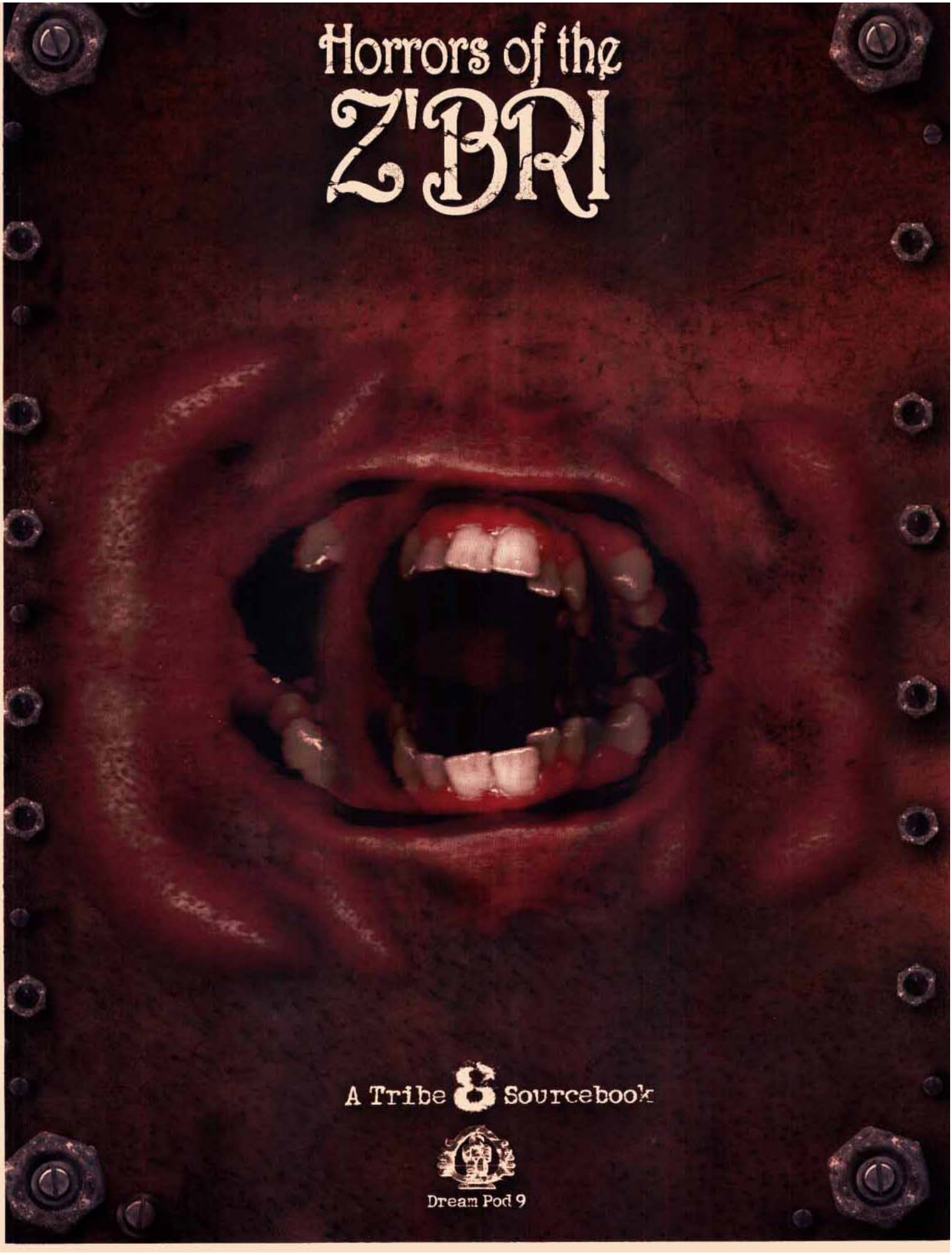
Horrors of the Z'BRI



A Tribe 8 Sourcebook

Dream Pod 9

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Horrors of the Z'BRI

The Beasts rose from humanity's despair. We welcomed them with open arms, for they took our shapes and entered our bodies. As much as we called out for a savior, so did they. The Fold was split and they poured through, newborns eager to experience as much as they could. They laid bare secrets which we were never meant to know. The Z'bri, a name spoken in their tongue, claimed to be gods, and we followed.

It has been generations now, and still they howl into the night. They have created rules and traditions and lords to pass judgement on themselves, and still they rage. They seek nothing less than all of us under their power, eternally. They are inhuman, otherworldly, bestial. They play at being like us, walking abroad in the bodies stolen from our kin. But they are not us.

- The Words of Ra'Ham, Slayer of Z'bri

Horrors of the Z'bri is a sourcebook detailing the past and present of the beasts that stalk the shores of Vimary. Within these pages you will see the Beasts through their own eyes, and discover the true horror of their unearthly nature.

- Eight new Aspects used by the Four Houses;
- Sundering and expanded Atmosphere rules;
- Dozens of beasts, weapons and NPCs;
- Tips and advice for weaving the Z'bri;
- Details on the Serfs, Gek'roh and Hunters.

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Horrors of the Z'bri

Fifth Interlude

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter one: Introduction

The Sangis are complete when all of Creation succumbs to their touch, birthing a new world born of rape and passion.

The Flemis are complete when all of Creation rests within them, for then they become the Great Totality.

The Koleris are complete when Creation lies in ruin, leaving a barren world for the Seed to sow and harvest.

The Melanis are complete when all secrets are theirs, for then they would vanish into the void and have new places to explore beyond.

- From the Annals of Shade

They Are The Beasts, We Are The Beasts

From the letters of Altara Ven, member of the Eighth Tribe:

This letter is late, I know. And I am sorry — the things I have learned will not easily resign themselves to parchment and ink. I will be home as planned, in two weeks, though I could easily remain here for centuries and not learn all that there is to uncover. Kt'aalsik has been most forthcoming, and his Skyrealm perspective fascinates and repulses me at the same time. Bazaar looks so different when regarded from the semi-transparent windows of his roost in the clouds. Our fights and our trials seem so petty, so distant and removed.

It scares me that understanding comes so easily, and I have to force myself to recall the evil that is the very nature of the Beasts. Why should that be the case, when I sit in a warm chair that pulses with the blood of our kin, and lean on a wall slick with sweat, that reaches out to embrace me when my weariness grows strong? I entered the building through a tunnel of flowing blood, and rode into the sky in a carriage formed from human hair, twisting and coiling itself in hypnotic patterns. The evidence of the Beasts' perversion is all around me, and yet. And yet. . .

I cannot seem to bring myself to hate Kt'aalsik for what he is. I have seen sorrow in his stolen eyes, and a longing that he cannot articulate punctuates every gesture. Beyond his physical evil, there is a sense of vast wrongness about him and his presence here, as though the earth itself was revolting against his very existence. He does not belong in this realm. He and his kind violate not only every moral law but the fabric of the universe itself. Even more horrible, they are aware of their wrongness with every breath that their stolen bodies take.

Can you imagine what it must be like to spend every moment, awake or asleep, knowing that you do not belong here? That every breath you take is an abomination, and every word you speak offends the air itself? To know that your world has been sealed off, that you are in hell, and can never, ever return to your home? It is no wonder that the Beasts are what they are. They have been living this horror since long before the Age of the Camps. They see us live our lives, they see us at peace and harmony with the world, living in our proper place, and they hate us. They hate us and love us at the same time, wanting to kill us, wanting to be us. Wanting their 'Seed' as we once craved the Fatimas' love, wanting to touch the River of Dream as they once did.

They are more like us than we had ever imagined. And they are more alien than we could ever dream.

Step Into My Parlor

The Memoirs of Deacon Vytor, as told to Test Subject 0548:

Hello, little one! I'm glad to see that you're still with us. Glad? Yes, I'm glad. I've grown quite attached to you over these few days. . . what? You don't feel the same way? Well, I'm sure that we can change that quite soon. I'm hurt, you know. You've been a wonderful help to me, and I'll be sure to keep your soul for my own when this shell dies. No, no, I don't think your Fatima will save you. Things don't work that way here.

The Way We Were

Now. . . where were we? Ah, yes. Please don't move right now. There. As you were saying? Shall we pass the time in conversation again? Your questions have begun to intrigue me, and this will take a little time to set. The Houses? No, they are nothing like your Tribes. It was not until the destruction of the camps that we banded together into these incestuous little clans. For eons we roamed free to do as we pleased on this world of yours, to savor the delicacies that your kind had to offer. Each of us ruled his own domain, each had his own experiments and studies to perform. We did not bow to any overlord, nor did we cower before your monstrosities of metal. You think me wrong? I remember all of this quite clearly. Am I not one of the oldest there ever was?

Here — let me make you more comfortable. The pain is delicious, is it not? What do you think about tightening this. . . no? I am curious as to your reactions. Ah yes, the Houses. The arrival of your Nomads made things difficult for us, you know. They were the ones to break through and open the succulent folds of this world to us, but then they had to ruin everything. The Closing of the Fold was not an entirely pleasant experience. Have you ever felt an explosion at the very foundation of your being? Felt your anchors be ripped away and been left to twist uncontrollably in the wind? Felt the understanding be torn from your throat as you lay there, helpless? No. I thought not.

The Closing

The Closing left us bereft, isolated, repulsed by and drawn to you at the same time. The Camps were an interesting but poorly thought-out idea. We had the materials for our experiments close by, we had the fields to play our games, we savored the taste of your pure and primal emotions in the musky, bloody air. But we stopped growing. Those of us who dared to reach out, dared to experiment and try to learn, were ostracized. We formed our group and we stayed within it. The others soon followed. But instead of being perfectly content to remain in our own created paradise, we stagnated. . . we rotted. We created nothing new. Then the Nomads came back. . . but this story is a part of your myths as well.

The Houses

While we draw our own boundaries around the Houses, they were as permeable as your own flesh — here, how does that feel now? We are stuck as we are, now, but at one point we had choices. Much like your ancestors, when they chose which Succubus to tag along behind during your Liberation. The young ones, the foolish ones, the hasty and vile ones joined the rest of the bloody fighters to play with their herds in the Slaughterfields. The slow ones, the ponderous ones, the ones with too much soul for their bodies, or too much body for their soul, they merged into a Collective. A Hive. Now two hives, as I hear. The power-mongers, the hedonists, the dilettantes and connoisseurs raised Tibor above them all, and now kiss the Baron's feet. And then there were the scientists, the explorers, the curious elders and wise men, who eschew all of that superficiality in the pursuit of pure knowledge. You don't seem terribly impressed. Hmph.

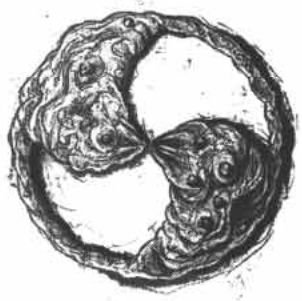
The Balance

The balance of the Houses is as intricate as the balance of the Tribes. The Sangis spend their time in pretty dreams, ruling over us all — as far as we let them. The Koleris keep themselves leashed with chains of tradition, the Flemis bound into themselves and we. . . we teach the Sangis, help the Flemis mold and shape their children, and release the Koleris from their madness. They are all indebted to us. And we to them — but less of that now. We were speaking of the camps. I wish I had that amount of raw material available to me now. You have such beautiful potential. Just let me get this out of your way. Such an awkward place to have something dangling, wasn't it?

The Liberation

We played in our camps for a while, building our stores of knowledge — your anatomy is really quite fascinating — and then everything seemed to happen at once. We paid our fealty to Tibor and kept the other houses quiet, until the Nomads returned again. They snuck into your dreams where we could not follow, whispered words into your ears with their ancient arts and made general nuisances of themselves. And to think that you spend so much time worshipping. . . I'm sorry. . . did that not hurt? Let me try again. No, I don't believe that I will let you sleep. Where was I — ah, yes. . . the Nomads returned, you built your giant metal Succubi, and proceeded to make mincemeat out of a few of our younger and stupider warriors. I'm sure that you felt very proud of yourselves.

The Liberation was a bit of a nuisance, I must admit. I had to abandon most of my experiments and try to repeat the findings all over again! I'm sure that you can appreciate the bother involved, especially from your current perspective. Although I have to admit that killing Tibor made things somewhat easier. The Baron is much less concerned with the actions of his followers, which gives us more freedom than is, perhaps, in his best interests. The Liberation gave us freedom to play, and play we have!



The Beginning

It began at the moment when the Fold was split and we poured through into this fresh new world. It began when the Fold was closed and we felt our souls ripped in a thousand parts. It began when you rose up against our love and make your great conquest. And yet it began before that, when your world screamed out as one for salvation, when your souls grew so empty that you were willing to fill them with anything and we answered your call. For decades we wallowed in your love and your dreams, taking all that you gave us, and more. Such bliss!

Does the sight of the blade disturb you? I would advise you not to move — this next part is something I've not tried before.

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Who Watches the Watchers?

From the Letters of Yanik Turinkin:

Altara, you are out of your mind. Please understand that I do not say this lightly — is it possible that you have been possessed and are simply unaware of that fact? I have never heard you speak like this before, and I grow concerned. Why, in the name of anything holy, did you decide to go up there with that *thing*? He has warped your perceptions beyond any reason. Deus and I are both worried about you. Come home.

I have been doing some traveling, and have found some things that you need to see. The beasts are not what you claim. They are evil beyond all comprehension, perverted beyond all understanding. You are wading too far into this world that you cannot hope to escape from. Joh'an or not, he is evil, and you are in grave danger.

A Circle in a Spiral

From the Letters of Count Valk of Melanis:

Count Lothar,

Greetings. Things have continued as planned, but our mutual friend has become something of an irritant. While he continues to promise that he will evaluate our proposal, his actions consistently belie his commitment to our ultimate goal. Nemerath of Capal is no more an ally than Magdalen the Whore. His assets will only make him a more dangerous foe; it is far better that we prepare for his rampaging ambition rather than wait for his betrayal.

Nemerath came down from the north to speak with that thrice-damned Deacon again. Does he not comprehend that Vytor is nothing more than a puppet of Ethian and the Baron? He sits and waits, reveling in the stagnation of this hell-hole, while the rest of us burn. Trying to gain either of their support is nothing but a waste of time. This most recent mark of the Baron's trust in Nemerath will ensure that he does not waver overtly in his commitment. Meanwhile, the Deacon putters through his experiments and blissfully ignores reality. He will be of no help whatsoever.

Parity

My companions have been proceeding apace with the task at hand. It is amusing to see how easily the Tribals fall to the will of a few determined members of my house. Their "Goddesses" are not doing their jobs properly, that much is obvious. If we eliminate the northern faction from consideration, it may be possible to begin much sooner than we originally had planned. My cohorts are in position, for the most part, and can begin their task once the word is given.

I have assurances from certain sources that the Baron will not interfere. He grows weary of the intricacies at court, and his mind has been turned towards the island. The turmoil there in the last few years has his complete attention, and he has begun to let slip the reigns. A few careful reminders in certain ears will ensure that his attention remains fixed on the tin godlings and their followers for as long as is necessary.

I trust that you have carried out your part of the bargain with equal alacrity, and I await your reply. The messenger bearing this missive is supple, and of good breeding stock. Enjoy him as you will.

Tell Me A Tale

From the Letters of Yanik Turinkin:

Altara, maybe this will change your mind. We came across a document that brought a crawling chill to my back, for it foretold the future if we do not take action soon to prevent it. The horrors are not the wronged beasts you spoke of so eloquently — they are planning to destroy us all, and return us to the ways of the days of the camps. You spoke of a balance held by the Baron, how he can control his followers and force them to respect the pact forged so long ago — but he is not even involved in their true plans. Perhaps he is as much a figurehead as others I could name. . .

I've copied the information I discovered into this letter. Please, I beg of you, read it with an open mind, that you may see the dangers that lie before all of us. It comes from the hand of a man who has hunted the Beasts for so long that he knows them as well as he knows himself. You know that I mean Ra'Ham, the Z'bri Slayer.

He traveled into the H'l Kar for many years, and witnessed countless atrocities that would long ago have broken his mind were it not for the hatred for the Beasts that fills his heart with rage and his arms with fury. He has walked the lands of the Koleris, and been embraced by the flesh of the Flemis. He has spoken with the Guides, waded through the organ fields and swam rivers of liquefied fat. He came across one of the Hunters and sat with him for weeks. . . this manuscript shows what he learned. A Sheban friend of mine dug this document out of the library. We will all be killed if anyone discovers that you have it.

Please, read this and understand.

The Hunter's Story

From The Memoirs of Ra'Ham:

I almost attacked the Hunter before I understood what he was. It took me time to accept that one of the vile abominations could understand the pain it was causing, see that it did not belong here. I remain wary of him, but respect his actions. We hunted together for a few moons, and he told me what he remembered of the monsters' past, so that I could understand them better.

The Z'bri had once lived alongside us, or so the legend goes; or maybe they were just within earshot, close but not here. But in a time-before-time, they were banished beyond the River of Dream — or perhaps we just stopped listening. Long forgotten by humanity, the Z'bri forgot us as well.

The Hunter told me that the world here was once very different, teeming with people with hopes and needs and yearnings. As their world grew, so did their needs; they became unconnected with one another, lost in a tribe that did not allow them to live together as humans, but more like anonymous ants. They yearned for something better, for explanations, for something tangible, strong, to fill their souls and make them complete. The world screamed out as one for salvation, and empty souls abounded.

So strong was our need that it crossed the River of Dream.

The Yearning

They came from seemingly nowhere, at first only a few. These came to be called The Nomads, for they were the first to cross over. They came to aid us, to show us the true way; to piece together the fragments of our existence: Messiahs of spirit and flesh.

The beasts rose from humanity's despair, trying, in their own twisted way, to make us whole again. We welcomed them with open arms, for they took our shapes and entered our bodies. They had needs, just as much as we did — they needed that essential completion that only we could provide, filling the holes in their souls. As much as we called out for a savior, so did they. The Fold was split and they poured through, newborns eager to experience as much as they could.

But we needed too much, too fast, and they were the same. The world of our forebears cracked under the pressure, their wants and needs overpowering everything. Families were split apart by the pursuit of new experiences, civilizations ruined by the selfishness of its members. They laid bare secrets which we were never meant to know. Beasts and carrion, the creatures saw our weakness and devoured us. The Nomads, weak and frail, vanished and slowly the Beasts came to rule over us. The Z'bri, a name spoken in their tongue, claimed to be gods, and we followed.

And the Nomads saw this, and attempted to correct what they saw was a dramatic mistake that would be fatal to all, and they closed the Fold. Just as the opening of the Fold led to the arrival of our so-called saviors, did the closing forever bar them from theirs. We are forever each others' salvation and damnation in one.

A Dark Time

The Fold was closed and they felt their souls, their entire beings ripped apart in a thousand ways. The camps were an act of desperation, fervently attempting to find the Seed once more by digging into the Flesh. The Hunter remembers it well, for the Z'bri became more. . . tangible in our reality at that time.

Barred from their homeland, the Z'bri lashed out in pain. Horrors walked upon the earth clothed in the very bones and flesh of the dead, scouring the land of all life. All across the land the Z'bri herded the survivors, building grotesque temples and palaces of depravity and violence designed to alleviate the Beasts' hunger with the cartilage and despair of their earthly thralls. Pyres burnt ceaselessly, flooding the lands with thick ash.

And the Beasts rejoiced, for they were tasting new intoxicating flavors. And the Beasts howled, for they knew an unbearable agony.

Aching

The Fold has been closed for generations now, and still they howl into the night. They have built themselves rules and traditions and lords to pass judgement on them, and still they rage. They rage against the Nomads who abandoned them here, against the Fatimas who bar their progress, against us, for refusing to bend to their undying wills. They seek nothing less than all of us under their power, eternally. They plot themselves into circles, each trying to outdo the rest. Some try to return to their home. Some try to return us to the camps. Some simply want to tear us into shreds and feast on our steaming entrails. But they are not us. They are inhuman, otherworldly, beastial. They play at being like us, even to the extent of walking abroad in the bodies stolen from our kin. But they are not us.

A Wheel Within A Wheel

From the Letters of Count Lothar of Koleris:

Count Valk,

I thank you for the gift of the messenger. He was indeed a pleasure. I would ask that you retain any siblings that he may have had for my future use. I will discuss a proper exchange with you at a later date.

While your news of the northern contingent is unfortunate, it was not entirely unexpected. Nemerath is not a necessary piece of this puzzle, and contingency plans are in place. The annexation proceeds apace, and our herds have begun to grow rapidly. The humans not attached to the Nomads are much better at accepting our guardianship, and they tend to be more easily pliable. Perhaps Vytor would appreciate a gift?

United We Stand

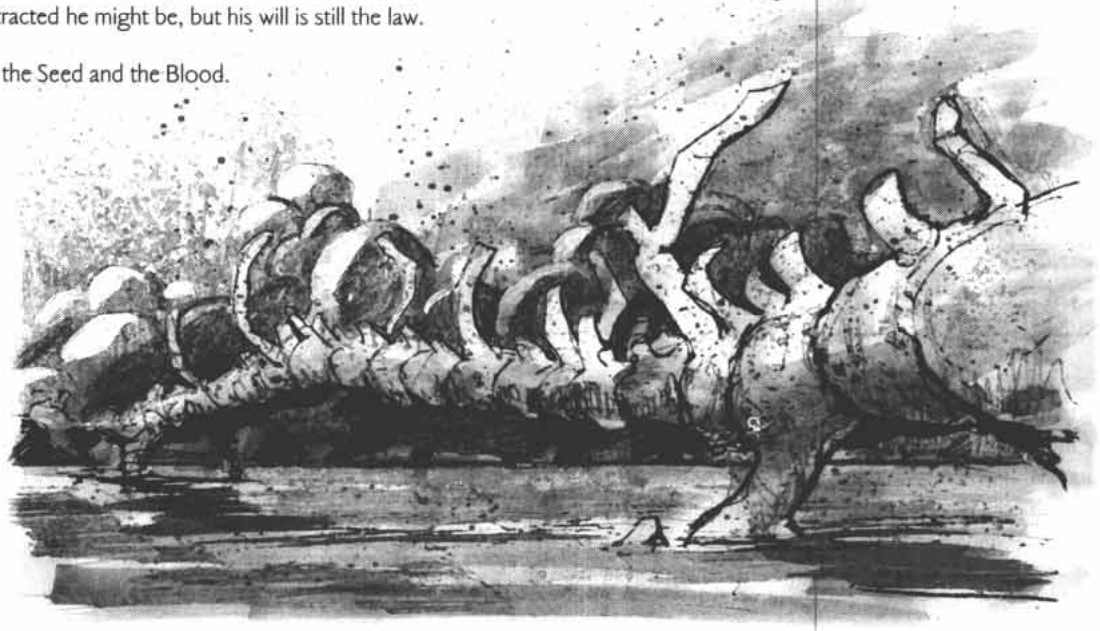
At any rate, Nemerath is not our concern any more. He has made his position clear, at least on this matter. Perhaps it is better that he not interfere, as he would no doubt expect appropriate recompense for his time and efforts. I have no wish to share this wealth with anyone but a select few. Let him play out his dreams in the camps, and we will continue with our own work here.

I have received word from the south. T'sser'ion has succeeded where Tot'lynd failed, and the disputed territories are now ours. My Iv'chet have moved to secure the land and mark the new herds for my Order. You are welcome to the pick of the crop, of course, as soon as you can find the time to journey here and make your selection. We move to the new stronghold soon, and will strike out from there to take the necessary steps towards surrounding the island.

Divided We Rule

The other Orders have begun to sniff at my heels. I have been accused of becoming more Sangis than Sl'Onis himself, and my 'good fortune' and large herds have begun to raise minor suspicion. I will be moving some of my Order away to reduce the obvious signs of these machinations, so that these rumors will not be brought to the Baron's attention. Distracted he might be, but his will is still the law.

For the Seed and the Blood.



River of Return

From the Writings of Sabine, of the Brightwing Caravan:

Our Lady of the Dance,

I write this report to you in order that you may hear and understand. Damma's dream-vision led us south, past the Island of the Outcasts and down into the territory once claimed by Boarhead. The land is lush and green, with only the barest traces of ancient civilization showing through the underbrush. We saw a few footpaths, probably made by the unfortunates who live outside your grace, but no other signs of life for quite some time. The Outlands are a strange and terrifying place, Bright Lady, chaos without the guiding hand of the Chaos-Maker.

We had been traveling for almost ten days before we sighted the first sign of life. Or rather, the first sign that life had been there since the deaths of the ancients. The footpaths began to increase in frequency and number the further east we moved, and we grew hopeful that we would find a small settlement, possibly even a Tribal settlement that we were unaware of. Drawing closer, we noticed that all sound had ceased. There was no wildlife to be heard, even the birds were silent, in a kind of hushed awe. We passed through a stand of trees into a clearing, and understood.

Clarity

We were looking at the ruins of a village that once had thrived here. Ramshackle houses, made of dried mud and crumbling brick, stood empty, their doors swinging on broken hinges. A clay bowl lay on the ground, shattered into blackened shards. The air reeked of blood and smoke, though there was no fire damage to be seen. We stopped the caravan and walked in on foot, silently, the weight of an unknown grief pressing heavily on our shoulders. There was no-one there. There were signs of struggle, and dried blood caked on the now-dusty ground, but no bodies. None at all. Paeter found a snapped-off handle, probably from a hoe, now covered in some strange slime that reacted when he touched it. That told us what we needed to know. The Beasts had come.

In Every Season

We fanned out, then, searching every house and every room for survivors, expecting not to find anything. We were not disappointed. Tancred picked up a trail, and we sent scouts ahead to uncover the secrets behind this empty graveyard. They returned after a day, their hands shaking and eyes wild. The Beasts had indeed invaded the southern shores, but had not returned to their infernal citadel when their looting was done. The scouts had not gotten close enough to see the Beasts themselves, but the all-pervasive atmosphere of doom surrounding them and their lands was enough to prove their continued presence. It was all the scouts could do to stop from killing each other, the aura was so strong.

Wheeling, Turning

We decamped and left immediately. We are bound to the glory of your name, Oh Dancer, but we are not people of battle. We must have been spotted, however, because not two days after we began our tumultuous run for safety than we felt the anger and utter hatred that follows the warrior-beasts wherever they go. We were close to turning on each other when the beast itself broke out of the bushes and attacked the Caravan. Your gifts were enough to enable our escape, Sweet Trickster, but we lost four to the attack. As far as we know, the beasts are still down there. We know not what happened to the squats who used to claim those lands as their own.

Rockabye

While that in itself would be more than enough to fill one report, I bear other news as well. My brother's caravan, at the end of last month, began a journey out to the east. I know that this was against your Sister's edicts, but he believed, as I do, that there is more there than the Judge will tell us. Or you. Perhaps this is sacrilege, but I remain sure in my knowledge that your love permits curiosity.

He set out near the first beginnings of spring, hoping to cross the ice while it was still solid, but trying to plan it so that he was mainly traveling after the first thaw, when the ground is somewhat warmer. His caravan went with him gladly, and they left in high spirits. We have not heard from them since. It is now the end of summer, Lady of Song, and he promised to be back before first frost. I would say that they were simply delayed, but there have been rumors of movement to the north of a kind which I do not like.

The beasts are moving, Bright Lady. Despite the peace we have held for generations, they are moving and regrouping. We are in danger, Dancer, and must prepare.

Chapter two: Sangis

Into Dream we walked,

And into Reality were born.

We are joy and agony in one,

Pleasure and pain unfathomable.

We live in the blood of your birthings,

And die in the arms of your lovers

We are made in your image,

As you are made in ours.

Come to us, and live the cycle again.

- The Lover's Call

The Baron's Beasts

Autumn Equinox Ball — Baronial Musings

My great hall teases and delights with its splendor this evening. Bodies gracefully spin and turn for my entertainment, whilst the Lords watch with their entourages from the sides. It is the joyous celebration of the beginning of the winter. Through the whirling of dancers comes my lover, to stand tall and elegant at the foot of my throne. His chest heaves, his skin flushes, his eyes glisten, as I fondle him in greeting. His gaze turns to the crowd, and he tells me of the latest gossip and assignations. I listen politely, teasing him to gasps in my lap.

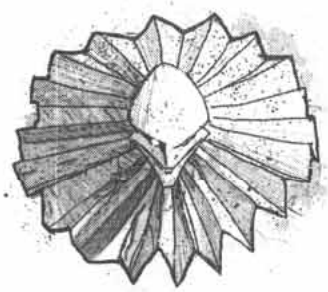
Through the bones of my once-lord Tibor, I feel those in the chamber most intimately. It is as if they were all within me; the steps and grinding of the dancers, tantalizing intimate touches upon my soul; the thrashings in the alcoves, a lusty warmth in my loins; the murmur of intrigue, a sweet liquor in my belly.

Sl'Onis, his passion inflamed, departs with whispers of the pleasures he plans for us at the evening's end. Again, feelings of disquiet stir within me. This bond with Sl'Onis goes beyond lust or duty. It burns deeper, in ways that I plumb, but find unfathomable. Being the most enlightened, I wonder, is this the beginning of a new phase for my children? Am I the first to touch this place? Is this a further depth to the Seed?

