

d20
system



FADING SUNS™

ORPHANED RACES

Ascorbites & Hironem



ALIEN EXPEDITIONS

BRIDGES '03

ORPHANED RACES

Ascorbites & Hironem

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my years as a merc, it’s stay away from the Bugs and Lizards. They’re both hidin’ somethin’!”

Orphaned Races examines two of the sentient races of the Fading Suns™ universe: The insectoid Ascorbites and the reptilian Hironem.

- The Ascorbites, native to the Decados-ruled jungle planet of Severus, are perhaps the least understood race in the Known Worlds. Their alien culture —formed by a hive-mind — has proved resistant to most of humanity’s attempts to understand it. What’s more, the Church claims that the race worships dark entities — gods the Ascorbites claim will one day return to drive the “soft-flesh” humans into slavery.
- The Hironem, native to the Decados-ruled planet of Cadiz, revere their ancient culture-bringer gods, who are now believed to have been renegades from the advanced Vau Hegemony. These gods gave the Hironem their caste system and set a secession of God-Kings to rule them. Some humans wonder: Did these Vau “gods” also leave another, hidden legacy in the genetics and culture of the Hironem that is yet to be revealed?

Each book in the *Alien Expeditions* series examines one or more alien races, detailing their histories, cultures and planets of origin from multiple perspectives. *Orphaned Races* features dual-stats for both Holistic’s Victory Point System and the d20 System (these rules require the use of the *Dungeons & Dragons®* Players Handbook, Third Edition, published by Wizards of the Coast®).



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ORPHANED RACES

Ascorbites & Hironem

by Gabriel Zarate





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The emblems on the front cover represent a glyph used by Ascorbite *Mi'tlazh* ambassadors (its meaning is unknown) and a symbol of the Hironem God-King.

Pilgrims:

Who can fathom the alien races? I regret that I never tried. Myriad mysteries are spread before us like jewels in a kingly raiment, yet we shun them like albinos weaned in a dark sewer, pained by their glittering light. All men are some day faced with the choice: the sewer or the jewels.

I hate the stench of this place.

— Deacon Andre Torensen, *Notes on a Banal Existence*



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ORPHANED RACES

Ascorbites & Hironem

Contents

Alustro's Journal: Blood Debt	4
Introduction	8
A Song in the Darkness: Ascorbites	10
The Heavens Denied: Hironem	56





BRIGGS '03



Alustro's Journal: Blood Debt

I write quickly in longhand, hoping that I shall survive long enough to complete this narrative. Bullets whine over my head; my only protection is an old bathtub my companions and I have overturned facing the open window. I do not wish to die here, but if I do, I pray the Pancreator will look well upon the acts that brought me here.

Finally, a lull in the gunfire. We now enter a standoff. They have the advantage; they can wait as long as they want. We can't leave this room, but neither can they enter, lest they risk being cut down by my companions.

I will take these precious moments to relate our recent history, in the hopes that my Lady will understand what befell us, should this document ever reach her.

Our alliance with the legendary Captain Kor'uk has embroiled us in a seedy underworld of slavery and bigotry: we have joined the fight for alien rights, working with Kor'uk's allies in FAR, the Frontier for Alien Rights. I have always been sympathetic with their aims, but until recently their exploits were only political rumor to us. I have not the time or the discretion to fully describe every step of our journey, but I now sit crouching behind cover in a third-floor slum apartment on Pandemonium, waiting for the Chainer slavers gathered outside to finish us off.

How in the world does a priest come to such travail? In brief, my Lady bid me travel with my three new companions — Sarus, Kuelth and Jubal — while she, Cardanzo and Ong accompanied Captain Kor'uk in his ship, "The Crimson Talon," to rendezvous with a benefactor near Farery. My companions are all aliens: Sarus and Kuelth are Hironem, and Jubal is Gannok. We were not supposed to encounter trouble, only gather provisions for an expedition to Iver. But we met the Chainer gang in the alien slums as they brazenly kidnapped an Ascorbite.



I was, of course, startled to see an Ascorbite on Pandemonium. Kuelth was also shocked, and quickly inquired among the locals, discovering that this alien was a shaman of his people who had been brought to the world by a Decados baron, only to escape his "entourage" and hide himself in the slums. The Chainers now sought to reclaim him.

I ashamedly admit that I would have done nothing to prevent them. The sheer odds against success were daunting. But Sarus and Kuelth, partisans in FAR, would not tolerate it. They set a sniper ambush from this empty apartment and pinned the Chainers into an alley, hoping they could distract the enemy while Jubal slipped in and freed the Ascorbite.

It did not go well. Sarus killed two of the eight Chainers, but they quickly took cover and then pinned us here. We sought to leave, but found that they already had a man downstairs, well positioned to shoot anyone trying to exit. Worse, we fear Jubal might be dead, for we have neither heard from nor seen him since he departed our company on his mission.

Sarus is a fascinating figure: an ex-Dragon, a Muster mercenary, who left his unit to work for FAR on a variety of missions. He despises the slaver faction of his former guild, and could not stomach their stealing a fellow alien — even one of another race than he. His skill and unique weapon gave us a strong lead in our battle. Even now, as I write, he prepares to fire at one of our foes without even looking at him!

He explains that his gun is fixed with a "rovles'su" sight. This amazing device creates a form of magnetic tunnel down which the bullet travels. He can adjust this tunnel to fire around corners. It is invisible to my sight, but Sarus and Kuelth both assure me that they can see it, for it is visible as "S'su" energy. I regret that I might never have the time to more fully understand this S'su the Hironem speak of.

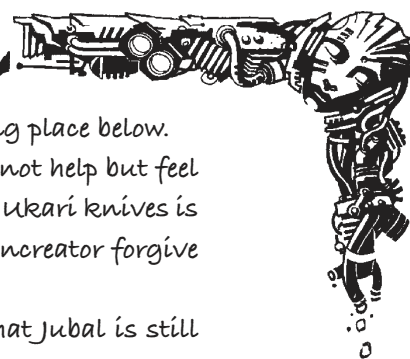
Kuelth is quite conversant in the lore of S'su, having been a highly placed Siban before he left his homeworld. He is now — like many of his caste who leave Turaz — considered Illu, debased and casteless. He joined Sarus, of the Kigazi warrior caste, to further the aims of FAR.

Sarus has come away from the window and joined us behind the tub. He is out of bullets. It is only a matter of time now; the Chainers will surely move in soon and even my position in the Church will not sway them from enacting revenge.

Kuelth prods me and points to the window, smiling. "Angry S'su. Not the Chainers. Them." I shake my head, not understanding. A cacophony of cries erupts in the street below, followed by gunshots, then louder roars. Kuelth pulls me up, interrupting my writing.

I have just looked out the window and can scarce believe what I have seen. The Chainers are under assault by an angry mob of aliens, residents of this slum district. It seems we are not the only ones here who can no longer tolerate their





activities. Perhaps our rebellion sparked the larger one now taking place below.

My faith urges me to abhor what is going on below, yet I cannot help but feel it is just. Being trampled by a Shantor and then finished off by Ukari knives is a grisly fate, but one not entirely unearned by these slavers. Pancreator forgive me for my lack of forgiveness.

I join my companions as we go down to the street, hoping that Jubal is still alive.

I repent my petty acceptance of the mob's revenge. O that I ever approved of it.

I write now in safety, once more aboard *The Re-surgent* as Julia prepares for liftoff. Do I deserve to live when so many are dead by such brutal means?

The mob's ire was terrible and their justice swift and painful, but no man deserves what this...creature did to him.

We arrived at the alley to find Jubal, who had been tied and bound by the slavers, now standing against the wall vomiting. The crowd had moved back, wary of something in the alley. Even the Ukari seemed unnerved by what they saw.

I, too, nearly voided my stomach upon seeing it. The Ascorbite we had fought to free had broken his bonds, perhaps lifting a key off one of the dead Chainers. It now grappled the sole surviving slaver, wrapping his arms and legs around the man from behind, holding him in an unbreakable grip. The man screamed in pain as the Ascorbite sucked his blood out of him.

The sight of the creature's tongue, driven into the slaver's neck and throbbing as his victim's blood pulsed through it and into the Ascorbite's mouth, will surely haunt me for many nights to come.

Sarus stepped forward, unaffected by the horror of the scene, and spoke. "I know you are hungry. The Decados starved you. I am sorry for what they and my guildsmen did to you. But you must stop your feeding. Let this man die."

As if Sarus had pressed a button on a machine, eliciting a preordained result, the Ascorbite withdrew its tongue and dropped the man to the ground. It walked away from the body, which twitched as the man sought to staunch his wound. Sarus stepped forward and deftly broke the man's neck.

I groaned and closed my eyes. What have I become? I knew that if any of these men were to tell what happened here, the retribution against the alien residents would be extreme beyond all sense of justice. But he was a man, with a soul, no matter how tarnished by his sins. I silently prayed for him and his guildmates.

Kuelth took me by the shoulder and led me from the alley. Sarus undid Jubal's bonds, and we walked down the avenue together, away from the dispersing mob. I looked back and saw that the Ascorbite followed us. I shook off Kuelth's hand and turned to address it. It stopped and watched me with its inscrutable insect eyes.

"They say you are a shaman," I said. "A priest among your people. Does not your god abhor killing?"

The Ascorbite twitched its head, perhaps some attempt at communicating a 'no.' It then spoke in halting Urthish. "No god... Gods... Death is life... How do you feed?"

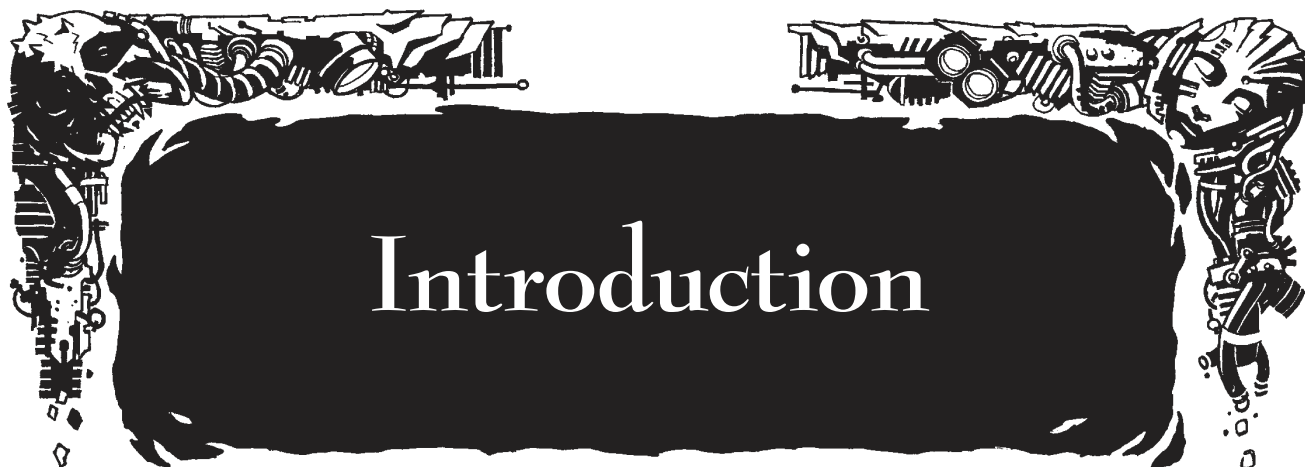
I could not answer. Life feeds on life, yes. But to revel in such brutality is barbarism. We must hold ourselves to higher standards if we ever hope to attain the Emphyrean.

But who am I to preach to such a being as this? Did not the Pancreator design his body as well as mine? As revolting as his blood-feeding was, it sustains him. Or is this the dark design of demons masquerading as gods, changing the anatomy of whole races to fit their sinful demands? How could I judge this?

The Ascorbite now sits on our hold. We will transport him to Kor'uk's ship. Julia, who was not witness to the events I describe here, finds him fascinating, and even quipped that he could solve our hull rat problem.

I shuddered at the joke.





The Alien Expeditions Series

This series examines the lives of different alien races, both on their homeworlds and in new environments. The reports are provided by humans trying to catch a glimpse into these alien cultures, to understand them or gain a degree of control over their mysteries.

The colonialist attitude and its attendant arrogance inherent in humanity's historical relationships with these races is unavoidable. Such perspectives are revealed honestly in these books, and do not constitute an approval of imperialism. Depicting such historical realities — albeit in a fictional, far-future setting — can perhaps expose them to greater scrutiny. Judgments are left to the readers.

These races are wholly fictional. While certain aspects of their histories and cultures might resemble elements from actual human events or cultures, no specific reference to any real person or culture is intended. The authors may draw inspiration from the varied web of human history to add verisimilitude and authenticity to their creations, but they intend no disrespect or cultural pilferage.

These books aim to open up new worlds and civilizations for consideration, evoking wonder and mystery as well as danger and sorrow.

Fortuno: "For it is said, o prelate, that in those lands held by the Mantis that there are two races most unlike the mien of Man."

Archbishop Gullet: "More of them? And of what kind are these?"

Fortuno: "The first is like to the mantis itself, carapaced and spectrum-eyed. The second is scaled and cold of blood."

Archbishop Gullet: "And what know they of the Pancreator?"

Fortuno: "Naught. Indeed, the former know gods who dwell in darkest night, doomed one day to return from exile. The latter were weaned by gods who fell from the sky."

Archbishop Gullet: "Fell? What, do not their gods have wings? These 'gods' are pettier than the angels, then, of low rank in the Worlds Above. And do not the first gods know light? Damned they are, then."

Fortuno: "Aye, 'tis best to leave them be, unmolested by our stalwart priests."

Archbishop Gullet: "Nay. Draw not the wrong lesson here. Many a martyr can be made on the swords of these pagans. We will thus gain saints a plenty, and they the Light of the Empyrean to chase away the dark and to lift their spirits."

— Elgar Troggoth, *The Suns at Play*, a 46th-century mystery play

Whether someone in your troupe is playing an Ascorbite or Hironem, or if they're just appearing as background characters, this book provides a wealth of information on these sentient races, each with their own cultures and histories distinct from humanity's.

The first half of this book examines the Ascorbites, while the second half concentrates on the Hironem. This introduction provides some roleplaying hints for players and gamemasters.



Roleplaying Ascorbites

Perhaps the most difficult of sentient races to play, the insectoid Ascorbites are quite different from humans (and most mammals) in their behavior and thought processes. Their hive-mind makes it very hard to even imagine what goes on in their heads, let alone effectively play one of them. For that reason, it's usually best to play an Ascorbite who has been removed from the hive-mind — who no longer hears the “song.” While these individuals are somewhat tragic, tragedy is a good basis for roleplaying drama.

The main method of disconnection from the song is damage to the antennae and/or resonator. However, unique supernatural curses might also cause the problem, holding out a hope of restoration if the curse can be reversed.

Ascorbites who cannot hear their song — or any song — are not accepted by other Ascorbites and they might very well be attacked by them (for reasons explained in this book). Disconnected characters might find the rigors and loneliness of space travel little worse than the ostracism received at home.

All-Ascorbite Dramas

A more unique gaming experience is to attempt an all-Ascorbite drama or even epic, wherein all the players take the role of Ascorbites. For these, it might be best to create a sub-tribe with its own unique song (created through long exile from other Ascorbites, or shaped by a shaman); this way, they can have a hive-mind among themselves but cannot share the hive-minds of other Ascorbites (and hence, will be distrusted by those Ascorbites).

It's not easy running a hive-mind player character group, but many roleplaying games recognize this “mass mind” phenomenon. Let the players listen in even on private conversations between other characters — they're privy to one another's actions and thoughts (well, only those thoughts an individual chooses to broadcast, but most Ascorbites don't seem to even consider keeping secrets from their fellows).

This could lead to some fun roleplaying — and behavior that is unnerving to most humans. The thing to remember is that the hive-mind is far more than mere telepathy. It forms the very psychology of the race. They are units in a greater whole, not individuals who freely choose to participate in a social group only so long as they care to. The very idea of individuality might not even fully exist among Ascorbites. Ascorbites cannot be individuals as far as the hive-mind is concerned; ergo, individual Ascorbites are not Ascorbites, and can be killed.

Playing in this sort of game requires the full commitment and imagination of all the players, pledged to the common experience of the unit, not to each character's individual

glory or benefit. Hence, there is no idea of self-sacrifice, for there is no “self” to sacrifice — risking one's life for the unit comes with no sense of personal loss, only fear of group loss.

It's a real challenge, but it could be a rewarding one.

Roleplaying Hironem

While not as weirdly “alien” as Ascorbites, the reptilian Hironem are still farther removed from our mammalian heritage than, say, the Shantor or the Gannok. This means they have assumptions about life, the universe and everything that might seem strange to us mammalian humans.

Among the challenge to playing a Hironem is that their cold-blooded nature restricts their environmental range (no arctic travel, for instance). Technology can overcome this, but it does make new environments seem odd and even threatening to a Hironem unused to them.

Their caste restrictions might at first seem daunting, but Hironem won't necessarily find human culture too strange — they can readily see the “castes” in human society, from nobles to peasants. It's humans who seem oddly reluctant to recognize these as enduring or permanent features; many seem to think that any among them can rise to better standards (or sink to lower ones). Only the nobles seem honest enough to proclaim the unyielding standards of human “castes.”

The other challenge for Hironem falls more on the gamemaster — Hironem perceive an energy that they call *S'su*; it colors their perceptions of emotions and events. If a Chinese Taoist geomancer could actually see the chi energy of his feng shui, he'd have a similar experience to the Hironem. Hence, any environment needs to be described not just with its visual and auditory (and perhaps tactile) features, but also its emotive features, based on its *S'su*. More detail on *S'su* is provided in the Hironem chapter.

All-Hironem Dramas

The full dynamics of the caste culture can best be brought out in an all-Hironem drama or epic. The challenge is keeping player characters of different castes together over long periods of time — their caste roles might restrict their mobility. Makers are often restricted to certain regions, while Warriors have military duties to attend to, and Siban must administer to their superiors. The most ideal set-up might be to have one or more players take the roles of high-ranking Sibanzi. Any Kigazi characters can be their choice bodyguards and Makers can be personal tailors, chefs or other functionaries. With a writ or mission from the God-King himself, they might even be able to travel outside of Turaz and even off-world with less fear of losing their caste status.







A Song in the Darkness: Ascorbites

Introduction

To His Most Royal Highness Alexius, Emperor of the Known Worlds, Lord of Byzantium Secundus, Tethys, Stigmata and his Dominions beyond the Skies, Defender of the Faith,

This collection of documents, assembled by Your Majesty's humble servant, represents a brief survey of what humanity has thus far discovered of the insectoid race of Severus, known to us as Ascorbites. That body of knowledge is surprisingly sparse considering the millennia of our two species' interaction, but Ascorbitology, as it was known during the Second Republic, was never a popular field and much of what was learned was lost in the Fall.

The last few decades have seen a renewed interest in these aliens now that the Severan mining province of Mistanza has come under the administration of the Brother Battle order, and because of the intensified alien guerrilla fighting taking place in the Vi'kro Tan'doda. Due to the frequently antagonistic nature of the relationship that humanity has had with Ascorbites the majority of the data collected in this time has been mostly under the auspices of the Inquisition. It was no doubt for this reason that I came to the attention of Your Majesty's intelligence network.

However, it is not simply as a subject of the Em-

pire that I permitted the disclosure of such information to Your Majesty's operatives. Your Majesty should know that before sharing these documents I received instructions from Archbishop Eli Bodio, the Church's highest authority on Severus. These instructions not only authorized but encouraged my full cooperation with Your Majesty's inquiry. I admit that I was surprised to hear this, since I had not yet contacted the archbishop's office on the matter. Thus it is with great pride that I present to Your Majesty this compilation, to illuminate the mysteries of the Ascorbite race.

Your servant,
Sister Karinne Vernus, Chartophylax
Cathedral of St. Lextei
Tsaritsyn, Leshiy
Severus

Imperial Eye addendum: Neither our agents nor those answering to Sir Mazarin were responsible for the Church's authorization of the release of materials contained herein. This is especially troubling considering that the Church was expected to refuse to assist in this project. Your Highness has ordered that we not pursue the matter, therefore it shall rest.



History

The following document was among several that the Inquisition submitted to my care several years ago. Four of these are included in this compilation.

— Sister Marianne

Transcription note: This confessional was conducted as a result of Inquisitorial concerns of a possible demonic origin of the native aliens of Severus called "Ascorbite" in Urthish. Their own word for themselves remains yet uncertain, for they seem to use several different words interchangeably. The subject was confiscated from the Muster slave-transport Fredensborg in the Cadavus system. It was already able to communicate in broken Urthish, and named itself "Rom'kl," once a heathen shaman or T'zhamivt among its people. Rom'kl was further instructed in spoken Urthish until her speech was deemed satisfactory by [DELETED] and then brought to the confessional. Avestite theurgists and Penitent psychics were included in these sessions. Unfortunately, due to unauthorized action by an Obun Penitent the subject died prematurely. The appropriate rites of unction were performed, and all personnel were transferred to Pyre for debriefing and cleansing. Transcription begins...

You take me from my world, the center of all worlds, you take me from my people and their Song, you even break me so that I can never hear them again and then you want to know about their memory? Is this how humans learn such things? Perhaps that is why you know so little, that you don't even ask the right one. We are traitors; we fight against the chosen ones of Those Who Dwell in the Night and damnation is our reward. You call us all "Ascorbite," though you have no idea what that says and why I cannot be the right one; you know nothing of us. We talk to you humans and trade and use your cursed, blessed tools and it taints our blood, but we do so for a higher goal, one that you can never understand. Well, you would never get one of the pure ones to tell you these things though they may know them better, so I will tell you what I can. Then you might redeem the *Bokurn E La* as only you can: by killing us all.

Memory is a constant; what has been always has been. The past has always been so and the future will always be the future. We must live in the moment, for it is all there ever really is. But infants feed, youths fly and the grown *S'corva* wait for the next change and just so are our people now waiting. You humans go from the womb to the pyre without understanding the changes of your lives, without feeling it within you, so you make ceremonies to mark them arbitrarily: infancy, youth, maturity, Advancement, even death. The changes of time are obvious to us, and we see it in the memory of our people as well.

Infancy

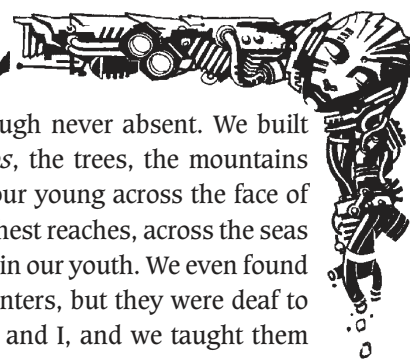
Our life began on the carcass of the world now called Severus. It had no name then; as infants we were as mindless as any infant on tugarin meat. We were, in your terms, non-sentient; we had no Song; we were just one of many kinds of simple beasts living on our world. What manner of creature that made us is forgotten, for those that attended our birth never told us what they were. The Iron Mantis? Don't be stupid. Our *Arme'tova* was a tree-climber and a blood-drinker; that much is certain. You were told that we believed that the Iron Mantis gave birth to us? Surely it does, but many creatures birth us: the tugarin, the shriva, the human.

Youth

After many meaningless years the *Somta Vosht'i* came, Those Who Dwell in the Night. They put us in the cocoons, they bred us, they gave us reason and purpose. They gave us skillful fingers and wings to fly with and taught us to use them, and gave us our apprenticeship: their hunters, their soldiers. We sent scouts across black oceans, saw lands so soft that a raw infant could make a kill, and with every generation we grew stronger in mind and body. We learned to make our strongholds, our *Tunos*, places to breed and trade and train, our archives of knowledge, and the Song revealed more of its beauty and complexity, deafening in its intensity.

Some scouts even adopted little cousins of their own and taught them the rudiments of the Song, under the watchful eyes of our masters. A language was





designed, a system of sounds much like this one, this Urthish, to speak to our cousins while the Song was in its infancy in their heads. Perhaps in this we overstepped ourselves; our *Tunos* of *Vin'arum* was lost to dissension and invasion, our cousins there left orphaned and confused.

But youth cannot last forever; sooner or later it must end and the young apprentice joins its master in maturity, the time for fanciful voyages past. After hundreds of years of our world we were ready, full grown into our understanding of the Song that had become the heart of our existence. We were taken to our places of strength, our *Tunos*, and as many do, most returned to the place of our birth. Some of the *Somta Vosht'i* joined us there, taught us new ways to live, but they themselves could not remain among us; great though they were they could not survive the jungle for long, and their bodies soon birthed us new life. As a final gift and warning the *Somta Vosht'i* gave us the name of that place, its meaning translated to Urthish but never understood by your people or mine: Severus.

You ask me about the Song? How can I describe it when I will never hear it again? Even the memory of the Song becomes confused without the Song itself as its focus. It is the chorus that binds us, the Start-is-the-End that makes us who we are. We hear it in our heads and we sing it with our asses. What is funny? Your hunters catch us, take the grown ones from their homes and leave behind the youths who would welcome the voyage, and then mutilate us so the Song leaves us, and this is funny? You humans will learn little if you think so.

Now I ask you something, you humans who have traveled the farthest lands. Have you seen nothing of our kin in the far places? Are there none like us, no Singers? Is there even no trace of the *Tunos* we built? We know you have seen the *Somta Vosht'i* or someone like them; it is evident in your fear of we "Ascorbites." You have heard the echoes of Those Who Dwell in the Night; even now you make signs to ward off evil as I speak of them. Well, perhaps we on Severus are alone again, but the fourth stage will begin in its own time.

Maturity

So we have lived on our world, hunting, breeding, listening to the Song and above all, waiting. Our *Tunos* delved farther and deeper, sometimes so deep that the

Song itself is muted, though never absent. We built communities in the *Tunos*, the trees, the mountains and the plains. We sent our young across the face of the planet to settle its farthest reaches, across the seas as we ourselves had done in our youth. We even found others like us, mature hunters, but they were deaf to the Song, as deaf as you and I, and we taught them what we knew.

I need a word in Urthish, one for a large collective of individuals coexisting in a specific place. Country? Race? Tribe? Nation? Nation must do, but you will misunderstand its meaning. Well, this was when the first *nations* of the *Bokalo'o* came into being. You cannot know the confusion of those days. How could there be full-grown adults who did not know the Song? They should not have reached maturity without the essential understanding, yet there they were. Now, with the wisdom of damnation I have learned, I can see that these strangers were just as we were, the Song as strong as ever in their heads, but it was a different chorus. Sometimes when the young are long separated from adult voices, their Song shifts a little; it is ever the danger we face when they wander too far. It is how a new nation is born, that orphanage of music. I understand now: these others long-sundered from us were not Songless at all; they simply had Songs of their own.

Nations grew, splintered, merged. They learned their purpose in the Long Wait, the *Ull'Vukk Tlazhn*: to attain the perfection of maturity that would lead to the Advancement by maintaining the rules and roles given them during the stage of Youth. Other nations could not hear the Song; they would be taught or culled, for no imperfection could be tolerated on our world. When the *Somta Vosht'i* return they must find a single Song of unity on Severus, for only then will we experience the fourth stage of life. Each nation named itself alone the *Bokurn E La*, the Beautiful Singers, for in their own minds its people alone were destined to be the chosen ones.

Some nations learned to make peace with others, revived the old language of teaching and used it for trade, learned if not to love then to tolerate the Songless. That was, for a time, the cause of great wars between *Bokalo'o* nations; each saw trade pacts between their enemies and feared the rising up of the Songless against the Singers. Nations themselves split over whether compromise with the Songless was even per-





missible, and the Song itself was dissonance. Eventually, as the Long Wait lengthened Ascorbites chose to allow trade, bide their time. When the *Somta Vosht'i* arrive, let them choose the Singers, or perhaps the nations will have their final war until only one Song remains.

First Contact

No memory exists of the first coming of humans to our world, but I have heard your stories of those things. The ship landed in the heart of the *Vi'kro Tan'doda*, lands now ruled by my own people. I have been to the places where the first humans walked and I think that, as ever, your choice was poor. Those lands are lush but dangerous; the *fosha g'maud* hydra hunts and the *amen'ta* swarm and the *Sozho Moda'en* ever skirt the edges of heresy. It would have been they, the Walkers of the Tides, who gave you the warning that you ignored. They must have sent the young to learn your speech as quickly as possible, a desperate tactic to ensure their place as the true *Bokurn E La*. But your people failed, they fed the *amen'ta* and were forgotten as false gods must be, their heretical allies probably exterminated. The *Bokurn E La* do not often forget; the confusion of your coming must have been great to cause them to repress the memory of you.

Colonization

They do remember when you returned and when you stayed. They remember when they saw the new star, the moving star out of no legend or record. Like the evening star *Vinoush'ok* that blesses our young the new star moved against the background of the sky without pattern. It ducked behind cloud and sun and moon or shone openly in the clear night, but ever it grew. The shamans, the *T'zhamivt*, called it the *Inok'tan'i*, the messenger of the *Somta Vosht'i* that would finally end the Long Wait. Wars broke out across the world; trade pacts of generations were discarded and allies massacred to impress our "gods." It is ironic to realize that the Song was splintered, not unified, by these wars. Young were orphaned and scattered to the jungle while adults killed infants and each other, but the young fled and survived in the wilds and new nations were born. And they all fought for the privilege of greeting the *Inok'tan'i* when it landed.

But the vessel ignored the ancient place that had been made ready, the *Tunos* we had prepared in the

G'mosh Beti, the place you call Rhodesland. Where? That is a secret known only to those far purer than I. No, instead it went to the plains to the east of the *Vi'kro Tan'doda*, to the wide lands now called the Transvaal. Local *T'zhamivt* went to greet the ship and maybe to judge its worthiness; the failure of the first humans was probably not yet forgotten and the *Tan'zhom* were kept far away.

Imagine the surprise, if you can, when the *T'zhamivt* saw the strength of its flame combined with the fragility of its soft metal skin, and more when its inhabitants emerged from within. The exposed flesh, unprotected by hard carapace as any infant, the palpable scent of salted sweat and rich blood, the primitive sensory organs, deaf to the world around them and the Song itself... the confusion was complete. Were these weak creatures the wardens of the *Inok'tan'i*? It seemed impossible yet the manner of their arrival was undeniable, as clear as prophecy. For a second time in memory the Song was dissonance as word was spread from one nation to another, and confusion paralyzed most of the planet.

For years you were watched by the greatest of the *T'zhamivt*; presented with this question the *Bokalo'o* forgot their wars and waited for word of judgment, word that was a long time in coming. You were watched as you built your farms and settlements and sent your hunters into the jungles to die, as you carved your mines into the mountains and found the *aal osharve*, the tugarin-bearers. More confusion! — humans always seem to bear it with them. No one yet knew of your obsession with gemstones and precious metals; to those observing it seemed that humans were delving *Tunos* of their own for the homage of the *Somta Vosht'i*.

Despite the caution of the *T'zhamivt*, contact occurred; some of the more foolish of the *Tan'zhom* could not be restrained and learned the human speech; they broke from the Song and greeted the humans. They were rewarded with capture and taken to the city. Whispers of the Song told of their great fear and pain, and they were never heard from again. Now I finally know what their fate was; I live it now, do I not?

New Humans

Then you humans changed, rapid, unexpected. More ships with more humans came; you built your first fortresses in the jungles; weapons were every-



where. Places where gems might be found were broken by huge machines for strip-mines and operations in the mountains were expanded. Above all, the soft preybeast worn on every human breast was replaced by a symbol of startling familiarity to even the youngest *Tan'zhom*: a strange blend of the Iron Mantis that is the pride of infancy and the Fourth Stage that is the highest goal of the *Bokurn E La*.

The *T'zhamivt* were now without any doubt; the word went out into the jungles: the true *Inok'tan'i* had emerged to maturity. Just as the *Tan'zhom* can fly to far places before their change so had the humans, thought the shamans. That change was unusual, certainly; a thing not of new flesh but of new mind, but still a change that none could dispute. From every nation emissaries went to the humans to offer their services to the messengers of the *Somta Vosht'i*, these "Decados." Warriors prepared for renewed warfare for the truth of the *Bokurn E La*.

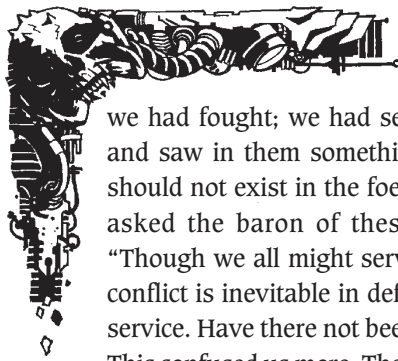
To the shock of all, you called for an end to our warring; you wanted no wasteful killing among your servants, you said. Not while willing *S'corva* can be used in the mines, I think! You accepted the offers of service from every emissary that reached you; entire nations became mining populations in Carpathia and Varangia. Those few who resisted, who denied your godhood, were exterminated.

Aberration

Then, as happens sometimes a new nation arose, a nation that you should know well. I don't know which of the *Bokalo'o* laid them or how that nation died, but not all of the *Arme'tova* were killed despite the normal customs of wars between nations. These were orphans of the dead, infants feeding on a great tugarin. The carcass was discovered by Decados rangers in the mountains of Carpathia and it was they, these Decados, who attended their birth. Those, the first of my kind were raised by one of the Decados and called *Mi'tlazzh*. Our master was Baron Yosef Nestor Decados; he taught us the manner of the Decados, the lineage that made you great. He showed us the power of their tech and our duty to use it in their service.

A few of us fought in the Ukar War under the Decados banner; ours was the finest unit in their command, for it was always sent on the missions too dangerous for humans. But the few who returned gave disturbing tales to the Song: it told us of the enemy





we had fought; we had seen their places of worship and saw in them something familiar, a kinship that should not exist in the foes of the *Somta Vosht'i*! We asked the baron of these things and he told us: "Though we all might serve the same masters, some conflict is inevitable in defense of the manner of that service. Have there not been wars among your kind?" This confused us more. There had been no wars among the *Mi'tlazh* but we held our silence and listened to the will of the Song.

The baron aged and died in the human manner but his heirs were not our friends. We were exiled to the jungles of our ancestors, to survive by our own strength or die. But we took our knowledge with us; we learned to trade treasures from the mountains for the tech of the cities. With the weapons and tools we possessed we conquered Carpathia within a century. We worked your mines to show that we were better than the poor primitives you had been using, and we were allowed to take their place.

And we fought for you. Your nobles claimed those of us on their lands as vassals, recruited us and sent us against their enemies. Most of these enemies were other nobles with *Mi'tlazh* fighters of their own. We would fight human soldiers without hesitation, but how could you expect us to go to war against our own kind? So we refused, and were punished for it. We lost the privilege of fighting for you and the tech that you gave us as reward for it. And you took many of our Carpathian lands from us and settled them yourself.

From Carpathia we spread to Central Leshiy, where resistance was fierce and our knowledge of the jungle was poor. The first generations were hard, and many died from the *Bokalo'o* and the jungle itself. We were targets for the *Bokalo'o* but could not strike them in return, for they were laborers for the Decados and under their protection. You were building vast strongholds there and objected to the disruption of your work.

Those wars of our expansion lasted centuries, and with every step we were made to prove ourselves again to you. We learned the ways of the jungle and became its wardens; we culled the horrors you had unleashed in Decius, we guarded the transport pillars of the fortresses and gathered the plants you desired. We even whored ourselves as guides to your treks in the jungle, and how did you repay us? You ignored us, exploited us and slaughtered us at your whims. But the worst

was the temptation that you offered, that which would finally give us the mastery of our world but would make us truly lost to the *Somta Vosht'i*. It is the pride of our people that although we are the aberration of the *S'corva*, we still had the strength to reject that abomination.

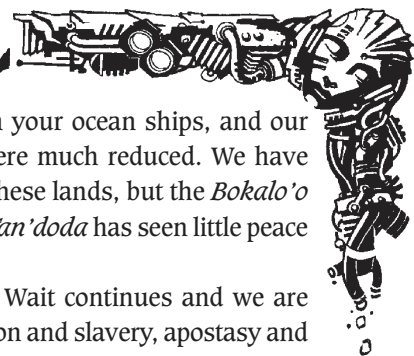
As our power grew on Severus so did yours in the wider universe. An emissary came to us with a skin of hardest metal and a heart of fire, of a power far greater than yours. It whispered to us of a thing called a "Republic," a great Song which bound all races to a greater harmony of which you yourselves were only a part. We sought to go out to find this thing and see if it knew of the lost cousins and *Tunos* of our infancy. We went to Tsaritsyn, Chobor-Zemsky and New Krakow; a few of us even made the dangerous treks to New Capetown and Domovoy, but every answer was the same: denial. We were not permitted to approach the Republic, nor could we leave our world. No ship would bear us. We discarded the myths of the Republic and returned to our duties under your rule.

Revelation

And then you destroyed Varangia. You burned it to the bare ground, wiped out the jungle and every animal in it and all the nations of the *Bokalo'o* who dwelled there. The skies themselves showed their displeasure as the sun dimmed and shifted red, and every nation of *Bokalo'o* everywhere took this sign and knew, even we knew: you were no form of the *Inok'tan'i*. They all left your mines until only we of the *Mi'tlazh* would still work them. Many attacked you but many more attacked the tainted ones, your last allies — *us*. Things, medicines and crystals of the deep jungle became lost to us for we did not have the knowledge to find them and none would trade them to us. Even our young doubted our path in the Song; many *Tan'zhom* fled our heresy to join the pure ones across the *Vi'kro Tan'doda*.

But still we increased. Central Leshiy and the *Vi'kro Tan'doda* were ours, but we would spread no farther. Varangia was dead and still is; your farms nursed on its carcass and we kept away. Rhodesland belonged to the *Bokalo'o*; we would never penetrate their strongholds there. Your rangers patrolled the borders of the Transvaal, killing us without mercy whenever they found us there. The *Bokalo'o* of the Transvaal were long dead, wiped out by the Decados, and we could





not even go there to find their *Tunos*.

You had wars of your own on Severus and elsewhere. Your soldiers left frontier posts to the merciless jungle. We raided some of these in the guise of *Bokalo'o*, for we dearly needed your supplies. You refused to sell us your tech and weapons, for you had need of them for yourselves. The *Bokalo'o* came to know this and came against us, for we were outnumbered, as we always are, and we fell back before them.

Worse, you demanded our service as soldiers off-world. We refused, for in the face of the *Bokalo'o* we could not spare the fighters, and we now knew that you were not the holy ones we had thought you to be. You responded by bombing most of our settlements in

the *Vi'kro Tan'doda* from your ocean ships, and our territory and numbers were much reduced. We have since reclaimed some of these lands, but the *Bokalo'o* took the rest. The *Vi'kro Tan'doda* has seen little peace since then.

And now? The Long Wait continues and we are trapped between temptation and slavery, apostasy and extinction, dispossession and the Song, the Decados and the *Somta Vosht'i*. Those who went to the colony of Rhodesland are lost to us now. Perhaps the jungle devoured them or the *Bokalo'o* defeated them or accepted them; it is the same. And whoever might be the true *Bokurn E La*, it shall not be us.

Biology

The origin of the following excerpt is a great mystery for me. The book from which it is taken was deposited in my apartment overnight without any sign of how it arrived there. Clearly it is written by or for the monks of Brother Battle. How it came to my door I have no idea, but it is a comprehensive study of practical Ascorbite biology. Perhaps a member of Brother Battle became aware of my studies and chose to give me covert aid, but this clearly took place without the approval of the ranking Brother Battle authorities.

— Sister Narinne

The Ascorbite race is demonic in character but its existence in the material world is nonetheless governed by material laws. As such, the twisted visage that it exhibits is subject to conventional inquiry, as we can now demonstrate. Attend carefully; live prisoners are not common, so when the opportunity arises for you to employ this treatise's procedure you had better get it right the first time. This information might just save your life.

