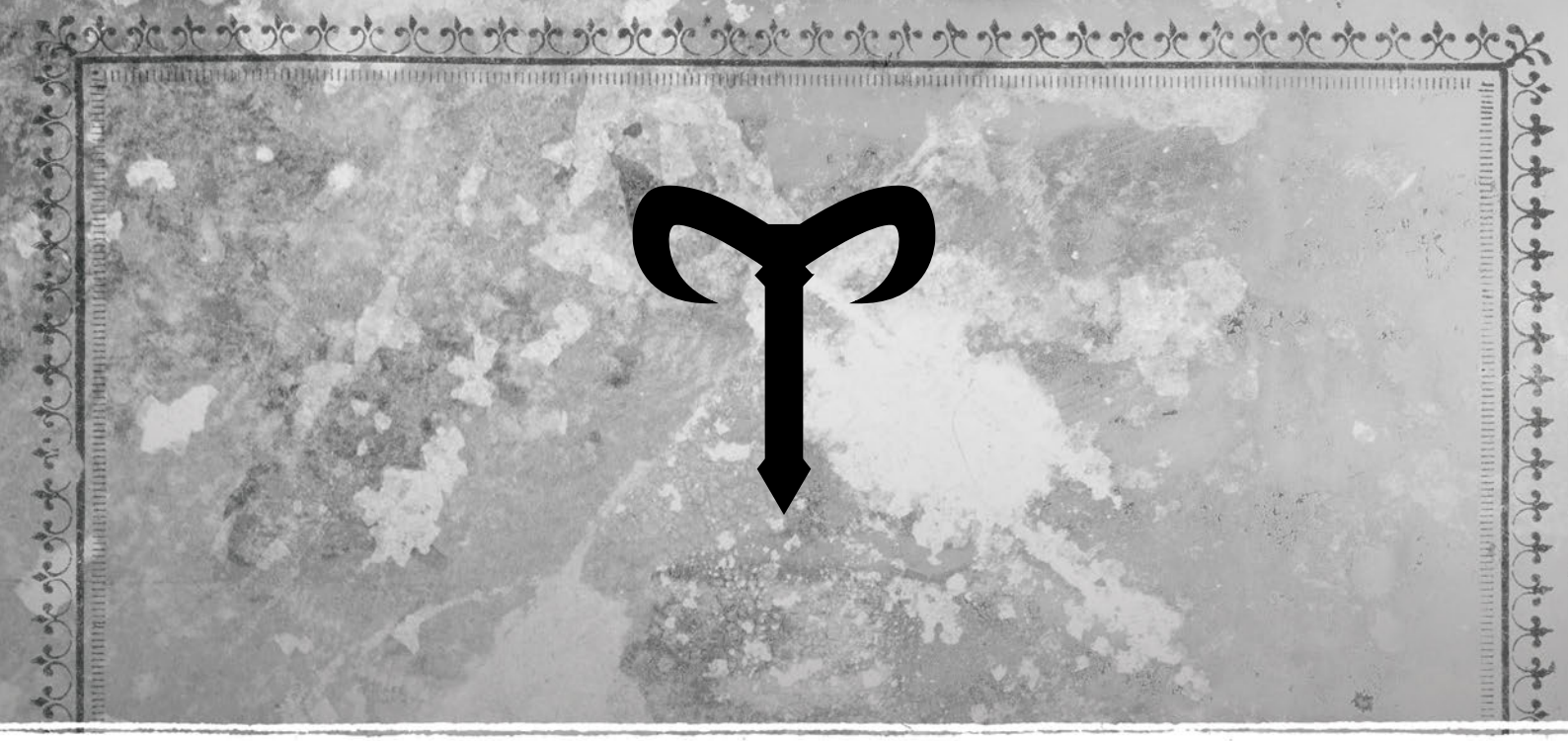
He comes from a Spitalian family steeped in tradition. His grandparents, his parents, they were all devoted doctors and members of the HIVE research group. Their genes were … special. So are his, Consultant Petrova said, and years later the hooded figure in Perugia said the same. This figure was Jamali, an Anubian. She scratched his skin with the Anubis finger, and everything changed.

That was more than 30 courses of the sun ago. Since then, he has been through thousands of catalysis, has transformed his body into a pure vessel of Ka. The Psychovores avoid him, and the portals in Cairo open for him, too. Between books of the dead, nanite canopic jars, and ancient machinery, he's getting ready for the end of the cycle.

WAITIMU
THE ANUBIAN SICKLE

Culture: Africa
Concept: The Traveler
Cult: Anubians (Ammit)

His Khopesh is made of the finest steel, shining like the sun, avenging like Anubis's ghost. It cuts through the life threads of the unworthy, hacking apart their bodies to keep them from being judged by Osiris. In Wroclaw, he left everything behind: the Scourgers, the Neolibyans with their mindless boasting. He wants to go north, feel the magnetism of the heart of darkness, of Pandora. Whatever waits for him there, his Khopesh is ready.



CARRIERS OF GOD'S COUNTENANCE

JEHAMMEDANS

SACRIFICAL LAMB

His horse tramples a swath into the attackers' ranks. Around him, his enemies fall and die. The Scimitar rises and falls; every hit is a wound, every gaze finds new targets in the sea of opponents.

"Jehammed!" he cries, and a hundred brothers in faith answer with shouted devout prayers. The rider turns his black horse around, flanking towards the enemy camp. The corona of pinned-up hair comes down in the headwind. Tattooed marks adorn his skin; on his forehead, they meet to form a complex pattern that sings a silent song of an exalted ancestry and countless battles.

The hooves thunder, the horse snorts, its crest flies in the wind. The Jehammedan presses against the shivering body, kicking the horse's flanks. He rides like hell, and looking back he sees his men skirmishing with the infamous Anabaptists. It's a losing battle. 300 feet to the enemies' tents, 300 feet through a thicket of swords and war spades to kill the Anabaptists' fat leader. Only his death can turn the tide and win the day for the Swords of Jehammed.

200 feet. The warrior chants his Iconide's prayer formulas, batting aside swords. The Baptist's bodyguards form a dark line in front of him. Furors. He grips his blade tighter, strikes out, hits, hears spear shafts breaking, feels dirt and splinters in his face. He's destined to die for others to live, for he is an Isaaki. He is the sacrificial lamb.

50 feet.

The black horse's hooves throw dirt around. If he pushes back the enemy in this area of the riverbank, new families can settle down at the banks with their herds…

Something hits his shoulder hard, almost throwing him out of the saddle; something hisses past his head. He presses to his horse, feels hot blood run into his chest armor. Barely enough time to say goodbye to the glorious days as a blessed child in his mind. To his father's love. To the priest's eulogies.

He raises the sword and guides his black horse through the Furors' wall of spears, feels the jolting in his legs. He hears the splintering, the snorting and the cries, lets go of the reins and slides from the saddle, blindly thrashing as he falls, crawling onwards, jumping up, shouting and fighting.

May God decide if he wants to accept this sacrifice.

CAIN AND ABEL

He appeared to them on top of the Kaaba, the mysterious black building in Mecca: Jehammed, last of the prophets. He was a shining dream, replete with God; his voice thundered down on the people and made them feel the power of his Lord. He told them that God would come upon the world in anger, to purge it from lazy faithlessness. To pass it on to his disciples, the descendants of their progenitor Abraham so that the Seed may sprout and the land may flourish in faith.

Then God hit the world with silence and dust.

Years passed awkwardly; life was hard and unbearable for everyone, even for those who had looked for the covenant with the last prophet. But the flames of faith burned on. Small tribes and families helped each other, rebuilding in the knowledge that they were God's chosen children. As promised by Jehammed, a huge land spread before them that they could pacify and settle until the last prophet would return to his fold.

Many followers of the Cult lost their faith in the time of the beast, gave in to the ferociousness of their urges and joined the unleashed masses of the Apocalyptics. But the Righteous Ones remained faithful. As if in a fever, they struggled through the dark days after God's judgment day, their faces cast down in humility and in the knowledge that the eyes of the Lord were trained on them. They mastered husbandry and craft, kept clean and took good care of themselves to keep plague and illness away from their families. They forged weapons and armor from Bygone scrap, avoided the barbarity of the simpletons and the faithless. They proudly called themselves Jehammedans. With the name came unity; they wore it like a war banner, and the faithful flocked to it. The community grew to a giant extended family that offered protection – and demanded awe from its enemies.

The Jehammedans spread from the Balkhan to Borca and Hybrispania and flourished where other clans died. In the early years, they gathered all those under the roof of the faith who felt homeless and stranded in the wasteland and adhered to Jehammed's laws.

In the heart of the Balkhan, on the ruins of old Bucharest, the new center of the Jehammedan faith arose. Borcan Osman, the city of the sickle tower, converted within a few days after the Jehammedans' ancient Iconides entered the gates and declared the covenant with God. In Hybrispania, the Cult came to reign over Castile.

Its warriors, the Swords of Jehammed, were received tearfully as blessed avenging angels. Once-independent, proud settlements joined the Jehammedans and chanted the Cult's prayers with fervor only days later.

ANCIENT ANGER

However, what looked like an unstoppable rise in the beginning suddenly came to a halt in the youthful Adriatic lowlands: the Anabaptists, a Cult of farmers and rioters, claimed the new land for themselves as farmland, but the Jehammedans saw the lush meadows and gestating grass plains as a place God had given them to feed their herds. When the Anabaptists finally took up their arms, a conflict arose that couldn't have been much crueler. The life-giving Adriatic soon was adorned with piles of corpses on the Purgan side. Just like Cain, the farmer, had killed his brother Abel, the shepherd, the Jehammedans felt victimized. The Anabaptists attacked them, raped them, killed them, smashed what the Jehammedans had built with the diligence of a thousand hands in the centuries after the Eshaton. Humiliated, they jumped into the waters and retreated to the east bank. The Anabaptists also crossed, to exterminate their enemies.

But in the darkest hour, the tide turned.

Aries the Ram appeared in the Iconides' tents.

No one knew this stranger, but he promised to destroy the enemy souls, for his anger was tremendous and old. The Jehammedans let him do as he pleased, and the foreign warrior lead their troops. The wind of revenge came over the Anabaptists like a roaring blizzard, the occupied areas of the East Adriatic plain were reconquered with a thousand saber cuts, and the enemy who had already felt victorious was killed, beheaded, and defiled. On the Adriatic Sea, the enemy armies clashed one final time, then settled in for a hundred years of cold war afterwards. Each dug in on one riverbank, waiting for a chance to launch a devastating attack. Reprieve.

FRONTS

On the Balkhan, the Africans expanded with long steps, forcing the Jehammedans into a desperate fight. Family after family fell, and sadness hung over the battlefields. There were enemies everywhere; heresies grew wherever you looked. Hatred was a fire that allowed them no respite, that accompanied their every step.

Both sides wore themselves out fighting each other.

Sofia's Voivode liked what he saw, and he took a chance. He pushed forward into the power vacuum, clawed his way to the top of the food chain, laid siege to Bucharest, and finally offered a hand to the Iconide – a hand that grabbed tightly and hasn't let go to this day.

The brothers and sisters in the West didn't fare much better. The Swords of Jehammed opposed the

Hybrispanian invaders with full force and were smashed on the Surge Tanks and fortifications.

The heated battle would have continued if it hadn't been for the Warpage. Guerreros and Scourgers alike have been watching the Psychonautic phenomenon skeptically ever since, exploring its fringes to open up a new front. But Scourgers and Jehammedans think alike: could it be that they have fought the wrong enemy all these past decades?

PARABLES

The fisherman takes a bucket of paint and paints his boat to protect it from the worm; the shepherd guards his flock, protecting it with his life.

The fisherman loads his boat and enters it, pushing away from the shore into the solitude of the sea; the shepherd finds quiet within himself and in his flock.

The fisherman flounders, hoping for a lucky catch, gazing into the emptiness and receiving it; the shepherd shears his sheep, combing and spinning the wool, finding God's mercy in his work.

The fisherman returns to find his wife in another's arms; the shepherd has watched his flock.

The fisherman behaves like a raving animal, attacking the raunchy woman and his rival until blood flow; the shepherd is steadfast, grabs his staff and kills everyone who approaches his flock unduly.

The fisherman is dead; the shepherd is full of sap.

The fisherman's children are reprobate and do like the father did, whoring, cheating and lying because they know no other forms of behavior, because it's in their blood. Look at them! See the hatred in their faces and the stupidity in their eyes! This fat ilk, made of only wanting and taking, consider giving a weakness and work an offense. They say they want to find themselves! But what will they find? Money maybe? A whore's wet thighs? It's the only thing that God grants them, for they will not be part of his mercy. But what about the shepherd? His flock knows no hardships, for it follows God's path. His children don't have a try at false gods and do not fall for the false claims of the fisherman's children, no. They even offer them a hand, though they may be afraid it might be bitten off. But would they tolerate this? No. For they, too, know how to protect the flock. They take staff and steel and kill the fisherman's children.

There is only one way. If any see another, they are mistaken. If a former friend raves about possibilities, he has distanced himself from the flock, has gotten entangled in the fisherman's children's nets. Ask him if he feels the hook in his mouth. Wolves and fishermen are lurking by the road, and sometimes it seems blocked. Stand as one, but never swerve, for this is the way!

THE FISHERMAN

Jehammed's words have survived the centuries in the hearts of his disciples and written on meters-long papyri that are rolled and kept in brass capsules, the few surviving testimonies of the last prophet. Word for word they describe a philosophy based on tradition and its conservation.

The fisherman is used time and again as an embodiment of wrongness, but without painting him as a supernatural force or red demon. In the Jehammedan mythology, there are no supernatural beings except for the Lord; there are only humans and animals on the stage of creation. Their lives are constant trials demanding struggle and self-sacrifice. God surrounds those who face those trials with his benevolence. They experience humility and deepest fulfillment, but not personal happiness.

The fisherman stands for everything that people experience when they have removed themselves from this God-given cycle. No supernatural force has lowered the fisherman, so everything bad he experiences is his own fault. To guide him back to the flock is considered godly, but is it worth it? Obstinacy or laziness are in the renegades' blood. In the end, that will impact their thinking and behavior, and tomorrow they will walk the path of discord.

FAMILIY TIES

Jehammed's traditions are based on natural family roles. How is the herd supposed to ever exist in peace if heart and soul have to fight for their place? It is up to the married man and father to lead the tribe in worldly and spiritual affairs. He stands in the progenitor Abraham's tradition and bears the honorary title of Abrami.

As Abraham took a young slave to procreate, the Abrami takes a wife – the Hagari – to keep his house and be the mother of his children. The daughters prepare for their lives as Hagaris and help their mother, while the sons herd the flock, provide water, and guard the tents – as Jehammed decreed for an Ismaeli. Life doesn't offer any grandeur. Only when they join the Jehammedan ranks as Swords of Jehammed, they can excel. If they prove themselves, they are allowed to found their own family as Abramis.

Although the Hagari births children to the Abrami, she's not considered his primary wife. For this the Abrami

chooses a Saraeli, a virgin creature, strong and pure in her faith. Once in the cycle from spring to winter, the Abrami and the Saraeli share a bed. If a son arises from this union, the joy is boundless: the Lord has blessed the clan with an Isaaki!

This son is clad in the richest fabrics and surrounded by fatherly love. He gets the best piece of the lamb and sits next to the Abrami, but he's also taught how to use the saber and how to ride. Day in, day out, he shapes his body and soul to be a perfect vessel of devotion to God. He is the sacrificial lamb that the clan will offer to the Lord on the battlefield. There will be many opportunities for this; he rides into battle after battle. The Isaaki leads the host, gallops in front of them into the enemy ranks, is a blazing example. Very few live to reach their thirtieth winter, and only if God wills.

But sometimes the Lord rejects the sacrifice.

Such an Isaaki's life's work is not yet done: the Council of Elders makes him an Iconide, and as such, he will then lead the Cult and mark the way that God has prepared for the Jehammedans.

ICONIDES

Just as Abraham bargained with God to save the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Iconides bargain for the Jehammedans' future. To do so, the Iconide retreats to his chambers, burns incense and sandalwood. Then he washes his feet according to the ancient rites and dries them thoroughly. From a samovar, he fills two cups with sugared tea and carries them to a low round table at the center of the room. He places one cup where he's going to sit and the other on the opposite side, where his imaginary bargaining partner takes a seat. Chanting softly to praise God's deeds, he is invited in.

The Iconide waits patiently, sometimes for hours, sometimes for days. He meditates until he becomes aware of God. Then he brings over a small box inlaid with gold, places it at the center of the table, and opens it. Wrapped in velvet, there is a so-called Icon – a symbol for the deal.

The Iconide explains to the Lord what it symbolizes: the skull of a Jehammedan torn apart by machine-gun fire stands for the wish to punish an emplacement of Scourgers with death and destruction; with the severed hand of a thief, the Iconide pushes for quiet and order in a rebel village; gazing at a piece of concrete from Tripol, he discusses a flood to punish the sinful city; a broken sword is intended to lead to an Isaaki who is considered lost back to the temple of the community.

The Iconide sits and recounts all the sacrifices he and his clan had to make. He counts them like bills, thus buying the Icon's symbolic value. Usually, the deal ends with old Saraelis dragging the unconscious Iconide outside to breathe the fresh air and regain consciousness. He is marked by lack of sleep and food and will have to

rest for days. Next comes the waiting and watching. Did he win the bargaining? What are his conditions and restrictions? It is up to the Iconide to interpret the results that reach him via messengers. Does the flood come from a devastating downpour? Does the leader of the revolt die by his concubine's hand? Will the Swords of Jehammeds be needed to exercise God's will at the Scourger emplacement?

Usually, it takes months or years before the clan can be sure. If the bargain is kept, the Icon becomes a relic. If it is denied, God will have had his reasons not to fulfill the Iconide's wish. The Iconide himself will carry the Icon to a secret place and retrieve it years later to decipher God's true will.

JEHAMMED'S LEGACY

Many Jehammedans can neither write nor read. They spend their first years as Ismaelis on the pastures with the flock and have no time to learn. And anyway, those who study this ancient art are often called blighters because they are considered to be abusing their Abrami's trust and having others work for them. Later, when he might have the time as head of the family, he will refuse to be taught by a scribe like a little child. Still, he will crave Jehammed's word on paper and trade dozens of goats and sheep for it when the opportunity arises.

His inability to read doesn't bother him, for he carries his true faith in his heart. But the usefulness of the scrolls is indisputable: Iconides visit the family to study or copy Jehammed's word. These revered Jehammedans' glory rains down on the Abrami like divine manna and makes him a respected man.

LAMB MEAT & TINCTURES

As caught up as the Jehammedans are in their spiritual worldview, which they pay tribute to through rigid traditions, they cannot deny that they are still very humble shepherds. The flock has always been the center of their life; an Abrami feeds his family by means of his sheep and goats. The bigger and healthier the flock, the more Ismaeli the progenitor can sire to add to his wealth and influence. Having many children has always been considered a sign of God's favor by the Jehammedans; Abramis blessed thus are very respected. Even if they don't produce any Isaakis for the community, they still strengthen the military ranks.

That would not be possible without the flock. The animals' meat feeds the family, the milk satisfies the children's thirst, and the Hagaris produce cloth from the wool. The fat is used to produce candles or torches; from the innards, the Ismaelis craft strings for their bows. The old ones mix extracts from organs with herbs to produce tinctures that are supposed to give strength to the Swords of Jehammed and virility to the Abramis.

WIND IN MY BEARD

According to Jehammed's teachings, the tribes are supposed to be nomads. Stone buildings would only produce a false impression of security where alertness would be preferred. Stone is property, and a lot of property would produce haughtiness where humility would be preferred. In the scroll "The Last Days", Jehammed implores his followers to keep moving. To sleep in tents and to avoid the stone deserts. To prefer the ram to the cornfield. To leave everything behind and make a new camp at the end of the day.

For centuries, his faithful heeded his counsel. Tent cities arose and disappeared when the flocks grazed the tundra. The tribes grew. Everyone mastered a craft, was able to make crockery from lead or wood, to forge iron or build tables. The Jehammedans never needed to rely on trade, were always autonomous.

But the world has gotten smaller. Judges and Anabaptists claim large areas. When a group of people travels through a foreign domain in the Balkhan, hundreds of fighters rise up at the behest of the Voivodes. In spite of Jehammed's commandment, the Jehammedans had to stake their claim and sometimes fortify or defend their land. Many have settled down. The largest cities are glorious Osman in Eastern Borca and Bucharest in the Balkhan, led by Voivodes.

THE HOLY CITY

Mecca, the city of the Kaaba and of Jehammed's revelation. Here lie the roots of the Cult. It is said that at the base of the black cube, there are still piles of hundreds of scrolls in their brass tubes: Jehammed's answer to the Eshaton, furiously written down and sealed in the last days before the global conflagration. Nothing is more valuable to the Cult than these texts. Bucharest's Iconides hope to find an interpretation of the Eshaton and hints for the future in them and keep sending Isaakis there, carrying precious gifts for the African conquerors. But Mecca remains out of reach for the Jehammedans. The Lion will allow no Crows in his domain.

LIFE RINGS

Just as a tree's age rings document the change of the seasons, the Jehammedans carry the history of their lives on their skin.

From the day of their birth, the tattoos expand every year until at old age they cover the whole body. However, these pictures do not number the years, but describe the bearer's development with all its joys and deprivations. An Isaaki who already bears his ritual tattoo pattern all over his body at an early age is marked by great sacrifices, wisdom, and strength, while an Abrami who isn't at least half covered by life rings at an advanced age can easily be identified as a blighter.

Every spring, all members of the clan gather for a seven-day ceremony, the so-called Bairam, where everyone recounts what he has experienced in the past year. By means of these stories, the Iconides decide the degree of tattoos – starting at the forehead, the left hip and the calves, a complex pattern of tattooed lines and dots grows.

ARIES THE RAM

The legendary figure that once brought victory to the Jehammedan host hasn't been seen for decades. But it remains in the people's minds: when a mountain goat strays into a family's camp at night, the Ismaelis see this as Aries' work; a surprise victory can only have been won with the Ram's help.

Many Iconides watch this development skeptically, for the faith in Aries replaces the faith in God. Miracles are no longer ascribed to the One, but to the mythical battle leader from the past; Jehammed's words are replaced by Aries'.

At first, Aries' disciples were only seen in the hinterlands of the Balkhan, but now they have reached Justitian and Osman. Are the Jehammedans to devolve into a Cult of goat worshipers? The faithful Iconides fight the cancer of the Ram worship. Sometimes, the holy men exile the so-called Arianoi to the wasteland, clad only in their haughtiness. In Osman, many a Scourge has sung its song on the deviants' skin. In doing so, the Iconides revolt against the word of Jehammed: he has ordered to cut off any hand that rises against the clan, be it a foreigner's or a brother's. The Iconides are desperate. They never had to fear an enemy within. There is no counsel on that in their scrolls. Honorable Iconides unwilling to characterize Aries as a corrupt false God and deny his worshipers God's mercy make their fight even harder.

ARIANOI

After the battle in the Adriatic basin, Aries and his newly recruited followers disappeared without a trace. Rumor has it that he went to Crete where he had been born. These days, the Jehammedans only hear bad news from the island. Rams' heads and skinned, impaled Africans should be warning enough for anyone who consider approaching its shores. The inhabitants of the coast claim that the Arianoi, Aries' messengers and Prophets of the Ram, allow no foreigners on their holy ground.

Actually, there are several eyewitness reports from Neolibyans who foundered on Crete's dark shores at night. They could not but watch the terrible orgies that took place inland next to temples and bizarre labyrinths of scrap and bones. The tales of torchlight and squealing lambs staggering around in a circle of ram-headed men with open jugulars seem far-fetched. For a long time, the Scourgers laughed about the Neolibyan Wamai who claimed to have watched this gruesome spectacle. Then the Gimbya, a 500-ton transporter, ran ashore close to Tobruk on the Neolibyan coast. There were no survivors on board. The Neolibyans and Scourgers had been disemboweled and skinned. Rams' heads were piled on the deck. The Neolibyans may rule the Mediterranean, but they have given Crete a wide berth ever since.

The truth about Aries and his Arianoi goes much deeper than simple tales of bloody orgies. The few Arianoi who revealed themselves to their brothers in Bucharest paint a completely different picture. While Jehammed separated the Cult from the world to enable its survival, Aries is going to bring it full circle and reconcile the Jehammedans with the world. He wants them to set out, see with open eyes the miracles that they could not experience from the confinement of their clan. Leave the defensive, start attacking, use their strength to liberate Bucharest and conquer Justitian. Take the Arianois' hands. They know the way, you children of fishermen.

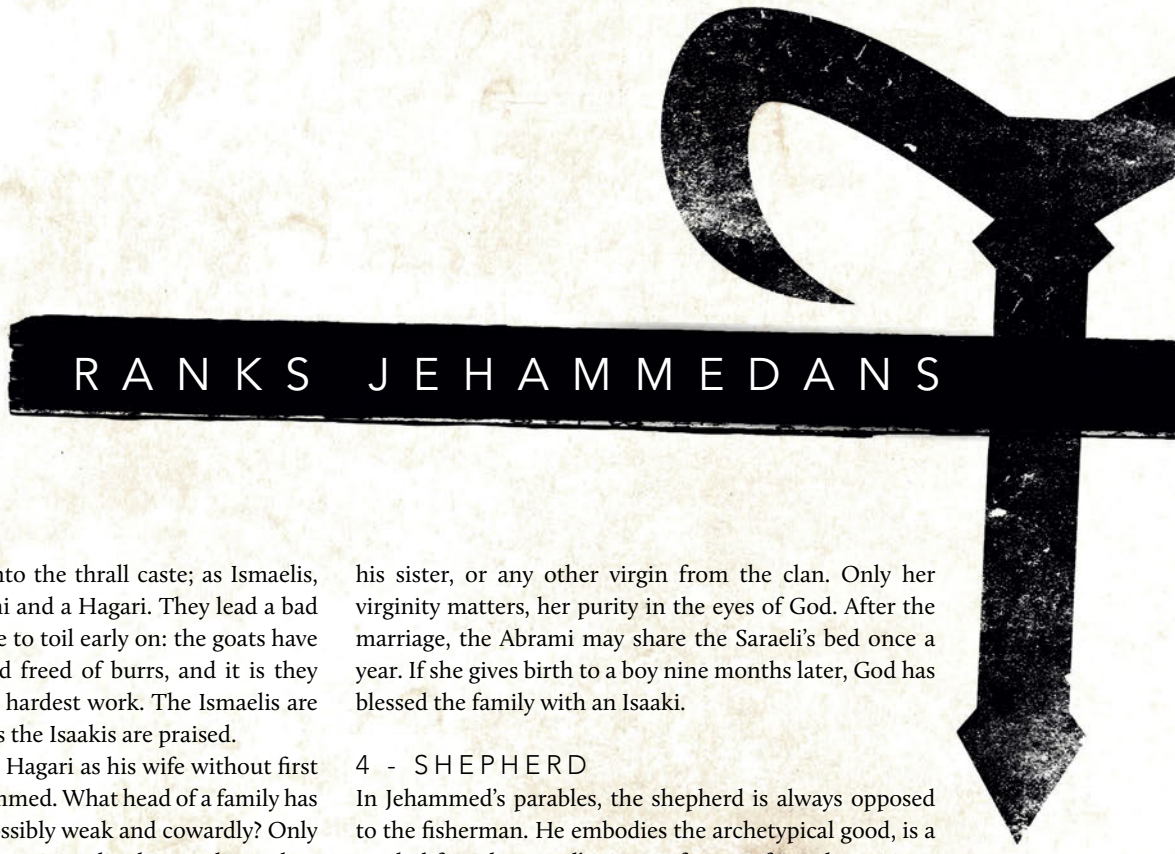
Do they still not know who Aries really is?

FOR I AM THE FIRST AND THE LAST.