Sangis Iv'chet and serfs of my harem start to frolic about me, slipping tidbits of sweet food between my lips and, perhaps sensing my introspection, seeking to pleasure me with their expert caresses. Pleased by their attendance, I indulge. Prince Fa'Cul and the other skincrafters have outdone themselves for this ball. Forms gasp, thrust, scream, stroke, bleed, throb and ejaculate with me.

A moment freezes. One here is a pretender, a spy, and perhaps an assassin. He kisses and writhes, but his mind shows his pretense. His purpose here will not remain a secret for long, but such an expert deception requires tact to seek the source. How to shift the blade and whatever poison it carries, to pierce another's heart?

I cradle the pretender's head, and with a seductive grin, whisper words too tempting for him to ignore. I see him, caught by the promise of overwhelming ecstasy. I know he will not fail to be at the tryst tonight.



Sl'Onis, Knight of Sangis

A narcissistic and jealous being, Sl'Onis is feared and envied. Sl'Onis' position as the Baron's lover places him on par in House Sangis with Prince Fa'Cul herself. Sl'Onis' physical prowess and leadership of the Baron's bodyguard, the Talons, assures him respect and obedience from all. Sl'Onis appears to have no political ambitions. He did not contest the recent crowning of the latest prince — although it is known he harbors suspicions that the Prince desires the Baron. Sl'Onis makes clear that any would-be lovers of the Baron best make sure that he does not find out, as he deeply covets his privileged position.

Highlights: Beautiful, narcissistic, vibrant, depraved, growing ambition

Atmosphere: Sangis

Attributes: AGI +3, APP +5, BLD +2, CRE +4, FIT +1, INF +3, KNO +1, PER +3, PSY +3, WILL +3, STR +1, HEA +2, STA 45, UD 9, AD 9

Skills: Athletics 2/+3, Camouflage 2/+4, Combat Sense 3/+3, Dance 2/+3, Dodge 2/+3, Etiquette (Z'bri/Court Intrigue) 2/+4, Grooming 3/+5, Hand-to-Hand 3/+3, Intimidate 2/+2, Leadership 2/+3, Melee 3/+3, Navigation 2/+1, Notice 2/+3, Read/Write 2/+1, Riding 2/+3, Ritual 1/+1, Seduction 3/+5, Sneak 2/+3, Speak (Tribal) 1/+1, Survival (Forest) 2/+4, Sundering (Appeasement, Soul Stealing, Exsanguination) 3

Edge: Baron's favor, backing of the Talons.

Viz'Ix's Assignation — A Glimpse of Sangis History and Tradition

All has gone well, but this assignation both troubles and delights me deeply. I move swiftly through the rooms of flesh and bone, to get to the place he proclaimed. My position amongst the Baron's immediate household has allowed me deeper penetration of the House than any other infiltrator that I am aware of. Now I race through these familiar places of the Ziggurat, wondering if the Baron has guessed that I am Viz'Ix, a Melanis spy. This abode is instilled with eroticism, which shifts from the subtle to the blatantly perverse in typical Sangis style. In some places gentle curves of skin whirl into pungent clefts, whilst in others one runs the gauntlet of pawing hands amidst orgasmic discharges from all sides. My passage to the imperial apartments leaves me slick, sticky and breathless.

Within the Baron's chambers are some of the most fantastic of the flesh crafter's works; large chandeliers of polished tooth and bone that bubble glowing fountains of blood as if they were flames; a great stone pool filled with the tears of many whom we nurtured in the camps; a carpet of lips, whose tongues clean and tickle.

I pass by the Sirens, stunning serfs and Iv'chet whose bodies tempt all who wish an audience. Messengers and even ambassadors have been lost to their appetites for days before leaving, their tasks unfulfilled. They recognize me and let me pass with a few choice caresses. I have heard this barrier of lust extends into the spirit realm, where it is even more powerful, thus preventing any, even in dream, from intruding in upon the Baron. The Baron's bodyguard, the Talons, ignore me as well. This pack of Sl'Onis' knights who make up the Baron's personal bodyguard often go out hunting and their numbers are unknown — say thirty at least — but not the handful we were led to believe. I arrive at the great blubber bed and gaze out the vaulted, slightly opaque bone windows.

Then I hear him enter, his faint reflection chills me — those eyes. . .

Baronial Retrospection

Dear pet. I care not to dwell too much on the past. Seeing you brings about concerns that promises we have made between the Houses have been forgotten. Please come close and be privileged to hear my recollections.

In the beginning, we knew this existence was ripe for us. The Seed called, especially to my Sangis children. Although I led those who had first been drawn by the stink of power and indulgence, Tibor was the most powerful. He organized the great crossing into the flesh. Power and sex were plentiful here, but conflict was the greatest force of all, and Tibor thrived. During this time, an authority structure developed amongst the Z'bri based on personal strength and diplomacy. Once in place, Tibor brought about rituals of domination to keep the order, its origins part of this world and part from the place of death that was our eternal home before. Thus began the peerage. To help keep the peace a form of etiquette evolved, to bring a halt to the excesses of violence and killing between Z'bri. The Koleris refined this etiquette the furthest, needed it the most, because of their most violent nature. But then Tibor's kingdom collapsed with the fall of the camps, and I sought to save as much as possible.

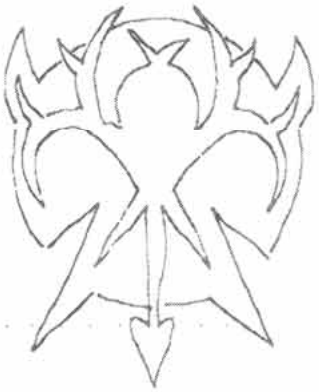
Tibor's failure to maintain rule reflected his limited views that oppression and slavery would suffice as existence for these humans. He had to be destroyed for that failure so it would not be relived. The camps served many useful purposes, taught us to take pleasure in the Flesh, to understand the Seed, but after our failing, we have since discovered that cooperation allows for so much more.

When the Fold was closed my Sangis brethren and I were best able of all the houses to reclaim the spiritual release, which gave us the vitality we needed to establish the current detente. I organized the House structures based upon the evolution of our kind in the camps. I drew from the chaos the alliances and deals I needed to hold all under my power, and those that resisted were slain or outcast. All who remained took part in the ritual of allegiance. The Princes submitted to and consumed of me, and their lessers to them, all the way down to the least of the least. I then swore;

'All who carry my seed I vow to treat as I would my own flesh. . . '

So began a new conquest, a conquest of hearts. I saw at this time that they, the Tribes, must come to us with willing minds. We must show them that cold, silent, "death" is their fate under the creatures they call the Fatimas. My Sangis children are best suited to show them the delights we have to offer in the Seed. This Truth has kept their ancestors from oblivion, from the abyss. They must be tempted to understanding, so that I can bring them all on the journey to deeper truths. I so want to immortalize each and every one of them, to end their pointless, ignorant existences.

But now this, the one and only way we can retain our safe rule, has been forgotten by your master and other schemers who secretly call for change. It is a cutting betrayal to my efforts, to my position. So you are going to tell me in your own words what you believe you have discovered of my people, and then I will see that your last duty is to my great plan. So dearest creature, look deep into my eyes — the gateways to your soul.



Dermal Desire

Report of the First Winter Snow : Mind of the Beasts — Viz'lx

My Lord, my secret study of the Sangis continues.

I know a review has been in order for a decade or so, and I am the first to get close enough to the Baron's immediate household to witness the inner sanctums. You have asked for this document to be both a history as seen by the Sangis and current reflection on the Sangis culture. I have endeavored to do my best. I am glad the record is almost complete, for I feel that my perspective is being skewed. I am taking too much enjoyment from walking the way of the Sangis. With each encounter, I fear my purpose will be revealed by my own lips. Pray recall me soon.

The House of Sangis encompasses those Z'bri whose natures are solely focused on a passion of purpose found only in erotic indulgence and abuse. They bring to these couplings an eerie sense of the intimate and the unknown. At one level, with intimate familiarity, they expose and draw out hidden desires. At another level, they remain darkly alien even to us, bringing to their rutting a hatred and sadistic hunger beyond even our understanding. To be seduced by a Sangis is to experience the heights of physical pleasure and the depths of depravity — a combination they bask in.

The Sangis lust is also sated by acts of dominance and sadism. Exquisite pain is on par with the heights of sexual ecstasy, and holding the delicate balance between the extremes is considered amongst the Sangis the work of a master. In all intimate encounters the Z'bri know only the dominant and the submissive. They see the human ideal of equality as an enigma and a lie. For them, there is no partnership in intercourse, and to even attempt such would only dull the pleasure of the experience. This domination is more about the emotional than the physical, as lust and pain are used to expose the dark secrets of the submitting soul. Utterance of these perversions brings forth torturous guilt, to add luscious cream to the communion.

Fiendish Passion

The Sangis spend their time tempting and exploiting one another to sate their desires. From intimate trysts to wild orgies of sex and domination, they seek satisfaction from everyone, to quench their carnal thirst. Any final orgasmic success only serves to give momentary respite, however, for their drives, the deep dark urges, cannot be placated for long. To counter this, lust for new and more overwhelming fleshly sensations colors their every pursuit. Amongst the Sangis House, a special group known as the Skincrafters, or Artists, are self-styled experts at discovering new ways in which to be gratified. The Baron shows great favor to those who uncover particularly exotic delights for him to indulge in, making these Artists a potent force in House Sangis.

Of all the Houses, the Sangis have the most interest in human motivations and desires, particularly emotional innocence and bonds. They have long since mastered lust and sadism, but other, more delicate, emotions are yet to be fully explored and understood. Innocence and love fascinate the Sangis, who sense within both a potent source of pleasure. Corrupting the innocent is a luxury few Sangis enjoy, for their fellows and serfs are far from untainted. The Squats are barely better, their souls so crude and animalistic. Within the Tribes much purer forms of innocence and love can be found, and presently the Tribals have become the infatuation of the Sangis elite. Toying with the sexual and emotional purity of some Tribal members allows the Sangis to experience the same sensations they felt when they first came across the River of Dream. The delicate flesh and psyches of prepubescent Agnites and Evans are the most favoured choices for a well-planned subtle corruption or violent sadistic abuse.

The Sangis find the corruption of love a most challenging and rewarding experience. Some of the Sangis believe love represents the root of the power of the Tribes to wield Dream. The Sangis have tried to study love in captivity previously, but their experiments have always become tainted and fail because of the presence of the experimenter. But the Sangis find the greatest of personal pleasure in destroying the "bonds of love" in carefully calculated ways which allow them to drink deeply of the resultant suffering. At present, several long-term studies of couples amongst the Tribes are being conducted independently by some of the Sangis Lords, to try and unravel more of this alien phenomenon. The Baron is a connoisseur of the careful manipulation and torturous destruction of such ties of love, and his Lords know that their success in experimentation is a certain way to gain his attention and favor.

The Corrupting Seed

For the Sangis to tempt and manipulate people they must find a weakness in their chosen victims that they can exploit — a chink in their armor, as it were. Such susceptibility normally takes the form of a natural tendency to indulge in high immorality, severe depression or psychological trauma, extreme selfishness and a bent towards violence in the subject — anything that can cut the victim off from both society and her inner self. Once found, such seeds must be slowly cultivated to conceal the abuse from the waking mind. Sangis Lords use their supernatural influence to do this, with suggestive ideas and impulses used to tempt their prey. They draw the subject into performing actions that reinforces her weakness repeatedly, to make it a permanent — and prominent — part of the victim's character. Then, when the seed is firmly embedded and the victim is properly blinded to her own weakness, the victim is drawn into more self-destructive activities, to further dehumanize her. It is this last stage that leads victims to wanton violence, suicide and what the Tribals consider deeply depraved actions. For those humans that survive, such couplings remains a permanent scar on their ability to love.

Beauty of the Beast

Well, dear Viz'Ix, you have a peculiar insight into my House; a refreshing view that I will muse on at some latter date. As I sit here deep in your being, I sense that there is more to you than this dry dissection of the Sangis heart. Surely your master, ah yes, had more in mind than sociology when he placed you here. Ah yes. . . he wanted to know my weaknesses. So my dearest, let me coax you along some more. Tell me what secrets you have uncovered.

The Powers that Be

Report of the Summer Equinox: Powers and Players — Viz'Ix

The Baron's authority over the Sangis is absolute, although his interest appears to be fickle. He is often away in the Ziggurat, leaving **Prince Fa'Cul** and the Baron's lover **Knight Sl'Onis** to handle House affairs. None dare speak up against his wishes, the fate of the last Prince — the one whom they had chained and cast into the wilderness — remains a recent reminder of what it means to defy the Beast. The Baron's swift appointment of Fa'Cul to the mantle of Prince is the epitome of Sanguine intrigue. The Prince, who must be the most feminine Z'bri I have ever encountered, is said to have seduced the Baron right under the nose of the Baron's long term lover, Sl'Onis. Rumors abound, and it has stirred up several powerful cabals in the court.

Prince Fa'Cul thrives in the power and dominion granted by her new role, and several Sangis Lords have already found themselves out of favor. For some, it is a simple slight or failure to receive an invitation to a ball; for others, it is a request for them to expend their serf resources for her monstrous art, thus diminishing their power. A few Counts have even been forced back to the River Quarter, losing their titles and places in the senate to those whose loyalty is more assured. So far, she has shown she can manage the duplicity and power plays of the senate. She has begun raising some of her magistrates to higher posts, and amongst these are several of the elite skincrafters.

The Baron's lover — the Knight Sl'Onis — and his militant Talon companions may be preparing to stage their own coup. I have heard that the second in charge, Re'Qum, has been entertaining Count H'x and visitors from other Houses. They appear too small a group to do much, but with powerful allies outside the Sangis they are too well placed to be ignored.

The other Sangis Lords know better than to speak up, but the rumor is that Duke Belz'ey, the lover of the last Prince, is growing tired of the decadence and apathy. He heads a third faction bent on purifying the House from the apparently growing influence of outsiders and the upstart Counts. The Dukes would surely be drawn to such a cause. Their dislike of these Counts — the pretenders — is well known. The Dukes have greatly enjoyed their time spent in the pleasures of their positions, and will certainly fight tooth and nail to keep them. One Sangis Iv'chet even told me, amidst ministrations, that Duke Belz'ey has been directed by the Baron to build this power base to be ready for his personal command, which would make sense given his loyalty to the Baronial mantle. Whom the Baron is really backing, and how much of this is his doing, I have not yet discovered.

In summary, my Lord, the regime appears to be in flux. It is a good time to tempt those losing power to join our alliance. At present, more than the usual blood has been spilt amongst these nobles and the atmosphere is tense. Several food and slave "tasters" have died exposing some poison or trap destined for their lord. The identity of the perpetrators only publicly appears as rumors amongst the Iv'chet courtiers, knights and slave masters. Soon though, whispered accusations are likely to become pleas for the Baron to allow duels, or they will end up in open fighting between lordly estates. The Baron is unlikely to permit such activities. I can only imagine that soon the shadowy corridors of the Ziggurat and Sangis Palaces will be stalked by assassins, and perhaps we shall even see a return of some of the forbidden rituals.

Those that Serve

Below each Lord exist minor Lords and superior Iv'chet, who manage the running of the Lord's estate. The power of these lesser Lords means that, like our own elite, they can escape mundane death and so have little to fear from the rest of the palace machinations — although they are very much a threat to each other. With their own fates intricately linked to that of their Lord, their efforts against one another try to strike a balance between undermining their opponents and maintaining the public image of a united front. For this reason alone, this handful of elite usually use their underlings to try and better their own position, whilst sabotaging the efforts of their peers.

The main body of Sangis Iv'chet live lives of beauty and deception under a cloud of imminent betrayal. Trying to gain the favor of the master of a palace is the highest priority for most Sangis at this level. Trying to become the favored artist, courtier, bodyguard or slave-master requires a choice blend of cunning, eloquence, sexual attraction and treachery. Occasionally murder occurs through such ambition, typically through poisoning and asphyxiation, but most Lords will make a murderer suffer excruciating torture, to deter such depletions of the house staff.

There is an official form of competition by way of sanctioned dueling. When it is clear two Iv'chet cannot exist together, the Sangis Lord arranges for a competition that will see the loser dead, or banished to be traded to another Lord. Such competitions, on occasion, are the focus of an evening's entertainment.

Palace Balls

The highlights in the never-ending Sangis social calendar are the grand balls. These great balls are held, at the Baron's whim and at various times dictated by tradition, in the Ziggurat or one of the nearby palaces. Most intriguing are the masked balls, favored by our people as well. Guests are expected to alter their bodies into the latest fashions, or in the case of the more powerful lords, "wear" a specially crafted serf. Fashions are fickle, and a very important part of how well you will be received at such an event. Skincrafters make names for themselves at these events, endearing themselves with their "made to fit" wardrobes and couture creations. Sangis vanity makes these events as important to one's place as the amount of wealth in slaves and property one has. Many of the Counts are well connected to or are exceptional skincrafters in their own right. Some balls act as "coming out ceremonies" for newly acquired slaves, who are paraded to impress peers. Current fashion is to bring almost untouched and unaltered specimens, with unblemished young tribal virgins being the height of chic.

The Sangis serfs live much as our serfs do. The Sangis see that any that are to appear in public view are made presentable in a mix of the current fashions and the traditional taste of their Lord. For this reason, the Sangis slave-masters are skilled fleshcrafters, to keep their wards in vogue.

The pride of most Lords requires them to have excessive numbers of sex servants and serfs designed for their "wardrobe." The constant state of flux in the appearances of these servants provides an ideal way to get spies and assassins into a Lord's boudoir. I am sure this is already being undertaken on some scale, but another way is to appeal to the burning desire of most serfs to become a favored one. With our House's own fleshcrafting expertise we should not only be able to disguise one of our own — such as I — but use that quintessential Sangis tactic to tempt and then corrupt these beings to do our spying.

Sangis Estates

To the outside observer the Sangis Palaces appear as clusters of domes surmounted by single great towers. Their external similarities belie the vast repertoire of the Sanguine indulgence, for the fleeting fashions and peculiar tastes of their Lords have no limits. I have found Sangis skin-crafting to be equal in many ways to ours in appearance and aesthetics, but they still lack a true insight into the task.

Some palaces are tender and sweet-scented, caressing the visitor, drawing her into alcoves of orifices and probing flesh. Others are places of sharp bone and flailing tendons, where solid mists of stinging, musky vapor blind and choke. Favored serfs, Iv'chet guards, slavemasters, courtiers and artists are found here, close to their lord. These servants are the best placed to know their master's business, without being so close as to be impossible to approach.

The bony spire that rises from each estate contains the boudoir of the resident Sangis Lord. Iv'chet guards are quite diligent at screening all that pass, to make sure no assassin or spy slips into their lord's pillar of pleasure. The buildings themselves, much like our own, have living defenses whose crafting began during the camps and are updated ever more recently with the flesh of their loyal serfs.

Nestled in the upper half of these devotions to excess, the Lord and his elite live in decadence. Here they gaze from windows and balconies at their peers. Highly socially concerned — in terms of their image, power and position — the Sangis use this section to entertain. Splendid parties are held often, to allow the Lord to show off his collections, his fine flesh and bone crafted furniture, and to draw praise and desire with his entertainment.

Scenes I have witnessed include the sipping of fine wines in the gentle breeze of an evening sunset whilst a specially crafted serf undergoes ruinous torture; and dimly lit, pulsating, tentacle-filled chambers, swimming with intoxicating fumes and writhing bodies.

Skincrafters

The Sangis shape their bodies to reflect both their particular place in Sangis society and their personal tastes. Typically they design their bodies to accentuate their sexual appeal, but in a fashion of wanton excess and perversion. Many Sangis spend their time exploring fetishes and taboos, shifting portions of their bodies as their whims dictate. For the Sangis Lords, much time is also spent on the alteration of serfs whom they plan to "wear" to important outings or assignations. The Skincrafters are favored for advice and assistance on particularly important occasions. Whatever the final designs are, one can be sure that great care has been taken to tempt others as only the Sangis know how. When one gazes on a Sangis form, one cannot help but be both drawn and repulsed by the beauty and perversion, as deeply hidden forbidden desires are stirred from the subconscious depths. Prince Fa'Cul has secretly organized several exceptional and trusted skincrafters into a group of spies and assassins known as the "Beauties." Their ability to craft themselves and others in the guise of others, even members of other houses, and in the case of the most senior, to possess others, is often used to uncover treachery and treason amongst the Sangis.

Dangerous Liaisons

Stop, my Melanis spy. Trying to regain possession of this fleshy shell is a futile task. Just watch and enjoy this candid experience through your eyes and my mind. You have been so enlightening, and so it is my turn to reward you. Ah, here is the main ballroom and there is Count H'x debauching with the entourage of one of your brothers, Eth'ian. Don't they look a sight in the ruddy light? You would think they were lovers but really they are my, and each other's, greatest adversaries. H'x thinks I have forgotten what it is to rule, and in his own way feels that he does what is best for my throne. Eth'ian, your lord, I am sure thinks he has a masterful scheme in play, but he only sees what I wish him to see of my rule. Their ambitions see to it that others do not rise too high, and I know them well enough to keep my throne. For example, see how the would-be Koleris prince, Sk'ksul, restrains himself from bringing about a bloodbath for the sake of Count H'x's whispered promises. Ahh, it is a tangled web of intrigue, deals and rude alliances, and I am the spider in its midst who feels even the slightest tremor, and makes sure everything stays intact.

Now over here in the pool you can just make out Prince K'ark'oom's entourage and my dearest Sl'Onis. I have asked my Knight lover to spend tonight reminding the Prince of our ancient ties. You see, if the likes of Sk'ksul find out the truth behind Tibor's demise, the Prince's suffering will be long and painful. I see you still have not grasped the truth. Suffice it to say Tibor's death was my plan, a pact between the Houses and the Nation's Fatimas to end the destructive conflict. As you well know, the younger of us — especially the Koleris — find the tedium of waiting for bloody glory too much. Soon their fatal desires will be sated, but at my bidding, and not in some aborted coup. The Tribes are stronger than you might imagine, and we cannot afford a schism.

Now we pass another great schemer, Prince Skkr, here cooling off his enormous sexless bulk on the balcony. Indeed, it is more appropriate to call the Flemis as a whole 'the schemer.' Theirs is an intriguing philosophy, to assimilate ours and this native intelligence, which echoes a desire close to my heart. Why do I allow such a threat? Let's just say that they forget that my seed bound their existence with the ritual of submission after Tibor's fall. But, my pretender, you can render one final great service to your lord and master to pay for your sins.

Loving the Innocent

I, the mighty Baron of the Z'bri, rarely have opportunities to travel in the flesh from H'l Kar. Many times I come to haunt the Tribal lands, to study and indulge, but few are the times I get to taste the sensations of these doomed who live under the Death Goddesses.

We stroll in the midnight air into the great twisted wood. My Melanis thrall's astonishment and fear is delectable, adding undercurrents to the physical sensations of his body. I reach out into the stygian depths and draw forth a gift. He hears, struggles — which I permit — to turn and see. The beast crashes into the moonlight, hair, nail, tooth, stench and gleaming eyes. It leaps. A soggy explosion shudders its shadowy form, the creature's orifices jetting its bodily fluids onto the leaves, bark and wiry shrubs; it crashes, broken and crumpled at his feet. I spend some time basking in the blood and bile that dribbles, steaming and acrid, off my thrall's form.

The path continues, through brambles and gnarled trees. I sense my estranged, gullible "allies" — the Squats — are responsible for this trail. How my beloved Hsh'don beguiles them with promises of power and retribution. Their self-made prince, Luther, will be an interesting ally in the inevitable struggle to come. Luther's people have come very close to accepting us, living as close to the Seed as their Serf peers. His forces, with the Koleris, should prove ample competition to the Tribes. In that they will, with careful handling, reduce themselves both to insignificance. Best of all, this will assure there will never again be another Tibor.

The Tribal Hunting grounds loom. I feel Her people, Joan's, the Battle Bitch, nearby. Images of indulgence we could have taunt captor and thrall alike, but tonight's design trivializes these temptations. We pass on, rounding the base of the Harbinger of Death's little hill — She who began the Rebellion of Ignorance. I thrill for the time when She has become the fate She has led so many to. A fleeting image of excreting into Her bony pit from atop the crumbled dome dances through my mind. One day.

Then the remains of the great city are about us. Scents assault my thrall's nostrils; sweet smell of fires, the delicious stench of bodies, the sharp and tang of the forgotten world's buildings. My senses reach beyond my thrall, to my lost children sitting high above us — outcasts, criminals, hermits and disciples of the Seed. They huddle in ignorance in their crumbling spires. The purge that comes will see most meet long and painful deaths. Some, my spies and the few who have offered tribute and assistance, I may allow to call on my mercy. But we shall see.

Finally, the river. I leave those I find with the water vessel alive. It suits me presently to keep the pact, written by the Whore of Words. This delicate, crumbling patience is what we need to enlighten these lost slaves to the Deaths. Sheba's control wanes, as it seems to wax; its own worst enemy. Assuredly it is a sign; the moment of renewed struggle stalks closer. We pass amongst the flooded ruins, then away.

The island of the enigma of the Fallen is small, but theirs is the path that my subjects and I find most enchanting. Escaped from, but living within the shadows of their Death Goddesses, they are instilled with new spiritual form and focus. They are alive in ways on par with those of my own splendid House. They blaze with Dream. We, the Sangis pleasure moths, come to dance amid the flames.

Oh, how I take pleasure in this place, feeding off its so-called "Fallen" denizens as they grow strong in their passionate lives. Here we continue our search. Closed by shadows, we pass mostly unnoticed into the places of fleshy excesses, where these lost souls, instinctively but unknowingly, pursue the Seed. We watch, my thrall spellbound between desire and fear. The bodies writhe as the party nears its peak. My timing is impeccable. Sweaty bodies slide, slick under the faint candlelight. My presence washes over the revelers, bringing renewed appetite to those flagging with exhaustion. Then, all too briefly, we ride. I am caught between passion, enticement and restraint. They delight in my thrall's form. They are so caught up in their lust that they only see the carnality, their ignorant fears momentarily forgotten in the clarity of the Seed. One after another, I draw them in to touch, penetrate and delight them in ways their own bodies cannot match.

A subtle shift takes us to a new level. My thrall's mind twists, trying to escape the fate he knows is coming, whilst still foggy from the orgasmic waves that have just passed. I have allowed him to see at the height, my plan, and the secret use for him. Those around me offer little resistance, some barely noticing my Sundering touch upon them. The pretender is lifted and taken to the roof by the writhing mass. I have them hold my dear thrall firm, and then the bites and blows begin. Caught in that great nexus between pleasure and pain, I release him so he can struggle and beg them to relent. Finally, he hangs partly suspended in space over the hard stones below. He thrashes as loops encircle his fine throat. A crowd has gathered in the street watching, mesmerized by the sight. Then, bleeding and bruised, we are pushed and plummet, and jerk back with a snap of rope and neck. As I drift away, I enjoy his final orgasm as it spills onto those below. So, the Seed is planted.

Chapter three: Koleris

Blood pulses and screams,

Flesh writhes and yearns.

We live at word's end;

We live in chains.

Release is all.

- A Call to Arms

The Serpentine Shadow

We burn like fires in the night.

The forest is alive, and we tear it with teeth and talon, gouging wounds in bark and soil, shivering with need as splinters rake our skin. We sense our forbidden prey drawing nearer, smell their blood in the trembling air. Our skin writhes and suppurates, steaming hot and rancid with hate. Our lust swells as we long for the slaughter to come.

We are forsworn, but our fury is unfettered at last. Our flesh is forfeit, but we will no longer be denied.

We burn, and the world will catch fire around us.

There is a scream in the dark. One of the oxen is thrashing in its traces, kicking at the drovers. Voices answer, shocked and angry, and the beast screams again, in pain.

A moan escapes my lips. The blade is pale white in the moonlight. I place its tip just above my genitals and slice the skin open to my chin. My pride-mates take up their knives as well, as the sweet, ragged agony ripples through my chest. My fingers fumble eagerly for the gaping cut as the pain turns to rage. Blood calls out to blood. Pain must answer for pain.

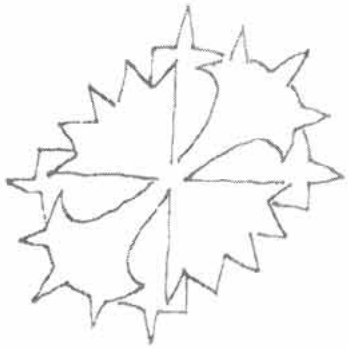
I pull, and the skin comes free with a long, liquid rip. Naked muscles spasm and glisten. I shriek, and the voices in the forest shriek in turn.

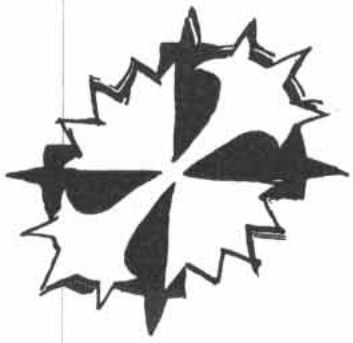
The Prison of Flesh

We are the Koleris, the Shackled Ones, and we suffer like no other in this hell of stagnant flesh.