You should begin with external examination. Try to contrast the grossest differences in its physiognomy as compared to your own, especially the extension of the torso into an insect's abdomen. This is not a tail, it is a distinct body segment full of critical internal organs, as you will discover. Pay special attention to the rear tip and underside, where the creature's reproduc-

tive organs and excretory apertures are found. Images I and II show the physical differences between genders. Both possess small gripping positors: males for mating, females for laying eggs, but the adjacent apertures are larger in females.

Under the abdomen, near the thoracic connection there are two rows of slits, as you can see in Image III. These are of critical importance for they lead to the creature's lungs. Note this fact: strangulation of a bug's neck will be totally ineffective for asphyxiation, as will blows to the throat region. The proper strike on a bug looks oddly like an old-fashioned kick-to-the-testicles on a human, but slightly lower. If done correctly it is extremely painful to your opponent and may cause paralysis and eventual death.

The topside of the abdomen is a sheath of thick armor, but it is not entirely fixed. There is some slight give, allowing the exposure of the organ underneath. This is the source of the creature's hellish voice, speaking the demonic language of its own kind, the hive-mind. Thankfully the frequency is too low to subvert the ears of humanity.

Continuing the externals you can now move up to the thorax. All the creature's limbs are connected to this section: arms, legs and the vestigial second arms and wings. These may not be present in the particular prisoner you have to examine. Note that there is some give along the sides of the thorax; this is to allow room for a stomach full of blood. Pay attention to the jutting shoulders; they are more important than they look.



Underneath are apertures leading into the body: these are the “ears” of the Ascorbite, oddly enough. They are also a vulnerable point, if you are ever so unfortunate as to engage one in a wrestling match.

Moving up to the head (Image IV): visually fearsome to be certain, and strong evidence of the race's malevolence and spiritual darkness. The two eyes are hard compound eyes, larger but less vulnerable than a human's. They are capable of perceiving near-infrared light but become blind toward the violet end of the human-visible spectrum. Each eye is an array of individual optic cells, each fully capable of vision within a small area, so they have remarkable peripheral vision. Destroy part of the eye and the creature just loses vision within that field; in battle it is a fruitless effort.

On what would be the forehead are its antennae, the second half of the connection to the hive-mind of the beast. These are high-sensitivity receptors of the subsonic signals that maintain that devilish collective thought. They also act as motion sensors, which can be devastatingly effective at night. The antennae can be withdrawn under a protective ridge of carapace as a live prisoner will certainly demonstrate. Muster slavers usually remove these when gathering Ascorbites; it makes them more docile, at least temporarily.

Below the eyes is the famous maw of the beast. This is a complicated structure that merits close scru-

tiny, especially considering how many brave Brothers have fed it. Examine Image V for a detailed view. When examining a live prisoner use heavy forceps and be certain that its head is well secured. The largest structure is the feeding tube or labrum, which can reach up to 25 centimeters at full extension. At its base there is a muscular pump that provides the suction for the feeding process. Above the labrum there is a second tube,

the hypopharynx, for injecting an anti-coagulant into the prey to prevent feeding from being interrupted by messy blood clots.

On either side are the maxillae. These appear to have been meant for piecing the thick armor of Severan animals but they have since atrophied. These now function as the speech organs of the beast. On each side of the maw there is a “mouth” capable of speech. The wind is provided by one of the internal pumps used during feeding, and the air passes through a number of small tracheae that have a purpose that will be explained later. This arrangement means that an Ascorbite must inhale frequently during speech like a hyperactive human child, but it is capable of speaking with two voices at once — an eerie feat to say

the least.

Now your observation should shift away from the vitals to the extremities. The arms are thin in appearance, but this is a deception; these limbs are easily as strong as a human's, but the muscle is all underneath the exoskeleton. Note that there is little or no protec-



A SONG IN THE DARKNESS: ASCORBITES

tion around the joints, especially the elbows, and these can be used as a vulnerable point of attack. The sharp-looking protrusions on the forearms, legs and shoulders are actually sensory clusters: olfactory and tactile. They can detect movement in the air and act to supplement the bug's vision. These are not overly sensitive to pain, however, and heal quickly if damaged.

The hands are obviously very different from our own (Image VI). There is no actual wrist, so conventional joint locks will not be effective. The Ascorbite compensates for that loss of dexterity with longer fingers and an additional joint on each. Each hand has three fingers and one thumb, the bases of which are recessed into the carapace of the forearm. Any live subject will almost always keep their hands closed into fists — this is not a sign of pain or effort but the natural resting state of their musculature. The exoskeleton of an Ascorbite's hand is continually stressed into a fist, similar to the talons of most birds that also are closed in their resting state, enabling them to sleep while perched. This is the reason for the powerful grip the Ascorbite possesses, and the foundation of the old adage: "Hurts like a Bug's handshake."

A similar phenomenon exists in the creature's legs, which are relaxed at full extension. This means that they are capable of powerful leaps both horizontally and vertically. Never forget this ability in combat; it enables some shocking changes of position. The cost of this ability is limited sideways mobility, which reduces their agility when trying to kick. This is a small blessing since such a kick could cripple or kill by its sheer force.

Image VII shows the feet. Despite their appearance the toes are not prehensile. The internal musculature does exist but the nervous connections have become dormant. The dominant theories are that these nerves have either atrophied or are used in another stage of the bug's life-cycle. Some Decados-friendly tribes actually remove these toes; they are of little help when working in the mines.

The unused limbs are shown in Image VIII: the wings and second arms. Nerve connections in both cases are sparse, so it is likely that the act of removal is not very painful for the beast. Note that the wings are far too small to bear the weight of the creature; these are merely a remnant of its adolescent stage of life, which is capable of flight. Likewise the second arms, which are functional during adolescence but lose

their fingers and most of their musculature as they mature.

Now pay attention to the joints in general. Note their extended range of motion due to the elasticity of the attached tendons. In the case of a live subject note its lack of discomfort as you explore the flexibility of its joints. As can plainly be seen Ascorbites would, by human standards be considered "double-jointed." This is an added reason to avoid grappling with these creatures.

Proceeding to the internal structures, you will require an electric bone-saw to penetrate the thoracic breastplate if a prisoner is available. Image IX illustrates the appropriate cuts and how to open it up, and Image X reveals the internal organ structure. Remember to remove the tendons attached to the inside of the exoskeleton before opening it fully; failure to do so will tear the internal organs out of place and ruin your examination. Note the placement of the heart, which corresponds with a human's belly. This is protected by thick exoskeletal plating. Above it is the long, narrow stomach, which you should leave intact unless you desire a truly messy examination room. Most of the rest of the thorax is pure muscle, some active and some inactive, mostly for the strength of the Ascorbite's arms and legs. Observe the muscular development around the stomach: the stomach itself actually functions as a pump, adding to the suction of the pumps in the head.

Tie off the veins that bring blood to the heart and view the response of the organism. The heart stops, breathing slows, stops, and muscular spasms do likewise. Initially you might think that the creature is dead but this is not the case. The heart pumps oxygenated blood throughout the body, but the internal organs including the brain are not wholly dependent on the blood supply for oxygen. Notice that the creature's abdomen still twitches and its mouthparts might still move. Only its limbs are inactive. It is not dead, only paralyzed, and it will take days before the lack of a working heart causes death unless further measures are taken.

Leave the heart arrested and move on to the abdomen. Make the cuts shown in Image XI and open the exoskeleton, again being certain to sever the attached tendons as you do so. Compare the internals to image XII; you can see the intestines, lungs, endocrine glands of largely unknown purpose, and repro-



ductive organs. The last will not concern you; alien mating practices are not an appropriate field of study for good Churchmen.

Note that these organs continue to function despite the inactivity of the heart. The oxygen supply to these organs is only partially provided by the flow of blood; the remainder comes from a system of small tubes, or tracheae, which allow the passage of air through the abdomen. This allows the organs to absorb oxygen directly from the atmosphere. A similar system exists in the head, the same tracheae of which are used to provide the creature with its speaking voices. The full purpose of this is not fully understood, but it does allow the Ascorbite to survive neurotoxins that stop the heart long enough for the heart to adapt and recover.

By now the creature is probably showing new signs of life; the opening of the abdomen has flooded its organs with oxygen. Now pour some oil over them and observe. Activity slows, then stops. The creature will now die. The Ascorbite cannot endure blockage to the oxygenation of its abdomen for long, especially if its heart is stopped as well. To reliably asphyxiate an Ascorbite you must block the lungs under the abdomen, the abdominal tracheae and the head simultaneously. As you might guess, this is more difficult than it is useful. Even drowning is not completely effective; the tracheal systems of the head and abdomen can draw small amounts of oxygen from water, so immersion will take several minutes to kill the creature. Immersion in another medium such as oil, for example, is far more rapid and effective.

This concludes your examination. Hopefully it has improved your understanding of the Ascorbite's physiognomy such that it can be useful during field exercises. Our war against these creatures can swell into a full-scale invasion any time. You will be the veterans of that conflict, and you must ever be prepared for it.

Glory to the Pancreator's name.

Reproduction & Development

This is a Muster document that was acquired by the Inquisition in the capture of the slave-ship Fredensborg. By the edicts of the Church the dissemination of this document was extremely proscribed; it was only by the explicit directive of

Archbishop Eli that it can be revealed even to Your Majesty's agents.

— Sister Marianne

Muster High Command has ordered Severus' labor collection operations to compile a report detailing everything known of Ascorbite reproduction. They are considering using Bugs in mining operations on other planets, and perhaps as frontline combat troops as well. Up until now there has been very little demand for Ascorbite labor or soldiers: the Church opposes it, nobles distrust and too little is known by our guild or the League. However, given the Bugs' natural armor and discipline, Muster High Command believes that they have potential and should be investigated.

The main problem is that Ascorbites simply do not mate in captivity. Ever. This is not just a matter of modesty; even when treated well, fed and given privacy it just doesn't happen. We have tried using environments simulating their native jungles and even a secured compound on Severus itself, but if they know they are prisoners they will not do it. Ascorbites that have been clipped and taught Urthish simply state that they have no interest. The only solution that presents itself would be to involve the Engineer's Guild for artificial insemination. Naturally, High Command is the only proper judge of whether or not this is desirable.

However, on occasion a group that has been caught has included a pregnant female, and these have provided us with valuable information on the species' unusual life cycle. Pregnancy is extremely short due to the external incubation period that follows it, but since conception has never occurred in captivity the precise duration is unknown. The longest Ascorbite pregnancy in the guild's records lasted 43 days after the mother was captured, but she died before "giving birth." The longest known pregnancy in which the mother survived was 27 days. Intelligence from House Decados suggests that this period is even shorter in the wild.

After such a period an Ascorbite female deposits a single larva directly into the carcass of an animal where it will feed and grow. A human corpse is quite suitable for this purpose, and the guild has an abundance of them. However, if no suitable container is available the fetus will continue to develop into the larval stage and begin feeding within its mother, causing her death. Small animals are not large enough to house a larva



A SONG IN THE DARKNESS: ASCORBITES

so many females were lost before the problem was discovered. Again, since Ascorbites don't breed in captivity we don't know how long after delivering before the mother's body is ready for another pregnancy, but given the small size and the lack of birth trauma when compared to mammals there might be no lag time at all.

The larval stage is similar to a large maggot. It eats the flesh of the creature it was born into, and is eyeless, immobile and mindless. It is initially 200-300 grams and reaches its maximum weight of approximately 10 kilograms after about four months. The larva is soft and fleshy, with chewing mandibles in the front that help it burrow deeper into the flesh of its host. The anus is located below the breathing tube, which are both at the rear end of the larva protruding into the open air. In the case of larger animals multiple larvae may grow on the same corpse, but if there is not enough meat the creatures become cannibalistic. They are also vulnerable to predation; early collections took serious losses because hull rats got into inadequately guarded clutches. It is possible that this is actually a natural source of food, given that they are originally native to Severus. Once the larva attains the necessary 10 kilos it undergoes a period of metamorphosis that marks the end of this stage of its life. This lasts about five weeks, during which time the creature is dormant.

Finally, it emerges from the dead flesh of its infancy into the adolescent stage of the Ascorbite's life cycle and the beginnings of its conscious existence. At "birth" the creatures range from 6-9 kilos, the size of a small dog. They walk on six limbs, all of which possess fully articulated hands, and can fly on their functional wings. Unlike the Vorox, who also walk on all sixes, young Ascorbites cannot stand upright, and must use all six limbs when walking. Like their parents, their diet consists only of blood, but their appetite is greater in proportion to their mass, and their muscular strength and exoskeletal armor are nowhere near those of the adults.

This stage of life lasts approximately 12 standard years, during which time the creature is enormously inquisitive. These "children" are capable of learning far more quickly than their adult counterparts, and we've seen them learn to speak and even read Urthish and handle sophisticated tech. However, the adults almost always kill those of their young that learn such

skills if they are reintroduced to the slave groups. Over the last year of their "youth," if they have spent most of their time within their own species, the adolescents seem to lose the need for verbal speech with their fellows. Their antennae and abdominal resonators become active and they connect to the Bugs' hive-mind. If they are isolated from their fellow Ascorbites for most of their youth-stage they seem to become incapable of establishing that connection, even though their organs are functional and physically active.

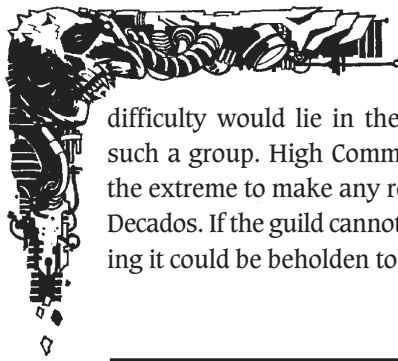
During their growth adolescents must periodically shed their exoskeletons every 5-6 months, as the exoskeleton does not stretch to accommodate growth in the manner of mammals. The molt takes a few hours with the help of adults and other youths, and the new skin is soft and tender for several days afterward. Most remarkable is that the molting process regenerates lost limbs, including antennae and wings. These develop under the old skin and are folded up against the body, but once that skin is shed they become usable, though they may be initially weak. By the next molt a new limb is fully functional.

The adolescents reach their maximum growth at an average of 120 kilograms before beginning the transition to adulthood. This consists of approximately two months of dormancy, followed by a final molt in which the new adult sheds its childhood skin along with 30-40 kg of weight. At this point the Ascorbite is fully physically and sexually mature. No further molting will take place, and any lost limbs will remain lost to the end of the alien's life. Ascorbites in captivity have lived as long as 50 years into adulthood; that number may be significantly more or less in the wild.

The limited learning ability of adult Ascorbites is well known. One can expect that individuals are culturally expected to do most of their learning during their adolescence. However, based on physical and psychic experimentation it is clear that there is another side to this. Although capable of adult education only with difficulty, Ascorbites are conversely extremely resistant to memory loss, most particularly those acquired during their youth. Thus, in theory, a youth indoctrination program conducted on members of this species would be enormously successful and possibly unbreakable once adulthood has been reached.

It is plain that Ascorbites fighting on behalf of the guild would be of unquestionable effectiveness; the





difficulty would lie in the sustainable cultivation of such a group. High Command should be reluctant in the extreme to make any related bargains with House Decados. If the guild cannot solve the problem of breeding it could be beholden to that house for its supply of

alien troops. This, combined with the various political difficulties involved in such an undertaking, should cause High Command to give this proposal serious consideration before making its decision.

Religion

This report was initially marked for open dissemination to parish priests across the Unknown Worlds, but that order was rescinded by the authority of Archbishop Eli. The archbishop claimed that the document would be inflammatory and could result in a crusade against the Ascorbites. Never an advocate of alien rights, the archbishop's missive claimed that he was concerned that such a crusade would divert Church resources and attention away from where they are needed most, on the Symbiot and Nurgan fronts.

— Sister Marianne

During the confessional of the Ascorbite heathen called "Rom'kl," I became aware of a great deal of information which was being concealed from Church investigators, despite the insect's apparent cooperation. As my abilities are far beyond those of most other Penitents that the Church employs, I felt that I could provide a deeper insight into the heathen faith that these poor misguided creatures profess, a skill beyond simply observing her emotional responses and refuting any outright lies she might have tried to feed her confessors. I regret that my overzealousness cost the Church the opportunity to study her further, but I believe that the information that I gathered will be of great use.

The Ascorbite faith revolves around a pantheon of dark gods that they call the *Somta Vosht'i*, roughly translated as Those Who Dwell In The Night. This verifies information leaked by the Jakovian Agency in 4170. The attributes ascribed to these "gods" are partially reflected in the Ascorbites' own moral code and self-image: warriors all, but with a wide variety of temperaments, not all of which resemble the Ascorbites' own. However, visual descriptions of their deities are lacking; the Ascorbites place far more emphasis on

mental attributes and spiritual purviews than on physical form. This differs from human pagan mythologies, which almost invariably cast the gods "in man's own image," or Obun and Ukar beliefs, in which the gods approach a conventional humanoid appearance with additional attributes such as multiple faces, heads, wings, etc. Details on the specific deities of the Ascorbites' pantheon are below.

It is important to note the level of sophistication in this religion; from the Ascorbites' technological and social development one should expect a more animistic worldview, based on spiritualism in local, immediate terms. This religion is instead based on a stable pantheon, apocalyptic prophecy and an oral tradition that approaches codification in its longevity, all of which are not typical of such a primitive culture.

Creation Myths

The origin of the Somta Vosht'i, according to Rom'kl's own beliefs, is that they are the orphaned children of the primordial darkness that preceded the creation of the light of the living universe. They call that darkness *Okt'tunut'nva*, and its dead flesh was the womb from which the Somta Vosht'i were born. Alone, unguided, the Somta Vosht'i sought to reawaken their mother. They shook her, shouted at her, struck her, but she remained dead to their eyes. They gave her pain and pleasure of every kind that they could imagine: stone they made to pelt her, water to drown her, heat to warm her, wind to caress her, but all to no avail.

Then one of them made a little light. Suddenly the darkness recoiled and the Somta Vosht'i rejoiced, for it was the first response that she had ever given them. But she fled them and their light, and her children gave chase, shouting and laughing until they could chase her no further. So they hid the light and



A SONG IN THE DARKNESS: ASCORBITES

Okt'tunut'nva ran no more, and the children came to her and found her dead once again. Then they grieved, for the mother who had died long before their birth so feared the only thing that made her live, if only for a little while.

In grief, the Somta Vosht'i sang, a deep chorus of their reverence for the darkness. It began as a simple monotone, resonant with many voices partaking, but as they listened to each other a few began to make simple harmonies. Then there emerged harmonies to those harmonies, and soon the sound was that of a dancing, interwoven complexity of enormous splendor. Pursuing even greater and greater depths of beauty the Somta Vosht'i allowed their minds to drift together, to know the musical needs of their fellows as they sang.

In effect, they sang the first Song.

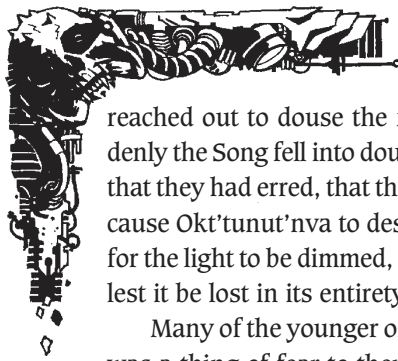
As the Song developed and the minds of the Somta Vosht'i joined, the thought came: "The Song is wondrous, but we are but a few. How much more wondrous would it be if there were more voices to sing?" And so, using the body of Okt'tunut'nva a new generation was born, and then another and another, and the Song grew and grew until its beauty was beyond comprehension.

Now in the fullness of its growth and power the Song itself gave counsel: with the growing numbers of the Somta Vosht'i and their offspring they required a place to live, a Tunos in which to gather as well as room to hear the Song's farthest echoes, so it put forth its will and guided its singers in their tasks. They carved the night sky out of Okt'tunut'nva's flesh, for she had no need of it, and made little bits of light and placed them within as the stars. A few among them removed small pieces of themselves, fingers and such, sculpted them and gave them to the growing universe and these became the worlds and their moons.

And so the Somta Vosht'i came to live in the material universe with their offspring, where they made life upon life and the suns to sustain them. More and more voices were added to the song, a multitude of countless variety. Among the youngest were the Bokurn E La, who we now know as Ascorbites. Pleased with their creations, the Somta Vosht'i forgot their grief over their mother and were content.

But eventually Okt'tunut'nva felt the growing light of the universe and stirred in pain, for the universe had grown so large that there was no respite. She





reached out to douse the fires of the suns, and suddenly the Song fell into doubt. The Somta Vosht'i knew that they had erred, that the light of the universe could cause Okt'tunut'nva to destroy it entirely. They called for the light to be dimmed, for the universe to be culled lest it be lost in its entirety.

Many of the younger ones disagreed, for darkness was a thing of fear to them and they had no love for the dead flesh that birthed them. These *Chf'rik* loved the universe that they had made and would not suffer to see it diminished. So they broke the Song with a crash of discordance and drove the Somta Vosht'i back into the darkness of Okt'tunut'nva beyond the universe, where they yet struggle to keep her quiescent.

A few among the young ones repented their betrayal. They valued the universe no less than the traitors, but they loved the infant races of the universe far more and they were willing to see the suns' light diminished if those little ones could survive. These loyal ones are the *Inok'tan'i*, who allow the Somta Vosht'i back into the universe in little ways, to give them a moment of escape from Okt'tunut'nva's arms and to give them tools and toys with which to quiet her.

I beg your pardon. My connection to the Ascorbite T'zhamivt shaman Rom'kl was such that I must be wary not to lose myself in the memories of her thoughts. Hers was a powerful mind; I do not doubt that she possessed some measure of occult powers.

The similarities with the Ukar are striking, and I am convinced that there is a kinship between the entities that comprise the Ascorbites' "gods" and those of the Ukar. Note that both consist of a pantheon of light challenged by a dark, rebellious minority, a race destined for battle on a world designed to strengthen them. The primordial darkness of Okt'tunut'nva bears some resemblance to the tenets of certain Draconian Antinomic cults as well. A great deal is also obviously drawn from the Ascorbites' own imaginations, but clearly the Somta Vosht'i are of demonic character.

Religious Practices



Ascorbite shamans are, like their mythical gods, born directly from their mother's dead flesh. An Ascorbite female unfortunate enough to lack a suitable receptacle for the carnivorous first stage of her offspring's life will eventually die as the infant develops and begins to feed on her own body. Shamans are

thus the "mother-born," tragic figures but with holy significance. They are not at all common in Ascorbite society, and the more prosperous tribes might lack them entirely since the requisite "maternal birth" does not occur without near-famine. They exist as an uncomfortable reminder of the race's duty rather than as constant shepherds of the soul.

Worship of the Somta Vosht'i is reflected in all aspects of life, though not in a human sense. Indeed, the Ascorbite religion is largely lacking in ritual as such, instead placing emphasis on collective belief as expressed by the Song of the hive-mind. As such, any Ascorbites who have been severed from the hive-mind are considered apostates by their very nature and must be killed on sight. Ascorbites of neighboring tribes who do not share the same hive-mind are viewed similarly, but their numbers usually restrain such behavior.

Ascorbites view themselves as the future soldiers of the Somta Vosht'i as represented by the *Inok'tan'I*, who they once believed were incarnate in House Decados. Their ultimate duty on Severus is to collectively endure with their beliefs intact until they are summoned to battle by their gods. Severus' harsh environment is specifically intended to challenge them and force them to continually improve until their day of judgment comes. On that day their race as a whole will finally reach its fourth stage of life, which they believe will be as the ultimate fighting form.

However, given their warrior self-image the Ascorbites have an odd view on death. Ascorbites are infamous for their recklessness in battle, but, paradoxically, there is no reward for their self-sacrifice. Death, being a separation from the hive-mind, is viewed as nothing more than the ultimate failure, a condition no better than apostasy. No blissful afterlife awaits the faithful fallen, for they failed to survive and witness the end of their Long Wait. As such their spirits are condemned to wander, scorned and forgotten, and eventually witness the arrival of their gods as outsiders who will never participate in their people's destiny. Ascorbite heroes command respect only as long as they survive.

However, the arrival of humanity has introduced an unexpected element to the Ascorbite religion, as it often tends to do. Even disregarding the Decados' claims of divinity, the Ascorbites are presented with a serious dilemma. Humanity has introduced a wide variety of tech that they find extremely useful — weap-

ons, naturally, but also medicines, building materials, transportation, all of which can make life a great deal easier than is traditional. But should Ascorbites actually seek out an easier way of life? Their religion advocates that they live as harshly as possible.

The tribes of the deepest jungle reject humanity entirely. They use no human tech of any kind, and kill anyone on sight who does so, including any humans. They will not trade in tech with any tribe that has access to it, nor will they tolerate non-Severan flora or fauna of any kind. They will not feed from such animals, nor will they use them to birth their young and will instead just leave them to rot in the jungle, including humans. In fact, such tribes are so xenophobic that they will often include in this behavior legitimate Severan lifeforms that are not native to their territory in the belief that they are from off-world.

Tribes that live closer to humans remain hostile toward humanity. They agree with the xenophobes' view that humans and other aliens are invaders that must be driven from their world. They are, however, willing to use human tech that they have stolen from human jungle parties, and they accept off-world plants and animals. Therefore they do hunt and even tame some of the animals that have been introduced to the Severan ecosystem from Ungavorox.

Nearest to human settlements are usually the tribes that call themselves Mi'tlzh, including Rom'kl's own people. Mi'tlzh accept human tech and off-world animals, but they are alone among Ascorbites in that they tolerate humanity's presence on Severus and are willing to trade with them. For their beliefs they are completely isolated from every other tribe, which considers them equivalent to humans.

This view is supported by a truly unique ethical structure: Mi'tlzh believe that they have been irredeemably tainted by their association with humanity under the mistaken assumption that the Decados were from the Inok'tan'i. Furthermore, their over-reliance on human tech has meant the loss of much of their native jungle lore, such that they would not survive without trade with the humans that they know to be their enemy. Thus they are caught: Accept that they are a tribe that should not exist and die, or renounce the Somta Vosht'i and accept human tech use. Oblivion or apostasy? The Mi'tlzh have chosen a third path: heresy.

To accept humanity's presence is to accept damnation; the Mi'tlzh have chosen to do so, but for a higher purpose. The Ascorbites must be prepared for the arrival of the Inok'tan'i when it finally occurs, to be the fighters for the Somta Vosht'i. The role that the Mi'tlzh have accepted is that of enemy to the chosen ones; they use human tech in wars against other Ascorbites with the intent of forcing their enemies to prove their worth by surviving the Mi'tlzh depredations. Thus the Mi'tlzh have acknowledged the damnation of their entire tribal identity in order to improve their race in general. Whether their enemies accept the validity of that role is irrelevant; as long as the wars between the Mi'tlzh and other Ascorbites continue their existence is vindicated.

Pantheon Okt'tunut'nva — The Darkness Before the Light

Okt'tunut'nva is not worshipped directly; her disciples are the Somta Vosht'i. She sleeps, but the living universe's existence disturbs her. The Somta Vosht'i lull her with songs, distract her with sweet tastes, and sometimes they must keep her at bay with weapons, all gifts they have been given by their own worshippers. In their own way Ascorbites love her and fear her, for they owe her the universe, and fear that she could take it away from them.

Vinoush'ok — The Balance Overwhelmed

Vinoush'ok was one of the Somta Vosht'i, a direct offspring of Okt'tunut'nva. She is primarily associated with sunlight, and her children were spirits of light, the leaders of the rebellion against the Somta Vosht'i. However, she supported the dimming of the universe to control Okt'tunut'nva, and for that she was betrayed and nearly slain by her children, her body left dormant or dead beside the sun that she herself had created. As such she is identified with the Severus system's innermost planet that bears her name. Her primary association is with sunlight, but the Ascorbite prayers that are dedicated to her are more usually concerned with appeals in desperate situations, such as famine or invasion.



Shaa'tcol – For Offspring that Endure

Shaa'tcol is a loose equivalent to the Lulaat of Ukar mythology. She is counted among the Somta Vosht'i, though she was not born from Okt'tunut'nva — she is the offspring of one of the Chf'rik, but repented the path of her elders. During the creation of the universe she is credited with conceiving the process of self-perpetuating life and sexual reproduction. However, because of the Ascorbites' biological connection between sex and meat her responsibility also includes hunting, and most especially the defense of those carcasses too large to move to the safety of a village or Tunos. Shaa'tcol is associated with the feshaal chameleon python native to Severus, which is frequently employed to guard the larvae from predators.

Bik'lkeif – Power of Hands

One of the Inok'tan'i, Bik'lkeif was known as a patron and teacher to the peoples of the material universe, and the Ascorbites revere him for the crafts that he left them. He is held responsible for their knowledge of crystal-shaping in particular, but all products of skilled hands in general. The Ur ruins in the jungles of Severus are held by Ascorbite belief to be his discarded castoffs. As such they are noted but not particularly worshipped or preserved. Bik'lkeif is notable as the only Ascorbite deity with known physical features: he is missing several eyes, which he removed to create a number of moons during the creation of the universe.

Osh'chlur – Knowledge Gained by Pain

Osh'chlur is one of the Somta Vosht'i, brother and sometimes mate to Vinoush'ok. However, his reclusive nature protected him from the worst of the revolt of the Chf'rik, and when they drove the Somta Vosht'i out of the universe to Okt'tunut'nva they found that Osh'chlur was already there. Osh'chlur is the essence of fire, which to the Ascorbites is primarily a tool of chemistry, since they have no need to cook food. As such his purview is the dedicated pursuit of material knowledge, even to the neglect of the Song. He is also a healer, and his balms and warmth provide comfort both to Ascorbites and to Okt'tunut'nva.

Zhsua'dli – Riding Winds

Zhsua'dli holds an ambiguous position in Ascorbite theology, being reckoned as the youngest of the Somta Vosht'i and for a time allied with the Chf'rik. Zhsua'dli represents travel in all its forms and the weather that can help or hinder it, be it on the wings of the adolescent stage of life, among the tides of the Vi'kro Tan'doda or in among the stars of the Ascorbites' distant past. His allegiance to the Chf'rik was due to his fear of being expelled from the universe in which he wandered. He later repented his treason and was indeed exiled into the darkness with his siblings. He ever hungers for news of new places, which he weaves into songs to sing to Okt'tunut'nva.

Gbat'itum'zh – Pushing Outward

Once held the highest of the Inok'tan'i, Gbat'itum'zh has lost a great deal of respect among Ascorbites for her support of past failed expansionists. She represents the drive toward the perfection of a society as manifested in its expansion into new lands, and because of that there have developed fears that she has forsaken the Ascorbite race in favor of more successful conquerors, and since humanity's arrival she has been regarded with a new perception: the example that humans provide is a constant temptation for victory and expansion at the cost of inevitable downfall and oblivion. Some doubt his commitment to the Inok'tan'i and fear that he could rejoin the Chf'rik.

It was the recurring references to temptation made by the Ascorbite Rom'kl that I was trying to investigate, which were repeated in her thoughts on Gbat'itum'zh. Unfortunately, it was my persistence that allowed her the moment of freedom necessary to take her own life and ended this confessional investigation. Her last thoughts were a jumble of confusing images: an open plain, a ruined Ascorbite city, a herd of shrivai, a great multitude of Ascorbites and an overwhelming sense of anger throughout. I am, unfortunately, uncertain as to the meaning of these images and can draw no firm conclusions. Furthermore, I am certain that the Ascorbites' pantheon of deities is far larger than what I have described, but this ended my exploration.

With regrets,
Sister Trienne Shaavuri



Society

By far the oldest article in this collection, this piece dates back to the Second Republic and has been in the cathedral library for centuries. It's disclosure was strongly proscribed less because of the material discussed than because of the nature of its author.

— Sister Narinne

The Ascorbites of Severus are in many ways in a unique position. Over the centuries of the expansion of humanity there have been encounters with many diverse species of sentient aliens of varying levels of social sophistication. However, only a few have exhibited such a lack of technological development as the Ascorbites. Of those, the Vorox and the Shantor have begun assimilation into human society and the rights due them as members of the Republic. The Ascorbites, meanwhile, maintain an existence that has changed little since their contact with humanity. The necessity of xenoanthropological study of such a culture should be obvious.

The Ascorbites have acquired a fearsome reputation as headhunters, or bloodhunters in their case, and are deemed responsible for hundreds of jungle deaths per year. These statistics are hotly disputed by alien advocacy groups, but the possibility of a hostile welcome remains. As such I acted as field researcher myself, having no blood in the conventional sense. However, I was in constant communication with my research group colleagues, based at the Republican outpost of New Krakow, constant human contact being a preference of my design parameters.

My guide in this adventure was Galen Nikolov Decados, a scion of the local old aristocracy. He is, I was told, a botanist by education and a skilled bushman with years of experience. His greenhouse is one of high repute, being home to many specimens Galen himself acquired during his trips into the Severan wilderness. He is also fluent in the Ascorbites' spoken language and is known and welcome among many local tribes.

Our journey began by canoe heading northwest into the Vi'kro Tan'doda out of New Krakow. This re-

gion consists of islands and peninsulas off the coasts of Leshiy and Rhodesland and is home to both friendly and hostile tribes. We planned to make contact with one of the human-friendly tribes of that region and remain with them until I was ready to move on. From there we would head south seeking one of the hostile tribes and evaluate what impact humanity has had by contrasting them with the friendly groups.

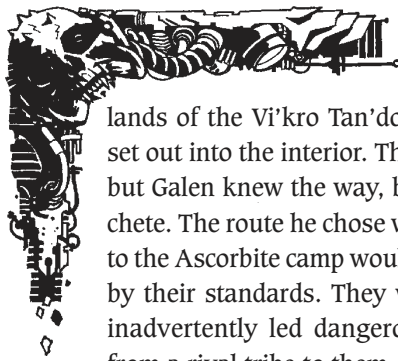
From the very beginning of the journey the undertones of danger have been present. Inedibility is no protection against dismemberment and death, and Galen was naturally protective of his own well-being. At his direction we kept our canoe in shallow waters as much as possible; the deeper waters are home to creatures that would present real dangers to our little craft. We proceeded slowly, sacrificing speed for stealth. Even so we watched the jungles, which are little safer. The greatest danger in this region is from ashtati, which prefer coastlines, have no fear of humans and hunt in packs. We traveled only by day; at night Galen slept while I performed routine self-maintenance, conferred with my group and wrote this article. We lit no fires; after centuries of human explorers many animals recognize fire and know that it usually accompanies prey. The mautizho in particular is attracted to light and is of serious concern for travelers along the saltwater coastlines of the region.

Being artificial in origin and having spent my formative years in the cities of Liberty I am not well-equipped to describe those surroundings in aesthetic terms, but at the urgings of my colleagues I have made the effort. Severus' red sunlight shines on the dark green leaves of the trees, which absorb so much that they seem darker still. The shadows within are deep but the spectrum of my vision is wider than a human's. I can see well, and Galen's eyes have been replaced by cybernetic implants for just this purpose.

Animal noises are a constant background, and by Galen's reaction I gauge the danger that each noise poses to us, or rather to him.

After several days of travel we approached our first goal, a settlement of a friendly tribe with which Galen was familiar. We beached our craft on one of the is-





lands of the Vi'kro Tan'doda, hoisted our packs and set out into the interior. There were no trails to follow but Galen knew the way, blazing his way with a machete. The route he chose was circuitous; a direct path to the Ascorbite camp would have been lethally stupid by their standards. They would not forgive us if we inadvertently led dangerous animals or Ascorbites from a rival tribe to them.

The camp was magnificent, totally concealed from view from the ground. If not for Galen I could have traveled under it without the slightest clue that I was near a populated area. As we arrived we were abruptly surrounded by Ascorbites, clad in leaves and armed with spears, crossbows and various primitive rifles. One, however, cradled a Martech laser rifle, weathered by the jungle but still functional. We had apparently been followed for some time.

Galen spoke to an Ascorbite; I assumed it was a chieftain or his representative, though I eventually realized otherwise. The aliens recognized and welcomed Galen, but my presence was the subject of discontent. They demanded my immediate departure or destruction. Galen said that I was here to remain with them for a while; I needed no food and could learn quickly the duties necessary to earn their hospitality. He further informed them that I was inedible to any creature on Severus, and that my destruction would be accompanied by a massive explosion that could destroy their village. The last comment was, of course, false, but Galen did not realize it; I had told him I carried a self-destruct subroutine linked to an antimatter explosive within my frame. The Ascorbites would better believe that fact if Galen believed it himself.

Thus began my time among this tribe called the *Mi'tlazzh*. I remained with them for over a year, learned their language and their way of life. Galen did not remain long; he received word that his greenhouse needed tending and he could not trust the work to another. After that I journeyed south alone and joined with several tribes of less human influence. Oddly, each tribe except the *Mi'tlazzh* called itself *Bokurn E La* but had various names for their neighbors. I stayed in the deep jungle for several months before heading back to civilization. I remained in contact with colleagues in New Krakow as they came and went, taking turns acting as my monitor, and so I was never far from human voices.

Unfortunately, I will never be able to deliver this report in person. I have been ambushed by members

of one of the tribes with which I stayed for a time. It seems that they waited for me to leave their Tunos before choosing to have me killed; they surely wished to avoid the threatened fictional cataclysm of my demise. I have assembled this rudimentary report and am sending it to New Krakow as I am destroyed. Remember my sacrifice, for I have gone where humans cannot and died in their service.

— Livingstone C86g, University of Veridian

Social Structure

Ascorbite society is, above all else, preoccupied with two concerns. The first is simple survival, a logical aim given the environment of the Severan jungle. Hunting, trade, reproduction, shelter, all these concepts are largely stripped of the spiritual significance found in other aboriginal cultures and viewed with an attitude of harsh pragmatism by the Ascorbites. I do not doubt that if they realized for a moment that there was no self-destruct bomb within my breast that they would have killed me without hesitation or regret for the electronic trinkets I might provide.

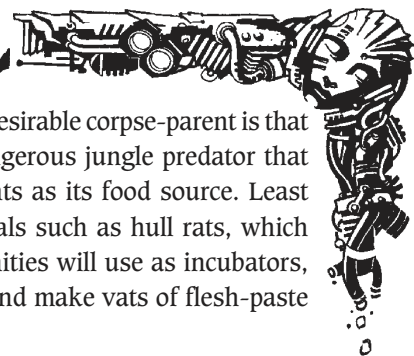
The second concern is the Song, which is a more difficult concept to explain. Ascorbites believe in an overriding will of the universe that guides their actions and their destiny. It is a strange paradox when viewed alongside their total pragmatism, but the two concepts do overlap. The Ascorbites claim that the Song demands survival before all other things and so, in essence the very fabric of the Ascorbites' ethical code involves a freedom from moral constraints in pursuit of that survival.

The metaphysical basis for the Song must, unfortunately, remain unknown. Ascorbites have always been notoriously taciturn, and this trait applies nowhere more than when discussing religion and history. It might be comparable to the concept of Gjarti common to some of the fringe worlds of the Republic but more data is still needed on this matter.

Government among Ascorbite tribes seems oddly nonexistent. They appear to have no chieftains or individual leaders of any kind, nor do they hold tribal councils. Each member of the tribe simply knows what to do and does so without command. Elder individuals are accorded respect by the younger, but they experience no special privileges and are expected to continue to work and hunt and fight just as any other adults. Indeed, Ascorbites seem to have no concept of senescence, though they suffer similar frailties of old



A SONG IN THE DARKNESS: ASCORBITES



age as most other sentient races. The respect given to the elders seems to be meant to honor the length of their survival, rather than a spiritual reverence for an inborn wisdom that might come with seniority.

For humans, lawful negotiations with Ascorbite tribes invariably involve a group of their most respected elders. This is not because these individuals are especially empowered to speak for their people; it seems to make no difference to the Ascorbites which of them deals with humans. Conversely, humans send high-ranking diplomats or trained specialists to deal with Ascorbites, so Ascorbites do the same. To do otherwise would be, by their understanding of humanity, rude. Thus Ascorbite traders and diplomats are trained specialists, elders and heroes thoroughly decorated with ornaments absent among their own kind, including when dealing with other tribes.