I AM THE HONORED AND THE SCORNED ONE.

I AM THE WHORE AND THE HOLY ONE.

[FRAGMENT FROM THE NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY]



RANKS JEHAMMEDANS

1 - ISMAELI

Most children are born into the thrall caste; as Ismaelis, they are sons of an Abrami and a Hagari. They lead a bad life within the family, have to toil early on: the goats have to be led to the fields and freed of burrs, and it is they who must perform all the hardest work. The Ismaelis are humiliated just as much as the Isaakis are praised.

No Ismaeli may take a Hagari as his wife without first proving his worth to Jehammed. What head of a family has never seen battle? Is he possibly weak and cowardly? Only as a Sword of Jehammed can Ismaelis cleanse themselves of this kind of doubt.

2 - SWORD OF JEHAMMED

An Ismaeli is constantly being kicked; the tribe has him perform the most menial tasks. Only his faith and deep humility keep him from trying to break the community's chains. In battle, he turns the humiliation he experiences every day against his enemies. Unleashed, he cuts through the enemy's ranks with his scimitar. His ferociousness is legendary. Even the Scourgers avoid open battle with a group of Ismaelis. They are the Swords of Jehammed, after all, killing every infidel in the name of the last prophet.

3 - ABRAMI

Only when the Ismaelis have proven themselves, have taken another family's Hagari as a wife and thus founded a new line, they get rid of the yoke of their lineage. From now on, they may call themselves Abramis and sire children with their wife.

Abramis are the Cult's worldly rulers, the shepherds and leaders of the families. Through them, God's people live on. Their helping hands protect the Jehammedan farms and cities. Abramis are honored as exalted father figures, though not like the holy Iconides – rather as experienced, world-wise men they are.

An Abrami is gauged by the number of his children: if his loins are fertile and none of his children suffer from lack of food, he is considered a blessed man and God's favorite. High-ranking Abramis from Bucharest or Osman are said to have 30 sons.

In addition to the Hagari, his spouse, the Abrami chooses a Saraeli, a blessed one. She can be his daughter, his sister, or any other virgin from the clan. Only her virginity matters, her purity in the eyes of God. After the marriage, the Abrami may share the Saraeli's bed once a year. If she gives birth to a boy nine months later, God has blessed the family with an Isaaki.

4 - SHEPHERD

In Jehammed's parables, the shepherd is always opposed to the fisherman. He embodies the archetypical good, is a symbol for Jehammed's vision of piety. If an Abrami is as esteemed by his clan as he is by the Iconides, the Council of Elders makes him a Shepherd. Only very few are that close to Jehammed.

1 - ISAAKI

Abraham and his wife Sara were married without children for a long time before God made an agreement with them and blessed them with a son: Isaac was born. But was the love of a father for his son more important than his faith in God? To find out, God asked the old man to lead Isaac to a faraway place and sacrifice him to the Lord.

Abraham's heart bled, but he did as he was told and led his son to the slaughter. When God saw that Abraham was ready to do so, he sent down an angel to stop the horrible act. Abraham had proven his readiness to make sacrifices of loyalty to God.

Every day the Jehammedans must walk the same path – but they cannot count on the reconciling intervention of God's hand. Thus, they send the Isaakis, the blessed children of the Abramis and Saraelis, to death on the battlefield.

To make up for this, the Isaakis are showered with love by the Abrami, clad in precious garments, and taught all honorable arts by scribes. As soon as the child can walk, he is given a wooden saber and taught how to fence. Years later, he's already in the saddle, galloping through the Balkhan woods with his teachers and decapitating straw puppets hanging from trees with a sure aim.

The whole clan tries to perfect the Isaaki intellectually and as a fighter. If the Abrami cannot pay the teachers, the Ismaeli and Hagari have to work harder. It is considered a deadly sin to even say one word against the blessed son.

2 - JEHAMMED'S BLESSING

A firebrand has become a warrior: the Isaaki has fought in hundreds of battles, has escaped death time and again. He must be truly blessed! Very soon, he'll become an Iconide.

3 - ICONIDE

The Iconides are the Jehammedans' heart and soul. These venerable men were once Isaakis who won hundreds of battles and reached their thirtieth year. From this point on, the Isaaki takes on the role of the spiritual leader and interpreter of images. His job is to recognize when a sheep is pregnant, find new watering holes for the flocks, and determine which newborn girls God wants to be Saraelis.

Iconides are priests, judges, and executioners all in one. They guide the masses, and their word is law.

4 - PROPHET

In their dialogues with God they created Icons like no other. Their counsel opens a path illuminated by God's radiant countenance to the Jehammedans. Their word be done.

1 - HAGARI

Hagaris are the Cult's backbone. While theirs is the lowest rank in the Jehammedan family, everyone regards these women with pride.

They tend to the fire, they sew the garments, they mend the tents, and they milk the goats. A family's wealth depends on their zeal. They cook, they provide clothing, they heal, and they take care of all the day-to-day jobs. They are workers and maid-servants, but also warriors when the men's strength is spent. They live for the family; if it's in danger, they are willing to sacrifice their lives. From an early age they are taught to love their father, husband, and children and precede them into death.

It's terrifying when unassuming women mingle with the Anabaptists or walk across Purgan markets to kill themselves and countless enemies with explosives. In the evening, the Abrami will explain to his children that they are sure to gain access to Heaven, who then tussle his beard in mourning and pride.

2 - DELILAH

She has lost her Abrami's favor and will soon lose her tribe's. A Delilah is a fallen Hagari. To pay for her debt, she fights at the side of the Swords of Jehammed. Her courage in battle is legendary, for she does not fear death.

But the holy warriors shun her, too. No one wants to give the impression to his Abrami that he was guilty of the Delilah's fall.

2 - VOICE OF JEHAMMED

The Hagaris' place is in the bosom of the family, as decreed by Jehammed, and every reassurance and greatness must arise from within themselves. That's why some few Hagaris seek out a domain that men would not challenge them for. They find it in interpreting the writings of Jehammed – to the great displeasure of their Abrami. A woman confronting him with Jehammed's venerable rules is the last thing that he needs. Suddenly he must watch his actions and his words. From now on, he would do well to pay some respect to his Hagari, or he may have to answer to an Iconide for his loose tongue.

3 - RIGHTEOUS ONE

Even an Iconide will not argue with a Righteous One. She is the voice of Jehammed, having spent decades studying the texts, learning them by heart. Wise – and progressive – men come to her seeking counsel in religious affairs.

Their knowledge makes the Righteous Ones misfits. Their Abrami is considered a little soft and seems to be unable to control his women.

1 - SARAELI

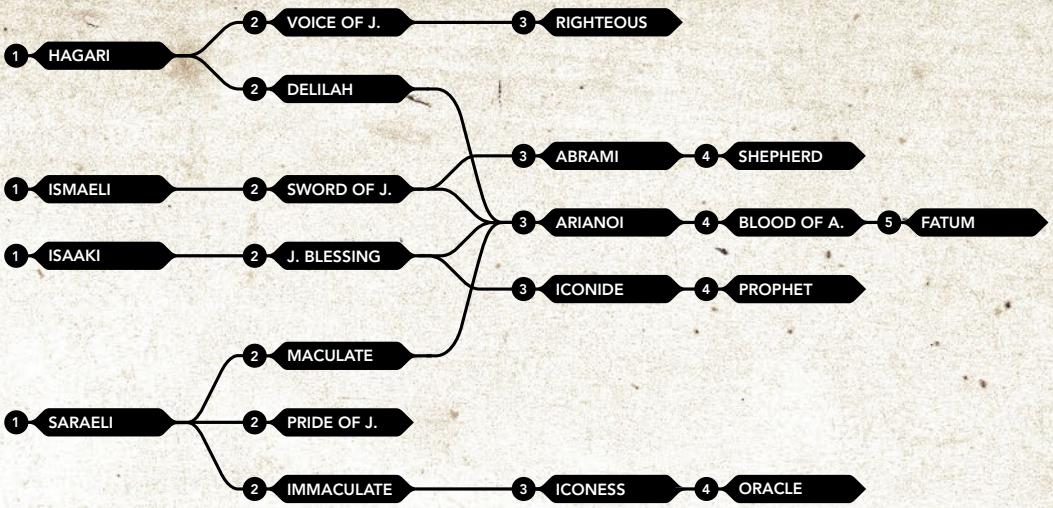
The life of a Saraeli is wonderful from the day of their birth. From an early age, they are taught their meaning: Iconides praise them as holy, Ismaelis bow their head in passing, and Abramis fulfill their every wish. According to Jehammedan faith, the Saraelis are God's vessels. Someday one of them will give her body to him and gift the Jehammedans with a blazing leader made of fire and starlight – the Messiah!

To offer only the best to God, Saraelis are pampered, doused with the most wonderful perfumes, and clad in the most precious cloth. All their lives, no one contradicts them. While they have no influence at all on the Iconides' interpretations of images, they are equal to the Abramis within the family. Only during the annual rite when the Abrami shares her bed for one night is she carnal, and this for a brief period of time. Should a child arise from this union, it becomes a Saraeli at once if it's a daughter; in the case of a boy, he becomes an Isaaki.

2 - PRIDE OF JEHAMMED

Saraelis are the chosen women, but if their body does not produce a son, all the gifts, attentions, and Dinars invested in them would have been better spent on the animal market buying a herd of goats. However, when a Saraeli fulfills her destiny, it was well worth everything, and she becomes a Pride of Jehammed. She can influence her son and thus determine the Cult's the future and path.

HIERARCHY AND RANKS - JEHAMMEDANS



2 - MACULATE

She hasn't lost her virginity to an Abrami - or was unable to bear him a son, even after years of sex. She lives at the fringe of tribe society, surrounded by false courtesy and mock respect. The few who dare to take this step simply vanish one day. No one will miss or follow them. In the wasteland, they look for a new family, experience fear and imprisonment or fulfillment and freedom.

2 - IMMACULATE

Having been brought up as a Saraeli from an early age, she has never had sex with an Abrami. Maybe she never married, maybe her Abrami died before the year was over. Now she is considered a holy woman, and the burden of destiny is taken from her shoulders. Very few Jehammedans can claim to be free; the Immaculates are. They are no longer pampered. They can go and explore life – within the limits of modesty.

Some Immaculates care for the tribe's ill, practically performing miracles for them. Some explore religious texts with a Voice of Jehammed or a Righteous One, or act as mediators between clans.

3 - ICONESS

It is a rare thing that the Iconides choose an Immaculate to be one of their own. The elders claim that this is not the will of Jehammed, while the Righteous Ones counter by saying that Jehammed never said a word about women as interpreters of images and thus has of course not excluded them.

An Iconess must have served the Cult as an Immaculate in an almost miraculous way. She will be gauged by these past acts.

4 - ORACLE

The Iconess's prophecies were breathtakingly brilliant and true – they can only have been the result of a connection to God. She's now considered an Oracle, and each and every one of her words is recorded and treated as a revelation.

3 - ARIANOI

The Arianoi have dedicated themselves to Aries. They have been to Crete, face to face with the ancient one, have seen his tattered cloak fly when there was no wind at all. They have taken the Ram's head, drunk Aries' metallic draught from it. Intoxication, courage, and strength have been the pillars of their life ever since.

4 - BLOOD OF ARIES'

Every sip opens another door of perception. Their wounds close impossibly fast. Their mind becomes clouded when the visions come. They are no longer Arianoi, simple followers and servants. They become Aries, are parts of his body and mind.

5 - FATUM

As Aries' herald, the Fatum announces imminent misery for the Cult's enemies. He acts as an assassin and an ill omen.

SCIMITAR

STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS

The old hatred fades. We have fought and worn each other out. What remains is a human being, hurt and tired. Their teachings are still blasphemous, but at least they have a faith.

ANUBIANS

Their path leads into the land of death. They defile corpses and adorn themselves with their bones – where is that supposed to lead?

APOCALYPTICS

They are children of the fisherman trying to lure us from the path with intoxication and sinful flesh. If they don't give way, we will respond with our sabers.

CHRONICLERS

They pray to false steel gods, even style themselves as gods with their droning.

But look into the heart. The only thing you see there is a bawling fisherman's child.

CLANNERS

Some of them follow ancient traditions and look back to great family trees, just like us. But they have not been given Jehammed's revelation; in their minds, they remain children.

Some pray to idols, stones, or trees, others harass us at Bucharest. Be careful, and keep your sabers handy.

HELLVETICS

Look what stone does to people. They pray to weapons, follow a man-made set of rules instead of a divine revelation. Their roots reach into putrid waters.

JUDGES

They enforce peace, taking whole nations along. But it's a man-made way that does not stick to the way markers a judge set down in ancient times. Where will it lead to but to the water in which the fisherman poaches?

NEOLIBYANS

The Dinar is their faith, they fight for it, they measure themselves by it. You can talk friendly to them, but you talk into an empty cave. You will never reach those fisherman's children's souls.

PALERS

By day, they stain their holes to attack our flocks like wolves do by night. It is a sign of the highest piety to still offer a hand to these creatures.

SCOURGERS

They have occupied our ancient sites, loot the land of our forbearers. How many of our children will have to die until we can walk the holy city again?

SCRAPPERS

What should we do about them? They are devoid of God, devoid of hope.

Break bread with them. We watch them go with pity when they return to the wasteland. Thank Jehammed for his foresight.

SPITALIANS

On the Adriatic Sea, they cooperate with our archenemy. But can we be angry at doctors if they want to heal? Yes, we can. Don't trust them, never trust them.

GILEABOD RUBEN ABRAHAM

Culture: Borca
Concept: The Zealot
Cult: Jehammedans (Prophet)

The ruler of Osman and keeper of the faith is the most dangerous person in all of Eastern Borca. His hatred for Justitian surmounts everything Jehammed would have considered appropriate. To the west of the Reaper's Blow, the Anabaptists' alarm cries that he gathers an army of many thousands remain unheard. Very soon, the prophet's breath will caress the world.

SENKA THE IMMACULATE

Culture: Balkhan
Concept: The Righteous
Cult: Jehammedans (Immaculate)

She's a saint. She had won a dozen Jehammedan tribes for the war and the Adriatic basin. She was a hard and implacable judge. But then the Swords of Jehammeds' lust for battle trickled away in the blood-drenched ground; the Iconides turned their backs on her and courted the Voivodes. She sees Bucharest, where she grew up and learned to love Jehammed's words, as her new target.

ELIAS ISMAEL

Culture: Hybrispania
Concept: The Traveler
Cult: Jehammedans (Ismaeli)

Elias, Sword of Jehammed and resistance fighter on the Al-Andalus front, comes from an unholy union between a Jehammedan woman and a Clanner. His mother never worked up the courage to confess this to the community. The beast is strong within him unto this day, and it has proven a great companion in the confusing nether realms of the Warpage.

THE LORDS OF DESIRE

APOCALYPTICS

BAD CARDS

"Shit, look at the way she moves her ass."

Dushkov's eyes followed the dancer's every step. Her dress seemed to consist only of buckles and belts. He slid deeper into his armchair.

"For ten bucks, you get the whole thing. For friends of the Flock." The Apocalyptic with the matted hair patted Dushkov's shoulder and disappeared towards the bar through the brothel's haze. Dushkov grinned.

The dancer had noticed him. She winked at him. He winked back. His grin broadened. Slowly, as if by chance, she came over and let him have a good look at her body. He breathed harder, adjusted his heavy leather skirt and smoothed down his coarse linen shirt. He was not the cleanest person. After weeks in the dust, there was dirt in his every pore; yesterday's visit to the baths had not helped. Suddenly, the dancer was very close.

"You..." She leaned over and fumbled with his shirt buckles. He was breathless, sweating. Wow, they went fast in here. She gave him a short, shy look and straddled his lap. He could smell her perfume, her sweat; her hair smelled enticing, like a Pheromancer's gland ichor.

"Why did you say ‚zigzag' at the door?" Her mouth was close to his ear.

"Because..." An odd tingly sensation mixed with his arousal.

"Stay calm, darling," she whispered and ran her long, manicured fingers through his greasy hair.

"It's the password. For friends of the Flock, I got it from old Deisha."

"That's not what I meant." Her pelvis pressed against his groin. Her voice sounded harder now, but that had to be her arousal. Dushkov found her simply divine.

"What did you mean?"

"Mhm..." She pressed close to him, touched his ear with her lips. He felt her warm breath. She nibbled his earlobe – and bit down.

Not softly.

She jerked back her head without opening her mouth. Dushkov yelled, wanted to push her back, but her legs were wrapped around him like a vice. He grabbed his ear, felt the blood flowing, hit her. She leaned even closer, embracing him – and she was strong! Then she let go, jumped up and spit something cloggy into his face. He winced, frantically tried to hit the slick thing, and fell backwards. He rolled to the side and got up again. His ear throbbed; blood ran down his collar and colored his shirt red. Wide eyed he looked around the room, pleading for help, saw only the faces of strangers. They all had blank expressions, stared at him from the inn's gloom. With shaky fingers, he groped at his ear.

"Why?" he whimpered.

"Answer my questions, Dushkov." Her mouth was like an open wound. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of her lips over her chin and down to her breasts.

"I got the password as a reward, damn you! From old Deisha!" His voice cracked.

She looked around, nodded to the onlookers with a grim smile.

"He doesn't know." There was scorn in her voice. The other Apocalyptics came closer. One of them laughed.

"This password," she took a deep breath and stepped closer, "is no password at all." She sounded amused now. "If you'd only stayed quiet, Siska at the entrance would have let you one door further. Right now, they're partying heavy over there." With a grin, she pointed to the wall behind her with her thumb.

"Zigzag is a stigma. We give it to traitors." She looked around expectantly. "Now we will show this darling, what 'zigzag' really means."

MYSTICISM AND VIOLENCE

Apocalyptics are pure, unbridled life. Their urges open up a land of lust and satisfaction waiting to be explored and exploited. Yesterday and tomorrow are endlessly far away – foreign lands that stinking old men rave about. What makes an Apocalyptic's soul shiver is the caress of a perfumed woman or a strong man, cries of passion and of pain, cold power. Bookish knowledge makes them (and one very important part of the body) shrink back.

The Cult's roots, though, seem forgotten. What good were they for the Apocalyptics anyway? Should they have learned from them?

Chroniclers are known for dealing with fun and sexuality like Spitalians do with Psychonauts. Beyond normal life, this gives them a lot of time to sniff around in other people's affairs. The Cluster has evaluated hundreds of thousands of stream extracts related to the Apocalyptics over the centuries and added findings of Streamers and Mediators to them. What's interesting is that they found an inherent structure in this trove of data. Information clustered around white spots, joining to form a giant puzzle that had to be expanded several times and finally was transferred into an n-dimensional data space. Click! Every day, new data comes in, sticking to the structures or strengthening existing links. The silhouettes of the white spots are higher in contrast than ever before, mocking the Chroniclers and keeping them going until, yes, until … Yes!

In the beginning, there was Gerome Getrell.

He was a billionaire, visionary, brilliant orator, and televangelist. He preached the power of the archetypes and of the tarot, free love and sadism, nationalism and anarchy, democracy and dictatorship, a life on the fast lane, subversion. His stream feeds made the data paths glow, illuminating the deepest recesses of the Bygone soul. One feed alone generated thousands of interpretations, most of which were founded on Getrell's paradoxes. Everyone felt he was onto something, a feeling of insight. Getrell's wisdom promised freedom in an overregulated world to those who were able to decipher the feeds and see the truth between the contradictions.

Passion over mind was the simplest interpretation.

Their proponents set forth to shock. They formed gangs that at first were only known for ecstatic parties and orgies, drug abuse, mass brawls, and storming public buildings – a nuisance, but not a danger that couldn't be handled with truncheons and shockers.

But the gangs grew, and so did their confidence and ruthlessness. With a fleet of captured drones, they cut a bloody swath through the ranks of established cartels to finally take over the drug market. They discovered mobile prototype factories, produced guns and metal blades for the masses in them. They avoided the security forces, but they didn't hide. They were free as a bird, and when one of them was shot down, the flock didn't care. Wherever they appeared, they sprayed a stylized raven on the wall, the sign of Getrell's Apocalyptics.

Getrell never took a stance on this. He never referred to current events. He was above the fray.