This world was once a paradise. Life spattered and sprayed, bursting from putrid sacks of meat and bone and soaking the churned earth. Such ecstasy, such vitality! We found the Seed in each raw moment of slaughter, tearing apart the fleshy husks to release the life within! We leapt from body to body, rending our mates and feeling their teeth in our breast, a lusty communion of carnage. Hundreds died, night and day, making way for the newborn. We clothed ourselves in gore, and knew ourselves to be holy.

And how did humanity reward our devotion? By burying us alive, closing the Fold and imprisoning us in crypts of skin and bone. We can feel the blood hissing in our veins, but we dare not open our arteries and let it free. We can slice our blades along our skin, but we dare not cut too deeply. We dare not consummate our lusts, or we will perish. It is obscene. Our blood-soaked Eden is now bitter poison on our tongues.





The Fall

When the Tribes squirmed from the camps we ached to lose ourselves in fervent murder, but we dared not open our bodies to blade and claw and the red, red Seed. It lingered, just out of reach, denying us peace. No matter how many we killed, it was never enough to slake our need. Long had we been the angels of war, the sublime hands of death. We were the Sword of the Z'bri: champion, protector, executioner, bearers of ancient tradition. No more.

Then came the terrible blow. Tibor, greatest of us, fell beneath hated Joshua's blade. Our insides churned with anguish and humiliation. Our veins blackened with thwarted rage. The Baron, who rose in Tibor's place, commanded an end to the war, and tradition demanded we obey. Defeat seared our souls. We laid waste to our lands, killing everything we touched. We savaged our souls with loathing. Our bodies twisted and writhed with rage, and as we seethed in our prisons we found our way back to the holy Seed. We rent our souls from moment to moment, and were reborn, even as our talons twitched to rip flesh from bone. Murder without, murder within, fury without end. It was not the sweet communion of shredded flesh, but it sustained us.

That was when the Sangis came to us, gathering together the scattered prides with promises of a reckoning. They reminded us of our traditions and our venerated Orders, and they said that things might be made right again. The time would come, and we must prepare. We have counted each day since. Each day, the fire within burns higher. The Sangis still wallow in fleshy decadence, the Flemis abandon themselves in their deviant hives and the Melanis fulfill themselves with arcane secrets. Yet we are empty. So long as the Tribes exist, there can be no return to paradise, no atonement for Tibor's fall. The Baron has stayed our hands, and left us to feed upon ourselves. As tradition demands, we have obeyed, but not for much longer.

Shackles of Tradition

It is no small thing for a Koleris to forsake his oath, even in this time of madness. Obedience to tradition is buried deep in our souls, and once it gave our bloodletting form and purpose. Much of that millennial knowledge has been lost, eroding precious links to our identity, but some tenets still have the weight of ages: respect and obey the mighty, forsake no oaths and let no blood go unspilled.

Even in times past, when we leapt from body to body in the chaos of battle, raw savagery and physical power were the merits by which we Koleris judged ourselves. This is all the more important now, as we must make the best of the forms we are trapped in. Our skin is sacred, its scars and mutilations bearing witness to our ferocity and the long litany of battles we have fought. We ache for the Seed; it beckons like a lover from the heart of the fray, and those who leap unyielding into the storm of claw and blade attract others seeking to share in their renown. In this way, we form our many prides, each of them centered around a warrior of great promise, reflecting his glory and at the same time seeking to usurp it from him. A pride leader must defend his power at every turn from both within and without, and challenges occur almost daily.

The pride of which I was a part followed dread Hrik'skrr, the Flayed One, whose skin dangled in tatters from his chest and arms. We were Koleris of the Order of Razors, for we sought the Seed in hacked meat and severed veins opened by our long blades. Hrik'skrr commanded a large pride, so great was his renown, with fourteen of us raging in his terrible shadow and a hundred serfs to slake his needs. In truth, only twenty or so were his alone; each Koleris must possess as many serfs as he can, to demonstrate his terrible appetites and to provide gifts for those mightier than he. We keep our serfs close, for raids and slaughters are commonplace by prides wishing to increase their standing. Four of the serfs were mine, but of course Hrik'skrr could claim them as his own, as could any others in the pride whose renown eclipsed mine. As we are commanded to obey the mighty, we take what we will from the weak.

Every pride has its hierarchy, and it is always in flux. Our rage hollows us from within, and our hunger ever swells. We may satisfy our needs on those of lesser status than ourselves, or partake of their serfs as we wish, though we may not slay a serf outright, unless we duel its owner for the privilege. Blood flows daily within the pride, through a precise dance of custom and rank, laws older than time.

The Slaughterfields are home to the many prides, and it has been so since the time of the camps. Each pride claims as much of the wasteland as it can hold with claw and blade, declaring it their stalking. Any prey within the stalking is theirs alone, to do with as they will. Hrik'skrr's stalking was large, at the edge of the Order's Duchy and in the shadow of the great Ziggurat. In times past the Baron drove serfs, prisoners, or Chained Z'bri into the Slaughterfields to whet our appetites, and many entered by way of our lands.

The Chosen Meat of Lords

The Baron's gifts have dwindled over time. Now they are rare, sweet gifts, and those prides nearest the Ziggurat watch their borders closely. I remember the day the howl went up from Jk'krur, echoing over the waste. Prey. Our minds reeled with lust. The two least pride members were left to guard the serfs, howling and slashing in frustration as the rest of us raced after the prey. Our noses tasted the ashen wind and our jaws slavered at the thought of wet, red flesh.

It was one of the Chained, a huge, misshapen thing of terrible strength and ferocity. Our entire pride could have pitted ourselves against it, partaking of its blood and pain, but when we arrived, it was already faltering, its flanks savaged from hundreds of cuts. Other Koleris danced around it, difficult to follow with the eye. They were Unseen Strikers, members of a neighboring Order, and they had stolen our kill. The Chained one died as we approached, and we shrieked in fury. Death is priceless in the Slaughterfields — it is the meat and drink of Captains and Lords alone, for the Iv'chet that perishes is lost forever. We had come too late to the feast. Hunger twisted our bones, rage seethed and boiled from our skin. The Unseen Strikers heard our cries and howled in challenge.

They had violated our stalking, and stolen our prey. Our blades sang in the air as we approached. Our minds were all but lost to visions of gore — but the laws of our House restrained us, holding us back from the brink, hedging us from the point of no return. Laws and tradition are branded on our souls; it has been so since long before the closing of the Fold, before any Z'bri thought of themselves as Koleris. The laws gave our actions purpose and form, and are even more important today. Without laws and careful ritual, we could not survive at all.

We stopped our approach at thirty-six paces, showing respect and restraint. As our pride was larger, only an equal number of low-status Razors brandished their blades. Hrik'skrr was the accuser, and so it fell to X'aqr, the Unseen pride leader, to speak first and declare his actions. Yet he did not. We could feel their hunger as strongly as our own, and the anger weeping red from their pores. They were defiant, consumed with need. Finally Hrik'skrr spoke to me. "Go to him. Give him no blood-greeting, but tell him that he must fight me for his crime, or I claim a hundred of his serfs in forfeit."

I went to X'aqr, careful to follow all proprieties. I was the third-lowest in status within the pride. It was an intricate insult to the Unseen Ones. Etiquette is a weapon to the Koleris, for the Z'bri who loses control loses status as well, or worse, loses beyond reclamation the careful balance of reason and rage, and becomes Chained. The Chained are prey, by command of the Baron. So Hrik'skrr and X'aqr sought to unbalance the other, pushing one another's self-control.

X'aqr could not ignore me, but speaking to me was beneath him. He held out his arm for the blood-greeting. Low-status Koleris must show subservience by granting their superior a bloody wound, while taking no such pleasure in return. When I refused, it nearly unsettled X'aqr and his entire pride. I repeated Hrik'skrr's demands over their shouts and screams.

And then the bone dart was quivering in my shoulder, its poison sac pumping. Other Unseen Ones let fly, striking me again and again, and my pridemates howled in outrage. X'aqr's people were undone. By interfering with Hrik'skrr's challenge, they opened themselves to retribution. But before we could act, the assassins fled, blinding us with Sundering and leaving us howling for blood.

Half of us chased after the Unseen Ones, howling for vengeance, while the rest remained to guard our serfs. The acid bile from their darts left gangrenous holes gaping in my chest, and I savored their pain. The wounds enriched my standing in the pride, so much so that I ran alongside Hrik'skrr's chosen ones. We would make X'aqr pay, in blood or in serfs, or else we would seem weak. We also raced the rising tide of our rage, hoping to feed it before it swallowed us from within.

The Rules of Slaughter

Duels are fought daily in the Slaughterfields, usually between members of a pride jockeying for status. It is a careful, deadly dance, as the duelists feed their hunger without giving in to the sweet release of killing. The duel continues until one opponent is incapacitated, lying in a heap of torn limbs and spilled entrails, or loses control of their fury, at which point they have forfeited their claim.

Serf raids are also common between prides, even within the same order. Serfs are a source of status among the prides, and the only steady supply of prey. A powerful pride might have as many as a hundred or more, bred for hunting and food. The larger the herd, the harder it is to defend, reflecting upon the pride's prowess. As revenge for what X'aqr and his pride had done, we intended to slaughter every serf they had. Prides that lose all their serfs lose nearly all their status, and become an embarrassment to their Order and its Captain. They would have to disband, and try and seek acceptance with other prides.

Sometimes, prides conducting a serf raid would steal the serfs instead of killing them immediately. As the years wear on since the closing of the Fold, it becomes harder and harder to grow content with wounds and scars, while great Lords still gorge themselves on death in the Ziggurat. More and more serfs are slaughtered by the prides, and the herds grow thinner, while our appetites only grow keener.

As we hounded the Unseen Ones onto their own lands, we saw that they had succumbed to such a hunger. They had all but consumed their meager herd, and the handful remaining was an insult in itself to the blood price we demanded. The Unseen Ones cowered in the hills, howling our presence to all the nearby prides. Others might try to take our herd while it was poorly guarded. We had no choice but to leave, cheated of our due. We dug our knives into our skin, gouging our cheeks to feel the blood flow. Hrik'skrr screamed to X'aqr that there would be a reckoning, and their cries taunted us as we returned to our lands. Hrik'skrr and the greatest of the pridemates slaked their fury in the slaughter of three serfs, and then we began to run, driving the herd ahead of us as we sought the holding of Kr'ksul, Captain of our Order.

The Red Paths to the Seed

Even before we were called Koleris, the warrior Z'bri sought the Seed in splintered bone and bloody spray, the instant of divine revelation as the body is ripped asunder. Yet there is no single path to reach this communion — over the centuries there have been hundreds of different methods and practices that open us to the glory of death. These philosophies are the basis for our House's many Orders, each refining their individual approach to the art of battle.

I and my pride follow the Order of Razors, whose catechisms hold that the Seed is strongest when the body is cut so deeply that moments pass before it realizes that it is dead. We fight with bone swords and knives, honed to unnatural keenness, and live to strike swiftly and cleanly. Other Orders' philosophies are far more formal and intricate, such as the Order of Briars, who perform numerous rituals before battle, and restrict themselves to very specific foes. Some Orders are very ancient, going back farther than our emergence from the Fold, while others, like the Order of the Leviathan, are only a decade old. The catechisms of the Orders give particular focus to our use of Sundering, and when our rage has washed all other aspects of self away, we cling to our Order as a final, precious shred of identity.

There are scores of Orders surviving in the Slaughterfields, each led by a Koleris Lord who serves as its Captain. A Captain is charged with maintaining order and discipline within the prides who serve him, and enforces the Baron's law. In return, the size and power of each Order reflects upon the Captain's status at Prince K'ark'oom's court. For this reason, Captains often feud and scheme with one another to advance their status at the expense of another's. Often the prides are the tools of the feud, going on serf raids or seeking out duels that weaken a rival Order's strength. Occasionally, the schemes culminate in sanctioned war.

Unlike the prides, the Captain of an Order remains in one place, ruling a small court of lesser Lords from however great a stronghold as his Order can manage to build. The forts of serf hamlets surround the stronghold, as well as one or more breeding farms. A Captain holds much of his Order's wealth, giving gifts of herds to the prides that serve him well. The thick, rich scent of several hundred serfs set our bodies to trembling as we approached Kr'ksul's stronghold, a show of wealth and power that served to remind us of our lowly station.

In the Shadow of the Stronghold

A Captain's court is as large and complicated as the Captain can manage, the better to show his status to his people and the Ziggurat. Our plea for justice would be difficult and expensive, requiring great Hrik'skrr to give blood-greeting and herd-gifts to the Captain's major-domo, his Master of Serfs, his Lord Marshall and his trusted Lieutenant, with more gifts to come before the Captain's reply could be heard. We would never actually find ourselves in the presence of the Captain. Our lowly status forbade it.

So we camped our herd and howled a challenge at the stronghold, and were forced to wait. We watched our serfs taken away in twos and threes, and watched Hrik'skrr return with their fragrant blood staining his chest and arms. Our pride's wealth dwindled steadily, while our thirst for vengeance grew sharper. More time passed, and more gifts, and we watched our status dwindle. We circled one another carefully, and were precise in our conversations, for we were hungry for blood and eager for a chance to duel.

Finally we learned that the Captain was not even in the stronghold at all, but away in the Ziggurat, courting a Flemis Lord who had designs on rebel Abonom. Our fury boiled over and we turned upon one another with dagger and sword. We ran down our serfs, slaughtered some and tortured the rest. It was too much for our pridemate Uckr'ou, whose mind was lost to fury. Clawing out his eyes and peeling away the skin of his face, he was overwhelmed with anger and Chained himself, flesh torn, in a berserk rage. We hacked him to pieces, slaking our murderous hunger even though it meant his spirit would be lost forever.

The killing sickened yet sustained us. That night I howled at the hated sky and thought of the hundreds of Tribals swelling unchecked in the city to the south. A feast of gore, wealth uncounted, just out of reach. We knew, deep in our bones, that once the Tribes were gone and the Fatimas no more than gristle between our teeth, the Fold could be opened again. Yet we waited, and the agony went on.

On the next day, news came from the stronghold, with a gift of a dozen serfs. The Captain had learned of our plea and would demand retribution from the Captain of the Unseen Strikers.

Captain Kr'ksul

The Captain of the Order of Razors is a Lord of considerable power and influence, having been one of the first supporters of the Sangis plans to form House Koleris. Once the Koleris had been formed, Kr'ksul became a solid supporter of the Baron's rule, and his Order was instrumental in enforcing Sangis authority in the early years.

Of late, Kr'ksul's fortunes have been on the wane, after a power play by a number of Koleris Captains reduced his Order's status and diminished his influence at court. Since then Kr'ksul has worked tirelessly to gather more power for his Order and find his way back into the Baron's favor, though recent meetings with the ambitious Count H'x suggest to many that his loyalties might now be open to the highest bidder.

Attributes: AGI +3, BLD +2, CRE +2, FIT +3, INF +2, KNO +2, PER +2, PSY +1, WIL +3

Skills: Dodge 3/+3, Hand-to-Hand 4/+3, Melee 4/+3, Throwing 2/+3, Intimidate 3/+2, Tactics 3/+2, Leadership 4/+2, Lore(Camps) 3/+2

Abilities: Sundering 3

Aspects: The Shattering, Exsanguination

Lordly Power

The Lords of the Koleris command us and torment us, reminding all of the glory we once had and holding it over us like a leash of sinew and bone.

Not all of us are bound in a single sack of flesh. The Z'bri Lords were mighty enough at the closing of the Fold to avoid the bonds of a single body. They can still leap from host to host, and know the sublime sensations of swimming in a sea of ruptured organs and spilled entrails. The Koleris Lords still know the Seed as it was truly meant to be known, killing and being killed, wrenching themselves from body to body in the swirling, crushing melee. They pack their halls with orgies of reeking death, while we Iv'chet linger at the gates, eager to please in hopes that we will be allowed to join in the celebrations.

The Lords can not only pass from husk to husk, they can liberate an Iv'chet if they so choose, using rituals to give them transfer into a new form. When the Captains fight one another they reward their most loyal servant with this gift, so he may leap headlong into battle and surrender himself utterly to the Seed, settling into a new form when the old is torn apart. Every passing day dims our memories of such past glories, and we wait on the Lord's every command, hoping to secure such a gift for ourselves.

Because the Lords may still taste the true flavor of the Seed, we trust that they strive ceaselessly to reopen the Fold and return us all to paradise. Some, whose patience has soured over the years, have suggested that the Lords intend no such thing, content with the power they now hold over us. Such dissenters and rebels are quickly weeded out and silenced, their status stripped along with their skins and driven to the edges of our lands, or to the Skyrealms. As our hunger grows and the herds grow thin, we must depend on the Lords to lead us, or all our faith in the traditions is for nothing, and all that we may count on is our rage.

Captain Kr'ksul courts the favor of many Z'bri nobles, ensuring the loyalty of his prides through rich favors from the other Houses. Powerful prides act as bodyguards to Sangis nobles, and in return the Sangis shape our warriors into stronger, deadlier physical forms. It is a relationship that so far has mutually benefited both Houses, and competition is fierce among the Razor prides to be chosen. The Flemis have recently taken an interest in our House, seeking prides eager for glory and setting them against Abonom in raids and ambushes. Though the thought of one, communal flesh sickens us, the armor and weapons the Flemis provide, as well as sacs of healing juices that can knit severed limbs back in place, are of great value. As to the Melanis. . . they do not seek us. Rather, we find ourselves turning to them, as time and rage wears away the memories of what we once were. Their knowledge provides a link to past glories, and their powers of Sundering can release our brethren who have lost themselves to Chaining. They ask for nothing in return, and this troubles us. Each day sees us more in their debt. When will they call it due?

While my pride waited for retribution, our Captain moved among the Lords at the Ziggurat. Though the Lords suffer less from rage than Iv'chet, theirs is still an intricate dance of status and protocol, where any slip can be an invitation to attack. Competition for the Prince's favor is fierce, and Y'k'krr, Captain of the Unseen Strikers, was one of the Prince's favorites.

Prominent Koleris Orders

Amid the scores of powerful or petty orders still served by the Koleris, three stand above the rest in terms of power, influence, and numbers:

The Order of Bones

This is an ancient Order whose lords can trace its existence back into the distant ages before the Z'bri crossed the Fold. Its knights clad themselves in armor fashioned of bone, and wield swords fashioned from human thighs. The Order is steeped in tradition, with customs of initiation and rituals of advancement through seven levels of mystery, each purporting to imbue secrets of Sundering lost to most Z'bri. The Order operates with strict discipline and demands unhesitating loyalty and savagery at the command of its Captain, Jhin'ko'var. The Order has sworn its undying loyalty to the Baron, and it enjoys considerable support from the Sangis court.

The petitioning lasted for days. Y'k'krr rebuffed every attempt, and the Prince turned a blind eye. Our Captain demanded a duel, and was refused.

But these were merely diversions, meant to hold Y'k'krr's attention. In the background, Kr'ksul was gathering support among other Captains. When the duel was ignored, Kr'ksul had exhausted all other means of revenge, and was free to petition the Prince with the support of five other Captains to declare a war. Y'k'krr was trapped, having closed off all other avenues of escape. The Prince had little choice but to agree, in the face of Kr'ksul's support. Now Y'k'krr stood to lose far, far more than the skin of a few pride members.

That evening, the Captain and all his court arrived at his stronghold and, as one, shrieked the War Howl. *Our cry for revenge had turned into a raging storm.*

Marching to War

When pridemates fight, it is a duel — bloody, quick, and decisive. When prides fight, it is a raid or skirmish, a fast hit-and-run that leaves one or the other weaker than before. When Orders do battle, it is war.

Wars are rare things within our House, and must be petitioned before the Prince. The scope and nature of the war must be detailed in the petition, though not necessarily the reasons behind the conflict. Only one potential side need make the petition, naming its enemies, and if the petition is approved, the two sides have a single night's truce to assemble their forces before the fighting begins.

The Prince permits such wars because it reminds us of our ultimate purpose, as the Swords of the Z'bri. Koleris Orders comprise the bulk of the Phalanx, the Z'bri army, and our Lords hold most of the highest positions of leadership. It is not enough to master the art of single combat; we must also know how to fight as a larger unit, for the day we take to the field and muddy the earth with Tribal blood. The wars test our skills as soldiers, and force us to work with Koleris from other Orders.

Combat on such a large scale also results in violent changes in the political hierarchy, affecting even the highest Lords. Fortunes can change hands overnight, and when the smoke clears, the balance of power in the Prince's court is rarely the same. Kr'ksul had carefully gathered the allies he needed to ensure his victory even before the petition was declared. Perhaps he had been looking for such an opportunity for some time.

As the chief petitioner (and the highest in status among his coalition), Kr'ksul would take overall command of the eight Orders, and the various warriors were to assemble in the shadow of his stronghold. We would fight for the enemy serfs, killing or taking a hundred for each Order in the Coalition. The Unseen Strikers, in the face of such fearsome opposition, managed to find only two allies to its cause, and between the three of them there wasn't nearly enough serfs to fill Kr'ksul's demands. If Y'k'krr lost, he and his allies would be ruined.

The Yellow Order

This Order came to be in the time of the camps, its catechisms developed amid the festering, bloated corpses of the killing fields. The Koleris of the Yellow Order found the Seed in the bloated infections of their injuries, and cultivated the arts of physical corruption. It is widely believed that it was the Yellow Order that first created the horror of Kola's Plague. These Koleris become hosts for virulent forms of gangrene, and spread infection with every swipe of their talons. This Order controls a sizable portion of the Slaughterfields, and unlike many other Orders, their herds have grown fractionally each year. Some Lords whisper that they have found a means to control the infections they spread in their foes, corrupting them — and controlling them — from within.

Blood and Honor

The Orders gathered through the night, while Kr'ksul held a tournament to determine who among his Iv'chet would claim the glory of reincarnation during the war. We battled like frenzied beasts, and the air was filled with the shrieks of combat. Great Hrik'skrr won the honor, as did five other pride leaders.

By morning, our forces filled the ashen vale. We set out for Y'k'krr's lands beside the Order of Bitter Dancers, whose flesh crawled with poison spores, and with the Order of the Pale Riders, who went to war on the backs of huge, misshapen serfs. There was the Order of the Stranglers, who chanted as they marched and swung thick garrotes of knotted sinew, and the Order of the Maggots, whose bodies squirmed and seethed in anticipation of virgin flesh.

Arrayed against us was the Order of the Long Knife, an old and much-diminished house of great traditions, who faced certain ruin to fulfill an old debt to Y'k'krr. There was also the Order of the Carcass, terrible warriors whose long service to the Flemis have allowed them to benefit from gifts of Assimilation, merging the bodies of slain enemies into their own to create huge, living war machines.

The Unseen Strikers turned their talents on us at once, lashing out in ambush with their poison darts and disappearing into the shadows. We longed for the sight of X'aqr and his pride, but were denied. Our blood sang to be marching with an army, yet we wondered how our plea would be served amid the upset of battle. Would we be guaranteed serfs to make back all we had lost? Would we be allowed to partake of a kill, to make up for the one denied us? We were borne along on a tide of battle-lust, and soon our need for bloodshed drowned all other thoughts in a haze of red.

The Long Knife and Carcass awaited us at the foot of Y'k'krr's stronghold, fierce and defiant, but barely a handful against the surging tide of our numbers. We swept over them with a roar, clawing and slashing.

The front ranks held the prides with the highest status. My pride was farther back, and after the first moments it became clear that the enemy would be overwhelmed before we could even come to blows! We howled and screeched our frustration, tearing and biting at one another in a blood-frenzy. Other prides suffered as well, Chaining themselves in thwarted rage. On a hill behind us, our Lords watched, impassive, and a cluster of Melanis monks waited to free those who became lost.

The Carcasses lingered longest, but too soon they fell, choking on bitter poisons, slashed and swollen from the bacteria feeding and multiplying within. A great wail went up from their assembled herds as the victors drowned themselves in wet, glistening plunder.

Not even Hrik'skrr had taken a single foe under his blade. We reeled about amid the maimed and wounded, our skin splitting with pent-up fury. Where was our vengeance? The Lords on the hill were unmoved by our howls. As one, they turned away, heading back for the Ziggurat, their goals accomplished. The monks began their silent procession across the field, seeking out the Chained ones.

I was struck from behind by Q'l'rukk, one of my pridemates. His talons drew deep furrows along my back. I turned and sank my teeth in his cheek, and we tore at one another for long moments until I finally shattered both of his legs.

The Order of the Leviathan

This Order was very recently formed from a score of dispossessed Z'bri whose prides had been disbanded. The Leviathans sought the favor of the Flemis, and after a series of raids against the rebel Z'bri in Abonom, the Flemis rewarded them by using Assimilation to combine their bodies into three huge, terrible Beasts. Since their formation, the Leviathans have grown in number, until now there are nearly two dozen of the horrific creatures. Their appetites, both physical and spiritual, are undoubtedly ravenous, yet the Order maintains only a token herd. Their raw physical power has made them a force to be reckoned with in the Slaughterfields, though many Sangis openly question their ultimate loyalties.

We were lost souls as we lurched back to our Captain's stronghold, bereft and bloodless. Y'k'krr was ruined, but what had we gained? If anything, our suffering was worse. The rage and pain swelled in our skin until blood ran from our eyes.

I tried to remember our tenets. Respect and obey the mighty. Did that not obligate them to serve us in return? If we were to suffer the agonies of being separated from the Seed, and hold back our swords from the hated Tribes, did it not fall to them to fulfill our lusts? Our herds grew smaller, and gifts from the Ziggurat more rare.

Forsake no oaths. What oaths had been sworn to us? We believed the Sangis. In truth, we needed them, because in our weakened state we could not challenge the Tribes alone. We have followed them, and have been the teeth that kept the other Houses in line. Yet how have we profited from it? What have we gained besides more suffering?

When we reached Kr'ksul's stronghold, we saw a field of bodies, and learned at last why X'aqr had not been seen in the battle. While we marched, Y'k'krr, knowing already that he had lost, had sent his best tribes sneaking past us, to wreak what slaughter he could on our herds. He could not keep us from victory, but he could make it bitter on the tongue.

All of my pride's serfs were gone. We were ruined. Great Hrik'skrr lost himself to his fury, and left two score of our Order in bloody heaps before he could be stopped, cut to pieces by other prides as enraged as we.

I watched our Order rage and tear at itself amid the bodies of our serfs, and I saw, in a flash of cold anger, what we had become. The Baron and the Sangis were using us, a serpentine shadow keeping the rest in line to foster their decadent ambitions. They repaid our loyalty by hemming us in the wastes of the Slaughterfields and leaving us to consume one another, either by madness or hunger. As the herds dwindle, more and more of us will be lost, Chained by our inescapable rage.

We were fools. We had been tricked all along into mocking the greatest tenet of all:

Let no blood go unspilled.

The Flayed Ones

The skin slid back from my skull, the night wind singing along the exposed nerves. I was forsworn, and free. Q'l'rukk was next, and then Yil'qrr. Hrik'skrr was gone. They were my pride now. They had seen the truth as well as I.

We are Koleris, born in blood. We are meant for slaughter, and the world is our abattoir. If we do not kill, we die.

We will show them. We will slaughter the Tribals at every turn, and leave their torn bodies strewn across the Slaughterfields for all the prides to see. Let them remember our days of glory, and hunger. Let the hunger drive them wild, and the earth drip with gore. The Lords must either be swept along, as we have been, or be torn apart.

I lay the glistening skin carefully on a drooping branch, listening to the terror of the caravan. Come the dawn the craven Joanites will find our hides and know that a season of death has come around again. They will fear, and with luck, they will come seeking us. We will hang their bones from the trees, and howl curses in the night. We will howl loud enough to be heard at the Ziggurat, and if the Baron would stop us, let him send the Phalanx, and see how long they can resist the temptations of Tribal flesh.

The hunger keens along my bones. Deep rage surges within me, and my mind fills with visions of Vimary, covered in clotted gore.

I run, and my pride runs with me. Our cries shake the trees. We fall upon the milling herd of humans, and blood flows hot and wild, splashing against our savaged bodies. We are reapers sowing our seed in the earth. We are killers of man and beast. The earth turns on the edge of our blade, and we are divine.