This absolute communalism does not imply egalitarianism among Ascorbites, nor is age the only measure of respect. A complex fashion of lineal prestige does exist among their culture, a unique mixture of native and human conventions. Ascorbites regard an individual's pedigree highly, it being representative of survival ability, which is the highest ethic of the Song. However, their form of lineage manifests in several distinct ways that are wholly alien to human customs.

Foremost is the shared history of the community. Members native to larger populations are afforded respect, but so are those of tribes of great age and continuous history. A small group that traces its history back for centuries has proven its durability better than a large but nascent city. Specific catastrophes that the tribe has survived are points of pride, unless they resulted from the fault of the tribe itself. Naturally, this form of status is invisible within a tribe itself, but it becomes quite relevant in dealings between Ascorbite groups.

Ascorbites also differentiate themselves according to the manner of their birth: the species of animal that housed them during their larval infancy and the tale of its acquisition. Each individual can recount the story of how its birthplace was hunted and killed, and in the case of large animals that could not be moved to the safety of a village, how the birthplace was defended against scavengers and predators that would take the infants within.

A general tendency seems to be that the most respect is afforded to those who emerged from more vi-

cious animals. The most desirable corpse-parent is that of the Iron Mantis, a dangerous jungle predator that raids Ascorbite settlements as its food source. Least desirable are small animals such as hull rats, which only the poorest communities will use as incubators, for they crush the flesh and make vats of flesh-paste to house the infants.

In the case of craftsmen and other specialized trades Ascorbites also consider the prestige of the individual to whom one was mentored during *Tan'zhom* adolescence. Considering that such a mentor might also be respected for its own birthplace as well as the skill of its craft, Ascorbite lineage can become complicated indeed.

Lastly, communities more influenced by humans make efforts to follow genetic parentages. Ascorbites are normally raised communally during their infancy, and connect to a specific mentor after emerging into adolescence, so biological parents are usually unknown. Additionally, Ascorbites do not form permanent sexual relationships, and an individual may take many mates over the course of its life. Thus, determining biological fatherhood is even more difficult than motherhood. Few communities bother.

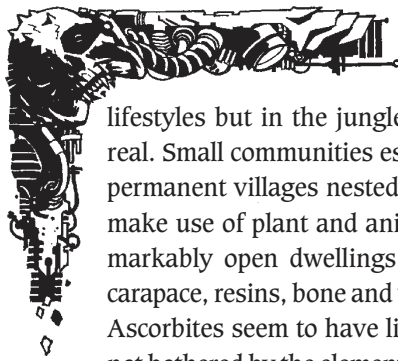
However, the manner of an Ascorbite's descent is accompanied by a concern for that individual's accomplishments: successful hunts, valor in warfare, wisdom and cleverness, skilled craftsmanship, etc. As with many cultures one's deeds can supercede a low birth in gaining the respect of one's fellows. Conversely, foolish mistakes that cost the community in some way are not forgotten, and must be redeemed or else cost the Ascorbite esteem.

These forms of individual respect become most relevant among Ascorbites when considering mating. A prospective mate's deeds and lineage are considered before a choice is made. This takes place among both genders; cultural gender differences are nonexistent in Ascorbite societies. As with most aspects of life there seems to be a significant element of communal influence in mating selection. Mates are apparently chosen by what their offspring would offer the community rather than by the individuals involved. Coercive mating is unknown, perhaps impossible given their physiognomy.

Communities

Ascorbites by and large maintain a variety of





lifestyles but in the jungles they are primarily arboreal. Small communities establish temporary or semi-permanent villages nested among the tall trees. They make use of plant and animal parts to build their remarkably open dwellings, employing wood, leaves, carapace, resins, bone and whatever else can be found. Ascorbites seem to have little need of shelter and are not bothered by the elements. The true purpose of these shelters seems to be camouflage and outright fortification against enemies and predators.

The center of any arboreal community is invariably the nursery. This is the most well-hidden and heavily defended structure to be found. Due to the Ascorbites' unique reproductive cycle such a nursery would be a horrific place by human standards. Within are the bodies of various dead animals incubating Ascorbite infants, affixed to the walls by a mixture of pulped wood and resin. These young, the *Arme'tova*, will feed on the meat of the dead before emerging into the adolescent stage of life, the *Tan'zhom*. There are of course constant rumors of Ascorbites seizing humans to house their young; I must concede that it is certainly possible, though I saw no such indications myself.

Unlike other treetop communities Ascorbites make little use of ropes or vines for locomotion, though they do use them for binding tools and structures. There are no ladders or bridges for crossing between dwellings, though Ascorbites can and do weave ropes. Instead they simply leap from place to place, employing their powerful legs and hands to secure themselves. To this end Ascorbites spend a great deal of effort clearing smaller branches from their territory, the better to travel without obstruction. Larger branches are tended carefully to provide handholds and perches, and to reach above the jungle canopy to attain sunlight for the tree.

Much of this work is performed by the Ascorbite young, those in the rarely seen *Tan'zhom* stage. With their functional wings and sextupedal stance they might appear as simply another of Severus' lifeforms to human eyes, but are in fact young examples of the planet's indigenous sentients. They act as aerial scouts for their elders' hunting and warfare, and their mortality rate is high. I would estimate that approximately a third survive their growth to adulthood.

Large populations are more typically subterranean, living in an underground Tunos city. Note that few

Tunos are newly established. It is more common to seize one from another tribe or to discover and settle one that has been abandoned than to create an entirely new city. Many are based around ancient excavations of a Tugarin Serpent, a massive tunneling creature found worldwide. These tunnels are fortified to resist collapse and used as Ascorbite living quarters. For lighting Ascorbites cultivate a biofluorescent fungus they call *oklamt*, which provides a dim golden light to the Tunos tunnels.

Those chambers nearer the surface provide the marketplaces of Ascorbite society, though in a manner most distinct from the commerce of even the most primitive of human societies. No commerce is evident within an Ascorbite community; each individual gives what she produces to whatever other needs it; trade takes place only between different communities. A trading party from a neighboring tribe is invariably large and well-armed, for there is always the danger that the hosting city might simply kill them all and take their goods. Such visitors must always demonstrate that the cost of battling their group outweighs the profit that they offer. Trust between different tribes is a concept foreign to Ascorbites.

This fact has been the cause of a great deal of misunderstanding between Ascorbites and humans. For example, an Ascorbite guide who is paid in advance has little incentive to honor the contract in the human sense. A lightly armed party in the jungle can find itself betrayed by its guide for their valuable tech as well as their very blood. The proper manner for such a transaction would be to be constantly prepared for an ambush by your guide's kinsmen: be armed and be alert, and do not leave your guide on watch alone. Pay your guide in small amounts daily, for he will not serve well if paid in advance, nor will he trust to be paid after the voyage. Exchanges of valuable hostages are extremely useful as a tool in negotiations.

One significant exception to this system of trade is the tribe called the Mi'tlazh, which dominates the jungles near human settlements in Carpathia and Leshiy. This tribe seems enormously successful, having adopted elements of human technology and controlling several known Tunos. Trade between settlements is conducted in the same manner of altruism as that which takes place among members of the same tribe: they give what is needed and take that they need. In fact, Mi'tlazh traders invariably give all that they



A SONG IN THE DARKNESS: ASCORBITES

have brought and often take a great deal more or less than the worth of their cargo in exchange. By this observation one may surmise that the Mi'tlazzh are in fact a single nationality in direct contrast to the many smaller and fractious tribes that all call themselves Bokurn E La.

The middle caverns are the nurseries and sleeping quarters of Ascorbites. These are communal, and individual Ascorbites seem to have little need of a specific, personal space; they simply retire to whichever place is most convenient. One might expect friction to occur over sleeping arrangements, but this is not the case — whoever arrives first stays there. The nurseries are much similar to those of the arboreal villages, carcasses of various types incubating Ascorbite young.

Deeper within the Tunos are the workshops of the community. Tunos display a wider range of skills than the treetop villages; within are metalsmiths and craftsmen of great variety, gardeners, and professions not found in smaller populations. One striking sight was an Ascorbite smith constructing a primitive chemical rifle, a blunderbuss-type weapon. Many such smiths seldom seem to leave their underground smithies, and food is brought to them. Again, trade is absent within the tribe itself; craftsmen are given food and seemingly give their products to whomever needs them.

The deepest places of the Tunos are the mines. Communities that have ties to human communities seek precious metals and gemstones for trade, for Ascorbites do not value such things among themselves. They also mine workable metals such as iron, nickel and copper. The more remote Tunos, those less influenced by humanity, ignore the metal ores in favor of something far more valuable: the crystal streams.

When properly cultivated by skilled Ascorbites certain crystalline deposits can yield a unique liquid crystal that can then be shaped. Exposure to sunlight hardens the sculpted crystal into whatever form desired. The Ascorbites of the deep jungle craft knives, axes and other edged tools, but above all they craft swords. These swords, called *arbat'a*, are the preferred weapons when warring with other tribes. Properly wielded they will penetrate an Ascorbite skin even with additional armor. The knowledge of crystal-craft is kept obsessively hidden; communities nearer human lands may have lost these secrets entirely. I was only permitted to witness the craft by threatening my hosts with my mythical antimatter self-destruct; the threat

of destruction of their entire Tunos outweighed their desire for secrecy. In retrospect this intrusion may have cost me my life, for it is this tribe that is responsible for my imminent destruction.

One of the strangest features of the Ascorbites' way of life is that despite their dependence on other animals for sustenance and reproduction they choose to maintain no herds. Even the native shriva, an animal that has been domesticated by humanity, is instead hunted in the conventional manner by Ascorbites. There seems to exist a strong taboo against the domestication of animals for the purposes of reproduction and consumption. Republican records accessed from New Krakow show that Ascorbite traders have purchased cattle, brutes or other docile herdbeasts in a few, rare instances, but no Ascorbite is willing to speak of such things. In one Tunos they kept a small herd of sickly goats in one of their deepest caverns; in truth, I saw them only by accident and the tribe refused to comment on their existence afterwards.

Domestication of certain animals does exist, but these are never actively bred. These include ashtati as hunting companions, feshaal as vermin-catchers and shrivai as beasts of burden. Tamed animals among Ascorbite communities were captured from the wild and reared from infancy by Ascorbites but they are restricted in their reproduction; most large Severan species lack mammalian maternal instincts and leave their young to fend for themselves, away from settlements.

Aside from the settled communities there are many tribes that maintain a more nomadic lifestyle. These tribes subsist by following animal herds upon which they feed and breed, preferring the largest animals for their pursuit. This is distinct from the human concept of herding that is seemingly so abhorred by most Ascorbites; these nomads do not follow one particular herd for more than a few years and do not shelter their animals or themselves. Relations with settled tribes vary between warfare and trade, and often both simultaneously. These groups are common only in areas far from human lands, and are almost totally arboreal.

Reproduction is tightly disciplined among nomads; mating takes place only when enough recent kills have been made to sustain them, and an entire generation incubates at once while their parents guard them and the surviving herd leaves them behind. Such tribes





are vulnerable during this time, as they are unwilling to abandon their children if threatened and head for safety of the trees. When the young are born they take to the air to find another herd. The adults follow and the tribe gains its new food supply until the next breeding time.

Among any Ascorbite group, even in the largest city, an eerie constant is the utter silence. Ascorbites within the same tribe seldom speak to each other even for mundane matters, but they somehow manage to maintain complex societies without the need of language. Most of the speech one might hear is among the young and their teachers, but as the young grow older and approach the metamorphosis to adulthood they speak less and less, and finally not at all. By contrast, when traders from another tribe arrive the dialogue is verbose and often loud, but silence resumes when the visitors leave. Among the Mi'tlazh the occasional spoken exchange takes place but these invariably consist of a great deal of Urthish vocabulary, discussions about human tech and relations.

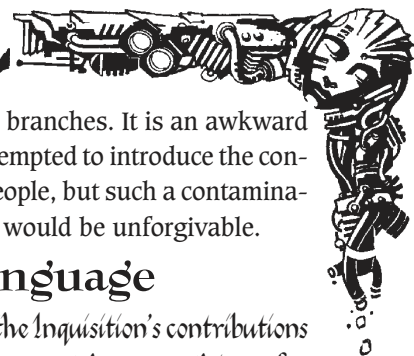
Technology

The technological sophistication of Ascorbite culture ranges from the paleolithic to neolithic stages of

development in most fields, though they are more or less advanced in certain areas of those periods. Most notable is the total lack of agriculture and herding techniques; even the largest and most advanced communities remain essentially hunter-gatherers, but in those fields the Ascorbites have clearly specialized, acquiring a proficiency beyond any human cultures at an equivalent stage of development. As such most of the Ascorbites' technological development has been directed toward hunting and survival techniques suited to their harsh environment.

Ascorbite tool use has completely ignored the concept of smelted metals such as bronze or iron in favor of crystal, which is shaped into darts, spearpoints, quarrelheads, axeblades, knives and even swords. Those communities without access to crystal streams instead trade for such items, or are forced to use stone implements. This is an obvious sign of an impoverished community. In addition Ascorbites use the exoskeletal chitin of their prey in a manner similar to how primitive humans use wood or bone, though the Ascorbites use wood as well, in lesser quantities. Both chitin and wood are used as building materials and in crafting tools. They have also mastered ceramic pottery, the products of which are used extensively in





shaping crystal. Most tribes have developed the wheel for use in pottery, and although they are aware of its applications for land transport they do not use it for such; their cultural reluctance to establish navigable paths on the ground precludes the use of wagons or carts in the human fashion.

Like many tropical cultures Ascorbites are extremely skilled in practical biochemistry. Using local plants and animals Ascorbites can extract medicines such as antibiotics and anesthetics and healing stimulants, adhesives for use in tool-making or construction, lubricants, as well as all manner of minor improvements to their quality of life. They also make paints, dyes, fabrics and ropes with what the jungle provides.

Most remarkable in this regard is their relationship with the Severan angler, which they call the *Tl'chovr'*. This is a creature of the deep jungle that preys exclusively on Ascorbites. However, contrary to being feared the angler's presence in a tribe's territory is actually desired — an organic element of its urine, when properly treated, becomes a medicine of great spiritual significance to Ascorbite shamans. Fed to those in the adolescent stage it is a potent narcotic capable of releasing psychic potential. Thus Ascorbites adamantly refuse to drive an angler away unless it approaches a village, and under no circumstances will they seek to cause it serious injury.

Transport among Ascorbites is extremely primitive, again due to their refusal to allow the creation of leveled pathways that could be used by wheeled carts. This is due to the fear that a rival tribe or some of the more intelligent animals could use such a path to find their village. Ascorbites do occasionally employ draft animals, such as various species of shriva or li'shto'al, but again these are invariably captured from the wild and trained, never cultivated and raised as humans prefer to do.

Most transport is accomplished by Ascorbites bearing such burdens themselves, leaping and climbing among the relative safety of the trees. Ropes are used for the heavier loads, such as large carcasses being brought to a village or city. It is a remarkable sight: a long loop of rope is bound to the carcass, and some of the Ascorbites will leap to the tree ahead and simply reel the carcass in, while the Ascorbites in the tree behind pass along the other end of the loop. A few Ascorbites accompany the carcass itself to guide its

passage among the lower branches. It is an awkward method, and I am deeply tempted to introduce the concept of a pulley to these people, but such a contamination of this virgin culture would be unforgivable.

Spoken Language

The fourth and last of the Inquisition's contributions to this collection, this document has something of a convoluted history. Written by a minor Engineer in the employ of the Jakovian Agency, it passed into the hands of the Muster slavers of the Fredensborg. This text as well as the accompanying visual and auditory recordings were submitted to my library by the Inquisition and are now passed on to Your Majesty.

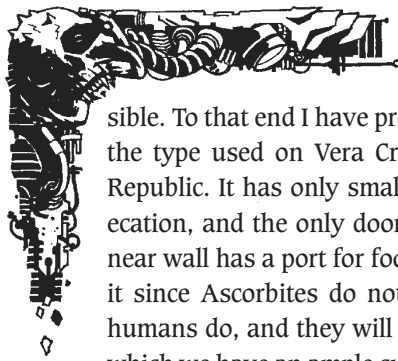
— Sister Narinne

Guild preamble: This document was recovered by a Muster team in the employ of Huo Rustai, Entered, of the Engineers' Guild at 4997.7.47 League Standard. Rustai's laboratory was discovered destroyed, broken from the inside out. No bodies were recovered, and the experimental subjects had escaped. Doubtless High Command will be amused when they receive this report; our guild has had long experience with Bug care and maintenance. If Rustai had realized that fact we might have saved him a good deal of trouble. The Ascorbites being brought to Rustai have been clipped as per standard procedure and are instead being sent to one of the Deepcore mines on Ravenna; if the Decados can use them for cheap labor they might be similarly productive for us.

The following is a total investigation into the spoken linguistics of the Ascorbite race, meant to supersede the work done by the Diasporan scholar Sir Anton Salmonovicz. Sir Anton's work was groundbreaking in its day but has not been significantly expanded upon since that time. I mean to correct that oversight. I shall place a group of Ascorbites from the deepest jungles in a sterile environment and observe their interactions, both spoken and body language if necessary. Naturally, the entire process will be recorded.

According to the Muster's transmission my specimens were acquired as a group in southern Rhodesland. That would place them far from any known Decados-friendly tribes. This is of utmost importance; I wish as little human contamination as pos-





sible. To that end I have prepared a large prison cell of the type used on Vera Cruz during the late Second Republic. It has only small ports in the floor for defecation, and the only door is locked and barred. The near wall has a port for food to enter; I had to enlarge it since Ascorbites do not eat conventional food as humans do, and they will have to be fed hull rats (of which we have an ample supply). Hidden cameras and microphones are recessed into the walls and ceiling (fig. 1).

4997.3.05 League Standard / 34 Iiakoia, 4997 (Decados Severan Calendar)

My subjects have arrived: 19 healthy adult specimens. Their sensory clusters are intact. Good. I paid that Muster squadron extra to leave them pristine, but those mercenaries are not always reliable for such subtlety. I am told that the removal of their antennae and abdominal cords is standard procedure for Ascorbite collection; it seems to ensure their passivity for transport. One of the older Muster men fed me horrible tales of “revolting bugs,” as he put it, that a friend of a friend of his had witnessed; obviously a piece of guild legendry meant to frighten me. Regardless, my research requires totally intact specimens, neither physically crippled nor mentally abused. If I find otherwise I shall lodge a formal complaint with the Merchant League and the Muster’s Vigil; I have no tolerance for incompetence.

The subjects were sedated, examined and placed in their cell. This took no longer than three hours — the Ascorbite resistance to poisons is well known and I have no wish to tempt the Pancreator’s mercy. Upon their revival I began visual and auditory recording. At first no communication was evident, but following Sir Anton’s research I lowered the frequency of reception and heard their harmonic communication. Now the real work begins.

4997.3.09 LS / 38 Iiakoia, 4997

I have been listening to their humming for days now. Apart from their initial awakening there has been very little change. Every individual produces an identical tone at nearly identical moments, but sub-harmonics come into play only rarely. Individual acts are announced by that individual, and then their sequence is propagated by the others as if to say “yes, I received your message.” I can conjecture that in the jungle that

signal propagation is most important for long-distance communication, a maintenance of the Ascorbite “hive mind” even across wide areas. I have isolated sequences for “hungry,” “not hungry,” “feeding” and “defecating” so far (audio set 1). Since all the subjects do is eat, sleep and defecate these sequences are to be predicted.

Now that I note it, no mating activity has taken place in their confinement. From their initial examination I know that 11 of the subjects are male, the rest female, one pregnant. It is possible that Ascorbites have similar cultural taboos regarding privacy and mating as humans, but they have shown no such reticence in their waste processes.

4997.3.19 LS / 4 Antonia, 4997

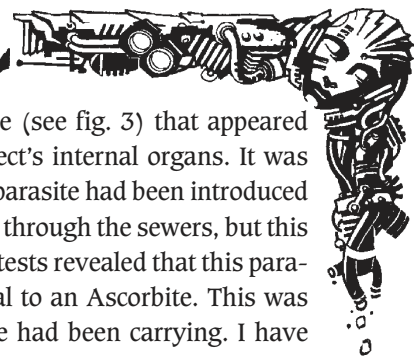
By giving them some variety in their diet and some objects for stimulus I have managed to create a database for the harmonic sequences of many concepts: colors, shapes, animal names, tools, body parts (audio sets 2-9). One interesting note is that the subjects invariably examine what they are given, and if it is not a tool or food they discard it into the toilet-ports. I am extremely familiar with the sequence for “useless.”

Most of their diet remains hull rats, but now the animals are delivered with their teeth removed. The subjects were removing them and using them to cut at their cell’s door. This method was proceeding surprisingly well before it was discovered, and I now have a sequence corresponding to either “frustration/anger” or “failure.”

Unfortunately, I seem to have reached a premature limit with my present methods. I can amass countless useless and esoteric nouns and adjectives but verbs largely escape me. They just don’t DO anything because I give them nothing to do! Most of the sequences I have collected are “standing,” “sitting,” “walking,” “eating,” “defecating,” etc. Well, I have a new shipment of specimens arriving in a fortnight; their interactions will be fascinating.

The female’s pregnancy has advanced. The rate of growth is remarkable — remarkably slow. As this rate it will be weeks before the fetus is the size of a chicken’s egg. Of course, the size of a newborn Ascorbite is even unknown. Astonishingly little is known regarding the specifics of Ascorbite reproduction; I might be able to contribute to that field when the specimen delivers. It is most unfortunate that the date of its conception is unknown, for research purposes.





4997.4.02 LS / 18 Antonia, 4997

Nothing! After days of waiting with no significant progress, nothing! The nine new specimens were introduced to the original 19 and their harmonic communication lasted all of 3.428 seconds before the normal baseline resumed! Initially, different sequences came from different individuals of the first group, but these immediately meshed and formed a coherent, unified pulse from all 28 subjects before terminating (audio set 12, section 53). Almost nothing can be decoded except the usual “hungry,” “white,” “standing,” “sitting.”

4997.4.11 LS / 27 Antonia, 4997

The subjects have a new, totally inexplicable activity: They remove the intestinal tract of each hull rat given them, tie them together and lower them into the toilet ports (fig. 2). One of my assistants suggests that they are attempting to determine the depth of the ports, a possibility I cannot ignore. However, to what purpose? The ports are far too small to admit one of them.

These activities are accompanied by some fascinating harmonics (audio sets 16-23). I have isolated variations on “work” which merit further study, and even abstractions such as “need.” There are several that continue to escape me, especially those initiated by the pregnant female; these must be related to her condition but the lack of knowledge in this area limits the references I can use. The female’s harmonics are, however, propagated by the entire group so in a sense all of them are pregnant, a unique group dynamic.

4997.4.16 LS / 33 Antonia, 4997

This cannot be the normal method of their reproduction. The laws of biology, of mathematics, of common sense forbid it. The Pancreator could not have created a species that breeds in such a fashion; he could not possibly be so cruel. The gravid female died during the night; I reviewed the recordings this morning. I now have isolated a new sequence of harmonic: “pain” (audio set 28, section 12).

The female died and its fellows dismembered the body. In this they were hampered by their lack of tools; most of the work was accomplished by actually tearing her limbs and exoskeletal plates apart. All the pieces were deposited in the toilet ports. The local Purgers’ Guild recovered the fragments from the sewers for me.

My team and I examined the remains; how I wish we had not. Within the posterior abdomen we found a

large maggot-like parasite (see fig. 3) that appeared to be devouring the subject’s internal organs. It was initially believed that the parasite had been introduced during the specimen’s trip through the sewers, but this was not the case. Genetic tests revealed that this parasite is genetically identical to an Ascorbite. This was the infant that the female had been carrying. I have placed the abdominal section in isolation and shall monitor the creature’s growth. Will this matricide develop into an Ascorbite like the others? It seems impossible.

4997.4.31 LS / 8 Kvintia, 4997

The maggot-creature grows rapidly in the dead flesh of its mother, seemingly requiring no outside attention (fig. 4). I have requested biologists from the guild to assist in its examination; my group is primarily linguistic but this discovery is critical. The guild does not seem to share my interest; it seems that the study of Ascorbite biology has a priority similar to that of their linguistics. I begin to wonder: what do these creatures understand of their situation? What do they think of the mind that controls their lives here? I have requested another shipment of Ascorbites from the Muster; their interactions with my present subjects might shed light on these questions.

In preparation for the harmonic communication between them and my earlier subjects I have installed upgraded microphones in the holding cell to higher-sensitivity units. I believe that the complex “pulse” that occurred when I introduced the second group was a synchronization of their harmonics, informing the new group of what the original group had experienced since their captivity began. When it occurs with the introduction of the new group I will be ready.

4997.5.08 LS / 23 Kvintia, 4997

A major breakthrough, but one which raises a host of new questions. The new specimens arrived — 11 adults, none pregnant — and were introduced to the 27 presently in captivity. However, the expected introductory harmonic pulse did not occur; it seems that this new group belongs to a different tribe than my originals. Their communication is completely distinct using different sequences. Some similarities are discernable upon initial analysis but these are likely due to root similarities, since both groups originate in similar regions — that is, according to the Muster report on their acquisition.



No harmonic communication has taken place between both groups, but communication has occurred nonetheless. Both groups possess a spoken, vocal language separate from their intra-tribal harmonics. Vocal conversation has been lengthy, and I have established a new database for translating it. The existence of this new form of communication finally explains several personal, non-academic accounts of Severan explorers learning to speak the Ascorbite language. They must have referred to this method. I had previously discounted such accounts as fiction since humans obviously lack the biology to employ the harmonic method.

Unfortunately, this means that my work on Ascorbite harmonic communication is quite useless. If different tribes exhibit different harmonic sequences then any translation matrix is limited to the tribal level, so my work to date is applicable only to this particular tribe.

Of further concern is that the surviving original specimens (group A) have stopped feeding; they simply leave the hull rats for consumption by the new arrivals (group B) or even discard them intact into the toilet-ports. Whether this is a product of grief or defiance is uncertain; the harmonics they exhibit could imply either or both.

4997.5.25 LS / 2Sextiabria, 4997

Group A is visibly suffering from malnutrition. Physical changes are evident only upon examination; listlessness and muscular atrophy is widespread. Group B is feeding normally. Vocal communication between groups continues and my database is expanding rapidly. The subjects' discussions center on their captivity and group B's confusion regarding group A's fast. Oddly, there has been no mention of the deceased female and her offspring.

4997.5.36 LS / 13Sextiabria, 4997

The maggot creature has been returned to the holding cell. It has now nearly consumed the flesh of its mother that it was given. Visual indications are that it is undergoing a metamorphosis into a mobile form, likely that of the rumored adolescent stage of its species. Upon its arrival group A immediately ceased their hunger strike, and are now feeding well. There is discussion between groups A and B — group B demands that the creature be killed or sent down the toilet ports. Group A refuses yet has not given any reason. Group A's harmonics are becoming more aggressive (audio

sets 37, 38). Group B is unknown since I have prepared no database for translating their harmonics.

4997.6.18 LS / 31Sextiabria, 4997

Damnation! 21 specimens are now dead, including the entirety of group B. The maggot creature finally emerged from its "mother" as a fully developed adolescent, upon which group A immediately attacked and killed group B. Interestingly, none of the bodies have been dismembered and discarded like the first female had been. Furthermore, none of the hull rats' bodies are being discarded either. Everything in the cell is being presented to the young one for inspection.

The young one is the size of a small dog and learning the vocal speech with extraordinary speed; at least I can continue to build that database based on its progress. It is also developing its harmonic communication, synchronizing itself with the others'. Perhaps group A wanted to ensure that the young one did not learn the "wrong" harmonic sequences; local folklore indicates that the species is notoriously protective of its young.

4997.6.26 LS / 39Sextiabria, 4997

The young one has been inspecting the cameras and microphones lining the subjects' cell; it has even managed to damage a few. These have been replaced, and as a further exploration I have added loudspeakers. My databases of this group's harmonic and vocal modes should be sufficient to make actual communication possible.

The vocal language is surprisingly simple. It exhibits a limited range of phonemes, attached (table 1). The grammatical structure is elegant and easily acquired; verbal arrangements are even more simple than Urthish, while pronunciation is as rigid as Latin. I would estimate that the entire language is quite resistant to linguistic shifts over time and distance. However, the total vocabulary is oddly limited, an aspect that is found mostly among artificial literary languages such as were common during the Second Republic. I wonder how a language like this came to exist among a culture like the Ascorbites; such a rigid, efficient but limited language should be the product of a large but tightly integrated and insular population. Given the volume of Anunnaki ruins on Severus I can only assume that this language is somehow related to their interactions with the early Ascorbites.

4997.6.32 LS / 5 Sentiabria, 4997

What an experience! The combination of language and harmonics stresses one's intellect, for it is in essence countless exchanges simultaneously! If one were to have a conversation in Urthish while translating a written essay from Urthtech to Latin while listening to a Kurgan poetry it would not compare to this. I must listen to each harmonic separately but minding the form of the whole, and the vocal language is spoken throughout whenever the young one is concerned. Sir Anton was unaware of the vocal language but his notes describe a similar experience with the harmonics.

The subjects have certainly become aware of my presence and seem to welcome my harmonics. They even reciprocate my sequences when delivered properly. There is no danger of hunger strikes or despair now; their captor is one of them. Even plans of escape have been forgotten.

4997.7.02 LS / 14 Sentiabria, 4997

I use progressively less of the vocal language as my skill with the harmonics improves. This method is far more versatile and they respond much better to it.

My friends are the *Bokurn E La* or "singers of beauty," as would be translated from their spoken mode, but the harmonics correspond to something near "song-singing-struggling-we-beauty-start-end-world-night," in no particular order. Ironically, as my understanding grows translation becomes more difficult, not less, for the simultaneity of thought is not well suited to translation into Urthish.

4997.7.11 LS / 23 Sentiabria, 4997

Communication improves further. I sleep little. They are glad that I am learning their Song. My assistants are deaf. I understand the *Bokurn E La*. I do not leave the communication desk. They understand me and my purpose. A new group of Ascorbites is coming. We understand each other. We sing constantly. Translation is difficult. They are confused that I stop singing when I sleep. I want to go to the cell and sing but I have no voice unless I am at the communication desk. If they are not *Bokurn E La* we may kill them. My assistants are confused.

4997.7.24 LS / 36 Sentiabria, 4997

white/listening/breathing/singing/sitting/holes/



young holy/talking/looking/things/singing/shitting/
wall's voice/young learning/inside/holes/listening/
standing/white/singers/being/sitting/intent to join/
to place/together soon/intent/open/intruder/living
food/kill it/break it —

Written Language

Perhaps most remarkably, this document was brought to me in an official capacity by the Jakovian Agency for the express purpose of this report to Your Majesty. However, I had made no such request to the Agency, nor had I notified or intended to notify them of this project. I have lived on Severus all my life, and I can assure Your Majesty that the Agency is never forthcoming without some subtle motive for it.

— Sister Narinne

Following the obliteration of the Ascorbite-infested jungles of Varangia, House Decados was provided with the unprecedented opportunity to study the infamous underground *Tunos*, or cities of the Ascorbites. One of the primary aims of the Jakovian investigation of the remains of these habitats was the study of the Ascorbite written language, which has eluded decryption for centuries. Samples of the writing are commonly seen in the jungle, where they in all likelihood mark territory or dangerous regions. Also, Ascorbite traders to the fortress-cities wear garments with their writing prominently displayed, yet despite the availability of these samples an understanding of the written language continues to evade our best cryptographers. Because of this fact the strategies and goals of this alien race have remained a mystery to House Decados and the Jakovian Agency. That the nearest neighbors to the Decados throne should remain so unknown to it is surely intolerable.

As such, the aerial/orbital bombardment of Varangia was calculated to spare the regions surrounding two known *Tunos*. The task of gaining their possession intact was left to Decados general infantry, shepherded by chemical shock troops of the Volga division. Losses were deemed unacceptably high even among the infantry, due in large part to the casualties accrued in tunnel fighting against the defending Ascorbites in their own lair.

Cursory examination of Ascorbite markings immediately reveals their similarity to those found on

ancient Ur ruins. However, such ruins are not uncommon in the deep jungles, and since humanity's tread has been comparatively light in the wilds these ruins are in relatively good condition. As such, the possibilities exist that the Ascorbites either were instructed in their written language by an aspect of the Ur or merely aped it from their remnants, which are abundant in Ascorbite territory. Due to this Preadamite connection it was thought that a comparison with the known written languages of Ur descendents might prove productive: the Obun, Ukar and Oro'ym. The Ascorbite alphabet by comparison is far less complicated than any of the above, but a possible similarity has emerged to some of the most ancient samples of Oro'ym writing that the Agency has acquired. Note that the word "possible" is key, for that linkage is a subject of serious contention among the investigators.

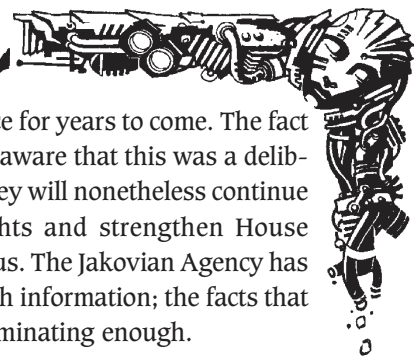
Indeed, from the writing discovered in the wrecks of the Varangian *Tunos* it would appear that the Ascorbites do not have an entire workable alphabet. In essence their form of writing has devolved or is an incomplete copy of those found on the proximate Ur ruins. The Ascorbites use this form as a manner of shorthand code by which to mark locations of importance and for specific ritual occasions. Its use for garments appears to be an innovation unique to the Decados-friendly *Mi'tlazzh* tribe of Carpathia and Central Leshiy.

Attached to this document is a list of all previously known Ascorbite sigils; plainly, this list is very short and consists mainly of the names of various Severan animals. These are frequently sighted in the jungle by Decados rangers, the most experienced of whom learn their rudiments, the better to avoid the most dangerous wildlife. Certain other sigils have been decoded as well, mostly dealing with danger.

The traders and emissaries who come to Decados cities are invariably from the *Mi'tlazzh* tribe, and they always wear robes and hides with their marks prominently displayed. This is, of course, despite the fact that the Ascorbite race has little use for clothing; their natural body armor provides sufficient protection for most occasions. The traders' clothing have been decoded thus:

- The symbols indicating several sub-tribes of the region; these might be still in existence or long-dead, but they are all confirmed as part of the *Mi'tlazzh* tribe
- The profession of the individual, usually proclaimed several times on the same garment





- At least one sigil confirmed to be an animal, possibly a kind of totemic spirit to that group or individual.

All of these are accompanied by various unidentifiable markings; translation success is no more than 20%. One theory posits that these signs are representations of various spiritual connections of the Ascorbites to aspects of their environment. Another suggests that they are the names of other Ascorbites, possibly ancestors or heroes of note that human trading partners might recognize. There is also the sneaking suspicion that they merely wear meaningless garb to confuse and annoy their human betters.

Unfortunately, the new carvings acquired from the remains of the destroyed *Tunos* yielded little in the way of hard data. Most of what has been translated consists of an historical record at an extremely local level, but some confirmations were made by comparisons to jungle and trader markings: the names of prominent individuals from the past and their most notable deeds, the names of related or previous nearby tribes.

As per Agency instructions the data acquired on the Ascorbites mytho-historical origins was leaked to the Temple Avesti, which will ensure the Church's

marginalization of the race for years to come. The fact that the Church might be aware that this was a deliberate leak is irrelevant; they will nonetheless continue to oppose Ascorbite rights and strengthen House Decados' control of Severus. The Jakovian Agency has no need to falsify any such information; the facts that were discovered are incriminating enough.

It is the judgment of this agent that the conquests of these Ascorbite *Tunos* did not yield sufficient data to justify the cost of their seizure while relatively intact. It would have been far less expensive for House Decados to obliterate them entirely. The destruction of other *Tunos* in other regions of the planet and the subsequent investigation of the carvings within them might expand the known vocabulary and give valuable details regarding linguistic shifts across geographical distances. However, given the remoteness of this possibility the cost of such an undertaking should be deemed prohibitive, and the Agency should recommend against any further such undertaking by House Decados.

Xavier Decados

Varangia, 18 Maiia, 4151

File # 82476309

Warfare

The following transcription was delivered to me as an auditory recording without any indication of its origins, similarly to the biology section of this book. I transcribed the recording myself, attempting to maintain the tone and language of the speaker as much as possible. Again, however, the ultimate source of this document remains unknown.

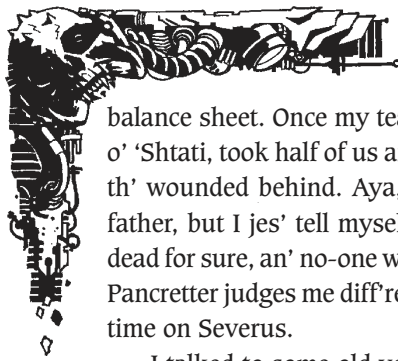
— Sister Niarinne

Aye, father, I'll tell you want you want to know. Keep them drinks coming, barkeep! Have a tchitcha. Vodka? Ah, that's for th' nobbs. Yer health! Ah, sometimes I think that's why they took Malignatius, Pancratter knows there inn't much else there, eh? Nai, won't get me in trouble talkin' to you, father. I think th' royals likes it when you ask this kinda question,

shows th' Patriarch their "holy struggle to claim this world for the 'Mpyrean's chosen race." Pah! 'Tis our struggle, not theirs. We're th' ones that go into th' jungles, an' 'tis our bodies that rot there. Every time a ranger team sets out th' base chaplain says a prayer for their safe return, an' every time they come back he holds a service for th' ones that didn't. Sometimes a whole team dunn't come back, an' then 'tis a long service.

Aya, I served Her Ladyship for eight o' th' nastiest years o' me life. Beggin' yer pardon, father, that's 10 years o' Holy Terra. As for Her Ladyship the Baronet Serena Decados, pah! She gets to hide behind her fortress walls an' pocket th' profits an' we get th' scraps what're left. 'Tis us that get sent into that green-black G'enne fer her precious flowers an' damned if they ain't worth a whole lot more than we are on th'





balance sheet. Once my team got surprised by a pack o' 'Shtati, took half of us an' th' rest of us jes' ran, left th' wounded behind. Aya, it bothers me sometimes, father, but I jes' tell myself that if I didn't run I'd be dead for sure, an' no-one would be alive that died then. Pancratter judges me diff'rent, he needs to spend some time on Severus.

I talked to some old vets that stayed here in New Krakow, what din't have th' money 'r jes' din't want to go back to Tsaritsyn. Heh, now I'm near to bein' an old vet meself, eh? Well, back then they tell me 'twas diff'rent than when they was makin' th' jungle treks. Went in less often in their day, they say, mebbe only four times a year — pardon, 'bout thrice a Holy Terran year. For me we went in near thrice that often, but I hear 'tis less now. Guess I'm a lucky one, eh? Bar-keep!

They tell me there used to be caravans, Bug traders out of th' jungle, brung th' nobbs what they wanted an' sold it cheap, a few weapons, a little tech, some livestock. Rumors were that Decados sold 'em slaves, humans even. Nai, Templ'Avesti did a big investigation, found nothing that could stick. Th' bishop who called f'rit got "promoted," made archbishop on No-where. Lucky, eh? Heh, wonder what th' royals paid 'em for that.

Something, eh? Bugs trading. Hard to credit fer me, spent most o' my time killin' em an' tryin' not to get killed right back. Anyway, that sure stopped when th' Emp'rer Wars started. See, th' royals wanted 'Scorbites fer cheap shock troops off-world, but th' Bugs told 'em they could stuff it up their... Um, pardon, father. They told em no, an' th' royals din't like that a bit! They sent bomber planes to Bug cities an' jes' leveled em. Only chem'cal explosives, no fire-bombs, no atomics, no plagues. They wanted jungles intact, jes' not th' Bugs, 'cuz jungles got something more valuable to 'em than an alien rebellion.