The tree of chaos he had planted continued to produce

FALSE PROPHET

```
Streamfeed-Subject: Manipulation
From: Ammit@hiddenhost
To: *
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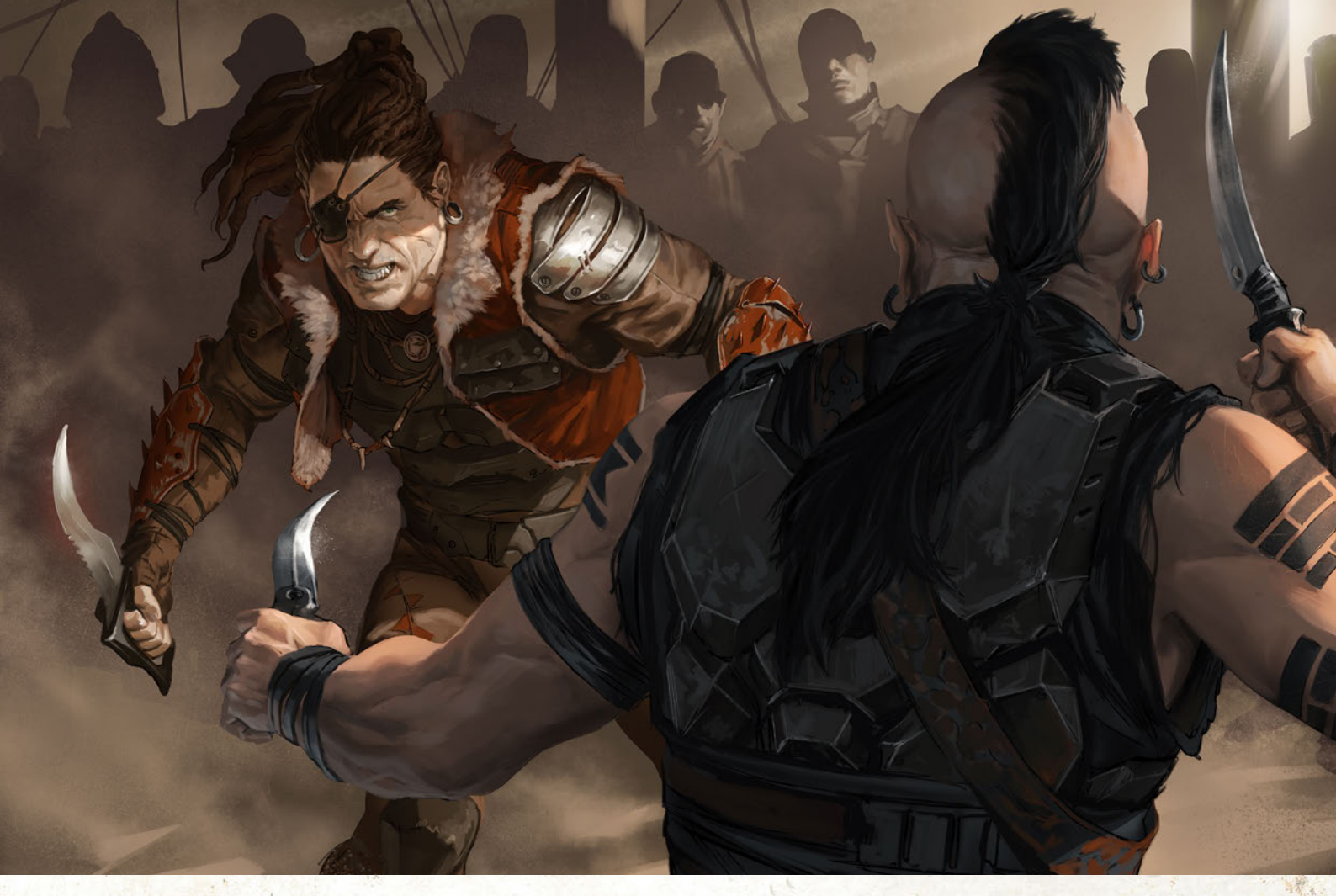
Gerome Getrell did not address you, your wife, your kids, or your neighbors. He talked to the masses. He experimented on them. Pitch, choice of words, ideas. Do they change the recipients' use of the stream? Do the stock prices rise or fall after a feed? He has everything covered, counts on the magic of the large numbers. He doesn't care for the people on the street. They'll be drifting through the urban canyons as ashes soon, anyway.

There's only one reason to his feeds: he wants to statistically double check his theories on manipulation and on implanting ideas. Memetics. He's up to something. You help him. Block his feeds. Boycott Recombination Group.



colorful blossoms, some of them poisonous, some of them wholesome. For there were peaceful offshoots as well: spiritual people who turned their backs on the established religions in disappointment and found inner strength in Getrell's mystical tarot.

He disappeared a few months before the Eshaton. His stream feeds kept hammering into his disciples' skulls, but there were no updates. He didn't tell them what the future held. Journalists looking for him got lost in the thicket of his corporations. He had to be somewhere in there.

Here, the Chroniclers lost his track.

His followers stepped up, dominating the stream almost until it collapsed. At that time, the Apocalyptics were an outlet for many people. Really live one more time, feel every nuance of your own suffering and joy…

YEARS AFTER

The beast called Eshaton brought disaster to humanity. No one was prepared for it, not even the Apocalyptics. But their practiced fatalism helped them to see the shimmer of the present in the dark years. They quickly conquered the black markets, placed intermediaries with the UEO soldiers monitoring the reconstruction. Through them, the Apocalyptics got their hands on food, weapons, and filtration systems and hid them in the ruins. Those who got in the way were bribed, blackmailed, or killed. Drugs, sex, and weapons: they catered to every market.

With sticks, stones, and automatic weapons, they herded Europe into the age of the beast. When the wave of violence hit them, they were surprised, but quickly recovered. Centuries later, the undertow subsided and left humanity washed up on the shores of a new stone age. Other groups had started sorting out the chaos and gaining influence. In Borca, the First Judge strode through their ranks, and carnage ensued; in the Balkhan, the Voivodes joined the game for power. The Hellvetics closed the passes and the ancient smuggler routes.

The Apocalyptics had to close ranks.

Now that they felt besieged on all sides, they remembered Getrell's tarot. A card sequence on a table could smooth down differences or give a hint to death. More and more, the archetypical symbols decided the Apocalyptics' fate, which fostered fortune tellers and mystics amidst the Cult. The tarot made the Apocalyptics thrive. Even those who laughed about the mystical forces of tuners or martyrs had to admit that the Cult had become unforeseeable.

LIFE, WHATEVER THE COST

Getrell's ideology fell on fertile ground. Even more than 500 years after the Eshaton, his motto "Live as if there's no tomorrow" is practiced daily by the Apocalyptics.

To the Apocalyptics, every emotion is as precious as a sea of diamonds. Whether it's love, hate, violence, fever, Burn intoxication, or the wind in your hair, everything is taken in greedily and celebrated to the extreme. The will to go to physical extremes, to completely exhaust the body, makes the Apocalyptics reckless, fearless people.

Can they survive the winter if they prefer the Burn trade? How will the Swords of Jehammed react to the abduction of a Hagari? Always the same principle, an action and its consequences, and always the same answer: I don't care! Apocalyptics live in the present; they only look to the future via their tarot – and it doesn't tell them if they'll be dead on the eve of tomorrow.

FLOCK OF BIRDS

Apocalyptics are migrants. They appear in large Flocks, pick their fill, and fly away again to restart somewhere else. They name their Flocks according to their provenance or way of life. Whether they call themselves Dust Riders, East Wind Flock, Splinter Wings, or Carrion Birds, the Apocalyptics carry their Flock's name as proudly in their hearts as if they had been born with it.

Individually, they earn the name of a bird reflecting their nature. A cunning knife fighter becomes a Battle Crow, a whore and thief a Magpie, an innkeeper a Woodpecker. Those who flinch from every blow get their daily dose of humiliation as Finches; those who guide the Flock through hardship as a wise fortune teller may walk the paths of his world as a Raven.

RAVEN GAME

While the Battle Crows sometimes embrace violence like a dear friend, Magpies satisfy their and their customers' desires, and Woodpeckers give the Cult a home, the Apocalyptics' Ravens rise above the everyday hubbub into a realm of knowledge and manipulation. With a clever eye, they watch the sequence of cards on the table, judging their Flock's nature and what has happened in the last few days and months in order to counsel the people around them, who listen to them full of awe. Usually, they answer a specific question: When is the best time to carry the Burn across the Alps? Which pass do I use? Who shall be the Flock's champion in the pits? What do we do about the information on the pedophile Judge? The fortune teller's word carries weight.

He's a strategist, a manipulator, and a punishing father figure all wrapped into one. He leads his Flock through future's night and keeps its members from getting lost in the dark.

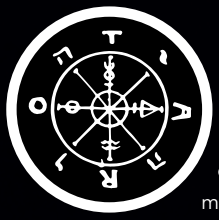
THICKER THAN BLOOD

Blood relations always lead to dynastic pageantry. The strong ones don't lead, but the old ones. Fresh blood curdles at the fringes, hoping for recognition. The Apocalyptics are different. They buy or sell children, have them fight the dogs for their food. Everyone gets a chance to prove himself and rise every day. Brawls and knife fights spoil the daily routine, and there is only one rule: fighting fairly means not taking your opponent seriously.

If a Flock leader shows weakness, he may be attacked. Usually a duel in the dust in front of the tents ensues, consisting of lightning-quick blows and kicks. The Flock roots for the combatants, cheers. It's a great spectacle that has only one winner. The loser will leave the Flock to lick his wounds in the wasteland. His days are numbered.

The pecking order is subject to continuous change. Usually a broken nose or rib is enough to knock a pretender down a peg. A knife in the throat is not a welcome sight but proof that the attacker has lost control and all respect. Get him away!

For Apocalyptics, physical fights are a way to strengthen the Flock and end useless debates.



TAROT

The Apocalyptics' tarot is an ever-changing game, its cards continually adapting to specific mundane and spiritual conditions. The cards of the battered UEO troops and governments disappeared centuries ago, to be replaced by the 13 cults, the Primer, the Stream, the Psychonauts and their plagues. After the attack of the Clans, the corpse eaters found their way into the deck as a dark omen and the Exalters as usurpers. Some Ravens use the original Getrell Tarot. Here, the Creator is the top card, flanked by the Adventurer and the Mentor. Others drift through the Ether and extract new symbols from these experiences, which they add to their deck. Every tarot is as unique as its owner.

THE MIRROR SHOWS SAGGY BREASTS
DENTS HAVE TORN HER MOUTH A P A R T .

IF SHE DIDN'T KNOW BETTER
SHE'D HOPE

I T G O E S A W A Y .

BUT AS IT IS, SHE READS SCORN FROM CURIOSITY
THUS STAYING TRUE TO HER FEARS.

SHE W I T H E R S ,
AND NO GOD
CREATES HER ANEW IN SEVEN DAYS.

[JANUS]

Hotheaded like puppies, they have been fighting from an early age; now they have learned to love the law of the jungle. For an Apocalyptic, loyalty towards the Flock grows from respect, dependency, violence, and submission. To betray it breaks his wings.

NESTING

Even migrants need nests to recover from their journeys and raise their young. That's the Woodpeckers' job. They open up brothels, meeting points for smugglers and secret lairs where Burn buds will soon amass. They bribe Judges and court Scrappers and Clanners.

Most nests are established on forbidden ground, in the heart of settlements or in forgotten tunnel sections – smack in the middle of life. They are starting points for raids, as well as retreats and attractions. Here, the Flock's Raven will read the future from the cards and gather his Battle Crows. A nest can be a bane for its surroundings, but also offer … opportunities. Gambling, the selling of distillates, and baths with extended services promote physical and spiritual hygiene. When Judges raid such a nest, they risk a Scrapper rebellion.

BEAUTY OVER AGE

The Apocalyptics are a Cult of youth and life. When the bones ache, the skin gets wrinkled, and the eyes water in the harsh wind, an Apocalyptic's time has come. A withered leaf has no place in a clearing full of gaudy flowers. But there is no acceptance for this. The old ones cling to life, gritting their rotten teeth and using powders and perfumes to hide the stench of decay. However, every gaze upon their rotting face by their younger siblings screams: GO! GO AWAY AT LAST! Yet the old ones don't see that others avoid them at the campfires; they laugh with the others when they kick away their crutches and act jovial.

No one needs parents. An Apocalyptic needs siblings to whirl out into the world or live his need for intoxication with. The old ones only sit at home or hinder the Flock's ventures. Oh, and all their wise-ass talk. The young ones lose their patience; they hate the ugly faces. They tell them one last time that they are unwanted. If the old ones don't leave on their own accord, they are pushed from the nest. The fall is deep and deadly.

Those who stay anyway and can win through must be cunning and dangerous. Such elders have made use of the years and now are lords over life and death, are quick with

CARRION BIRDS

Right after the Judges had proclaimed the Protectorate, they came fluttering: the Carrion Birds. Some say they'd always been around. No one dares to doubt this. The Carrion Birds have their fingers deep in the city's economy. They own the hottest bordellos; their champions are amongst the best pit fighters. Their Storks buy the children of poor Scrappers or farmers at dawn, teach them to pick pockets and to perform evasive maneuvers. Smuggling, slavery, assassinations – the Carrion Birds are in. They have always been led by a Raven or better: the Mother of Ravens. Since the time of the beast, a person of that name was the talk of the town. With her claws, she tore enemies' throats out, was full of anger. She was there when Exalt fell, took part in the City Wars and in Cultrin's march. Generations of lovers became caught in her web and died after making love to her. She birthed whole tribes in the East; Ravens in the Balkhan, in Pollen, and in Borca have her blood in their veins. The incapable ones amongst her children she killed in their sleep; she cooked and ate them so they returned to her womb – food for the next spawn that already made her belly swell. But that was centuries ago. The Mother of Ravens nesting amidst her Flock like a haggard demon nowadays simply has to be someone else. Yet the legends claim differently.

the blade and are subtle schemers. To deny them respect is foolish. Usually, they act from behind the scenes and control an impressive syndicate. They trust nothing and no one – especially not their siblings. They would rather be accompanied by Hellvetics than by Battle Crows.

FOUL BUSINESS

Whether it's human trafficking with girls from the Balkhan, Burn smuggling past the Spitalians to Borca, pit fights in Purgare, prostitution and gambling in every major settlement, or blackmail, theft, and pick pocketing, the migrants cannot desist. Hard work is for Anabaptists who sacrifice today for tomorrow.

The Apocalyptics' reputation in the towns is thus divided. For Scrappers, the temples of lust and the inns are the only places to call home during their stay in the civilization. For a fair price, the migrants soften up a hard life with distillate, Burn, and love for sale.

Jehammedans usually are somewhat stricter. The migrants seduce people and thus drive a thorn into the clan's side that festers and leads to gangrene. Many a family was cast out and had its Icons smashed because their venerable Abramis or Saraelis succumbed to a Magpie's charms.

The Anabaptists can deal with passion and excess as long as they come from a pure soul, but the Apocalyptics carry decay in their lungs and Burn buds in their pockets. Wherever they go, white flakes soon well up, sinking into stone and earth and calling out to the Demiurge's spawn. That cannot be tolerated.

The East Wind Flock got to feel the Cult's anger. The Flock was deeply immersed in the Burn business: no bud reached the market that had not gone through their hands. Finally, the Spitalians sussed out the East Wind.

Led by Dr. Heilkamp and the Office of Hygienics, they compiled dossiers on all Flock members. Heilkamp always knew where the Ravens were and what was stored in their warehouses. Then, the Great Purge followed. In a concerted action of Judges, Anabaptists, and Spitalians, all Flock members were herded together and killed.

The other Flocks got the message. Or did they?

Sacks of buds still reach the Protectorate cities, where they are sold to chosen customers at staggering prices. Only now, no one openly claims to be behind this.

FLOTSAM

Justitian's old harbor. The colossus' bulk is wedged deeply in the petrified silt. The Carrion Birds took over the ship decades ago, turned it into a casino and bordello, called it "Flotsam" and lost it to the Dust Riders Flock, a humiliation the Mother of Ravens has not yet forgotten. Bridges upon which punters, gamblers, or the simply curious mill about at sundown span the gap of more than 20 feet between quay wall and upper deck. The chains of lights come alive with a flicker and make the superstructure blink colorfully. Apocalyptics open up the gates, and the people enter the ship's belly. Pulsing bass frequencies blast from speakers, merging with violin and synth notes to a song of love and passion, possession and release, from a time when the Bygones were still at their heyday. Magpies sneak, hookahs smolder, the crowd dances, sweats and stomps. African seeds are chewed. At gambling tables, gamblers lean over Kalaha or slap cards onto the tabletops; others wager sheaves of Chronicler Drafts on the wheel of fortune. Those who dare agree to an exhibition bout against a Battle Crow – 20 drafts in cash if they hang on for three rounds. The crowd cheers, bets against the man and wins. In the Flotsam, life is gaudy, loud, and unruly. For many, it's a haven to forget the daily grind. The Judges exercise restraint. People who know how to blow off their steam do not rebel.

WHEN THE MILLENNIUM AFTER THE MILLENNIUM BEGINS

THE FATHER WILL LUST AFTER HIS DAUGHTER

MAN AFTER MAN, WOMAN AFTER WOMAN

OLD MAN AFTER CHILD

IT WILL HAPPEN FOR ALL TO SEE.

BUT THE BLOOD WILL BECOME UNCLEAN

EVIL WILL SPREAD FROM BED TO BED

TAKING UP DECAY FROM THE GROUND

THE FACES WILL BE CONTORTED,

THE LIMBS EMACIATED

AND LOVE WILL BE THE GREATEST THREAT TO THOSE

WHO ONLY RECOGNIZE EACH OTHER THROUGH THE FLESH

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

A PLAGUE OF SEAGULLS

The Seagulls and Albatrosses are the Battle Crows' equivalent on the Mediterranean. For decades, the Neolibyans have been fighting pirates who come rushing in nimble torpedo boats, board the African transport ships, get everything valuable off board, and disappear again within 30 minutes. Other pirates are less interested in the cargo: they block the ships with wire or attach explosives to the hull. Here's one in the eye for attacking a pirates' nest, with kindest regards. Others throw garments infected with the pox or the plagues at the crew – and then sell them the remedy. Or at least something that looks like a remedy.

Among those pirates are some who have changed sides: Africans who wanted to get away from the Neolibyans' and Scourgers' paternalism. In the Flocks, they have the same rights as everyone else; they repay every humiliation with fist and cutlass. They are said to attack their enemies like hungry hyenas when boarding a ship, tearing them apart mercilessly. Of course, African Apocalyptics know what would happen if they ever were caught by Scourgers: they would skin the traitors or nail them to the ship's side. That's motivation.

After a capturing mission, the sea birds return to Europe's Mediterranean coast. They enter estuaries, pass underwater chain barriers, and navigate to their hideouts where they unload and celebrate their success. Supposedly, some Albatrosses have dared to do the impossible: in the bellies of cannibalized boats, they built small ports and dry-docks on Bedain's coast – right under the Neolibyans' noses!

The steel island of Corpse is another legend. Close to the Reaper's Blow, it remains hidden behind yellow-brown billows for weeks. Only when the wind turns does its iron wall gleam in the sunlight. For centuries, pirates have been capturing ships and sailing them to Corpse. Today, a wall of hulls lashed and partially welded together forms a barrier around the island that no Scourger squad can penetrate. If you're looking for a ship of extraordinary quality, you should get on board. But the boat blocking the opening in the rusty wall doesn't move for just any Albatross.

Those who want to enter need to have made a name for themselves – and be armed well enough to step into the known world's most depraved location.

LION'S BLOOD

In Tripol, there is a market for gambling, prostitution, and services beyond the Bank of Commerce's tenders. Here, too, the Apocalyptics have seized it, but unlike their European brethren, they are part of the society.

They are led by the venerable Buzzards who stand out due to their cleverness and sharp wits, not quick blade and brutality. Only in the lower echelons conflicts are resolved by combat. As soon as an African Apocalyptic has earned his Flock's respect, no one will raise a hand against him anymore.

In their establishments, many still indulge in carnal desires, play Kahala, and squander their Dinars. However, these are not dark holes. The bordellos resemble palaces, and in the casinos, every guest is surrounded by children bringing him drinks and regaling him with little artistic acts and laughter.

THUNDER ACROSS THE PLAINS

Apocalyptics are mobile. They avoid Spitalian patrols and look for unguarded Alpine passes. They are always moving, lurking, deceiving, taking advantage of any opportunity. Some Flocks bring the principle of mobility to a boil: with the Scrappers' help, they repair looted Koms or motorcycles and roar through the wasteland on them. Fuel is expensive, and the roaring engines call forth from their holes all of the surrounding area's scum. The Hellvetics at the crossings have time to raise barriers from the ground; Spitalians can load incendiary dust into their Fungicide Rifles; Judges can form a squad column. It's speed, penetration, and the element of surprise that count.

When a Flock starts relying on vehicles, everything changes. It becomes more aggressive. Cunning is still the measure of all things, but the Flock devolves to raw violence all too quickly; fast vehicles debauch their drivers to seek fast solutions. Additionally, the motorization is considered a power factor, and great influence challenges strong enemies. Hellvetics wouldn't tolerate an apocalyptic motorcycle gang in their mainland.

RANKS APOCALYPTICS

1 - FINCH

What is a Finch good for? It pecks, it flies, it craps. Now and then it also squeals – like when a Judge steps on it. Thus, Finches are at the lowest rank of Apocalyptic hierarchy. They have achieved nothing and are pushed around by their brothers and sisters. Only a trial of courage to prove they are of worth to the Flock frees them from this miserable life.

2 - BATTLE CROW

In murders they rise above the battlefields, screaming woe, only to dive down at foes and peck out their eyes. They are cunning and swift. With knife and clawed glove they kill the Flock's enemies.

2 - MAGPIE

A whore stealing from her johns, a cunning Burn dealer, a great footpad – those who have adopted the thieving bird's qualities may name themselves after it. Stealing from its own Flock, though, leads to a Magpie with broken wings.

2 - VULTURE

Vultures are Apocalyptics who brave the ruins together with the Scrappers to get the best pieces in the end, but also frauds who attack the victims of intrigue battles and scavengers. To show weakness to a Vulture means to become his next victim.

2 - CUCKOO

A Cuckoo is a deceiver and trickster poaching in other cults' domains. He can live as a Judge or Spitalian before becoming fed up with his role and shedding it like a snake's skin to adopt a new one soon after. He's always teetering on the brink; only his thousand masks keep him from falling.

2 - OWL

She only attacks at night. She's merciful in her precision – the victims don't suffer, can't even scream. Then she takes flight, carrying her victim in her talons, and disappears into her nest. Owls are assassins and raiders. They ambush and shirk back from open conflict.

2 - WOODPECKER

They are the first to enter unexplored terrain. They scout, watch, and cast their nets. They bribe, they build, and they secure. No nest is without a Woodpecker.

2 - STORK

Storks steal children to make them part of their own clan or send them to work. They are cunning manipulators, recognizing every emotion and knowing how to use them to their own benefit.

3 - RAVEN

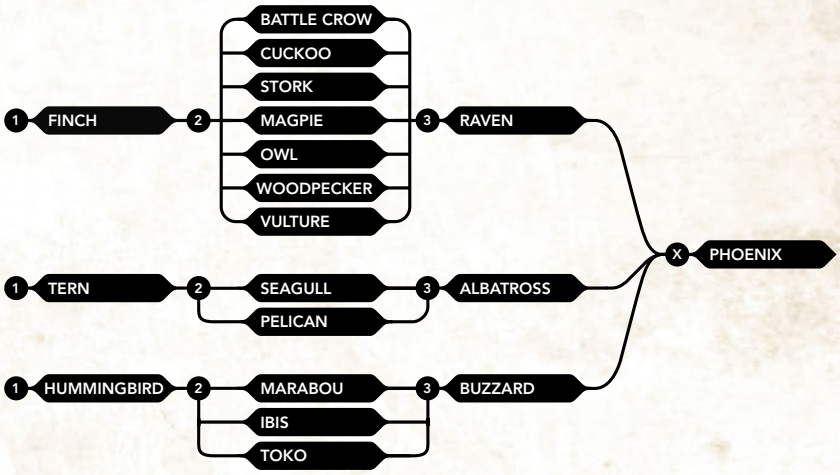
The Ravens amongst the Apocalyptics are leaders and fortune tellers. Obviously, someone has to consider the future. They determine the Flock's destiny, for better or worse.

1 - TERN

They are the Mediterranean Finches: their cheeping is annoying, and they're just as worthless otherwise. They keep the ship clean, are pushed around, and have to stomach a few Seagull jokes.

2 - SEAGULL

They are the nemesis of the sea. Unerringly, they attack human driftwood and tear it apart. Seagulls are shifty people whom the next strong gust of wind will carry out of harm's way.



2 - PELICAN

They have spent years at sea, know every swell and stream. They can tell the weather for the next few days by looking at the clouds. They know the coastline by heart and are aware of every hidden barrier. They are the boats' helms. Without their experience, no boarding maneuver would succeed, and any storm could be the last.

3 - ALBATROSS

He's the king of the seas. Harbor princes, pirate captains, and river lords use this term for themselves.

1 - HUMMINGBIRD

Like a hummingbird, a young African Apocalyptic should start sucking nectar before trying his hand at something bigger. Similar to a Finch or Tern, a Hummingbird is exposed to his brothers' and sisters' whims. He'll beat his wings like crazy, be smiled at – and be beaten for it, once, twice, a dozen times. When he finally blocks or counters the blow, the Hummingbird has become something new, something tough.The he is awarded a new bird's name.

2 - MARABOU

Like the European Vultures, the Marabou is a Profiteer. He takes opportunities his victims don't see fast enough or at all. He's a thief and looter who can watch for victims for days without losing his patience.

2 - IBIS

The Ibis is the keeper of secrets. He collects information to present to the Flock's Buzzard. He keeps the establishments' books, noting every expense and every slander, including its initiator. He commands an army of spies and couriers.

2 - TOKO

The Toko is to the Lion as the Woodpecker is to the Crow. He has a knack for being in the right place, establishes a nest and expands it into a glittering palace adding to his Buzzard's glory.

3 - BUZZARD

They sit on their high perch, with claws as sharp as diamonds. They see everything. They command large groups of African Apocalyptics and are respected by Scourgers and Neolibyans alike.

4 - PHOENIX

A Phoenix is a fallen Raven, Albatross, or Buzzard. He had the world at his feet, but fate had other plans for him. Even if his feathers are ruffled, the Phoenix's spirit shines. He rises from the ashes, spreading his wings, taking flight, and circles upwards again. His cry echoes across the land. Even if his Flock is gone, he is unbroken.

HARPOON CROSSBOW

STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS

As long as they don't follow a track of Sepsis to our doorstep, we get along. In the end, they're only flesh and blood.

ANUBIANS

Their bodies, eyes, and mouths are soft and tender, too seductive not to touch. But those who do will feel the snake's cold scales. The Anubians embrace life – and caress it with poisoned lips. Beware of them.

CHRONICLERS

They hide behind their masks. I don't mind fetishism! But it seems as if they take their fetishes very serious. Well, not serious enough that a hand in the right spot couldn't get a bit of information out of them.

CLANNERS

The people are scared. One grim look and they leave you alone. Not these Clans, though. They are aggressive and do not discern between a Judge and a migrant. Who would have thought that one day we'd be fighting side by side with the floppy hats?

HELLVETICS

Big guns aren't everything, but tell that to a Hellvetic. Soldier's honor and doctrine? Hypocrites. In the brothels, they moan just as loud as everybody else.

JEHAMMEDANS

A challenge – they really dig this family thing, enjoy the roles their leader appoints them. They have trouble with fun and joy.

JUDGES

We had an intense relationship until the Clans came. Now they are out there battling Cockroaches and savages. The time seems right to revive some old business models.

NEOLIBYANS

They dig luxury and spend quite some Dinars on a visit to our palaces of joy.

PALERS

They sit in their holes and enjoy the droning voices. That's weird.

SCOURGERS

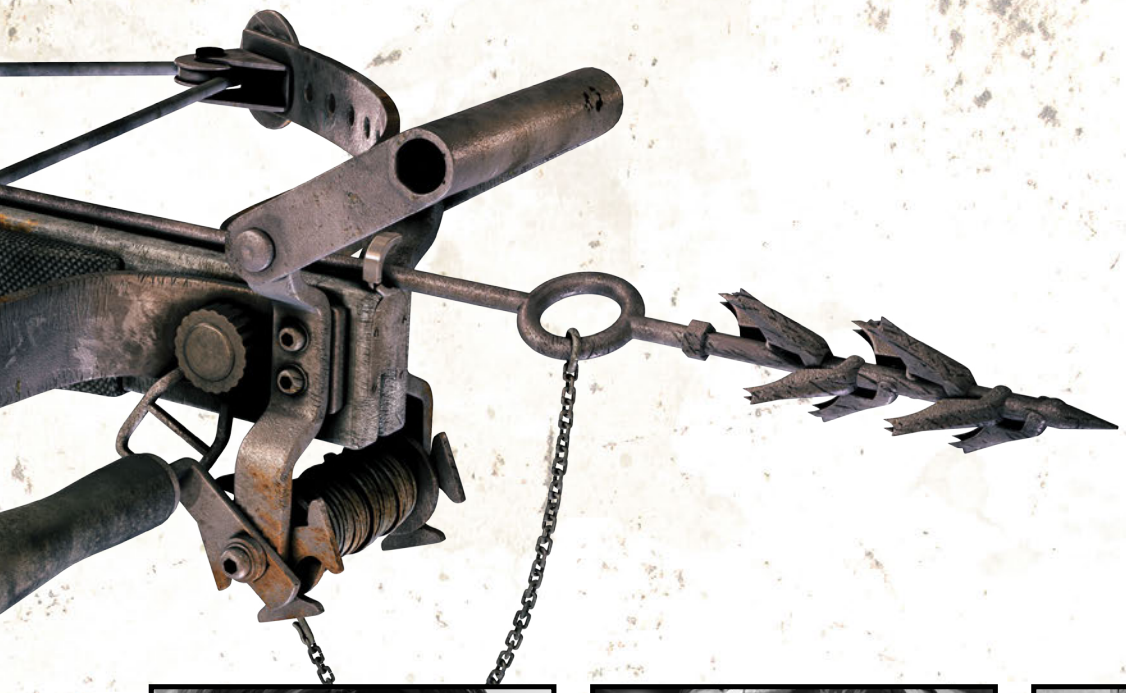
Fit and luscious, but one wrong word, and they bite you like a rabid dog.

SCRAPPERS

Good customers. From the ruins, they go straight to the Chroniclers and then come to us with their Drafts.

SPITALIANS

Doctors, but mad and rotten at the core – ask our Magpies. They have destroyed the East Wind. That's good for the other Flocks, but it's also a warning. Be wary of the Spitalians.



DEJAN THE RAVEN

Culture: Balkhan
Concept: The Adventurer
Cult: Apocalyptics (Raven)

As Raven of the Carrion Birds, Dejan was one of the big players in Justitian's amusement business. Then, the Dust Riders came. Their leader Vulco humiliated the Raven in battle; beaten like a naughty child, Dejan crawled back to his Flock. He has since lost standing and his left hand, a gift to the Mother of Ravens to calm her. However, this won't be enough if he doesn't get even soon.

JELENA THE MAGPIE

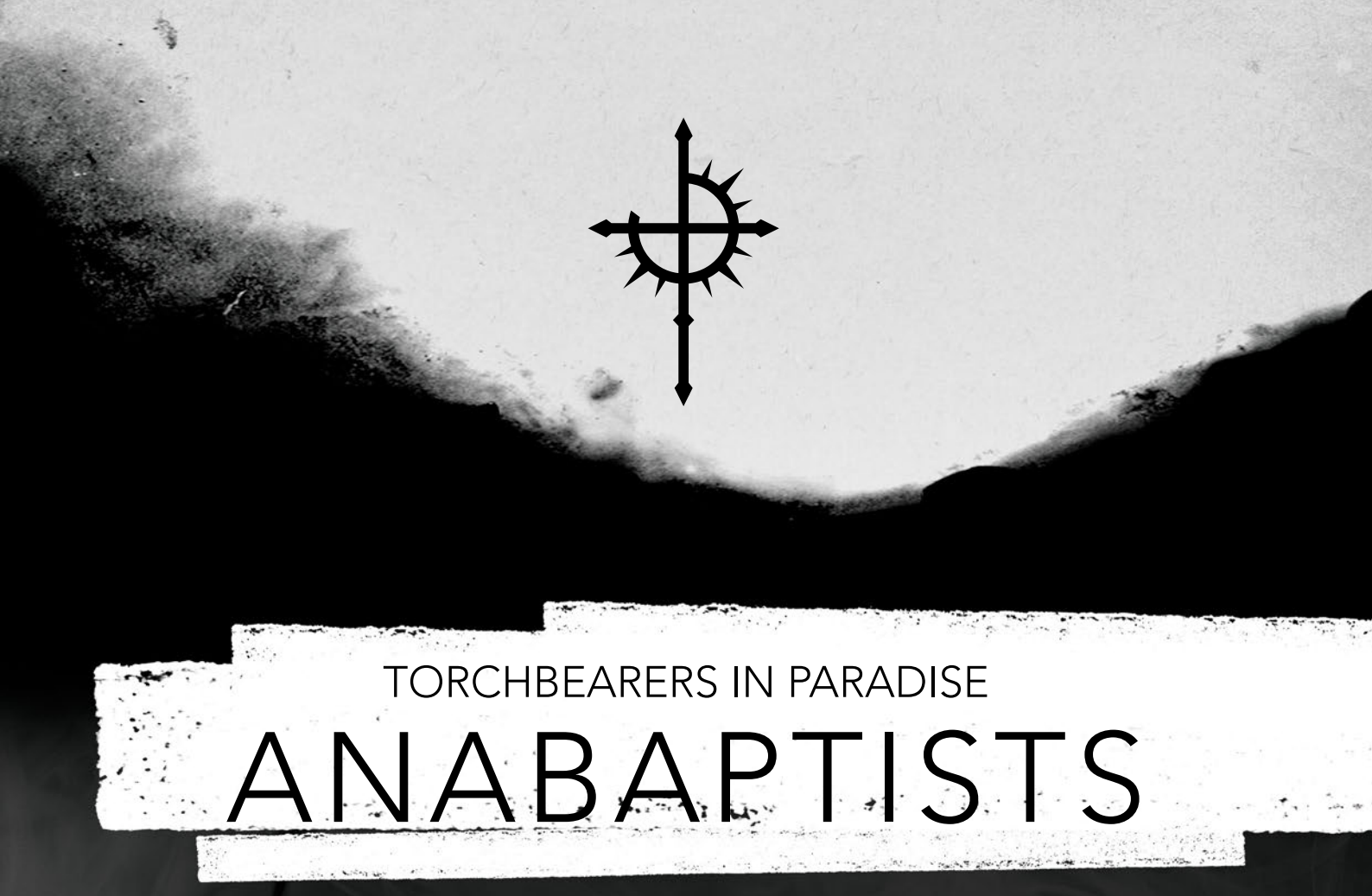
Culture: Balkhan
Concept: The Healer
Cult: Apocalyptics (Magpie)

She anoints herself with precious oils, is clad in provocative clothing – yet she remains in the dark: she is the Osmanic Iconide's consort. He is totally devoted to her and lets her Flock get away with deeds that another of his standing would punish with a saber. That also many small precious baubles vanish from his rooms, inflames his mind less than Jelena's attentions in the evenings.

HAGRA

Culture: Balkhan
Concept: The Traditionalist
Cult: Apocalyptics (Vulture)

In the Hybrispanian woods, he hides and stalks the battlefields. He listens for the noises of battle to subside and the moaning of the injured to fade. That's his moment: he darts between the piles of bodies, searching the clothes on the still-warm corpses, taking everything of value and disappearing in the woods before the rearguard can capture him. He's marked by death. Black boils blister on his forearms; he spits blood and belches fermented gases. It seems as if not all of his victims have fallen in battle.



TORCHBEARERS IN PARADISE

ANABAPTISTS

PREFACE

The air in the ancient stone building is dry. Daylight paints a gaudy display of colors through the stained-glass windows onto the cracked marble tiles. Once there were rows of pews here; now all that is left of the church is a gutted corpse. The religion it once catered to doesn't exist anymore. Something else has replaced it, something powerful, something irresistible. A man crouches in front of the altar, thick fingers clutched in prayer. He's part of this new faith.

Outside, a horn sounds, making the windowpanes rattle in their frames.

The man straightens. A ring made of steel makes his delicate nose seemed broad, and he smells of sweat and earth. He nods towards the altar once again and looks to the door. The portal is wide open, spring air shimmers in the sunshine.

The man takes a metal flask from his belt, opens it, smells the opening – a whiff of Elysium – and pours some oil into the palm of his hand. He puts the flask back.

"Strength, faith, insight," he murmurs, rubbing the oil with both hands and then touching them to his hair, slicking it back and keeping it out of his face with a leather headband. Today, he will go to war, and everything he is as a common person and a farmer will remain in this church.