Chapter four: Flemis

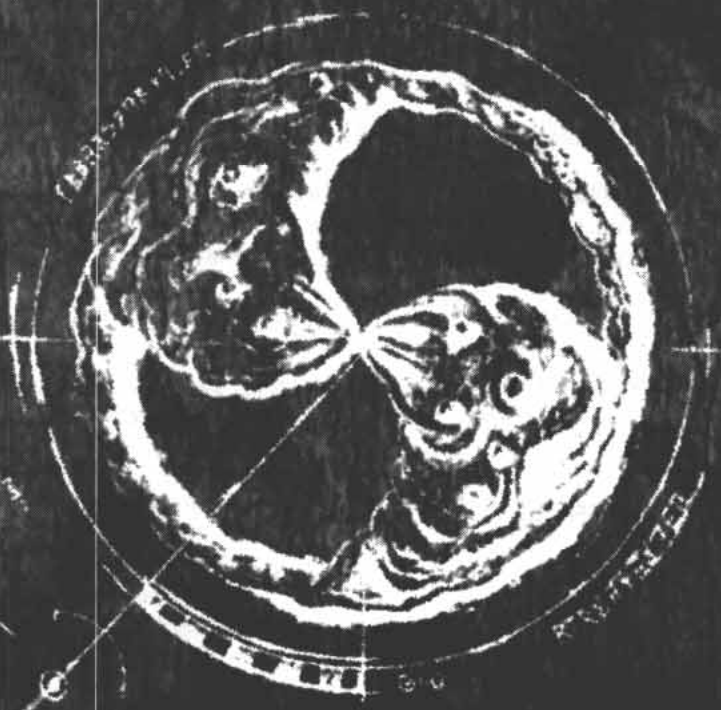
We Are. Until the ends of time, We Are. You will fight and fall, strive and hope and die, but not prevail, for We Are. We have been, and always shall be. You will be us. In time, all will be us. While the world still breathes, while the winds blow and earth moves, We Are.

We are Unity.

We are Flemis.

We Are.

- Voices



Little Visitors

From the Musings of Prince H'pakht, Flemis Exile:

What is that sound? A rustling, scurrying. . . *visitors*? We get few guests in our dark part of H'l Kar, in fact we get none at all! Who could they be? Tools of the Baron, come to destroy us? No, our visitors' minds are too weak to wield that sort of power. Let our body inhale. . . the physical stench of blood and sweat, the spiritual reek of fear and passion. . . how utterly human! But we sense something else, do we?

We sense our Flemis brethren! The bloated hives, their misguided power, their overwhelming urges cast shadows over the humans' petty feelings. If these mortals are a vengeful device, our former brethren are more foolish than even we can give credit. Whatever their motive, let us welcome them into ourselves. They are frightened, so let us soothe them with our touch.

Poor, fragile humans. Welcome to our lair, rest your weary bodies. Let us manifest a nutrient sac to fill your belly. There, now sup your fill.

Do you realize how special you are? Not a single creature has stumbled into our lair before you, and here we have lived since the Baron's foolish purges! We did not sense your approach until you nearly stumbled into us! And here we soothingly caress you with our body, allow your minds to flow within ours, and yet you retain your self, your coherence. Your minds are whole, intact! How intriguing, how. . . inhuman.

We. . . Prince H'pakht. . . I. I am no longer a part of the Hives. I am fooling no one with this charade of unity. We. . . I have not touched another mind since I absorbed my last dull-witted Iv'chet many years ago. My presence is too strong, my followers too weak. Their souls are muffled and agonized within mine. And though their quiet screams are delicious, I wish they could speak with me as before our merging.

Little visitors, I suffer like none of my brethren. I am. . . *alone*.

But wait! You are here, sharing your thoughts with my own! How can your frail minds be stronger than my poor Iv'chet? That does not matter; what matters is that you are here, inside me. I can share myself without destroying you! Oh, there is so much to tell! Where should I begin?

The World Before

My tiny guests, when I peer into your minds I can see but glimpses of your pasts. If only you could remember the *bliss* we offered humanity! My brothers fester in their Hives, finding themselves further from the Seed with every "discovery" they make. We were closer to the true Seed when we offered *joy* to you mortals. You once had a freedom unknown in the prison named H'l Kar.

Humanity was our only hope at finding the Seed, a hope now lost to depravity and selfishness. But I feel the past within your souls, a quivering gem buried by generations of flesh. Perhaps I can stir those ancestral memories? Yes? I will tell you the tale of how we came to your world, how we held our salvation in such slippery hands and how we have failed.

My precious guests, let me pour my thoughts further into yours so you can truly remember. Can you sense the now-squandered purity? Taste the air, it is. . . was so fresh! *We will begin. . .*

I am the City Heiypacht

We. . . I was one of the first to cross the Fold into your physical world. I remember the exhilaration of this world, sweeping through your cities as a bodiless spirit, devouring the pleasures and pains oozing from your own delicious lives! It is a shame we cannot return to the decadence of the past. . . I still dream of the raw bliss of humanity's self-inflicted climaxes and bloodletting.

In time I grew hungrier, my spiritual belly rumbling for more of your sensuality. Finally succumbing to the temptations of your flesh, I possessed a human's body and gathered a flock of passionate souls around myself. Years passed, and with them grew my adoring followers. They christened me *Heiypacht, of the Seventeen*, worshipped me as a savior for raising their mundane lives to otherworldly heights. But I was not fulfilled with mere flesh. With much effort and many pleasurable failures, I began to open your minds to my own. Before this I felt only a taste of human delight and suffering, but with your thoughts transparent and skins flayed before me, what were once shadows took shape and became entire worlds.

With this discovery I devoured souls like a beast, gathering an entire city into my clutches, walking the streets as a mighty avatar of temptations fulfilled. I toyed with their simple minds, stretched the already vast boundaries of my own eager spirit. In time each of my humans was a marionette, with my mental fingers guiding their strings. Their passion was my passion, their hatred was mine, I was the City Heiypacht.

Attacks from bands of wayward mortals grew ever more frequent, but they either succumbed to our might or fled in terror. I was proud and stubborn then, not possessing the wisdom earned through betrayal and defeat. Some days after one such assault, reveling in the tortured minds of our captives, I was approached by a trio of Z'bri owing allegiance to a *Melancholic Brotherhood*. They spoke of horrid Z'bri, *Nomads*, awful cousins who sought to destroy our decades of rulership. In the Nomads' eyes, said the trio, our presence in this world beyond the Fold is a travesty and must be erased! My guests, can you believe that? A *travesty*? My city loved me, worshipped me as a god and an omnipresent lover. I remember guiding my three brothers to the balcony of my palace and showing them my city of steel and flesh. *Look over the city of Heiypacht*, I told them. *And tell me I have a stray Z'bri and his minions to fear! My mortals flow with my power, their thoughts and desires are my own, their souls moving at my whim. Smell the passion they hold, feel their hearts of blood and steel.* I laughed in the faces of my three brothers then, dismissing them with a wave of my arm. They repeated their warning, urging me to find strength in and provide my power to their Brotherhood. Only two of them left that day, the third spread out across my palace garden in a vivid display of my rejection.

The Closing

Though we did not know it, our most glorious era was nearing its end. The assaults from my barbarous cousins, the Nomads, grew in frequency and strength. Though reinforced with the flesh and bone of our enemies, thick with screams of pain and delight, our walls had begun to falter. And then the attacks ceased altogether. We, the City Heiypacht. . . I. . . was foolish for not recognizing the signs, pointed out by the Melanis harbingers. Stretching out to the thousand thousand mortals within my thoughts, I could feel a psychic electricity in the air, but ignored its grave warning. Our. . . my urge to pull the Seed closer overcame wiser decisions.

Then while my spirit lay in the beds of a thousand sleeping mortals, flowing through their dreams as if on a lazy river, the Nomads enacted their vicious Closing. My great body heaved itself from a bed of pillows to the stone floor, writhing in agony. A thousand-thousand minds that were my minds awoke and shrieked, their spiritual pain pulling muscles taut. Millions of bones stretched and snapped, rivers of blood ran through my streets.

Only my willpower held us. . . myself together, now one mind in one surviving body. I lay on the polished marble, sobbing in a pool of drying blood. There I lay for days, or even weeks. My brothers found me then, a knotted heap in the center of the City Heiypacht, an avatar of bliss to a thousand-thousand corpses. I felt, barely, warm fingers caressing my shattered skull, spiritual tendrils winding through my broken mind.

H'pakht, whispered the voice, calling my true Z'bri name. *Your thoughts flow within ours so easily. We knew your strength would save you from the Nomads' doing. Let our desires envelop your own, let your emotions become ours, know what it is to be us.* The fingers lifted my head, pulled my eyelids apart to let me gaze into the unity of a hundred Z'bri. Our. . . my spirit left that mortal shell and drifted into the great Collective. A hundred whispers explored me then:

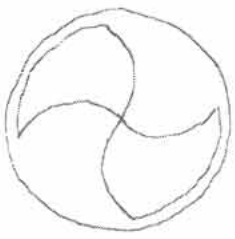
Become Flemis. Become us.

Inquisition

I gave in to the Flemis that day, reveling for days in our unity of thought. Where my link to a million human minds was a sensual caress, the Flemis Collective of only a hundred Z'bri was a violent and smothering orgy! My anger with the murderous Nomads combined with the wave of our collective hatred, and with a decision made as one, the Flemis descended upon the mortal world.

Inhabiting a hundred million humans at once, using powers gained from all our experiences, we merged their bodies into amorphous beasts. Thousands of beasts sharing the minds and revenge of the Flemis; thousands of monstrosities with but one goal, the utter destruction of the Nomads.

Thus began the great Inquisition, the days we. . . I remember with a guilty zeal. The destruction of Z'bri souls, once an unthinkable act, became a new pleasure. Some we destroyed physically before rendering their souls into ghosts, others we ravaged mentally before absorbing and devouring their mind with the strength of our Collective. We unleashed horrors both physical and spiritual upon the mortal world, flesh-swallowing plagues and epidemics of madness, all aimed to wholly destroy the Nomads for their crimes. For months we hunted our cousins, our linked thoughts driving the immense hulks forward.



The Camps

At last we believed the Nomads to be defeated, but we both know better now, don't we little visitors! With the Inquisition over, our souls exhausted and our fleshy bodies weak, we were approached by the Melanis. They were a painful reminder of our. . . my vanity at the City Heiypacht, but any personal contempt was washed over by indifference and curiosity from the others. The Melanis Brotherhood discussed with us a plan to undo the damage of the Closing. And do you know what this plan was, my guests?

Remember back to a previous life, one filled with the pain's blissful release. Remember the lives you spent herded like cattle, your souls ignored for the sake of Z'bri indulgence? Remember the Camps?

When the Melanis approached one of our bodies they spoke with us all. Some of the Collective protested and others were reserved, I swallowed my pride and was among those in favor, and among the most influential of the Collective. Each individuality succumbed to the Unity and our bodies converged to meet in the lands now known as the H'l Kar. Lumbering, crawling, and oozing across the land, we and the Brothers Melanis gathered mortals through temptation, fear and brute force. We contacted other Z'bri, ones who would not give themselves to the Collective or who had gone into hiding after the Closing, telling of our plans for the future.

And oh, my little visitors, what a wretched future it came to be.

The Search For the Seed

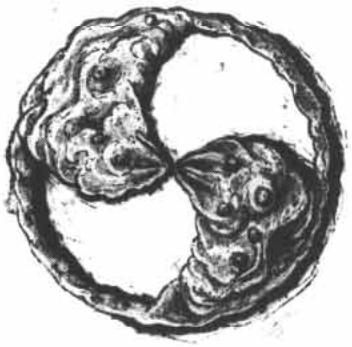
Our Camps were so decadent! We indulged ourselves, drinking the flesh and chewing the bones of our mortals. I. . . the part of Flemis that was H'pakht. . . bathed in the memories of my dead city. We remade entire cities with skin and sinew rather than steel and glass. Linking to the minds of thousands of mortals, we experienced the torture of individuality and considered the fear of mortality. As beings without bodies, we never feared our own death. In the back of our vast Mind we believed the Nomads had not truly known Death, for they were also Z'bri. If only we had considered this rather than pushing it deep below other memories.

We. . . I do not know what other factions believed the Camps to be. For we Flemis it was a rediscovery. The Closing left us all shut off from the spiritual world, abandoned us to suffer in this mortal world of flesh. But we rediscovered a power within this world! A prize beyond our reach before we arrived to this side of the Fold. Do you know what this was, little guests? No? It was the *flesh*. Your flesh lured us across the Fold with promises of the Seed, but the Closing made us curse our desire! Our pain blinded us to our original passion. The Inquisition quelled any thoughts or yearnings other than the deaths of our traitorous brethren. But the Camps left us idle and introspective; the Seed once again became our preoccupation. Every thought, every action performed in the Camps was to bring the Seed within our grasp. A thousand bodies, their flesh soft and gelatinous, combined into a single mass. One mind stretched across a hundred humans, each action mimicked a hundred times in unison. Skin melted, bones skewed, organs burst. All this for the Seed.

Our unity was our strength, a single Mind composed of a thousand minds, a Collective of thoughts and experience and knowledge. And with this came vast insight into the Seed. Though closer to the Seed than any other Z'bri because of our unity, we still lacked the raw flesh that carries and channels the Seed. Only humans truly *are* flesh; Z'bri can only use skin and bone as a vessel. Within every body there still exists a self, even when one of us inhabits it. A trace of the soul and the Seed. You, my little humans, are very special indeed!

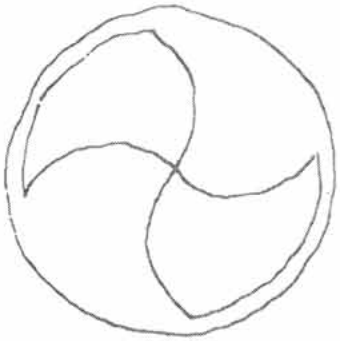
The Flemis and Their Camps

You may think the Houses ran their own camps, but we were not Houses then! For many years the Melanis Brotherhood and our own Collective were a minority; most of the Z'bri running the camps formed their own loose alliances, usually centered around a single powerful Z'bri. There were many conflicts and betrayal during this time. . . Z'bri are such selfish and powerful beings! We. . . I do not know how the Melanis survived, but they survived and still rule as one of the four Houses. We Flemis were not bound to a single Lord, my guests, in one we held the power of all Flemis! With our vast mind we tried looking into the future. The decadence of the Camps let us forget the present and plan for the Age of the Flemis. But for all our combined knowledge and power, we never foresaw the return of the Nomads.



Liberation

Surely, my precious guests, you know what happened then, in the height of our power, the Seed beckoning, closer with every passing thought? We were foolish to think the Nomads destroyed. With the Seed blanketing our thoughts, no Z'bri knew of the Fatimas' births. When the rumors of Baba Yaga reached our Collective, what were we to care? Some Z'bri toying with his herd, surely. We. . . I saw the signs, however. Not the Flemis Collective: they surpressed my anxiety, not having suffered from ignorance as I once did in the final days of my City. I struggled to overcome the will of the Collective but the power of even my thoughts were drowned in the Flemis Mind.



A Uniting

Many of us died during the Liberation, something we did not think possible. Somehow the Nomads were able to sever even the link of the Flemis Collective! Imagine that, my guests, and fear it! With the might of our mortal cattle behind them, the humans' gods rose up and slew scores of Z'bri. We united then, against these traitors, Flemis, Melanis and others. Though we pushed them from H'l Kar and slew many of their spiteful mortals, our losses were great. In the aftermath, only four factions remained: Our Collective, the monastic Melanis, a deplorably self-absorbed Sangis and the Koleris, driven insane by the loss of their leader and their traditions.

Rebuilding

With the junk piles nursing their broken bodies and tending their doomed flocks, we Z'bri crafted our plans for the future. While the Koleris urged us all to rise up and stamp out the Nomadic creations, and the Melanis remained quiet and introspective, it was the Sangis who envisioned the H'l Kar, a solace for the four Z'bri Houses, a haven where our organization would protect us from the Nomads' treachery and prevent another resurgence. Our Houses would cooperate to create a massive Ziggurat to recapture our closeness to the Seed. The Melanis would lay out the scheme, we Flemis construct the framework, the Sangis raise our buildings into an aesthetic masterpiece. The Koleris, my visitors, offered their passion for violence and cruelty, grafting suffering and loss to the work so no Z'bri would forget the Nomads' deeds.

H'l Kar

We lived in the H'l Kar then, and we live here still. The Flemis in their collectives and I in my tiny "hive." You do know we are still here, in the H'l Kar? Do you? My little guests, you seem to know so little of the world, yet your minds are so strong, your wills unbreakable! How did this come to be? No, do not answer yet. Let me continue.

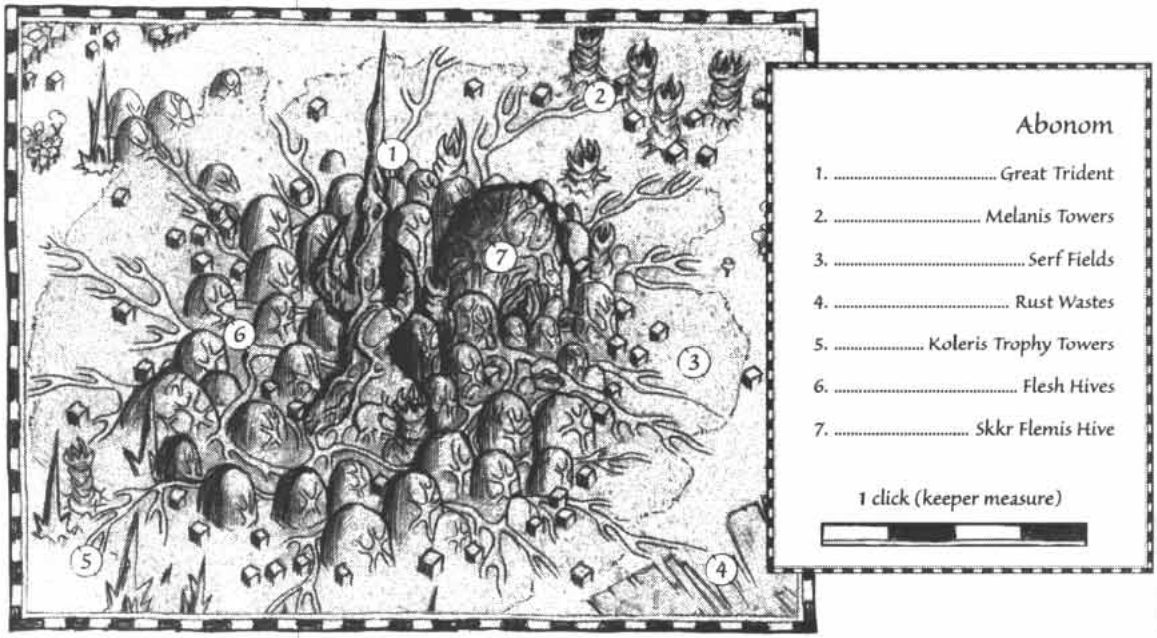
I was Flemis then, living within the Collective. During the Liberation a single entity, Skkr, had emerged as the most powerful mind among us. Now he was a guiding force, sacrificing what little remained of his individuality for the greater coherence of the Flemis. We. . . I lived within the Collective, watched the Breeders and Architects emerge from the Unity. My power was great, and since manifesting in flesh seemed far too simple, my spirit drifted within and around the entire Hive. Skkr's will, the Hive's will, created Messengers, Ambassadors to the humans, a careful plan to communicate with the Tribals. My will was strong, and so were others within the Flemis. Our protests rippled through the Hive Mind. *What is this? An Alliance with the traitors?* Within moments, nearly a third of the Collective agitated the entire Unity. A schism appeared, a break in the shared thoughts. I felt a single Flemis mind touch mine. *Rakh*, it said over and over, with flowing images of a new Hive, a new Collective. The very day the first Messenger, Ult'maht, was sent among the Tribes, the Rakh Hive split and left for Abonom.

I am afraid, little visitors, that I was not among them. I too gathered Flemis about me, but a mere handful compared to the thousands Rakh took to Abonom. Fearing both the Rakh and the Skkr I abandoned the Unity of the Flemis. After centuries of the Collective, I forced my mind from theirs, stole their flesh and removed their Unity. Severing my ties, I fled into the deep forests of the H'l Kar. I lumbered through the trees, devouring Gek'roh and lost Drones and stray Z'bri, until I discovered this forgotten building.

It was buried beneath the ground with only a single small entrance — I crawled inside and waited. I have since grown so lonely in my tiny hive, luring flesh down so I can survive. It is tiring, my precious guests. Very tiring.

Come closer. Closer to me. Your minds are too strong to rend and tear. I know this, for how else could you have entered unchecked? I will not consume you, do not worry. But rather I would make an offer. A trade. My flesh for yours. You see, my friends, I am no longer Flemis, no longer Z'bri. I wish to discard this massive shell and walk the world as you. As a mortal. As a Human.

And then at long last will I know the Seed.



A Hive Mind

From the memories of the serf Divd, channeled by Yagan Gerta Matakin:

Where am I? Who am I? I am Divd. I am dead. Am I? Where is the Mind? There is only my own! Am I alone? Who is that? You are. . . not Getwn. Who is Getwn? I am not. I am Divd. Divd the gifted, Skkr's blessed child, Getwn's lover eternal. I am Divd.

Oh! That Light! This is not a new beginning, I am not being born! Have I been abandoned? Skkr has abandoned me? I have no body, but I am still Divd! Help me! Help! You can help? Who are you?

Questions? You have questions? About Divd? About Skkr, about Flemis? I am Divd. I am Divd the gifted, Skkr's favorite, Skkr's beautiful tool. I will answer.

Birth

I am Divd! I am and am not Flemis. I am not Z'bri! But Skkr favors me, blesses me with his mind, their mind. . . our Mind. I am born. An Iv'chet — the Breeder charged with overseeing my birthing chamber — scoops me from my mother's womb. Holds me against his rolls of fat. Unlike many serfs I do not remember my lives before. Until Getwn. But I do think and reason. His swollen fingers. They caress my writhing body and dive into my soul. In accordance to Skrr's plan.

Skkr's idea spread throughout the Hive Mind. The Iv'chet opens my spirit up to the Hive and embraces me. His individuality is a dissonance, not a cooperation. He is jealous of my station. Jealous even as I lie helpless and squirming. Hiding his thoughts from the Hive Mind, I feel his presence drown me. *You little boil, Skkr thinks you worth more than food or flesh? We disagree. Let us prove to Skkr that all mortals are bags of skin to stretch across our Z'bri souls!*

He opens my mind. My mind to his single one, not the Flemis. Skkr opens me to the Flemis when I grow older. Now it is only this Iv'chet and Divd. Psychic organs pulse and squeeze, trying to burst me, smother me. I am Liecc Kti, the Iv'chet. I am but another of the drones, a part of Liecc. Bred for flesh and food and waste. I am not Divd. I am a drone. I am Drone. I am Liecc Kti. . .

I am Divd! I open my eyes and scream. I am Divd! I am Divd! My spirit resonates. I send ripples throughout the Hive Mind. Skkr himself possesses part of the chamber's living walls. I am a newborn. The muscles in my neck are weak and I roll as best I can towards the bloated face. Skkr's face stretching from the wall. He sees a tiny baby clutched in the arms of a dead husk. A dead Z'bri. And Skkr knows I will be his chosen one.

Chosen

Skkr manifests. Arms, fingers, a torso. Skkr softly tears his new body from the chamber wall, a circle of fat legs supporting his weight. They — Skkr is all Flemis — scoop me out of Liecc Kti's dead arms. The arms are already dissolving. No Z'bri spirit holds the flesh in place.

Skkr presses me to his chest. I have a memory that is not a memory of my mother holding me. The Hive Mind surrounds me. Comforts me. I do not want to scream. I. . . we want the Hive, we want Skkr. And Skkr wants us.

I am Divd! I am Skkr. We are Flemis. We sense my humanity, and shiver until Skkr assures us. *Divd will be our equal, though born of a mother's womb. With our greatest strength lies our greatest betrayal: All Z'bri know a Flemis. And all Z'bri are afraid of us. Divd is and is not Flemis. He is Flemis and not Z'bri. We will use this.*

I want to be used.

Pieces of a Whole

Skkr raised Divd then. Raised me. Us. Our body hurts. Skkr. Not Skkr the Z'bri. Skkr the Hive. Appeases the flesh and softens the pain. *Poor Divd, you are only human and our Mind brings you suffering. You are worth saving. You will be our eyes and ears and body where we cannot go.* Skkr offers images. Tastes. Smells. Thoughts. Another Flemis. Another Flemis Hive whispering a single name. A name remembered and hated by Skkr. *Rakh.*

I am. . . we are Divd and are human. Not Z'bri. The Rakh Hive will not know us. Skkr tells us this and prepares us for travel. We are to join the Rakh serfs, be a drone. We are frightened. We were a drone once. Skkr assures us that we will not be a drone. We will always be Skkr's blessed child. Divd will be safe.

As a Nest

Before we can join the Rakh we must learn. We must know the Flemis. The Skkr Hive teaches us with thoughts and the Mind's memories. We learn of all Flemis. There are three tiers. Three roles within the Hive. Like the roles of the flesh wasps, explains Skkr. A serf is possessed and walks to where a crusted nest of the flesh wasps lies. Stuck in the ground. The wasps' tiny bodies writhe around the nest, flying away to collect more detritus. We stand over the nest. Reach down and crack it apart. Ignoring the poison stings, we look into the nest. We see fierce warriors flying up to attack us. Attack the serf. Other wasps. Builder wasps regurgitating clotted blood to repair the nest. Collector wasps returning home. Bits of flesh stuck to their hindlegs. A single breeder wasp squeezing pink eggs from her womb. Our vision fades. Turns red. Goes black. We die from a thousand poison stings. We do not die. We are Divd, not the serf. The serf is dead.

We are like the wasps, young Divd. As the flesh wasps, we act as one body, one nest. But we are not all equal. Just as the wasps are shaped to suit their role, so are the Flemis crafted. Divd understands. We understand. There are three tiers:

The ***Architects****, builders of the Hive.* Like the wasps, Architects regurgitate and reshape serfs to craft our buildings. Buildings for all of the Z'bri. Skkr tells us of the Architects of the Liberation. Building war machines to dwarf the Koleris soldiers. Giants crafted from a thousand serfs. Limbs each made from ten or twenty bodies. Weapons of sharp bone and whipping sinew. Mouths to tear through the Fatimas' serfs. Tortured and imprisoned Flemis minds suffering worse than the Gek'roh. We wonder if these war machines still live. Lost or abandoned. We wonder and fear.

Messengers*, couriers and warriors.* They are like the collector and warrior wasps. Not all Z'bri are Flemis. No humans are Flemis. When we must speak with others. Others who are not Flemis. We must use Messengers. And at times we must fight. But we are not the Koleris, we are not warriors by nature. Soldiers of House Flemis mold themselves into weapons of the flesh. Weapons which liquefy the flesh. Which combine mortal minds into one, killing them with shock. Which appear as humans who travel among the Tribals and couple. And spread the Flemis seed.

Breeders *are just that.* They watch over the Serfs. The drones. I. . . we killed a Breeder. Liecc Kti. He strayed from the Hive. He was no longer Flemis. Breeders herd and control the drones. They are needed for building material. For food. For desire. Skkr tells me we need the drones for more than that. *For the Seed.* We do not understand.

Fragments

Now Divd knows the unity of the Flemis. But I. . . we must learn more. The Skkr Hive lifts our mind from our body. Divd's body. We are grafted to the individuals of the Flemis. Not individual. Pieces. Pieces of the Skkr Hive. We are Breeders and Drones and entire Buildings. We are F'hl the Architect, crafting a Chamber of the Self to rediscover and combat the individuality of our Drones. We are Tct'lu the Ancient, slumbering beneath the water, our dreams winding into the thoughts of Skkr. We are Ll'Enh the Joh'an, unknowingly linked to the Skkr Hive. Our Skyrealm above Hom with Drones linked by their minds, bodies sewn tightly shut.

We are Az'Lr, Larval Worker

I am not Divd. I am. . . we are Z'bri. Our thoughts are simple. Content. Our desire is Skkr desire. Our thoughts are Skkr thoughts. We remember. We remember being reborn. Recycled through the Hive. Why? We sought assertion. We needed to be reborn. We were not Flemis, not Skkr. Our spirit was tainted. Tainted with self. The Skkr Hive felt our individuality. Felt it and loathed it. We were a cancer. If we were not reborn, our thoughts may have infected. Stained the Hive. Skkr felt this and stopped us. Enclosed us. Destroyed and renewed us. Now we are Skkr. We are Az'lr: A single cell in collective body of the Skkr Hive.

Before we were reborn, we had much power. We were Iv'chet. Alpha. Overseeing the construction of a breeding chamber. Now we are Worker. Larva. Only three Drones make our flesh. Three drones. . . we are young.

We are Ult'maht, Alpha Messenger

We are not Divd. We are Ambassador Ult'maht. If we were not Flemis we would be Lord, Prince, Count. We are Flemis, we are all Skkr. We are meeting with Tribals. Tribals? They should all be our Drones, but they are not. We feel a presence like that of the Baron. A Fatima. Fatimas rule the Tribals just as we use our Drones. Only we save our Drones from Death, save their souls from the River of Dream. From the selfish Goddess. This Fatima is watching. Watching through the eyes of her servant, her Drone. We must be careful. We will not fill these Tribals, daughters of the Fatima Magdalen, with our Flemis seed this day. We can wait.

A clutter of thoughts. Not from these Tribals. From nearby, bodies hidden behind broken concrete. Flesh hidden but minds open to us. Flemis and Fatima. Open to Z'bri. The Fatima sends a ripple of fear into her Drones. Drawing weapons they stand back to back, eyeing our Flemis body with suspicion. *This is not our doing,* we assure them. *These are of your kind.* Our thoughts are interrupted by a savage yell. A band of Joanites burst out of the rubble and charge us. Shouting. Hating. Hating us. Hating the traitors at our feet. Knowing the truth would destroy them.