You don't know what that is? Yer kidding. Where you from, off-world? New Capetown might as well be off-world, ya soft fairies. 'Ey, jes' a joke! Yer a surly drunk, father! Y'know, yer accent inn't much like Transvaalite... Hey, thanks! Yer health! Where was I? — aye, th' bush. Th' Decados want *Selchakah*, father! There's other things there, medicines, gemstones, lumber, meats, but nothing they want as much or pay as much for as opiate poppies. Hahaha! That's what this whole pile o' shit is for! You think they put a whole

fortress-city out here 'mong the Voydanoy's for th' scenery? Sure, th' surface navy, but there's a lot more money in th' jungle than the sea no matter what th' Whalers' Guild sez.

Aye, there's money in th' jungle, but there's a whole lotta ways 'a make sure you never get ta spend it, an' th' worst 're th' damn Bugs fer sure. Begyerpardon, father. Rilly? Filthy-demon-ridden-shite-eatin'-uberwhore-spawned-corpse-humpin'-church-pissin' bloodsuckers! Not bad, father. I seen priests faint when a ranger cusses. I must be getting old.

Well, after the Bugs got bombed th' caravans stopped comin' in. See, seems those was the "civilized" kind, an' now they were pushed back north an' west, an' now th' bush 'round here got new tribes comin' in, nasties from Rhodesland whut never seen a human an' din't like us when they did. No trade, jes' huntin' our teams like animals when we went lookin' fer Her Ladyship's precious poppies.

Bugs're like no other enemy a human can imagine. Yer laughin', father, but th' Bugs got no humor 'bout them. You seen th' lantern show o' th' Malignatius front? Armies line up all pretty an' polished, officers all polite, even t' th' ones on th' other side, full o' heroism an' sacrifice, but 'tis not like that here. Here yer armor is slick with humidity an' yer own sweat, an' it itches but you don't dare take it off. Th' pickflies nip at whatever skin inn't covered unless yer good enough at th' job to have a standard shield, an' if you do you can bet all yer partners're planning how they're gonna make sure they get it if you get eaten. An' yer groggy with the heat an' mebbe a little Selchakah an' yer wondering whether yer buddies smoked a little too much in th' morn', an' suddenly th' Bugs come pourin' out o' th' bush with thrice th' number o' men with you... this inn't rilly botherin' you, is it? Yer pretty hard f'r a priest. Bet you were a chaplain yerself once, mebbe even in a combat unit, weren't you? Oh, thank'ye! Yer health!

Nai, they'll come day 'r night 'r in twilight, an' lemme tell ya them bastards see real good in both kinds a dark. Yah, you unnerstand, eh? Our sunlight's too red for human eyes, but th' bugs see jes' fine an' so does every other animal on this damn rock 'cept us. Aye, that's why I got these eyes. Optic-spectrum shift, they call it. Let's us see in th' same range o' light as th' Bugs so daylight is as clear as th' lights o' th' Baronial





Manse. Most who make th' trips into th' jungle get these eyes, place's dangerous enough without bein' near blind. Makes th' cities look sort o' purple to us unless we turn 'em off, but that feature costs extra. Most of us don't bother, you jes' get used t'it.

Night's diff'rent. Dark is dark by any kind o' light, so we camp at night an' use spotlights, both true-white an' red-shifted. Th' Bugs don't care either way, they're as dangerous at night as in th' day. See, at night they don't even need their eyes, they got antennas on their heads, feel motion in the air, gives them a natural radar. They can't see as far, but they see real good up close no matter how dark it gets, even t'eyes like mine. Night's a rough time f'rus, we gotta sleep sometime. You set a watch an' hope those guys stay correct, cuz all yer lives depend on it. Pancratter help you if you don't wanna sleep in yer armor, which is why we can't wear th' real heavy stuff into th' bush.

I dunno jes' how them Bugs did it, but they always knew jes' where to hit us. You take a shit in th' bush without backup, betcher arse it won't make it back. Always set up latrine pit in camp itself, made 'orrible stink an' you had t' be near it, but was better 'n disappearin' in th' jungle. O' course we was bein'

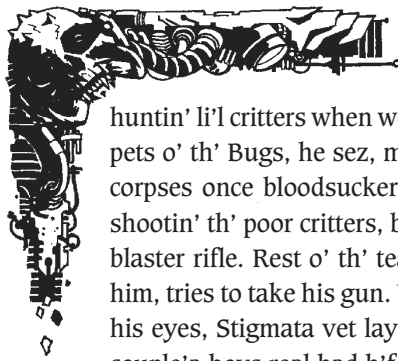
scouted, father! We jes' never saw em, an' I mean never! Sometimes we'd see em gatherin' f'r an attack but we never saw th' scouts.

S'always theories 'bout why they're so good. I mean, I served with a Stigmata vet once, scarred, cranky old baster, but he was real good, could pick a feshaal out of a tree 10 meters away when someone else might walk right under it 'thout knowin'. An' him, even he never saw th' scouts sizin' us up. He had a theory that th' Bugs's usin' a kind o' jungle critter t' watch us b'fore an attack.

You know what a muhapavela is? 'Tis'n animal gets a bit bigger'n a man, insect, six legs, wings. Like to fly around our teams in th' bush, sit in trees an' watch us. Sometimes one or two, sometimes dozens, but they're not stalkin' us or nuffin', jes' watchin', curious 'bout us. Folk say they're good luck, say that 'Scorbites don't like em, won't come near us if th' muhapavelas're near. 'M not rilly the superstitious type, but there might be somethin' to it, an' 'tis kinda nice havin' animals 'round that aren't tryin' t' kill us.

Anyway, this old Stigmata vet got it in his head that th' muhapavelas're spyin' for 'Scorbites. Sez they never ate nuffin' we saw, not grazin' on leaves or





huntin' li'l critters when we could see 'em. Mebbe they pets o' th' Bugs, he sez, mebbe they get our dried-up corpses once bloodsuckers finished 'em. So he goes shootin' th' poor critters, blastin' away with his fancy blaster rifle. Rest o' th' team gets right pissed, grabs him, tries to take his gun. Well, his fists 're as good as his eyes, Stigmata vet lays into us right back, hurt a couple'a boys real bad b'fore we put him down.

C'mon! What else could we do, father? We dinnt want him bringin' bad luck, right? So we grabbed him, but then he's swingin' an' kickin', an' even bitin', gougin' eyes an' hittin' throats an' punchin' kidneys an' grabbin' wrists an' twistin' them jes' right, real commando stuff, y'know? So its either kill him or he leaves us so battered that we're no way makin' it home alive. 'Sides, guy was a soddin' arsehole, an' that blaster rifle looked real good to some of us.

Whatever they did, Bugs always knew where we were, where we were goin', how many of us there were an' how much gear we had. If we looked too tough they'd soften us up first, lay a few traps along our path. See, Bugs like th' trees, don't like t' walk on ground when they can jes' jump fr'm tree to tree. Safer, see? Lots' o' nasty creatures on th' ground. So Bugs'll trap the hell out of it jes' f'r us, like covered pits filled with spikes, or triplines that bring down that dead tree right on our heads. They'll even cut trails for us, make 'em look like game trails, we follow 'em an' end up right under a shriva hatchery.

They'd only attack when we were exactly where they wanted us, when we're hot an' tired an' nervous. Usually go for th' flankers first, zap'em with poison darts, knock 'em right out without a word. When flankers're feelin' nervous they start singin', usually a hymn, not jes' to calm themselves or fer th' Pancratter, but so can we hear there voice an' know if it stops suddenly. S'good, Bugs don't seem t' like losin' that element o' surprise.

Well, that's a bit funny, rilly. If you got eyes like mine Bugs show up real good, bright reddish-orange against the blue o' the leaves. They use a camo paint, makes em' same color as ev'rything else. Joke is, sometimes they pick a color that looks th' same to their eyes but not to normal humans! Before I got these I remember sometimes the Bugs'd show up a real bright purple if you shined a true-white lantern their way. That's why 'tis good t' have a few men with natch'ral human eyes, help th' rest see what they can't.

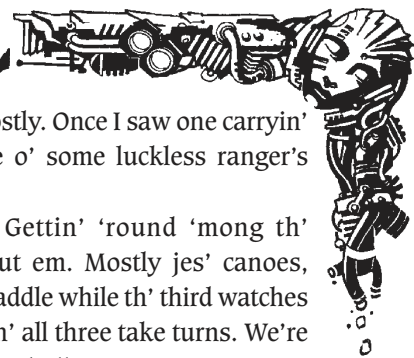
Poisons? Heh! Aye, Bugs love 'em. Nerve toxins, muscular paralytics, hyperallergens, anesthetics, numbing agents — th' jungle's got it all, an' th' Bugs know how to use most of it. Sting you with a blowpipe dart tipped in diuretic, you think 'twas jes' a pickfly'r something, right? Few minutes later you gotta shit so bad you leave yer mates behind fr'a sec, an' then they got dinner. Aya? Hahahahaha! Aye, I guess I know me poisons pretty good, you kinda gotta when yer goin' into th' bush, tho from what I hear 'bout Tsaritsyn 'tis good t' know 'bout it there too!

N'other thing 'bout th' Bugs's that they use covered pits. Forget th' spikes, jes' put a few 'Scorbites in th' pits. They hold th' cover up themselves, let th' man on point walk right over them an' let it go while the heart o' th' team is walkin' on it, fall right in. Suddenly yer flankers are runnin' back to th' team with their backs to th' jungles, crossbows're firin' from behind em an' mebbe some stolen guns from th' last poor suckers who came in here. Meanwhile th' pit's full o' hand-to-hand, axes n'swords o' crystal, bloodsuckers love it close up, mebbe get a taste o' dinner b'fore th' meal's even ready. They know if we're too tough they can jes' jump right out, simple as th' day, leave the pathetic humans t' wait f'r a rope, if their buddies topside live long enough to drop em one.

Oh, you heard o' those, eh, father? Aye, th' Bugs do love their swords an' I can't say I blame 'em. Folk consider it a sign o' real skill an' success to have one, booty from surviving a raid, see. Don't know jes' what they are or what th' Engineers think o' them but they sure are pretty an' they sure are good. Hard as ceramsteel, good weight, keep a wicked edge. Friend o' mine had one once, I got to play with it f'ra bit. But that's not th' good part. Trick is, whack the flat o' th' blade against a stone or something like that an' it vibrates for a quarter-minute or so, an' then it can cut through solid plate armor like 'twas nuffin'! Th' sound o' th' vibration's too high for human hearin', but if there are enough o' them goin', like in a fight in th' jungle, it can raise the hairs on th' back o' yer neck, aright! They got axes and knives what do th' same, but they don't last as long.

Aye, they love their crystal swords but that's not all they got, not by a long way. They like long spears an' axes too, an' they got this sort o' wooden club with crystal shards lined up on both sides. Maquahuitl? If you say so, father. Anyway, these things 're a lot





more common than th' swords. I'd guess they use th' shavings an' loose shards to make th' things. But they're nasty. They're heavy enough t' rilly drive th' sharp edges in, an' sometimes some shards get left behind so you need surgery to get em out. See this scar here? I'd those damn things in me for over a week before I got back to New Krakow an' a decent chirurgeon.

They use th' crystal in a lotta their weapons. Th' swords, sure, an' axes an' those clubs an' also fer spearpoints an' crossbow bolts. Nai, the spears ain't rilly for us. They're long suckers, with a crossbeam, so I figger they use 'em fer hunting th' big beasties like 'Shtati.

Hmm? Aye, Bugs use crossbows. Way I hear it, Bugs spend a lotta time hunting an' warrin' with each other, right? You know how tough their hides are, right? So the 'Scorbites crossbows got a lotta pull to punch through those hides, an' I mean a lot, an' they do th' same t' our armor as they do to their own. Most humans can't even cock th' things without usin' a crank, but th' Bugs do it by hand. Nai, Bugs ain't a lot stronger'n us, jes' in certain places. That's why they can jump over a man's head without tryin', their hands're th' same way. Strong grip, an' they use it, a lot better than if they tried to use a normal bow. That's why we don't look for wrestlin' matches an' why they can handle those powerful things.

Aya, that's probably why they like our gear so much. They love rifles, especially shotguns an' flameguns. Guess they feel familiar. They usually leave th' sidearms behind, but th' smarter ones might take the ammo. Mebbe they try an' fit it in th' rifles they take.

Nai, not rilly. Bugs don't rilly need armor, they got so much natch'ral-like. Well, ak'chally they do wear some when we're lookin' real tough. Y'know the abar fern tree? So y'know 'bout th' leaves, right? Real tough, got some industrial uses f'r us, but out there the 'Scorbites use 'em fer armor. Paste it on to their skins with glue fr'm tree resin, put a few layers, makes 'em even tougher'n normal. On Leminkainen? Humans? Nai, that dunn't happen t' Scorbites. Wow, che. A man's gotta be pretty desperate t' trust his flesh t' that. Suffocation's no fun.

Well, they do use shields sometimes, I mean, y'know, solid shields, right? Look like they make 'em out o' th' hides o' some real big critters like tugarins

or hydra shells. Scrap, mostly. Once I saw one carryin' a shield had to be made o' some luckless ranger's breastplate.

Us? We use boats. Gettin' 'round 'mong th' islands'd be hard without em. Mostly jes' canoes, they're cheap. Two men paddle while th' third watches with his weapon ready, an' all three take turns. We're not usually lookin' f'r any bulky sorta treasure, an' 'tis better to come home with a lighter load than not at all, as we say.

Nai, Bugs don't use boats 'round here. Mebbe the "friendlies" do out west, but not here. Here th' basters watch th' tides, learn th' water currents, got centuries o' knowin' this turf, I think. They swim from one island to th' next, if y'can believe it. They know th' currents so well it takes them jes' where they want. Smart rangers learn 'em too, makes th' trip go a lot quicker.

What gets me is that sometimes th' Bugs showed up on islands they couldn't possibly have got to without us knowin'. Like, Her Ladyship got the House Army t' bomb th' Bug village on Krimea, that's an island about 200 miles northwest. I was a spotter for that, had a communications man with me, called in coordinates. Bugs were totally routed, driven into the sea at low tide. Planes tracked 'em, word was they all drowned. Celebration, many drinks, cheap whores an' so on. See, intel was that 'twas th' village farthest east in that area, an' with it gone we got easy run o' two small islands east o' Krimea. So Her Ladyship convinced th' royal family that it was worth all th' damage to that one island and all th' goodies in it.

Course it din't work that way. We got a good year on those islands, Severan year, that is. Nuffin' t' worry 'bout 'cept 'Shtati an' Mautizho an' such. Dangerous, sure, but compared to 'Scorbites? Well, 'Scorbites came back an' th' royals never even saw 'em coming. Jes' up and appeared on our happy li'l islands an' started killin' us, an' there wasn't even another tribe for hundreds o' miles that they could o' come from, jes' right out o' nowhere. An' we'd gotten a li'l too relaxed in th' bush by then, so when th' Bugs came back they bit us hard. I barely made it home, an' me arm got left behind. That was my last trip.

So that's why I'm in this pub with me head at th' bottom o' th' bottle, givin' me last confession t' you, father. Physicker sez I ain't got a lotta time left on me liver, an' I sold me nice shiny metal arm jes' t' pay fer him t' tell me that. Damn thing keeps hurtin', hurts



worse than when I first lost the real one. The Selchakah's cheap when a team's jes' come in, but right now supply's tight so here I am with this watered-down tchitcha an' a sore throat. An' I may be drunk,

but I heard what happened down south in Mistanza. Reckon I can guess yer accent now, eh, father? Yer health!

Rules

Combat

Ascorbites have a number of obvious natural advantages in combat: their exoskeletal armor, their iron grip, and most spectacularly, their leaping abilities. However, Ascorbite legs have limited flexibility, and thus they have difficulty learning kick attacks. They must learn any kick actions at two levels higher than the action's required level. However, fist actions can be bought at one level less than normal. Ascorbites who learn human martial arts must use the modifiers below in addition to those of the martial art.

New Martial Arts Actions

Bite (Level 2): The Ascorbite bite can be a wicked thing, for although it might not inflict much damage it enables the Ascorbite to literally suck the blood of his opponent. An Ascorbite can only make a bite attack after a successful grapple, and the following turn he can begin draining blood. This inflicts one automatic Vitality level of damage per turn, in addition to any grapple damage.

Roll	Init	Damage
Dex + Fight	-1	1+ special

Leaping Strike (Level 6): The Ascorbite's powerful legs add momentum to its strike, which makes contact with the opponent while airborne. This modifies a fist attack, or it can be used when carrying a melee weapon. Such an attack is modified as follows:

Init	Goal	DMG
-1	-1	+2

d20 System

Living Weapon Specialty: +1 to reactive Spot checks in combat.

Traits

Ascorbite characters can purchase the following traits with gamesmaster permission.

Curses

Physical

No Antennae (+2 pts: -2 Perception in the dark in addition to any normal penalties)

Benefices

Status

Singer (2 pts): This benefice is not meant for player characters, for it represents membership in a hive-mind. All Ascorbites except those raised alone or by humans, or who lost the Song due to physical injury, are assumed to possess this Benefice. If you are playing an all-Ascorbite campaign, all characters should have this trait.

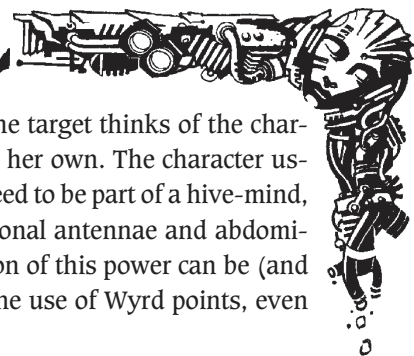
T'zhamivt (2 pts): The character is a shaman of Ascorbite culture, and can travel relatively unmolested across tribal lines. Other Ascorbites will not go out of their way to aid the character — survival is a T'zhamivt's own responsibility — but neither will they make life especially difficult. T'zhamivt can even enter hostile Tunos to deliver a scathing sermon, and as long as that Tunos' really private secrets are not discovered the character is probably safe.

Affliction

Physical

Obvious Disconnection (1 pt): The injuries that caused the character to be severed from her original hive-mind are readily apparent. Perhaps her antennae were removed by Muster slavers, or her abdominal resonator was visibly mutilated by a jungle beast. Other Ascorbites will immediately recognize the character as an independent without a tribe, and will probably try to kill her on sight.





Psychic Path: Song

The T'zhamivt shamans of the Ascorbites have developed their own psychic path, which twists and harnesses the power of the Ascorbites' hive-minds. This path is totally unknown beyond Severus, and the T'zhamivt are very particular about sharing their secrets. Unless otherwise noted these powers require that the character have fully functional antennae and abdominal resonator, which usually means that she is connected to a hive-mind. Thus, these powers may not be suitable for player characters.

Break Song

(Level 1, Extrovert + Impress, sight, instant, 1W)

With a disharmonic pulse from the character's abdominal resonator he can temporarily sever another's connection to their hive-mind. Most Ascorbites thus severed will be immobilized with confusion until the connection is re-established, but in a situation where the proper action is clear they may be able to carry on without their guiding voices for a short time. Note that if the character lacks the physiology necessary to transmit such a pulse this power can be used at a range of touch. This power can be prolonged with the expenditure of Wyrd points. It can also be used on multiple targets.

Listen

(Level 2, Perception + Observe, self, temporary, 1W)

The character can interpret the hive-mind Song of a foreign group that she can hear, and can understand the communication passing between them. She still retains her own sense of identity and cannot broadcast in that new Song, so she cannot pass for one of them. The duration of this power can be extended by using Wyrd points. If the character does not have working antennae she can still use this power at a -2 penalty.

Teach Bokalo'o

(Level 3 or 8, Extrovert + Charm or Impress, touch, temporary, 1W)

At level 3 the character can induct a willing Ascorbite from a different hive-mind, or one who was raised independent, into his community by psychically altering the target's harmonic recognition patterns. This

temporarily means that the target thinks of the characters' own hive-mind as her own. The character using this power does not need to be part of a hive-mind, but she must have functional antennae and abdominal resonator. The duration of this power can be (and usually is) extended by the use of Wyrd points, even to a perpetual duration.

At Level 8 the target need not be willing, and contests with Ego + Stoic Mind.

Adopt Song

(Level 4, Perception + Empathy, self, temporary, 1W)

The character is now capable of not only listening to a new Song, she can actually broadcast it as well. This means that the character can actually change the tribe to which she belongs. However, a player character who uses this power must immediately roll Ego + Stoic Mind or lose her individual identity. The character may then come under gamesmaster control for the duration of this power, unless the gamesmaster feels that the player is capable of maintaining character under these circumstances. The duration of this power can be extended by the use of Wyrd points, even to a perpetual duration.

Give Song

(Level 5 or 7, Extrovert + Charm or Impress, touch, temporary, 1W)

The Song can now be shared with creatures that are not physically equipped for it. At Level 5 this is restricted to Tan'zhom who have not yet become part of the Song, or adult Ascorbites who lost the Song due to physical injury. At Level 7 this can include any sentient species. The use of this power at either level requires that the target must be willing. The duration of this power can be extended, but not to a perpetual duration.

Infect Song

(Level 6, Extrovert + Impress, sensory, instant, 1W)

Greatly feared by Ascorbites, this power allows the character to introduce an element of pain to the hive-mind of which she is currently a part. The character must first connect to a hive-mind using Adopt Song before using this power, unless her intent is to use it on her native tribe. All Ascorbites who share that Song within sensory range must roll Calm + Stoic Mind or



take one Vitality level of damage. The range and duration of this power cannot be extended.

Merge Song

(Level 9, Calm + Empathy, self, instant, 2W)

This rare and potent power allows the character to create a new Song, based on a synthesis of other Songs of which he has been a part. As the character broadcasts it from her abdominal resonator and is heard by other Ascorbites it will displace the original Songs of which it was first composed. Effectively, this means that multiple tribes of Ascorbites with separate hive-minds can be joined. Of course, if the tribes are too different in their outlooks this could result in the complete collapse of all the hive-minds involved.

Psychic Path: Song (Wis)

1st Degree

Learn Song (Wis; Trained Only; Song Psychics Only)

Activation Time: 1 action

Range: Personal

Target: Self

Duration: Minutes

Saving Throw: None

Check: You can comprehend the Song of an Ascorbite hive-mind that is not your own, while maintaining your own identity or choosing to become a part of that group as you choose.

DC Comprehension

- 15 Emotions and dominant themes only.
- 20 Total comprehension only; unable to reply. You cannot infiltrate an Ascorbite community, because your Song's responses will not be valid.
- 25 Lose sense of self in new tribe's Song. Your character comes under gamesmaster control for the duration of the power, but you may learn something useful.
- 30 Able to reply without losing sense of self. Ascorbites of the Song you have learned will take you for one of their own.

Retry: Yes, but Wyrd points are still spent for failed attempts.

2nd Degree

Teach Song (Wis; Trained Only; Song Psychics Only)

Activation Time: 1 action

Range: Touch

Target: Living creature touched

Duration: Minutes

Saving Throw: None if willing; Will negates if unwilling

Check: You can temporarily induce another being to join your hive-mind. If you are an independent Ascorbite without a hive-mind you can still use this power and effectively create a hive-mind of two members. You must declare what your target is before making an activation check.

DC Target

- 15 Tan'zhom (Ascorbite adolescent)
- 20 Adult Ascorbite from different tribe
- 25 Adult Ascorbite with damaged antennae or abdominal resonator
- 30 Sentient non-Ascorbite
- 35 Non-sentient animal

Retry: Yes, but Wyrd points are still spent for failed attempts.

3rd Degree

Attack Song (Wis; Trained Only; Song Psychics Only)

Activation Time: 1 action

Range: Medium

Target: One Ascorbite

Duration: By effect and check result.

Saving Throw: Will negates

Check: You can introduce a disruptive or even painful disharmonic into an Ascorbite's Song. You must declare which effect you are trying to achieve before making an activation check.

Disconnection: Successful activation will sever the target from his Song for the duration of the power. Most Ascorbites will be immobilized with indecision unless the proper action is totally clear.

DC Rounds of Disconnection

- 15 1 round
- 20 2 rounds
- 25 3 rounds
- 30 4 rounds
- 35 5 rounds

Confusion: Successful activation will give an element of confusion to the target's Song. The target will be confused for a number of rounds.

DC Rounds of Confusion

- 20 1 round
- 25 2 rounds

30	3 rounds
35	4 rounds
40	5 rounds

Pain: A pulse of disharmonic inflicts physical pain on the target. The duration for this effect is instantaneous and cannot be extended. Damage varies by the check result.

DC Damage Dice

15	2d6
25	3d6
35	4d6
45	5d6

Retry: Yes, but Wyrd points are still spent for failed attempts.

Psyche Psi Power

Hive-Mind

(Level 2, Extrovert + Empathy, sight, temporary, 1W)

Similar to the MindSpeech power, this allows psychic Ascorbites to communicate telepathically with one another, projecting thoughts and receiving the projected thoughts of others. Emotions can also be projected or felt, but this power does not allow the psychic to force others to think or feel in any particular way. It operates line-of-sight only; its range cannot be extended. This power only operates with other psychic Ascorbites; the other Psyche powers must be used to gain those effects against non-Ascorbites or non-psychic Ascorbites.

Soma Psi Powers

Purge Immunity

(Level 1, Introvert + Vigor, self, instant, 1W)

The character can purge herself of one or more immunities that she has developed using the Ascorbites' racial Blessing of Adaptability. This is done mainly for the purposes of repeatedly experiencing sacramental drugs, to which Ascorbites normally become immune very quickly.

Wings

(Level 6, Introvert + Vigor, self, temporary, 1W)

By redistributing muscle and body mass the character can temporarily make her vestigial wings functional and fly at a speed of 10 meters per turn +2 per point of Vigor. She can carry 20 pounds per point of Strength, twice that during an unpowered glide. Use

the rules for flight presented for Etyri in the **Player's Companion**. The Ascorbite is assumed to have the Flight natural skill at 3 from her own Tan'zhom adolescence. The duration of this power can be extended.

Molt

(Level 7, Endurance + Vigor, self, special, special)

By spending a permanent point of Wyrd and a permanent point of Endurance the character can begin to process of molting as if she were still in the Tan'zhom stage of life, in order to regenerate grievous injuries. One month after using this power and spending the necessary points the character's sheds her exoskeleton. The new exoskeleton underneath will have all the Ascorbite's natural organs including vestigial limbs and wings and antennae. If the exoskeleton is removed before the necessary month has elapsed the new skin is incomplete and the character has just been effectively skinned alive.

Fourth Stage

(Level 9, Calm + Vigor, self, temporary, 2W)

The character can catch a brief glimpse of the fabled fourth stage of the Ascorbite cycle of life, temporarily transforming along the prophesied biological sequences. This power has never been witnessed by humans (at least, not by anyone who lived to tell about it), and most Ascorbites would immediately worship anyone who displayed it, whatever tribe they came from.

The Fourth Stage is the legendary form of the warriors of the Somta Vosht'i, a huge, nightmarish image of insectoid claws and jaws. In human terms it loosely resembles a bipedal preying mantis with a massively armored exoskeleton. It retains the normal Ascorbite hands just above its claws, and can still use weapons normally. It is also semi-aquatic, able to hold its breath for 10 minutes at a time.

Size: 4-5 meters tall, weighing 600-800 kg. (Base Run: 16 meters, +2 meters per victory point swimming)

Body: Strength +4, Endurance +4

Natural Skills: Fight +2, Melee +1, Vigor +2

Natural Weaponry: Claws (5 DMG), Bite (6 DMG, -1 goal and initiative)

Armor: 9d Carapace (not cumulative with normal Ascorbite carapace)

Vitality: +5 non-vital levels



Equipment

Arbat'a (Crystal Sword)

Tech Level: 2

This amazing weapon is made from a unique crystalline substance found only in deep underground grottos on Severus, places no human has ever been. The crystal flows in a near liquid form in small streams, "bleeding" from gashes chipped into hard crystal rocks by the Ascorbite swordmakers. In this form it can be shaped. Once exposed to light, it hardens to near-diamondlike consistency. Only a few, deep jungle Ascorbites are taught about the making of the swords and even about the location of the crystal streams.

Besides their sharpness, the swords have another interesting feature: when struck against a stone surface (this takes one action), they will briefly vibrate at a high frequency. The sound is beyond human and Ascorbite hearing range, but the vibrating crystal will cut through objects better. The effect will last for only three rounds, after which the sword can be struck again for further effect.

The crystal streams are very rare; fewer and fewer swords are made these days. Old lore states that the vibrating of many such Arbat'a in unison will call forth the Somta Vosht'i.

Ascorbites also make axes (kukt'a) and knives (sh'imt'a) in similar fashion. However, because their blades are smaller a crystal axe will only vibrate for two turns, and a knife for one turn. These are used as tools more often than as weapons. Kukt'a and sh'imt'a use the same stats as axes and knives, respectively.

When any of these crystal weapons vibrate they are modified as follows: Goal -1, DMG +3, STR +1

d20 System

When struck against a solid object (a move-equivalent action), a crystal weapon vibrates very quickly. When vibrating, the weapon's threat rating increases (see the d20 System Weapons Chart). An Arbat'a will vibrate for three rounds after being struck, a Kukt'a for two rounds, and a Shi'mt'a for one round.

Blowgun

Tech Level: 1

Blowguns are used only infrequently by Ascorbites when hunting, but they proved remarkable useful when dealing with soft-skinned humans, who are laughably vulnerable to poisons.

Crossbow

The native missile weapon of the Ascorbites, who use a heavy version to penetrate the thick armor of most of the lifeforms of Severus. Game stats are equivalent to a heavy crossbow, but when recocking one of these crossbows an Ascorbite's Strength is calculated as if it were 2 levels higher due to their powerful hands.

d20 System

Use the traits of a heavy crossbow, but Ascorbites reload as per a light crossbow. However, an Ascorbite using a human's heavy crossbow would have to reload it normally, since it was not designed with Ascorbites in mind.

Maquahuatl (*Yl'shi*)

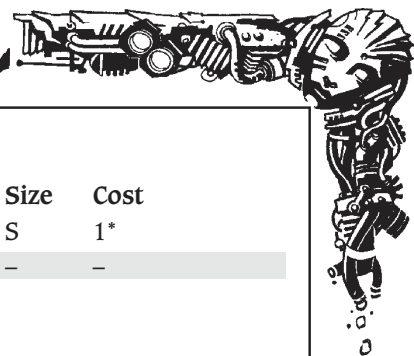
Used by Ascorbites with limited supplies of precious crystal, this weapon consists of a bone or wooden haft lined with crystal shards along both sides, forming a primitive medium between a sword and an axe. These shards often break loose, possibly in the flesh of an opponent. Note that the name given is the closest equivalent in human language. In the Ascorbite spoken language it is *yl'shi*.

When rolling damage dice, each "1" that is rolled results in a crystal fragment being lodged in the wound. This damage cannot be healed until the shards are removed with minor surgery. It requires one victory point per shard on a sustained Dexterity + Physick roll to remove them

d20 System

If a critical is rolled the extra damage cannot be healed until the shards are removed by minor surgery. This requires a Heal roll with a DC of 15 from a character with the Physick feat.





Weapons Chart — Victory Point System

Weapon	Roll	Goal	Damage	Strength	Range	Rate	Size	Cost
Blowgun	Dex + Vigor	-2	1	2	5/10	1	S	1*
Stone**	—	-1	-2	—	—	—	—	—

* 1 wing/5 needles

** Apply these modifiers to stone versions of weaponry.

Weapons Chart — d20 System

Weapon	Cost*	Damage	Critical	Range	Weight	Type
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SIMPLE WEAPONS — RANGED

Small

Blowgun	11	1d4 +poison	x2	10 ft.	2 lb.	Piercing
Needles (20)	1	—	—	—	—	—

Medium

Crossbow	50	1d10	19-20/x2	120 ft.	9 lb.	Piercing
Bolts (10)	1	—	—	—	1 lb.	—

MARTIAL WEAPONS — MELEE

Medium

Maquahuatl	500 (40)	1d6	x2**	—	6 lb.	Slashing
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EXOTIC WEAPONS — MELEE

Small

Sh'imt'a	600(20)	1d4	x2 (15/20/x2)**	10 ft.	2 lb.	Piercing
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Medium

Arbat'a	1000(100)	1d8	x2(15-20/x2)**	—	10 lb.	Slashing
Kokt'a	900(60)	1d8	x3(17-20/x3)**	—	15 lb.	Slashing

* The price given in parentheses is for Ascorbites, who have easier access to crystal weaponry.

** See text.

Armor — d20 System

Armor	Cost	Armor Bonus	Maximum Dex Bonus	Armor Check Penalty	— Speed — (30 ft) (20 ft)	Weight
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MEDIUM ARMOR

Abar Leaf	50 fb	+7*	0	—	30 20	10 lbs.
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SHIELDS

Buckler/small

Wood	5 fb	+1	—	-1	—	5 lbs.
Chitin	4 fb	+1	—	-1	—	7 lbs

*When worn by Ascorbites, the armor bonus is only +3



Stone Weapons

Ascorbites communities that lack access to a crystal stream or a trade relationship with a community with crystal must resort to more primitive weapons: stone axes, spears and crossbow bolts. The relevant modifications are listed on the Weapons Charts

-1 to Goal, -2 Damage

-2 Attack and Damage (minimum Damage 1)

A armor

Abar Leaf

Defense: 9d for most aliens (4d for Ascorbites)

Dex: -1

Tech Level: 3

Cost: 30 firebirds

The leaves from the abar tree are tremendously resilient, a natural defense against Severus' herbivores. Few Ascorbites wear armor under normal circumstances, but for major battles they wrap themselves in these leaves for extra protection, held together by tree resin glue. The barbarians of Leminkainen have also adopted abar armor, the tree having been successfully transplanted to that world. However, when worn by humans and most aliens the abar leaves constrict over time and will begin to suffocate their wearer after 30 turns of being worn, inflicting one vitality point of damage until removed or the wearer passes out. If the leaves are still not removed after another hour the wearer dies. Ascorbites do not suffer these effects.

Humans can wear heavy or padded clothing, leather or synth silk over abar leaf, but suffocation will begin after only 15 turns.

Shields

Physical shields are frequently used by Ascorbites, who fashion them out of wood or the exoskeletal chitin plates of large animals, most especially Tugarins or hydras. These are usually bucklers, which allow Ascorbites some small protection without much hindrance of mobility.

Character Creation

Unless playing in an all-Ascorbite campaign it should be assumed that any Ascorbite player character has been either severed from his original hive-mind or joined human society while still in the Tan'zhom stage. Ascorbites that still identify with their kin on Severus, even the barely tolerant Mi'tlazh, are not

appropriate as player characters. Such disconnection can occur by a variety of means, and the player should choose one of them when the character is created:

- Damage to the antennae
- Damage to the abdominal resonator
- Raised by humans
- Raised alone in the jungle — these are the only

individualistic Ascorbites who are tolerated by the species at large, and that is not by much.

- Prolonged separation from other Ascorbites (a year or more)

Custom Creation

Cost: 5 Extra points

Characteristics: Perception (base 4, max 11; cost: 4 pts). Calm (always primary), Ego (always primary)

Natural Skills: Dodge, Observe, Vigor

Learned Skills: Speak Ascorbite (no base Speak Urthish), Stoic Mind, Survival, Tracking

Blessings: Adaptability (3 pts: Immunity to any toxin or disease which the Ascorbite survives; this trait is passed on to offspring), Carapace (7 pts: 7d armor), Double-Jointed (2 pts: +2 Dex to escape tight places/bonds), Far Leap (2 pts: Vertical jump 5 feet + 3 per victory point, horizontal jump 12 feet + 2 for every success), Obstinate (2 pts: +2 Stoic Mind to resist divulging secrets), Strong Grip (2 pts: +2 Str to grasp objects)

Curses: Bloodsucker (+3 pts: Strict diet of blood, cannot eat meat or vegetables), Fixed Development (+7 pts: Once an adult, the Ascorbite must spend 3x the current rating in experience points to learn new learned skills, 2x cost to raise learned skills), No Theurgy (+3 pts: Cannot purchase theurgic rites), Weird (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert among other races)

Affliction: Ostracized (+2 pts)

Character Histories

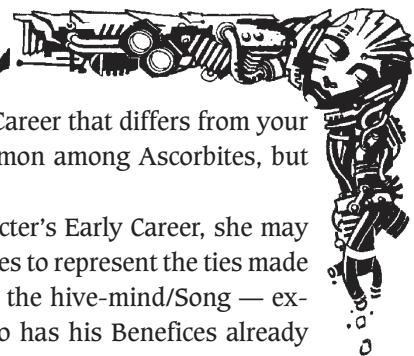
Upbringing

This represents the character's development during the first years of her Tan'zhom stage.

Characteristics — Strength +1, Dexterity +2, Endurance +1, Perception (base 4, max 11) +1, Calm (always primary), Ego (always primary); **Skills** — Dodge +2, Observe +1, Sneak +1, Vigor +1, Survival 1; **Blessings** — Adaptability (Immunity to any toxin or disease which the Ascorbite survives; this trait is passed on to offspring), Carapace (7d armor), Double-Jointed (+2 Dex to escape tight places/bonds), Far Leap



A SONG IN THE DARKNESS: ASCORBITES



(vertical jump 5 feet + 3 per victory point, horizontal jump 12 feet + 2 for every success), Obstinate (+2 Stoic Mind to resist divulging secrets), Strong Grip (+2 Str to grasp objects); *Curses* — Bloodsucker (Strict diet of blood, cannot eat meat or vegetables), Fixed Development (Once an adult, the Ascorbite must spend 3x the current rating in experience points to learn new learned skills, 2x cost to raise learned skills), No Theurgy (Cannot purchase theurgic rites), Weird (-2 Extrovert among other races); *Affliction* — Ostracized (mild)

Apprenticeship

Towards the end of the Tan'zhom stage the Ascorbite chooses (or is chosen by) a mentor to whom she is apprenticed. Those who are without a native tribe are called orphans, and they must raise themselves alone in the jungle. An orphaned Tan'zhom who is raised by humans can adopt their apprenticeship programs with the gamesmaster's permission; this will likely involve purchasing the Alien Upbringing Benefice.

Hunter, Soldier or orphan: *Characteristics* — Strength +1, Dexterity +1, Wits +1, Perception +1, Calm +1; *Skills* — Combat skill (choose 2 from Dodge, Fight, Melee or Shoot) +1 each, Observe +1, Sneak +1, Vigor +1, Acrobatics 1, Beast Lore 1, Remedy 1, Survival 1, Tracking 1

Trader: *Characteristics* — Strength +1, Wits +1, Perception +1, Extrovert +1, Calm +1; *Skills* — Charm +1, Combat skill (choose from Dodge, Fight, Melee or Shoot) +1, Impress +2, Observe +1, Sneak +1, Vigor +1, Stoic Mind 2, Survival 1

Shaman: (must take Natal Psi as one of the Extra Stages) *Characteristics* — Endurance +1, Wits +1, Perception +1, Extrovert or Introvert +1, Calm +1; *Skills* — Impress +1, Observe +1, Vigor +1, Empathy 1, Focus 1, Lore (Somta Vosht'i) 1, Social (Oratory) 1, Stoic Mind 2, Survival 1

Crafter: *Characteristics* — Dexterity +1, Endurance +1, Wits +2, Tech +1; *Skills* — Combat skill (choose from Melee or Shoot) +1, Observe +1, Artisan (primary specialty) 2, Artisan (secondary specialty) 1, Inquiry 1, choose either Remedy 2 or Tech Redemption (Craft) 2, Science (choose specialty) 1, Stoic Mind 1

Early Career

Once an Ascorbite makes the transition to the adult stage she becomes a full equal in the eyes of the com-

munity. Taking an Early Career that differs from your Apprenticeship is uncommon among Ascorbites, but not unknown.