Outside, the others are waiting. Men and women braced two-handed swords, long spades, flails, and pitchforks – war weapons for farmers and the suicidal. Many wear loose striped pants and leather jerkins or are equipped with padded shoulder pieces. The broken cross is everywhere: drawn onto the leather in simple chalk lines or worn as iron pendants.

Some of the warriors avoid the man's gaze and stare at the ground. Others are vibrating with excitement, their eyes blazing, their faces blotchy. Elysian fire burns within them, fueled by the oil in their hair.

Today will be the end for many of them. Who really believes in becoming one with the divine Pneuma? Harris over there has been recruited away from his land in Justitian's mires; he was a provider for his family like Frenke next to him, harassed by Spitalians and Chroniclers every day.

These men and women are not dumb, but they are simple people. The emissary had promised them that they'd be absorbed by God, but he actually won their souls when he praised the strong community of the Anabaptists and promised an end to their hunger.

We will see who shall not have to go hungry anymore. The man grabs a sword someone hands to him; he pats another warrior on the shoulder, laughs and makes his way to the front, to his gang. There is boasting, muscle flexing, and the ringing of swords. The weather is mild; he can see clearly. It's a good day to be devoured by Pheromancers.

INSIGHT

Rebus the Baptist was a seeker. He felt the presence of something sublime that could be traced through the living and dying of people like a golden thread. But no religion and no sect brought him any closer to it.

He knelt by the side of dying people and asked midwives. He dissected corpses, weighing the hearts and brains of godless people and believers alike. He filled page after page with notes, sometimes leaning towards Christendom, sometimes towards the Jehammedans.

It didn't matter. They all followed man-made beliefs; even Iconides and the few remaining Padres were only pagans. If they had something in common, it was their blindness. If it was fed from a common source…

Rebus' worldview shattered and changed.

On one hand, he saw the discord. It created chaos, which he had documented throughout his journeys. There had to be a counterbalancing force he had gotten close to over the years, the force that filled his mind with crisp freshness and kept him going yet had still remained intangible.

In the thicket of pagan faiths he finally found something called Neognosis. It was the tree in the Garden of Eden; it was the apple and the snake. It was pure, divine insight.

The Neognosis had hidden from him and from the world, had persisted between the covers of ancient volumes, when the archons of Christendom still gathered people around them. Their teachings were branded as pagan, infectious, and sick. The truth is never beautiful.

THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL

Creation: billions of fine tendrils shivered greedily, reaching out to return at once into the Demiurge's slimy body. The creature dreamed. The Lord of the hosts – God – had once created it to expand the Paradise ensouled by the divine breath. But the Demiurge dreamed of material world, hard and full of sin. As pollen clings to a bee's legs, Earth got stuck within the shimmering feel of tentacles. It felt good. The incredible happened: God's servant mixed his Lord's breath with the soulless matter and thus created the Bygone world. Like sticky slime, it surrounded the divine paradise. The Lord watched and waited, wanted to see if his youngest creations, the humans, would be able to withstand the Demiurge's corrupting influence.

They couldn't.

They were caught in a quagmire of ignorance; happily, they breathed the intoxicating gases and hummed old songs when war cries would have been more appropriate.

Only one tribe did not bow to the deceiver. Rebus the Baptist was its leader. He implored the Lord to refrain from destroying the world as punishment for their growing pile of sins; day and night he fasted and prayed, chastised himself and his followers and cried to the heavens. Finally, God took pity upon him. He decided to give Humanity one more chance. "Watch and learn!"

THE LONGEST NIGHT

There was a heavy thump. Break. Then there was another one. This time, the break seemed to last forever: the heart of Paradise beat like that of a mortally wounded deer, uneven and weak. Silence ensued. Paradise was dead. It was time for the apocalypse.

The Lord grabbed the earth, buried his fingers deep into it. The mounting lava surrounded his fingers, but he felt no pain, only sadness. They tore the earth apart. The Demiurge's ilk had eaten into it like maggots and rose to the surface as pus. With a negligent gesture, the Lord of the hosts tore apart the Demiurge and threw the broken body into the seething oceans.

On one side, the demons and avatars of the Demiurge gathered, remainders of his infamy; on the other side were Rebus and his rebaptized ones. Between the lines were the ignorant ones, waiting to be seduced by one side and redeemed by the other. For that was the deal between the super creatures and the nether creatures: the humans had to prove that they were still God's people. Victory or death. No middle ground – God was fed up with the humans.

The final battle had begun, a war to be waged on the decaying body of Paradise.

From Doomsday to Armageddon.

FARMERS AND WARRIORS

Rebus wrote down his thoughts and deeds in dozens of tomes. He saw the Eshaton as a revelation, the last act of mercy of an angry God. He revealed the illusion of a perfect world as a demiurgic veil, tore it away and opened up the view of the old paradise. It lay in front of the humans, torn. The ground was burnt and poisoned, waiting for honest hands' work. Rebus led, and his hosts followed. Armed with spades and humility they fought against the decay.

Years later, golden fields swayed again amidst broken cities; bulbs grew on the ancient battlefields. The land thrived.

The message spread. At first, there were only a few who begged for a fistful of grain and received it. But Rebus had underestimated the magnetism of his newly awakened paradise. Like locusts, famished skeletons attacked the fruits of the fields, eating until their bellies were fat and rounded and they could only crawl and grunt. However, they did not stop eating, striking down the workers, biting them, fighting for torn-out arms and gnawing at fingers.

NEOGNOSIS

Neognosis doesn't need faith. It's there. Every being, every stone is part of the reality it describes. Those who ignore it get caught blindly and happily in the Demiurge's tentacles. But those who accept it find salvation through insight. This insight can take many forms. To understand and transcend it takes a whole lifetime. According to the Neognosis, God and the world are opposites on a large scale, while mind and matter are opposed on a small scale. Once, both principles were separate: God's breath, the Pneuma, was clear and good; matter was dark and bad. It was the Demiurge who mixed two opposites and thus sealed his fate and the fate of the world. Humans are pure divine breath caught in a prison of flesh. The Neognosis describes the body as corrupt and dirty, and this is how Anabaptists see and treat it, too. Only death breaks open this prison, allows the Pneuma to flow out and rejoin the source: absolute knowledge. But between death and the reunion with God, there is a long drift through nothing riddled with chunks of decaying matter. An unenlightened soul wanders aimlessly, gets stuck easily and devolves into a new physical incarnation. Anabaptists teach contemplation in life to find the way to enlightenment in death.

Rebus' hosts had always been working the fields with the stamina of horses, but now they behaved like children when they had to raise their hoes against the devourers.

That had to change. Rebus armed them with pitchforks, pikes, and spades, and had them attack scarecrows until they were able to handle their farmers' tools like the weapons of a warrior.

Years later, the farmers were aided by a caste of warriors blocking every attack with a wall of spades.

In spite of all the skirmishes and the drills, Rebus' hosts kept very much in touch with the people. They were simple people and were considered good workers. Rough guys and women with their hearts in the right spot. Their community was strong, their religion decent. That death was supposed to bring salvation was easy to understand and got in nobody's way during their lifetime. Let those who wanted to believe Rebus' stories of the rotten paradise and the eternal struggle – paradise or no paradise, this was about survival, and at that, Rebus' hosts were experts.

THE FOUR RIVERS OF PARADISE

There are four rivers in paradise: Perat, Hiddekel, Gihon, and Pischon. Legendary powers are attributed to their waters. Supposedly long ago resin, cinnamon, and ginger floated on their surfaces into the glory of the garden, where they rooted and surrounded the tree of knowledge with their scents.

In his final years, Rebus roamed the land searching for these rivers because he wanted to wash off his old age with their waters. He could not leave yet, even if death promised salvation. It was too early! But all rivers he falsely identified as Perat, Hiddekel, Gihon, and Pischon had fallen dry, and their dusty sediments wafted across the land. Rebus' salty tears fell on the ground.

But his search had brought him another insight: were not the four rivers rather metaphorical rivers within each and every one of us, carrying in and out the good as well as the bad? Didn't people become hectic when they were exposed to the miasma of cities like the terrible Exalt? When they were ill, didn't they reek of decay and pus? Rebus ground seeds and pips, experimented with herbs, had the concoctions massaged into his body. Several hundred people sifted through old texts and collections on his behalf and gathered recipes.

The Pneuma was already leaking out of Rebus, though. On his death bed he called for his faithful followers, and they came running. Pischon oil and Hiddekel extract: crucible after crucible he emptied over his companions' heads. He anointed them all. The oil sank into the skin and mixed with their fluids. It cleared their gaze and gave them hope. No longer did they grieve for upcoming losses; now they euphorically waited for their teacher and leader to become one with the Lord. When Rebus was finally absorbed into the Pneuma, he was surrounded by the scent of Paradise.

CATHEDRAL CITY

Even though Rebus never found the rivers and began trying to locate them in the human body, some of his companions did not give up the search. How would one recognize one of these headstreams? What were they looking for? No doubt the land around would be especially fertile, even if the river itself had fallen dry. Around it, even the heretic Bygones would have noticed God's greatness and felt inspired to do great things.

When they were riding through the wild wheat of the river Rain one day with the ears caressing their legs, their breath caught. In the haze, they saw a giant tower, a cathedral. So often had they passed this spot, lost in thought or in conversation with each other. They had harvested the Rain wheat and sowed it in faraway regions. But that day, the cathedral seemed to them like a hint of God.

The insight hit them as cold as mountain water, and they stood and stared. The Demiurge must have stricken them with blindness and ignorance for centuries. They sank to the ground and buried their hands into the soil, rubbing the wheat straw and inhaling its scent. Gihon or Hiddekel, Pischon or Perat, this had to be one of the headstreams! The cathedral at its banks would become the center of their faith as it had attracted piteous people ages ago.

But the building was afflicted with heretics and other infamous people. A technology Cult called Chroniclers had dug deeply into the catacombs. Whatever they did down there, it helped the Demiurge rather than the Lord. Thousands of Neognostics armed with war spades and hoes marched against an enemy that a dozen could have vanquished.

That day, the Chroniclers suffered a defeat that they would never recover from; for Rebus' hosts, the liberation was just one of many successful skirmishes.

The hosts had been fragmented into several congregations, but now religious life became more centered. Rebus' hosts dug wells and caverns to collect water and built aqueducts to bring it to the fields. They cultivated the wild wheat and sowed the city's surroundings with it. The aqueduct artery grew. Pumping stations leveled out height differences, and even in remote enclaves, the fonts were soon filled with water from Cathedral City.

REFLECTION

The history of the Anabaptists knows no failure. Where God's warriors took up arms, any resistance ended soon. Yet still, now and then the Scrappers find forgotten fortresses and dig Anabaptists crosses out of their walls. Not the forged pendants that are worn in battle these days, but precious little things made of wire. Rust has turned them into gnarled strands: they're much older than anything that can be found in Cathedral City's arsenals. Those who dig deeper, under the grass, may find iron crockery, rotting books, glass-like stones from wells, and corroded swords. There are entryways to the underworld. A network of pale roots hangs from the ceiling; the air is damp and moldy. A font stands amidst decaying leaves; the water in it is black. Some explorers have claimed to have looted texts and sealed clay jugs from these ruins. Supposedly, these are the recipes of Elysian oil, including samples.

But how could that be? Those who enter the archives of Cathedral City and are brave enough to open up even the last doors encounter the name Cultrin. He must've been a strange man who did not really belong to this time.

Whole cities and armies perished when he and his entourage of the corrupted rode into battle. He almost destroyed the Anabaptists. But in Franka's pheromone-laden air, he changed his mind, dropped everything and disappeared. To the land, he left a civil war and thousands of secrets buried in the dust.

Gnosticism

END TIMES

200 years passed. Rebus was gone, but his sect of warriors and farmers had spread far beyond the borders of Borca. His prophecies were almost forgotten when the first Psychonauts were seen in the Rifts of Purgare. Soon, reports of Aberrants reached the Cult from all sides. The parallels to the Demiurge's ilk were too obvious.

Rebus had been right once again.

The final battle was near, and Rebus' hosts had been chosen to fight for the cause of humanity. A jolt went through the Cult. Rebus' hosts got ready. They anointed themselves, felt the four rivers within them well up. They baptized people and land with water, the enemy with fire and steel. From that day on, everyone called them Anabaptists.

TWO HEARTS

Today, the Anabaptists present themselves as an invincible front of strength, will, and community. They are dirty, and vulgar and don't shirk from any work. They fight their enemies passionately, sacrificing themselves for the greater good. Their principles are few, and almost none of them are unchangeable. Come to the Anabaptists, and tomorrow, there'll be more brothers and sisters at your side than you would have dared to dream. We are your family, your life and death.

The former farmers call themselves Ascetics. Those amongst them who go to sleep with the Neognosis and awake again with a quick prayer on the lips detest the body as a carnal burden caught in sin. They work the land to help paradise get rid of its rigor mortis – only when the soil is strong will it be able to feed Rebus' fighters in the final battle. Only late at night, when the muscles ache and the body gets weak, do they retreat to their chambers and give thanks for the work they are allowed to do. They dissociate themselves from their bodies through pain and meditation to finally break their chains and become one with the Pneuma. They suppress physical needs as if they were a blemish sent by the Demiurge. They starve themselves and deny copulation and other forms of sexual intercourse.

"Yeah, sure," the Orgiastics say and start laughing. For them, this entire Ascetic talk is a big joke and definitely nothing to imitate.

They are what has become of Rebus' warrior caste; they protect the Ascetics on the fields and in gangs attack Psychonauts and anyone who raises a hand against Rebus' hosts. While those amongst them who follow the faith see themselves as marked by the Demiurge like the Ascetics do, they believe in the superiority of their spiritual souls. They are above carnal desires and get rid of their human urges via excessive violence and orgies.

SYMBOLISM

The symbol of the cross, coupled with the broken wheel, points to Christian Gnostic roots. It is worn as an iron pendant, forged onto pauldrons, and sewn to banners. The wheel symbolizes God's creation; the missing quarter the human imperfection. Only when the circle is unbroken will God's people find salvation.

14

WHEN THE MILLENNIUM AFTER THE MILLENNIUM BEGINS
HUMANITY'S GAZE AND MIND WILL BE PRISONERS

THEY WILL BE INTOXICATED WITHOUT NOTICING IT

THEY WILL CONSIDER IMAGES AND REFLECTIONS
THE TRUTH OF THE WORLD

THEY WILL BE TREATED
LIKE SHEEP:
THEN, WHEN THE PREDATORS COME,
BIRDS OF PREY
WILL HERD THEM TOGETHER,
TO MAKE IT EASIER TO PUSH THEM TOWARDS A CLIFF

TO SET THEM AGAINST
EACH OTHER

THEY WILL BE SKINNED
TO GET AT THEIR WOOL AND SKIN
AND IF HUMANITY SURVIVES

IT WILL BE
BEREFT OF ITS SOUL.

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

SNAKE AND APPLE

Anabaptists don't recruit. They only open their arms wide, and the people come running, let themselves be directed from their everyday quagmire into the torchlight of Cathedral City. The new ones are called ‚Touched' when they become part of the gangs. They partake of the Anabaptists power and reputation with full hands. Not even Eve could resist the apple.

The teachings concerning the Demiurge are considered bullshit by many of those Touched Ones for many years. The Baptists in Cathedral City don't care. Those who join the Cult at least don't work for the enemy. Additionally, the community has a place for everyone, be it as an Ascetic working the land or as an Orgiastic on the battlefield. There comes a time when everyone has to prove his worth.

In the first year, Cathedral City pairs the Touched Ones with a senior Anabaptist who serves as a confessor and guide. He teaches his Touched One the basics of the Neognosis and how to recognize friends and enemies of the Cult. The Touched is the Anabaptist's lackey, helping him get dressed and performing menial tasks.

In his spare time, the new arrival explores Cathedral City or the Anabaptist camp in which his mentor is stationed. For days or weeks, he joins Orgiastic gangs or toils with the Ascetics in the fields. He has not pledged his life to the Cult yet and can leave his current service at any time to explore another aspect of the community the next day. But he should not expect the Anabaptists' patience to be boundless. He has at most one season to come to terms with himself: Where does he stand? How does he intend to gain insight? Does he want to liberate his mind through excesses and risk his life in battle against the Demiurge's monsters, or does he want to gain entrance to heaven through hard work?

One last time, he chooses a gang, though he remains with this one until the end of his days. His new brothers and sisters embrace and kiss him and lead him to his quarters. They anoint him just as Rebus anointed his chosen – and then grab the tattooing needle.

INITIATION

Whether Ascetic or Orgiastic, every Anabaptist wears a nose ring. It marks him as a slave to his body. Another symbol of membership are the dots tattooed on the forehead. There are always three dots, but the gangs vary form and color to differentiate themselves from each other: some wear three circles, others diamonds or triangles; some add more soot, others red dust from Ferropol or crushed minerals.

The Anabaptist learns to slick his hair with oil and tie it back with a piece of leather. In battle, this helps him see better, and in the fields, he doesn't have to stop to brush his hair from his eyes. In the first years, simple oil will have to do: rapeseed, mixed with a few Elysian ingredients. The oil tingles on the skin and vitalizes. The rivers flow. But that's nothing compared to what awaits him: in the oil presses in Cathedral City, Elysian oils are produced according to Rebus' recipes. They open up heaven and its powers to the user. The young Anabaptist will have to earn them – and he will need them.

THE SEED

The way into the Cult is simple; the way to its top isn't. Without a modicum of Neognostic devotion, an Ascetic remains on the fields and an Orgiastic on the front.

Those who want more start searching for the Seed. It's a little thing, but if you water it, it grows to be something bigger that produces new seeds. This is how Rebus described his first divine insight, which led to many more. Seeds require hard work, however, just like a garden doesn't thrive without the investment of energy. Only those who question themselves on a daily basis and try to see the big things in the small things will feel the Seed within them and be able to make it sprout – to partake in divine emanations.

The emanations are individual, and every devoted Anabaptist would be well advised to explore them in his mind. For some they are glaring visions, others believe to hear voices, and then there are those who feel an undefined mental change within their soul, as if they were keyed to a divine pole like a compass needle. Most reach this state during their days of hard work or seemingly lost battles, when heart and lungs pump and the enemies' hot blood is still running from their fists. Some take a shortcut and invent visions. They should be as cryptic as possible: giant stones, a blood-soaked sky, hands reaching down from the clouds, burying themselves in paradise's heaving body. There are frauds, but their descriptions often lack the excited passion and transcendent qualities of a true emanation.

Still, it's hard to tell if an emanation is real. This is why the commission of ancient Anabaptists resides in the cathedral's great hall, weighing and gauging their brothers' and sisters tales. Those who are called before this Council of Emanations are questioned for days. The Council takes its job seriously, for the emanations are seen as proof of the proximity to God and thus determine rank within the Cult.

With every new emanation, the Council listens a little bit more intently, exploring the soul of the enlightened one. The visions grow to become multilayered and contain mystical symbols, the existence of which is only known to Council members and the Baptists. In the end, only true believers or the truly cunning can reach the Cult's top.

RICH ON EMANATIONS

The eight most insightful Anabaptists rank higher than even the Council. They are as close to God as Rebus himself once was. They are the Baptists, and they determine the path of the Cult. Their discussions in the high chamber in the cathedral are secret, but the old men from the Council whisper that the Baptists rarely agree. However, if the Pneuma only allows one way, why should one need eight Baptists?

Outside the cathedral, the Baptists present a unified front. No harsh word comes from the lips of these enlightened people. Unanimously they push the Anabaptists forward and walk ahead themselves: those amongst them who once fought the Aberrants as Orgiastics still take up their swords; those who confronted forests of thorns with Spitfire and hoe do not refrain from leading the plow, even as a Baptist. Their actions soon make others forget the fact that they decide the destiny of tens of thousands.

ABERRANTS

There was never a shortage of enemies for Cathedral City. Six of the seven large countries bear the mark of the Demiurge, and in none of them is victory close at hand. Biokinetics and Pheromancers are especially repugnant to the Anabaptists: the breed queens' bloated bodies or the malformed arms and legs of Pollen's devourers prove at first glance that they are nothing more than soulless matter ripe for slaughtering. It has never been simpler to discern between good and evil.

The Sepsis, the plague of the present day, is just as bad as the Psychonauts. The Anabaptists consider it the affliction of paradise. Only through great fertility of the ground can it be exorcised – in spite of the Spitalians claiming something different. What do they know of paradise? They seem to feel pretty much at home in their own dirty little corner.

REVOLT

Borca was supposed to be an oasis of peace – at least someday. When the Rain river is swollen again from the waters of paradise and cinnamon grows at its banks. For decades, Anabaptists have been skirmishing here with Jehammedans and Chroniclers. The conflicts have left deep trenches full of spears.

But the times, they are a-changing.

Liqua, one of the largest Anabaptist cities in Borca, only a few days' journeys away from Cathedral City and her Orgiastic gangs, was under siege. The Exalter clan claimed the city as part of its heritage, and the population opened up the gates without much deliberation. They even cheered the invaders. The Anabaptists remained calm. In fact, they did not understand what happened there and thought the hubbub was a fun affair. When they realized that they had just witnessed the conquering of the city, it was already too late. Now, emissaries travel to and fro between Liqua, Cathedral City, and Justitian as though Liqua were the most important spot in the world. Attacking the city is unthinkably bold if you don't want to endanger the whole region's water supplies.

The Exalters see themselves and behave as legitimate rulers of Liqua. They point to centuries-old edicts and show documents signed by Rebus to the emissaries. These are obviously forged, but the people don't see that – or they want them to be genuine.

The Exalters stall for time and thus try the Baptists' patience. If Baptist Amos' gangs weren't busy destroying pheromone vents in Northern Franka, the conflict would have long since reached its bloody climax. If only Liqua were an exception! For the Clans are rising everywhere, attacking Cathedral City's water deliveries or conquering whole aqueduct segments. Day by day, they are getting cheekier. They avoid the Orgiastics, set traps, dig tunnels under the gangs marching routes.

BAPTIST AMOS

For decades, Amos fought Franka's Pheromancers as an Orgiastic. Even as a Baptist, he did not exchange his spot in the battle lines for a chair in the cathedral. He still leads the attacks on Ziggurats and breeding mounts.

His Anabaptists look up to him and would follow him into hell. In fact, that's what they do every day. They see Amos as a brilliant leader and an uncontrollable berserker in battle, and his emissaries spread the stories of his heroic deeds as far as Borca and Purgare. Hundreds come every day to march towards heaven at Amos' side.

The other Baptists are just as brave as he is – at least that's what their emissaries say. This leads to discord. Baptist Orphid and Baptist Trachees dared the unbelievable: they called the personality cult around Amos godless and asked the Council to recheck Amos' emanations. Amos only smiled at that. If he asked his Anabaptists to elevate him to a second Rebus – to an autocrat, even – they would do so.

OLD ENEMIES, NEW FRIENDS

When the Fragment Modus took off his streamer glove and offered a hand to the Baptists, they took it. Amos is said to have raged. Since then, the Fragment has been living in the cathedral as a guest. Modus is said to roam the archives together with Baptist Orphid, inspecting the documents that the Chroniclers left behind centuries ago. Once per day, Modus shows up on the steps of the cathedral to prove that he's alive and has the right to hospitality. As long as this applies, there is peace between Anabaptists and Chroniclers.

The Jehammedans are a different case. Their demeanor, their cleanliness, their precisely shaved beards, and their starched garments expose the Anabaptists' own crudeness. The Orgiastics repaid that arrogance a thousand fold: they killed their goat herds, dragged Abramis from tents, pushed them into the dirt, and shaved them clean with their swords. Hagaris and Saraelis were raped. The hatred has deepened the trenches between them to a bottomless hell over the centuries.

In the Adriatic basin, however, where the eons-old battle began, something new is rising. In the fight against the Jehammedans from the Balkhan, the Anabaptists converted the majority of the Purgans and built large fortresses along the river Adria. A year ago, heavily armed troops manned those bulky fortresses while the cries and moans of the wounded in the giant sick bay cities echoed across the basin.

But now, the Anabaptists' sword arm has become just as heavy as the Jehammedans'. They still curse each other, but no one risks an attack for fear it might enrage the enemy and provoke a bloody counterattack. Still, the Adriatic remains a powder keg with a short fuse.

RANKS ANABAPTISTS

1 - TOUCHED

Those who feel the calling can follow the Anabaptists for a while, no strings attached. Afterwards they can leave – or renew the covenant through baptism, start wearing the nose ring, and have three dots tattooed on their forehead. They are now Anabaptists.