The Joanites fear us. They cut down the Tribals but not us. We introspect and find an image of the Seed. A blade sinks into our body! A Joanite has mustered her courage. The Seed dissipates as we suck the blade further into our body. She struggles to pull it free as folds of meat pull her closer. We reach out with a bloated hand and hold her head. She stops. They all stop and stare. We hold her tighter, pressing her against us. *Join us. Become us.* Her skin feels soft. Softer. Softer. Realization erupts from her mind and she tries to scream but her flesh is not under her command. And no longer is her mind. She is Ult'maht. Skkr. *Flemis.*

The other Tribals — the Fatimas' Drones — are united by their fear. Horror. We feel the link between them our terror creates. The Seed is closer to us, pulsing. Tempting. Some Tribals fly at us with hatred, others scramble over the rubble to flee, another falls to her knees and giggles. It is too late, they are bound by fear. The air around us shimmers a fleshy pink as we Sunder their minds; it is easy when the same emotion runs through them all. Their thoughts are as one. Our thoughts are as one. *My/your/our grip on the sword is slick with perspiration. This thing can't be true! Can't be! Our/my knees hurt. Joan! How funny. Can't be! Look out! Can't be true! Our knees hurt. Goddess! Look! Can't be! Joan!*

We leave the battle. All the Fatimas' wretched Drones lie dead, their souls within us. Skkr's. . . our's. . . the Flemis plan proceeds.

I am K'lyor, Drone

We are Divd. And K'lyor. Mortal. Serf. Drone. We. . . I hate the Flemis. Love them. Skkr is my savior, my murderer, my lover. I live forever within Skkr, within the Hive. My spirit is bodiless, the birthing chambers remake my flesh. The Skkr Hive protects me, saves me from the true death. The death of the River. The death of the Tribals.

I am working now, toiling in a field of tissue and bone. I plunge my hand into a ripe organ and pull out a handful of nutrition-filled sacs. Dumping these in my skin-pouch I continue my search for ripe organs. What is that? A commotion at the edge of the field! I turn to the Flemis watching over us and feel its tension. Tension quickly covered up as it washes us with comfort. *Do not worry. You will live forever.* The Worker's flesh ripples only slightly with its own thoughts.

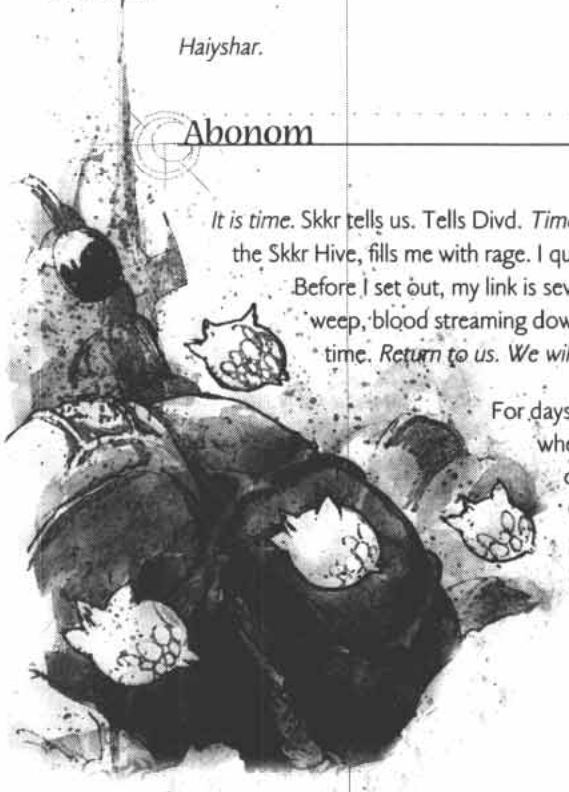
But I am curious. I am not Flemis, driven by the Hive Mind, acting out the will of Skkr. It is a pact. My flesh for an endless spirit, saved eternally by the Skkr Hive.

My will is my own, and I am curious. I creep closer to the commotion, partially hidden by reeds of sinew. Pushing a handful of reeds aside, I see a beast, a Gek'roh! The Worker's thoughts try to calm me but my mind rejects it. I am frozen in place, terrified! The Gek'roh stands atop a Drone, stabbing and sucking with a huge needle-like mouth. Flecks of blood and bone spray into the air with every swallow. Swarms of insects coat the Gek'roh like a black cloak, stinging and biting the Workers and Drones trying to destroy the beast. *Aid us. We will free your spirit.* I am no longer afraid. *Destroy the Gek'roh. And you will be born again.* I break into a run, tripping over the sinew reeds, stumbling through the ripe organs. Gore bursts around my legs as I speed towards the beast. My teeth gnash, and I feel Skkr within me, stroking my muscle and bone. Pushing it. Skkr softens the pain as my fingers become long bone knives, teeth become fangs, ribs grow sharp and burst from my sides. I am a weapon of the Flemis. This is my pact.

Biting a piece from the Gek'roh, I feel my ribs punch through the swarming insects, but there is nothing underneath! The beast's long mouth twists and bursts into a hundred insects, its limbs scatter into a cloud of thousands. As I thrash against the swarm, a single name enters my head. Where is Skkr? Where is our pact? There is no tug at my soul this time. This beast prevents it! I am dying! My body! My spirit! The only thoughts in my head are those of a million insects speaking one Z'bri name.

Haiyshar.

Abonom



It is time. Skkr tells us. Tells Divd. *Time to seek out the Rakh.* The hated Rakh. The Mind of the Flemis, of the Skkr Hive, fills me with rage. I quell it. I must remain a serf. A Drone. I must be invisible to the Rakh. Before I set out, my link is severed. My mind. The Hive Mind. I am alone. I claw at my hair and weep, blood streaming down my scalp and stinging my eyes. I feel the Skkr Mind one more time. *Return to us. We will be one again.* We. . . I. . . Divd flees into the wood.

For days I have traveled, searching for Abonom. For the Rakh. I know where it should be. One more day. I hide from a Gek'roh and her pack of shuffling Drones. They will not see me. I am nothing to them. Gone. They are gone now. I am rising a hill. I have been climbing this hill for two days. Pushing past ferns. Grass. Vines. I am at the crest of the hill and below is. . . Abonom.

Getwn

Stretching for miles, my eyes see the images Skkr gave me. Familiar but not-familiar smells. I remember the taste of the air. But I have never stood here. Stood and watched and smelled and tasted. Directly below me are fields. Fields of flesh, bodies tripping and gathering. Harvesting. Drones. Beyond is Rakh. The Rakh Hive, a cancer to the Flemis, to the Z'bri. A massive three-pronged fleshy spear pierces the center of the Hive. What is this? We. . . I remember. I remember that Skkr does not know. And Skkr wants me to know. Around I see other Houses. Traitorous Houses. Selfish Houses. These Z'bri are not Flemis. But they cannot even hold the Unity of a House. Even a House that is not Flemis!

I carefully descend the steep slope. Into the fields. Like the Drone in my memories. Killed by the Chained. Gek'roh. I push through reeds of sinew. Ripe organs roll and burst at my feet. Sacs spill out. I am hungry, but I do not eat. I will not eat from Rakh. Drones. Harvesting. Working. A Worker Flemis watching. I feel its mind, but it ignores me. I think like a Drone. I am a Drone. I am an individual. Alien to the Rakh. To Skkr. To all Flemis. I am Divd.

I feel something. A mental pull. Someone. A Drone. Someone I know. I cannot know! What is this? I follow the pull. Pretend. Pretend to be a Drone. I am a Rakh Drone. The Worker knows this. Knows I am Rakh. And ignores me. I follow the pull. Push through the reeds. Collect nutrient sacs. The Worker ignores me. I am Rakh. I am a Drone. The pull overwhelms me. I part a tall patch of reeds. A bony spider crawls away. I see a Drone. She pulls me. With her mind. She is pulled. She looks up. I cannot move. *Getwn.*

I am Dave. I am living comfortably in my apartment. The television blathers something about a cultist phenomenon but I don't care. I am with Gwen. She lounges on the couch; we are both exhausted from lovemaking. She feels my eyes on her and looks up from the television screen. "Forever?"

I am David. I haven't eaten for days. My last meal was some animal long dead before we found it. Born in the Camps, a plaything for the horrid creatures preaching our salvation. Our worth. They know nothing of humanity. I am too weak to move, cradled by my wife. We were married in the Camps, a ritual the elders from Before remembered. She is all I live for. Without Gewen I would be lost. Tears fall onto my face. I try to taste them but my tongue is fat in my mouth and refuses to move. I look up and try to speak. Gewen lowers her head to my cracked lips. "I'll be. With you. Forever."

Escape

I am Divd. I am David. I am not Skkr. I am not Rakh. I am Divd. And this is Getwn. This is Gwen. We are not Flemis. We are not Drones! We are eternal! Getwn drops the bloated organ; it spatters on the fleshy dirt. She rushes toward me. The Rakh Mind quivers. The Worker! The Rakh! He knows who we are! Knows we are Divd. And Getwn. Knows we are not Drones. Not Flemis!

We run from the Worker. I feel him close. His mind tears into mine, trying to join me with Getwn. Destroy my self with Unity. But he does not understand. I already *am* Getwn. And she is Divd. We scream as the Worker's spirit is destroyed. By us. The Worker's bulk collapses into the reeds. Our bodies are sprayed by gore. We run into the wood. Rakh is surprised. A Worker destroyed. We feel its thoughts through Getwn. *A Drone? So strong! We must find it!*

We race through the wood. Stumble through the vines. Rakh Drones. Rakh Workers. Alphas. Behind us. Charging through the H'l Kar. Listening, smelling, reaching with their minds. We break through the trees. A clearing. Concrete. Rusted Steel. We feel safety. Comfort. We rush into the clearing. Find an opening in the ground. Hidden by vines and something else. Something in our minds. Something pushing us away. But we are strong. And afraid. We break through and fall down through the ground. Down. And land on something soft. Warm. Fleshy. A serene mind enters ours. A single name is thought. Not Divd. Not Getwn.

H'pakht.

Chapter Five: Melanis

We are of a thousand whispers;

Of forgotten truths and remembered lies.

We are the shapes that form when the light grows dim.

We are the fear of not being,

The pain of cold passion tearing tender flesh —

For every dream, we are the horror and doubt that all is for naught;

We are Melanis.

– from the journals of D'sher, Melanis scholar.

The Coming of Shadow

From the deranged mutterings of Vox, Melanis Symbiot:

Ah. . . *visitors*, welcome and enter.

Forgive the dust and neglect, we. . . we do not entertain too often. These crumbling walls and living corridors were once the grandest of Melanis' Covenants — Hn'ious — built when your kind adored the Z'bri and called them saviors. A time when your ancestors opened their hearts, their minds, their bodies to my Masters — a time before the Closing. But please, make yourself at home, I long for company. . . Hn'ious has stood empty since your Fatimas came and stole you from us.

Do not look at me with disdain or horror, for I am of flesh and bone as you. This mouth you see, a jagged collection of teeth and tongue, belonged to one of you and is now immortalized in me. The muscles that power my limbs are the same ones that now tense your stomach, that excite your sex as you gaze at me — an impossible ramble of muscle and sinew. I am alive, hundreds of consciousnesses flow through me, through Hn'ious, forever pulsating with the rich essence of your flesh.

No. . . I am not Melanis, but *of* Melanis. If you must know, I am a Symbiot, a tool sculpted by my masters to assist them, to cater to their needs. I am Hn'ious, but that is such a crass description, vulgar really. I see you are confused.

The walls around you are alive and are a part of me; my presence extends to them. I can feel my muscles opening and closing doors, eyes looking into cells that once housed "patients" and some that still do. Hn'ious is as alive as I am. See that door? My thoughts travel down synapses and arouse the muscles of the door to open. That hiss is not crude gears, but moans of pleasure, of excited flesh. . . follow me to the Nexus where I'll tell you of my masters, the Hooded Melanis.

Where are my masters? That's a tale for later, for now let us learn the basics, to better understand the Melanis. And yes, I can sense your thoughts, your fears that reach out and permeate Hn'ious, absorbed like sweet nectar.

Fear not, your company is more prized than your flesh; Hn'ious' stables are well stocked. Now let me tell you of my masters, the Melanis. . .

Genus

From the recollections of Hector Ih'on, Yagan Flesher

We found the serf haggard and starving. Boils raged on his body, and his skin stretched tight over his bones, all of which were twisted and gnarled like the trees of the Great Hill. He was not long for this world, but the Evan I was with, now exiled, cared for the thing through the night. It kept us awake with its screams and mutterings of its masters, the cloaked Melanis. What I remember still haunts me, his twisted voice etched into my soul.

I fear Baba Yaga, sweet death, will forsake me for repeating them. . .

". . .it was The Ones Who See — the one whom all Melanis descend from and who are one and the same — who first awoke in the Darkness beyond the River of Dream and knew for the first time. . .

"Alone, The Ones Who See felt the pull of the mother and father and called them Seed and Goddess, male and female, life and death. From the void It formed and felt and knew and longed. It reached out and called others, but The Ones Who See were alone. . .

"Blinded by her own importance, the Goddess ignored The Ones Who See and They hungered for the Seed; to feel, to give their thoughts, emotions and passions context that the Goddess would not give.

"And so, They reached out and felt the dreams of our ancestors in a time before time. They longed for what They were — essence, potential, fear and power. The Ones Who See understood that human and Z'bri were indeed One, and so more powerful than the divided Seed and Goddess. . .

"Through dreams they communed and we longed to be one with The Ones Who See, but the Goddess forbade it. The Goddess denied her love to the Seed and turned her back on us. She forsook her children and let us fall. She then turned and banished The Ones Who See to the depths of the void, forever separated from us, and we from it.

"Alone we learned to hate, to war, to consume and to rape. Our dreams awoke the others in the darkness: the Ones Who Feel, the Bleeding Ones and the Consumers of All. Without the Goddess, we worshipped the Four Beyond, but they were nothing more than fabled recollections and vague hopes.

". . . the Age of Separation was upon us.

The Nexus

From the deranged mutterings of Vox, Melanis Symbiot:

Please excuse the mess. The bodies you see suspended by ligaments and attached to the walls were once vibrant and lithe — beautiful, even — now their emaciated flesh is stretched taut on their bones, excrement and urine covering their legs and the floor. It's been summers since they have been properly cared for. Their bodies may be dead, but their minds are kept alive, repositories of knowledge and secrets long lost.

Were you expecting rows and rows of books? Why, when flesh is eternal when touched by my masters? Each of the dozens of bodies you see suspended, tethered to arcane machines and laced with arteries bringing nutrients from the walls, hold volumes of knowledge. Each a library of experience no book or tome could possibly match. I can feel them stir, awakened by our presence. Here, this one will suffice. I'll open its mouth and purge it of refuse to allow it to speak of the time you call the World Before and the Closing. . .

The Ending Times

From the projections of a Kirilian Construct in Hn'ious:

. . . *cough*. . .

For eons humanity and Z'bri were separated. Denied the contact that would elevate both, instead chained to ignorance by the Deceitful Mother. Mud homes gave way to stone and finally to towering steel monoliths. During this time, humans forgot about the Four, about the Goddess and the Barrier that separated both. They were truly ignorant, and without faith, the Goddess' barrier weakened. Through gaps of disbelief the Openers entered, hoping to save humankind from the darkness of Separation.

The Openers decided only they could pass beyond the Fold as they were of The Ones Who See, and hence ancient among the Z'bri. They reasoned only they could bring about the Union of Man and Z'bri. And so, the Openers crossed the Fold and opened humanity's eyes to the wonders of Flesh and Salvation.

But the Others were not content. They wanted to share in the discovery of the Seed, to be one with the Dreamers, but the Openers denied them. The Others seethed with jealousy and anger. Those who would be called Sangis, Koleris and Flemis, however, did not understand the fragile balance of things or the delicate work the Openers. The Openers pleaded with them, but the Others wanted to commune with humanity. Their hunger was boundless.

And so, a great war was upon the Four.

The Closing

From the projections of a Kirilian Construct in Hn'ious:

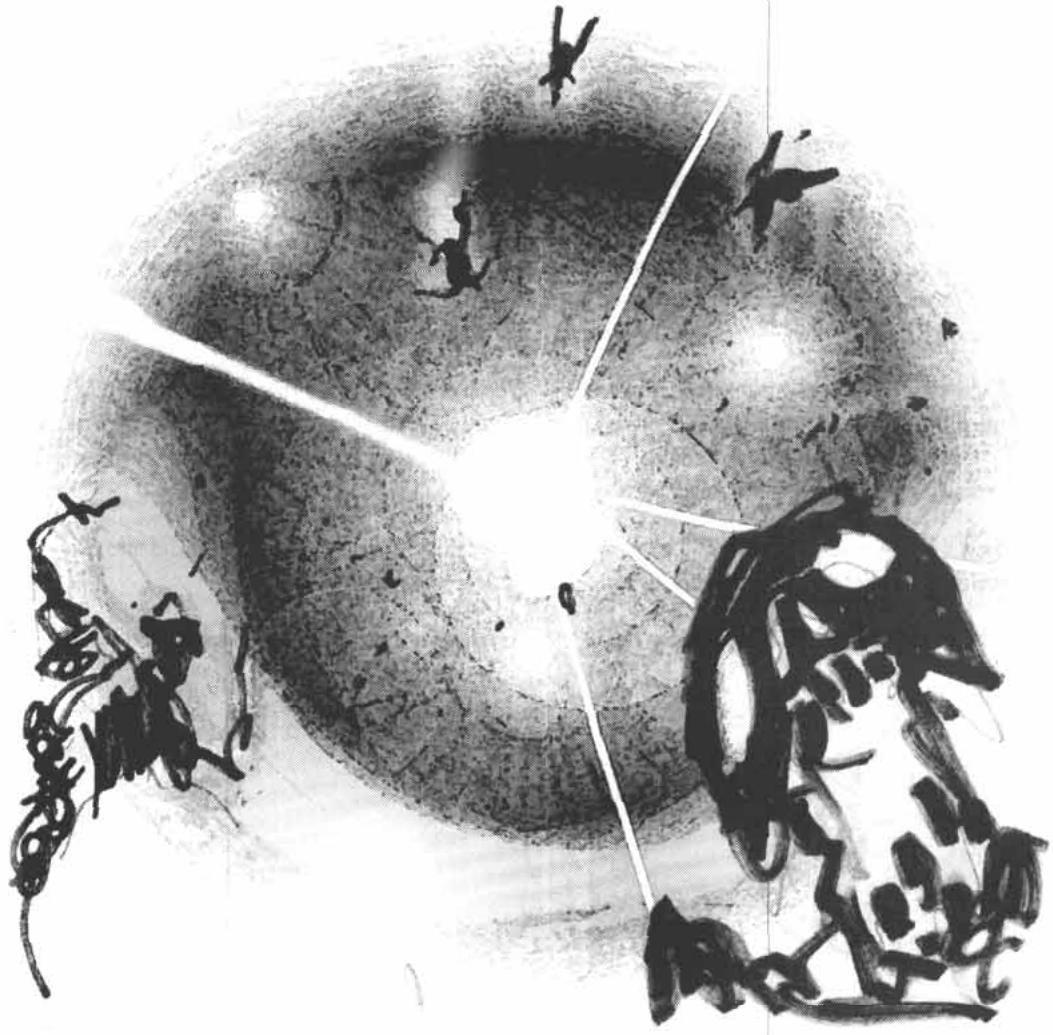
Outnumbered, the Openers fought and lost, their defeat borne from the hands of treachery. Among the Openers was a potent seer named Teth'us of Melanis. This Teth'us, leader of those who would become the great House of Melanis, knew the Openers had lost their way. He understood that unity between Z'bri and humanity was not a matter of communion and co-existence, but of melding and transformation — of forging a symbiotic relationship between man and beast into a new superior being.

His fellow Openers failed to see this truth, and so Melanis betrayed his order, knowing the Others would see his wisdom. They did.

One by one the Openers were hunted down until only twelve remained.

However, in the moment of Teth'us' victory, the twelve struck a final, desperate blow. Sacrificing themselves and their followers, the twelve sealed shut the Fold, forever dooming Melanis and his cohorts to this sphere.

The realizations of this sent Teth'us of Melanis into madness, resulting in powerful visions and fragmented understanding of the future. Soon after, he retreated, and left those who would form the other houses in control, the world theirs to plunder.



The Camps

From the deranged mutterings of Vox, Melanis Symbiot:

Not what you had in mind. . . nothing about the Goddess, or the Z'bri as her servants punishing the world for their lack of faith. That's all nonsense. Yes, the Goddess exists, but she forsook this world. Why do you not understand this? You and the Z'bri are alone. There is *nothing* else. . .

The Age of Camps was my Master's heyday. I was present when the trains of haggard humans were brought here, to the fields surrounding Hn'ious. It wasn't a big camp, a mere hundred thousand souls clamored in the hovels and laboratories where his followers carried out his experiments.

The camps were a glorious time. Your ancestors were stripped of every muscle, organ and ligament and reconstructed in perfection's own image — to eliminate your flaws, your shortcomings — to build the perfect union. It strikes me as odd that my Masters would waste so much time and effort in trying to understand and repair you, beings of imperfect nature. Such a waste of potential and time, but then again I am only a servant and Symbiot. . .

It was during this time that the foundations of the four houses were laid and the Melanis, Sangis, Koleris and Flemis codified the feudal system that would come into its own after Tibor's betrayal. But Teth'us became more and more withdrawn, leaving his House to a council of Deacons until one day he was nowhere to be found. He became a stranger to his kind and vanished. Shortly after Teth'us' disappearance, the Revolts and the Seven Deaths were upon us.

The Revolts

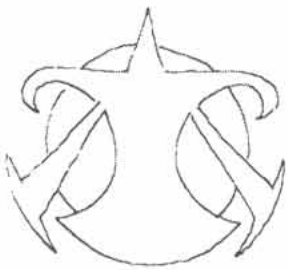
My Masters had grown lax. Research and knowledge took a back seat to pleasure and decadence — yes, even for my Melanis masters. Where they came from, or what the Fatimas are still troubles me. But before you hail the Goddess, remember that the world is dark and ancient — a place where some secrets are better left to the sands of time.

The truth, simply, is that the Z'bri were not ready. Your Living Deaths swept through us and one by one the camps were freed. My masters were smart; upon hearing of the revolts they opened the gates and let the vermin go — no need to attract the wrath of your witches — and so Hn'ious was spared, unlike so many other Z'bri sanctuaries.

Of Joshua and Tibor, all I know is that treachery was behind both deaths. Curious how your Tribes were granted respite even though the majority of the Z'bri were still alive, and how a new leadership assumed control of the Four Houses. The Old Guard was replaced, swept under the rug, while new "visionaries" took the vacant seats more than content to let your Tribes exists while they enjoyed their newfound power.

How I know this? My master was one of the unfortunate few to perish as his lover took his life and title. Soon after the traitor took his coven of Serfs and left Hn'ious and I alone and abandoned.

Treachery is as ingrained in the Z'bri as it is in the Fatimas. . . maybe this one thing we both have in common.



To Sup With Fiends

From the deranged mutterings of Vox, Melanis Symbiot:

The Melanis are a unique breed among their fellow Z'bri. Unlike the Sangis, they are not enrapturing, but nor are they like the featureless blubber of the Flemis. My masters' shapes are frail and delicate; their impossible limbs hidden within the dark recess of their cloaks. I hear serfs whisper that beneath the Shadowed Ones' shawls and hoods rests only abject darkness — limbs and faces nothing but shadows draped with flesh. I myself have not checked the validity of this rumor, but the Melanis do have the annoying talent of appearing seemingly out of nowhere — to emerge or spy from the empty recesses of dark chambers.

Melanis temperament is likewise disturbing and detached. Their only passion is knowledge, stripping flesh and unveiling the secrets locked within. But even in their passion they are removed. There is no rushing a Melanis. I am confident if you were to see one, their forbidden presence would not disturb as much as their bored detachment. When a Sangis rapes, or a Koleris maims, one can see pleasure in their faces. But when a Melanis dissects, nothing is reflected on their dark pupils except your own agonizing face contorted by pain and fear.

Servant and Tools

I see you are curious about the machines that you see throughout Hn'ious. The Melanis are engineers and architects of the flesh. They can create any mechanism imaginable from living bodies. The process is painful, but no, it does not kill the specimen, at least not outright.

There are three categories of "tools" though I prefer the term species myself, for *we* are alive and some still blessed with consciousness, sustained eternally by the living ecosystem that is a Melanis creation.

The first are the **Chained**, but I am sure you know enough about them. They're the basest of creations, a rude amalgam of Z'bri and animal, or plants in some cases. Chaining is a painful process, stripping the Z'bri of their memories and knowledge — many of the tomes in the Nexus are just these memories — and forced into a mindless feral state. Chained make good pets and beasts of burden but little else.

Constructs are nothing more than biomechanical tools, simple and effective in their design. Built with muscles, bones, nerve fibers and ligaments rather than cogs or bolts, Constructs have millions of uses. Some, like that fleshly sphincter, are doors; others are more complex, like the Krilian encyclopedia you saw in the Nexus. Unlike the savage tribes, the Z'bri have access to electricity to power lights and other contraptions. Electrical current flows through you, current my Melanis masters can tap and channel through cables made of nerves. Most Melanis prefer torches and candles of human fat, as they give off a delicate light more conducive to research.

We **Symbiots** are the last and most evolved of the tools. Each Covenant only has one or two, but we are versatile and adaptable. Some are golems of flesh, granted freedom of movement, only hindered by the tubes and veins that bring us our nutrients. We act as assistants, companions and guardians. Designed with specific tasks in mind, Symbiots are the ultimate expression of the flesh. Sculpted from dozens of bodies, we are made perfect. Our flesh heals super-naturally fast. Our senses and minds are keen to help our masters in their research and our bodies strong and powerful. But, yes we need our nutrients or we wither and cease to function.

Some Symbiots are short lived, designed as war machines or Sentinels. Their bodies are covered in bone and their limbs bustling with spines they can hurl at their foes. Lies? You think the Melanis are not capable of this? My poor Tribal soul, your Fatimas have indeed lied to you.

A Hierarchy of Tenure

My masters are creatures of habit. While free from the incessant politicking and sheer childishness of the Sangis, they're Z'bri and so only the strongest prosper. For their own reasons — largely a result of Teth'us' disappearance shortly before the arrival of the Fatimas — the Melanis no longer hold the position they once held. It was Teth'us and his followers, the first *true* Melanis, who led the Z'bri in the early days. Now the other Houses shun my secretive Masters unless they need information. But the Melanis seem content with this — away from prying eyes they can follow their own nefarious agendas without fear of interference.

The Melanis, as all the other Houses, has its hierarchy. Unlike the other Houses, though, this hierarchy is divided. **Prince Vl'dus**, a practical and driven Z'bri, tires of the Melanis' reclusive ways. He hopes to bring the House back to its position of dominance, though how he plans to do this, I know not. Remember, I am a simple Symbiot, worshipped only by the serfs who care for me and bring news from the outside world. What I do know is that a number of younger Melanis, tired of living the cloistered monkish life of contemplation, yearn for adventure — to feel the Seed. I fear they, along with the Koleris, will not leave your tribes alone in the coming seasons.

Rivaling the Prince is the **Council of Deacons** composed of the leading Melanis mystics and heads of the three Orders (all in good time, my impatient friend). The Council insist the Melanis should stay true their nature and leave the leadership of the Z'bri to the Sangis and Koleris. They tire of this earthly prison and yearn to return beyond the Fold. Before my master was. . . betrayed, I heard whispers of a covenant of sorts working to unlock the barrier to my masters' homeland. I fear, however, that even for my masters, such lofty goals are only a veil over their true intentions. Darker and less altruistic motivations must be at work. The Council is currently led by **Deacon Vytor** an ancient Melanis and first companion of Teth'us. This pedigree, I fear, gives the Council an edge I doubt even the Baron is aware of.

Below the Council and the Prince are the Counts and Dukes of the Melanis. Belonging to no Order, these feudal Melanis perform administrative and courtly duties for the House. It is these secular Melanis who travel to the Baron's court and lobby for the interest of the House. Most are aligned with the Prince, but alliances among the Melanis are fleeting.

Counts hold great power. It is they who lead the few Warrior-Monks of the Melanis into battle and who manage the Shadowed One's stable of serfs. While they may not dabble in knowledge as their brother Deacons do, the counts are wise and subtle manipulators. More than one Sangis lord or Koleris captain has fallen to the machinations of a Melanis count and few trust them. Count Valk has spent an inordinate amount of time with the Prince of late, access one of his rank should not be able to achieve so easily.

Dukes are seneschals and warriors. Their mental acumen limited, they are shunted from the Orders and left to a life of boring administrative duty in the Ziggurat or far-off Melanis lands. To be a duke among the Melanis is to know no freedom except servitude. Those not serving the House are dispatched to the other to serve as advisors and bookkeepers.

The Calling of Melanis

In truth my dear interlocutor, the Melanis are mystics and not statesmen. They're but simple and dutiful students of the Seed, and warriors or courtesans second. Most of my Masters spend their days in contemplation, searching for the secret that will allow them to unravel creation and transcend to a higher state and meld Seed and Goddess, life and death, male and female, entropy and creation.