At the end of a character's Early Career, she may choose 3 pts from Benefices to represent the ties made since being severed from the hive-mind/Song — except for the Shaman, who has his Benefices already included.

Hunter or Soldier: *Characteristics* — Strength +1, Dexterity +2, Endurance +2, Wits +1, Perception +2, Calm +1, Ego +1; *Skills* — Combat Skill (choose from Fight, Melee or Shoot) +2, Dodge +1, Observe +1, Vigor +1, Acrobatics 1, Choose either Crossbow (2 pts) or Read Ascorbite (2 pts), Tracking 1

Choose one of the following:

Jungle Lore: Beast Lore 1, Lore (Regional) 2, Survival 2, Stoic Mind 1

Martial Arts: Martial Fist, Bite, Head Butt

Fencing: Parry, Thrust, Slash

Orphan: *Characteristics* — Strength +1, Dexterity +2, Endurance +2, Perception +2, Introvert +1, Passion +1, Ego +1; *Skills* — Combat Skill (choose from Fight or Melee) +2, Beast Lore 1, Dodge +2, Observe +2, Vigor +2, Acrobatics 1, Lore (Regional) 2, Tracking 1, Survival 2

Trader: *Characteristics* — Strength +1, Dexterity +1, Endurance +1, Wits +2, Perception +1, Extrovert +2, Calm +1, Ego +1; *Skills* — Charm +1, Combat Skill (choose from Dodge, Fight, Melee or Shoot) +1, Impress +1, Observe +1, Vigor +1, Acrobatics 1, Beast Lore 1, Drive Beastcraft 2, Stoic Mind 1

Choose one of the following:

Bokurn E La: Empathy 1, Lore (Regional) 2, Read Ascorbite (2 pts), Survival 1

Mi'tlazz: Lore (Humans) 2, Speak Urthish (2 pts), Tech Redemption (Craft) 1, Xeno-empathy (Human) 1

Shaman: (must take Natal Psi as one of the Extra Stages) *Characteristics* — Dexterity +1, Endurance +1, Wits +1, Perception +1, Extrovert +2, Calm +2, Ego +2; *Skills* — Charm +1, Combat Skill (choose from Fight, Melee or Shoot) +1, Dodge +1, Impress +2, Lore (Somta Vosht'i) 1, Observe +1, Vigor +1, Empathy 1, Focus 1, Read (Ascorbite), Social (Oratory) 2, Stoic Mind 2; *Benefices* — T'zhamivt (2 pts), Functional Resonator (1 pt)

Crafter: *Characteristics* — Strength +1, Dexterity +1, Endurance +2, Wits +2, Perception +1, Tech +1, Calm +1, Ego +1; *Skills* — Combat Skill (choose from



Melee or Shoot) +1, Dodge +1, Observe +1, Vigor +1, Artisan (primary specialty) 3, Artisan (secondary specialty) 2, Inquiry 1, Science (choose specialty) 1, Social (Teaching) 1, Stoic Mind 1, Tech Redemption (Craft) 2

Optional Crafter Specialty Role:

Healer/Herbalist: Substitute Perception for Tech, Remedy for Artisan (primary specialty), and two Science skills for Artisan (secondary specialty) and Tech Redemption (Craft)

Tours of Duty

Ascorbites can take two Tours of Duty, but they receive only 9 skill points from the first. They cannot take cybernetics due to their incompatible physiology, nor than they become Imperial Cohorts without gamesmaster permission. Ascorbites are the most despised aliens in the Known Worlds, and it is unlikely in the extreme that the Empire would accept the political fallout of giving one a Cohort Badge. If playing an all-Ascorbite campaign in which the characters are participants in a hive-mind, they should all purchase the Benefice: Singer.

The Tan'zhom Stage

Players interested in playing an Ascorbite still in the Tan'zhom stage of life can do so with the traits given below. These traits describe a Tan'zhom youth no more than four years away from undergoing metamorphosis into adulthood. Such a character can be strikingly different from adult Ascorbites if they have lived among humans — immensely inquisitive and possibly even talkative.

Cost: 6 Extra points

Characteristics: Strength (max 9; cost: +2 pts), Endurance (max 9; cost: +2 pts), Perception (base 4, max 11; cost: 4 pts). Calm (always primary), Ego (always primary)

Natural Skills: Dodge, Fly, Observe

Learned Skills: Speak Ascorbite (no base Speak Urthish), Stoic Mind, Survival, Tracking

Blessings: Adaptability (3 pts: Immunity to any toxin or disease which the Ascorbite survives; this trait is passed on to offspring), Exoskeleton (3 pts: 2d armor), Flight (5 pts), Obstinate (2 pts: +2 Stoic Mind to resist divulging secrets), Regrowth (4 pts: The Tan'zhom will regrow a severed limb, wing or antenna on her next molt, which occurs every 5-6 months. However, each time this occurs, the

Tan'zhom permanently loses one level of Endurance, although this may be raised again with experience points)

Curses: Bloodsucker (+3 pts: Strict diet of blood, cannot eat meat or vegetables), No Theurgy (+3 pts: Cannot purchase theurgic rites), Nosy (+2 pts: -2 Calm when seeing something new), Weird (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert among other races)

Benefice: Extra Limbs (4 pts: Total of six limbs usable as arms or legs, but cannot stand upright; at least four limbs must be used when walking; all six are needed to run, +4 base run)

Affliction: Exoskeletal Respiration (+3 pts: Takes one level of damage per turn of immersion or envelopment), Ostracized (+2 pts)

Eventually any Tan'zhom character must make the transition to adulthood. The game stats for this event are easily altered: simply exchange the blessings and curses of the Tan'zhom stage with those of an adult Ascorbite. No traits or skills need to be changed except that the Fly skill becomes unavailable, and the character must pay two experience points to reflect the improvements in her abilities.

Note the effects of a Tan'zhom's extra limbs: all six legs have functional hands, but they are needed mostly as legs unless in flight. A Tan'zhom could learn and use certain Graa combat actions, but few to none do so since they cannot be used once they reach adulthood.

d20 System Stats

Typical Classes: Living Weapon, Soldier. Ascorbites may not be Brother Battle monks, Nobles, Priests or Theurgists. Any other character class is permissible, especially for those raised in human society (but a gamesmaster might be finicky about an Ascorbite Starwolf, since there are no known Ascorbite communities in Vuldrok space).

Language: Ascorbites speak their own language; most also speak Urthish.

Names: Van-Keel, H'Chur'ff, Ka'bchta, H'pt'zom.

Alignment: Ascorbites are usually lawful, but player character Ascorbites are considered outcasts and vary in alignment as much as humans.

An Ascorbite player has the following statistics:

- 2 Hit Dice: An Ascorbite starts as a 2 hit dice creature. A starting, 1st-level character is considered to be a 3rd-level character for the purposes of level



A SONG IN THE DARKNESS: ASCORBITES

advancement. The Ascorbite receives 2d8+Con modifier for starting hit points, +1 Base Attack Bonus, +2 to Fort saves, and all of the normal abilities of Ascorbites except for hive mind.

- +2 Dexterity, +2 Constitution: Ascorbites are nimble, quick, tough and more resistant than humans.

- -2 Intelligence, -4 Charisma: Ascorbites are not very smart, as humans judge such things. Ascorbite thought processes are completely alien to other races. Coupled with their strange appearance, this leaves most others with unease if not outright fear.

- Medium-size: As medium-sized creatures, Ascorbites have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.

- Ascorbite base speed is 30 feet.

- +8 racial bonus to Jump checks.

- Darkvision (60 ft.): Their antennae allow Ascorbites to sense things even in the absence of light.

- Unenlightened: Psychic Ascorbites are rare but not unknown, but no known Ascorbite has ever exhibited theurgic powers.

- -2 penalty for Bluff, Diplomacy, Gather Information, and Sense Motive checks against humans, Vorox, and other alien races. This penalty can be negated for a particular race by taking the Xeno-empathy feat.

- Blood-sucker: Ascorbites cannot digest meat or vegetables; they instead live exclusively off the blood of other creatures. An adult Ascorbite must consume about two pints of blood every day or start to suffer the effects of starvation.

- Carapace: The thick chitin of an Ascorbite provides it with +5 natural armor bonus to armor class,

but this also makes it impossible for an Ascorbite to use most manufactured armors (armor can be custom-fitted). Custom fit armor for an Ascorbite costs triple the normal cost.

- Adaptation: An Ascorbite that successfully saves against a poison is forever immune to that particular poison, as are all of his descendants.

- Improved Grab: An Ascorbite can use this ability when making a successful bite attack, making a normal grapple check as a free action. Success in the grapple check means that the Ascorbite can use his blood drain ability (see below).

- Blood Drain (Ex): An Ascorbite that makes a successful bite attack and gets a hold can drain blood each round, dealing 1d4 temporary Con damage.

- Prodigious Leap (Ex): With their strong legs, an Ascorbite can make incredible jumps. Ascorbites treat all Jump skill checks as running jumps, even when standing still. They also ignore normal height maximums for jump checks.

- Fixed Development: When reaching adulthood, an Ascorbite has trouble learning new skills. Ascorbite characters have no favored multi-class, and receive a -20% xp penalty for each class

that is not within one level of the most experienced class.

- No Hive-Mind: An Ascorbite player character is assumed to have lost his ability to communicate with the hive-mind, either by conscious mutilation of the antennae or by injury. Alternatively, the character might have grown up around humans or as a lone orphan in the jungle in the Tan'zhom stage. Either way, such individual thought is considered madness by Ascorbites and those who are not part of a hive-



mind are killed as abominations.

- **Incompatible Physiognomy:** The Ascorbite nervous system and musculature is incompatible with human cybernetics. Ascorbites therefore cannot receive cybernetic implants.

- **Automatic Languages:** Ascorbite and Urthish. **Bonus Languages:** All human dialects, Latin, Lojmaa (Obunish), Uryari (Ukarish), and other alien races as the gamemaster permits.

Tan'zhom d20 Stats

See the Victory Point System rules above for more information on this stage.

- **1 Hit Die:** An Ascorbite starts as a 1 hit die creature even as a Tan'zhom. A starting, 1st-level character is considered to be a 2nd-level character for the purposes of level advancement. The Ascorbite receives 1d8+Con modifier for starting hit points, +2 to Fort saves.

- **+2 Dexterity, no Constitution bonus:** Tan'zhom are as quick as their parents, but they have not yet come into the fullness of their adult physical abilities.

- **-2 Intelligence, -2 Charisma:** Tan'zhom are, if anything more physically alien to humans than their adult form, but their inquisitiveness and willingness to talk and listen make them somewhat more likeable than adult Ascorbites.

- **Medium-size:** As medium-sized creatures, Ascorbite Tan'zhom have no special bonuses or penalties due to their size.

- **Tan'zhom base speed is 40 feet on the ground.**

- **Darkvision (60 ft.):** Their antennae allow Ascorbites to sense things even in the absence of light.

- **Unenlightened:** Psychic Ascorbites are rare but not unknown, but no known Ascorbite has ever exhibited theurgic powers.

- **Carapace:** The natural armor of the Ascorbite is not fully developed in the Tan'zhom stage, and only provides a +2 natural armor bonus to armor class. The Tan'zhom's unusual body shape and dependence on breathing through its skin makes it unable to wear armor of any kind.

- **Adaptation:** An Ascorbite that successfully saves against a poison is forever immune to that particular poison, as are all of his descendants.

- **Flight:** The Tan'zhom can fly. Flying movement is 50 feet (average).

- **Six limbs:** Tan'zhom have six limbs, all of which possess functional hands. The Tan'zhom uses all six for walking and running, but in flight she can use them similarly to Vorox, using an additional limb as an off-hand. Tan'zhom can learn Graa feats, but these will become useless once the character reaches the adult stage. (Note: The character does not get to select new feats to replace them; they are lost.) While on all sixes (the natural stance) a Tan'zhom gets a +4 bonus against bull rush and trip attacks.

- **Regrowth:** A Tan'zhom can permanently sacrifice a point of Constitution to re-grow a severed limb or antenna the next time she molts. This occurs every five to six months. The Constitution point is lost when the molt begins.

- **Respiration:** The lungs of the adult Ascorbite have not yet fully developed during the Tan'zhom stage, so most of a Tan'zhom's respiration takes place through a system of microtracheae that lines the exoskeleton. This means that a Tan'zhom cannot be strangled, but she can be smothered quickly if her skin is not exposed to air, such as during immersion in water or another fluid.

- **Normal Development:** While in the Tan'zhom stage the character does not suffer any experience penalty for multi-classing.

- **No Hive-Mind:** The Tan'zhom has not yet been fully integrated into a hive-mind. If the character associates predominantly with non-Ascorbites he might never develop that aspect of his abilities. Those who are considered too "tainted" by human influence are killed as abominations by adult Ascorbites.

- **Incompatible Physiognomy:** The Ascorbite nervous system and musculature is incompatible with human cybernetics. Ascorbites therefore cannot receive cybernetic implants.

- **Automatic Languages:** Ascorbite and Urthish. **Bonus Languages:** All human dialects, Latin, Lojmaa (Obunish), Uryari (Ukarish), and other alien races as the gamemaster permits.

- **Tan'zhom lack the following abilities of the adult stage:**

- Prodigious Leap and racial Jump bonus
- Improved Grab



A SONG IN THE DARKNESS: ASCORBITES

• **Maturity:** Undergoing the metamorphosis to the adult form requires that the character sacrifice a level of experience, remaining at the same level when she would normally advance. Instead of reaching that new level the character undergoes the following changes: +2 Constitution, -2 Charisma, +1 Base Attack bonus, add 1D8 hit points and exchange the special abilities of the Tan'zhom for those of the adult Ascorbite. If the character is multi-classed she is now threatened by the experience point penalty that accompanies it.







Introduction

To Emperor Alexius Hawkwood,

I have, as per your request, compiled this report summarizing the current sum of human knowledge concerning the indigenous aliens of the planet Cadiz, the Hironem. Over the millennia since contact between our two species, interest in the Hironem has waxed and waned. In the time of the Second Republic a huge volume of information was amassed during the massive development that Cadiz underwent in its abortive role as ambassadorial world to the Vau, and as a result the data available from that era is considerable, even after the Church-sponsored purges that eradicated so much else of what was known in those times. Much of that information has been gathered by the universities here on Leagueheim, most especially the Academy Interatta itself.

Even so, there have been serious misconceptions concerning the Hironem that are only now being corrected. This is due in part to the isolationist policy of Turaz that has encompassed both its own populations and those Hironem not on the reservation itself, as the God-King's pronouncements must be viewed as religious edicts by Hironem who follow that faith, which comprise a majority of the population. In addition, the Decados rulers of Cadiz have been systematic in the obstruction of any research into the aliens

of their world, and their misinformation has been a constant concern.

There is a great deal of speculation among the academic community of Leagueheim and other worlds concerning the precise nature of Vau-Hironem relations, especially with regards to House Decados. If the Vau are as concerned about the Hironem as I believe, why do they allow the Hironem such an ignoble position under Decados rule? And, their house being what it is, what have the Decados learned in their centuries of rule on Cadiz that they have not shared with the Empire?

However, with the discovery of the Hironem population on Iver a great deal of new information became available, presently out of reach of Decados/Javokian manipulation. Your agents were most helpful in collecting the documents that I needed to create a clearer picture of the Hironem, enhancing that body available in the archives of the Academy Interatta. I am grateful to you for the opportunity to compile this work, and it is with great pleasure that I present to you this Alien Expedition.

Prof. Brenn Davidge, B.A., B.Sc., M.A., Ph.D.,
D.Litt.

Academy Interatta, Leagueheim



History

The Beginning

Our understanding of the racial past of the Hironem has been the subject of a host of entrenched misconceptions for centuries now. The extent of this misunderstanding has only recently become clear, with the Empire's recent access to new sources of data on Iver and Vril-ya. These fundamental errors were compounded by the House Decados' control of relevant information, which has a vested interest in refuting the existence of any Vau involvement in the history of Cadiz.

The House Decados policy has been a consistent paradox since the death of Vladimir Alecto: The house denies any possible connection between the Vau and the Hironem at the official level and vigorously suppresses any concrete proof of same. Simultaneously, they covertly spread and encourage rumors of Vautech and Vau-influenced customs among the Hironem, all of which have been thoroughly investigated by the Jakovian Agency. In this manner the house hinders any serious investigation of the Vau's presence on Cadiz that might threaten the Decados monopoly of power on that world, meanwhile providing fodder for naïve, less dangerous treasure-seekers who come to Cadiz and feed off-world firebirds to the house's machinery of graft.

Sir Klimenty Decados' Imperial Survey of Cadiz included a more-or-less faithful account of what was until recently the known history of the planet. His reference in this field was one Sir Michael Basque, a historian whose barely-noble family is bound to House Decados for its very survival. Further, the emphases placed and the opinions he offered clearly manifest the Decados agenda on Cadiz. No doubt his sinecure on Manitou was a reward for the services he performed in the production of that blatant piece of Decados propaganda. Basque's knowledge was a potential source of information for our own research, but he apparently committed suicide shortly after the publication of Sir Klimenty's Imperial Survey. From what I understand, his death remains under investigation by your agents.

However, the Hironem of Iver began their exile from Cadiz accompanied by detailed historical and geo-

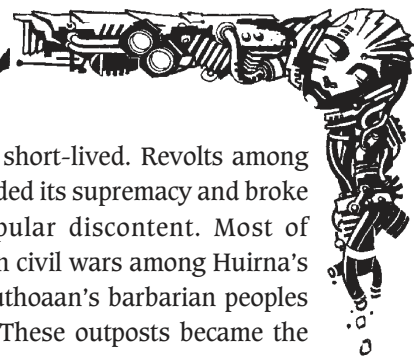
graphical records that have been scrupulously maintained over the generations. As a race, the Hironem have a deep respect for tradition, and those on Iver reflect that tendency. It is ironic that accurate historical data regarding pre-human Cadiz is more accessible on Iver than on Cadiz itself.

Hironem civilization first arose among the fertile marshes of Lemfoaal, lands now lost to the Hironem in the face of the dual spread of the Niber Desert and the urban wastes of Elibyrge. Nomadic tribes became settled communities, communities became cities and then city-states. Jua lyha, a Hironem historian on Iver, characterizes this as a mercantile civilization, as commerce thrived along the now-dead Zamiith River and the coast of the Khigsya Sea. Technological and social advancement was rapid, and Lemfoaal established efficient monarchies showing no signs of decay. The city-state of Nahrezaz became the dominant power, its commercial might eclipsing that of its rivals.

All of this information is undisputed, though largely considered irrelevant. However, among Hironem scholars on Iver there emerges a serious disagreement with the Decados-controlled historical record. Records on Iver, which are far more detailed and accessible than on Cadiz, show no evidence of a caste society among these early city-states, except in the loosest possible sense. The modern divisions of Sibani, Warrior or Maker did not exist, only a tradition of lineal inheritance of profession. Hironem children were encouraged to follow the profession of their parents, but this is a tradition common to most species that do not raise their young in a communal manner, including early humanity. This single fact disproves the Decados-sponsored theory that the Hironem independently developed their caste system, which is so similar to that of the Vau.

Nahrezazi traders carried the seeds of civilization, agriculture and trade across the coastline of the Khigsya Sea, with overland routes even reaching the southern shores of Nnielhab (Southern Sabtah). Successive cities were annexed into Nahrezaz's growing empire, with varying degrees of willingness. Kingdoms independent of Nahrezaz emerged in Maakhrij (Western Herculeum), geographically protected from that





empire by the mountainous terrain but able to trade via the sea.

Then, abruptly, the entire civilization collapsed. A tsunami devastated the coastlines all along the Khigsya Sea, wiping out most of the cities of Lemfoaal and Maakhrij. Evidence indicates that it was a meteor impact that struck the sea, causing the massive tidal wave that put an end to early Hironem civilization. Modern conspiracy theorists constantly point to this event as some manifestation of the wars of the Ur or the Vau, an impression that House Decados has done little to dispute. For this fact alone I am inclined to believe that it was simply an act of fate.

Out of the remains of Nahrezazi civilization the kingdom of Huirna rebuilt and created a prosperous empire, one that revered its predecessor as a golden age. It is from this Huirna Period that a solid historical record may be established. However, centuries of peace soon proved unhealthy for Huirna, which turned inward to civil war. The Huirnu monarchy was overthrown in favor of a pseudo-democracy largely controlled by a select few individuals formerly of the economic underclass. This government soon fell prey to endemic corruption and its troops were withdrawn from their borders for the suppression of further popular revolts.

Suffering from such internal chaos Huirna proved easy prey to an aggressive and expansionist semi-nomadic tribe, the Meblasseh. However, Vittorio Sang of the University of Ptah-Seker has convincingly argued that Huirna was not destroyed by the Meblasseh; it was enhanced by their arrival. The Meblasseh were assimilated into Huirnu culture and eventually became part of the ruling oligarchy. Sang proposes that the Meblasseh's aggressive culture revitalized Huirna and aided the expansion of their empire to include nearly half of Nnielhab.

Huirna expanded in direct competition with Maakhrij, which had escaped the worst of the cataclysm and established a confederacy of its own city-states. Both powers explored the interior of Nnielhab and encountered long-forgotten Nahrezazi settlements now grown into large kingdoms. These were conquered by Huirna over the course of centuries, and Maakhrij became an isolated nation, content to trade within its city-states and avoid contact with the outside world. Huirna expanded further into Duthoaan (Northern Sabtah), conquering, displacing or enslaving its primi-

tive nomadic inhabitants.

Huirna's empire was short-lived. Revolts among the conquered peoples ended its supremacy and broke its oligarchy under popular discontent. Most of Nnielhab fell into chaos in civil wars among Huirna's former provinces, and Duthoaan's barbarian peoples conquered the outposts. These outposts became the seeds of new nations as the nomads made homes among the fortresses of their own conquerors. It was into this fractious period that the Vau introduced themselves.

The Vau

Since the diplomatic mission to the Vau world now known as Shaduveen new sources of information have become available. The manuscript by the human "Yonn Gwin Ko'anti" we obtained has proven a useful point of reference for further investigations. On Manitou and Vrilya some of the subject races of the Hegemony — the large Manshogo humanoids and the serpentine Fah Selani in particular — have been willing to exchange information with human agents and are curious about the Empire, and most especially about the aliens within it. However, intelligence suggests that neither race may be completely reliable in this regard. The Manshogo's recollection might not even be lucid, and the Fah Selani's information could be deliberately false.

Sometime in the late 20th or early 21st century by the Church calendar, the Vau Hegemony underwent a fundamental shift in policy regarding non-Vau aliens within their territory. Most alien homeworlds in the Hegemony, previously designated as "Watchworlds" under the direct administration of the Vau authorities, became "Protectorates," with a measure of self-governance comparable to that which is now practiced by the Ur-Obun on their homeworld. However, one of the consequences of this change was that many prominent Vau officials who had been involved in the governance of the Watchworlds were suddenly recalled and reassigned to lesser posts, their entire field of expertise abruptly rendered obsolete.

On Sar, homeworld of the Manshogo aliens, several members of the Vau ruling council rejected the directives ordering the establishment of an independent planetary government. In response the Hegemony announced to the Manshogo populace that the council was no longer acting with its sanction, and that the population's assistance in removing them from power



would be welcome. A violent rebellion ensued, one that the Hegemony did not hinder, and most of the disobedient council was captured or killed.

One of these was a Yoma, a Mandarin whose name has been stricken from the Hegemony's historical records (so far as I could ascertain). This unknown Yoma escaped the rebellion on Sar and went into hiding among the stars of the Hegemony. One Manshogo scholar named Uven was particularly helpful in our inquiries, and claimed that this Yoma was instrumental in the Hegemony's abortive attempt to genetically alter the Manshogo for parity of gender. He was also an advocate of further genetic manipulation of the Manshogo and other subject peoples toward the Vau ideal, fully aligned with their perception of "auspice." Much of this testimony is peppered with outlandish tales of ethereal beings and possession, Vau ancestral spirits and dubious relationships of cause and effect, much of which seems to be endemic to prolonged conversation with Manshogo.

Some years after leaving Sar this Yoma emerged from hiding as the leader of a shocking raid on the world of Shelek'Thai, but the details of that incident are undetermined. Our Manshogo and Fah Selani contacts have provided us with the official historical data, but very little concrete data is contained therein; it is probable that the Vau have suppressed any important information on the subject. Manshogo scholars consider him a kind of spiritual representation of Vau intolerance toward other species, an intellectual ghost manipulating the Hegemony to the paternalistic colonialism of his day.

The God-King

Somehow the renegade Yoma and what remained of his followers found their way to Cadiz, called Saolleth by both the Vau and Hironem. Their last pursuers were finally destroyed in a battle near Hammon, against a ship now called the *Katerina* among the Known Worlds, site of the famous *Katerina Run* race held under the auspices of House Decados. The renegades' landers made planetfall near the kingdom of Turaz, on the site of the modern reservation of the same name, while their heavily damaged starship remained in planetary orbit. With the Vau tech at his command it was a simple matter for the Yoma to convince the Turazi Hironem of his divinity. The queen of Turaz resisted and questioned the Vau's godhood; she was quickly deposed

and her cousin was installed in her place as Shamash, the first of the God Kings. The Yoma dubbed himself "the Nameless One," a reference to his self-image as a martyr of the Hegemony that had chosen the wrong path, and he and his cohorts were worshipped as "the Four Gods" of the Hironem.

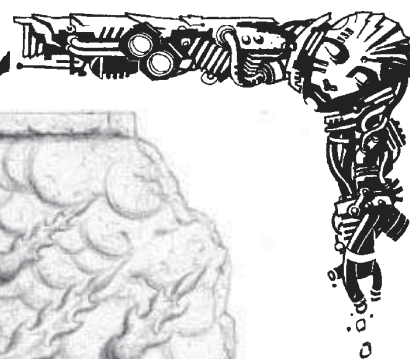
The God-Kingdom of Turaz expanded rapidly, fuelled by Vau tech and Hironem religious fervor for their living gods. The semi-barbarous peoples of Duthoan were conquered and assimilated into a fighting force for the further expansion of the new empire as it grew southward. There the Turazi and their Vau patrons encountered the remnant of the empire of Huirna, which fell quickly to the onslaught and forced conversion to the new religion.

The stronghold of resistance was the ancient cities of Maakhrij, protected by the natural fortifications of the mountainous terrain. The Maakhriji were prepared for the long war, having gained great wealth from colonizing and exploiting the natural resources of the Baria peninsula to the north of them. However, by the beginnings of that war the Vau had depleted much of their advanced technology, and lacked the infrastructure to replace or repair damaged tech. As such that war was fought by mostly conventional means, and Maakhrij resisted for many years. However, the war ended when the Nameless One deployed his most powerful weapon: by remotely controlling his abandoned starship he guided it to violently crash-land on Cadiz itself, onto the capital of Maakhrij. This effectively put an end to the resistance, and the Nameless One's conquest of Hironem civilization was complete.

Meanwhile, the lands held by the vassals of the Vau stretched to encompass most of the continent now called Sabtah, saving only the farther latitudes considered undesirable by the reptilian Hironem. There the Nameless One had access to a vast population with which to fulfill his vision for the ideal society of a Vau subject-race. He originated the caste system that the Hironem now practice, based directly on that of the Vau, with the priests of the *Sibanzi* caste at the top. His own Soldiers trained the *Kigazi*, or Warrior caste, and his Maker did the same for the *Kimmu*. One theory suggests that Eresh, Tanam and Akkad, the divine patrons of the warrior and maker castes of the Hironem, were the clutchmates of the Nameless One.

According to the records that are accessible on





Cadiz, Akkad, the patron of the Maker caste, rebelled against the Nameless One and was joined by the warrior Eresh, and together they slew the other warrior Tanam and the Nameless One himself. For their crimes they were taken away from Cadiz by the Gods Above All, and the Hironem were left to the charge of the God-King.

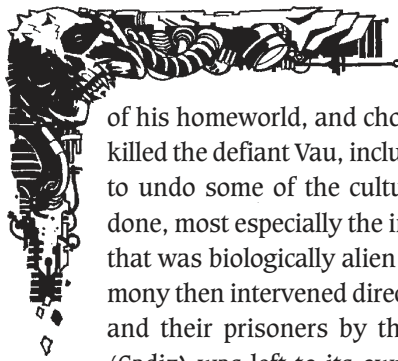
Iver's Hironem tell a different story, one completely unknown in the Empire except, in all likelihood, by a few high Sibanzi of the Hironem and some of the files of the Jakovian Agency. Akkad and Eresh were not alone in their rebellion; they called upon the most awful of demons, creatures of Hironem nightmares. It was a horde of creatures of unbelievable speed and viciousness, which easily bested the elite of the Kigazi guard and alternately terrorized or tempted the populace to defy the divine wishes of the God-King. The demons' leader, a massive creature called Fim, challenged and slew Tanam in single combat and then slaughtered the Nameless One himself, after which the God-King went into hiding among his followers. It was then that the Gods Above All came and drove the demons off, took Akkad and Eresh away and left the Hironem

alone. The most remarkable aspect of this is what pictures of those demons showed: bipedal humanoids with garishly bright, striped pelts and long, shaggy manes. It is beyond reasonable doubt that those "demons" were in fact Manshogo.

Bringing this testimony to the scholar Uven brought more revelations on both sides. Uven was shocked, even horrified to discover the Hironem legends of her people, and seemed furious that the Hegemony had kept this fact a secret (the question of whether the Vau were even aware of it did not seem to occur to her). In anger she gave the Hegemony's version of events: The Vau discovered the wayward Yoma on Cadiz and dispatched scouts to assess the situation. Vau soldiers could not be relied upon to act against a Mandarin without serious psychological damage, so the task was assigned to the Manshogo. Their orders were to kill the Vau who stood by the Nameless One, who was to be returned to the Hegemony along with any Vau who aided him. Casualties among the native *Gaz'bula* (Hironem) were to be kept to a minimum.

However, the Manshogo commander Fim was a native of Sar. He remembered the Nameless One's rule





of his homeworld, and chose to exceed his orders. He killed the defiant Vau, including the Yoma, and worked to undo some of the cultural damage that had been done, most especially the imposition of a caste system that was biologically alien to the Hironem. The Hegemony then intervened directly, recalling the Manshogo and their prisoners by the threat of force. Saolleth (Cadiz) was left to its own devices, no doubt due to the whims of the Mandarins' "Prophecy."

It seems clear that the Nameless One was quite insane by Vau standards, even apart from his disobedience of the higher authorities of the Hegemony. His interpretation of Prophecy was based on his own beliefs, his disdain for those unfortunate enough to have been born as non-Vau. However, the Manshogo believe that the Nameless One fell under the influence of forces beyond those of simple Vau Prophecy and arrogance. They suspect something new, unknown and dangerous. They point to the Vau's unwillingness to return to Cadiz even when the opportunity presented itself during the Second Republic as evidence that there is something among the Gaz'bula that the Mandarins perceive should be left alone.

Some among the Fah Selani aliens have disagreed, however. They claim that the Nameless One's actions indicate a loyalty to auspice far beyond those of the ruling councils of the Hegemony, and his unorthodox methods were the product of desperation rather than insanity. These aliens suspect that the Nameless One's relationship with the Hironem is not simply a case of mistaken deification. One individual has suggested that the *Jaykata U'moti*, one of the most powerful Mandarin councils in the Hegemony, has become extraordinarily interested in the Hironem on both Cadiz and Iver, and are especially interested in Hironem concepts of S'su energy.

Interlude

Now alone on their world, the Hironem reordered their society according to their interpretations of the commandments of the Four Gods. The caste structure, which under the Vau had been based on merit and individual temperament, was reformed into a hereditary system. The *Illu*, the outcast class, was created, mostly from Maakhrij prisoners of war, who carried out the filthiest of tasks in near-slavery. Many of these Maakhrij had been wealthy capitalists, and so merchants and moneylenders were included in the ranks of the *Illu*.

From Turaz the God-Kings further expanded their empire, conquering Teoghel (Murciyah) and the Fathaaji (Malaca Novan) Islands with ease. The primitive inhabitants of both regions were helpless against Turaz's technological advantage and were further devastated by diseases brought by the conquerors, against which they had no resistance. Most of the survivors of the conquest became *Illu* outcasts, though some of those who cooperated with their invaders became local Sibanzi, Kigazi or Kimmu.

Despite its outward expansion the God-Kingdom suffered from endemic internal unrest, with strife occurring along racial and caste lines. In the 25th century the eldest son of the God-King had the bad judgment to dally with his Warrior bodyguard, and produce his eldest son by her. The Warrior was put to death, but her child, Nas Shva, was hidden among her family.

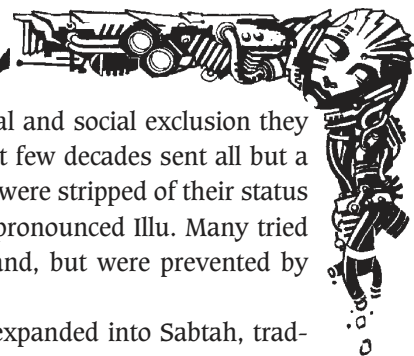
A generation later Nas Shva emerged, fully grown, with his legitimate claim to the Divine Throne, though he was tainted by blood not of the Sibanzi caste. Many among the Warrior caste raised arms in support of his claim, and a costly civil war ensued. Nas Shva's forces were brilliant in battle, but they could not endure without the support of the other castes, and soon lacked weapons and supplies with which to fight. Nas Shva's supporters were defeated and exiled far from Turaz, and Nas Shva himself was executed.

In the 27th century a major rebellion took place, whose participants advocated a reform or even abolition of the caste system. It was mainly the Sibanzi, ironically, who led this uprising. Some had involved themselves out of a sincere belief in egalitarianism and others in order to use the revolutionary rhetoric to increase their personal power at the expense of their rivals. The rebellion began in Maakhrij but its stronghold was in Teoghel, which rebelled and won its independence from Turaz. The caste system was maintained, but according to the archives now available in Tlog, it was intended only as a temporary measure, with the stated intent of dissolving it once the threat of the God-King's retaliation had abated.

Humanity

History repeated itself on Cadiz in that the arrivals of both Vau and humans coincided with a period of Hironem weakness. In the case of the Vau it was the aftermath of the destruction of Nahrezaz, and for





humans it was the rebellion. The Nasrids of House Gloucester landed and established holdings in Murciyah in 2682, and Turaz never noticed. The Gloucesters dealt with the rebel Sibanzi of Teoghel, giving them tech in exchange for land, and without the authority of the God-King to coordinate or restrain them the rebel Sibanzi effectively sold the whole of the continent to House Gloucester within 20 years.

This was in fact humanity's first discovery of an alien race, even before the revelation of Shantor sapience on Shaprut, but the Gloucesters concealed it from the general public of other worlds. House Gloucester feared that the publicity generated by the discovery of an alien race would threaten their control of Cadiz, so the news was suppressed with the assistance of the Gloucesters' intelligence agents, who would later be the founders of House Decados. Sir Klimenty's Imperial Survey shows some confusion on this issue; I would theorize that he (or whoever ghost-wrote for him) suffered from conflicting orders from the Jakovian Agency about which "official" version of history should be given.

Initial Hironem attitudes toward humanity were guarded. Nearby humans were neither the gods they worshipped nor the demons they feared, but their heavenly origin was undeniable. Because of this even the most hardened of egalitarian rebels of Teoghel found a new faith in the old beliefs, in order to better appease the gods or ward the demons, whichever the humans were found to serve. When House Gloucester chose to investigate the culture of the Hironem it found no indication that the egalitarian movement had ever existed; the rebellion had been under the exclusive control of rebellious Sibanzi.

House Gloucester continued to expand, making official contact with the God-King's representatives in 2698. A complication arose in that the God-King did not recognize the land transactions conducted with the rebel Sibanzi, acting as they did without Divine Royal authority. As such the God-King demanded a massive sum in human technology in order to legalize the transfer by the legitimate laws of the Hironem. The Gloucesters, after much consideration, paid the God-King in full.

The position of the Hironem of Teoghel was unenviable: live under the occupation of aliens of unknown character, or face the judgment of the God-King. Initially most chose to remain in the human colony of

Murciyah, but the political and social exclusion they experienced over the next few decades sent all but a few to Turaz, where they were stripped of their status in the caste system and pronounced Illu. Many tried to return to their homeland, but were prevented by the laws of Turaz.

Gloucester holdings expanded into Sabtah, trading human tech for Hironem lands. In most cases these agreements were carried out with the full and legal consent of the God-King, but a problem soon developed. The flow of refugees into the diminished lands of Turaz was rapidly becoming a source of concern for the Sibanzi caste, particularly as they saw impoverished Sibanzi among the refugees. The conclusion that many drew was that if the God-King would soon sell their lands, then the Sibanzi themselves should sell those lands first, so that they could at least bring a wealth of technology with them when they were forced off those lands to Turaz.

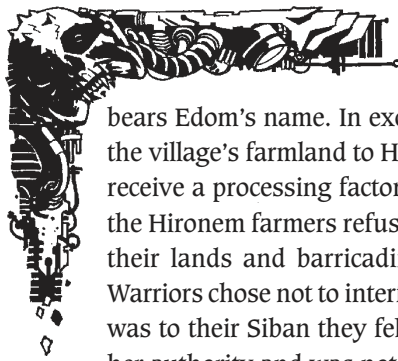
Thus the God-King lost control of the Hironem withdrawal, as individual Sibanzi claimed his authority when dealing with humans, and by the beginnings of the 29th century the lands of the Hironem had been reduced to modern Turaz and northern Herculeum and Elibyrge. The God-King's emissaries went to House Gloucester and demanded the return of the lands unlawfully sold to them. House Gloucester, still in debt to the God-King over the twice-paid purchase of Murciyah, refused and began arming the settlements along the Hironem borders. Most of the arms were purchased from House Hawkwood, with whom the Gloucesters were negotiating for a diplomatic marriage and their own adoption into that house.

House Decados

The advent of House Decados and its seizure of Gloucester lands and titles fundamentally altered the character of human-Hironem relations. House Decados was far more aggressive in negotiations with Turaz than the Gloucesters had been, and was far more willing to deal the individual Sibanzi with or without the approval of the God-King. Relations between Turaz and House Decados deteriorated rapidly, and an outright war seemed inevitable.

That war never manifested. In 2821 Baron Edom Decados, under orders from the Jakovian Agency, reached a trade agreement with Master Kima Ghou, Siban of the village of Semak, in the isthmus that now





bears Edom's name. In exchange for trading much of the village's farmland to House Decados, Ghou would receive a processing factory for her village. However, the Hironem farmers refused to relocate, squatting on their lands and barricading their village. The local Warriors chose not to interfere, for although their duty was to their Sibani they felt that she had overstepped her authority and was not acting in the best interests of her people.

In response, Baron Edom dispatched his personal army, sweeping through the disputed lands and seizing every Hironem they found. The village of Semak itself was surrounded by his troops. Confronted with this external threat, the Warriors of Semak chose to side with their people against the humans. Decados troops taunted the Hironem on the barricades, openly torturing and killing Hironem prisoners. The Warriors, under the command of a Sibani that they no longer respected, attacked the Decados troops despite her orders. In response, the village was obliterated by orbital bombardment. However, this action could not be concealed from Hawkwood Rook agents on Cadiz, which exposed the existence of the Hironem and the Decados atrocities against them to the universe. It was a major propaganda coup against House Decados in its day.

The official response from Turaz over the destruction of Semak was that the lower castes had rebelled against a legal transaction carried out by Master Kima Ghou, legal representative of the God-King, and that the Decados reaction had been fully justified and acceptable. Turaz ceded all its lands beyond the Baria Peninsula as recompense for the incident, in which the Warriors and Makers of Semak had clearly been at fault, and the modern borders of the Hironem reservation were established. The God-King publicly announced that interaction with humans without his direct sanction would result in expulsion from one's caste and permanent exile from Turaz, a threat specifically directed at any Sibanzi engaged in land-for-tech transactions.