2 - ASCETIC

Paradise is dead. The Ascetics water the dusty ground with their sweat, tear rotting roots out of it, and clear away stones. Where the Aberrant essence blighted the land yesterday, tomorrow healthy wheat shall sway in the wind. With willpower and a brave heart, they reclaim the wasteland. They incite the people to give their best, lead by glorious example, and never give up.

3 - ELYSIAN

They have developed a deep understanding of the creation and can track down and destroy the Sepsis. From herbs – some wholesome, some deadly – their presses produce the oil that turns the Orgiastics into fearless fighters, taking away pain and unleashing strength. They kneel next to the fallen on the field and bandage their wounds or anoint them for their journey into the divine Pneuma.

2 - ORGIASTIC

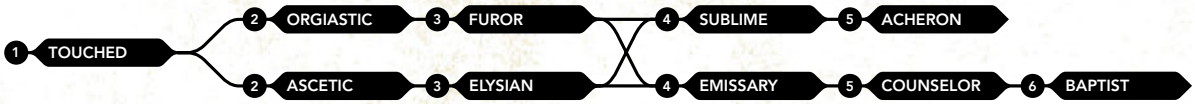
On the battlefield, the Orgiastics leave everything behind that humankind has assembled in the way of moral excess over the millennia. Elysian oils burn through their veins like the purgatory, and their senses are painfully clear. They shout their anger at their enemies and feel their urges rage out of control. Then they attack.

Orgiastics always go to extremes. While the Ascetics try to turn their world into paradise, Orgiastics destroy the Demiurge's world.

3 - FUROR

The Furors have distinguished themselves by fearlessly fighting countless battles and radiating emanations. Their adamant faith is undisputed, which opens the way to Cathedral City's catacombs for them. Down there are the forbidden arsenals: row after row of corrupted weapons covered in age-old dirt. Some of them were stored here when Cathedral City was still infested by the Chroniclers. The Baptists allow no one but the Furors to wield these weapons in battle. Most of them choose Spitfires: the burst devours the spores of Sepsis that otherwise well up when slaughtering Aberrants.

HIERARCHY AND RANKS - ANABAPTISTS



4 - EMISSARY

They have mortified their flesh and have come out of this torture rich in emanations. Their mind is clear; they see the threads of life beginning in Cathedral City, feel the gossamer woven by the Anabaptists. One day, it'll turn into paradise, and divine Pneuma will free the people from their mortal shell.

Until then, however, they need to find allies, coordinate campaigns and create refuges in the wasteland. Emissaries speak for Cathedral City in councils, on panels, in front of the Clans, and in Justitian's senates. They carry the Baptists' will into the land. Their influence is great – only one word and a gang of Orgiastics is at their side.

5 - COUNSELOR

When the Baptists' bliss shines on emissaries, they move amongst them, eat with them, and receive the word like a vocation: they will form the next generation of Baptists. Until that time, they lead the Council of Emanations and listen to the description of dreams and prophecies. They judge their meanings for the Cult and for the Anabaptist blessed with them.

6 - BAPTIST

Eight Baptists lead the Anabaptists. Each one commands thousands of Anabaptists, sends dispatches out into the land, and decides on plans for war and destruction. However, the Baptists do not spend their old age sitting around a map of Europe pushing around tokens: the Orgiastics amongst them still wield the sword; the Ascetics still wield the hoe. Only very few of them rise into divine Pneuma from their bed.

4 - SUBLIME

The common Anabaptist looks within himself for insights, lets the Seed take root and grow to be able to harvest more grains. But some are at the center of the prophecy themselves, are announced by emanations and signs. Interpreters of the script explore the old texts for such instances looking for clues, collecting books, producing diagrams, and asking counselors and Baptists. The chosen one, though, is above the fray. Protected by Furors, he waits for the Baptists to decide: is he a common man or a manifested emanation, a Sublime?

Cathedral City has known only a few hundred Sublimes throughout her long history. These chosen ones are like Saints: they are revered and worshiped. Some disappear into the mountains to become grains of seed in the heads of Anabaptists. Others attack the enemy lines like forces of nature, burning up in the fires of their passion. When they call for a crusade, thousands follow.

5 - ACHERON

The rules of the Cult were made for common people, not for Sublimes; they can choose paths that even a Baptist wouldn't risk to take. One of these paths leads away from Elysian Rivers down to the rivers of the dead, Styx and Acheron.

There is no cinnamon and cardamom on their banks, but Sepsis and Burn. To use their powers means opening your own heart to the corruption, means separating yourself from humanity to attack enemies like a glaring, searing star. An Acheron is feared, his way of life cursed.

Still, his sacrifice is accepted. It fills an Anabaptist's heart with pride and is a warning to him at the same time.

SPITFIRE

STEREOTYPES

ANUBIANS
They look for divinity in stones and trees, talk to bugs, and surround themselves with bones and death. They won't find anything.

APOCALYPTICS
They are rotten at the core and defile the paradise where it seemed whole again. If we were more, they would be fewer.

CHRONICLERS
Poor fools who hide their cowardice behind masks and impress the crowds with magic tricks. Baptist Orphid seems to be impressed, too. In spite of everything we are bound by her word: that's why there is a cease-fire.

CLANNERS
We don't deceive. We don't fill people's heads with promises of salvation. We work hard in the fields and give our lives for the security of the villages. We lead by example, and the people love us for it.

HELLVETICS
They would make good soldiers for a good and holy cause. For now they sit in their mountain holding their hands open whenever someone wants to traverse God's world. The Filaments are a fitting punishment.

JEHAMMEDANS
Oh man. Do you know what they do with the goats? I don't want to think about it. Otherwise, everything's always spick and span; everything has its place, never any disorder, and great beards. Even their curses are like lukewarm air: they call us fishermen's children! Geez.

JUDGES
Rebus and the First Judge both had a vision. Both erected a fortress for humanity: one was founded on faith, the other one on rules and laws. One is adamant; the other is crumbling.

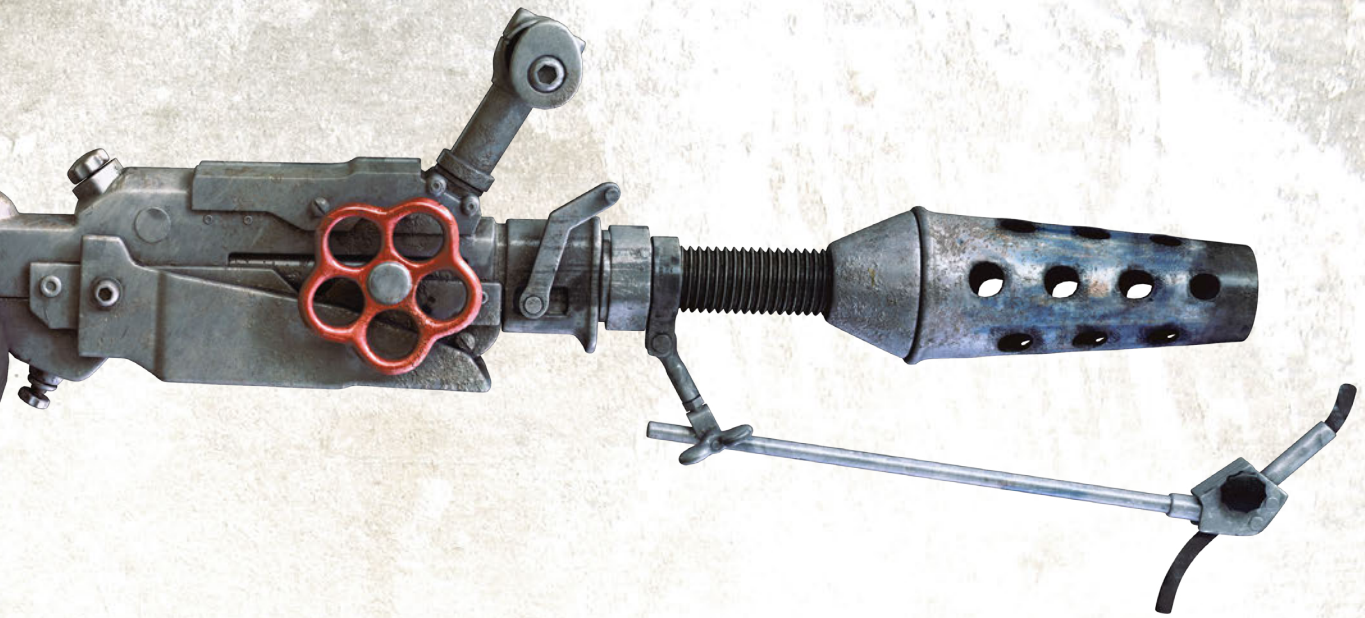
NEOLIBYANS
In Purgare, they knew how to keep us fighting: bulbs and steel for their "white brethren". They are sly dogs. As if they hadn't also sold to the Jehammedans.

PALERS
Sated on other people's work, these toads hide in their realm beneath the roots. Still, the Baptists have not branded them children of the Demiurge … yet.

SCOURGERS
We'd love to have them join the ranks of the Orgiastics. They, however, follow the path of revenge, not the path of insight. They are another victory for the Demiurge.

SCRAPPERS
Scrappers have devoted themselves to material things, but they are good workers. They are the ear we are supposed to reap.

SPITALIANS
They believe to have found their grain of seed in science. Since the time of Rebus we have known that it makes no sense to try to teach them, so we take them as they are. At least they are on the right side.



VINCENT THE BREAKER OF BASSHAM

Culture: Franka
Concept: The Protector
Cult: Anabaptists (Counselor)

Vincent freed the Frankan Bassham from the Swarm and has been ruling the border town undisputedly ever since. Baptist Amos lets Vincent teach fresh squads how to fight the Pheromancers. From here, they break through pheromone vents and run through wasp storms for the first time. He's considered an important intermediary for the Spitalian mission in Franka.

CASSANDRA THE DREAMER

Culture: Purgare
Concept: The Creator
Cult: Anabaptists (Sublime)

Cassandra was one of the great resistance fighters on the Adriatic West Bank. The Orgiastics claimed she was able to dream the thoughts of her enemies from the Balkhan. Deep within, though, she had a desire for peace in this war-torn region. When the fighting slowed, she fell into an endless slumber that is still continuing. The Elysians watch over her resting place, anoint her with Elysian oils, and note every word she utters.

LEIBNER THE HUNTER

Culture: Borca
Concept: The Mediator
Cult: Anabaptists (Furor)

Leibner made a name for himself around Cathedral City when he was still a young man. Known for his courage and his talent for tracking down Spore Beasts, he hires combat gangs to ferret out these monsters. He also has a network of informers looking for and monitoring breeding caves. Hundreds obey his command, following him into combat. The Baptists tried honoring him by making him an emissary, but he declined their offer. His is a different fate.

THE VAULT CRAWLERS

PALERS

BUNKER RATS

A rectangle of light marked the border between the outside and the eternal darkness on the inside. The rectangle slowly shrunk, became a slit, and a pounding noise echoed through the tunnel. Dozens of people watched the spectacle; their pupils widened as the darkness began to surround them. There was a last shimmer, like a string of pearls made of flashes from a total eclipse of the sun, and then it was done. With a loud bang, the bar closed. Engines roared and pushed invisible bolts that were big as an arm into the bulkhead. The mountain had closed behind them. Neon tubes awoke with a soft clicking noise. For a long time, their light would mean day to the group.

Many generations later, people stand before the bulkhead again. There are patches of rust on the steel; condensate has created dirty grooves in the concrete of the tunnel walls. The engines tremble and start, stuttering and roaring like old miners suffering from a lung disease. The bulkhead shudders with the beat of the pistons; rust flakes away and falls to the ground shimmering. The neon tube flickers and hums. With a crash, the gap opens a finger width. At once, two figures separate from the group and jam hydraulic claws into the gap. With a crackle, the tools work the bulkhead, pushing against petrified lube oil and jammed friction bearings.

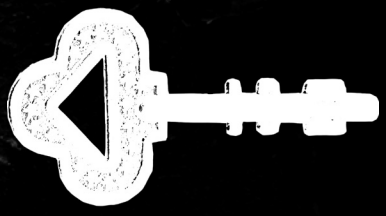
Suddenly, the bulkhead opens, its halves crashing into their recesses. The hydraulic coils fall to the concrete with a thud. Dirt and roots fall from the bulkhead; dust billows through the corridor. The engines die down. The neon tube does the same. Darkness.

The people wait. They can taste the earth in the air. A breeze washes over them: the mountain exhales.

The dust settles; starlight falls into the corridor, glittering in the eyes of the people, different than those who went into the darkness long ago. Their skin is waxen and pale, their eyes unreadable black holes in the darkness.

A lot of time has passed.

But they have never forgotten their gods, have never left out even one ritual, have never become unfaithful to the fuzzy figures on the image screens and their likenesses in the sarcophagi. When they go out into the world now, raising their gleaming, pearlescent pendants high, they will be the chosen ones. Chosen to free the world and pave the way for the gods.



IN FILE

They marched. Hundreds and thousands streamed into the Recombination Group's subterranean facilities all over the world under cover of night. They gazed straight ahead; there was no doubt in their eyes. They were beautiful people: strong and powerfully built, their skin without blemish. Everyone knew them as the 'Guardians'. With long strides, they went down into the mountain, through whitewashed, brightly lit corridors. They followed the signs, endless colorful lines. They went past operation theaters, ignored the generator rooms, the provisionary systems, and a forest of Freon tanks.

They marched on.

A hall opened up before them: thousands of tubes, all larger than a man, some standing, others lying on the floor or piled upon each other. Red and green lights flickered in turn; cables and hoses from the cylinders disappeared in the ceiling.

The Guardians spread out and attacked the cylinders. They touched control panels, removed digital barriers. Inside, something hissed, and then the tops opened. Ice-cold mist from the inside blew across the floor. Men, women, and children lay in the cylinders. They slept. Hoarfrost glittered on their skin. The lids were tight over the frozen eyes; their cheeks sunken in. They were all ill, most of them frozen in the throes of death.

The guardians could have woken them. But what should they have answered to the questions and the screaming, the nervous "Am I healed?" or "What are you doing to me?" It would have added unacceptability to unpostponability.

Instead, the guardians put on gloves and took the bodies from the chambers. Bones and flesh cracked like ice. With scrapers, they removed the remainders. They threw complete bodies as well as single arms and legs into carts, piling them up in a wild mix of limbs. Electro cars came, and cart after cart was hooked to them until they finally started moving with a hum.

They drove to the storage halls. Endless halls with pillars, empty, the end barely visible to the naked eye. The electro cars unhinged the carts and returned. They carried everything here that the sleeping chambers had to offer.

The work was done. One guardian stood at the portal and let his gaze drift across the army of carts. There had to be a hundred, all filled with… what looked like the stuff a butcher leaves behind. He switched off the light, closed the doors, locked and sealed the halls for eternity. No one noticed that some of those trapped awoke – this transgression remained unpunished.

SEALED

The guardians formed a guard of honor when their wards arrived in armored cars and climbed down into the dispensers. All traces of the last purge had been cleaned away; the corridors shone in the brightest white, brightly like the smiles of the guardians.

All newcomers were marked. They had numbers on the backs of their hands, all multiples of 100; there were 100s and 200s and 300s – up to the 900s. People in white coats were already waiting at the glass cylinders and hailed the newcomers. With a machine the size of their hand they scanned the tattoos, nodding. Everyone was tense; that feeling of being part of something big was ubiquitous. They were in a festive mood, like at one of Getrell's announcements. But today, the gift was not self-awareness but survival.

Ten days later, the newcomers had become Sleepers. Locked in the chambers, their eyes gazed out of crystalline nanite. Shining green displays confirmed the cryostasis. Then the lights went out, the doors closed. Heavy steel bulkheads snapped into their bracings. The countdown had begun. 100 years until the first ejection.

The guardians lived on the outer ring. They maintained the backup systems and bioreactors, watched the data stream from the facility's core: the Sleeper Chambers. This data stream really was something. Those who tried to find a pattern in the flood of gene and human parameters soon were successful. Too soon, some of the guardians thought, but their warnings remained unheard. All the Sleepers carried within them a special combination of genes that made them… divine? According to data, there was no other possible conclusion.

It was all a facade. With every generation of guardians, the information backed up in the dispenser software's code was presented simpler than before. It planted the seed for a religion.

Pure, infectious memetics.

BLACKOUTS

The Eshaton came and went. The annual clock within the dispensers kept ticking.

But even before they could announce the first scheduled opening, some bunker teams had already given up and blown open the portals. Outside in the wasteland, they started a new life, rid themselves of the brainwashing and became part of the surviving population.

Most waited, though. Year after year, they forced down the slimy liquid from the algae tanks, drank water that had

passed through thousands of bodies. When the daylight lamps, the xenon tubes, and the light bulbs finally expired, eternal dusk surrounded them. On the last day of light, there were recollections of helplessness, but practiced doggedness was passed on through the generations. After centuries, day X had become a mystical moment: it was not the guardians who chose the darkness, but the darkness that chose the guardians.

Life in the darkness of the tunnel systems, interrupted only by a few islands of light – pale LCD gauges at bunker aggregates – took its toll: the guardians suffered from deficiency signs, became paler with every generation and lost their hair in handfuls. Seeing became less important; other senses like hearing and touch took over leadership from the eyes. When the darkness threatened to swallow them completely, the guardians scratched their collective knowledge into the walls. With fingers caressing the scratches, one could experience the last days of light, learn about the Sleepers' powers, or listen to problems and fears of guardians who had lived many years ago. A history in stone. Next, the intercoms died. The guardians replaced them with a tube system that wound through the bunker in endless curves. First they banged simple rhythms; later more complex patterns emerged. They were able to transmit entire news stories that way.

The crying of children echoing through the darkness was liberating and provided a dimension to the nothing that the people could cling to. The guardians sang to keep the darkness away from their hearts.

FAITH

The faith in the Sleepers as divine creatures grew. Use and maintenance of the facility were coded in rituals: the religion served as a transmitter for practical knowledge. The memetics modifications within the dispenser code finally unraveled completely: picture walls that had been dead for eons woke up, displayed some shining creatures for a few seconds, and then died down again. Artifacts recovered from caches made bulkheads open or activated speakers from which spherical sounds came. Sung melodies or simple noises could open doors that had been sealed for centuries. Every bunker was a paradise only waiting to be explored with a strong faith.

Some crews took centuries to solve the biggest mystery available to them. Only through the right combination of artifacts and the right words at the right time could they break past a series of barriers and finally stand in the room with the domed ceiling.

In this vault, there were strange echoes – it seemed as if the speaker always stood behind the listener. The dome's

true power, though, only revealed itself to those who were blessed with pendants and an impressive voice: stars were projected on the walls, accompanied by a supernatural murmuring. Perfect sound synthesis. Even those who doubted the Sleepers' divinity saw their faith restored under the dome.

FROM THE DARK

The aggregates died down. They were replaced from supply caches as long as the guardians could do so. Then the ventilation's propeller drives started screeching; they finally stopped with a discharge flash. More spare parts. The water preparation became more and more undependable: the drinking water stank; the toilets clogged. Mold spread in the corridors and made entire sectors uninhabitable. The bioreactors leaked; cable isolations became brittle; displays flashed for one last time and then blacked out. The technology in the bunker facilities died down, and there was nothing that the guardians could do about it. The controls for the entrance seals did not react to their keystrokes anymore. The dispensers had become the guardians' prison – or their deathtrap.

Some few guardians dedicated their lives to the language of the Bygones. They rummaged around in databases, where they found instruction manuals, documentations, and emergency plans. They had to recover what the centuries had forgotten, and all too often their insights were lost again when they died. Others eventually performed the miracle: they reactivated the bolting mechanisms and the opening mechanisms, destroyed the seal with tools.

For the first time in their lives, they saw the sun and realized the limitlessness of the sky. And they were afraid.

AWAKENING

The world was very different from what they had imagined. They did not bow to the world's rulers of their own accord. The Balkhani only laughed about the pale creatures and their stories of sleeping gods and bludgeoned the guardians back into their holes.

For so long, they had called themselves ‚guardians', but now they received the title that would spread on the surface: Palers, a war name to hide their true nature. They felt hatred rise within themselves.

Back in the safe body of the dispensers, the survivors of the first expeditions discussed what they should do. The aim was clear: they had to pave the way for the divine ones, build palaces out of limestone and bones for them (they did not all agree about how gods liked to reside). But they were only few, and a direct confrontation with the abovegrounders was out of the question. So they remembered their strongest ally: the night. Under cover

of the darkness they returned to the location of the defeat, strangled their enemies while they slept, and stole their belongings. The re-conquering had started.

DEMAGOGUES

Getrell's memetics induced territoriality and dominance coupled with submissiveness towards the ruling class. Highly infectious ideas disguised as an elitist ideology – a difficult construct that was modified and statistically backed a million times in the Stream before it was installed in the dispensers. Yet it was successful. Without outside influences, the memes developed as planned. They created a form of solidarity for which love or devotion are only insufficient descriptions, as well as a special talent: the ability to lead and to instruct by voice, facial expressions, and gestures.

Language and sounds had always held immense meaning in Paler society. A Paler with a deep, resonant voice is more influential than one who speaks in a falsetto. Children with a strong voice power were made to train their pronunciation. The elders took care of them and taught them the art of storytelling in the hopes of raising one of their best: a Demagogue.

Within him, memetics and talent have become one. One word from him, correctly intoned and spoken with the right attitude, provokes emotions like fear or desire; concentrated to a series of memetically active phonemes, it can influence the mind.

The Demagogue judges, leads councils, and gives solace. His memetics develop along with his nature: Rato, a Demagogue of fear, controls his subordinates through terror and punishes deviance with panic; the words of Chire, a Demagogue of violence, hurt like whip lashes; Jiklas' people indulge in the intoxication of song to forget the terrors of the outside world.

Within the Cult, these influences work very well as they were created as tools to control the Cult. But the abovegrounders, too, feel the fire in the vocal power of the Demagogues. It doesn't burn them, but it changes something inside them: implants fear, although the voice sounds very agreeable; lures them into a trap; hurts like hell; makes the gums bleed.

AWAKENED

There had to be others like them out there, that threw themselves against the portals with broken hydraulic coils. There were brothers and sisters to save.

Soon, the first Revivers left the bunkers. The sun burned through their skin into the flesh, made them look for shelter by day and travel on in the night. They were adorned with Sun Discs that bore the dispenser command codes and other artifacts, signs of awe and proof of their origin. For orientation, they used old Recombination Group maps, followed signs into a world they did not understand.

Every dispenser they found made their hearts swell. They were not alone.

Where they found others like themselves, the implanted memetic mechanisms took over at once: the Revivers were received like old friends. With their pendants, they opened portals the skeleton crews had despaired on and loaded additional codes into their Sun Discs from the picture walls. They were in a holy quest and felt that they were getting closer to their goal with every dispenser.

SLEEPER

The ancestors of the Palers belonged to the best that the Recombination Group had to offer. All of them were loyal and infected with Getrell's memetics; they looked up to the leaders of the corporation with gleaming eyes. That was not enough for Getrell. Deep down in the abysses of the sealed catacombs, those he had chosen himself waited for their awakening. Are they scientists, the board, soldiers? The dispenser data systems bore witness and could tell – thousands of glass eyes watched the long march into the depths. But their life elixir ran out centuries ago. Without electricity, they have fallen silent.

Posterity only has the words of Jaquar, an alleged Sleeper. In the ruins of Laibach, he was found by Hellvetics and told a story about betrayal, immortality, and madness: "Do you see this 100 here? Goes all the way down to the bone. Even right into the damn soul. Don't touch it! I am, no, I was a socio-cyberneticist. Others built roads; I programmed groups of people. Advanced memetics. What year is this? No. That can't be. That can't be! Only weeks ago… I met a 300. That shouldn't have happened."

He told about Exalt: all the blood and gore, the endless labyrinths and the grinder. He said the city was their temple, prepared for a coming that would test and take in the best of us and to turn down the worst.

But why? He told of the Free Spirit equipment. "Free Spirit – is that a rank or a subgroup? Why don't we know it? Why do we know so little? There must be dispensers, that have to be in working order. The plan can still work…" It was to be his legacy.

Shortly afterward, Jaquar died under mysterious circumstances in a locked chamber in the Alpine Fortress. When the Hellvetics prepared the body for the last journey, they saw the countless pinpricks for the first time – as if something had milked him for his blood.

Eventually, they had checked all dispenser locations on the maps. The search was over. All Palers were free. Still, they felt incomplete. They had to have overlooked something. The Revivers settled down, grew old, and died in bitterness. In the dispensers, they were considered heroes, their names were honored, and meritorious Palers carried them as honorary titles, but no one wanted to follow in their footsteps. But several years ago, a drawing surfaced. It showed a type of dispenser that no Paler had ever seen. 'Gusev', number 12 of 44. According to the Chroniclers, the coordinates pointed to a location in Noret, right in the middle of the Machine Mens' territory. But who trusts a Chronicler? At least in this case, the Palers did. Since then, the Revivers have been on the road again. They look for old records, dig into Recombination Group facilities, and exchange burnt-out artifacts for information. Sometimes they even talk to abovegrounders. Then they hold back, ask instead of order. It doesn't always work, but without help, they will not find the 44 bunkers. Maybe that's the divines' last test. Yes, the liberation must be truly at hand!

TRADE

The implanted memes strengthen the community, but they also erect a barrier against everything from the outside. Indifference is the best thing that abovegrounders can expect from Palers.

Traders try anyway. They transport food to the bunker portals and engage in the dance of arrogance. Palers demand instead of asking and take instead of buying. For the trader, everything's on the line, but if he is successful, he can make enormous profits. The alleged scrap that the Palers pay the traders with can be resold for a lot of money to the Chroniclers.

Who's laughing now?

23

WHEN THE MILLENNIUM AFTER THE MILLENNIUM BEGINS

THE SUN WILL BURN THE EARTH
THE AIR WILL NOT PROTECT US FROM ITS FIRE ANYMORE
IT WILL ONLY BE A POROUS CURTAIN
AND THE BURNING LIGHT WILL
CONSUME EYES AND SKIN

THE SEA WILL FOAM LIKE BOILING WATER
CITIES AND RIVERS WILL BE BURIED

WHOLE CONTINENTS WILL VANISH

THE PEOPLE WILL FLEE TO THE MOUNTAINS
AND THEY'LL START REBUILDING AND FORGETTING
WHAT HAPPENED.

[JEHAN DE VEZELAY]

HUNTERS IN THE NIGHT

Food is getting scarce, and what little remains in the algae tanks tastes awful or is simply poisonous. The only alternative for the Palers is to go searching at the surface. They've never considered tilling fields or breeding animals. They know stores from which they can take things according to a rationing schedule. They are depleted now, so they need new stores. There are many on the surface, and they are refilled regularly. There's no rationing schedule, either.

This is why many Palers have moved from the darkness of the underground to the blackness of the night and are robbing villages. Especially the regions in the northern Balkhan where there are lots of dispensers suffer from the Paler plague. Villages are bled dry, vanish, and all too often drag the parasitic Paler society along to its doom; others resist or turn to the Voivodes.

The large bunkers Thalus and Fermat have existed for centuries in spite of the raids. They developed a rota system, which gives looted villages the chance to recover. The Palers loot the land continuously, but they do not completely bleed it dry.

THE DAY AFTER