My Masters refer to this quest, this mystical journey, as the *Mn'keth*, or Road of Flesh. Some embark on this journey to return to the homelands of the Z'bri, beyond the River of Dream. To others, it is a search for power: to transgress the boundaries and limits set by the Wayward Mother and claim possibility for themselves. Still, a few pursue the Road for knowledge's sake, or more honestly, for the power that comes with it. It's no lie, and your Fatimas understand this. In an area where dream and raw reality are one, those who know how to influence the subtle flow of the River of Dreams can wield powers of untold magnitude. And my Masters hold all the keys. . .

The Orders — Followers and Mystics

Socially, my masters are divided into monastic Orders, each searching for its own brand of enlightenment. I find faith to be a. . . *human* quality, and frankly I always wondered why my masters chose to wrap themselves with such primitive trappings. After all, they are neither human nor imperfect, so why the need to worship? But I digress. . .

The Orders are the foundation of the Melanis. Although each Shadowed One professes disinterest and apathy when it comes to politics, behind closed doors the Orders are a viper's nest of deceit, jealousy and intrigue. Unlike the Sangis, Melanis intrigue is not a courtly game. My masters follow no rules, no traditions; their ambition is boundless and driven by envy. The maneuvering of the Orders is deadly, even for seasoned veterans of the Baron's Court.

Standing among the Orders is based on accomplishment and mystical acumen. A young **Initiate** gifted in the arts and knowledgeable in the Way of the Flesh Road will find himself elevated above his peers. Similarly, a **Doyen** who's failed to advance a new theory or insight since the last Council will find himself answering to his Initiate. So, smart Doyen keep their Initiates dependant on them, curb their freedom and advance their theories as their own. The Initiates, on the other hand, dance around their Doyen, playing one against the other and always looking for an opportunity to advance. Death is rare for wayward Initiates or despotic Doyen. Chaining or morphing into a Symbiot, however, is not.

During the Dark of Winter, when the Sun's light shines for a few short hours, my Masters hold **Council**. All the Shadowed Ones gather and elect the Deacons — the true leadership of the Melanis. While Prince Vl'dus rules the House, the Deacons rule the Melanis. Each Order appoints three Deacons to the Council of Deacons, which guides the spiritual path of the Melanis and Z'bri. During Council matters of importance to the Melanis and the Z'bri are debated and dogma set.

While there are many Orders, only three are recognized as the Great Orders of the Melanis: the Bek'rx, the V'hen and the Qh'far. The Lesser Orders traditionally associate themselves with one of these Orders.

The Bek'rx — Architects of Pain

The largest Order, the Bek'rx, are responsible for many of the myths and legends your Tribes have about the Melanis. Passionate in their quest, the Bek'rx believe Creation contains the clues needed to tear apart the veil that separates reality into its two spheres. Every permutation of this grand scheme from the passage of seasons, to the glands that now excrete sweat on your skin or excite your sex, to the dead hearts of your Fatimas, must be dissected and analyzed, for embedded within are the blueprints that tie everything together — the Seed.

To the Bek'rx, the Seed is the fundamental spark of life, that primordial essence embedded deeply within the body and cells of all living things. Death, they reason, destroys the Seed and so they have found all sorts of ingenious contraptions to keep the flesh alive. It is the Bek'rx who discovered the process of Chaining, and who created the first Symbiots as a means to prolong life. I may not look human anymore, but I'll never have to fear death, that horror you feel every night as the dark skies entomb the land. That fear that in time, nothing of you, or your life will remain save dust and feeling that's all for naught. No, thanks to the Bek'rx I am immortal — imperfect flesh in its most pure form.

The Bek'rx need living specimens to experiment on to unlock the Seed. They have discovered that Flesh and Spirit are not two entities but one, and through the right stimulus — pain — the Seed can be experienced. By inflicting pain, the Bek'rx tap into the most primordial of instincts, and hence the purest manifestation of the Seed. Pain allows the elusive Seed to open itself to the Melanis like a flower born of the most rare and sumptuous of nectars — misery and terror.

Scientists and Engineers

Unmistakable in their deep crimson shawls, the Bek'rx are feared even by their fellow Z'bri and for good reason. Even to this day, secluded away from your delusions of safety in Vimary, hundreds die on cold, metal slabs looking into the dark eyes of the Bek'rx as their flesh is torn open and their pulsating organs, miles of veins and the varying degrees of pain catalogued in grotesque fashion. Your kind is not the only one who should fear; even fellow Z'bri are subjected to this pain, but this a secret my masters wished I knew nothing of.

I have seen Koleris, Flemis and even and a Sangis noble strapped to the tables, arms and legs spread and their bodies prodded and raped. I know the Bek'rx plan this fate for your Fatimas as well. Imagine seeing the Whore spread open and probed, or the Child forced still while her innocent eyes are cut out or the Liar forced to tell the truth, forced to feel betrayal for the first time. It will happen. . . you can run and warn them, but they know. She's told them. Perhaps a stint on one of the metal tables will *enlighten* you? Pain can do such wonderful things. . .

The V'hen — Eaters of Secrets

While your Tribes know of the Bek'rx, few know of the reclusive V'hen. Living far to the north and east, the V'hen rarely venture to the Ziggurat or the Hl'kar — when they do many see it as an ill omen. The V'hen dress in dark robes of gray or brown hues, seemingly woven from the shadows themselves. Unlike other Melanis, their faces and arms are dark in color and decorated with white markings and insignias that constantly shift upon their skin. Many whisper that these signs are souls and secrets consumed by the V'hen.

All Melanis are adept at moving unseen, appearing only when they wish to be seen, but the V'hen are second to none. Even with my senses, a V'hen Doyen could elude me for a score of hours. Against you, or the Fatimas, the V'hen could move unseen, even work their powers for days or weeks. In the ruins of Vimary, there are always plenty of shadows to hide in, where the V'hen could sit and steal your most precious of secrets.

Among the Melanis, and even the Z'bri, the V'hen are brokers of information and knowledge. Their monasteries are dimly lit mazes littered with books and scrolled missives. Yes, you heard me right, while they have Constructs and Symbiots, the V'hen place their trust on dead books to store their information. I've heard them say to one of my Masters that the reason behind this is objectivity. Even the most carefully purged Symbiot or Construct retains a fraction of their former self and can taint the information they store with personal half-remembered memories.

Nonsense, I say. The V'hen prefer to keep their legions of Serfs busy transcribing their maddening rants in darkly lit rooms, taking perverse pleasure from seeing Serfs chained to the desks, slowly going blind and dying having never see the outside world. Slaves to knowledge, which I admit, has a poetic justice to it.

To the V'hen, pain, torture and horror are only pathways to the Seed. The most stoic of the Beasts, the V'hen claim that the Seed is not to be "experienced" but understood. To commune with the Seed does not mean to lose oneself to wild abandon or pointless experimentation, but to unravel secrets and codify creation. By comparing, analyzing and testing theories, the Seed will manifest. To the V'hen, the key to creation itself lies within the invisible and only knowledge can shed light on the Seed.

Scholars and Oracles

I must concede my own engendered prejudice against the V'hen. Their practices, rituals and theories seemed so far removed from those of my own Masters, the Bek'rx. Insatiable curiosity is one of the failings of the V'hen. They prowl the night and shadows looking for knowledge and often collect secrets they should not be privy to. It is because of the scholarly, and insidious, V'hen that the Melanis are distrusted by all.

Nonetheless, the bookish V'hen have contributed greatly to the success of the Z'bri. If they are to be believed Teth'us was the founder of the Order. But whether this is truth, the fanciful ramblings of a V'hen monk or the delusional rambling of a Serf Scribe I do not know.

The Oh'far — The Cloaked Fist

The last of the Grand Orders is the smallest, but if my serfs are correct it is rapidly growing in size. The Qh'far are the warrior-monks of the Melanis. Bridging the gap between the courtly Melanis (the Prince and the Counts) and the Orders, they serve both the Council of Deacons and the Prince. While the Counts and Dukes keep small retinues of warriors, the warrior-monks are the main combat force of the Melanis. It is not rare to see a Count leading a stable of Qh'far on patrol.

The duty of the Qh'far, first and foremost, is the defense and protection of House Melanis — a task all of them are oath-bound to. Unlike the Sangis knights, the Qh'far do not bow down to a Count, Prince or Doyen, but instead they are loyal to House Melanis as an entity, and act as an internal inquisition of sorts among the house. Their powers are limited when prosecuting Melanis deviants (what defines one as a deviant is a good question, and is leverage they use to maintain their position of importance and power).

Distinguished by their flowing cloaks of green and black, the Qh'far's training is rigorous and stern. Most, while possessing Melanis characteristics, are of strong build and powerful to behold. Skilled in armed combat, the Qh'far are masters of mounted warfare. Riding specially constructed Symbiots, they are shock troops among the Koleris' Phalanx. Although the Koleris commanders alternately depend upon and despise most Melanis they respect the Qh'far troops, forging a strange union between the bloodthirsty Koleris and the peering Melanis.

The Qh'far are likewise respected as monks and mystics, especially for their more pragmatic and practical form of beliefs. The Qh'far understand the Seed to be an unattainable ideal, something neither the Bek'rx nor the V'hen agree with. The Seed is not something one can hold, or that one could possibly understand — such thought is full of hubris to the Qh'far. To the warrior-monks, one must not strive to find the Seed, but rather one must open themselves to the Seed, to become its tool and avatar. In this way, the Qh'far argue that once they crossed the Fold the Z'bri became the Seed, and are only wasting their potential trying to find it. The Seed is being, and so the Qh'far charge into battle knowing they are the Seed's chosen.

If it were only so simple. . . the nobel Qh'far are misguided in their thoughts, but their actions are indeed pure. Seldom are there double-meanings or ulterior motives behind their deeds. The same could not be said of the V'hen, nor even the Bek'rx.

Warriors and Inquisitors

Proud, the Qh'far ride the wastes that separate the Melanis covenants from each other, rounding up wayward Serfs and battling your Joanites on the northern shores of your island prison. They ride in small parties of four and have small keeps scattered though the dark wilderness. Here, while not patrolling, the Qh'far practice and meditate. Unlike the Koleris who revel in destruction and death, even off-duty, the warrior monks practice balance in all things.

As inquisitors, I've heard tales that they use their contemplative and fatalistic air to lull deviants into letting their guard down. You ask why the Z'bri need an inquisition. . . Treachery is part of the Z'bri and one can never be too careful. Already Tibor and the Openers have perished to treachery, and more are sure to follow. The Qh'far tries to keep the Houses honest.

It is whispered that the V'hen and the Qh'far are actually one Order, and together they form a real, hidden inquisition. Supposedly, if the ramblings of mad serfs are to be believed, these watchers know everything, all the ploys and plans of all the Z'bri, from the Baron to the lowest Duke. The ramifications if this is true would be dire.

Outlooks

My masters are insular and reclusive. Rarely do they venture far from their laboratories or covenants, save perhaps for the questing Qh'far. And when they don their traveling cloaks, be sure that strange and awful events will follow. The Melanis stand idle for no one, their curiosity is insatiable and their appetite for knowledge boundless. Rest assured, their silence is not deferral to your Seven Deaths, the blasphemous Fatimas.

No, even as we speak, as the day's light dies and night comes in its slow, relentless march, the Melanis watch your Tribes. The Child, the one born from death, fascinates the Melanis, her lithe frame and innocence so alluring. In her simple being lie the answers to so many complex questions. And like a child, her curiosity will bring her to them.

The Old One frightens the Shadowed Ones. She *is* death, the end of flesh and so the first that must be destroyed. Listen before you run to the tribes with warnings — as long as the Old One remains, death will visit you. Without her, death has no power over you.

The simple farmers and the Mother remind me of my serfs, dutiful and loyal. The Mother watches my masters and warns her slaves, but by sheltering her tribe, she denies them true love.

The Trickster, now there's a danger. She knows more and is playing you all as fools. Watch her; my masters do.

At least the Whore understands the pleasure of the flesh. And she, more than any other feels the pain when flesh withers and grows old, the torment of seeing your lover die. This will lead her to my masters, and together they'll turn her immortal and reveal her secrets.

The tarnished Warrior is used by all like a beast of burden. She is fading, her light dying and in her bosom grows death. Betrayal is characteristic of the Z'bri, and so of the Fatimas as well.

And so we come to the Liar, she who weaves tales and half-truths from the blood of her Sisters and Brother. I say, dear friend, that I'd rather bed with the most capricious Sangis, the most manipulative Melanis, the most bloodthirsty Koleris and the most single-minded Flemis before worshipping the Liar, for she's all these and more. By blinding you and poisoning you with lies and death, you'll remain forever in her grasp, ignorant of true divinity.

Ah yes, the Fallen show promise. They see the lies of your Fatimas and yearn for the truth. And if the Fatimas are lying about Joshua, they what other falsehoods have they spread about my masters? The Fallen knew this, and soon they'll come looking for the Melanis — the ones who know. And my masters will welcome and enlighten them with the truth.

Adieu

So, as night arrives I bid you goodnight, gentle traveler, for I cannot guarantee your safety along the paths that lead to Hn'ious once night has fallen. Take heed of what you learned and warn others not to come looking for me, because I will not be welcoming. These past few hours, while enjoyable, showed me why the Z'bri herded you like cattle and raped your souls. You are imperfect and tainted.

In truth, I could not bear to see my master whore itself in the pursuit of "making" you perfect. I tired of seeing it gleefully dissect you, love you, while he ignored the perfection that I am.

So know you know, though perfect, I am still *of* Melanis and so prone to treachery and betrayal. My master still lives, but now his frame is mine to explore and caress. Go now and never return. . .

Chapter six: Other Horrors

Look beyond your Houses, look beyond the lies you have woven;

Turn outwards from your Tribes, and lift your face to the new-risen sun.

Take the first steps that lead to freedom,

Taste the excitement on the wind.

We are all the masters of our own destiny.

- The Song of the Guides

Serfs

It is cold in this place, but I can hold myself. . . myselves. . . We can hold each other to keep warm. I dare not risk a fire, for the smoke will reveal me to those that hunt me. As though they need smoke to find me!

So I. . . we — two bodies, two names, Judah and Aubrey — we hold each other in the cold and darkness, too tired now to keep running, just waiting for them to come. It makes me think — remembering all my short and painful lifespans. I wonder if this will be my last, since I have betrayed my masters, my gods, now for the second time.

Yes, I remember. I remember all of my lives, my different bodies, beginning with the one born into the Camps. I fought at Joan's side during the Liberation, so I was an honored member of Her tribe, one of Her Blades for many years after we left the Camps. I took delight in continuing the work of the Liberation, joining hunting parties to push our former masters farther back, away from tribal lands.

It was on one such hunting party that I realized the magnitude of the error I had made. We faced a Koleris warrior of such strength and ferocity that he laid waste to our best warriors without suffering a wound. I lay at his feet, my battlerage giving way to fear, looking up at him as I bled and waiting for him to bite out my throat with his slavering mouth. Instead, his mouth twisted into something like a smile, sending true fear tingling into the pit of my stomach. Gesturing at the bodies of my fallen comrades, he spoke in a voice dripping with inhuman cruelty, so beautiful it sent my weakening pulse pounding in my ears. "These souls are not worth reclaiming. Yours, though, I will keep. And your master will pay me well to have you back."

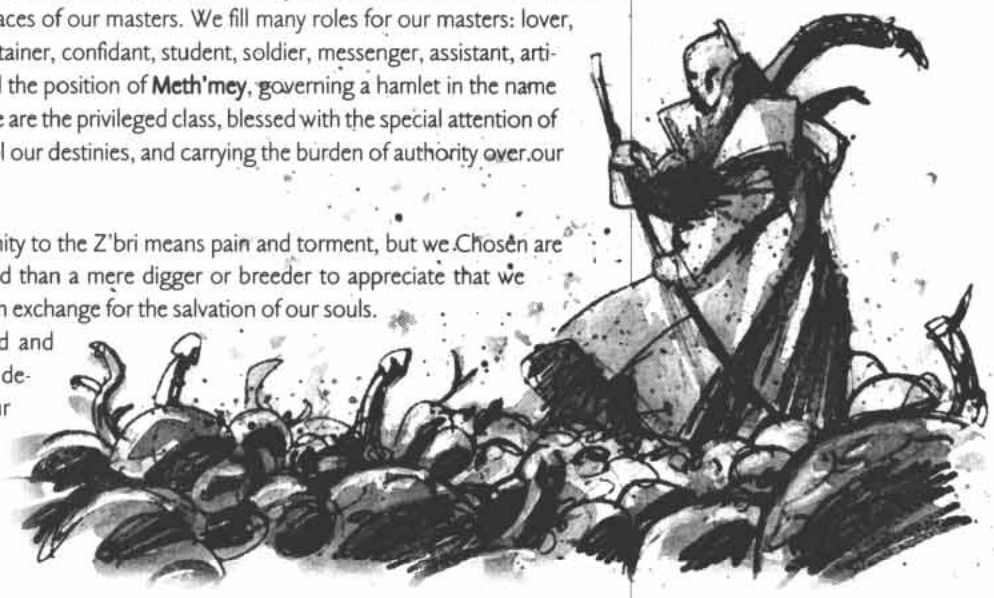
Then his claws tore through my chest and pulled out my heart.

A New Life

I remember this, just as I remember my birth in K'l-irr. Que'uen, the minor Koleris lord who had spared my soul if not my life, owned this hamlet, and assigned one of his Bonded Ones to attend personally to my upbringing. From the age of three I was trained as a warrior, and — remembering my Joanite training as well — I excelled even as a child. When I was 12 I killed my Iv'chet mentor in a training exercise — he provoked me too far — and from then on my tutelage was directly under Que'uen. He loved me, enjoyed my strong young body, and delighted in my passionate anger.

To be the Chosen of a Z'bri Lord or Iv'chet means a life far different from those who toil in the fields planting crops or harvesting bodies. We Chosen move more or less freely between two worlds: the huts of our fellow Serfs and the palaces of our masters. We fill many roles for our masters: lover, scribe, spy, procurer, retainer, confidant, student, soldier, messenger, assistant, artisan. Some Chosen hold the position of **Meth'mey**, governing a hamlet in the name of their Z'bri master. We are the privileged class, blessed with the special attention of the masters who control our destinies, and carrying the burden of authority over our fellows.

Of course, life in proximity to the Z'bri means pain and torment, but we Chosen are perhaps better equipped than a mere digger or breeder to appreciate that we make a bodily sacrifice in exchange for the salvation of our souls. Our bodies are twisted and shaped, molded to the desires and whims of our masters, but our souls are spared from oblivion.



Soldiers of the Koleris

The Chosen of the Koleris — as I was in my first life back with the Z'bri — are violent people of rage and passion. But like their masters, they learn the subtleties and intricacies of the Koleris social code, sublimating their rage into the orderly behavior that etiquette demands. They live by the warrior code of their masters.

Not all Koleris Chosen are soldiers as I was. Others serve as smiths, forging weapons of steel, blood, and bone for their masters' use. Others are spies or assassins. Still others serve no function in their short lives besides bearing the force of their masters' unleashed rage when it cannot be restrained any longer. The gladiators are allowed to vent their own fury in public combat, fighting grisly battles to the death for their masters' vicarious enjoyment.

Kordian, Chosen Gladiator

One of the few Koleris Serfs to have survived several public combats, Kordian has gained quite a reputation for his fighting skills. He will almost certainly not survive many more fights, as the Koleris increasingly speculate about exactly how much it will take to overwhelm him.

A hulking monstrosity, a twisted mass of muscle and sinew, Kordian is barely recognizable as human. His neck is thicker than his head, his shoulders broader than a bear's, and his muscles protrude from his body in disturbing ways. He carries a large ax wherever he goes, and is more likely to speak with its eloquent blade than with his own halting, gravely voice. The only time his rage is truly in check is in the presence of small animals — cats, dogs, or rats — which he treats with the greatest tenderness.

Kordian's master is a Koleris Iv'chet named Morr'd, a mighty warrior himself whose reputation is growing with each of Kordian's victories. Morr'd dreams of one day usurping his Koleris Lord, and sees Kordian as his ticket to that goal. If Kordian dies to help him accomplish it, it is no great loss.

Highlights: Bestial, ferocious, dim-witted.

Attributes: AGI +1, APP -2, BLD +3, CRE -1, FIT +2, KNO -2

Skills: Combat Sense 3/0, Dodge 2/+1, Hand-to-Hand 3/+1, Intimidate 2/+3, Melee 3/+1.

Workers of the Flemis

In the hives that are Flemis hamlets, the Serfs that serve these bloated gods scurry like ants, united in purpose and in action. Their Chosen are not actually part of the common mind that the masters of the hive share, but they nevertheless seem well-attuned to their masters' will. I have been told that many Flemis Chosen are like myself in this life — a single soul split into two or many bodies. In this way, the Flemis create a loose approximation of their shared thoughts, allowing a group of Chosen to act as one.

These Chosen serve as general-purpose servants to their hive masters. They dig the hamlet's tunnels deeper into the earth, swinging pickaxes and shovels in perfect unison. They carry their enormous masters on great palanquins formed from the bodies of other Serfs. They carry messages to other lords, sometimes singing the message in torturous harmonies. And when their usefulness is expired, they form a delicious meal, or find their bodies incorporated into those of their masters.

Lovers of the Sangis

The Chosen of the Sangis are the playthings of their elite masters, the ruling class of the Z'bri. Their bodies are like works of art, sculpted by their lords into forms they find pleasing. They are creatures of desire, serving to slake their masters' thirsts while seeking the fulfillment of their own cravings. They are givers of pleasure and pain, and the tortured victims of Sangis enjoyment as well. They are also artisans, shaping and being shaped in order to serve the Sangis idea of beauty.

The Chosen of the Sangis, perhaps most importantly, are pawns in the political games that occupy so much Sangis thought and energy. They wear masks of etiquette to hide their leering faces of betrayal, just like their masters. Their words are like razors coated in honey, so sweet, oh so sweet as they slit open your flesh. . .

I allow my emotion to carry me away. Yes, I have been betrayed, for betrayal is second nature to the servants of the Sangis.

Novices of the Melanis

I have never, in all my lives among our masters, seen the inside of a Melanis monastery. Yet there is a vision that haunts my dreams, and it causes me to wonder whether there may be a life I have forgotten, a life whose memories may perhaps have been obliterated from my mind, leaving only traces in my dreams. In this vision, there is a robed figure, a Melanis, hunching over a table. Sometimes I am lying on the table, looking up at his odd, angular face and the enigmatic smile he wears. Other times, I look down on the scene as if I am floating near the ceiling. He extends a spidery hand beside him, and an assistant places a scalpel in his hand. Then he brings the scalpel to bear on his subject on the table.

The Chosen of the Melanis work beside their masters as assistant and scribes, ensuring that tools are close at hand, helping to restrain unruly subjects and recording the Melanis' findings. Often enough, they serve willingly as subjects for these experiments as well, for — I am told — they hope to find a blissful union with their masters under the scalpel.

Antiphon, Chosen Messengers

Antiphon is the name shared by four Flemis Chosen — a quartet of messengers who carry missives from the Skkr hive to other Flemis hives and Z'bri settlements, sometimes even to Tribal lands. Despite their name, they chant these messages in grotesque harmony, reciting them in a formal and eloquent style.

Antiphon's four bodies are identical quadruplets who share a single soul. They are tall, slender, even beautiful men with pale, almost white skin and bald heads. Each one has an incredible vocal range, from deep bass to high countertenor, and their recitations often find them leaping from one extreme to the other.

Highlights: Serene, harmonious, sadistic.

Attributes: APP +2, BLD -1, CRE +1, INF +1, WIL -1.

Skills: Dance 1/0, Etiquette (all Houses) 2/+1, Grooming 1/+2, Music 2/+1, Theatrics 1/+1.

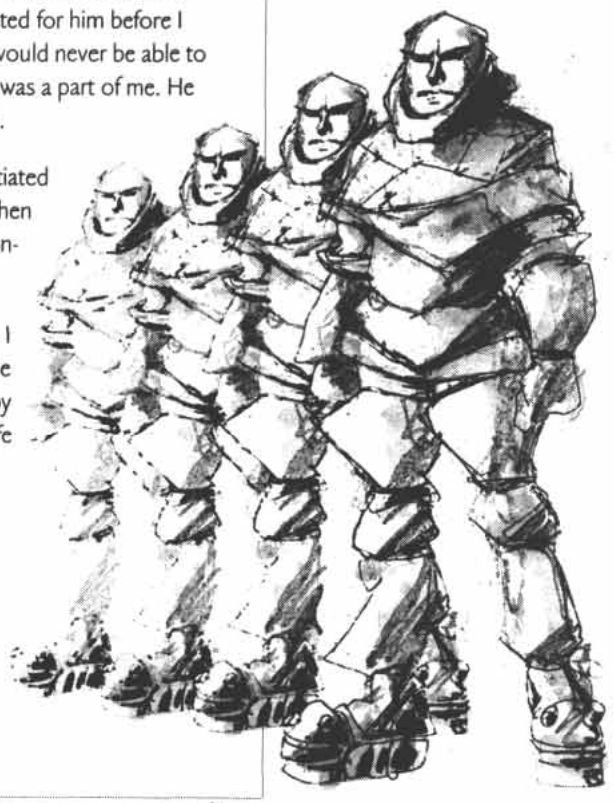
The Prodigal Daughter

As I continued to study under Que'uen, learning martial techniques that no Joanite would dare attempt, harnessing my rage into disciplined ferocity, I gradually became aware that my master had a purpose in mind for me. When I was 14, a young woman just beginning to blossom into maturity, he made a gift of me. He clothed me seductively, in black with spikes and sharp edges. And he sent me to Therial, my old Sangis master.

I was like a prodigal daughter returning home, and my master ran to welcome me back. He was a being of unearthly beauty, and I longed and lusted for him before I even came in sight of his palace. I knew when I saw him that I would never be able to betray him as Que'uen had commanded me; I needed him, he was a part of me. He ran to welcome me and took me, filled my longing in the fields.

When our needs were satisfied, he gathered my bleeding, satiated body and carried me lovingly to a bedchamber in his palace. When I had slept, he celebrated my return by sending one of his honored Chosens to fill me with seed.

I wept tears of joy and agony as the brood matured within me. I floated in a web of life-giving veins, my womb becoming my whole body. I gave one long scream — hours, maybe days, as one by one new lives sprang forth from me. I was no less a goddess of life than Eva the Fatima, though I died in that birthing.



Gift of the Z'bri

Oh, yes, I died then — as I have died many times since. You see, as Que'uen tore my heart from my body in that earlier life, my true fear was not of the death I faced, but of the oblivion I had so narrowly avoided. I realized at that moment, in terror, that the so-called Liberation had robbed us of what our Z'bri masters had given us in the Camps: life. Life that extends beyond the pain of birth and the agony of death, life that never ends. . . unless the Fatimas take it away. Oh, I know what the Fatimas teach — that the Crone comes at the moment of death to lead the departing soul across the River of Dream to bliss or damnation in the Other world. It's a lie.

There is no crossing the River — the border is sealed. Without the gift of our Z'bri masters, our souls would be swallowed up in the Sea of the Lost, condemned to wander without rest for all eternity. Those lost souls haunt the night at times, threatening to take us back with them into oblivion, threatening the souls that our masters protect. Our bodies may be warped and abused, but our souls are safe in our masters' keeping — unless the ghosts snatch them away.

This is the gift: as the last infant erupted from my swollen womb and I screamed my last breath away, the screaming of the youngest child and the screaming of the mother were one. My soul left the body that could no longer contain it — the body that had become only a home for fetuses — and entered a new body, an infant body. I was my own child and my own mother. And even at that moment, I remembered.

This is the gift: the Z'bri tend our souls with care, keeping them from wandering away to a place from whence they can never return. Our masters restrain our souls, penning them in to the material sphere, placing them in one body after another so that not one should be lost.

Memories

I remember looking around with my new infant eyes, looking upon the husk of a body that was my mother's, that had so recently been mine. I saw it suspended in veins that pulsed with blood, carrying nutrients to a body that no longer needed them, hanging limply like a ruptured wineskin. I could see that it was dead, that there was no soul in it, and I understood that the soul had passed to me. I could see other bodies hanging in the web, bodies still living, with fetuses maturing in their ever-expanding wombs.

I remember looking around and seeing other infants — my children, my brothers and sisters — and seeing each of their souls as well. They were not like me, they did not remember, and they cried helplessly while an old woman picked them up, one by one, and carried them out of the chamber. I could see where each soul had come from, but I had no idea where they were being taken, what future they awaited. I had sixteen children, ten sisters and five brothers and myself, a boy this time. Most of us had souls that came from other servants of the masters. Jonah's soul had been a mother who died in childbirth, like me, though she only had one child. Geoffrey's soul was her child, who had also died in the birthing. Mother and child were now twin brothers, and Jonah and Geoffrey were closer than brothers when they grew into favored soldiers in a Koleris fort. They died together on the field of battle, sword brothers, and I do not know where their souls went after that. I have not seen them yet.