Humanity's First Contact with the Vau began a period of great confusion for the Hironem. Human vids of the battles in the Apshai system showed humans fighting beings that bore a striking resemblance the Four Gods, as depicted in their holy texts. The situation became even more pressing when Hironem astrologers looked through their scopes and saw a Vau

heavy cruiser in orbit over their world, something that the Decados had not seen fit to reveal to them. Hironem of all castes debated what this might mean, and if the war came to Cadiz which side they should support. The God-King, trapped between the firepower of the Decados and the fervor of his own Sibanzi, adopted a policy of evasion, not officially neutral but refusing to publicly favor either side.

Many individual Hironem, especially those from outside Turaz took their own actions without the sanction of the God-King. Some supported human defense efforts as a means to win honor for their people in the eyes of the human overlords, while others sabotaged human defenses and engaged Decados troops in the name of the Four Gods. Numerous covert Hironem advocacy groups established themselves at this time, many of which endured for centuries and provided a constant thorn in the sides of the Decados dukes of Cadiz.

However, no Vau invasion took place, and Hironem society within Turaz changed little over the centuries to follow. No more exchanges of land for tech were conducted, and what tech that had been already purchased from humanity was maintained as best as the Hironem were able. Periodic unrest among the lower castes was suppressed without mercy, at least twice with the assistance of Decados dragoons at the request of the God-King. Progress, technological as well as social all but ceased in the face of human superiority.

Outside the walls of Turaz the lives of the Hironem under Decados rule changed radically. Beyond the authority of the God-King, the Sibanzi were the foremost spiritual authorities of the Hironem. House Decados officially recognized the caste system within their territories as a means of maintaining order among their alien subjects, but not all of the Hironem they ruled were inclined to agree. The farther one traveled from Turaz the weaker its traditions became. In Murciyah, once the farthest province of the God-King's empire, the local populace rejected the caste system outright, adopting instead ancestral Hironem customs that predated Vau contact.

Although they might renounce the customs imposed upon them by the Vau, few Hironem were interested in adopting human customs either. As the caste system broke down, so too did the social order desired by House Decados. Murciyah experienced in-



creasingly frequent alien unrest, in the form of demonstrations, non-violent and otherwise, escalating into riots and even terrorist strikes in some instances. The Decados response was a relocation program, deporting vast numbers of Hironem to Turaz, which admitted them under the status of Illu by agreement with House Decados. That program only came to an end after the God-King refused to admit any further deportees, as Turaz was facing rebellions of its own as a result of the revolutionary ideas brought by those it had already received. The remaining Hironem in Murciyah grudgingly submitted to the caste system, now imposed by House Decados.

Second Republic

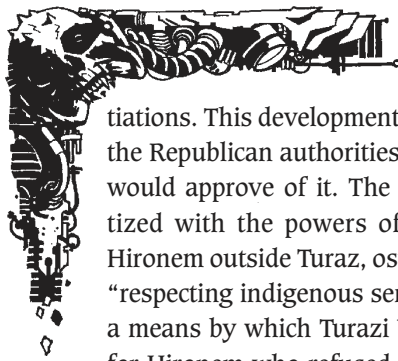
In the early years of the Second Republic the Hironem were among the most resistant of sub-cultures to its centralized bureaucratic rule. The Republican ideologies of egalitarianism were anathema to the socially stratified way of life espoused from Turaz. Decados control of Cadiz withdrew to Murciyah and was replaced by Republican administration on the rest of the planet, and many high-caste families of Hironem migrated to Turaz, fearing what the emancipation of

the lower castes could mean for them. The God-King, concerned of a similar problem among the lower castes in Turaz itself, welcomed these refugees without inflicting any loss of caste status upon them, so as to gain their support in maintaining the traditional social structures in his realm.

However, with the development of the Republic's emphasis on alien rights views shifted among the Hironem, especially those who had elected to remain under Republican rule. Outside of the Reservation of Turaz, the Hironem caste system was outlawed under the legal codes of the Republic regarding the fundamental rights of sentient beings. In Murciyah, where Decados family members still held great influence in local governance these laws were seldom enforced, but elsewhere the caste system gradually fell into disuse, especially since most of the Hironem living in Republican areas were formally either Illu or members of the Maker caste.

In the mid-39th century the Hironem underwent a period in which traditional values returned to the fore. This was during the Second Republic's talks with the Vau Hegemony, as Cadiz emerged as the likely choice to be the ambassadorial world for human-Vau nego-





tations. This development was quietly encouraged by the Republican authorities, which hoped that the Vau would approve of it. The God-King was even deputized with the powers of law enforcement for the Hironem outside Turaz, ostensibly for the purposes of "respecting indigenous sensibilities." In fact this was a means by which Turazi Warriors could scour Cadiz for Hironem who refused to recognize the caste system, and thousands were extradited to Turaz for reassimilation into traditional Hironem culture. However, these same traditions simultaneously created a racial consciousness among the Hironem with which they protested the massive urbanization of Cadiz that was taking place. The Republic did not encourage this aspect of the Hironem traditionalist revival, and many such protestors and rebels were transported to the Vasta Reservation for Hironem, located on Iver.

By the Fall of the Second Republic the Hironem were sorely divided. Dipak and Galiwango of St. Horace College on Pentateuch have researched this period of Cadiz history in depth. According to their findings, there was a small minority who rejected the caste system and the old ways of Turaz, and preferred the equality that the Second Republic stood for, yet were embittered by what they perceived as the Republic's abuse of Cadiz and the Hironem, especially in the face of growing corporate corruption and labor unrest. There were those who unconditionally supported the Republic, and denied every aspect of the God-King's authority. There were also some who had remained true to the God-King's religion, desiring only that their people be left alone and opposing the Second Republic at every opportunity. Lastly, there were those who followed the God-King, yet recognized the opportunity represented in the Second Republic's stance on alien rights, who called for Turaz to aid the Republic in its time of need.

Turaz experienced further internal turmoil as a dispute arose over the succession to the throne of the God-King. Tlinazh was the eldest son of the recently deceased God-King Shamash. His claim to the throne suffered from a questionable upbringing, as he had been raised in frequent contact with humanity and was under suspicion for his Republican ideals. The younger son, Gamarzil, was a traditionalist, allied with House Von Ferdinand, who sent Hironem Warriors to join the Rogue Alliance in its brief seizure of Byzantium Secundus. Gamarzil capitalized on this victory by gain-

ing support among the Sibanzi, and seized the throne with popular approval. Tlinazh was sent into exile as Hironem ambassador to House Decados, where he committed suicide in disgrace shortly before the news of the defeat of the Rogue Alliance reached Cadiz.

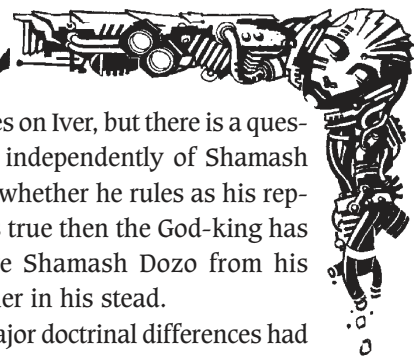
New Dark Ages

Cadiz was devastated by the Fall of the Second Republic, so dependent the world had become on the Republic's welfare system, but the situation was far worsened by the fading of Cadiz's sun in 3998. Its once yellow tint took on a greenish hue, and the heat that Cadiz received was increased dramatically. As polar icecaps melted water levels rose worldwide, and the deserts of the equatorial regions grew. Weather patterns shifted, sending droughts to fertile lands and floods to others, and tropical storms became a serious problem in coastal areas.

The famine that ensued was considerable; from its peak of over three billion Cadiz' population dropped to under half a billion in less than 50 years. These deaths were disproportionately higher among the Hironem, most especially outside of Turaz, as human militia groups seized food warehouses and what little arable land they could find. In Murciyah the Duchess Veronika Decados instituted a policy of deportation of all Hironem in her lands, and much of that population was forcibly relocated to Turaz before she was assassinated, almost certainly by a Hironem Warrior. The Hironem of Turaz rallied behind their new God-King to stave off human incursions; a great many Warrior families established or lost powerful reputations by their deeds during the chaos of these years.

During both of the Emperor Wars the God-King's official stance was one of neutrality, although individual Warriors joined the Decados or Van Gelder troops, but it was during the rise of the theocrat Halvor Li Halan that the Hironem rejoined the wider universe for a brief period. The God-King saw Halvor's rise as a threat to the Hironem and their beliefs, an anxiety that was enhanced not only by the fear-mongering spread by Jakovian propaganda but also by the genuine disruption caused by aggressive Li Halan missionaries out of Herculeum. Turaz officially allied with House Decados to oppose the theocracy, the only time in the history of human-Hironem relations that the God-King has adopted a partisan stance with respect to a largely human power struggle.





Following Halvor's death the Hironem's existence returned to its relative stability. Decados treaties promising the expansion of Turaz's borders were withdrawn, because those treaties all depended upon a Decados victory, which had not legally taken place. Legitimate veterans of the theocratic war who espoused human ideas in Turaz were expelled from the Warrior caste, beginning a tradition that remains to this day: To leave Cadiz without the express wishes of the God-King is to become Illu, and to do so even with the God-King's permission is to risk it nonetheless.

The Present

Turaz has once again been in an uproar ever since the discovery of the Hironem city of Tlog on Iver, the largest such population off Cadiz. Hironem pilgrims from that world have begun arriving to Turaz; a few have even settled there. However, the Hironem of Cadiz have not been permitted to go to Iver in return — Decados authorities have forbidden it, and maintain detailed records of each Hironem passing through the Pandemonium system to ensure that the only Hironem to go to Iver are those who are native to it.

Sibanzi scholars have been ferociously debating the legitimacy of Shamash Dozo, the "little god" of the Iverite Hironem. Only a small minority dispute that

Shamash Dozo rightly rules on Iver, but there is a question of whether he rules independently of Shamash the God-King of Cadiz or whether he rules as his representative. If the latter is true then the God-king has the legal right to remove Shamash Dozo from his throne and appoint another in his stead.

Furthermore, some major doctrinal differences had developed in the centuries of separation of the two populations, and there are concerns in Tlog regarding whether the God-King of Turaz would approve of them. Tlog is far less strict than Turaz in its interpretation of the caste system, most especially with regards to friendships, romances and marriages between members of different castes. Customs of acceptable behavior are less rigid as well, and as such Iverite Hironem are visibly more comfortable in the company of humans than those from Cadiz.

Because of these concerns the God-King has been forced to officially endorse the Decados claim to the planet of Iver. Otherwise, Turaz's claim of rule over Tlog would be meaningless. In the meantime the God-King has petitioned to be allowed a consulate in the Hub of Pandemonium, pending the approval of less restrictive travel to and from Iver. This petition has been mired in all the bureaucracy that House Decados can provide.

Society

Hironem society developed as a mixture of indigenous Hironem, Vau and human elements to produce a unique and persistent culture. Even beyond the boundaries of Turaz, among Hironem whose ancestors have not seen the reservation for centuries, elements of Turaz's way of life have persisted despite periods of entrenched opposition from human authorities. Similarly, some aspects of Hironem culture on Iver retain a striking similarity to Turaz, though there has been no contact between their cultures since the Fall of the Second Republic.

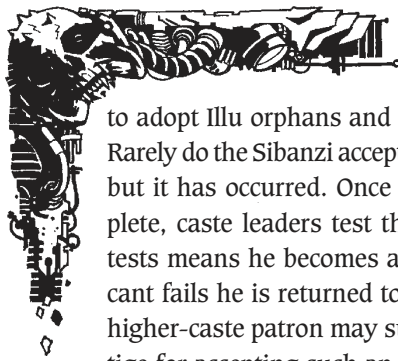
The Caste System

The Hironem social order is dominated by the separation between castes, a characteristic derived from their Vau patrons and thus of great interest to humanity. Like the Vau, the Hironem are divided into

three castes: the Sibanzi ruling class, the Kigazi or Warriors, and the Kimmu Maker caste. Unlike the Vau, a fourth designation exists, the Illu, or outcasts who are the bottom tier of Hironem society. Caste membership is hereditary via the paternal line, but mechanisms do exist by which to improve or worsen one's caste membership. Thus the Hironem system is somewhat less rigid than that of the Vau, and bears an element of meritocracy that is noteworthy.

The most frequent means by which to change one's caste is by being apprenticed to a willing member of a higher caste. This is often in the case of inter-caste marriage, when the higher-caste spouse trains his mate in his family's ways. However, it does take place independent of marriage as well; legends abound of Maker children who impressed an elder Warrior and joined that caste. Childless Maker families have been known





to adopt Illu orphans and raise them into their caste. Rarely do the Sibanzi accept an outsider into their caste, but it has occurred. Once the apprenticeship is complete, caste leaders test the applicant; passing these tests means he becomes a new member. If the applicant fails he is returned to his original caste, and his higher-caste patron may suffer a serious loss of prestige for accepting such an unsuitable apprentice.

Conversely, a Hironem who violates the rules of his caste can be put to trial and stripped of his caste status by the *Mahazu* ritual. If found guilty the offender is reduced in caste by a single level, such as from Siban to Kiga, or Kiga to Kimm. In extreme cases the offender's new caste may immediately subject him to another Mahazu, and this can be repeated until he is left among the Illu. Only the God-King himself has the authority to pronounce someone as Illu directly, and this usually only occurs to those who have left Turaz without the God-King's leave.

Religious laws strictly control relations between castes and social interaction is expected to be minimal. This is especially true concerning relations between Sibanzi and other castes, for the Sibanzi believe that their S'su energies can be damaged by the spiritual impurities of non-Sibanzi, most especially the Illu. In cases where castes must interact, members of the lower caste must strive to provide the highest quality of their product or service, or they risk summary exile or death at the hands of an irate Warrior or Siban.

Education among all castes is by a formal apprenticeship arranged by the individual's family. In some cases this apprenticeship takes place in the family itself, particularly among the Maker caste. In the case of the Sibanzi, apprenticeship marks the end of the individual's direct connection with his family; his relationship with his teacher and fellow students is expected to replace those needs. However, many Sibanzi maintain lifelong connections to their families, especially those originally from the Maker caste.

Sibanzi

Stewards of both body and soul, the Sibanzi are the God-King's designated representatives to Hironem society. The Sibanzi perform religious rites such as marriages, commemorative ceremonies and funerals and offer spiritual counsel to their subordinates, as well acting as judges in disputes between lower caste members. Sibanzi also comprise the bureaucracy of Turaz's governmental machinery, so those Sibanzi

whose ancient titles have been rendered invalid by land treaties with the Decados still have many duties.

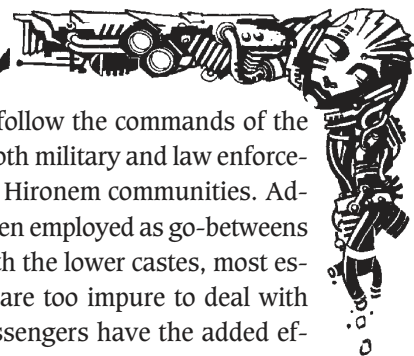
Sibanzi are expected to conform to rigid rules to maintain their purity at all times. They may not come into contact with Illu without undergoing lengthy and complicated rites to purge themselves of their pollution; for this reason few Sibanzi minister to the Illu. Those that do so are mainly of very low rank, or even Sibanzi who have been expelled from their caste and become Illu themselves. Such individuals are not permitted to perform the duties of a Siban and will be executed if discovered. Sibanzi are also forbidden to eat meat with the exception of that of insects, a taboo no doubt imposed upon them by the herbivorous Vau.

Rank within the caste is determined by oral and written examinations to determine one's knowledge of the duties of the caste. The exploitation of family connections to further one's career is considered unethical; the relationships most valued among Sibanzi are those with their teachers, students and classmates, and within those relationships the usually solemn Sibanzi can be surprisingly gregarious. Ranks are distinguished by different ceremonial robes, which are instantly recognizable to any Hironem who follows the traditional ways. The Sibanzi ranks, based on their common usage in Urthish are as follows:

Initiate (*Donokh*) — This rank is conferred upon young Sibanzi upon their ordination, which takes place when they reach legal adulthood at the age of 14 local years (slightly over 13 Holy Terran years). A few Sibanzi remain initiates all their lives, acting as minor religious or bureaucratic functionaries and servants to higher-ranking Sibanzi. Initiates are permitted to perform religious rites, but are not encouraged to do so unless no Siban of higher rank is available.

Master (*Amelayn*) — The most common rank found among Sibanzi, Masters are traditionally held responsible for dealing with the lower castes. A Master might once have been responsible for an entire village of Hironem, but with the withdrawal of Hironem-ruled territory over the course of history many Masters are without land of their own. Thus, many have become itinerant priests, healers and judges, and wander beyond the boundaries of Turaz tending to the needs of the Hironem there.

Etan (no Urthish equivalent) — Once a Siban attains the rank of Etan he is deemed capable of assuming positions of authority over other Sibanzi. Thus,



Etans dominate the middle management of the Turazi governmental machinery. Outside of Turaz an Etan controls the Hironem population of a neighborhood. Etans are usually responsible for ministering to the lower ranks of the Sibanzi caste, and are frequently found as advisors to human nobles.

Prefect (*Feol-theh*) — Prefect is the lower rank at which a Siban is considered worthy to speak with the God-King directly; lower ranks may be in the God-King's presence but are not permitted to address him. Prefects are often department heads within the governmental bureaucracy of Turaz. Outside Turaz a single Prefect might be responsible for the Hironem population of an entire city-sprawl — Prefect Gua Beli is considered one of the most powerful individuals in Abdera. Ambassadors to human society usually hold the rank of Prefect, as they are considered enlightened enough to endure exposure to human ways, but are not high-ranking enough that they must remain pure at all times.

Shin (no Urthish equivalent) — Shins are the public rulers of Turaz, for they are the highest rank of Siban that is still permitted to interact with other castes. At this rank a Siban is allowed the freedom of avoiding interaction with non-Hironem, and none live outside Turaz (except for those on Iver). Shins perform the most important religious and governmental functions, and frequently minister to the higher Sibanzi ranks. Shins occupy a critical position within Hironem society, for the higher ranks who ultimately decide policy for the Hironem people are not required to interact with most of its members, and so receive most of their information from the Shins.

Vizier (*Siboal*) — Viziers are the God-King's direct advisors, and are all above all the laws of Turaz, for they are considered to be acting in the God-King's name at all times. There are usually six to twelve Sibanzi holding the rank of Vizier, depending on the God-King's preference. The Viziers are the ultimate spiritual and political authorities except for the God-King himself, but most occupy themselves with theological debates. Viziers are considered above dealing with the lower castes, and interact exclusively with other Sibanzi.

Kigazi

The Warriors are the defenders of Hironem society, willing and able to take up arms against both external and internal enemies. The duties of a Warrior

are specific: to fight and follow the commands of the Sibanzi, and they act as both military and law enforcement for Turaz and other Hironem communities. Additionally, Warriors are often employed as go-betweens for the Sibanzi to deal with the lower castes, most especially the Illu. The Illu are too impure to deal with Sibanzi, and Warrior messengers have the added effect of reminding the lowly and often sullen Illu of their place. There are no other non-combat positions among the Kigazi; Sibanzi and Kimmu fill such roles in the Hironem military. Warriors are expected to maintain discipline at all time; there is no concept for "off-duty." However, Warriors are also permitted a great deal of latitude with regards to misbehavior, and battlefield atrocities are considered a normal part of warfare by the Hironem.

There is no official system of rank among Warriors; the laws of the caste consider all Warriors as equals. Nor are there separate units or divisions, in order to prevent civil wars within the caste. Individual warriors are expected to move about a great deal and interact with Kigazi of all types in order to foster understanding. Disputes between Warriors are resolved by a Siban arbitrator, but if peaceful resolution is impossible a duel may take place. These are rare and are public spectacles when they occur. A great deal of illicit gambling on the duel's outcome often takes place, under the auspices of Illu bookkeepers.

In military operations the official command positions are held by the Sibanzi, but most temporarily delegate their authority to a Kiga. Unofficial ranks do exist that the Warriors hold dear, and are based on prestige among one's fellows within the caste, but the most insignificant Siban is still considered above the most esteemed Warrior. Wise Sibanzi recognize these ranks when assigning posts to their Warrior subordinates:

Stripling (*Zogh*) — Warriors, both adult and children, who have not yet experienced their first battle.

Stalwart (*Galath*) — The rank-and-file of the caste, similar to a human private.

Champion (*Rovaash*) — The equivalent to a human non-commissioned officer, these are warriors whose battlefield experience awards them a position of respect, though not necessarily command.

Warden (*Elkh*) — Warriors whose names would be recognized by most Warriors. The equivalent of a human captain. Warriors at this rank are respected



enough by their peers to speak for them to the Sibanzi, and command other Warriors.

Praetor (*Wuyneh*) — Generals of the Hironem caste, their names instantly known to any Hironem Warrior. This means that they can lead by reputation alone, a necessity when leading a large army. Only a handful of Praetors exist at any one time, and spend most of their time answering to their Sibanzi superiors.

Kimmu

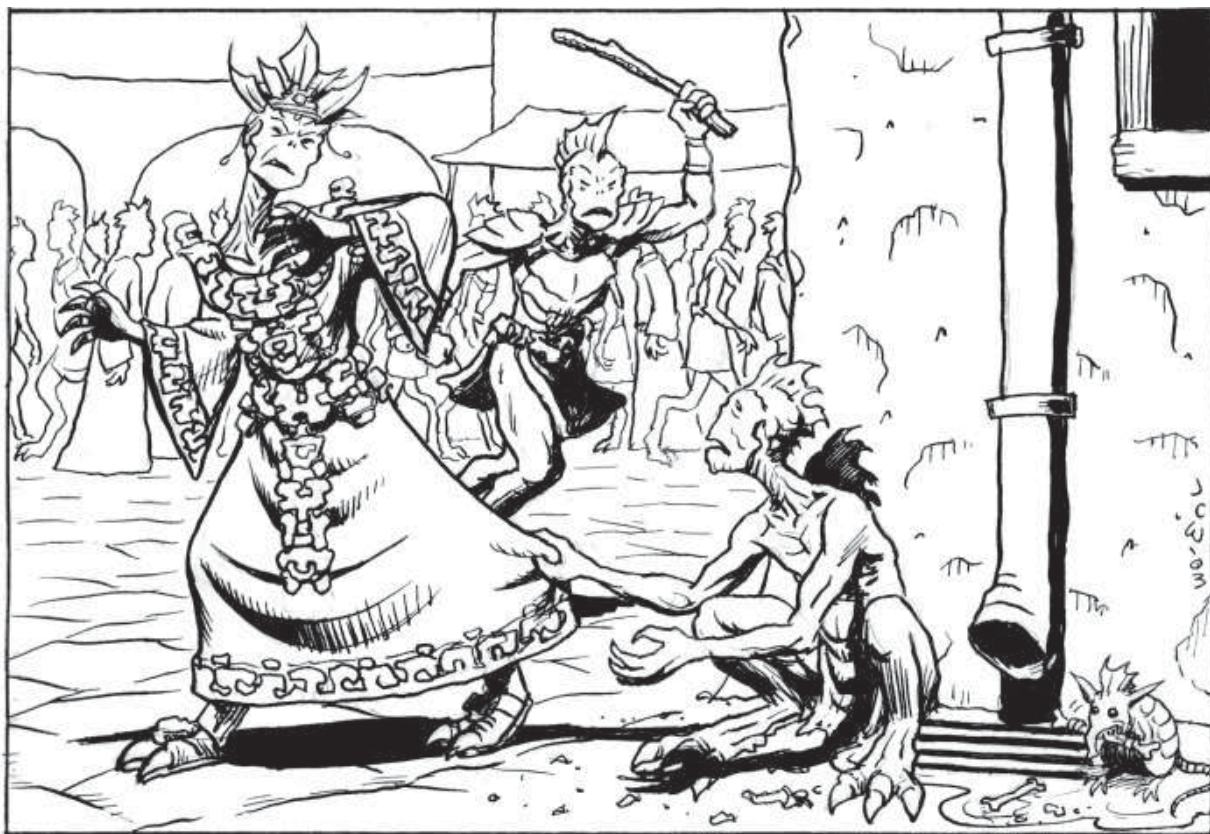
The Maker caste of the Hironem, Kimmu are defined by what they physically produce. They are not servants; that sector of the Hironem economy is the domain of the Initiate Sibanzi and Illu. Thus the Kimmu consist of the industrial laborers, miners, farmers, skilled craftsmen and artisans, fishermen, woodcutters and so on, all of which are kept rigorously separate from each other. Kimmu children are expected to carry on the craft of their parents, and those that choose another profession within the Maker caste often have great difficulty finding someone to apprentice them. Makers are bound to the region of their birth and may be sent to a different region without their consent at the command of the relevant Sibanzi. They may not

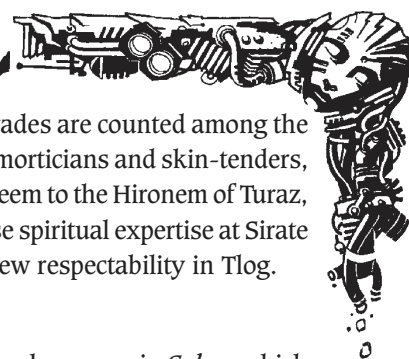
speak to Sibanzi unless commanded, and may not bear weapons under any circumstances and must be killed if they do. Despite their low status Kimmu enjoy a number of rights mandated by the scriptures of the Four Gods, at least in theory. A Maker may not be killed or dispossessed without reason, but the word of a member of a higher caste is usually considered reason enough. Warriors may not make demands of Makers unless they are relaying the commands of a Sibani.

Kimmu society is extremely family-based, far more than the Sibanzi or Kigazi. The Kimmu maintain family connections based on the most distant relationships, keeping rigorous track of first, second, third cousins removed to any number of degrees, as well as relations by marriages, marriages to relatives of other marriages, in a manner ironically reminiscent of human nobility. Of course, this also means that fierce feuds between Maker families have emerged, and can even draw in members of other castes if there is a blood relationship present.

Illu

The bottom of Hironem society belongs firmly to the Illu, the outcasts, the “non-people.” The Illu are composed of three groups: those who produce noth-





ing, such as moneylenders and merchants, those whose professions are considered unclean, including butchers, morticians, skin-tenders, tanners and purgers, and those who have been rejected from their original caste, most especially for leaving Turaz without the consent of the God-King. The Illu have no rights whatsoever in Hironem society, and live only at the sufferance of the higher castes. Makers may refuse to deal with them, Warriors may kill them on sight, and very few Sibanzi choose to minister to them at all.

Ironically, many Illu can become extremely wealthy; the static nature of the controlled economy of Turaz provides Illu merchants and moneylenders a great deal of opportunity, given that the laws regarding commerce seldom even mention Illu. An Illa, or outcast, may purchase goods from a Maker in the remote countryside at more than the mandated cost, and sell them in the city to Makers for whom those goods are difficult to find, after the tithes required by the God-King. The Illu run a thriving underground economy of which the Sibanzi are only vaguely aware.

The risk, however, is that an Illa's assets can be summarily seized at the whim of any Siban; many rich Sibanzi have begun their fortunes in this manner. However, those that do so risk finding that the sewers under their property have mysteriously broken down, or that a scandalous secret has become public knowledge, or that their last shedding session left them with a painful rash. Wiser Sibanzi and Kigazi often accept sizable bribes from wealthy Illu to buy their silence.

Illu are legally at the beck and call of any Siban who deigns to deal with them, which is usually by a written message delivered by a Warrior. Illu are considered to be without free will or the luxury of choice, and the wealthiest Illu moneylender can be commanded to clean the filthiest sewers. Of course, wise Sibanzi will allow the Illu to choose which of their number carry out the necessary duties, and leave a small "donation" to ensure a job well done.

Remarkably, the Illu are absent from Hironem society on Iver, having won their freedom in a bloody revolt centuries ago. The unclean roles of the Illu on Cadiz are carried out by respectable castes on Iver. Moneylending is the responsibility of the Sibanzi, facilitated by their connections to the administrative bureaucracy of Tlog. Merchants are part of the Warrior caste, and the Iverite Hironem's present ideas of commerce can be quite competitive as a result. Butch-

ers, tanners and similar trades are counted among the Maker caste. The roles of morticians and skin-tenders, as impossible as it might seem to the Hironem of Turaz, are filled by Sibanzi, whose spiritual expertise at Sirate gives these professions new respectability in Tlog.

Language

The dominant Hironem language is *Salsu*, which in its modern form developed out of the language of imperial Turaz during the Vau occupation. *Salsu* is an extremely expressive tongue, with many possible nuances and subtleties. *Salsu* grammar emphasizes adjectives, most especially those of emotion or perception, to a great degree. As such it is a difficult tongue to master, but relatively easy to employ in a simple manner. Hironem poetry is well known for its grace, beauty, and as the linguist Ching Budro once noted, the impossibility of its translation.

Over the course of Hironem history their language

Pronunciation

Consonants:

G = Always hard, as in "govern," not "gymnasium."

GH = A guttural "choking" sound in the back of the throat; no Urthish equivalent.

H = Represents a voiceless, breathy sound before a consonant, and a voiced expellation of breath before a vowel (as in Urthish "ho!").

J = Slightly trilled, as in old Urthish French "j."

K = When followed by an "h," it is an aspirate (as in Urthish *loch*).

PH = A softer version of "f," as in "fall" rather than "for."

TS = The "t" and the "s" are both pronounced.

X = Forms a sort of short, sharp *kh-z* sound, moving quickly from the back of the throat to the front.

Vowels: In almost all cases, vowels are short unless doubled ("aa"), in which case they are long.

A = Short = "cat"; long ("aa") = "father."

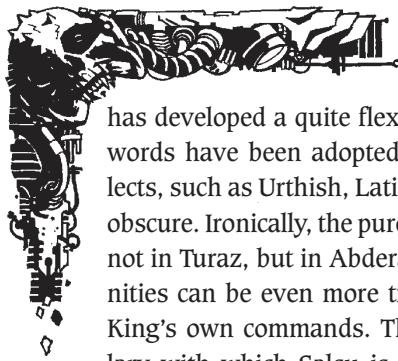
E = Short = "get." A doubled "e" is an especially long "i" sound.

I = Almost always long, as the e- in "evil."

O = Short = "oh" or "on."

U = Always long = "brute."





has developed a quite flexible vocabulary. Numerous words have been adopted from various human dialects, such as Urthish, Latin, Chinese and others more obscure. Ironically, the purest forms of Salsu are found not in Turaz, but in Abdera, whose Hironem communities can be even more traditionalist than the God-King's own commands. The inflections and vocabulary with which Salsu is spoken can reveal a great deal about the speaker; the conversant can distinguish regional accents as well as caste status.

The written language of Salsu is pictographic, and bears certain visible similarities to the sigils used by the Vau, specifically the *Ba'eni*, according to the book by Yonn Gwin Ko'anti. However, what little is known of Vau writing systems shows that the interpretation of the written language is completely unrelated. This demonstrates that the Hironem written language arose via a process of "idea diffusion," whereby the Vau's written language provided the example from which the Hironem invented their own. Prior to the Vau contact, it seems that the civilizations of Huirna and Maakhrij had both developed simple numeric systems, but no evidence exists that any written language had yet developed.

Over the course of human-Hironem relations Salsu has been adapted to the Urthish alphabet and is written phonetically. This can create some problems of translation due to differences in pronunciation because of regional and caste accents. Most of the sounds spoken in Salsu exist in Urthish, and are similar to the Vau languages upon which Salsu is partially based. See Yonn Gwin Ko'anti's pronunciation guide. It is quite applicable to Salsu, with the following addition: "nn" always refers to the sound that, in Urthish, is "ng," without the hard stop. Apostrophes are assigned seemingly arbitrarily; there is no phonetic basis for their inclusion, but the Hironem insist that many words are not complete without them.

Racial Divisions

What human perceptions exist of Hironem society are dominated by the caste system, but the Hironem are further divided along racial lines. Over the course of their evolutionary development a number of different races have emerged among the Hironem, separated by geography and lifestyle. However, with the compression of the Hironem population to Turaz a great deal of intermingling of Hironem ethnicities has taken

place over the centuries.

Racial discrimination is forbidden by the laws of the God-King. In practice, however, racial divisions are very real, especially among the Sibanzi and the Illu and in areas where the Hironem population is not quite racially homogenous. The Kigazi caste structure encourages intermarriage and cultural exchanges to great degree, and thus members of that caste bear mixed ancestry far more frequently than any other Hironem.

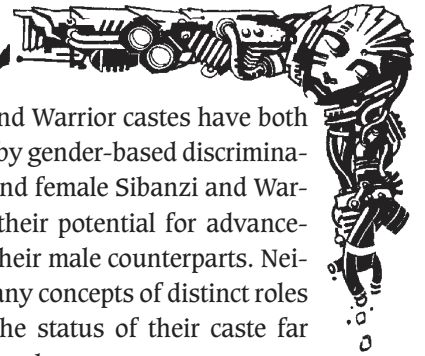
The dominant race among the Hironem, both politically and numerically, is the *Nahrezazi*. This term is deceptive, for it ignores the cultural and genetic changes brought by the Meblasseh conquerors that largely displaced the Huirnai, who were the original heirs to the ancient Nahrezazi civilization. The vast majority of the Sibanzi in Turaz are of Nahrezazi heritage, and an impure heritage is a minor scandal among that caste. The God-King's own lineage must be impeccably pure Nahrezazi. The Nahrezazi race is dark green in hue, though there are many Hironem of mixed heritage, especially among the Kigazi caste and beyond the reservation of Turaz.

The second most numerically widespread race among the Hironem is the *Maakhrijji*, which is ironically descended from the ancient Nahrezaz with far less interbreeding with other races. Maakhrijji form sizable minorities within all the castes, but the bulk of their numbers have been counted among the Illu for millennia. The Maakhrijji race has maintained itself as separate from others ethnicities throughout the history of Turaz; intermarriage with other races is uncommon, and those that do take place are expected to raise their children in strict Maakhrijji cultural traditions. They are physiologically very similar to Nahrezazi and indistinguishable to human eyes, but Hironem can be quite sensitive to ethnic facial features, accents of speech and S'su patterns.

Third are the light-brown *Gerchulda* peoples, originally from the desert that is now known as the Niber. Gerchulda are found among all castes in Turaz, but the bulk of their numbers live outside the reservation. They form the majority of the Hironem population of Rusaddir, and are sizable minorities in Herculeum and Elibyrge. Their ancestral traditions are long forgotten, and they mix freely with other races and adopt their customs without hesitation.

The *Duthoaana* are native to northern Sabtah, and exhibit a wide variety of hues. They almost invariably





possess the thick skin of their ancestry among the mountains. The Duthoaana are uncommon in Turaz, being found mostly in the Maker caste there, but there are Duthoaana Sibanzi as well. Outside Turaz they form the overwhelming majority of the Hironem population in northern Sabtah, though the local Sibanzi are largely of mixed Duthoaana/Nahrezazi heritage.

A small minority in Turaz claim descent from the *Fathaaji* race, native to the islands of Malaca Nova. These are found mostly among the Maker caste in Turaz, where their native crafts enjoy periods of popularity among the Sibban caste. Their pigmentation ranges from bright emerald green to darker than the Nahrezazi, but their manner and dress is distinctive.

The light-green *Teoghela* are the people native to Murciyah, and are not commonly found outside of that continent. Within Murciyah the Teoghela comprise the majority of all castes except the Sibanzi, from which they are completely excluded. Over the history of the Hironem the Teoghela have been consistently resistant to domination by the government of Turaz, and Murciyah has been a frequent hotbed of heresy against the God-King's authority. As a result a Teoghela heritage is considered undesirable for Hironem across the planet, and those with such ancestry will go to great lengths to conceal it.

Iver's Hironem were originally a mixture of Nahrezazi, Gerchulda and Duthoaana who were deported or chose to migrate during the Second Republic. However, the population has interbred to the extent that Iverite Hironem can no longer be distinguished by racial characteristics. Hironem scholars on Cadiz have taken to calling the Iverites *Tloghe*, signifying that they have no ancestral identity beyond their community on Iver. Iverite Hironem find the term insulting, particularly those not actually from the city of Tlog itself.

Gender

Hironem society does not seek or practice gender equality, and is male-dominated in many areas. This is a remnant of the Hironem society that predated the Vau contact. Records on Iver suggest that the Vau attempted to suppress gender-based discrimination among the Hironem, but those codes did not outlast the Vau presence on Cadiz itself. Most obvious in this regard is the office of the God-King itself, which is inherited by strict patrilineage.

However, the Sibban and Warrior castes have both developed systems whereby gender-based discrimination is all but forgotten, and female Sibanzi and Warriors are unrestricted in their potential for advancement when compared to their male counterparts. Neither of these castes have any concepts of distinct roles for males and females; the status of their caste far supersedes that of their gender.

Among the Maker caste the extent of gender parity varies wildly. Among some communities females hold a station barely above that of the Illu, and in other regions the relations between genders is comparable to the equality practiced among the higher castes. In general, more rural areas exhibit more equal relations between the sexes, while areas of concentrated populations are more male-dominated. Sibanzi frequently find this aspect of Maker culture to be distasteful, but any attempts to change it are resisted by all legal avenues open to the Maker caste.

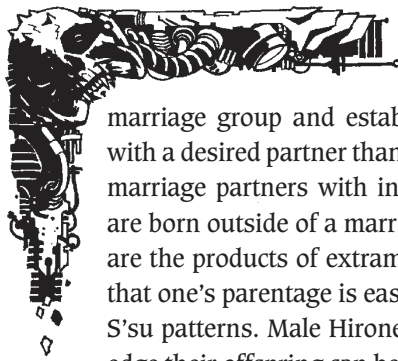
Males are by and large the dominant gender in Illu society, but exceptional female Illu have held positions of power, mostly when their husbands or male relatives die or prove too incompetent to carry out their duties. Certain family lines have even become matrilineal by tradition, in the case of successive capable female family heads. As ever, the directions that Illu society takes are of no interest to the higher castes, so it is allowed a measure of freedom in the nature of its gender relations.

Marriage

Hironem marriage customs differ depending on caste according to their individual social structures. The Hironem understanding of marriage is that of establishing emotional unions with which to raise offspring. Hironem marriages can include more than two individuals, of any combination of genders. Those incapable of procreation can purchase infants from other families of the same caste. Once a marriage group is established it almost never accepts a new member. Similarly, the departure or death of one of its participants often results in the dissolution of the marriage among the surviving members, who then go their separate ways. A Sibban performs the actual ceremony.

Sexual relations and procreation outside of a marriage group are strongly discouraged. The Hironem argue that it is better to attempt to bring a new member into a marriage, or more likely, to dissolve one's





marriage group and establish new, proper relations with a desired partner than to violate the trust of one's marriage partners with infidelity. Very few Hironem are born outside of a marriage group, and even fewer are the products of extramarital affairs. Hironem say that one's parentage is easily visible by similarities in S'su patterns. Male Hironem who refuse to acknowledge their offspring can be subjected to public humiliation and worse penalties, as assigned by a local Siban.

Sibanzi marriages are unique when compared with those of human nobility in that marriageable Sibanzi choose their own mates. They are expected to consider the status of those future spouses, but the ultimate choice is always their own, and most frequently these are friends that were acquired during their education. The direct caste superiors of all participants are expected to provide a dowry with which the marriage group establishes itself as a productive member of society, and these dowries are often the subject of strenuous negotiations between Sibanzi patrons. A Siban who chooses marriage partners that are undesirable to her superiors can find her dowry drastically reduced.

Marriage groups among the Kigazi are usually large, with some reaching over 10 members. However, Warrior marriages are invariably short lived, and a single Warrior will have many distinct marriage groups over her lifetime. Offspring of marriages that disband traditionally accompany the youngest "parent" whether or not that individual is the biological parent of the offspring, and this includes children of prior marriage groups. Bringing children from prior marriages into a new marriage group is considered desirable among Kigazi, who train their new heirs in their own fighting skills.