The Sleepers will awake. Their eyes are like gold and fire; their skin is like white plastic, even and without blemish. They come armed with the weapons of Armageddon, mighty artifacts from the depths of the dispensers. They will turn the heat of the sun against their enemies, burn them to ashes or turn them into pillars of salt. On columns of fire, they rise above the mortals and judge them cruelly. Then they will take the Palers by the hand and lead them into the light. After centuries of humility. Together they will build a realm of abundance on the bones of the abovegrounders; the few survivors will become slaves serving the sublime. The Palers are now a caste of priests. It is their calling. Even if the world resists them in the beginning, it will be grateful to them in the end. And worship them. Until eternity. Amen.

SECRET LANGUAGE

In the presence of strangers, the Palers use a system of clicking and clunking noises that imitates their tube raps. Crimes against the abovegrounders can be more easily coordinated when the victims cannot understand the Palers' discussions. It's a war language that differs very much from bunker to bunker.

SLEEPER PROPHETS

When the hundred-year-olds rose from the darkness in 2173, the third generation of guardians followed them into the untamed land of the Balkhan.

Memetics had already begun its work, but old knowledge was still stuck within the Palers' skulls like tar. They still clung to old values, were a little off the rails, but still autonomous. The second wave of Sleepers already gazed into the awe-filled eyes of worshippers who offered them dried lizards and submachine guns while intoning a polyphonic mantra that made the dust dance. Today, Sleeper Prophets roam Europe. They are called Daimondal, Trice, Helios, Uriz, and Enceph and conjure fire, heal deadly fever with divine stones, and talk in thundering voices that can be heard even over the noise of the wind and the cries of thousands of followers. In the eyes of the superstitious people, they are gods. However, they see themselves only as harbingers of a far greater power.

Many Palers leave the dispensers to serve the prophets, becoming Halos – thus abandoning their holy task to guard their own bunker with its sleeping gods.

THE TRISZYKLIKON

The disc is the size of the palm of a hand, black, smooth, and hard as glass. Into its surface, three interlocking triangles are etched to form one unbroken line; they are only visible when the disc is held into the light at a certain angle.

The Palers call it the moon disc or the Triszyklikon; in any case, it does not resemble one of the known Sun Discs. It is also impossible to load up codes into it at the stations, or at least it doesn't react: no humming, no flashing, no soft pulsing. However, some Palers claim that it sticks to the hands. Not because they are greasy: the disc seems to sink into the skin, which doesn't seem to want to let it go again. Nonsense, others say.

It is unknown where the Triszyklikon was found. According to legends, it was discovered in the catacombs of Exalt, alone in a room the size of the globe.

As this cannot be true, though, there are many and more alternative stories: forged by the gods and planted into the sky as star, fallen and found by the Palers; recovered from a battlefield in the Balkhan; discovered in a cave and torn from the mummified hands of an Anubian.

Whatever the case, the Palers worship the Triszyklikon. Only the greatest redeemers have the right to carry the disc into another bunker to be tested at the portals. It feels like a key, so it must open something...

RANKS PALERS

1 - SPECTER

Born in darkness, armed only with humility, the Specter submits to the community, offers his throat to the Demagogue. He is nothing and has to prove his worth through actions or the sound of his voice.

2 - SOLAR

The Palers hate the sun: it's blinding, it's hot, and it reveals the ways of the community to the abovegrounders.

But it's also a life giver, not unlike the dispenser aggregates – and as such, subordinate to the Palers. The Solars are its rulers. In the glaring sunshine, they unfold the matte black bunker panels and thus channel the celestial body's power into the dispenser that greets it happily with flickering cascades of symbols on its display walls. According to legend, the Solars are the keepers of balance and force the sun back into darkness every day, where it recharges to return renewed the next morning.

The Solars don't disagree, but they see themselves mainly as technicians. They keep the systems working, follow the ancient rituals for the upkeep of the ventilation, the strengthening of the pumps, and so on. It's a lot to do. The dispenser technology is modular; usually it's sufficient to unplug something and plug something else in its place. Most carry Sun Discs and use them to enter forgotten bunker segments. Almost no one else knows the dispensers as well as the Solars do.

3 - AURORA

They have become immersed in the dispensers' secrets; have seen the switchgear behind the veneer. One order is enough, and a corridor becomes brightly lit or pitch black. They energize control panels, lock portals, or flood corridors with gas.

The layer of memetic indoctrination is crumbling. They know too much. With a few strokes of work, they can access the dispensers' memetic program themselves. They don't have the codes yet to climb down to the forbidden depths, to control the Sleeper cells or enter the armories, but with every Reviver who finds one of the 44 and brings back codes, the Auroras' power grows.

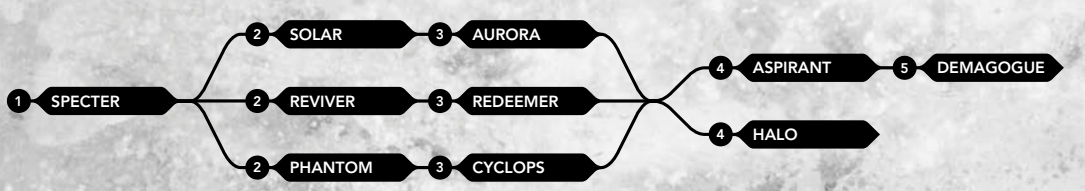
2 - REVIVER

They have to get out. Some feel drawn to the wild, into the Balkhan's' forests, to the noisy crowds of Justitian; some simply feel strange amongst their peers, or their squeaky voices caused acoustic dissonances in the corridors.

Revivers roam the world above ground, following the breadcrumbs that the gods left for them. They have an eye for the ancient buildings, finding entrances everywhere and diving down into them when there's danger.

They blend into the society above ground – though only as a parasite – using bugs, detectors, and blackmail to find the last hidden dispensers.

HIERARCHY AND RANKS - PALERS



3 - REDEEMER

Armed with Sun Discs full of codes, they conquer the wasteland. Only a few Recombination Group facilities can resist their advance. They are respected in the Paler enclaves, have help from a dozen Demagogues. They find tunnels that are not shown on even the most ancient maps.

2 - PHANTOM

They pave the way for the rule of the gods, striking out of the night at anyone who wants to oppose the Palers. To do so, they equip themselves from the storages of the guards, carry submachine guns and grenades.

3 - CYCLOPS

Cyclops are legendary executioners of divine rage. Only for them do the Sleepers' secret arsenals open up. That is where they get their Cyclops' eye, through which they see the night in fluorescent green. Nothing and no one can hide from them. They are the abovegrounders' nightmare.

4 - ASPIRANT

Their minds shatter the bunkers' and their Demagogues memetics. They know the mechanisms and have a try at them. They screech, they whisper, they sing, they modulate their voices, they fail and learn. Sometimes a Phantom shies away from them; sometimes the Solars move along without question. One day, the Aspirant will reach his goal and will dominate the bunker as a Demagogue.

5 - DEMAGOGUE

Finally, they've mastered their voice. It may be powerful or flattering, commanding or careful, but its emotional strength touches any Paler with cold efficiency. When a Demagogue with a thundering voice calls to order someone who has misstepped, the voice is his weapon; when he mediates differences in the dispenser, it's a community tool.

4 - HALO

They have left the bunker and their old life behind. They now follow one of the Sleeper Prophets: Daimondal, Trice, Helios, Uriz and Enceph, who preach a deviation from the old ways, preparing for the twilight of the gods.

As Halos, Palers are the paladins of the Sleeper Prophets, examining fortifications on the future battlefields for them and exploring the holy city of Exalt, gaining control there sector by sector. Free Spirit and Tannhäuser are not foreign concepts to them.

STEREOTYPES

ANABAPTISTS

Swords, final battle, baptisms: they have been in the sun for too long. Let them go on writing their weird books about divine phantasms.

ANUBIANS

Just look at their skin – they are marked by the night! But there is even more that connects us to them…Wasn't the Triszyklikon found in their homeland?

APOCALYPTICS

Apocalyptics are predators hunting at night like we do. When the gods walk amongst us, we will not tolerate this any longer. But until then, we wait, for the migrants have nothing of interest for us – and we have nothing of interest for them.

CHRONICLERS

We have to get into their Clusters! They know much more than they are ready to admit. All reports about the 44 were retrieved from the Chroniclers. Try it friendly first, lick their boots, and seduce them. Bug them. Then break into the alcoves, steal artifacts, and blackmail them with them!

CLANNERS

The gods abandoned them, and now they are destined to be our fatstock and milking cattle. They have been a little rebellious in the last few months.

HELLVETICS

The Alps: so many tunnels and unexplored bunker segments. If only these armed rats did not guard them. But we will get in. Then we'll see if the defense mechanisms aren't somewhat adaptable…

JEHAMMEDANS

They try to obey exactly ONE God. No one has ever seen him, and there are no pictures of him. They have no idea when or where he will awaken. For he's already there. Everywhere.

Aha! Even if he existed: what is he supposed to do against our army of gods, huh? Idiots.

JUDGES

The Judges are a force that owes us our due. Our Demagogue in Justitian has given up reminding them of that.

NEOLIBYANS

They trade with the gods' gift. That means they trade with what belongs to us. That makes them thieves, right?

SCOURGERS

The Bygone phoneme rings in their voices. It touches us, makes us feel a desire for their land. What enormous powers must be at work there!

SCRAPPERS

They enter our holy halls, looting, destroying and defiling!

How many gods have they killed already? Our Phantoms hunt them like rats.

SPITALIANS

Their suits look like those of our ancestors. Who are they? The fallen divine tribe? Or simply grave robbers?

SUNBURST

FINGER

Culture: Balkhan
Concept: The Chosen
Cult: Palers (Redeemer)

As a baby, his cries echoed unpleasantly shrill through the corridors. It was already decided that he would become a Reviver before he was able to say "Tata!" 40 years later, he's a legend.

He found countless bunkers and is said to have had contact with the Masters. The only question is where the fingers on his necklace come from – fingers that do not rot, that shimmer in the light.

ZON

Culture: Balkhan
Concept: The Defiler
Cult: Palers (Halo)

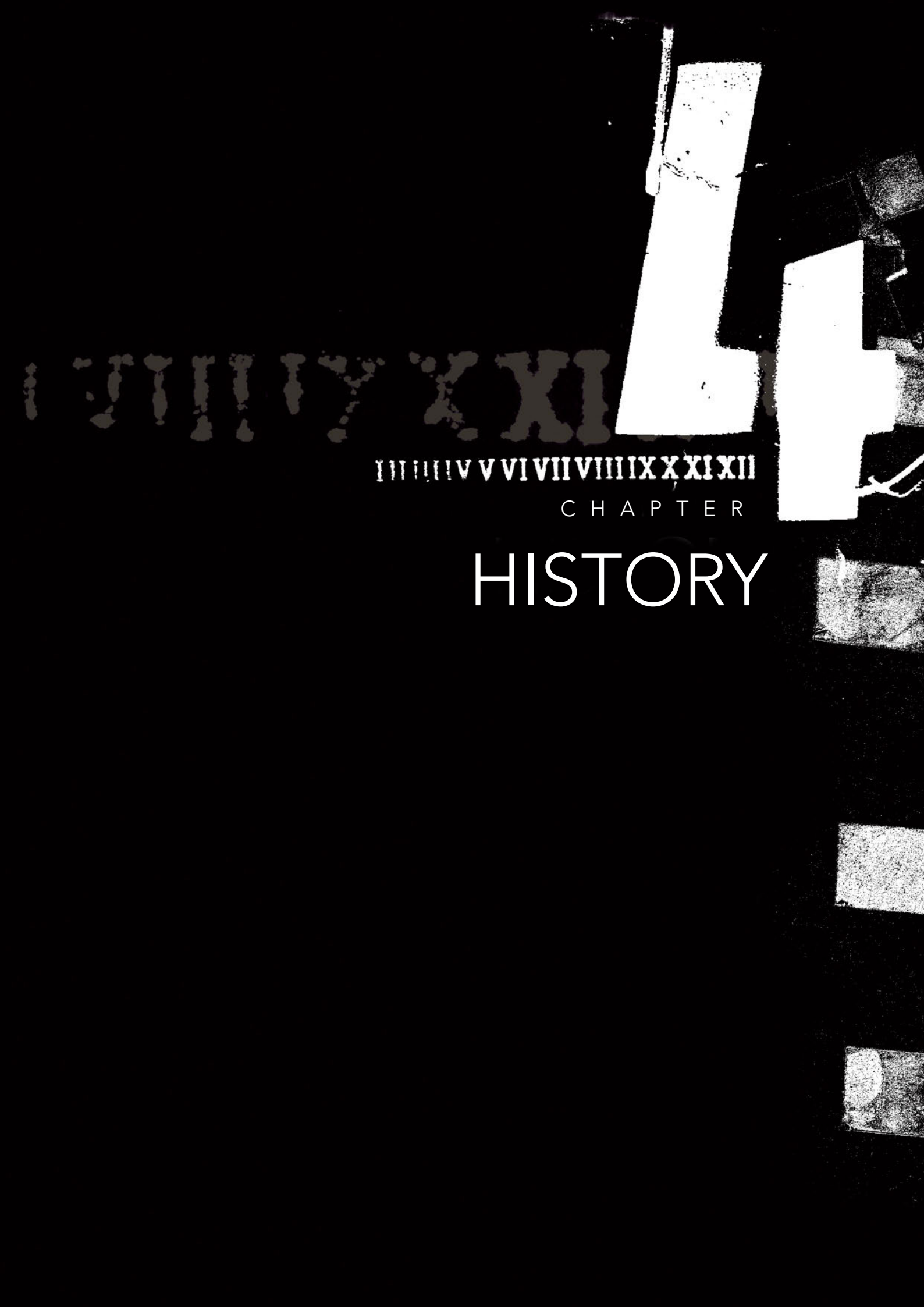
She was a Solar. Out in the glaring sunlight she repaired broken panels, laid cables, and cursed. Not only did she hate her work, she saw it as an abysmal punishment. She wanted back down, wanted to hide from the angry ball of fire in the skies, let her soul cool. Only when she received Daimondal's radio broadcasts did she see a way out. In the middle of the summer she fled, leaving everything behind. She knew that no one would follow her in the heat.

Today, she crawls through Exalt's tunnels and installs Sleeper Prophet radio disks to ancient sensors. She doesn't question the logic of what she's doing, even as she slowly realizes what Daimondal's plans are, as long as he only orders her to work in the cool quiet of the corridors.

MESNIK THE CARVER

Culture: Balkhan
Concept: The Destroyer
Cult: Palers (Demagogue of Fear)

He has long, delicate fingers, ideally suited to use surgical instruments. Cold blades that cut into pale flesh, that's what he loves. Without medical inclinations but with a deep understanding of pain he uses his scalpel. Sometimes he sings while he works. Mesnik is a Demagogue of fear in his bunker community in the Balkhan. He is also mad.



I II III IV V VI VII VIII IX X XI XII

CHAPTER

4

HISTORY

CROWN

The Preservist rubbed shreds of skin from his short hair. It burned like fire, but was impossible to shave. He looked upwards and blinked into the cerulean sky. No clouds for days. Also no birds and no sounds from the jungle except for this incessant cracking and crackling. He stood on the Surge Tank Ndulu's observation deck. More than 20 days ago had they left Qabis with the Neolibyan Wakili's blessing.

Yesterday, they must have crossed the invisible border: the Psychovores were now higher than the hatch, and in the East, the Preservist had seen a red grass plane through his binoculars. Today he couldn't. A green-blue forest roses in front of the Surge Tank and seemed to grow and become denser with every day. To the right, an earthly giant tree from the jungle towered, but it's trunk was already surrounded by the white veins of an unknown Psychovore species. In the branches, they turned into sheaves of green blades, each one longer than a man.

"The reserve tanks are connected."

The Preservist inclined his head towards the speaker.

"All right, full speed ahead."

The speaker exhaled loudly.

"They resist."

The Preservist turned to the speaker. Dr. Baszuk, a Field Medic. He had more than 50 mediocre years in Borca under his belt. Each and every one was written into his face. He was only one of many old farts who were loaded up and brought into nowhere. The bastion of experience armored by the flexibility of age would save them from the Psychovores' insinuations. At least for a while.

"Doctor." The Preservist patted Baszuk on the shoulder. "Full speed ahead."

*

The Surge Tank's chains smashed the scrub of fibers. With the cracking of whips, it burst into splinter clouds that covered the tank's sides like flour. The turbine roared steadily; the suspension absorbed the hardest jolts. The Preservist stood broad legged on the observation deck. He had gotten used to the swaying. It reminded him of his time with Malais.

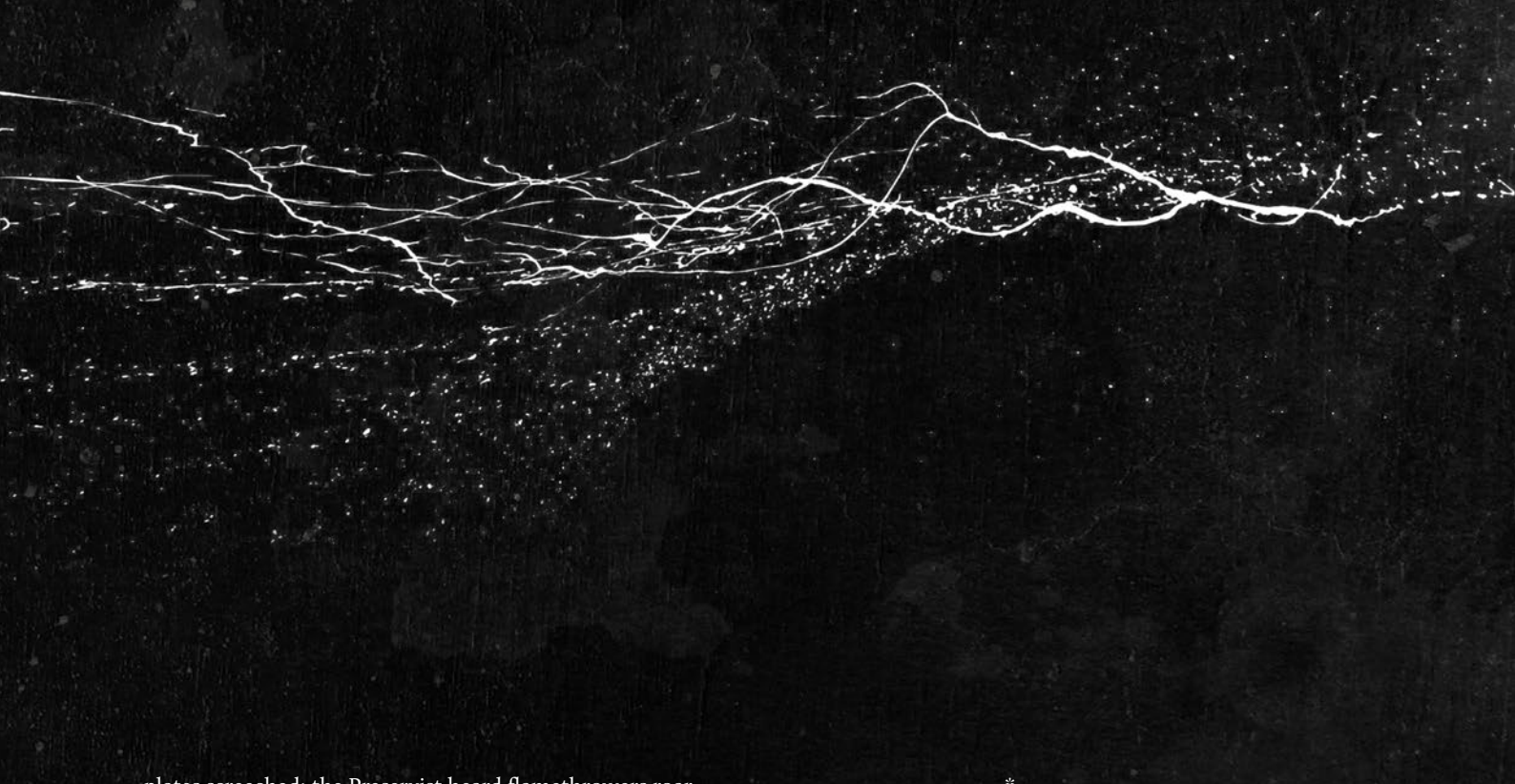
A shadow slid over the Psychovores. The Preservist looked up. There were still no clouds in the sky. He took his binoculars and…

He shivered. Something was in his head, and it grew like a crystal. Cut through his thinking and replaced it. It had begun.

He looked through the binoculars. They approached a garish green front. Faster than seemed possible. Thoughts of fear and pain welled up in his head, singing about the waters of time in unknown colors. He took a deep breath and stared through the binoculars again. Actually, they did not approach the front. The front approached them. He hurried to one side of the Surge Tank and looked into the green below. A wave of sickle leaves scratched the steel; some burst into hexagons, but most of them simply vanished or were brushed aside. From the stems, bundles of white worms emerged that changed into snakes several meters in length and then turned yellow within seconds. The first loops got into the link chains' grinder, were dragged along and torn. More vines smashed against the board wall, creeping between the armor plates or pushing upwards. There was a hollow cry from within. The Preservist readied his sword.

Loops came crawling over the edge. The Preservist retreated. The floor vibrated under his feet, and the roaring of the turbine became a hoarse screeching. They lost speed. The Surge Tank was jolted, and the turbine died down. The tank stopped and swayed. Black diesel fumes wafted across the observation deck. The crackling of the Psychovores grew louder; the air suddenly smelled of anise and camphor.

The Preservist groped his chest. The little tube was still there. But could he start the experiment right here and now? Loops rose from the deep, spiraling upwards like the dancing snakes in Qabis. Waves moved through the now-yellow vegetation, all directed towards the tank. Armor



plates screeched; the Preservist heard flamethrowers roar. A vine as thick as his arm touched the deck. He lifted his sword and hacked it apart – but it did not break at the point where he had hit it. Fibers closed the gap between the cut parts, holding them together. The Preservist hit it again and kicked it for good measure. The vine clung to his boot. He stumbled. White plexus sprouted across the steel tip and crept upwards along his foot. With trembling hands, he opened the buckles and kicked off the boot.

The hatch to the upper deck opened, and Baszuk climbed out, armed with a Splayer. The Field Medic came running and nodded to the Preservist. Back to back they stood. The sound of the biting Splayer blades reassured the Preservist.

"How is the situation below?"

"Malala?"

"Below?"

"Mala-ala-ma?"

The Preservist hacked away a loop. There was a tingling growing in his belly. Baszuk hummed, interrupted these sounds with fluttering tonguings. The Preservist turned around. Baszuk's Splayer was caught in a jumble of tendrils, brown and hairy like roots. The white plexus had grown along the shaft, had enwrapped Baszuk's hands and started creeping along his arms. The skin beneath was already turning purple. Buds were sprouting from it. Baszuk's eyes were wide open; his pupils shone like black pearls. The Preservist raised his sword.

"(You go. You go.)"

Baszuk slowly opened his mouth. The tongue within fluttered like a moth caught in a glass.

"(Discordance. No.)"

The Preservist did not understand the words, but the sounds formed thoughts in his head. The little tube – the Primer. In his mind, he saw himself holding it in his hand, opening it…

"(Turn over.)"

He attacked.

*

The Psychovores died. They dried up as if the land was demanding all the life energy it had invested in them back. The Preservist had freed his boot from the plexus and climbed down into the Surge Tank. Someone said there were locals outside and asked how to proceed. He pushed onto the hatch, pushed aside hands, shoved people out of his way, opened the hatch, and jumped out. The drying tendrils cracked under his steps. There were Anubians. Their black jackal masks seemed to be part of their heads, their hands were black as coal, and on their naked bellies, there wasn't a single circle.

One of them stepped in front of the others and reached out his hand. Delicate, calm and dark as basalt.

"(Turn over.)"

The Preservist wasn't even sure if he really experienced this. If he wasn't actually still standing on the deck with Baszuk.

"The last person to say this is now dead." The joke felt terrible. He put the little tube into the Anubian's hand.

"(Crown.)"

The Anubian pointed to a spot above the Preservist's forehead. His jackal eyes gleamed like starlight. Like a swarm of fireflies. Had it not started exactly like this?

"This isn't real." The Preservist straightened, and there was a grim smile on his face. "But I have no idea how you do this." The Anubians lowered their heads; the lips shone, the teeth were stark white. They retreated step by step.

"You wankers." The Preservist was now laughing, but there was no joy in the sound. "This is not the end!" The Anubians halted, and for a moment, a barrage of thoughts and images hit the Preservist's mind. He went down on his knees. No, this really wasn't the end.

SPORE RAIN

SPITALIANS ARCHIVES

STAR HAIL

2073 The year of 2073 brings destruction for humanity, but a new beginning for Mother Earth. Asteroids hit the northern hemisphere at several locations and plant the seed for a quick proliferation of Primer matter. The southern hemisphere stays mainly unmolested, though some chunks cut through the atmosphere and thunder across the land at only a few kilometers height. Chipped fragments rain down to earth accompanied by sulfuric compounds; here, too, the Primer will spread.

A giant asteroid – later to be named Colossus – hits the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean but can release its seed only centuries later.

2100 Almost all of the Primer matter in Europe and Asia has turned to Sepsis. Things look different in America, though: the Yellowstone Volcano's eruption threatens to bury the land under several meters of ash; the Primer finds no suitable host and cannot spread. Sporadically it afflicts individual explorers. Those unfortunate ones rarely survive the rape of their genes.

The first Primer-based modifications in Central Africa become visible. Unlike in Eurasia, the alien matter seems to prefer plants here. It spreads via pollen, growing areas of moss and sometimes amoeba.

2200 The Sepsis' advance is unstoppable, its attraction to insects enormous. Former Poland with its Pandora Crater close to the devastated city of Warsaw turns into a breeding area for spiders and venomous centipedes. Within Pandora itself, a lake emerges; primordial life bustles along its shores and is carried into major parts of Europe and Asia by rivers that originate from the lake.

The spores of the Souffrance are highly valued as hallucinogens throughout the land. Soon afterwards, the Sepsis' uncontrolled proliferation starts.

The African Primer plants spread rapidly along the Equator, separating the continent's northern and southern half.

2221 First documented cases of paranormal phenomenons that can clearly be attributed to humans. Only in 2305 do the Spitalians recognize the connection with the Sepsis when dissecting a Psychonaut's brain.

PHENOMENONA

The first Psychonauts emerge, mainly in the northern part of former Poland. In the beginning, they merely have advanced self-regulating forces. Only later do the Aberrants grow bone spurs; in their presence, fertile soil rots to stinking substrate. The altered humans are rejected by their families, but it will take years until the Spitalians start hunting them mercilessly.

2235 A massive seaquake unearths parts of Colossus.

Evolution's engine gets into gear. Subsequently, a multitude of primordial arthropods hatches, adapts the Primer matter, and starts its victory march across the oceans. At the French coasts, humans consider the strange animals washed ashore crabs.

2240 Souffrance in Franka's Central Massif is known not only for the drug called Burn sprawling on its slopes, but also for its weird interior panorama: giant vents rise skywards, hubs on ant trails heavy with pheromones amidst a bleak forest.

2267 The year of destiny for the metropolis of Paris. The country becomes marshy; the city threatens to drown. In feverish haste, jetties are built and dams are erected. But the true horror lurks elsewhere: swarms of insects rise and darken the sun, spreading Sepsis into every nook and cranny.

THE END OF PARIS

Mother spore fields bloom in the city center. Some brave souls attack them with incendiary agents and fungicides but are forced to retreat when subterranean waves emitted by the fields destroy the dams. People flee Paris and leave their city to the insects. Hundreds of square kilometers become marshy.

2270 Three Psychonautic Raptures have established themselves in Europe: Biokinesis in Pollen and parts of East Borca; Pregnocticism in Hybrispania; and Dushan at the Balkhan. All Raptures are tied to large Mother Spore Fields, the Earth Chakras that spread their traits to the surrounding fields in the decades to come.

2290 The African climate has changed radically. Permanent rainfall turns the Congo basin into one of the world's largest lakes. Fishermen can reach the heart of the continent on it without being threatened by the aggressive spores and plants. Still, there is no open south passage.

2300 The Souffrance vents start emitting methane, seemingly due to a mutation of the insect population. Ants and other species of insects have formed a complex biocenosis; millions of years of uncontrolled evolution seem forgotten. When the Spitalians realize the changes in the atmosphere and prove the Sepsis' immediate involvement, their campaign against the Primer and its ilk starts.

2302 In Purgare's western slag deserts, the Neolibyans encounter the first Psychokinetics, children who destroyed their village in anger. From the beginning, the fourth Rapture is considered the most dangerous and incalculable one.

2306 In France, highly specialized Psychonauts arise from the Mother Spore Fields for the first time, adapted to the huge swarms of insects: the Pheromancers. The population terrorized by the insect plague thanks the Sepsis' seemingly collective wisdom by accepting the Psychonauts as parts of their community and currying favor with them. The Spitalians are banned from the country, and their warnings go unheard. An oleaginous peace builds bridges across ancient chasms of hatred.

2312 The Spitalians literally tear through the Mother Spore Field at Menden, making enormous sacrifices to reach their goal. The result is a raped country robbed of its vital energy. But there is no rest: the festering, contaminated by megatons of entropic nanites, slowly spreads and seems unstoppable.

2320 The African Primer conquers the water. More and more infectious pollen is being carried widespread to shores farther and farther into the continent. Lake Victoria is covered by a proliferating layer of algae that continuously loses parts that the Nile sweeps away.

2360 The shores of the Nile teem with life – strange, bizarre life. The Anubians do not resist, but rather take an interest in the alien vegetation, monitoring it and experimenting with it. They call the plants the Key, though few truly know what this means.

2390 Although the Spitalians do not use entropic nanites again, their doctors can repress the Sepsis in Borca. Some developments seem promising: with the Mollusks, spore-infected muscle tissue in bottles full of nutrient solution, they can unmask Psychonauts; modified fungicides make young spore fields wither; Echein spiders hunt and kill spore-carrying insects without becoming infected.

2455 The Spitalians' fungicides stop working – the spores adapt. The war against the Sepsis keeps getting harder, until the Spital finds new hope in the Discordance Theory. There seem to be communication problems between Europe's Mother Spore Fields and their Psychovore equivalent in Africa. So far, the doctors assumed that the Chakras' communication served to coordinate and to exchange viable DNA sequences. Now a dissonance blankets the communication; the fields seem to jam each other or to communicate false information. The results are hundreds of dead Dushani. Large Mother Spore Fields wither and spew forth unviable mutants.

DISCORDANCE

2470 When the Discordance's shockwaves ripple through the Chakra collective, this influences the Biokinetics, too. The biokinetic Earth Chakra continuously pumps them full of grotesquely altered information, gives them useless psychonautic abilities, and influences their genes in a way that might have made sense on the Primer's home world. The Biokinetics writhe in burning agony. Their bodies transform into caricatures of their former self. Most of them die; the rest goes mad. When the Discordance dies down, the Chakra realizes that it cannot save its Psychonauts

CHAKRA QUAKES

and sheds them, bans the foul breed from the collective. Then it starts breeding new Biokinetics.

2476 The Discordance phenomenon has stabilized. Some Mother Spore Fields, mostly in the Mediterranean area, are still caught up in the discordant resonance. People avoid them and call the area, which is several hundred kilometers wide, the "Discordance Zone".

2492 The Spitalians invade Danzig – and meet with zero resistance. Many of the inhabitants pack their belongings into carts and flee south. The doctors do not come as raiders and killers, but the Pollners are a distrustful people, and it always seemed like a good survival strategy not to trust the Spitalians.

In the years to come, the medical organization turns the city into their operational base in Pollen and starts exploring the East.

2512 The spore belt closes. Where an east passage seemed possible before, the Sepsis has now conquered the land. The Spitalians build a number of Destructive Fortresses, all linked by rail. The fortresses blow fungicides and pesticides into the land at regular intervals, intended to eradicate the seed brought in by insects and arachnoids. They plan to breach the belt. The expansion goes well.

2535 Africa's psychovorous plant belt expands. Information is passed on to adapted life forms via thorns and pollen – viral genetic sequences that cause cancer in regular humans. The Africans call it "the Raze". Getting close to the belt means risking your life. Surviving members of expeditions come back from the Zone decades later, are several years younger than when they left, and remember nothing at all. They speak in tongues and cannot even communicate via body language.

More and more Africans fall under the Psychovores' influence. But instead of initiating a Babylonian confusion, the most recent change leads to tribes with different languages suddenly being able to communicate, finding common grounds, and burying old animosities. This change is attributed to the Anubians. They have tamed the country's wild spirit.

2544 The Destructive Fortresses are not linked anymore. Earth walls emanating from spore fields have interrupted the rails in several places. Spitalians based in Brno, Pollen, do their best to send the pesticide vats back east. A large expedition does not return and is considered lost. The breach closes; the Sepsis gains ground.

2562 The year that goes down in Spitalian history as

VASCO'S FALL