Medeira, Chosen Courtier

A creature of insatiable appetites, Medeira is much favored by her master, the Sangis Knight Thok'et. She is his minion of pleasure, enduring his ministrations of tender torture and returning the favor for him with exquisite skill, able to keep him hovering on the edge between agony and ecstasy for hours on end. She is a talented spy and accomplished assassin as well, using her considerable charms to infiltrate the hearts and homes of rival Knights, social-climbing Iv'chet and rivals' Chosen Serfs.

Thok'et has considerably modified Medeira's body in order to increase the pleasure she gives him. The most noticeable of these changes is her long, snakelike tongue, which she can wrap around an object as large as a Koleris' wrist and hold tightly.

Highlights: Seductive, cruel, deceitful.

Attributes: AGI +1, APP +2, BLD -1, CRE +1, INF +1.

Skills: Combat Sense 2/0, Etiquette (Sangis) 1/+1, Hand-to-hand 1/+1, Melee 1/+1, Music 1/+1, Notice 2/0, Seduction 3/+2, Sleight-of-hand 2/+1, Sneak 1/+1.

Angus and Deirdre had been lovers before, Chosen servants of a Sangis lord who enjoyed them both. Though they did not remember, now brother and sister, they grew to be lovers again.

My sister Charin had two souls joined within her flesh. One had been a Chosen bodyguard, the other a tribal explorer. The tribal killed the bodyguard, and an instant later her own flesh was torn from her bones by the Chosen's Z'bri lord and her soul reclaimed, redeemed. Blood enemies were united in Charin's body — some experiment, perhaps? I don't know whether the experiment was a success or a failure. I do know that Charin was Chosen again, and became Meth'mey of our hamlet. She was cruel and beautiful, like our beloved master.

A Tribal Soul

I was surprised, though pleased, to recognize a tribal soul in my sister Charin. Perhaps it was meant as a comfort to me, to know that the Joanites who had fought beside me while I followed the Fatima were not hopelessly lost, that they could still escape the oblivion of dying outside our masters' care. Charin's twin souls showed me that our masters have power even over the straying children of the Fatimas, if they can be present to deal the death blow. When a Z'bri focuses its power to rend the soul from a Tribal body, the soul is saved, not damned to wander the Sea of the Lost.

Yet I no longer know how I should hope to die, whether this salvation is worth the burden of memory. The peace I truly crave is denied me, perhaps forever.

Called By Name

Finally the old woman who had carried away each of my children, my brothers and sisters — all of them crying — came for me. She lifted me with a sigh from the blood and water where I lay. Because I didn't cry, she took notice of me, and looked down — expecting, I am sure, to find me a stillbirth. I looked into her lined and weary face and saw the sadness in her eyes.

"Where will you take me?" I asked her. She shrieked and dropped me back on the blood-slick floor, then ran from the birthing chamber in terror, leaving me to squirm alone in my helpless infant body.

She returned a few moments later, with a handsome young man in tow. He bent over me and gently lifted me from the floor where I lay. Looking quizzically into my eyes, he asked if I could indeed speak. "Of course I can!" I replied, the strangeness of it not yet dawning on me. He showed little surprise, unlike his companion. He explained to me that he had done the same thing when he was born, and began to speak to me of previous lives. Most of all he stressed the burden of responsibility that lies upon those of us who remember.

And so I became, and have been in all of my lives since, a Namer. Jephtha taught me much during his secret visits within my master's palace. He explained much of what I have already told, of how our masters save our souls from becoming Lost, and of the ghosts that are the only threat to our souls as long as we remain faithful to our masters.

Gaelle, Chosen Scribe

Gaelle is old for a Serf, a woman in her mid-30s. Her skin bears the scars of dozens of Melanis experiments that, somehow, she has so far survived. Her tongue was a casualty of one such experiment, and her eyes of another. Many people, and even Z'bri, when they look on her sunken sockets and realize she is mute, decide that she is not worth their attention — which allows her to disappear into the shadows with ease. She is not deaf, however, and writes down nearly every word she hears — either on the spot, or hours later, recalling each syllable with perfect clarity.

Gaelle remains in reasonable health despite her history, though her age is adding wrinkles to her scars. She normally adopts a stooped posture in order to further avoid attention, but when she stands tall she approaches six feet. Her hair is graying and filthy, but its original dark auburn color still shows through in spots.

Her excellent memory and innocuous appearance make Gaelle an excellent spy for her Melanis masters, though her primary function is transcribing notes dictated by Melanis surgeons as they work.

Highlights: Innocuous, blind and mute, crafty.

Attributes: APP +1, CRE +1, FIT +1, KNO +1, PER +2, WIL +1

Skills: Forgery 1/+1, Human Perception 2/0, Read/Write (Z'bri) 3/+1

Rites of Passage

Jephtha also taught me the rituals that are to be performed to commemorate the movement of the soul from body to body. Some of our masters frown on such rituals, so often they are practiced in secret. But we try to mark every birth and every death, remembering the chain of lives stretching into the past, celebrating the new life ahead.

Each child that is born among us represents a soul — or a portion of a soul, or sometimes two or more souls — entering a new body and forging a new link in that chain. When possible, a Namer reminds every newborn infant of its previous lives, reciting the names of its prior incarnations while knotting its umbilical cord to signify a new link in the chain. Taking blood from the birth, the Namer smears it on the infant's forehead, reminding the child that it is born into a life of blood and toil in service to our masters. Usually, the Namer then gives the child a new name.

I say 'when possible' and 'usually' because we conduct our rituals at the pleasure of our masters. It may not be possible to reach a child at the time of birth, so the umbilical cord and blood from the birth may not be available. Sometimes a child has already been named. We make substitutions, we adapt our words and actions to suit the circumstances. There is no harm in that.

In the same way, we cannot always be present at the moment of death, and many deaths take place that we know nothing about until we see the soul reborn. Still, when we can, we perform rituals over the dying and the dead. We do not pretend that we can help the soul on to its next life — only our masters can do that. But sometimes others need help to remember that death is not the end of our existence. They become afraid of death, and shrink from it when it happens nearby. Then it is most important that we perform our rituals.

The ritual of death is much like that for birth. A Namer takes blood from the dead body and smears it on the forehead, reminding the departed soul that it is not free from its servitude to our masters. Then she ties several knots in the body's hair (or sometimes in its clothing) while reciting the soul's past names. Again, the knots represent the chain of lives. Sometimes a Namer may supplicate our masters — particularly if one is present — to grant the soul some blessing in its next life, usually asking for favored status as a Chosen.

Saviors of Our Souls

Aside from these occasional rituals marking the passages of the soul, Namers like myself play an important role among our fellow Serfs. Without the gift of remembering (or is it a curse? I no longer know for sure), many of us become overwhelmed by despair and torment. Our lives, taken singly, seem all too short and all too painful. Namers must constantly remind those around them that this life is not the beginning and end of our souls' existence. We have a past before our birth, and a future after our death. Once they realize this, other Serfs are more able to endure whatever suffering fills their lives, and they lose their fear of death.

It is also too easy for Serfs with short memories to forget that our masters are the saviors of our souls. In the span of one life, if one looks only at the body and its experience, the Z'bri may seem brutal and malevolent. But seen in the light of our continuing existence from death to birth, the never-ending life of the soul, the tortures we endure under our masters seem trivial, and our masters' true beneficence toward us becomes apparent. The Z'bri are not demons, whatever a Tribal may say. They did not come to punish or torment us. They are gods, creatures of spirit cloaked in fleshly substance! They rescue our souls from wandering forever in the Sea of the Lost, yes, but even more: they bestow upon us some measure of their divine nature.

Our masters are spirits of passion and sensation. It is only in the passion and sensation of our lives that we can know the divine nature they share. Every flick of the lash or cut of the scalpel, the rending of a Koleris' claws or a Sangis' unearthly kiss, pleasurable pain and agonizing pleasure, all these sensations are a taste of the divine. Far from being punishment, the life we live under the Z'bri is salvation. We are being perfected, being shaped in the sublime image of our gods and masters. The Tribals may never understand this — not until their souls wander for centuries in the Sea of the Lost.

Passion, Pleasure, and Pain

There are some Namers, though I am not among them, who derive great power from their memories of past lives and their increasing perfection in the image of the Z'bri. These wise folk have learned to harness the divine power of passion, pleasure, and pain through elaborate rituals, to devastating effect. All the power of fury and flesh, of bone and blood, of horror and hatred is at the command of these gifted and enlightened Namers.

In all my lifetimes I have not learned to master this power. There are but a few who can do it, and among all our people there are none more feared. Even the Bondsones treat these powerful Namers with a modicum of respect, making them the most favored of the Chosen — though not anything like true equals. Masters remain masters, and if the slave grows powerful, it is only at the master's indulgence.

Life in the Fields

I have dwelled long on the most exceptional servants of our Z'bri masters, but the total numbers of Chosen and Namers are very few compared to the masses of Serfs whose short lives are spent in toil and drudgery. These are the Serfs whose great service to their masters is work in the fields, coaxing crops up from the desolate ground or excavating the mass graves of old. The Chosen sometimes scornfully call these folk Diggers, but their service is no less important than a Chosen courtier's or scribe's. And their reward is no less — they too are saved from the Sea of the Lost and shaped toward the image of our masters. I remember lives spent in this drudge work; I remember dying of fever, and I remember the joy of holding a single infant in my arms.

It is not always easy to tell a Digger from a more privileged servant. All Serfs look different than Tribals or Squats, for it is not just our souls that are shaped in our masters' image. Some Serfs are grossly bloated, like the Flemis, while others are slender and supple like Sangis. The bones or muscles of Koleris-owned Serfs generally bulge under their skin, while many Melanis Serfs are sallow and twisted. Of course, each Serf is unique, and generalizations only lead to false assumptions.

Some Diggers — particularly those who work in the mass graves — are easily recognized by the pustules and lesions that mark their skin. Exposure to corpses from the days of the Camps often infects these Serfs with terrible diseases that teach them new heights of suffering. Many of these Serfs die very young, rarely seeing their sixteenth birthdays.

There are whole hamlets, however, where the Diggers carry any of a number of deadly plagues but never suffer from the disease themselves. Outsiders entering these hamlets are almost guaranteed to contract whatever illness the Serfs carry, but only a rare, weak individual native to the hamlet ever shows symptoms. I believe that our masters extend some divine protection to these Serfs; perhaps it is a punishment, to be denied the experience of suffering from illness.

Diggers, like all Serfs, belong to their Z'bri Lords. We are property, even currency, a measure of a Lord's status and power. Despite or perhaps because of this, we can rely on our Lords for protection. If a Joanite Hunting Party or a band of Squat raiders attacks a hamlet, the hamlet's Lord will fight to protect his Serfs. And why not? We are precious to our masters; that is why they save our souls and perfect our bodies.

In our hamlets, we Serfs live our lives in fullness. Toiling in the fields, we meditate on the feel of muscles moving under skin, the ache of weary flesh, the pain of a wound, the sweat rolling down our backs. In our huts made of living flesh and bone, we revel in the pleasure of mating, the act of chewing our food, the agony of childbirth, and the pulse-pounding terror of nightmares. When disease wracks our bodies, we savor the fever and delight in our fleshly decay. These physical sensations are divine — they bring us closer to our masters and enlighten our souls.

The Baying of the Kun'il

The Z'bri give us the gift of life, and they allow us the rich sensation that draws us closer to their divine nature. Yet I threw their gifts away. After many lifetimes, in each one learning and maturing, I have abandoned the Z'bri again. For a time Que'uen must have forgotten me, or chosen to wait. Perhaps he knew that I would eventually fulfill the purpose for which he sent me back to my master Therial. *He had trained me well as a warrior and assassin, but over each lifetime I learned* more, always building on many lives of training and experience. Perhaps he was waiting for the particular circumstances of this. . . these lives, Judah and Aubrey, knowing that two bodies could perhaps accomplish what one could never hope to. For when we were born, we twins sharing a single soul, he was there, and he claimed us.

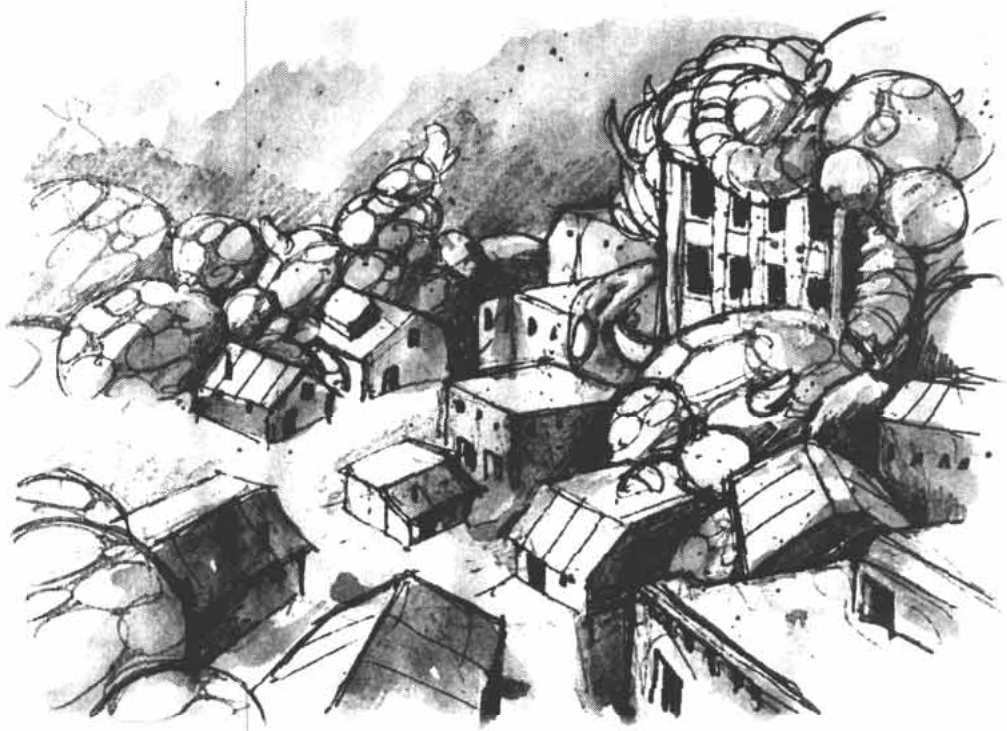
Again he reared us like beloved offspring, delighted with the martial skill we had learned. And again he sent us to Therial's palace — only this time there was no love for our long-ago master, no welcome with open arms, no passionate wrangling in the fields. There were only two swords and Que'uen's command, and this time we succeeded. It was a mighty struggle, but at its end Therial lay dead at our feet.

Then we heard the baying of the Kun'il, the monstrous hounds, and we fled.

Into the Darkness

Right now I cannot hear the Kun'il. Perhaps we will escape, as others have before. I have heard tales of Havark, who fled as we have done and survived out here for years before crossing over into Tribal lands. Others have reached the territory of a Squat band, and either met a quick death or become a servant to the band's leader. Some fit in easily with the Fallen, I am sure — that is what I would hope, for perhaps they know a way to save my soul. I do not wish to be stranded in the Sea of the Lost!

Listen! The baying comes again. Up! Up! Into the darkness! We will run, run before the skin is flayed from our bones and our soul is given up to the Lost. Destruction lies behind, ahead; maybe we will find peace. Maybe we will finally be free of the burden of memory, allowed to forget so many years, so many lives filled with such pain. The Kun'il grow closer. . .



Hunters in the Shadows

There are Z'bri who have come to an awakening, who have seen the travesty that their kind has become, and are repulsed by it. When the burden becomes too great to bear, they vanish into the wilds and become one of the Hunters. There are few of them, for they are abhorred by both Humans and Z'bri. Some hunt the Old Ones, others search for the fabled Nomads, others still wander the land, waiting for the days they will be called to take part in a Reckoning. They tell their stories to anyone they meet, to help us understand — and perhaps forgive.

Paenitere's Tale

As told to Radery Hoosen by the Z'bri Hunter Paenitere

Rest, little brother. Calm yourself, you are safe. Your eyes no longer see because of the Z'bri venom. Yes, I am Z'bri. Calm, little brother, calm. I mean you no harm. Did I not rescue you? No, I belong to no House. I am a Hunter, a redeemer. What is that? That is a long story, but we have nothing but time. Will you listen? Good. Then I will tell you of the four great sins of my kind, the weight of darkness that unbalances creation and the black path to redemption that I tread.

Sin

Across the Fold, over the River of Dreams, lies the realm of the spirit, my world. Your world, the world of the physical, which we see in the Seed, is both paradise and hell to us. Our essences came here after death. Yes, even as spirits we did know death, little brother. It came upon us as entropy, a need to move on in the cycle of existence that endlessly leads to perfection. When we died we crossed the Fold to a physical realm — paradise or hell, as the Seed decreed. Thus was the cycle, thus it had ever been, thus it was ever meant to be.

Among us were those who understood the Seed better than most. Shamans, guides, or priests, your kind would call them. Hundreds of your seasons ago a few such holy-beings, called the Openers, forged a path across the Fold, opening the gates to paradise. While the Openers had meant to find enlightenment within the Seed, many less studious forced passage across the Fold. These unenlightened desired the Seed, desired as a rapist desires satiation. This was our first sin, the sin of crossing.

The Openers fled our onslaught. Yes little brother, I say 'our,' for I was one of those unenlightened. I was callow, blinded by the chance to be one with the Seed. Yet we were overwhelmed by what we found. You cannot know what it was like, little brother. I was blind and suddenly I could see. I was deaf and then I could hear. I felt nothing and then sensation overwhelmed me. Pleasure, little brother, indescribable pleasure, and salvation within the Seed became twisted by myriad sensations we had never contemplated. We took your ancestors' bodies to use as whores for our pleasure. This was our second sin, the sin of taking.

Yet worse was to come, for the Openers returned to us in their guise as the Nomads, allied with holy-beings of your world. They came to show us our sins, to lead us back across the Fold. In a fury of guilt we destroyed them, lost in our infatuation with the manifestations of the Seed. Only a few Nomads survived, hiding in the ruins of our excess. This was our third sin, the sin of slaying.

The Nomads were wise, though. They sensed that the cycle rang like crystal about to shatter. Powerless to stop us, they sought to gain time. We, ignorant and inflamed, forgot that what had been opened could be closed. How it was done I know not, but the Nomads closed the Fold. Not just the Openers' path, little brother, but the entire Fold, stopping the cycle to prevent its destruction at our hands. This was our fourth sin, the sin of barring.

Darkness

With the barring of the Fold, night fell on paradise. Most of us were locked in physical forms, unable to exist except in our debauchery. How ironic, how poetic, how cruel was the Nomads' justice. As your arousal will become painful if held too long, so did our sojourn amongst the Seed become unbearable agony out of pleasure. Not agony as the sweet, exquisite bliss of pain, the singing of the body under the lash's caress; no, little brother, it was a wrenching of the spirit that left our souls howling into the dark. Our light, beautiful form was denied us. It became something we knew and could almost touch, but never quite reach. The Fold was closed, return was impossible, and we were locked in everlasting darkness.

Yet once damned there is nothing that can damn you further. So no act became repugnant to us as we tried to bring light to our suffering. Everything was torture, and rather than go completely mad we began to take pleasure in that torture. Yet even in the absolute darkness of our damnation the more aware of us saw possible salvation. We were locked within the Seed and this was beyond agony, but if we could become one with the Seed then the agony would end. So we herded our little brothers into camps, black temples in which to seek the Seed.

We were so lonely, enveloped in a sense of black abandonment that all the vessels of Vimary could not make us forget. We who had been brothers, all equal, changed with the barring of the Fold. Some went insane and had to be chained like beasts. Some were bound eternally to a single vessel and became mere servants. Some could change vessels only through ritual, and these became handmaidens to their masters. A few, a blessed few maintained a connection with their spiritual form and these became our masters. It was they who led our worship of the Seed. Their longings divided us into Houses. Their desires built the fires which lit the darkness and drove us onwards when we lessers might otherwise have failed and perished from despair.

Our lords and masters gave us form with the camps, and in giving us form they gave us purpose, subverting the Seed to alleviate our agony and loneliness. They made our misery and madness no less, but they made most of us forget that there had been anything but this endless night. When your ancestors overthrew the camps they changed nothing. Certainly you thought you were free, little brother, but though the form seemed to change it did not. From individual camps in which the Seed was pursued separately now the Houses combine their knowledge and seek the Seed together. All Vimary is a camp, little brother, only the guards have changed, and the night of our damnation and suffering continues. Yet in the dark, little brother, and our slow search for the Seed, some of us found something else, a path to the light. Not the false hope of subverting the Seed, but the true hope of restoring the cycle.

Redemption

Despite our masters' admonition to forget, slowly some remember. Most go mad and are chained. A few sense the unbalancing that our sins caused and redouble their efforts to subvert the Seed and save themselves. A handful, though, turn from the futile pursuit of the Seed and seek a path to redemption. Not an escape, but a way to redeem themselves — and their brothers too — because before the night we were equal. How do the memories come after so long? In darkness and pain, little brother. This endless night is where we face the choice between escape and redemption. To accept that the Seed tortures us for our sins is to choose a road to redemption. To deny our sins and seek escape is folly, for on that path lies only delusion.

In the agonizing darkness of the barring, little brother, dawn is ever present. Even in our distress the Seed lays the truth before us. You, our little brothers, give us the truth with every scream, with every death, with every rotting, discarded body. The truth is in every dark and fetid shadow that hides the beauty of the Seed. How we remember is different for every one of my redeemed brothers. In every case remembrance comes in a revelation of pain; even as we seek the Seed through a vessel, the Seed speaks to us through our little brother's agony. In understanding your agony, we remember the source of our own.

With memory comes the chance of redemption, for suddenly the Nomad's words are a burning fire in the night. All this — the tastes, smells and caresses — are wrong, *we* are wrong. The Seed is all around us. It is you, our little brothers, but we cannot discover the Seed except as you and we cannot become you by taking your bodies — only within the cycle can we do that. The result of our actions, the barring, has stopped the cycle and so doomed us to never find the Seed. How harsh it was, little brother, to realise that instead of being closer to the Seed I was further away from it than ever before.

My brothers and I accept this truth, we embrace it, and we give ourselves over to the torture of our damnation and revel in the agony for the chance of redemption it provides. Can you smell that rot? That, little brother, is my body, a wretched patchwork of corpse flesh and yellowed bone. The pain of keeping my spirit in this dead mass is excruciating, in the tearing, agonising, sense of my own wrongness. I feel tendons rip as they decay, pus drip from maggoty wounds, skin peel from the dried limbs and the crack and click of joints baked in the summer sun.

We feel nothing in these rotted hulks of vessels, for dead skin senses naught, ears filled with maggots hear nothing and putrid palates neither smell nor taste. Sight? No, little brother, I am blind. We put out the eyes of our vessels when we join with them. In this mutilation we remember anew the pain of our sins and commit ourselves to the truest darkness. By the ways of the Spirit alone, the ways rightly ours, do we redeemed make our way. It is as these blinded, walking deaths, bound by decay and cloaked in shadowed pain, that we Hunters seek the light.

Redemption is a blind path, little brother, where eyes would only betray us. I do not even know if we *can* redeem ourselves, for only the opening of the Fold can do that. Instead we search for the Nomads. No, little brother, we do not know if any survive. We also seek to save our brothers from themselves, to prepare the way for opening the Fold. How do we save them? We save them by putting their feet once more on the path that was ordained for them. This world is their paradise, or their hell, but they deny this truth by being here in spirit, not in body. We bring the truth to them, and before its light their sin dies and they set forth, pure upon the cycle again, in their true physical form.

What is that form, you ask, little brother? Have you even met a Guide? Yes? Good. You have seen the strange orbs that they use? Those are the death objects of the Z'bri, our true physical manifestation. That is why I called redemption a black path; we kill our brothers to save them.

Brothers of the Black Path

Foris the green handed

In a vessel made of dead men and stags, Foris hunts chained Z'bri in the great forests around Vimary. He is in touch with the spirits of the forest and loves and protects them. His great bone bow uses arrows made of living wood, and his vessel is garbed in still-growing bark and moss. He also has friendly contacts with some nomadic squat tribes who regard him as an avatar of the forest itself. Recently one of these tribes told him of a strange structure to the north of Vimary. Hoping this may be a link to the lost Nomads, Foris is pushing his explorations in that direction.

Highlights: calm, laconic, expert forester.

Atmosphere: Hunter

Attributes: AGI +5, APP -4, BLD +4, CRE +2, FIT +4, INF +2, KNO +1, PER +4, PSY 0, WIL +4, STR +4, STA +5, UD 11, AD 13

Skills: Animal Handling 2/+2, Archery 4/+5, Athletics 3/+4, Camouflage 2/+2, Combat Sense 3/+4, Dodge 2/+5, Dreaming 2/0, Herbalism 2/+1, Intimidate 2/+2, Lore (Outlands) 3/+1, Melee 2/+5, Navigation (Land) 3/+1, Notice 3/+4, Sneak 3/+5, Speak (Squat) 2/+1, Speak (Tribal) 1/+1, Synthesis 3

Are you calmer now, little brother? Good. Now ask your question. It is good for me to talk to you. Your kind are rightfully scared of Z'bri, and the aspect carried by my redeemed brothers and I is more frightful than most. Yet in you I sense what I will become if the Seed is kind and the cycle is restored. You amaze me, even now, despite all the vessels I possessed before my redemption. Do we deal with your kind? Yes, but not your seven tribes. No, nor the fallen, though I grant them respect for their opposition to the wrongness of my brothers.

It is those you call Guides that we have the most dealings with. They too understand that the cycle is broken, though their cares are for your souls, not ours. We deal them the death objects of our brothers for their purposes. While this wrings my heart it is necessary, and the souls of a few of my brothers are a small sacrifice to help heal the damage we have done you, our little brothers. In return, the Guides perform rituals for us, forge the weapons we wield, and they further our knowledge of how to restore the balance. What rituals? Perhaps later, little brother. Is there any other question you would have me answer?

How many Hunters are there? A worthy question, let me think on it a moment. Truth be told I am not certain. Not many. There is Ashash'in, the doe eyed, where he walks I know not. Occasionally he will appear to one of us, dripping with the bloody spoils of his silent ways, full of news from the Ziggurat and Sangis Palaces. He is perhaps the most powerful among us, changing skins with ease and doing so regularly to maintain his disguise.

Far wandering Foris, the green handed, walks the ways of the dark forests. At one with the plants and animals of his green domain, he will not speak of most of what he sees, but he hunts the chained like the beasts they are. His skill with a bow knows no equal, and straps hang from his waist bearing tokens from his kills. Most of all he hunts for traces of the Nomads in distant lands. He wanders to the north, now, following a long-hidden trail he believes will leads him to a Nomad.

The lonely Zelos, the bloody knife, walks where he wants, though he most often stalks the Slaughterfields of the Koleris. They know him and revile him there as the Painless Blade, for his skills give them no final pleasures. A ragged mess of torn flesh and shattered bone, he is a killer of all things. He serves the Seed and the Seed alone and madness haunts him; be afraid of his glittering knives, for he knows no mercy or thought.

Thoughtful Quaerere, the glowing brand, sits alone in the Steel Maze overlooking Abonom. To him we go for information, taking orbs, skins and prisoners as tribute to his wisdom. Though his form is skeletal, bleached and small, he gathers much information by slow watching, and his delicate and tender hands can make others sing any song.

Quiet Magos, the wise-eyed, haunts the margins of Vimary. He brings terror to the Melanis and Flemis who pursue the Seed unnaturally, meeting them in power and using the Seed to lay them low. His once brother, Count Nemerath of the Melanis, ally of the hated Baron, is his special foe and Magos longs wordlessly for the Count's redemption.

There is also Call'o, the Shadow-Walker, he who walks the path of Man. Call'o is the master of disguise, and I know he sometimes visits Vimary, hidden beneath a great cloak in the guise of a traveler. He hunts those who would hide among the tribes, and he has clashed more than once with the Exiled Ones who dwell within the towers of your world.

Herne, the Cloven-Hooved, walks with doubt and fear. He hates our bestial brothers for what they do, and yet has not been fully convinced that the humans deserve our aid. Frail in his appearance, like a doddering oldster, he wanders the woods and settlements of the Tribes, carving his exquisite wooden weapons. Happening upon travelers or an isolated hut, he pauses and asks for their aid. Should they welcome him and do their utmost to give him whatever he says he needs, he gifts them with a weapon and continues on, surer in his convictions. Should they turn him away, he dogs their trail for days, turning all of their efforts against them. No matter how often the children of the Tribes renew his hope, always the doubts return and his testing begins anew.

Yes, little brother, there is also me, Paenitere, the shadow cloaked. I stalk the borderlands between the H'l Kar and Vimary to prevent corruption where life re-blooms. I protect my little brothers from my unredeemed kin, and deal with the Guides who help us in our cause. It was I who saw Ra'Ham die and told his tale when human ears could hear.