Maker marriage groups are usually small, no more than four participants and many with only two. These are almost invariably arranged by the families of the participants; emotional attachment is considered secondary to the family ties that are established. Similarly, dissolution of marriage agreements are rare, occurring mostly due to the death of one of its members. As a result, infidelity is frequent among the Maker caste, which has led to some Hironem stereotypes of the caste's low morality. Makers in turn view the Warrior system of marriage with disdain, due to their large marriage groups and frequent separations.

Because of their legal status as outside proper

Hironem society, marriage among the Illu is unique. The Illu are rarely able to partake of Hironem religion directly, as the Sibanzi caste is not required to minister to the Illu. As such most Illu weddings must be conducted by other Illu, who assume the role of Siban when none are available and willing. Illu marriage groups are usually small, but some can grow quite large, for unlike the higher castes Illu often add new members to established marriages. Similarly many Illu marriages endure even if one of its members departs or dies. Large marriage groups are found most often among the more prosperous members of Illu society: rich moneylenders or merchants, or those whose services have attracted the patronage of high-ranking Sibanzi.

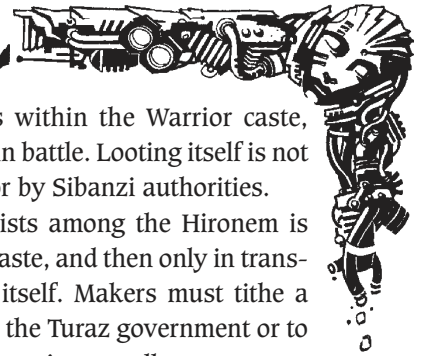
Economy

The economy of Turaz is rigidly controlled by the bureaucratic machinery of the state, administered by the Sibanzi caste. Second Republic ideas of capitalism are largely absent, and a great deal of property is administered directly by the state. Indeed, the only truly free-market economies among orthodox Hironem society are found among the Maker caste.

Turaz holds itself to the rhodium standard, by which that metal itself is held as legal currency just as some human societies have employed gold, iron, Pygmalium and water. Hironem find the metal attractive, and it reputedly has useful properties in S'su manipulation. The currency of Turaz is the *kheng*, often called the "king" by humans who trade with Hironem. The *kheng* is a coin bearing the symbol of the Four Gods on one side and the profile of the current God-King on the other, minted from an alloy of platinum and rhodium. *Khengs* are legally traded with firebirds and mantises, the house currency of the Decados, and stable exchange rates have been established.

Underlying the official economy is the influence of human technology, which has become something of a supplementary currency among the Hironem, most especially among the Maker caste. Officially human tech is considered dangerous, a destabilizing influence on their society, so by law all such tech is under the authority of the God-King; individual ownership of human tech is illegal. However, this means that members of lower castes who have acquired tech by trade or warfare with human communities have a tre-





mendous opportunity to establish connections with accommodating Sibanzi. If a Siban tried to confiscate the forbidden tech he would quickly find it difficult to deal with other Hironem who heard of the incident, nor would he even be able to keep the tech for himself, as the God-King's representatives would immediately seize it.

Most Sibanzi are supported by their immediate superiors, who arrange living accommodations and transportation for their underlings. Ultimately this capital derives from the government, which is financed by tithes from the Maker caste, and the occasional seizure of property from Illu whose wealth has become too conspicuous. Sibanzi who administrate their own lands collect their own tithes, a portion of which is passed along to the central bureaucracy. Sibanzi may supplement this income by performing religious services for prominent members of the lower castes, though this is considered somewhat crass in polite society, comparable to a human noble who takes up a trade.

Warriors are supported by the Turaz government via their direct Sibanzi superiors, and are not permitted to amass personal wealth or even possess currency; all their needs are to be provided by their Sibanzi patrons. Unlike Sibanzi, Warriors may simply take small amounts of merchandise from Makers without payment; it is considered simply a form of tithe that the Makers must pay to the higher castes. However, an

informal economy exists within the Warrior caste, based on property looted in battle. Looting itself is not forbidden by caste laws or by Sibanzi authorities.

What free market exists among the Hironem is found among the Maker caste, and then only in transactions within the caste itself. Makers must tithe a portion of their income to the Turaz government or to their immediate Sibanzi superior as well as accommodate the occasional requisition from the Warrior caste. Transactions with Sibanzi are with fixed prices, established by the government bureaucracy. The bulk of the Maker income comes from their caste fellows, and from their Illu customers for whom they raise prices dramatically.

The Illu, though formally excluded from Hironem society, are very much an integral part of the species' traditional economy. Illu moneylenders have been the secret investors to a great many Maker and Siban business ventures when their partners were unable to raise the necessary funds by their own connections, and Illu merchants have established themselves as essential in bringing goods from outlying regions of Turaz to the city center when the Sibanzi bureaucracy moves too slowly. Illu in the more critical areas of the service sector often receive sizable donations to ensure the smooth continuation of operations. However, Illu must constantly be wary not to be too successful, as greedy Sibanzi can seize their property without provocation.

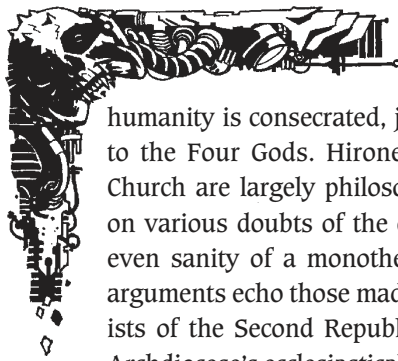
Religion

The religion of the Hironem is an oddity by socio-anthropological standards, as befits one imposed by an alien race. It is technically pantheistic, meaning that it recognizes a small group of gods, but exhibits few of the normal characteristics of a pantheistic religion. Indeed, the Hironem's very concept of "gods" is so at odds with the norm that the very term is deceptive. In relation to the philosophies of human history the Hironem might be described as a mixture of pantheist, deist, rationalist, "humanist" and even atheist.

The immediate deities of the Hironem are, quite naturally, the Four Gods who were the Vau. They gave the Hironem the laws, morality and much of the science upon which their civilization is based. However,

the Hironem understanding of their divinity is much more complicated than simple omnipotence. The Four Gods did not create the universe, nor do the Hironem claim that they are the only gods in existence; they are simply the particular gods to which the Hironem are beholden out of what might be a multitude of other gods for other peoples. One of the major theological barriers that has prevented the Universal Church from gaining converts in any significant numbers among the Hironem is that the Church does not recognize the divinity or even existence of the Four Gods. The Hironem, by contrast, do not dispute the Pancreator's existence or claim the Four Gods as a higher authority. By their beliefs the Pancreator is the god to whom





humanity is consecrated, just as the Hironem belong to the Four Gods. Hironem arguments against the Church are largely philosophical in nature, focusing on various doubts of the omnipotence, morality and even sanity of a monotheistic deity. Many of these arguments echo those made by the scientific rationalists of the Second Republic, and some of the Cadiz Archdiocese's ecclesiastical rebuttals to Hironem theological tracts make reference to this.

The famous Preceptor preacher Aiya Seto once noted that the Four Gods may be better understood in Hironem terms by approaching them as messiahs rather than omnipotent deities. The Gods' covenant with the Hironem, to the Hironem's understanding, is one of an elder sibling tutoring a younger, with the older clearly superior but with the knowledge that they might eventually become equals. Human religions establish a relationship more reminiscent of that of a parent and a child, in which the lines of authority are clear and unchangeable. The Four Gods are undoubtedly real, a Hironem might argue, but they are not watching every blade of grass on Cadiz; they are just waiting until the Hironem are ready to join them in the heavens. When will the Hironem be ready? Why, when they can reach them on their own, of course!

Much of Hironem cosmology is strictly a matter of science. The universe and the development of life and sentience are viewed as natural phenomena owing nothing to an overarching divinity, a remarkably atheistic perspective from the dominant religion of an entire species. No minor animistic spirits tend to their everyday lives, nor are the Four Gods perceived to meddle in minutiae. The Hironem have no conception of the spiritual significance of any material thing beyond its pragmatic role in their existence. No rituals exist for natural phenomena, no rituals of dawn, or fertility, or the changing of the seasons.

Hironem rituals revolve exclusively around their own accomplishments: harvests, mealtimes, marriages, the commemoration of important historical events, and so forth. Great battles of the past and important dogmatic changes are commemorated annually by the Hironem's own calendar, which is based on the orbital cycles of Cadiz rather than Holy Terra. The official local planetary calendar used by the general human populace was based off that of the Hironem. The newest Hironem holy day, the first introduced in centuries, marks the anniversary of the God-King's dis-

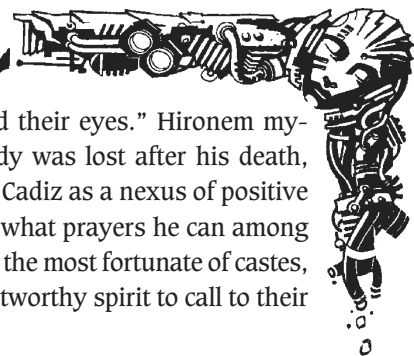
covery of the Hironem population of Iver. The wandering Sibani who brought the news to Turaz was officially promoted within her caste, this despite the fact that her departure from Turaz had been unauthorized. She has also been named a *Ghet*, the equivalent of a minor Saint within the Hironem religion.

Prayers among the Hironem are more a matter of gratitude than supplication. A Hironem facing a challenge does not believe that the Four Gods will answer his prayers and aid him in his undertaking; as far as the Hironem are concerned the Four Gods have already done all that they need to aid the Hironem. He will, however, give thanks to the god of his caste for the skills and tools that he possesses with which to meet that challenge.

The Hironem have high standards of propriety with regards to how and when religious functions of ritual and prayer are carried out, and I believe that in this regard they owe a great deal to the Vau, as it is extremely reminiscent of the Vau's concepts of "auspice." There are significant differences: in contrast to the Vau, who by Yonn Gwin Ko'anti's account are dedicated in their study of auspice and extremely cautious in its interpretation, the Hironem seem to understand such things at an almost instinctive level, and are not even consciously aware that they live in such a manner. Nor are the Hironem concerned with Prophecy; indeed, the Hironem religion espouses self-determination over determinism. I cannot help but wonder what the Vau's vaunted Glyphs have to say about the Hironem.

The Hironem view of death and the afterlife is a complex one. The Hironem recognize two components of one's metaphysical being: *Nnuom* and *Shij*, which might be translated as Mind (distinct from the biological brain) and Soul in Urthish. After death the Mind goes to one of several Hironem conceptions of heaven, which is divided by caste and worthiness. There are places for saintly Makers and tyrannical Sibanzi, as well as the mediocre of all castes. These are places of intellect, but the emotions appropriate to one's caste are present as well. Most remarkably is that these places of eternal rest are shared with the dead of the Gods themselves, and now with other species as well. The Four Gods reside in these places with honor, but do not rule; there are no rulers for the dead. Akkad wanders the places of the Makers, which include human craftsmen and guildsfolk; Eresh and Tanam make war among the places for dead Warriors, as well as





human soldiers, mercenaries and some nobles, where fighting is constant and a joy to its inhabitants; the Nameless One argues philosophy among the dead of highest of the gods, Hironem and human priests and nobles.

The Shij or Soul, meanwhile, might be a remnant of Hironem spirituality from before the Vau came to Cadiz. The Soul is considered far less important than the Mind, and is left behind as a bodiless spirit among the living. Hironem burial customs demand cremation and the scattering of the ashes, which is designed to destroy the Soul's identity and return its energy to the universe. Hironem that are not properly laid to rest become wandering spirits looking after their descendants in ways that are often at odds with the good of society as a whole, and become carriers of disharmonic negative S'su energies. For example, a dead Warrior's Soul would try to protect his daughter from harm, preventing her from taking part in a battle that is her duty but in which she could be killed. Prayers to ancestral Souls are considered a minor heresy by the authorities in Turaz, but punishment is not actively pursued in most cases.

An exception to this is the case of the Illu, among whom ancestral worship is frequent. The Illu are not counted in Hironem cosmology, and very few ever receive proper spiritual guidance from any Siban. This also means that very few dead Illu are properly laid to rest according to Hironem religious law, and by their own beliefs the Souls of their dead are widespread. As a consequence Illu communities are frequently investigated for signs of heresy by Sibanzi investigators, and Warrior squads exterminate those that are found to have strayed from the righteous path.

The Pantheon acknowledged by the Hironem is as follows:

The Nameless One

Highest of the Four Gods and patron of the Sibanzi, the Nameless One embodies both wisdom and arrogance, both the virtues and the flaws of the Sibanzi caste, for the Hironem do not forget the manner of his downfall. All Hironem ceremonies, no matter which caste, are ultimately dedicated to him. No depictions of the Nameless One exist, nor is he ascribed any physical attributes, for the philosophies he espoused are considered far more important than the Nameless One himself, for it was he who revealed S'su, the universal force of life, to the Hironem, who according to Hironem

scripture literally "opened their eyes." Hironem mythologies tell that his body was lost after his death, and his Shij still wanders Cadiz as a nexus of positive S'su energies, answering what prayers he can among the Sibanzi. They are thus the most fortunate of castes, for they alone have a trustworthy spirit to call to their aid.

Tanam

One of the Twin Warriors, patrons of the Kigazi, or Warrior caste, Tanam was the staunch defender of the civilization his compatriots had built. Tanam represents the defensive side of war, and his followers man the barricades and defensive emplacements. It was Tanam who established the Warrior caste's role in maintaining law and order in Hironem society, and taught his followers the rudiments Anzu, the martial art of the Hironem. Tanam espoused an adherence to duty above all, and a complete control of oneself in battle. Depictions of Tanam usually show him alone against many enemies, with battered armor, defending a wounded Hironem Warrior or a frightened Maker.

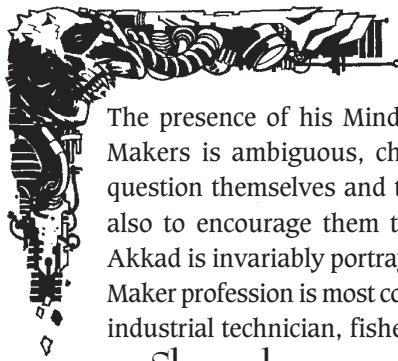
Eresh

Eresh represents the external, offensive side of Hironem Warrior psychology. He taught them how to breach fortifications, how to win an offensive war and skill with weapons, and encouraged exploration, as well as trade and scientific research, traits that aligned him with Akkad and the Maker caste. The dueling techniques practiced by the Kigazi are of his design. He was passionate in battle but not bloodthirsty, and although he rebelled against the Nameless One the Hironem believe that he has long since redeemed himself to the Gods Above All. Eresh is often depicted in the finest Warrior garb, victorious over barbarous enemies in far lands. In contrast to Tanam his attire is usually undamaged, and his weapons are brightly polished. His most fervent followers whisper that Eresh showed that there are some things more important than duty.

Akkad the Maker

Last of the Four Gods, Akkad's reputation is paradoxical. Although he taught the Kimmu, or Maker caste, their skills and duties he later espoused a rebellion against their legitimate rulers, and even employed demonic powers according to some. The Makers have ever since worked to collectively expunge the guilt of their founder, for according to Hironem theology Akkad remained unrepentant of his rebellion, unlike Eresh.





The presence of his Mind in the places of the dead Makers is ambiguous, challenging dead Makers to question themselves and their accomplishments, but also to encourage them to new levels of creativity. Akkad is invariably portrayed in the garb of whatever Maker profession is most common to that area, whether industrial technician, fisher, farmer, or craftsman.

Shamash

The God-King, divinely appointed by the Nameless One and approved by the Gods Above All, is the living embodiment of Hironem spirituality. He is the highest authority of the Hironem, both temporal and religious, but is ultimately merely a steward for the Nameless One. Most Hironem rituals involve a brief thanks for the God-King's rule and a prayer to the Shij, or Soul of the Nameless One for the God-King's well-being. The name of Shamash is assumed by each God-King as he assumes the throne, which is strictly passed from father to son; the Divine Throne of Turaz may not be occupied by a female. The God-King almost never leaves the palace of Bey Tal, and many of the less educated among the lower castes believe that he is physically immortal and has reigned since the departure of the Gods so long ago. The holiest of the God-King's festivals is held slightly less than once per local year, when the planet Hammon is full as seen from Cadiz.

The worship of the God-King is the primary objection that the Universal Church levies against the Hironem religion. Some bishops have acknowledged

that the Four Gods can always be subjected to Church doctrinal reinterpretation as Empyrean beings, but no such loophole is available to a living creature's claim to divinity. The Church has been forced to acknowledge the God-King's temporal power over Turaz, but his spiritual authority it denies outright. House Decados' position is to recognize the God-King's power as absolute within the Reservation, and beyond that he also acts as the ultimate spiritual authority of the religion of the Hironem. Furthermore, the Reservation of Turaz will remain free of Church missionaries and inquisitors despite all objections to the contrary, and the Church has had no choice but to accede.

Fim

Fim the Demon King represents every level of fear, disorder and aberration to Hironem society. His name is the specter used to frighten disobedient children as well as the genuine fear of rebellion among the more orthodox among the upper castes. Fim represents the antithesis of the Hironem's entire society, both as external threats and internal conflicts. He is a considered a source of temptation to disregard the holy laws laid down by the Four Gods and maintained by the God-King. The Hironem believe that he masquerades as a lost Shij that has been left in the world of the living, and he twists the desires of those who pray to the spirits that he impersonates. Only the Shij of the Nameless One is beyond Fim's power; its holiness protects it from his slander.

S'su

S'su is a keystone of the Hironem's understanding of the world around them and colors all aspects of their lives. It is not simply a religious concept; even the most insane or heretical Hironem will not argue against its existence, for S'su is plainly apparent to Hironem senses. For a Hironem to deny the existence of S'su would be no less unthinkable than to deny gravity or light; it simply exists, regardless of belief.

The Urth Orthodoxy declares the concept heterodox, though not fully heretical. This was as a concession to curious Mahayana theologians who have become interested in the Hironem and the possible interpretations of Empyrean cosmology that they could pro-

vide. However, the more conservative Hinayanas have long dominated Cadiz's Church hierarchy, which is why those few Hironem who leave the faith of the God-King usually turn instead to the Eskatonics, and to a lesser extent the Incarnates or Amaltheans.

The Nameless One is attributed with giving the secrets of S'su to the Hironem, but literature concerning S'su does not enter the mytho-historical record of the Hironem until shortly after the departure of the Four Gods from Cadiz. It appears to have developed as a syncretic response to the mixture of the Hironem's indigenous beliefs when combined with those imposed by the Vau. However, the Hironem perception of its



THE HEAVENS DENIED: HIRONEM

existence is undeniable and has evolved beyond its origins.

The Hironem's physical perception of S'su energies lies in the *Linnal*, specialized sensory organs located on either side of the nose, between the nose and the eyes. Despite the widespread term "S'su-vision," the Linnal do not share any connection to the Hironem optic nerve. Heo Elgin, a Herculean Engineer with whom I corresponded, believed that the Linnal developed from heat-sensory loreal pits, organs not unlike those found on non-sentient reptiles on many worlds. The sensory receptors involved in the Linnal are unique, unlike any other known to modern science. They provide detection for a form of energy that was not fully understood even at the height of the Second Republic. A few human xenophiles have claimed to be able to perceive S'su lines after being implanted with authentic Hironem Linnal, a procedure that is highly proscribed by the Universal Church, and further forbidden by House Decados and the God-King.

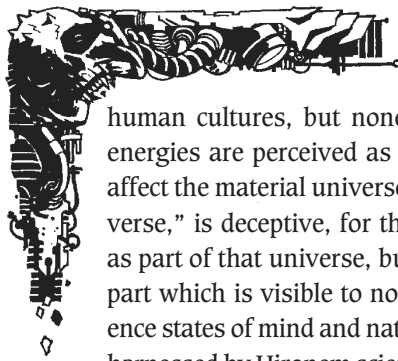
How this remarkable racial trait came to be is undetermined. The known laws of evolutionary development show that its occurrence in a strictly natural system is impossible, so the most likely culprit is the

Nameless One. However, all available sources among the Vau Hegemony show that although the Nameless One was a skilled genetic engineer (called "pattern modification" in the Hegemony) he did not arrive on Cadiz with either the nanotechnology or energy required to accomplish a feat of genetic engineering on such a scale.

During Cadiz's urban development the general human public of the Second Republic became aware of the Hironem and the exotic nature of their beliefs. Hironem meditative practices enjoyed a brief period of vogue among the Republic's more cosmopolitan worlds, and many studies of S'su were initiated with varying degrees of scientific merit. It is unknown how many of these studies reached completion, as interest in the Hironem ended abruptly with the Vau embassy's abandonment of Cadiz in favor of Vrill-ya. Little of the data collected has survived to the present, as the Church-sponsored data purges that accompanied the Fall were especially directed at data concerning alien sciences.

S'su is the lines of force that connect life throughout the universe as perceived by the Hironem. Similar concepts exist within the spiritual systems of some





human cultures, but none to the same extent. S'su energies are perceived as lines of energy that subtly affect the material universe. That label, "material universe," is deceptive, for the Hironem do include S'su as part of that universe, but in this case I refer to that part which is visible to non-Hironem. S'su can influence states of mind and natural phenomena, and when harnessed by Hironem science can create many strange effects.

Hironem can perceive a great deal about living beings by their S'su energies, most especially those of other Hironem, beyond the simple indicators of gender, caste, age and race. It is notable that the Hironem have no concept for anonymous fatherhood; S'su energies make parentage readily apparent. Marital infidelity is difficult as well, since one's S'su can subtly shift from the passions of an illicit romance. Also, Hironem who journey away from Cadiz will be affected by the alien S'su of other words, a taint that the God-King has forbidden to come to Turaz. As such, any Hironem who leave Cadiz without the God-King's direct permission are summarily pronounced Illu and banished from Turaz forever.

According so an Eskatonic with whom I spoke, some of the Sibanzi on Iver have developed a theory that I found interesting. These Iverites have come to believe that Iver's global S'su have affected its Hironem population and is responsible for the changes that Iver's Hironem have undergone in their society. Hence, Iver's relative liberalism with respect to the conservative culture of Turaz is due to the planet itself. The Sibanzi in support of this theory believe that it is an inevitability in any Hironem colonization to new planets, and advocate that each culture must adapt to each world as best it can; Turaz is the highest standard to which any population can aspire, but its model must be modified as necessary to the demands of each new planet. I wonder: Is this a reflection of the Vau's own preference for adapting themselves to different worlds, rather than terraforming the worlds to suit them?

To return to the topic at hand, S'su energies may be positive or negative or a combination of both, as the Hironem do not make the absolute distinction between them. Interactions between positive and negative S'su do not cancel each other out, but instead produce effects that are impossible without both elements. In its application to Hironem psychology the concept of S'su might be understood as highly morally relativ-

istic, which is one of the primary reasons why its exploration has been so strongly forbidden by the Church.

The Hironem's relationship with S'su is not simply a matter of perception. A great deal of their science and spirituality is concerned with the manipulation of S'su lines, a practice that they call *Kanasu*. At its most basic level *Kanasu* can be used to create a specific mood in a room, and is considered a normal part of Hironem aesthetics. At its most grandiose, *Kanasu* is used to maintain the S'su systems throughout the lands held by Turaz, to ease conditions of extreme weather and maintain a climate suitable to Hironem agriculture. This effort is constantly ongoing, as neighboring human industry, agriculture and architecture constantly disrupt the careful balance that the Hironem cultivate.

An incident at the Decados Consulate on Vrilya last year raises some interesting questions regarding the relationship between the Vau and the Hironem. Baron Boris Svanfeld Juandaastas-Decados, Decados ambassador to the Hegemony, received a Vau Mandarin calling herself Kwa'pholo Ravv Gli'shauvi for a dinner engagement. According to the Hegemonic human Yonn Gwin Ko'anti, the title "Kwa'pholo" indicates an advisory role to a Vau council. Judging by Imperial Eye files the meeting (files that I am assured were not fabricated by the Jakovian Agency), Ravv was astonishingly verbose over dinner, willing to engage in what might be considered small-talk: Discussions of the weather, her youth, other worlds she had seen, and so forth.

It was later revealed that the dining room had been prepared by Baron Svanfeld's long-term houseguest, one Zhutlak Onz, a Siban Prefect, who has been the Hironem's unofficial ambassador on Vrilya for several years. I would posit that Onz had employed her Sirate training to suit her species' tastes — tastes that coincide with the Vau's at a metaphysical level and pleased Kwa'pholo Ravv. Doubtless this information escaped Jakovian suppression because the Agency did not expect that Onz's work would have such an effect on the Vau, and had not bothered to neutralize the Eye's surveillance devices for what should have been a useless and uninformative dinner engagement.

The Hironem employ other forms of *Kanasu* such as *Sirate*, their understanding of the S'su lines of Hironem biology. *Sirate* is used as a form of medicine, stimulating or suppressing aspects of Hironem bio-



THE HEAVENS DENIED: HIRONEM

logical functions to aid in recovering from injuries, combat diseases and expel toxins. For example, Hironem physicks have developed an extremely effective treatment for radiation poisoning using Sirate techniques, and can accelerate the knitting of bone to a remarkable degree. The Sibanzi of Abdera have developed a form of Sirate for human physiology, sponsored by Van Gelder nobles, but this practice has not become widespread, as it is opposed by the Church, House Li Halan and the Apothecaries Guild. Amalthean priests who favor Sirate healing of human patients have lobbied the Cadiz Archdiocese to allow such practices, but without success.

As Kanasu is the practice of manipulating external S'su lines, *Naaram* is the manipulation of internal S'su, incorporating techniques of meditation, physical exercises, personal medicine, diet, balance and emotional control. Most Hironem practice Naaram, to regularly center bodily S'su and before any major undertaking. Its greatest master is said to be the God-King.

The form of Naaram practiced by the Warrior caste is called *Anzu*, a martial art comparable to Bharata zho Veda, the latter based on Obun philosophies and popular among some of the Eskatonic Order. Anzu emphasizes internal mastery while directing its energy outward as violent action; the art is both offensive and defensive. Warriors skilled in Anzu are popular as bodyguards among some of Cadiz's human nobility, as the conflicts of the Emperor Wars demonstrated the art's effectiveness against a wide variety of human opponents.

The principles of S'su are found throughout the history of the Hironem's scientific and technological development, until that development was arrested by humanity's arrival on Cadiz. At the peak of their native technology the Hironem had reached an advanced level of understanding of physics and biology, but their grasp of chemistry was relatively simple. House Gloucester, upon arriving on Cadiz, found a population that had developed devastating kinetic weaponry while lacking knowledge of internal combustion, and employed winds and rivers for power generation while ignoring the massive fossil fuel deposits beneath their feet.

The pinnacle of Hironem technological achievement was in their manned landing on Cadiz's moon, Persus, in early 2638, according to the Hironem records on Iver. This was accomplished through the construction of a massive magnetic cannon, which fired the capsule containing the Hironem astronauts directly to the moon. Strange, S'su-based internal systems eliminated the internal accelerations that, by all rights should have crushed the crew into jelly. The calculations involved in the flight plan were so precise that the capsule required almost no course alteration en route, and what little maneuvering that was needed was performed using primitive rockets. The landing impact was well within the tolerances of the powerful shock absorbers that had been included in its design using bizarre S'su-based technologies of remarkable intricacy. Etan Hiva Deru, Siban of the Nnenoya Valley, commanded the crew of Warriors and Makers in their journey through the ether.

Once on the moon the crew constructed a second cannon, intended both as a means by which they would return to Cadiz and as a base of operations from which the entire solar system could be explored. The God-King of the time was especially interested in investigating the planet now known as Hammon, with which the God-Kings have a personal spiritual relationship. Materials were sent via the cannon on Cadiz, with minimal Maker crews to ensure that they arrived safely. Unfortunately, the Hironem quest for space ended when the Etan and his entire team were killed upon attempting to re-enter Cadiz's atmosphere.

What became of the Hironem space program is not known. It is almost certain that the Hironem could have solved the problem of re-entry, but their space program was abandoned once humans came to Cadiz. Like many other races, interest in scientific achievement waned in the face of human technological superiority. As for the equipment itself, it is most likely that the cannon on Cadiz has long since been destroyed, but it plans might still exist somewhere in the archives of Turaz. The cannon on Persus was abandoned, and has almost certainly been discovered by House Decados. Its potential as a facility for orbital supremacy is obvious, and Persus has been the exclusive domain of the Decados Principality for centuries, with access severely controlled by the Decados Fleet.



Biology

The Hironem can be classified as reptile in most regards. They are exothermic, or “cold-blooded” in the old parlance, meaning that their bodies are incapable of regulating their internal temperatures as mammals do. Instead their bodies are the same temperature as their surroundings. The genetic code of the Hironem includes several sets of regulatory enzymes to accommodate a wide range of temperatures. Beyond that tolerance the Hironem become feverish and hyperactive in excessive heat, and suffer from lethargy in cold climates. It is for this reason that the Hironem never expanded beyond the equatorial and mid-latitude regions of their world.

Due to their comparatively low metabolic activity the Hironem need for food is less than other sentient species. A Hironem consumes slightly less than half the food required by a human of equivalent mass, and the production of bodily waste is similarly less. Similarly, the Hironem need for water is a fraction of that of a human: Hironem lack sweat glands and do not lose bodily moisture through perspiration, and their urine is extremely concentrated into near-solidity. Turaz could not maintain its current population density if its inhabitants had the same metabolic needs as a mammalian species.

Another consequence of their cold-blooded physiology is that Hironem do not develop body fat. Hironem that enjoy a surplus of food simply do not feel the urge to eat beyond what is necessary, and all appear lean by human standards. In times of hunger the Hironem become sluggish as their bodies attempt to conserve energy, though they remain capable of short spurts of intense activity. In cases of prolonged famine the body is forced to devour its own muscle mass, though this will redevelop quickly once the Hironem eats again.

There is considerable variation in height among the Hironem, depending on the availability of food during their childhood, but the general average is just under two meters. There is no statistical difference in height between the genders. However, Hironem who grew up in times of scarcity are visibly smaller than those born in more prosperous times. As such there is a general trend toward greater height among the higher

castes, though this is by no means absolute.

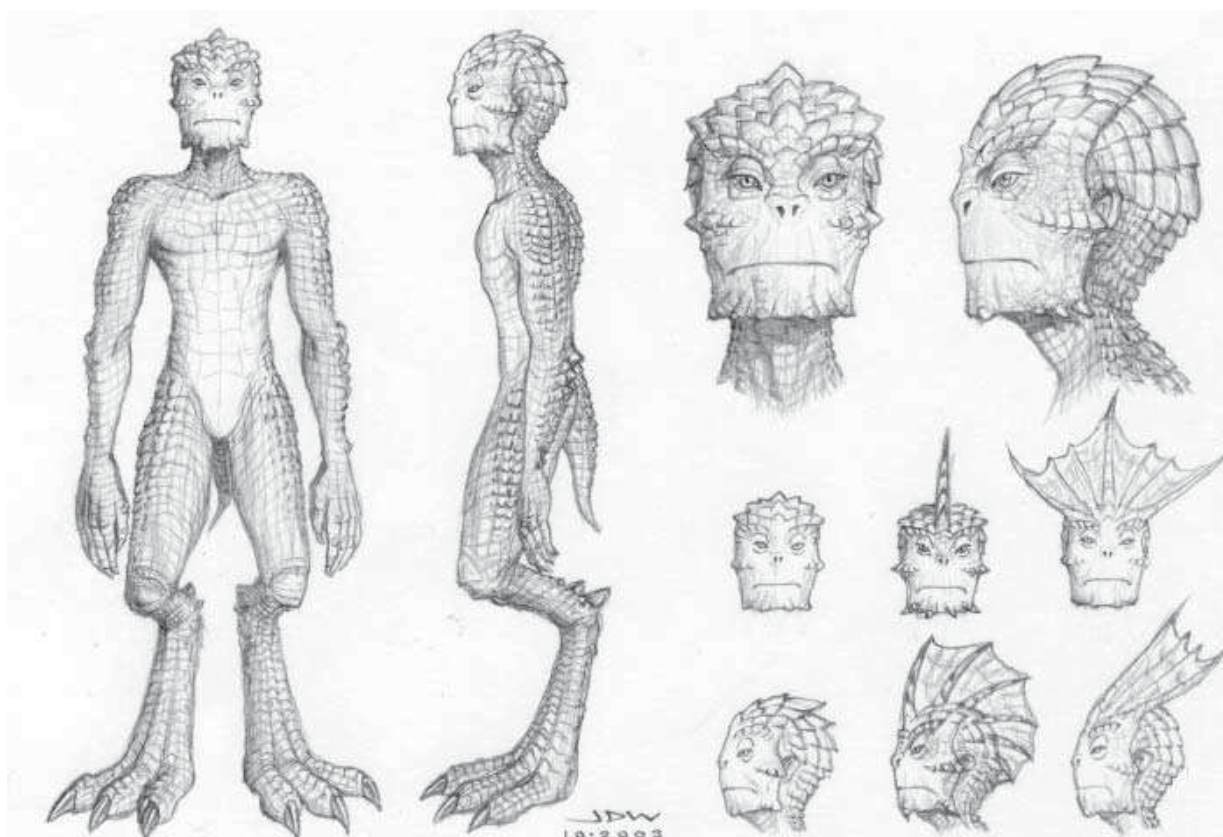
Hironem are naturally hairless; their skin is tough and leathery to the touch, composed of fine overlapping scales, which assist in the retention of water. On the tops of their heads Hironem develop an array of crests composed of thin skin stretched across cartilaginous growths; these are often sculpted by Sibanzi and Warriors to display their status. These appear to be a remnant of an earlier stage of evolutionary development, as they have no apparent purpose to the Hironem beyond simple aesthetics, although aesthetics can prove pertinent when working with S'su.

Hironem must periodically shed their skins to renew their cells. They must do this frequently as they grow, less often once they have attained adulthood. Shedding is considered an extremely private and uncomfortable matter, not unlike human attitudes toward waste processes. However, certain Illu specialize in assisting others in shedding their skins, and such skilled “skin-tenders” can make the experience quite tolerable and even refreshing, by including elements of Sirate and massage, and in extreme cases, sex. The employment of a skin-tender is considered somewhat questionable in polite Hironem society, though Illu laugh that the practice is far more common than any of the higher castes are willing to admit.

The Hironem possess six senses: the same five senses as humans as well as their perception of S'su. Ears are fully developed, though entirely internal, and sense of smell is slightly more acute than a human's. The Hironem sense of taste is comparable to that of a human, and many Makers have developed excellent reputations as chefs in noble households, although a human guest might become upset should he ask the origin of a dish.. The Hironem tongue can extend up to half a meter from its mouth; many of the poorest Hironem use them to forego the process of cooking entirely and simply catch live insects on their tongues.

The Hironem diet predominantly consists of small fauna: birds, insects, fish and small mammals, both native to Cadiz and off-world. *Takasad* is a cold broth brewed from the blood and body oil of the *dukheh*, a fish native to the estuaries around Turaz. The *dukheh* produces a mild stimulant in its body oil, and *takasad*





has become popular among the human peasantry and freefolk. Hironem also adapted quite readily to the Gloucester introduction of cattle and other herd animals, though in Turaz they are so expensive that only the wealthiest Illu can enjoy them. This diet is supplanted with seasonings of herbal spices, certain native fruits, vegetables and especially fungi. Hironem of all castes are deeply fond of off-world mushrooms.

The internal anatomy of a Hironem is quite similar to that of a human; what differences exist are superficial. The arrangement of heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, stomach, pancreas, etc. are all comparable to that of a human. The kidneys are large, however, to accomplish the concentration of urea, and the circulatory and respiratory systems are far less vigorous ex-

cept when the individual is excited. Hironem and humans are anatomically compatible for sexual relations, and several of the Decados nobility have been known to experiment in this area. Hironem can also receive cybernetic devices intended for human bodies, though the surgeon should be familiar with Hironem physiognomy if the patient intends to survive.

Hironem birth their children live and seldom experience multiple births. They reach sexual maturity after 12 Urthish years. The Hironem lifespan varies according to caste; Sibanzi frequently live over 100 years, but the other castes rarely exceed 70. This is due to social and environmental differences in lifestyles, not a genetic distinction between castes as is the case for the Vau.

Places

Turaz

The reservation city-state of Turaz is the spiritual and temporal heart of the Hironem people, and is the only place in the universe which they do not share with humans. The city of Turaz has a population of over 10 million Hironem, and the surrounding countryside is home to nearly twice that number, all under the direct or indirect rule of Shamash the God-King.

Turaz is a striking example of original Hironem architecture: ornate designs embroidering squat, rounded buildings, all arranged in line with the principles of Kanasu S'su manipulation on a massive scale. Most of the materials used are ceramic, reinforced by metal substructures. Poorer areas use materials of lower quality, and some shantytowns must be rebuilt after heavy rains that can wash their mud homes away entirely.

Towering over the city is the holy palace of Bey Tal, from which the God-King watches over his subjects. Bey Tal is built in a manner similar to an Urthish pagoda, with successive structures fashioned on top of each other. It houses the administrative centers of the Sibanzi bureaucracy that runs Hironem society, and its uppermost floors are the apartments of the God-King himself. Hironem legendry has it that the palace was built on the site of the arrival of the Four Gods to Cadiz.

Near the southern coast is located the sprawling Temple of the Four Gods, central to the Hironem religion. The Temple is a massive structure, nearly four square kilometers, and houses countless minor shrines to the Four Gods and the Hironem saints that have emerged since their departure. Different places of worship exist for the devout of all castes, excluding of course the Illu. Within is also the Hurkfei, the most respected seminary school for Sibanzi from all over Cadiz. Only those applicants with the most respectable backgrounds and impressive academic abilities enjoy the privilege of studies here.

Massive walls surround the frontiers of Turaz, constructed of brick and sun-dried mud. Just within Kigazi troopers man the scattered Hironem forts. These forts act both as deterrence to prevent encroachment by humans from beyond the walls and as training

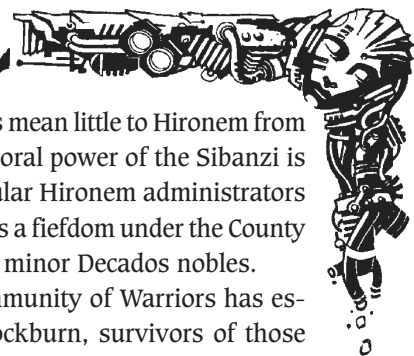
camps for young Kigazi. The walls surround Turaz on all sides except the east, where the harbors of the city are located. A section of the southern wall collapsed in 4997; confused intelligence reported that a cache of Vautech was discovered within, but a nearby Warrior base responded first to the site. Thus agents from both the Imperial Eye and the Jakovian Agency did not gain access to it until the contents, if any, were firmly in the hands of Sibanzi loyal to the God-King.

Sabtah

Beyond the Turaz reservation there are millions of Hironem living in or among human communities. These are officially under the rule of the local human authorities, ultimately governed by the dukes and duchesses of Cadiz, presently Salandra Decados. Hence they are subject to the laws of humanity, but the laws of Turaz are respected as religious edicts. House Decados has traditionally discouraged missionary work among the Hironem within their territories, though there is a legal basis for the institutional encouragement of pagan aliens to convert to the Universal Church.

In the Li Halan territories in Abdera and Herculeum the Church has made serious inroads among the ancestrally Illu population of Hironem, and the Prophet's Word is currently spreading among them in Elibyrge. Sibanzi who attempt to maintain their proper spiritual hierarchies must be cautious or risk running afoul of the Li Halan authorities. By and large the nobility of Houses Van Gelder, Basque and the Castenda Hazat are much more permissive of the Sibanzi in controlling their resident alien populations.