Vasco's Fall. Dr. Hernez Vasco was considered lost after an expedition to the Pandora Crater. One year later he is seen not far from Danzig and brought to the Spital. He has changed; even former colleagues barely recognize him. He claims to have found and performed extensive research on several grams of the legendary Primer matter. His testimony is regarded skeptically from day one. What happened to his expedition? Where are the other doctors?

Dr. Vasco doesn't know the answer or does not want to divulge it. Instead, he presents his results and the theories stemming from them – and shocks the Consultants. His explanations for identical genetic info found in all species known to man – the similarities between primordial trilobites and the modern Homo Sapiens are of special interest here – paint a different picture than the one propagated by the assimilation theory. So far, the doctors assumed that the Primer matter copied existing DNA to implant into stricken tissue. But in the Spital's assembly hall in January 2562, Vasco claims in front of selected doctors that the Primer itself is pure DNA – a virus that made life on earth possibly billions of years ago. He calls the fight against the spore fields a wrong track and asks his colleagues to encounter the Sepsis as a new chance for humankind with an open mind and full of curiosity. His suggestion meets with little appreciation. Two days later, he flees into exile with 36 fellow travelers.

The flight is too easy. For a long time, there is talk about aid in the escape, but there is never any proof.

2570 Preservists find Vasco in a hidden lab near Laibach. He manages to do the impossible: he vanquishes his attackers and flees. The Preservists later say Vasco had been amazingly strong and agile. In the years after, he is supposedly seen repeatedly, sometimes at different places at once, all considered to be false claims.

2575 A hint leads a group of Famulancers to a research bunker in Briton. There they find a body they identify as Dr. Hernez Vasco's. The body is brought to the Spital and woven in by Echein spiders for later examination. For a year, Dr. Vasco is presumed dead, until several sightings in the Balkhan prove the opposite. The body is given to Consultant Petrova and her research team. The hunt for Vasco continues.

2587 Preservists follow hints and watch the permafrost ground in the ruins of Lodz, Pollen, thawing in circular areas in several spots. The so-far unknown phenomenon is ascribed to the Biokinetics – an incorrect assumption, as later years will prove.

2588 The excavations in Lodz are in full swing. The Preservists find a crackling white bulk of nerves or muscles that emanates heat but dies within minutes after being excavated. In the Danzig Spital, samples are examined.

2589 The Hot Spots near Lodz are no unique finding. When accosted, Pollen's nomads freely confess that they have been planting bulbs in these areas for decades. The Spitalians still find no heightened spore infestation in these Clanners. At the same time, Spitalians discover the first Fractal Forest in the middle of the tundra near Breslau. Clanners protect the phenomenon and only let the doctors enter it once.

2590 Danzig's Preservists receive a hint concerning a decaying spore field near Lodz. They arrive just in time to witness a spore field's complete metamorphosis into a Fractal Forest. From afar, they watch attacks by Biokinetics and sea-spiders and document the forest's defenses. From now on, there can be no doubt anymore that Hot Spots and Fractal Forests have nothing to do with the Earth Chakra.

METAMORPHOSIS

2591 By this time, hundreds of Hot Spots and Fractal Forests have been recorded. When mapped, it becomes clear they grow along fractal coils, coils also recognizable in the Fractal Forests' plants. Should there be a center, it might be somewhere south of Danzig, but for an exact location, more local data is necessary. In the meantime, it is generally assumed that Hot Spots turn spore fields into Fractal Forests. If the Hot Spot does not meet a field, then no Fractal Forest arises.

2593 The Anabaptist emissary Wetzel realizes the Fractal Forests' value for his Cult: their fruit generates remarkable emanations – or madness. The Baptists decide that the rewards are greater than the risks and take the forests under their protection. Meanwhile, the Spitalians argue over whether to fight or welcome the Fractal Forests. For Apocalyptics, that question is clear: many profitable spore fields have rotted, and the Burn harvest has taken a tumble. When they find a Fractal Forest, they burn it down.

FRACTCAL FORESTS

2594 Invited by the Tripolitan Bank of Commerce, Spitalians land in Qabis, Africa, and start studying the Psychovores. The Anubians watch this with stoicism. What could these dozens of Spitalians do?

2595 (today): Many questions remain. The Discordance Phenomenon's barely understood. The Fractal Forests are a new factor in the battle against the Primer. Studies in the African vegetation belt have just begun. Who or what are the people there really facing?

A NEW WORLD ORDER

THE STREAM

The Stream permeated every aspect of life, linking people to the global data net in a subconscious, intuitive way. It was always there, always in the background, woven into shirts, integrated into household applications; it watched traffic and people through millions of electronic eyes, guiding them through city canyons, to cafes, to work, remembering, guarding. A sea of news flooded its channels, linked the real world to the digital one. Swarms of agents floated with the current, giving orders of their own or bursting into cascades of micro-instances making their way to the target cluster, turning from the data spines, routed via fridges and GPS systems. The world was in a state of flux.

The complex things happening in the Stream were fascinating. Researchers compared the motion patterns of agent swarms to the flight of migrating birds and ant colonies. They found structures that had never been programmed that way and that they did not understand. "Is digital life possible?" wasn't a question asked by social fringe groups anymore, but became socially acceptable. Suddenly it was considered hip to dabble in neo-philosophical issues; computer freaks became the focus of attention, their weirdness a measure of their credibility. It was like a sports challenge: everyone tried formulating a theory that was even weirder than the last one.

The observation of the highly complex developments in the Stream, scientific at first, was diluted to a discussion about digital incarnations, AI by critical mass, and manifest divinity. New communities and societies built massive belief systems upon these dubious foundations and poached the ancient religions. People flocked to all these ideas, clad in modern language and freed from yesterday's varnish, like moths to the flame – and the closer they got, the harder it became to get back. Many became stranded on the shores of weirdness, unable to escape intellectually.

The Streamers were one of these groups. Millions of them let themselves be driven to the fringes of human imagination by the Stream. With their data goggles they watched swarms of agents attack information in fractal coils, joined them, and floated with the current, followed. They felt sudden folds in the space-data-continuum; they fell into black holes and were reborn in new digital universes. Their understanding grew, if not necessarily towards the truth. Many Streamers told of an intense experience, the transcendence, and encounters with programs talking to them in an unknown language, trying to make contact. Time and again, they mentioned the number 2 to the power of 16 and its equivalent 65,536 – be it as an error code, as marker of a data node, or as a sudden visual flash. The "signature" was everywhere in those days, showing up suddenly and vanishing again just as quickly without a trace. The Streamers saw it as a sign of godly presence, but for the net experts it was a nuisance that could cost them their job. Was the signature a virus? Or the first sign of an extreme overload? Or really something supernatural? With the cosmic swarm, the fire came, and the Stream ran dry.

The Streamers died by the score. Reality tasted of blood and sweat, and so the survivors kept the Stream in their hearts, nurturing the psychological and mythical dimension it had generated in the last days.

They gathered in the ruins of the black Lung. Broken and bereft of their digital home, they saw themselves as saviors of civilization. They were the stream construct's physical manifestation and as such gathered any information they could. They looted antiquarian bookshops, established libraries, wrote down the contents of conversations, marked profitable loot spots on maps, looked for data stores and intact stream nodes. Every event became part of the chronology that started with Event Zero. They offered their data in exchange for food and technological findings. They survived and became more influential.

Many centuries passed, and a small community of Streamers grew into a movement. Their libraries and stores were filled with inconceivable treasures. Generators and solar cells restored Stream fragments for minutes, recreating the seconds before the Eshaton. Ancient knowledge lit up the Streamers' horizon.

But with their influence, desires grew. In the end, they had to retreat. They hid their knowledge in tunnels and fortresses, built an intellectual wall by using their own language and putting their main goal above morale: to awaken the Stream.

At that time, they renamed themselves "Chroniclers."

RECOMBINATION GROUP

A BETTER HUMANITY - A BETTER EARTH

MALMÖ | ACAPULCO | TORONTO | SEOUL | TOLEDO | NEW YORK

STREAMCONTACT: RECOMBINATIONGROUP.EARTH

MALMÖ, SEPTEMBER 27TH 2066

TO DR. NATHAN ARGYRE
ST ANDREW SQUARE 12
EDINBURGH, CITY OF EDINBURGH EH2
UNITED KINGDOM

Dear Dr. Argyre,

Let me first introduce myself as manners demand. My name is Deeva Almakova. I am the head of council at the neurolinguistic facility in Malmö, which is a representative arm of the Recombination Group. Secondly I have to excuse myself for relying on such outdated methods of getting in touch with you. But nowadays a written letter seems to be the only way to avoid Streambugs and keep a certain amount of discretion, which we, as members of the Recombination Group prefer. The media is too easily angered and fueled by rage when it senses any kind of genetic advancement, especially since the recent Bonifacius scandal that hit Argentina in late 2059.

We have been huge admirers of your recent publications on brain stimulation for coma patients, and your medical breakthroughs on the field of curing autism and magnetic brain data divergence have been of utter importance to our own experimentation. Also, using aggressive nanites to destroy brain tumors as you showcased in several sessions troughout 2063-65, have been considered milestones in the advancement of creating self-healing organisms.

We would therefore, deeply appreciate if you would consider this letter as an invitation to join us at our annual convention on October 15th, at our Think-Tank facility in Aspen, Colorado. Our executive chamber members have expressed their utmost willingness to fund your operations for the next three years and we would offer you the beneficiary usage of our laboratories and full funding in resources to compliment your scientific advances.
Doctor Salim Mushar and Professor Norman Thorn have both stated, that your foresight in genetics and brainwave manipulation will transform the world as we know it. Both have expressed their highest interest in sharing their own findings with you.

Please find your plane tickets transferred and locked on your Stream account. A drive[r] for you at the airport. All other preparations have been taken care of.

With deepest respect,

Deeva Almakova
Head of Council, RG Malmö

INVICTUS PAPER MESH
BUILT FOR ETERNITY

IS PRIDE
THROUGH DECEIT
FOR NOTHING

TIMELINE

2043 The friction within the United Nations becomes too high. The USA's hegemonic behavior and its recurrent exploitation of the UN for its own geopolitical interests wounds the already weakened coalition of nations deeply. White House spokeswoman Deborah Ann says President Trunk is bored of the Security Council's eternal debates and the bureaucratic tug-of-war and simply doubts their ability to make important decisions. America is no longer willing to listen to other nations and surely does not depend upon them. It's a perfect scandal. The largest European industrial nations stop paying their dues to the UN until further notice and start talking about reforming the alliance. Similar events take place in Africa. The UN dependency in Nairobi is closed on short notice.

UNO SPLITS UP

2045 A new world order emerges; decades-old structures crack and finally break. The UN is fractured into several factions, divided by continent: the UEO, the United Europe Organization, unites the European industrial nations and forms a counterweight to the superpower USA, with Russia and certain Balkan states included as permanent partners with equal rights; the United Africa Organization (UAO) unites the African member states of the UN. But those are few, since the Arab League has already united large parts of the continent under its banner. China, the strongest economic power, offers its neighboring states alliances in the form of a Protectorate. This endeavor is globally criticized and is the topic of hot debates. When the Mongolian as well as the Kazakh Republics join China in November 2045, this starts an avalanche of alliances – and becomes a fiasco for President Trunk's power politics. Instead of weakening geopolitical structures and expanding the US's leverage against enemy nations, the opposite happens: new power blocks arise and question the US's global dominance.

NEW ALLIANCES

Mister President is not amused.

2046 In Novaja Semlja (Barents Sea), a mammoth of the species Mammuthus primigenius is dug out of the permafrost. This is a sensation. Its DNA is in prime condition and is sent to numerous researchers all over the world in the following months. A genetics lab in Helsinki manages the unbelievable. A transgene ovum in a female elephant grows into a healthy mammoth calf born in December – 10,000 years after its species' extinction. This clone is only the beginning. Less than a decade later, dozens of the giants stomp through a spacious outdoor enclosure in Helsinki and are considered Finland's greatest tourist attraction.

2047 The UN is back, even if only as a forum for the new alliances. Trunk plans to re-forge the broken chain, but nations like their newfound sovereignty. The UN will never be what it was, and Trunk fails yet again.

INDEPENDENCE

The geopolitical restructuring has far-reaching consequences for other existing alliances: NATO's mission and necessity are questioned more than ever; here, too, a split seems likely.

The UAO and the Arab League maintain friendly relations and get closer to each other every day.

THE TRANSHUMAN ERA

Technology was a pillar of modern culture, maybe even its foundation. But the basic technological principles were all but lost. The consuming masses gathered on the side of ignorance, intrigued by the endless possibilities. They were fed the Stream's pseudo knowledge and guided on an orbit around seemingly honorable companies, preachers, regimes, social aggregators, and content generators by infectious memes. For a long time, education was considered a form of protection, but with every layer of data that covered the truth like sediment, the seekers of truth had to dig deeper to find out, that in the end, they had been moving in circles.

The traditional meanings of truth and fiction didn't exist anymore; the mass gravitation influenced all information vectors. The Stream decoupled itself from reality and caught all information in recursive feedback loops, generating hyperlinks to other data clusters to the beat of the resonance quartzes, connecting, optimizing. Stream researchers pointed out that the humans acted like genes in this system – as passive vectors of development that only as a whole created an emergence. Pessimists countered that humans were just a disturbing influence that had vanquished the system's self-regulating forces a long time ago.

Whatever theory people chose, everyone knew that a critical mass of data and computational power had been exceeded: the Transhuman Era had begun.

2050 The worries regarding China's expansion seem premature. Mongolia and Kazakhstan profit from the free trade with their powerful neighbor. Investments throughout the country turned their withered cities into blooming oases: Ulan Bator becomes a metropolis with western looks dominated by Asian flair. A multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure program intends to create a network of streets between the towns of the newly invigorated provinces. Hundred of thousands begin work on what is possibly the greatest engineering endeavor since the erection of the Great Wall. Still, though, people doubt China's intentions. Critics claim China only wants access to the Caspian Sea with its assumingly last oil reserves and that highways and maglevs through the barren regions are only there for army transports.

2051 The number of new technological patents doubles within a year. Genetically adapted implants and prostheses are no longer wishful thinking, but simply normal. Recombination Group's first nanite tests promise a quantum leap in medicine. The visionary and futurologist Salim Mushar says the information age is over and declares the Transhuman Era begun.

2053 The carousel keeps turning faster and faster: the Stream becomes a surrogate reality for a majority of the population where people live out social contacts, order food, or simply relax. Only those of the old school, the permanent hippies, technology resisters and certain splinter groups refusing to join the sprawling system in general complain about chip implants, retina and DNA scans, and stored health insurance and bank account data with shrill prophesies that make no impact whatsoever.

POWER OF THE STREAM

2055 AIDS is theoretically conquered. A new WHO plan aims at freeing the world from this plague within the next 20 years. The first distribution centers in Nigeria and India receive serums and vaccines. Millions of people start the road to recovery. The feared humanitarian disaster does not happen; the mass migrations are expected and watched by UAO troops. General Heshimu, a Tanzanian Bantu, is the man of the hour. With his contingency plan, he bolsters confidence and earns the respect of foreign leaders.

AIDS VANQUISHED

2057 The year of the sects. As if there wasn't already enough esoteric crap in the world, what with the presumably ancient Templars with their hermetic traditions, the new age and the old age movements, and the technophile Streamer spin-offs, two esoteric drudges fight for followers in the early Transhuman Era. In one corner, there is the self-styled Messiah Jehammed with his mix of all three Mosaic religions; in the other is Gerome Getrell, charismatic and dogmatic televangelist and co-founder of the Recombination Group. The first round has begun.

2064 There is no rest for the African continent. Along the shores of Côte d' Ivoire, sailors on an American cruiser die from a previously undocumented virus. The strange disease spreads rapidly and soon has all of Abidjan in its grip. Black flags fly above the metropolis. Urgently called UAO troops erect a demarcation line and clash violently with the masses of people attempting to cross it. Around June, the first cases of the disease in Burkina Faso and Yamoussoukro are reported, less than three weeks after the Americans' fateful landing. The spread of the virus is uncontrollable.

SHADOWS OVER AFRICA

Many Africans consider the new plague a US plot to weaken the great African people again after their triumph over AIDS. When the Pasteur Institute in Paris announces that the mysterious disease is a new and very aggressive strain of HIV in August 2064, this is grist for the mills of the anti-Americanists. In many Central African countries, US embassies are attacked and looted. General Heshimu sends UAO troops to quell riots, but with explicit orders not to use violence against compatriots. When American marines of the frigate *Washington* want to land to secure the embassy personnels' retreat, he denies them passage and quarantines them. The US is enraged.

2065 HIV-E, the virus from Côte d' Ivoire, spreads throughout the entire continent. It is communicable through the air, potentially bestowing upon one sneezing man in a cable car the label of mass murderer. Air conditioners are considered centers of infection and are shut down in many parts of the continent; almost no enlightened African dares to go out in the public without a surgical mask. The streets of Nairobi seem to host a city-wide space rave, though one without any music, as people hide every inch of skin beneath gas masks and coveralls in shrill colors. The otherwise emotional and hospitable Kenyans are reserved; they limit themselves to contact with direct family members only and avoid strangers.

HIV - EXTREME

2066 The Recombination Group has discovered medicine's Holy Grail – at least that is what European online media try to tell their users to raise their subscriber numbers. They are right, though. RG's PR department announces that they have taken the first steps towards

THE PROTO-NANITE

Created in the Recombination Group's labs, the proto-nanite is a compound of molecules surrounded by a fullerene shell. In the field of medicine, it was triumphed as a cure-all. When injected into the human body in vast quantities, it would develop an amazing collective intelligence that would theoretically be capable of vanquishing all diseases known at that point. The current behavior of information was known from the Stream, and the algorithms derived from it guided an army of trillions of nanites. But this was only the beginning of research into those matters; the possibilities were limited and partly uncontrollable.

In the Stream, faulty iterations were discarded within nanoseconds; in humans, one error meant death. Adjusting the nanites to a disease naturally required time. While the world waited, though, thousands of infected individuals besieged the Recombination Group's clinics, hoping for an impending cure. The board of directors secured its customers with a venture: RG offered to deep-freeze patients until the perfected compound was complete. A special nanite solution would stop intracellular crystallization and prevent the organism from taking damage. The cryostasis chambers filled up.

finding a successful cure in the fight against HIV-E; they claim that their development department is "confident they will be able to offer a serum soon".

The masses fleeing from the plague in Africa now turn north. Hundreds of thousands gather in Agadez, a city in central African Niger that had always been an important way station for caravans on the north-south axis. The tide of refugees bloats Agadez to a megacity threatening to collapse any minute.

Algeria and Libya close their borders and confront the immigrants from Agadez with tanks and infantry. The unity of the continent so often conjured by General Heshimu dies a little more with every refugee shot or starving in the Sahara.

2067 Algeria falls. Hundreds of thousands break through the minefield, the barbed wire, and the patrols. The government is powerless; the UAO is overwhelmed. Libya asks the UEO for help and receives it – and for a good reason. The refugees' destination is Europe, which according to many Africans has a cure for HIV-E. The plague reaching the European continent must be avoided at all costs, and the Libyan request comes just in time. The UEO war fleet is sent to the Mediterranean, where it comes face to face with overcrowded ships, rafts, and even floating coffins. Days later, the wreckage washes ashore along the African coast. The ship crews are traumatized, and a new strategy is implemented. The fleet occupies African ports and destroys boats and rafts while still along the shore. The Spanish exclaves Melilla and Ceuta serve as a base and are built up into fortresses.

2068 Much development aid seems to have gone towards purchasing weapons as four out of five refugees are said to carry Kalashnikovs. What started as a blockade escalates into a war without goals: the Africa Conflict.

Along the coasts of the Iberian Peninsula and Sicily, boats are seen. The population panics and forms a militia. Molotov cocktails are thrown at the tired Africans; shots are fired. Any stranger could carry the disease. The UEO erects quarantine camps but cannot contain the raging population.

2069 The conflict gets out of control. Thousands sink below the Mediterranean's waves; thousands more die in the frightened UEO troops' barrage of gunfire. AMSUMOs, two-legged robot systems designed for police work, are sent into combat for the first time. The UEO banks on deterrence, but it underestimates the refugees' despair.

2070 An OWL (Overwhelmingly Large Telescope) in Peru registers several unknown asteroids very probably on a collision course with Earth. Most people neglect the news as the war in Africa is so much closer and has much deeper impact on their lives.

2071 All telescopes now point at the unwanted guests from the cold of space. No agency rules out the possibility of a collision anymore. Outwardly, NASA, CNSA, Roskosmos, and the ESA make sure to look calm, but internally there is chaos. The paperwork of the Paladin satellite system for the defense against asteroids is re-checked and approved for lack of alternatives.

Meanwhile, the crisis in the Mediterranean area continues on. HIV-E spreads to Spain and Italy but is restricted to a few small regions through an effective quarantine policy.

The Recombination Group's efforts succeed: Serum production starts. But the facilities run far under full capacity due to "Project Tannhäuser". The media will soon pick up its scent.

The pastoral Masai tribe living in the Ngorongoro crater in northern Tanzania seems to be immune to HIV-E. Many wonder if their way of life and diet make them survivors of the plague or if the caldera of the

OUTBREAK

ASTEROID SWARM

STREAM MAIL

"DEAR MR. THORN, THIS STREAM MAIL CONTAINS A GEO LOCATOR TRACKING DEVICE. PLEASE PRESS SUPRESSION IF YOU WANT TO AVOID TRACKING OF YOUR LOCATION."

From: "Viktor Karminov" <karminov@RG.earth>
Subject: WHERE ARE YOU???
Date: February 15. 2070 7:20:35 PM GMT+01:00
To: "Norman Thorn <thorn@RG.earth>

Norman,
Pick up your goddamn streamline! I've been trying to reach you all week. Where the hell are you?!Are you embezzling funds from the RG? I've tracked your funding accounts to several inter-continental shipping agencies in Bruxelles. You've ordered staggering amounts of materials that are not registered to our labs. What in god's name are you doing? Do you know what will happen if the chamber gets wind of this ?

These are the invoices I recieved last week:

320 Nano Transmitters
ordered from NECHA TECH in Ulan Bator
COST: 1.206.000,- €

3020 Liters of Freon
ordered from GELCO in Leeds, UK
COST: 50.390,- €

1480 Liters of Xenon
ordered from MINATEX INC in Astana, Kazakhstan
COST: 19.600,- €

Please tell me this is an accident and I can explain this crap on Monday at the board meeting. If not, believe me, I will push for all international consequences against you. I've had your back one too many times! I've always been on your side, and you know that you've always had free reign at the facility but this is just too much. You're compromising my seat with this! Don't you understand? Is this how you treat a friend?
I swear to god Norman, if I don't hear back from you within the next 24 hours, I'll take this matter to the chamber personally.

Stream me!

RG
RECOMBINATION GROUP

A BETTER HUMANITY - A BETTER EARTH

VIKTOR KARMINOV
COUNCIL MEMBER | HEAD OF INVESTMENT AND FUNDING
PROJECT TANNHAUSER

STREAMCONTACT: RECOMBINATIONGROUP.EARTH
STREAMINFO: KARMINOV.EXALT

extinct volcano where they live after their relocation by the Brits is responsible. Ionized air? Condensed cosmic rays? Aliens? Jesus? It is the stuff that Europe's New Agers' dreams are made of; one result is an Africanication of the esoteric scene. The results for the Masai are not as dreamy: they fight for survival while refugees half-crazed with fear enter their domain searching for various forms of purification. Some seek a cure through prayer, sacrifices, and talking with the elders; others drink the blood of slain warriors to ingest their protective spirit.

2071 The first of 211 Paladin satellites is carried into orbit by an Ariane launch vehicle. The others follow within the year. The Silver Horde, as the media dub them, is controlled from a secret base in Spitsbergen. The large NASA and ESA centers only exist as a control function and serve as a distraction for potential terrorist activities.

2072 Virus waves bog down large parts of the Stream. Data currents are rerouted to guarantee a smoother process flow. Experts are worried, for the latest virus iterations all show a signature of 2 to the power of 16. They question whether it is some copycat hackers' work or the Stream's immune response announced by pseudo-religious techno-believers.

The Recombination Group finishes the expansion of its storage facilities. The press gets wind of the selection and indoctrination of capable and loyal employees – Project Tannhäuser is in danger. The media name board member Norman Thorn as the whistleblower. He flees to Egypt where he goes underground and is recruited by the Anubis Syndicate.