The degree to which the laws of Turaz affect local Hironem population varies a great deal. Some regions are quite strict in their adherence to the God-King's religious laws, while others have developed along more human-like lines. Some populations have taken entirely different directions, and are as independent of the Church as they are of Turaz. Respect for the caste system and observance of its strictures are mandated by the laws of House Decados, which takes advantage of the mechanisms of control that it provides. Thus Decados employ mercenary soldiers from the Hironem Kigazi, using Sibanzi as intermediaries. Sibanzi them-



selves are frequently appointed regional governors over areas with high numbers of Hironem, and Makers are a normal feature of human marketplaces all over the continent.

Certain sections of Abdera are home to autonomous communities of Hironem, outside the direct rule of any human noble. Invariably these regions are near-fanatical in their devotion to the God-King and ruled by a proper Sibani, or they reject Turaz entirely and the entire caste system may be forgotten. Any medium between these extremes is rare among the Abdera Hironem.

Murciyah

Murciyah has had a relatively small Hironem population until recently, with the introduction of new immigrants from Turaz and Hironem communities in Herculeum. The Hironem native to Murciyah, having been conquered by Turaz only a few centuries before the continent was settled by the Gloucesters, have always displayed some resistance to the religious beliefs that are dominant among Hironem across the rest of the planet. Instead, most of the Murciyah Hironem are declared members of the Universal Church, but the manner of their beliefs and worship shows some remnants of the cults of ancestor worship that exists among the Illu of Sabtah. The caste system is acknowledged only insofar as Decados law demands it; in Murciyah it has become an almost entirely secular arrangement.

Known Worlds

A few scattered Hironem communities exist on other worlds of the Empire. The largest of these is Little Turaz, a section of the Decados capital of Tsaritsyn, on Severus. Little Turaz is home to nearly 40,000 of the aliens, making Severus the planet with the third-largest Hironem population known, after Cadiz and Iver. Little Turaz's inhabitants are under a blanket condemnation from the God-King; to set foot in that section of Tsaritsyn is expressly forbidden, under penalty of expulsion from one's caste and being pronounced Illu. Although all are formally Illu themselves, the Hironem of Tsaritsyn are quite scrupulous in respecting the laws their homeworld, though their interpretation tends to be colored by the legal codes that existed at the time that they left Cadiz, shortly after the Fall. They have maintained the caste system, and religious power lies with a committee of high-ranking

Sibanzi, though their titles mean little to Hironem from Cadiz. However, the temporal power of the Sibanzi is limited. There are no secular Hironem administrators in Little Turaz; the region is a fiefdom under the County of Tsaritsyn and ruled by minor Decados nobles.

Recently, a small community of Warriors has established itself on Bannockburn, survivors of those Hironem who volunteered to serve House Decados in the Emperor Wars. The Dragons were a company of Kigazi recruited by Baronet Bogdan Gosinya, against the wishes of the God-King. The Dragons served on the Criticorum Front for most of the Wars, usually as a frontline combat or suicide unit. Against all expectations the Dragons survived to see the peace of the Empire, but were unceremoniously discharged from Decados service once hostilities had ceased. Most of the Dragons joined the Muster, and a few have managed to advance within the guild.

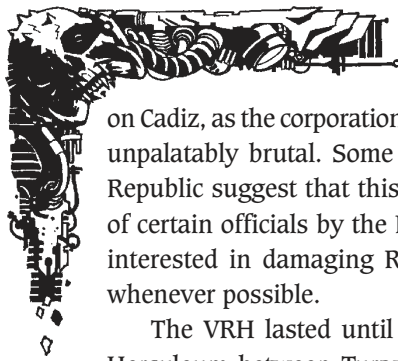
In the last few years Dragon Warriors have seen action along the Vuldruk Marches and among Muster operations on Leagueheim, where they have acquired an excellent reputation as skilled snipers. They have not been permitted to join the war effort on Stigmata, due to opposition from the Church, Brother Battle and the Manifest Light, all of which are deeply concerned with preventing the Symbiots from becoming aware of S'su and its potential.

The Dragons have become something of a legend among Kigazi society on Cadiz, which views them both as pariahs and heroes. Among some of the Hironem communities in Abdera, from where many of the original Dragons were recruited, a new tradition has established itself: Whenever a Warrior's group marriage dissolves and if no children have been produced, the youngest member of the marriage is sent to find and join the Dragons. These pilgrims seek out the first Muster ship that they can find, but most find themselves joining the Muster not as fighters but as slaves. Some of the older Dragons have become aware of this problem and are seeking ways to prevent it.

Iver

The settlement now known as Tlog was established by the Second Republic in 3840, among the jungles of western Vasta. It was originally a penal colony for Hironem, known as the Vasta Reservation for Hironem, or simply the VRH. Awarding prison contracts to private institutions had proven unworkable





on Cadiz, as the corporations that were involved proved unpalatably brutal. Some records out of the Second Republic suggest that this was due to the corruption of certain officials by the Decados family, which was interested in damaging Republic-Hironem relations whenever possible.

The VRH lasted until 3922, when the Treaty of Herculeum between Turaz and the Second Republic abolished Republican prisons for the Hironem; Hironem criminals would instead be extradited to Sibanzi answering to the God-King. However, a legal loophole was created in that if the crime committed was not illegal by the standards of the Hironem the criminal could be summarily freed by the Sibani in charge. This agreement was meant to gain Turaz' support in the face of rising turmoil within the Republic itself.

With the VRH terminated it was expected that the Hironem prisoners there would be free to return home. However, the God-King instead decreed that those of the VRH would be pronounced Illu if they ever returned to Cadiz. Many of the inmates of the VRH had been there for decades, and the God-King wanted no part of the off-world ideas that they would surely bring with them. Instead the Republic sent specialists, teachers and laborers to help the Hironem establish their own community where the VRH had once stood. The environment was pleasant to the Hironem, which was part of the reason that the site had been chosen for the VRH in the first place, and Iver already had sizable populations of other aliens.

Tlog was enormously successful. Its people learned to cultivate the swamps and jungles as they had on their homeworld, and imported certain plants and animals from Cadiz to help them do so. They established trade relations with other communities on Iver. Most remarkably, Hironem began emigrating from Cadiz, and Tlog grew into a fairly sized city. When Iver chose to close its jumpgate and isolate itself from the chaos of the Fall, Tlog was fervent in its support; the Hironem

were terrified of the rising power and intolerance of the Universal Church.

Following the closure of the jumpgate Tlog was forced to consider the future of its government, and of its religion, as their ultimate ruler, the God-King, was far away on Cadiz. It had until been under the authority of a Shin recognized by the God-King, but without a continuation of this endorsement that authority came into question. The decision was settled by a faction of the Sibanzi, among whom there was a young Etan distantly related to the Divine lineage, Na Nnua. Whether any real relationship existed is unproven; what genealogical records are available on Cadiz make no mention of this individual. A minor coup took place, supported by some very prominent Kigazi, and Tlog had its new dynasty: that of Shamash Dozo, the Little God.

At present, the Hironem population on Iver numbers nearly 600,000, centered around Tlog and the surrounding tropical countryside. There is still a Shamash Dozo who rules in that city and is also supreme religious authority for all the Hironem of Iver who have maintained the faith. The Hironem are represented in the Iver Senate by a Sibanzi vizier appointed by Shamash Dozo. Hironem also frequent the marketplaces of Zeppitai, and trade infrequently with their Shantor neighbors in nearby Shamrak. There are also trade relations with the human communities of Brun and Bilgo, but disputes arise frequently.

Over the millennia of separation that they have experienced, the Hironem of Tlog have developed some very considerable differences of religious doctrine from Turaz. The foremost of these affects one of the most integral aspects of the Hironem way of life: the caste system. The Illu Revolt of 4238 won the Illu of Iver the rights of caste; the designation "Illu" was abolished and those tasks once considered unclean became the duties of other castes. This difference is the chief dispute between Shamash and Shamash Dozo, and is a major concern to Sibanzi serving both rulers.



Rules

Combat

Anzu (Hironem Martial Art) Warrior Caste only

Hironem martial arts, practiced by the Warrior caste, utilize the concept of S'su. The student uses his internal reservoir of S'su to perform amazing feats. Teaching other castes the art of Anzu is illegal and Warriors who change castes must refrain from using it. Anzu employs the basic martial arts moves listed in the rulebook, though the techniques are known by their Hironem names, such as *Mak Paz* for Speed Fist and *Sum Paz* for Sure Fist.

Hypnotic Strike (*Reshla Avoshau*) (Level 4): Beware a warrior who weaves his body or arms. The Hironem has learned to confound his opponents through hypnotic gestures. +3 to overcome a single target's dodge.

Center (*Inteong*) (Level 4): The warrior deliberately slows his movements, takes a moment to calm his body and mind and before a burst of sudden movement. He can take no other action this turn unless he accepts a multi-action penalty, but his first action next turn is +2 initiative and +1 goal and damage. This martial ability can also be used with melee weapons; to do this the character must have Melee 4. No roll is required.

Ornamentation (*Vansib thiy*) (Level 6): The warrior can add an elaborate flourish to her performance

d20 System

Living Weapon Specialty: +2 Initiative when Refocusing (in addition to other modifiers).

of certain maneuvers, displaying her skill. When performing a Martial Fist, Martial Kick or Block the practitioner can make an additional Dexterity + Impress roll without a multi-action penalty. The game effects are up to the gamesmaster, but uncertain opponents may feel inclined to retreat or surrender, and any bystanders may be impressed. No other actions may be made in this turn.

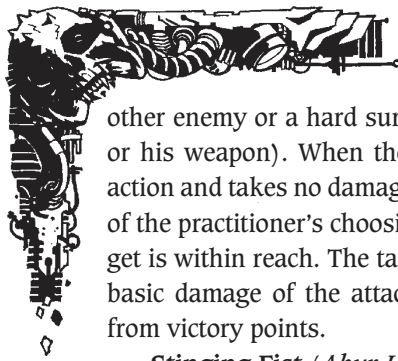
Barrier Spirit (*S'suvana Tanhu*) (Level 7): A defensive move, the warrior has refined her S'su to absorb the force of an attack. The practitioner spends one Wyrd point and gains protection equal to a leather jerkin (4d) for the rest of the span. There is rumored to be a higher level of this ability providing protection against bullets and beams, but whether or not it truly exists, and at what level, is up to the gamesmaster. This level can be combined with armor or energy shields.

Redirect Force (*Yigha Uvalimaft*) (Level 8): The character has developed a refined understanding of the kinetics of combat in relation to bodily energies, to the point that she can guide an opponent's strikes in unexpected ways. When blocking a hand-to-hand or melee weapon attack the practitioner can redirect that attack toward another nearby target, such as an-

Martial Arts Actions Chart

Action	LVL	Roll	Init	Goal	DMG	Effect
Hypnotic Strike	4	Dx+Fight	-2	3	-	If successful, target suffers -3 Dodge
Center		4	-	-	-	Skip action, +2 Init, +1 goal and damage next round
Ornamentation	6	-	-	-	-	Dex+Impress roll without multi-action penalty on certain maneuvers
Barrier Spirit	7	Faith+Dodge	-	-	-	Gain 4d armor
Redirect Force	8	Dx+Fight	-	-	-	As Block. If no damage is inflicted, a different target of character's choice is struck.
Stinging Fist	9	Dx+Fight	-	-	-	Roll Str+Vigor vs. target's Str+Vigor. If successful, target is grappled; apply damage





other enemy or a hard surface (to injure the attacker or his weapon). When the character makes a Block action and takes no damage the attack strikes a target of the practitioner's choosing, as long as the new target is within reach. The target is struck with only the basic damage of the attack, without added damage from victory points.

Stinging Fist (*Ahur Lam Paz*) (Level 9): A combination of Grapple and Speed Fist, the stylist has mastered two separate moves so that he can perform them as one. A grappling action designed to hold a target fast while delivering a rapid series of stinging blows. First, roll Dexterity + Fight to close with the target (make a note of the victory points). If successful, roll Str + Vigor vs. the target's Str + Vigor. If successful, the target is grappled and the attacker may then deliver two Fist attacks in quick succession.

No additional goal roll is required for these attacks. Roll damage twice; damage is equal to two dice plus the victory dice gained on the initial grappling roll. Total the damage of both rolls when applied against physical armor but consider each separate against an energy shield. The attacker suffers no multiple action penalty.

Traits

Benefices

Status

Ordained (1-11): The character is part of the Sibanzi caste, and holds a position of authority in the community. In old days, a rank designated specific duties, such as a Prefect overseeing an entire province. Today, relegated to one city, many of the duties no longer exist but the offices remain. A Prefect Siban might not have a province to command, but still holds a great deal of influence among Hironem.

- 1 = Initiate
- 3 = Master (parish priest)
- 5 = Etan (deacon/baron)
- 7 = Prefect (governor/earl)
- 9 = Shin (bishop/count)
- 11 = Vizier (advise the God-King directly)

Kigazi Prestige (1-5): The character is one of the Kigazi, the Warrior caste of the Hironem. These ranks are not official; the Kigazi are supposed to be without an internal hierarchy. However, they do indicate the regard with which other caste-fellows will hold the

character. A Warrior without this trait is assumed to be a Stalwart.

1 = Champion

2 = Warden

3 = Praetor

S'su Vision (5 pts)

(Perception + Empathy, 1W)

Every Hironem has the ability to empathically perceive the S'su of people and places, a sort of innate psychic power (although it does not require Psi). S'su can reveal general emotions, health and well-being, and states of mind, but cannot reveal specific thoughts. A very successful roll, however, can supply quite a lot of useful information. A Hironem does not see auras so much as senses emotions. Reading an area — a bar room, a ship's bridge, the Hazat nobleman's drawing room — S'su Vision provides information about the overall emotions present (happy, confused, angry, depressed, etc.). But it is more than simply reading emotions — it tells if a person or place is influenced by good or bad, positive or negative S'su. Accuracy and amount of information increases with victory points. If reading the aura of a human, roll Perception + Xeno-Empathy.

Affliction

Status

Illu (+1): The character is an Illa, an outcast from Hironem society. This is either due to expulsion from his former caste or he was born into an Illu family. The character has no legal rights in Hironem society and will be treated with extreme disdain by most Hironem. Because this Affliction is so limited (it only affects interactions with other Hironem), it only gives 1 point. However, the gamesmaster may wish to increase the points awarded if the campaign involves frequent contact with other Hironem.

Learned Skills

Lore (Naaram)

Hironem Skill

Roll: Wits + Lore (Naaram)

This skill concerns the personal understanding of one's own S'su and the proper techniques in channeling it to improve health and psychology, such as diet, meditation and exercises of breathing and balance. Most Hironem possess this skill to some degree; those without it usually do not subscribe to traditional Hironem beliefs. In game terms, Lore (Naaram) is most



effective as a complementary skill for Focus, Meditation, Stoic Body, Stoic Mind and Remedy (for self-treatment).

Sirate

Sibanzi Skill

Roll: Wits + Sirate

An ancient skill among Hironem, this is healing through the manipulation, regulation and tapping of internal S'su meridians. S'su moves through the body along set lines, similar to arteries and veins. By tapping the correct S'su line, a Hironem can perform surgery without anesthesia, cure diseases without drugs or prevent future illness. Needles or applied pressure can be used. This skill is useless on other races. The Sirate practitioner is able to perform the same tasks as Physick, but not those of Remedy.

Sirate (Human)

Sibanzi Skill

Roll: Wits + Sirate (Human)

Humans have been interacting with Hironem for a long time, and many Sibanzi have been paying attention. This skill implies an understanding of human physiognomy from the unique perspective of the Hironem, and enables the practitioner to heal a human patient in a fashion similar to traditional Sirate, which can only be used on Hironem. Sibanzi capable of using Sirate on humans are usually from Abdera, where the practice is growing. This skill is useful only for treating humans.

Kanasu

Sibanzi Skill

Roll: Perception + Kanasu

An important skill for a Siban, this is the ability to manipulate the vibrations present in an area, for good or ill. Attracting positive S'su brings good fortune while negative S'su augurs bad luck. This skill involves moving or placing object to affect an area's S'su. Certain rituals can cleanse a place of bad influences or attract them to cause harm. In an area of bad S'su a Hironem fails his skill rolls more frequently and generally suffers bad luck. The gamesmaster determines the energy of an area, and any goal roll penalties.

Whether or not Kanasu is effective remains debatable, but there are hints that it may be effective for the Vau as well as the Hironem. It doesn't seem to affect other races, yet a Hironem in an area of negative S'su feels cold and uneasy, as though something

were out of kilter. The effect may be genuine or psychological. Hironem know when the Kanasu expert has been successful, and the Sibanzi make a great deal of money from manipulating S'su lines.

Sas Kanasu (Theurgy)

Sibanzi learn their own form of Theurgy, tied to their belief in S'su. Although known by their own Hironem names, *Sas Kanasu* utilizes the rituals listed in the rulebook under Church, Orthodox and Sanctuary Aeon. The Warrior Caste can use the rituals listed under Brother Battle. All references to the Pancreator should be ignored.

Sas Kanasu derives its effectiveness from the force in which all material things take part — S'su. It requires gestures similar to Naaram or the ancient Urth practice of Tai Chi, and prayers in the form of meditation (though not a meditation skill roll). Hironem earn Hubris — becoming a focal point for bad S'su — as described in the rulebook. A Sibanzi or Warrior who undergoes the Mahazu ritual and is reduced in caste is not allowed to use Sas Kanasu — the penalty being death.

d20 System Rules Hironem Theurgists

Sibanzi and Kigazi characters may develop levels as Theurgists, but the theurgical canons that they can pursue are limited by their castes. Sibanzi may practice Piety, Sendings or the unique Hironem canon of *Sas Kanasu*. Kigazi may pursue Protection and Wrath.

Sas Kanasu Canon (Wis)

Degree	Rites
1st	Cleanse
2nd	Revive
3rd	Rejuvenation

New Feats

Sibanzi Ordination [Social]

You are a member of the Sibanzi ruling caste of the Hironem

Prerequisites: Hironem, Noble level 1+ or Priest level 1+.

Benefit: You bear a Sibanzi rank above the basic title of Initiate. Its title depends on how many lev-



els of this stackable feat you possess. Each successive level raises you in rank one title (see the chart below).

In addition, each rank grants you +1 Diplomacy among Hironem (of any caste). This bonus is stackable with each successive rank (i.e. an Etan gets a +3 Diplomacy bonus).

1st feat = Master

2nd feat = Etan

3rd feat = Prefect

4th feat = Shin

5th feat = Vizier

Kigazi Prestige [Social]

You have served as a Warrior of the Hironem, and have gained the respect of other Kigazi.

Prerequisites: Hironem, Kigazi, any character level 1+.

Benefit: You bear a Kigazi rank among the Warrior Caste of the Hironem. Your title depends on how many levels of this stackable feat you possess. Each successive level raises you in rank one title (see the chart below). Kigazi without this feat are considered to be Stalwarts. The drawback is that you may be called to duty in times of crisis. Refusing such a call is grounds for removal of rank, or even of caste.

In addition, each rank grants you +1 Intimidate when dealing with other Hironem. This bonus is stackable with each successive rank (i.e., a Warden gets a +2 Intimidate bonus).

1st feat = Champion

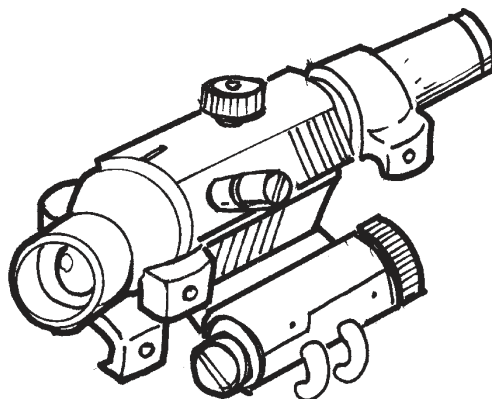
2nd feat = Warden

3rd feat = Praetor

Equipment

Rovles'su

While human nobles duel with swords and Ur-Ukar fight with knives, the Kigazi or warrior caste of the Hironem developed their own unique form of dueling long before the arrival of humanity on Cadiz. By human standards the Kigazi style is crass and without finesse, for Hironem employ firearms in their duels. A traditional Kigazi duel is fought with each Warrior carrying a small, bulletproof buckler in one hand and a pistol loaded with specific dueling ammunition. These slugs are designed for little or no penetration so that wounds are as clean and small as possible, and to allow the buckler's protection to be effective. Of more



significance is the unique "rovles'su" gun sight mounted on the weapon, a remarkable device which is as much the heart of the Hironem duel as the energy shield is for human nobles.

The rovles'su is a distant kin to the human laser scope, whereby a narrow laser beam pinpoints the target of the weapon. But where a laser sight merely predicts the bullet's point of impact, the rovles'su actually guides the bullet in its flight. The rovles'su's beam is invisible to human and other alien vision but is easily seen by Hironem. Thus the device has never been of much use for assassination among their kind — of what use is a sniper if the weapon is seen even before the gunshot? Rovles'su have likewise never been employed for larger conflicts, being far too expensive for the battlefield. They are specifically meant for dueling.

The beam projected by a rovles'su is only partially defined by human science, which detects a combination of high-frequency photons and fiercely condensed magnetic force lines. The Engineers' Guild suggests that the scope defines a magnetic tunnel down which the metal bullet travels. This pathway need not be linear; a gunman can define a quite complicated path of multiple curves quite impossible to human weaponry by adjusting a variety of knobs and dials on the scope itself. It is for this reason that possession of a rovles'su is strongly banned by House Decados outside of Turaz, who fear its potential as a sniper's weapon against its nobles. Only the very best of human detection equipment can discern such a beam among normal ambient radiation, but the most effective preventative measure is simply to employ a Hironem bodyguard. There presently exists a heated debate about the use of rovles'su



THE HEAVENS DENIED: HIRONEM

by Kigazi Hironem sanctioned as Mantis League assassins.

The Kigazi duel involves two Warriors who exchange fire until one dies or surrenders. Spectators, especially non-Kigazi, are strongly discouraged but not forbidden, due to the possibility of injury. If the duel remains unresolved by the time both combatants deplete their ammunition it simply begins again, but should one fighter deplete his ammunition he must simply defend himself until the other does the same. The Hironem concept of dueling finesse comprises several factors: the elegance and complexity of bullet trajectories, the skill and confidence of the parries, and the poise and attitude of the Warriors in combat. Since both warriors can perceive the projectile flight paths before the opponent's weapon is fired, using the buckler to parry is not as impossible as human spectators might believe. Often a duel is won with more wit than with skill, as even S'su vision is irrelevant if a bullet curves in from behind the target. On the rare occasion when a human becomes involved in a Kigazi duel both parties go without rovles'su, as humans are totally unable to employ or defend against the device.

The rovles'su may be considered a standard scope, in that for every turn a gunman spends aiming a +1 is added to the goal roll for the attack. Alternatively, the sniper may choose to spend a turn altering the flight path of the bullet; one curve per turn spent. The total number of turns spent together aiming and altering the flight path cannot exceed the quality of the rovles'su, just as the number of turns spent aiming alone cannot exceed the quality of a regular human-tech gunsight. Note that for the rovles'su to be effective the target must still be visible to the gunman, even though the path of the bullet might not correspond to that line of sight.

The rovles'su beam is visible to Hironem, and so they can use their S'su Vision (Perception + Empathy) as a complementary roll for the dodge or parry.

Rovles'su — d20 System

The rovles'su acts as a scope with 5x magnification. However, it provides the additional capability of enabling curved bullet trajectories. This demands that you take the time for an aimed shot (one full-round action to line up the target, another to catch him in the crosshairs). One additional full-round action of aiming is needed to manipulate the flight path as desired; overly complex trajectories may merit a



penalty on the attack roll.

The rovles'su beam is visible to Hironem, as long as their S'su Vision is active.

Cybernetics — Hironem Eyes (3 pts)

TL6

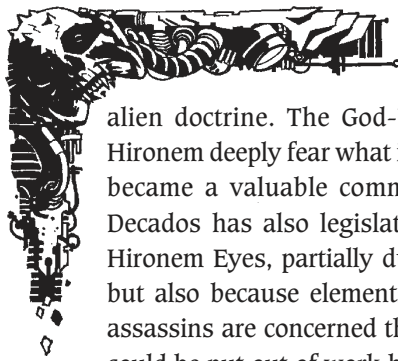
Features: +1 Perception, S'su Vision, Organic, Self-Powered, Unsilently, Skill Use, Proscribed

Incompatibility: 3

Firebird cost: 3083 (2063 organs and cybernetic interface, 1020 surgery)

This extremely proscribed procedure implants the Linnal, the S'su-sensitive organs of a Hironem, into another being using cybernetic interfaces to splice the sensory input from the alien organs into a more conventional optic nerve, allowing the recipient to "see" S'su energies (albeit crudely). These implants are highly sought-after by assassins and bodyguards on Cadiz, as well as mystics and artists. Human assassins desire to be able to use the Hironem rovles'su gun sights, and bodyguards wish to be able to guard against them. Artists and mystics wish to see the world as the Hironem do, for beauty and for understanding. Such transplants are forbidden by the Church, which views it as an abominable acceptance of a schismatic





alien doctrine. The God-King opposes it, as some Hironem deeply fear what it could mean if their Linnal became a valuable commodity to humans. House Decados has also legislated against humans using Hironem Eyes, partially due to pressure from Turaz, but also because elements of the Mantis League of assassins are concerned that many of their members could be put out of work by this tech.

These implants are readily visible; the deep facial scars that they inflict are unmistakable. Use of this device demands the purchase of a new skill: S'su Vision. To operate, spend 1 Wyrd point and roll Perception + S'su Vision; it reveals the same as the Hironem power of the same name.

Hironem Eyes — d20 System

TL 6 **Incompatibility:** 3 **Cost:** 3083 fb

Enables you to use the Hironem power of S'su Vision. This means that you have access to the 2nd Degree psychic power of Sixth Sense: Subtle Sight. Like the Hironem there is no Wyrd cost, but characters do not enjoy their Hironem +5 racial bonus, nor does this implant provide the Second Sight skill. The skill must be pursued as a normal cross-class skill.

Character Creation

Custom Creation

Cost: 3 Extra points

Characteristics: Dexterity (base 4; cost: 2 pts)

Learned Skills: Lore (Naaram), Read Salsu (2 pts), Speak Salsu, Speak Urthish (2 pts)

Blessings: S'su Vision (5 pts)

Curses: Cold-blooded (+3 pts: -2 Endurance for every 10 degrees below 60°F, -1 Perception for every 10 degrees over 100°F), No Psi (+3 pts; cannot purchase psychic powers)

Affliction: Ostracized (+2 pts)

Hironem may range in size from Short (+3 pts) to Tall (3 pts). Higher castes are usually taller, but this is not an absolute.

Suggested Caste Traits

Characters who attain a new caste should emphasize the traits associated with the new caste when spending experience points. Thus, a Warrior, upon becoming a Sibani, should spend points to increase her Impress and purchase the appropriate learned skills. On the downward slope, a Warrior relegated to the

Maker caste should stop improving combat skills and concentrate on his new trade.

Sibani

Characteristics: Wits, Faith

Natural Skills: Impress, Observe

Learned Skills: Focus, Kanasu, Leadership, Oratory, Sirate, Stoic Mind

Blessings/Curses: Commanding (2 pts: +2 Impress when leading Hironem)/ Arrogant (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert around lesser castes)

Benefices: Secrets, Gossip Network (1), Vestments (Hironem), Ordained

Warrior

Characteristics: Dexterity, Perception, Passion

Natural Skills: Dodge, Fight, Melee, Shoot

Learned Skills: Combat Actions (Anzu), Stoic Body, Survival

Blessings/Curses: Disciplined (2 pts: +2 Calm in combat situations)/ Obedient (+2 pts: -2 Passion around authority)

Benefices: Kigazi Prestige

Maker

Characteristics: Endurance

Learned Skills: Artisan, Empathy, Lore (Folk)

Blessings/Curses: Curious (2 pts: +2 Extrovert when seeing something new)/ Meek (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert around conflict)

Benefices: Ally, Family ties (Warrior or Sibani relative)

Illu

Characteristics: Perception

Natural Skills: Dodge, Observe, Sneak

Learned Skills: Lore (Regional)

Blessings/Curses: Tough Nut (2 pts: +2 Endurance when being physically beaten)/ Secretive (+2 pts: -2 Extrovert around non-Illu)

Benefices: Contact, Secrets

Affliction: Illu (+1 pt)

Character Histories

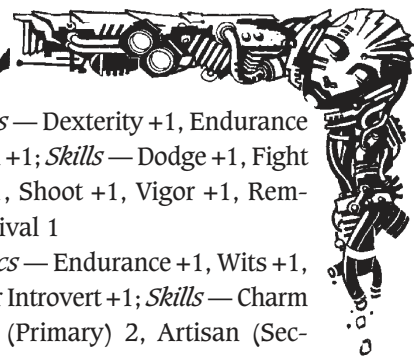
Upbringing

A Hironem's childhood, like so much else of her life, is strongly influenced by the caste into which she was born. Youth does not imply freedom from responsibilities.

Sibani: *Characteristics* — Dexterity (base 4), Perception +1, Wits +1, Extrovert or Introvert +1, Faith



THE HEAVENS DENIED: HIRONEM



+2; *Skills* — Charm +1, Impress +1, Observe +1, Etiquette 1, Focus 1; *Blessings* — S'su Vision; *Curses* — Cold-blooded (-2 Endurance for every 10 degrees below 60°F, -1 Perception for every 10 degrees over 100°F), No Psi (cannot purchase psychic powers); *Affliction* — Ostracized (mild)

Kiga: *Characteristics* — Strength +1, Dexterity (base 4) +1, Endurance +1, Perception +1, Passion +1; *Skills* — Dodge +1, Fight +1, Impress +1, Melee +1, Vigor +1; *Blessings* — S'su Vision; *Curses* — Cold-blooded (-2 Endurance for every 10 degrees below 60°F, -1 Perception for every 10 degrees over 100°F), No Psi (cannot purchase psychic powers); *Affliction* — Ostracized (mild)

Kimm: *Characteristics* — Strength +1, Dexterity (base 4), Endurance +1, Wits +1, Tech +1; *Skills* — Charm +1, Vigor +1, Artisan 1, Empathy 1, Lore (Folk) 1; *Blessings* — S'su Vision; *Curses* — Cold-blooded (-2 Endurance for every 10 degrees below 60°F, -1 Perception for every 10 degrees over 100°F), No Psi (cannot purchase psychic powers); *Affliction* — Ostracized (mild)

Illa: *Characteristics* — Dexterity (base 4) +1, Endurance +1, Wits +1, Perception +1, Faith or Ego +1; *Skills* — Dodge +1, Observe +1, Sneak +1, Inquiry 1, Lore (Regional) 1; *Blessings* — S'su Vision; *Curses* — Cold-blooded (-2 Endurance for every 10 degrees below 60°F, -1 Perception for every 10 degrees over 100°F), No Psi (cannot purchase psychic powers); *Affliction* — Ostracized (mild)

Apprenticeship

The early adulthood of a Hironem's life brings new responsibilities. Many castes separate the children from their families, which brings a new understanding of one's environment. Select the environment in which the character was raised, and add it to his caste apprenticeship.

Environment

Human City: *Characteristics* — Dexterity +1; *Skills* — Dodge +1

Turaz: *Characteristics* — Faith +1; *Skills* — Lore (Naaram) +1

Caste

Siban: *Characteristics* — Wits +1, Perception +1, Extrovert or Introvert +1, Faith +1; *Skills* — Charm +1, Impress +1, Focus 1, Kanasu 1, Leadership 1, Lore (Naaram) 1, Oratory 1, Sirate 1, Stoic Mind 1

Kigazi: *Characteristics* — Dexterity +1, Endurance +1, Perception +1, Passion +1; *Skills* — Dodge +1, Fight +1, Impress +1, Melee +1, Shoot +1, Vigor +1, Remedy 1, Stoic Body 1, Survival 1

Kimm: *Characteristics* — Endurance +1, Wits +1, Perception +1, Extrovert or Introvert +1; *Skills* — Charm +1, Observe +1, Artisan (Primary) 2, Artisan (Secondary) 1, Inquiry 1, Lore (Folk) 1, Streetwise or Survival 2

Illu: *Characteristics* — Endurance +1, Wits +1, Perception +2; *Skills* — Dodge +1, Observe +1, Sneak +1, Vigor +1, Artisan 1, Gambling 1, Inquiry 1, Knavery 1, Streetwise or Survival 1

Early Career

Sibanzi

Diplomat: *Characteristics* — Endurance +1, Wits +2, Perception +2, Tech +1, Extrovert +2, Calm +1, Faith +1; *Skills* — Charm +1, Impress +1, Observe +1, Etiquette 2, Focus 1, Inquiry 1, Knavery 1, Lore (a noble house) 1, Read Salsu (2 pts), Read Urthish (2 pts), Xeno-Empathy 2

Turaz bureaucrat: *Characteristics* — Wits +2, Perception +1, Extrovert +1, Introvert +1, Extrovert or Introvert +1, Passion or Calm +2, Faith +2; *Skills* — Charm or Impress +1, Observe +1, Academia 2, Arts (pick one) or Performance (pick one) 2, Bureaucracy 2, Focus 1, Kanasu 1, Read Salsu (2 pts), Sirate 1, Social (Leadership or Oratory) 1, Stoic Mind 1

Country Siban: *Characteristics* — Endurance +1, Wits +2, Perception +2, Extrovert +1, Passion or Calm +2, Faith +2; *Skills* — Charm or Impress +2, Observe +1, Focus 1, Kanasu 2, Lore (Folk) 1, Read Salsu (2 pts), Sirate 2, Social (Leadership or Oratory) 2, Stoic Mind 2

Kigazi

Frontier: *Characteristics* — Strength +2, Dexterity +2, Endurance +2, Wits +1, Perception +2, Passion +1; *Skills* — Dodge +1, Combat skill (choose Fight, Melee or Shoot) +2, Combat skill (secondary) +1, Impress +1, Vigor +1, Stoic Body 1, Survival 1, Warfare (choose specialty) 1

Choose one of the following:

Anzu: Martial Fist, Martial Kick, Martial Hold
Fencing: Parry, Thrust, Slash

Turaz: *Characteristics* — Strength +2, Dexterity +2, Endurance +1, Wits +1, Perception +1, Extrovert or Introvert +1, Passion or Calm +1, Faith +1; *Skills* —



Dodge +1, Combat skill (choose Fight, Melee or Shoot) +2, Combat skill (secondary) +1, Drive (choose specialty) 1, Impress +1, Vigor +1, Inquiry 1, Stoic Body 1

Choose one of the following:

Anzu: Martial Fist, Martial Kick, Martial Hold
Fencing: Parry, Thrust, Slash

Kimmu

Characteristics — Strength +2, Endurance +2, Wits +1, Perception +1, Tech +1, Extrovert or Introvert +1, Passion or Calm +1, Faith +1; *Skills* — Charm +2, Dodge +1, Observe +1, Vigor +2, Artisan (primary) 2, Artisan (secondary) 1, Drive (choose specialty) 2, Lore (Folk) 1, Craft Redemption 2, Tech Redemption (any other) 1

Illu

Characteristics — Strength +1, Dexterity +2, Endurance +2, Wits +1, Perception +1, Passion or Calm +1, Faith or Ego +1; *Skills* — Charm +1, Dodge +2, Fight 1, Observe +2, Sneak +2, Vigor +1, Inquiry 1, Gambling 1, Knavery 2, Survival or Streetwise 2

Tours of Duty

Hironem can take two Tours of Duty, but they receive only 11 skill points for the first. They cannot take Psychic Awakening. Hironem can become Imperial Cohorts, but not Questing Knights. Hironem can take Cybernetics, although they are not common on Cadiz.

d20 System Characters

Traits

Language: Hironem speak their own language, Salsu, and most also speak Urthish.

Names: Bel Zaar, Sabuta Dal, Zibota Lupar, Sanzo Sarza.

Alignment: Hironem are normally lawful, with neutral tendencies. However, individuals found off their homeworld can vary wildly in alignment.

- +2 Wisdom, -2 Constitution: Hironem are perceptive and contemplative, but their cold-blooded nature makes them less resilient than other races.

- S'su Vision: All Hironem can perceive the S'su of people and places. This ability works just like the Second Sight psychic power Subtle Sight. All Hironem have Second Sight as a class skill, regardless of class, with Wisdom as the ability modifier. This can only be used for the Subtle Sight effect. Hironem also receive a +5 racial bonus to this skill. Hironem can also use this skill untrained. Otherwise, it works just like the Psi power, except that there is no Wyrd cost required.



THE HEAVENS DENIED: HIRONEM

- **Cold-blooded:** Hironem are not well suited to extreme temperatures and suffer a -4 to all Wilderness Lore checks to resist subdual damage from extreme heat and cold.

- -2 racial penalty to Bluff, Diplomacy, Gather Information, and Sense Motive skill checks against non-Hironem. This penalty can be overcome for a particular race by taking the Xeno-empathy feat.

- **Automatic Languages:** Salsu and Urthish. **Bonus Languages:** All human dialects, Latin, Lojmaa (Obunish), Uryari (Ukarish), Oro'ym, and Gannok.

Caste

All Hironem belong to a caste. Choose one of the following:

Sibanzi (Noble Priest)

You must take the feat Sibanzi Ordination to be a Siban.

Bonus Class Skill: Sense Motive.

Knack: +2 Diplomacy with Hironem.

Kigazi (Warrior)

Bonus Class Skill: Wilderness Lore.

Knack: +2 Bluff when feinting.

Kimmu (Maker)

Bonus Class Skill: Any one Craft skill.

Knack: +2 to all Profession skills.

Illu (outcast)

Bonus Class Skill: Listen

Knack: May purchase up to 3 levels of Assets feat without its normal prerequisites.

Typical Classes

Most character classes are available to Hironem, but some are restricted by caste and others must include certain modifications. If a Hironem character changes castes she should choose a new, more suitable character class. She may not develop levels in the character class(es) of her former caste unless she happens to regain it. For example, a Siban who is reduced to a Warrior cannot develop any more levels as a Noble. Becoming Illu is an exception; a Siban who is pronounced Illu can continue to develop levels as a Noble or a Priest, but can also pursue development in Illu character classes.

Beastfriend: Any caste, but Hironem look upon Beastfriends with suspicion, fearing that they may associate with dangerous ancestral Souls in the wilds.

Brother Battle: Any caste, but the player had better explain it with a solid background story. This character would probably be the only Hironem Brother Battle in existence.

Guilder: Any caste.

Knave: Kigazi or Illu only.

Living Weapon: Kigazi only.

Noble: Sibanzi only. However, use the new feat Sibanzi Ordination instead of Noble House.

Priest: Special. Sibanzi Priests use the new Sibanzi Ordination feat instead of Church Ordination. If the character is intended as a Priest of the Universal Church, use the Church Ordination feat. A Hironem Priest of the Universal Church is a rarity, but may be from any caste.

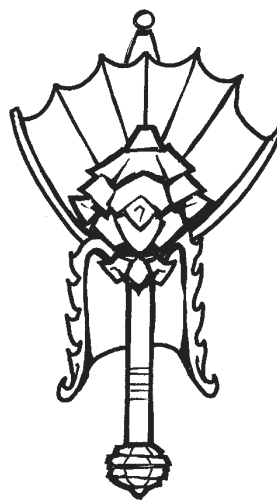
Psychic: None.

Soldier: Kigazi only.

Starwolf: At the gamesmaster's discretion. There may be Hironem communities on certain far-off planets such as Lamorak or Tsuma. If the caste system is still intact on these worlds, then the Starwolf class would be restricted to Kigazi.

Techie: Special. Any caste may be Techies by joining a guild, but Kimmu Techies have the option of exchanging their Guild Commission for a Bonus Tech Feat. The character still needs to meet the prerequisites of the feat chosen.

Theurgist: Sibanzi or Kigazi only.



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