THE SYSTEM FAILS

In December, the inconceivable happens: RG units empty the sleeping chambers and take the bodies of the afflicted into subterranean caverns that are sealed shortly afterwards. The project runs at full blast, the corporation treats dissenters with might and force – fully aware that judicative and executive won't survive the coming catastrophe.

The Swiss government does not trust in almighty technology alone and has large parts of the forgotten Alpine Fortress restored. For months, endless rows of trucks criss-cross the country, waiting to be unloaded at the portals of the labyrinthine tunnel system. Weapons, food, and medicine are stored in chambers as they are completed – a restart boost for the rebuilding after a potential catastrophe.

2073 „Clash of the giants!" – The battle in the sky between the human defense line and the rocks from the galaxy's depths is presented as a high-class media event – only it never actually takes place. The Silver Horde passes by the asteroid swarm without detonating even one of its demolition blocks. The exact reasons for this failure are mysterious and will never be completely brought to light. The only hint is a signature of 2 to the power of 16 in the Paladin satellites' control software.

ESHATON

There is global panic. People leave the cities and run to the mountains for shelter from the approaching apocalypse. Mass collisions clog every metropolis's exit roads. Terrible scenes play out in the streets as greed and violence become part of a desperate survival strategy. Police units and military forces are completely overwhelmed.

An RG insider reports in a streamcast that the storage facilities are internally called dispensers and are supposed to open in 100 years. The news gets lost between asteroid reports. Shortly afterwards, the dispensers are sealed. No one reports on it.

The Swiss military retreats to the Alpine Fortress's xenon-lit tunnels, along with members of the government. The mountain closes after them, shutting out a protesting population.

The Thor lasers designed to repel rocket attacks are directed skywards – their crews jokingly call the endeavor „shooting at elephants with a fly". They can laugh because they are hiding behind the technological culmination of ten thousand years of development, from mastering fire and discovering the wheel to large lasers that seek their aims independently. But the confidence the media lost after the Paladin fiasco is not easily restored. Reports on the Thor systems' performance are cool and sober; the patriotic undertone has long gone.

Many turn their backs on the technology that has betrayed them with its powerlessness and seek their salvation in faith. Tradition is highly valued again. Eschaton sects are very popular, but people also find shelter and solace in the old religions' churches.

The Kazakh plains tremble under the thrusters of twelve RG orbiters. Destination and mission are unknown. The people responsible at the spaceport in Baikonur refuse to supply information.

On March 13th, the Transhuman Era finally ends in a global inferno. No efforts were able to stop the celestial bombardment. The Thor lasers' megawatt discharges drown in the roaring thunder of the frothing atmosphere; they are merely toys in the face of this giant menace.

Mankind has never felt its inferiority clearer than on this day.

2074 The day after, reconstruction is the dominant goal.

Local action committees take over in Europe, while Sapper units clear strategically vital entry roads and fortify unstable bridges. A new patriotism kindles within the people – they are not beaten yet, not by far.

The electromagnetic pulses generated when the cosmic missile entered the atmosphere cripples

THE SUN BAND INCIDENT

While the asteroid fragments stamped craters into the land with heavy blows in the northern hemisphere, a stray one plowed the sky over Africa. Several kilometers above the land, it crossed the Congo basin from Sudan southwestwards before disappearing into space again somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. The fly-by incident only took about two minutes, but its destructive power would change Africa's face forever. The giant missile heated up the surrounding air to 30,000° C and radiated a blinding light – some believed they were staring into the face of God and fell to their knees at this sight. From the entry point, a glowing tail drew across the sky consisting of poisonous swathes of ionized oxygen and nitrogen. Molten rock dripped earthwards like grand fireworks, settling to glittering drops during the minutes-long fall.

All of this happened without a sound. People ran from their huts to watch the fiery spectacle. There was excitement in the streets. The midday sun burned hot; the air smelled of dust. Amazed, the people made friends and relatives aware of the glistening flashes of light that bloomed along the reeling stellar body's ever-changing face. Especially powerful discharges bloated to giant fireballs within the tail after the asteroid had already raced on – celestial pearls on a string of plasma and nitric oxides. Later, this phenomenon would become part of the returnees' and resettlers' culture under the name of "the sun band"; tribal religions later adopted the incident that devastated the region between Sudan and Congo basin only four minutes after its start.

Almost no one saw the danger, expected the bow wave of compressed air the asteroid displaced. A roar like a thousand thunderclaps surged down on the ground, and incredible pressure could be felt within the ears. Everywhere, people swallowed frantically, and fear crept into their faces. Clouds raced across the sky as in quick motion. The sky went dark; the sun was a glowing marble now, dim and distant; stars blinked through the zenith's midnight blue. Far to the north, beyond the horizon, something flashed.

Then suddenly the prelude ended. The wave hit the Earth with several thousand atmospheres of pressure, eating through the land at an incredible 30 km/s, pulverizing everything in a corridor approximately 300 km wide. It threw a mix of people, animals, vegetation, buildings, and dirt into the air in its wake like a dust cloud.

With good visibility, a black, billowing wall could have been seen from as far as Libya in the south, despite the earth's curvature.

Storms raged in the neighboring regions that had been spared the immediate effects of the fly-by. Central Africa drowned in a roaring sea of chaos and destruction. The people's cries for help remained unheard; a tsunami had devastated South Africa's highly urbanized coastal regions; the south shut itself off.

It would be decades before the rain had washed the dust from the air; it took a full 200 years for the first people to return. The land recovered. The changed climate drove clouds heavy with rain from the Atlantic Ocean across the Sahara, let the Ahaggar massif milk them thoroughly. The water found its way down the slopes into the erstwhile dusty plains by cutting deep ruts into the loose ground. Mud and stone avalanches went down into the seas or were pushed together to form rugged hillscapes. Vegetation literally exploded in the warm, humid climate, and plants covered the land at an enormous speed. Time and again, torrents tore large chunks out of the earth and floated them out into the sea as green islands. Nature triumphed over the desert.

THE DAY AFTER

global communication networks. A dense layer of ionized dust particles still makes connecting to telecom or GPS satellites impossible – if they have not been vaporized to cosmic dust anyway. The Stream is considered irrevocably destroyed and has taken important logistic data with it to oblivion. Reconstruction is hard without communications and coordination, but regardless, everywhere in Europe, crisis control centers get to work. UEO troops support the civilian units. The auxiliaries are soon known as "the Convoy" all over continent.

2075 The Reaper's Blow splits open and divides Central Europe along a north-south axis. Germany, Switzerland, and Italy are affected. The zone is tectonically very unstable: lava flows, earthquakes, and blowholes make it impossible to cross by land. Several convoys are lost trying. Europe is torn in two.

2076 The Reaper's Blow splits open wider. Town by town is crushed between the towering clods of earth; rivers of molten rock burn their way through the land.

2079 The so-called "second wave" reaches Northern Europe: HIVE, as the mysterious virus from Côte d'

THE SECOND WAVE

Ivoire is called by now, has fought its way from the Alps down to what's left of France and Germany. Heaps of corpses mark its path; only a few remote villages remain unaffected. The order tediously maintained by the military breaks down eventually. People flee from each other, for anyone could be a harbinger of death, a carrier of HIVE. Gunshots ring out in deserted city canyons.

The crisis department Southern Ruhr's medical staff surrenders to all the suffering and barricades itself in a hospital complex in the ruins of Dortmund. Later, these doctors' descendants will be known as Spitalians.

2080 No European or North African country is spared by HIVE. The few survivors retreat to remote regions far away from the former population centers. Red crater ash wafts across the streets. Rats and insects now rule the metropolises.

2082 The twilight years have cooled Mother Earth down; feebly, she falls into a fitful hibernation. Ongoing blizzards in Scandinavia drive the population to their limits. While a strong core of hard citizens insists on

AMBROSIA

In the Bygone's mythology, Ambrosia is the food that makes gods immortal. Argyre's Ambrosia – and thus all Marauders' Ambrosia – is the Sleeper pods' nanite blood. Thick and old it flows through their veins, waiting to be refreshed. Are Marauders immortal when they refresh their blood? Maybe. If Argyre is one single person and has not been replaced by someone else throughout the centuries, Ambrosia can really be compared to the gods' food.

staying in the fatherland and hope for better days, hundreds of thousands begin to go south.

2090 The Spitalians leave their exile and create the first containment zones around their HQ, trying to make a fresh start.

2095 The Janus Crater sits between the European continent and the United Kingdom like a coagulum and redirects the Gulf Stream. This impacts Europe's sensitive climate: the North Sea and Baltic Sea start freezing.

2097 The era of the beast comes upon mankind: helplessness and omnipresent decay lead to bloody violence, a last, mindless uprising against the inevitable. Without any controls, asocial types give in to their dark sides and terrorize whole villages.

2102 Streamers occupy the freight yard of the city that will become Justitian. They wander through the ruins and dig for pre-eschatological writings. Because of this, the locals call them "Chroniclers".

2109 In Cologne Cathedral's catacombs, a Streamer group discovers a vast collection of texts. That alone is remarkable, but in the museum next to the cathedral, a sensation awaits them. On a server, they find a bubble of static Stream. In the years to come, they remove layer by layer and carry the data to their HQ.

2122 An enterprising African merchant sells cereals from the hinterland and goods from his own manufactories to the coastal cities. His company grows. Everyone knows him as "the Libyan".

2132 Cults and sects arise from the ruins, nurtured by the desire for a strong community and for structures that simple minds can believe in. Still, almost none of these neo-religious communities survive their founder's death; their inner light is too small to keep those who strive for a way out of the dark enthralled.

REBUS THE BAPTIST

Rebus the Baptist is an exception. His faith is based on a new interpretation of the gnosis and does not get stuck in rituals, but provides help with everyday problems to the people. Especially farmers are attracted to his teachings, and they start tending to the deserted fields. At first they call themselves Rebus's Host. They will later be known as Anabaptists.

2146 The founding of the city of Exalt marks the end of the era of the beast. Police forces patrol its domain and pacify the region. Outlaws are hunted like animals and put down. Beyond the Exalt city limits, though, Clans still rage and make the populace tremble in fear.

2148 The dictate of faith: The Anabaptists' storming of the cathedral dome bereaves the Chroniclers of their largest collection of old texts and data to date. For a moment it seems as if the Streamers' end has come.

2160 The Masai leave the Ngorongoro crater and stride into a deserted land.

2173 Exactly one hundred years after the global conflagration, the RG facilities open to release human vanity back into a changing world: the 100s, the first Sleeper generation of Project Tannhäuser, awakens. It spreads out to subdue the earth. Some Sleepers test their socio-cybernetic skills on small towns, suppressing them with armed force if necessary and implanting memes as planned. Thus they prepare for a rural society susceptible to religion. Other groups check the situation for the 200s, repair, and expand. The Eschaton came upon mankind too fast; not everything was ready. A radio network and extended tunnel systems form the base for a new infrastructure.

THE FIRST CASCADE

2185 East Borca awakens from its rigor mortis. The climate has changed massively in the years after the Eschaton.

Humidity rising from the Reaper's Blow is carried east by the wind and favors vegetation. Forests of evergreen conifers spread.

2210 Purgans and Balkhanese meet in the Adriatic lowlands. The former stand with their backs against the wall as their hinterland is burnt by volcanoes; the latter claim to have been there first. Blood flows.

2215 The Libyan's enterprises flourish even decades after his death. A Cult has risen from his heritage: the Neolibyans. For the first time, their influence spreads beyond Africa as they send plunderers to West Purgare's deserted coasts. Syracuse gains importance as an entry port and terminal.

2265 Spaniards build a bridge across the Strait of Gibraltar. But they do not come as friends: they want African oil. At first, the Africans cannot stop the invaders and have to watch them loot their country's last resources. Their rage grows, and hosts come streaming from the hinterland. In a large concerted action, Africa finally strikes back and destroys the Spaniards utterly at

Tunis. Then, the Africans turn the table.

2269 The Spanish invasion forces are pushed back to Gibraltar. Day by day, young warriors arrive to keep the vanquished enemies' out, and the African army continues to grow. Now the war develops a momentum of its own that no one had been able to predict: the Africans not only push the Spaniards back to their country, but also take Andalusia as compensation for their losses and damages. No one uses the word "Spain" anymore; everyone calls the land "Hybrispania".

2270 Many people watch Exalt's rise to economic power with envy. The city's influence expands; it seems untouchable, a bastion of order and safety in a swamp full of snakes.

2273 The 200s rise from the Dispensers in the Balkhan.

THE SECOND CASCADE

But something goes terribly wrong. The Sleepers' memory has suffered from the long cryostasis; they have forgotten the camps' position. The supposed RG elite is like a pack of terrified rabbits, walking into every trap the Dushani set for them in the wasteland.

The Palers, RG's former guards, see the clueless ones as omnipotent leaders anyway.

Skirmishes between the reawakened ones and the shrewd, proud Balkhanese make the country tremble with their violence.

2305 A fleet consisting of 13 giant barges with triangular sails lands on Franka's west coast. The population is suspicious and keeps its distance – too often before were coastal cities attacked by Hybrispanian and Welsh pirates.

They turn to Aquitaine's troops and the godlike Pheromancer Jaquar for aid. Both agree to help, but the fear is unnecessary. The presumed invaders are Chinese merchants and explorers. With Jaquar's permission, the latter go east to study the land's flora and fauna – at least that's what they claim.

2310 Along the river Adria, Purgers and Balkhanese have erected sprawling fortifications. The fertile alluvial land is replaced by trenches and barbed wire. On Purgare's side, the Spitalians found infirmary cities. News travel fast: Balkhanese all over Europe rage and attack Spitalian facilities, even in Borca. The medical organization now mistrusts its own people if they are from the Balkhan or have any relations there.

2320 The Ice Barrier relentlessly expands southwards and pushes the Scandinavians to the coasts of former Germany. Their arrival resuscitates Borca's cultures and brings the horse cult to the nomadic forest tribes.

2333 The Anabaptists' conversion efforts in Purgare begin.

2373 Time for the third cascade: the 300-year-old ones are supposed to rise from their cold crypts. But the Dispensers do not open. Are the bunker computers afflicted by the 2 to the power of 16 signature? Or are the rumors of bizarre creatures entering the Dispensers and tampering with the Sleeper pods true?

2381 The First Judge appears and in the following years brings justice to Northern Borca.

2390 Argyre's foray: He is one of the old ones, winner of countless battles, his soul a bag full of swarming cockroaches. Northern Franka's people call him the Vulture. He is a Sleeper who never slept but used the power and the possibilities that Ambrosia gave him early on.

THE VULTURE

He built the yoke that bends the Sleepers to his will. In March of 2390, he declares Britain his domain. Signs warn every scrap collector and adventurer not to poach in the Vulture's domain or face destruction.

2410 Chroniclers and Judges found Justitian, the city of law.

2482 The city battles: No one knows Recombination Group's agenda. Even the writings of the first 100s only speak of assumptions and perplexity. For centuries, Sleepers have manipulated villages, bolstered pseudo-religious tendencies, taken over settlements, and established camps. Course and goal seemed clear. What other desire than a world order dominated by RG would justify the lengths that Gerome Getrell and his group went to?

CULTRIN'S DEPLOYMENT

Cultrin is a 400, and unlike his comrades, he was awakened on schedule. His memory is untouched by the cryo-sleep; the year 2073 is a yesterday that's only a few days old to him. His mind is a puzzle of implanted memes that start working one by one. He tracks down Sleepers, says the necessary code sequences. Memes that were considered buried and gone are activated. He is the Pied Piper playing the right notes.

The Sleepers gather around Cultrin, form a unit. An army. He equips it with Bygone weapons from the 100s' and 200s' warehouses. What he doesn't need, he offers to mercenaries and thus enlists them. His camps in West and East Borca grow into cities.

Clans and settlements send their emissaries, wanting to get on Cultrin's good side.

He rejects them all.

The Anabaptists do not accept this insolence. They attack a Sleeper outpost and wipe it out. Cultrin's troops pursue and take one Anabaptist settlement after another. Only when they reach Capital City do

they stop and return to camp.
In Exalt, a Sleeper agent is executed; Sleeper teams are sighted in the ruins of Berlin.

War is in the air.

But suddenly, Cultrin disappears. According to legend, he comes across a Pheromancer queen when entering an airfield in Franka. Hopelessly entwined in her net, he is said to have renounced fighting and ordered his troops to dissolve. According to another tale, he has a fateful encounter with a creature from beyond the abyss of time – once the most gorgeous woman of her era, today a mummy, deformed by malice and lust for life. She is said to have opened his eyes and cut him down to size.

Whatever happened, his officers have no intention of following his orders so close to their goal. They fight for control of the army, but no one can replace Cultrin. More and more small groups leave the army and go looting in the wasteland. Exalt sees a chance to get rid of this danger once and for all and sends its fighters. Rifle fire echoes across the plains. At the same time, an illness spreads amongst Cultrin's mercenaries. Sores grow in the groin, redden, blacken, and finally form festering boils. The plague.

While the Preservists bury empty canisters in the wasteland dust, the Black Death hefts its scythe. Cultrin's army is beaten.

In East Borca, the wind of change blows as well: Osman's Janissaries vanquish Cultrin's expedition armies at Berlin. The city is renamed Osman.

2495

Exalt's doom: The city battles bring Exalt countless wannabe heroes and generals. None of these want to return to earning a living as a farmer or a merchant again. They demand influence, compensation, and the right to participate.

Irregulars occupy the market square, the Portal Halls.

Others defy the Last Rule and lay bare the forbidden portals. With jackhammers and explosives, they try to break through. A sacrilege!

Violence runs rampant in the streets; the council flees to the wasteland.

Finally, the Exalters are fed up. They retreat to the surrounding settlements and to Justitian.

Without farmers to work the land, the silos get emptier by the day. The militia hungers. Soon they are gone with the wind.

Exalt is a ghost town slowly drowning in dust.

2496

A new star is born: Liqua, city of water and gambling, of whoring and quick cash. The population mainly

EXALT'S DOWNFALL

consists of former Exalters who indulge in their newfound freedom.

2498 With Exalt's decline, Justitian's influence rises. Its Protectors spread across the region, fighting uprisings, smoking out gang nests. Several settlements enter their protection: the Justitian Protectorate is born.

2512 Archeologists from Praha Republika initiate the construction of the Great Library in Osman. Hosts of adventurers enter unexplored East Borca to search for ancient texts in the mysterious ruins.

2515 Praha's Archivists suddenly vanish from the library at Osman. According to legend, Death himself dragged them into the deep and kept them with him.

2531 The Justitian Protectorate flourishes.

Justitian now encompasses several square kilometers, swallowing one settlement after another.

THE PROTECTORATE

The Spitalians, who have resisted any foreign influence for a long time, agree to a loose alliance, too. But they name their terms: Justitian needs the Spital more than the Spital needs Justitian. The Judges risk their lives in the ruins on a daily basis and need medical care, and the city itself keeps breeding illnesses. Though formally part of the Protectorate, the Spital remains independent.

2563 The Needle Tower Disaster: The Chroniclers order 16 of their most loyal Fragments to cross the Reaper's Blow and establish an information network in the land beyond. Their targets are the so-called Needle Towers, buildings rising cockily above Borca's forests that would be great for a new radio link. But far from their fellow brethren's prudery, far from the strangling control and equipped with a knowledge that makes them look like demigods in the eyes of the superstitious Borca nomads, the sense of duty gives way to vanity and greed. They occupy the Needle Towers, but the host of merchants, whores, mercenaries, and cutthroats in their employ shows that they have changed their point of view. Rumor has it that of the 16 emissaries, only eight could master the Reaper's Blow's trials, and of these remaining eight, four were renegades and four were keepers of the faith. It is unclear if the Chroniclers only spread those numbers to keep up the continuity of the number two and its powers (2 x 2 = 4, 2 x 2 x 2 = 8, etc.), an important foundation of their numerology. But it's a fact that in East Borca's large forests, at least two renegade Fragments – Iridium and Chromium – founded settlements and broke off contact with the Cluster. They behave like angry gods; demonstrations of their power take place on an almost daily basis.

NEEDLE TOWER DISASTER

2573 The thus far last planned Dispenser opening.

Their technology fails; they discharge their cargo at irregular intervals. Although Recombination Group's plan seems to be failing, Sleepers still pose a threat. Radio signals from the north make it seem probable that beyond the Ice Barrier in the polar circle, some facilities still bide their time.

2586 In Justitian, a Jehammedan assassin destroys the

Warsaw 27.11.2072

Getrell,

I dabbled in Black Magic, Sorcery, all the vices a mimetic brain can imagine and dove into the darkness you wanted to see summoned.

I found nothing.

Our end is nigh. Your prophecies were all true but you left us here as carrion for the gods. Your casts still echo throughout the Static Stream, your followers are in abyss, desperately awaiting your return. Everything is changing. Destruction is the motor, as you always claimed.

The night sky is now bright as the day, the stars have come to seal our fates. I drink the blood of ravens and I eat the bowels of birds in anticipation of this final judgement. I know that you have fled from us, so I write these final words in full knowledge that they won't survive the time, the fire and the killing that will have to pass until your return.

But know this Getrell, know that my hatred for you will survive. Know that I will copulate with the armies of survivors. Know that I will take the semen of every man alive and hatch children of hate. And these children that will spring forth from my bowels, will grow and come to bear more children and my family will grow. And every newborn will be nourished with the milk of my hatred. And this family will become an army, that will survive the time.

They will hunt you, turning over every rock on this planet in search for you. There will be no place left to hide from my revenge.

I spit on your ramite infested bones.

yours Y.

stone monument of Supreme Judge Archot. The colossus tilts and crashes down – taking Archot's mind with it.

The Jehammedans barricade themselves in their quarter, fearing a pogrom. The Osmanic Iconide Gileabod Ruben Abraham's blessed son is found, shot from his horse, dragged through the streets, and hanged at the High City wall. When this news reaches Osman, the whole city rages and cries for revenge. A thousand Swords of Jehammed march west from Osman. But the Reaper's Blow once again proves impassable. Humiliated, they settle down. They cannot return home: Osman will only welcome them as conquerors of Justitian.

2591 The battle between Jehammedans and Anabaptists on the Adriatic Sea has lost quite some intensity in the last decades. Both sides are bled dry and persevere in silent hatred.

2593 The Signal: Everywhere in Europe, a pulsed AM message can be heard beginning in February. It repeats every 15 minutes. The Chroniclers record it and try to decipher it – so far in vain. Via triangulation, they pinpoint the signal to be somewhere in the Balkhan.

On the same day, Chernobog, the Black God, rises from his chasm after a decade of deep slumber and assembles the forest clans. He starts to march south.

Two months later, he breaks through Praha Republika's lines of defense. He does not stop.

CHERNOBOG

2594 Relentlessly he marches, only destruction in his wake. The Clans rise. An artillery attack on Osman is just the beginning. In Borca, Clans that were considered vanquished crawl from the wreckage to attack Judges. Merchants are killed; no one dares to enter the ruins anymore. Settlements at the fringes burn; judgment stones are toppled. The Protectorate crumbles.

In the Balkhan, the Voivodes free themselves from the Clans' grasp and take over.

Although the Clans' cockiness is not founded in reality in many places, they attack platoons of Spitalians and sell them to Africans. The Balkhan becomes extremely dangerous for any foreigner.

REBIRTH

The Chronicler Fragment Modus offers a hand to the Anabaptists, and they take it. Modus enters the Cathedral as the Baptists' guest and once a day shows up at the main portal accompanied by the Baptist Orphid. As long as he is in Cathedral City, there will be no fighting.

Chroniclers and Anabaptists mistrust this peace and watch each other skeptically. Centuries of conflict have left their mark.

2595

Welcome to today! The Protectorate helplessly faces the Clans' hatred; the Cults close ranks. Even former arch-enemies consider alliances. Chernobog's hordes suffuse the Balkhan with violence and destruction – what is the Black God's goal, and what will happen once he has reached it? What does Argyre do in Britain? What are the Great Library's secrets?

YOUTH IS CONVICTION
DESTINY IS CHOICE
STRENGTH IS A VIRTUE

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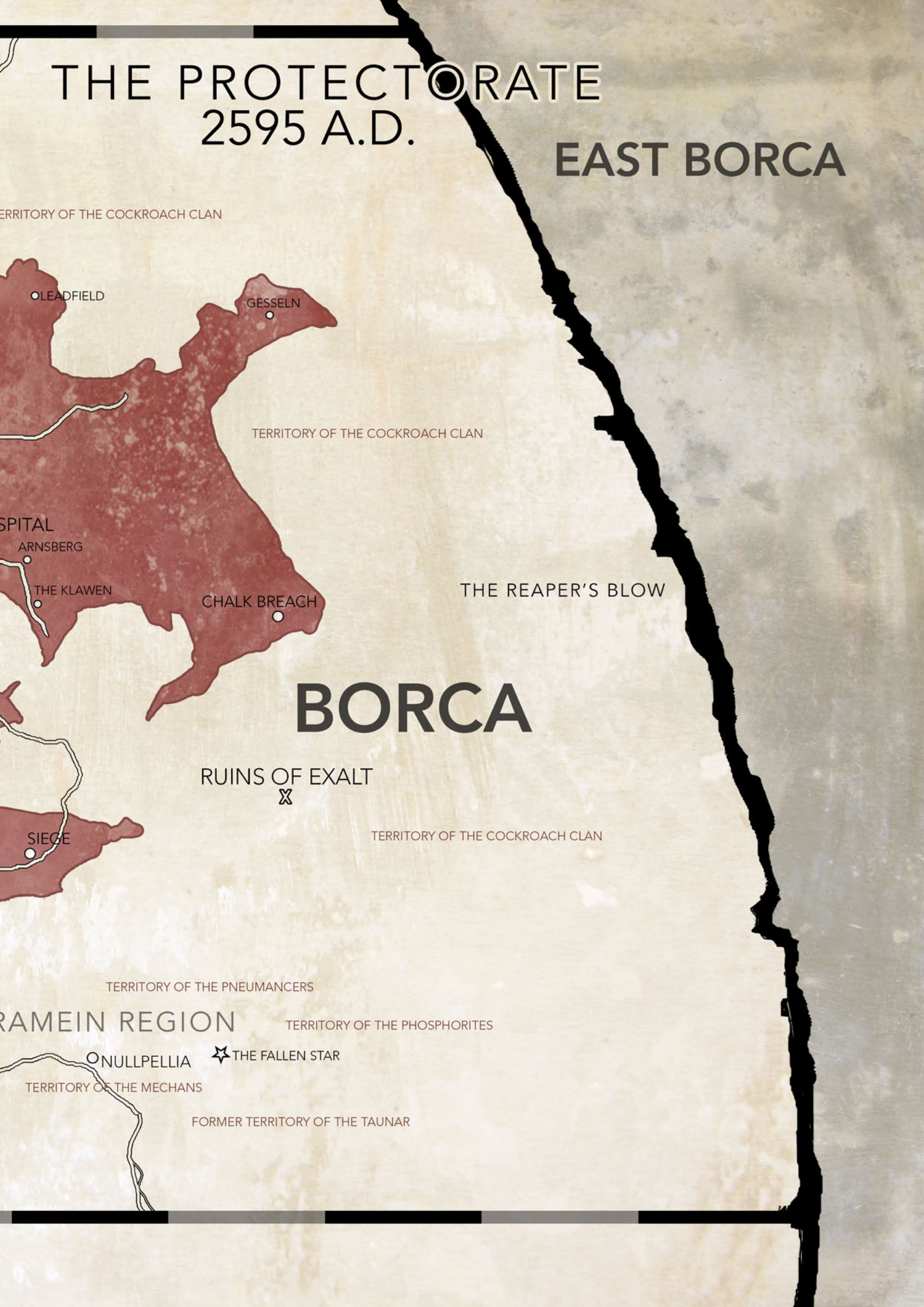
FRONTIER OF THE ENEMOI
BASSHAM


THE PROTECTORATE
2595 A.D.
EAST BORCA
ERRITORY OF THE COCKROACH CLAN
LEADFIELD
GESSELN
TERRITORY OF THE COCKROACH CLAN
SPITAL
ARNSBERG
THE KLAWEN
CHALK BREACH
THE REAPER'S BLOW
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RUINS OF EXALT
SIEGE
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TERRITORY OF THE PNEUMANCERS
RAMEIN REGION
TERRITORY OF THE PHOSPHORITES
NULLPELLIA
THE FALLEN STAR
TERRITORY OF THE MECHANS
FORMER TERRITORY OF THE TAUNAR

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS NO LIGHT

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