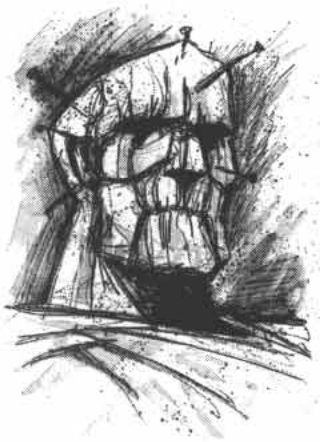
Life for a life

Hush, little brother, I hear, I hear, it is a guest I have been long been expecting to join us. Hail, Den-Hades, how go you, then? All is prepared? Good. Now, little brother, I have a painful final tale to tell. That growing tremor is the Z'bri venom, siphoning your life away moment by moment, slowly killing every part of you. I cannot stop it, but I can offer you revenge.

This body of mine is almost done; spirit can only hold together decay for so long. I need another and I ask you, with my head bowed in supplication, for yours. Join with me and live again in part.

You agree! Humbly do I thank you, Radery Hoosen. Calm again, little brother; it will not hurt, and Den-Hades will see the ritual done.

Sleep now, and know me.



Magos the wise-eyed

Magos is the greatest living scholar of the Seed and the Spirit in Vimary, unless there is a Nomad in hiding somewhere. He is concerned with keeping his benighted brothers from acquiring more forbidden knowledge and preventing them from damaging the cycle still further. Magos listens to subtle currents within the Seed and the River. When he detects discordance, he moves to destroy the source. While his vessel of clattering bones bound by yellowed, opaque skin makes him seem an unlikely killer, his powers of Synthesis are near unmatched and alone of the Hunters he has kept his powers of Sundering as well. With this hidden power Magos willingly redeems his brothers who pervert the Seed.

Highlights: studious, fussy, insightful, teacher.

Atmosphere: Hunter

Attributes: AGI +2, APP -3, BLD +2, CRE +4, FIT +2, INF +4, KNO +5, PER +4, PSY +3, WIL +4, STR +2 STA +2, UD +7, AD +7

Skills: Dodge 2/+2, Dreaming 4/+4, Healing 3/+5, Human Perception 3/+4, Investigation 2/+4, Lore (Ancient Z'bri) 4/+5, Lore (The River) 3/+5, Mythology 3/+5, Notice 4/+4, Read/Write 2/+5, Ritual 4/+5, Sneak 2/+2, Speak (Tribal) 2/+5, Teaching 3/+4, Sundering (all Aspects) 3, Synthesis 5.

Gek'roh, the Fated

Gek'roh — Tibor's mate — was the first Z'bri to undergo Chaining. Her crime was circumstance; her function, a living warning to other Z'bri that Tibor possessed no exploitable weakness. Neither wild animal nor voracious Beast, she is a creature of great age, reasoning and reckoning. Guided by instinct and knowledge of consequence, but touched by unshakable corruption, Gek'roh understands her many natures and she flitters wildly between them.

Gek'roh believes herself evolved beyond Z'bri limitations and superior to humans — who remain fodder like any other animal. Gek'roh attracts all manner of Chained to her Outlands domain, the overgrown town of the Grand Bee — a place where strange animals roam; a menagerie from the world before; a hallowed cemetery where beasts go to die. While other Chained do not necessarily obey Gek'roh, they know better than to oppose her. They respect her; she was the first, and therefore, mother to them all.

Highlights: cunning, powerful, unpredictable

Attributes: AGI +3, APP-2, BLD +2, FIT +2, INF +3, KNO/INS 0/+2, PER +2, WILL +3, STA 45, LD 10 (w/Claws +15, w/ Bite +13), AR 9

Skills: Combat Sense 3/+2, Dodge 2/+3, Hand-to-Hand 3/+3, Intimidate 2/+2, Lore (the Chained) 3/0, Lore (Z'bri) 3/0, Navigation 2/+2, Notice 1/+2, Sneak 1/+3, Survival 2/+2, Tactics 1/0

Gek'roh

Stopped crying, yessss? Good! Hssss. . . You recognize ggrrrowls as wordsss? Better! I give you choice. Hear saga and live to tell others, or feed me as poor morsel. Choose which! Good, listen closely; speech hurts. Other Gek'roh won't understand you. . . speak to you. I. . . khhhhhh. . . I was first; the other Chained came after; took my name. I am Gek'roh, *the* Gek'roh — the first Chained. Tibor's mate I was. That last honor spared me not. Tibor robbed my fate, gave it to Melanis. He shattered my. . . my trust; they shattered my form. I'm sorry Joshua payed my mate for itsssssss betrayal. Should have been me to offer death. Even so, I still dream of swallowing Tibor, hearing his screams in my tooth-filled gut. Yes, I still, still . . . ? Dream? ARGHHH! Why do the words falter? I could dream, even speak once. I spoke, better words than now. STOP CRYING!

When Melanis split my mind, I turned frenzy. Pretty colors frenzy: red, black and rough like hide. Frenzy consumed me, khhhh, drowned the pain of my beast-mate. My heart beat only when rage struck it with blows. I breathed out when anger crushed my lungs. I breathed in because pain forced me to. I tasted blood in the air like morning dew; it sang to me, roared in my skull like a foaming river crashing against rocks. I slept under cold stars, watching seasons slip. I let anger warm me, fill me, drown me, excite me, dissolve me. My thoughts fell into darkness, my instincts sharpened, but my anger raged. I tore through flesh hungry, but splintered bone to enjoy my prey's suffering. I hunted to survive, but stalked to spawn terror. I wanted to live, but I tried to die. I *existed*. . . yesssss, the words return. . . existed, this way for summers. Shell! I was a shell; a fiend of rage, a wounded beast.

I met another like me, moons ago, far into my pain. In our kinship beast to beast, Z'bri to Z'bri, came understanding of ourselves. We spoke in growls, and then with one-word exchanges. Armored by scars, guided by instinct and sharpened by desire, my ravaged thoughts returned. My two-spirits became one creature — better, superior.

My words mark me from beast, but my cunning marks me from Z'bri. Locked into one form, I have understanding of flesh and spirit that my brethren betrayers yearn to share. That is their hunger. Without ability to mold (yes, that's another good word) muscle and sinew, the Takers' flesh-madness left me. No choice but to forget what it was like to melt bone like hot wax. No reason to remember. I like what I am now. More than animal. More than Z'bri. More than you. I am a beast with words to command.

Enough tonight; my throat hurts and you need sleep. I smell your exhaustion, and I, I need to remember more words.

History

Speaking with you this last moon cycle has awakened my mind. I've recaptured my words and my chords are comfortable with your method of tongue. Perhaps you're useful, even if only to listen. My recovery is rare; many Chained have not yet escaped the maddening waterfalls pinning them down. Some survive by unleashing the animal rule — judgement through instinct. Others do not fare so well. They tear into their own flesh, ripping out bloody morsels in a furious dance to separate themselves from forced-mating. For them, sleep comes with exhaustion and feeding is consequence of slaughtering everything around them. If Tibor ever envisioned this rot for anyone, however, it was under his own dominion, where he could revel in their pain.

When we first came to this world, the flesh-madness overpowered us. Z'bri inhabited bodies with each breath, leaping through mortals like herds of racing deer. Your breed was our wilderness, our forest. At first, our adoration of your kind was brutal and inelegant. We mass-inhabited bodies to feel them rip under many conflicting minds, and we slaughtered with visceral glee. The flesh enraptured those would become the Melanis, who turned their devotion into science. Their experiments tested imaginations' boundaries, and while we delighted in their latest discoveries, the Melanis continually plundered newer horizons. The process of forced-mating, Chaining, was one such laurel.

The Chaining

The Melanis created Chaining when the camps swelled with prisoners. They first empowered Serf hounds, called Mithrops, by tethering the Serfs to animal counterparts. The Melanis continued refining the process, eventually merging two creatures into one form, thus creating Weres in quantity and uniqueness. It did not stop there. Melanis monasteries, brimming with monstrosities, competed to prove their menageries superior. Imagination dictated form and nothing was spared from the Melanis' melting touch.

Tibor distrusted the Melanis. In his eyes, they had created an army to usurp his rule. Using the Koleris, Tibor raided the Melanis monasteries and destroyed their legions of Chained. He allowed a few allied Melanis to keep their prize possessions as long as the creatures were bound to Tibor himself. He then forbade other monasteries from practicing forced-mating. Ironically, punishment for disobeying Tibor was the Chaining, a prospect few of us had considered using on ourselves. To prove resolve, Tibor and his Melanis allies subjected me to the process. Like a beast, they captured and tortured me before mating my weakened form to a mongrel. My mind splintered and fell beneath a sea of rage. I drowned.

I remember little of the following seasons. Flotsam images, some clear and others broken, drift on the surface of my memory; they never stay long; never reward me with a complete tale. I remember biting and clawing Tibor while he defiled me, and fighting in its arena and mauling Serfs. I also recall the frustration that I could never tear his throat out. If it commanded I sit, then I sat with a million hands slapping me down. If he said lick his hand, then I did so as though it tore my tongue from my mouth. I could only fight when commanded and I could only stop at his whim.

My sharpest, most vivid Chained memory came with Tibor's final fate. I remember the fight between Joshua and my mate in the moments before their mutual demise. The young Fatima crackled with power, his titan blade incandescent with raw Synthesis, his patchwork form covered with the blood of countless Z'bri. Tibor, at life's end, ordered me to attack, but another voice intervened, one of unfamiliar intonation. Like a dormant memory or hidden imperative, the voice told me to stay my attack. I did as ordered. I watched as the boy Fatima rained blows upon confused Tibor. I wished to join in, but I could not. Finally, Tibor fell to the ground, sniveling and begging for mercy in fashion most *human*. Joshua was not a merciful Fatima, however. He raised his blade; I held my breath, waiting for the moment of release. Then the same enigmatic voice bade me to flee and never return. Unable to disobey, I heeded its commands against my screaming will. I ran, springing over dismembered corpses, past unwavering Joshua and past a specter of movement hidden in the shadows. It caught my brief interest with its forlorn sigh. Then I was out of the palace and into the fresh-aired wilderness. My liberation howl, strengthened by the dozens of other Chained voices suddenly freed with Tibor's death, lasted the night.

Hunted Freedom and Awareness

While he lived, Tibor controlled many Chained. Even the supposedly banished still cowed to his will — they hunted in the abandoned cities and primordial forests, visiting ruin upon the remaining humans. Tibor's death, however, freed most, and though his allies tried reasserting their laughable dominion over us, it was too late. We'd tasted freedom and in doing so, resisted enslavement. Perhaps Tibor's allies did not share his strong will. Or perhaps they were distracted. The Baron's pogrom sent Z'bri scurrying for a cockroach's refuge in the wake of my mate's death. Phe! It didn't matter. We remained free; hunted, but free. The Baron feared us because we once served Tibor, and he created new Chained called Infidels, to make corpses of us.

Again, my bestial mind fails to capture the intricacies of subsequent events. Instinct prioritizes memories according to their emotional imperative. Fractured thoughts flash images of me nursing my wounds, outpacing Infidel Packs and battling the tiny, swarming beasts; seasons wasted in fear. To stave off starvation, I killed in one quick bite, and I wounded other Gek'roh to occupy my pursuers. The Infidels were cunning, snapping little beasts, and to better them I had to be smarter. My Z'bri artifice resurfaced when survival demanded it. Strategy overcame instinct; rational thought conquered impulse. Severed from Tibor's control, I adapted to my new nature. I learned to accept my duality. It was a beginning, but it was only that.

Several seasons ago, I met another like me. He was Chained male, younger (as is expected), but closer to my age then any other I had encountered. Inexperienced Gek'roh lack direction, for while beasts subsist solely on feed-rest-fornicate, the questing mind needs more. The animal-half cannot comprehend; the Z'bri-half cannot articulate. This maddening cycle feeds the mounting rage that only finds release in exhausting frenzy. With my growing understanding, however, I came to realize I needed substance outside survival, as did my new companion. It was this shared recognition that led to my first articulated word as Chained. I said. . . no, I asked with the only word appropriate:"Why?" He understood, for his head bowed in sorrow and he whimpered in response.

Memories Sundered

Once ago, his name was Garreed, a Melanis monk who had displeased Tibor. His ability to balance his two-halves did not come through enlightenment as mine did, but through the Melanis' dominion over Chaining. Though bereft of his Sundering arts, he remembered his craft well enough to isolate thought from instinct. The beast and he co-existed, though he maintained dominance; I quickly learned why. As once-Sangis, I was well-versed in Appeasement. While I could not actively use my gifts, Sundering remained with me on invisible levels. It fashioned chords necessary for my speech. Garreed, through Chaining, was equally affected by his former gifts, and far more rooted in the rational than I.

Garreed and I traveled together for three seasons before he fell to the Infidels. I regret wounding him; he was a faithful companion. During our time together, we encountered others including Druze the Raging — whose Flemis gift of One Mind allowed him to form a pack — and Ry'shall, the only Plague Chained strong enough to retain its thoughts and liberty.

Infidel Packs

Infidels are small, swarming, biting, screeching, frenzied beasts, and the bane of many Chained. Although they look like a large pack of rats, their oversized incisors, blade-like claws and engulfed-by-madness stares quickly dispel any sense of normalcy.

The Melanis' first successful foray into multiple Chaining yielded the Infidel Packs. Also known as Plague Chaining, Infidel Packs come from the splintered mind and body of an unfortunate Z'bri named Enakratt, whose crime was drowning Serf souls in the Sea of Lost. The torturous process of dissecting Enakratt into hundreds of sentient chunks — before feeding them to the rats — took months to complete. Understandably, Enakratt went insane from the procedure. There were also rumors that the Melanis responsible fell into the same madness and had to be sequestered in the Ziggurat.

The remnants of the original Infidel Packs and their immediate offspring remain under the control of the Baron, who sends them after wild Gek'roh outside tribal territory. Unbeknownst to the Baron, however, the Infidels are procreating in the Outlands. Although the generations have done nothing to tame the frenzied creatures, the latest breed are free of the Baron's influence.

Attributes:

Aggressiveness 4, Damage/turn 5, Damage Threshold 30, Random Horde Size 3d6, Basic Swarm Size 40

From our encounters with other Chained, Garreed and I surmised that without Melanis interference, the Gek'roh can evolve. The need for peer association is great. Although younger Chained attack everything, the older seek companionship with other Gek'roh or animal breeds. We are reaching an inner harmony and find purpose in shared existence.

From the mutual need for one another sprang unspoken alliances and territorial respect. The most viral and destructive of our kind sought out the tunnels riddling Vimary; the wild ones escaped into the forests where you could run for days and never encounter mortals. Those still touched by Z'bri sensibilities remained close to ancient ruins, finding comfort in memories of past handiwork. Still others, like true predators, marked territory where the land was thick with prey.

Home is Where You Go to Die

I chose the ancient animal prison of the Grand Bee, a small city of bars, pits and streets long-overgrown by Eva's meddling. I delight in this place, for beasts unlike any other dwell here. It holds secrets I've not yet plundered — particularly why animals come here to die. The Grand Bee is a graveyard littered with lifetimes of skeletons. I do not know why death holds sway in this place, but its frequent passage weakens the walls between waking thoughts and dreams. I can slip more easily into the River of Dreams and hold concourse with the great spirits guarding the dead.

Another delight attracting Gek'roh to the Grand Bee is a fragment of star that cracked the ground several seasons ago. Although it wasn't the greatest of the celestial fragments, it was the largest we could bring here. I cannot explain why this rock fascinates us. Perhaps it is the smell of power singing the air; maybe the way the wind howls like a sharp knife while caressing it; perhaps still it is the tenuous, puzzling whispers that only we hear late at night. They moan like a tongueless chorus of ghosts trying to share memories. I do not like their thoughts, but any truth holds an insect's sting as portion of its curative. I have dreamt of dark things to come, but have yet to understand their place. Their songs coat my mortal shell; I shed my skin if only to slough off the images afflicting me. In any case, the fallen, oracle star only adds to the Grand Bee's reputation as a place of death. Swiftly, though, it is also becoming known as the City of Gek'roh. This is our rally point for events yet to unfurl; events yet to reveal themselves fully, even to us.

The Process

I will not describe the mental anguish of forced mating, for it truly deserves separate mention. Instead, I offer you insight into its physical torments, the likes of which your ancestors' Hell had no foul dreams to offer in comparison.

My Chaining tutor was Garreed. He explained it as a dedicated Melanis ritual bordering on ecstatic dance. Despite what the sect would have us think, however, there are degrees to their Sundering gift. Simple Chaining as performed on some Iv'chet, animals and humans can be accomplished by one and all Melanis. It requires a refined mind to Chain other Z'bri, however, and to keep them Chained. The process I speak of is not the commoner art, but the specialized ritual for force-mating Gek'roh.

The Merits of Torture

The process begins in brutality. Torture works on many levels; it breaks a Z'bri's will, facilitating manipulation of the body, and it shatters their mind, complicating the victim's recovery. Pain also entwines the Melanis to his subject. By delicately exploring their quarry's body, the Melanis comes to understand how each nerve flares, how muscles twitch and which ministration elicits the loudest scream. Torture defines both thresholds and the means to surpass them. Some Melanis even undergo the molestation themselves, sharing in pain to better understand their victims.

The Melanis forces his subject to desire release. The pain is so great that Chaining becomes a blessing compared to the devouring agony. The torturer becomes savior, promising salvation for subservience, liberation for surrender. Melanis have a way of extending pain for seasons following the ordeal (I still ache from the ecstasy of a million cuts), but Z'bri are not the only ones to undergo torture. The Melanis also employ their touch against the to-be animal partner with the same diligence and forethought as they apply to their Z'bri victim. Then, when the two merge, there can be no refuge from the pain in either mind.

The Third Soul

The process ends in brutality, with the slow, deliberate stripping and rebuilding of the two victims. I'm sure the Melanis could carry about their twisted errands with more haste, but part of your punishment is to feel your identity slowly slip away. Your skin splits apart; you hear the beast's panicked squeals — both in and out of mind — growing louder. After an eternity of screaming, you fail to distinguish your cry from that of your mate's. Still, nothing stops. The Melanis, touching both victims, draws them together. Needle-sharp fur punctures your once soft skin. Your blood and the animal's life ichor collide like two searing waves. Your organs merge and the animal's foul breath fills your lungs. You instantly possess a stable sexual identity. Suddenly your senses are more acute, and with new eyes, you see all Z'bri as a stranger would. Indeed stranger than most, for you smell the unnatural quality of their existence. You *know* though that you once counted yourself amongst the Takers, they do not belong in this realm. From that moment on, no matter whose loyalty has been forced upon you, they are an enemy unlike any other. It is not rational thought that dictates this forced epiphany, it is instinct, your new ally.

Having Garreed as guide, I learnt of an intrigue the Melanis keep hidden from their precious Baron and many Z'bri. When the dark monk touches both victims during the merging, it siphons strips of flesh, bone splinters, muscle strands and brain matter through its *own* body first. The Melanis harbors minute portions of the Chained inside itself, and implants its own seeds within the victim. It is this foreign element in all Gek'roh that allow Melanis to control them. Unbeknownst to the Baron, the Melanis can override any imperative given to the Chained. More so, wild mated will not attack their individual creators because they sense these Z'bri as part of them. There is an element of distrust, certainly, but the Chained will not charge someone — unless completely deranged — that is, in part, themselves. I myself felt that control during Tibor's death, but have since excised my unwanted stowaways through Garreed's help. Others, like Ry'shall, have found other methods to isolate the Melanis seeds and expunge them. Sometimes it is through active Sundering; other times it's as simple as the body fighting contagion.

Natural Sundering Effects

Sundering affects Chaining in subtle ways, but the results are unmistakable. It is an innate facet of the Z'bri; a link to the Great Seed and its manifestation of everything corporeal. The Melanis can sever a criminal's connection to Sundering, but they can never stop Sundering from touching the criminal. Unfortunately, according to Garreed's tutelage, there is no set formula to its effects. The results vary according to personal philosophy. I can only offer examples and hope you have insight to fathom what I do not.

The gift of The One Thought allows Chained to attract lesser animals, forming packs and surrogate families. I also met a Flemis Gek'roh who shot thoughts directly into my mind. Because she could not speak, she merely deafened me with her mind-roar.

I've seen those with Assimilation feed by absorbing their prey into their very bulk. Others transform, slowly turning into more horrific beasts than when first mated. Those who knew Shattering have been able to break weapons or limbs by touching them. I heard of one Chained in the southern Outlands whose very presence warped and twisted bones. The bones never break; they fold and coil like supple green twigs. For Exsanguination, I give you the example of Ry'shall's ability, though there are those who subsist solely off a victim's liquid viscera.

Most blest are those who know Chaining. Melanis Gek'roh maintain limited mastery over their form. Like Garreed some remember their single-existence; others can partially undo their Chaining, or slay the mind of their animal-half (thereby assuming full control). Garreed may have been insightful, but he was still Melanis in spirit. He claimed he could do other tricks, but he kept these secret. He enjoyed a good enigma.

Of Animation, I have seen Chained crafted into a specific form and function using this art. They are the *In'sokhar*, a breed damned to a hellish fate.

The Sangis gift of Appeasement allows some, like myself, to recapture lost physical attributes. I speak through Appeasement's influence. I also met another Chained who, though beast in action, still wore its unblemished mortal face. How strange to see a Z'bri face gesticulate with such animal frenzy.

Soul Stealing is an unpredictable gift. Some Chained hold victims motionless by staring at them. Others engender feelings of loyalty and love through inadvertent manipulation. I manifest this gift, if only to a minor degree.

How our crafts must seem formidable to you. To stay your fear, however, it is rare that we have any control over these gifts. They manifest with or against our will, whether desired or unwanted, and in the most unexpected of fashions.

Born in Chains

Procreation is a blessing beyond Z'bri experience; this is their primary failing. They are corpse-architects, always building through theft, rarely creating. The Gek'roh cannot return to the barren existence of being Z'bri because we can procreate. True, I have heard of some rare Z'bri who can breed, but this proves more exception than rule in the Beasts' case. Our gift is of the Great Seed, a moment born in howling pain and spent blood. Again true, our offspring are not Z'bri in nature, and regardless the acumen of their parents, will never be more than animals. Still, we create. We are a part of nature's cycle.

Our children adopt our physical attributes, though differences arise in each offspring. Some take after their Z'bri lineage while others look more animal. Regardless, these children are of primal instinct, and better accustomed to the wilds than we ever were. Certainly, some emulate their parent's cruel traits (and even gifts), but I believe it is merely parental mimicry rather than innate corruption. The child imitates the actions of the parents, or, if you prefer, cruelty breeds cruelty.

Unlike their parents, our children are comfortable with their skin. They do not hear the raging voices fighting for control, or feel the rational mind's desperation for structured purpose. They exist within a cycle. One soul to guide them; one voice speaking with primal thought.

Mind the Beast

Z'bri are purveyors of vilest atrocities. They pardon their actions (as if they have ever tasted a modicum of their own corruptive misery), claiming their ministrations are a temporary pale against the longevity of the resilient spirit. Little do Z'bri comprehend the truth of their actions. Having undergone forced-mating, I know how flesh and spirit interact. The two are inexorably interwoven, laced over and through one another like lovers of the same cloth. The Z'bri, however, suffer color-blindness, and cannot distinguish reality's shades; they only see extremes because they experience life by the same measures.

Chaining assaults your core, indeed raping your very identity. In breaking down your walls, however, the Melanis unknowingly unleash inspiration. In fact, force-mating is a chrysalis stage, a transition point between two polar realities. Z'bri torture Serfs, hoping to glean some insight into the mortal condition. Fools! I say you cannot truly understand without the direct experience to fashion personal philosophy. Though I am long-lived, I am eventually mortal. My shedding occurs with mounting frequency, and I can feel my life eluding my grip. It is as though I am sloughing off my very spirit.

This realization of the finite impresses a sense of urgency, a need for purpose. Admittedly, mine is an eloquent observation, not at all in stride with my bestial half. My words hold true, however, for my experience is truer still. I hear the beast and I vocalize her impulses.

Cycle of Madness

The mind of the Gek'roh is a cacophony of foreign verses. The Melanis may strip your identity, but their attempt is incomplete. Isolated ideas and marooned memories remain, floating on a sea of confusion. Some thoughts come from the animal in washes of primal colors, living tastes and jagged smells. Other thoughts, those of the Z'bri, come in dreams of potential and fantasies of smothering sensation. These foreign minds collide against a backdrop of pain; guttural sensation blankets everything else out. Ironically, therein lies the Melanis' mistake.

The Melanis torture animal and Z'bri so that neither mind can find refuge in its partner's thoughts. By visiting pain upon both, however, the Melanis give the conjoined minds a common frame of reference. Both Z'bri intellect and animal instinct recognize the other's pain, drawing them together accordingly. The animal becomes more cunning while the Z'bri surrenders the irrational for the practical. Pain galvanizes the two minds into a patchwork mosaic. Not perfect, but the foundations for a greater creature.

This, of course, takes decades to form. Both minds, with nothing in common but pain, wean themselves off its dynamic fury. It offers direction and the will to fight. Some Gek'roh even forget there was anything but torment, and fall into a spiraling abyss from which they never emerge.

Like all wounds, pain eventually heals, if only partially. Without anger irrationally blinding them, the Chained look within themselves for purpose. The animal and Z'bri mind draw closer together out of a need for survival; pain is no longer the common thread. The Gek'roh transforms, experiencing ideas alien to the Z'bri (the desire to procreate and understanding nature's balance). The Taker's mind relies on the animal to survive the wilds, learning and *evolving*. Still, the union is not perfect. A Z'bri's predilection for violence poisons the beast and introduces corruption's rot. Assailed by dark fantasies, the Gek'roh lashes out violently until it can find a justifiable balance. Caught between different ascetics, it learns one action fills two needs. Feeding to inflict pain and sate hunger; sex to procreate and dominate your partner; hunting to engender fear and to survive. One action completing two opposing desires.

Eventually, survival proves an inadequate quest. The rational mind thirsts for greater purpose not found within nature's cycle. The animal-half (its eyes opened by malignant desires) joins the search.

The Mobius Horse and Rider

Regardless of whatever truce exists in a Gek'roh's shattered mind, the animal and Z'bri aspects never reach complete harmony. Even I, the eldest among the Gek'roh, must surrender to the beast to better exist with myself. Unlike the others, however, I am far more adept at balancing my two spirits. My many peers are not so fortunate. They either allow the animal dominion because its raw emotion is comfortable suffocation, or they embrace the starving violence and rampage. In either case, they flock to the easiest forms of expression: rage and pain.

The trick to survival is allowing both sides uncensored expression. Gek'roh make the mistake of countering one action with another, trying to reach stability through balanced control. That is a Z'bri way of thinking, not animal. Animals are carnal in their primal pleasures. Their existence is their justification. To slap down instinct is to spark a war of control, a war that costs the Gek'roh their sanity. I simply allow each aspect its moment of. . . of rule. Uh! Ironic that I speak of the very battle waging within me now. My beast, content to remain dormant for so long, has awoken from hibernation. I ghrrr. . . I wanted to tell you so much. There is little time left, I'm afrrraid.

Remember within Gek'roh, each side must sleep. Days, moon cycles, even seasons, it does not matterrrrhh. This is when the other half rules; night and rage, day and sight. But the rule. . . ghrrrr. . . the rule is impure. Beast touches Z'bri with dreams of the vibrant wild, of mates, children, the hunt, the kill. We taste colors, see smells, feel sounds. We react! Z'bri touches beast with dreams of. . . of decay, ent. . . ent. . . entropy. Dreams of cutting flesh, mouths choking on blood, hatred, anger, civility.

The Beast Arises

Now. . . now you've heard all my wordssss. To exist as me, you must live with thought and rage. The mind held strong for too long. Not good for the beast. Not good for instinct. I'm sorry little one. You served. . . ghrrrr. . . as companion, lover. But beasts have no. . . ghrrr allies; only food. Now run. . . escape.

Maybe I won't chase. Maybe. . .

The Johan

From the Letters of Tel Harper:

Journeys, like stories, all have a beginning, middle and an end. I no longer know where in mine I rest. I shall begin my tale at the ending of one life and the beginning of another. You had scarcely seen seven seasons when our life as a family ended; I did not know it then, but something drew you away from our shop and into the busy lane. Your mother was tending to errands for one of our benefactors within the Watch. The Joanites are always in need of the services of a good metal worker, yet they are constantly arrogant and demanding. On that fateful day she was many streets away when you crawled away from my watchful eye.

Curse me for a fool, that I turned from you to answer the nagging questions of one of my apprentices; I only realized your peril when I heard the horses braying. Somehow you had gotten into the street and were huddled in fear before the cart of Jacob the ragman. The vicious nag that pulled Jacob's cart had reared back and its hooves were coming down all about you. It was only a matter of time before one struck, ending your young life.

With no regard for my own welfare I rushed to your aid. Heedless of the danger I grabbed you in my strong arms, placing my body in the way of the enraged animal. If I had known then the consequences of my actions, I would still have taken the blows meant for you. You were thrust out of harm's way by the impact as the beast hammered its full weight onto my back. I smiled even as I fell, knowing you were safe, though my fate was much less certain. The nag struck twice more, shattered my left knee and shoulder with its rage.

As the world darkened around me I was content seeing you crying on the curb, clutching the colored ball Telehan had given you at your birthing ceremony, the ball that had drawn you into the street.

Hope

Jacob sent for the Evans right away and they did what they could for me. They chanted, applied poultices and brewed vile concoctions of foul smelling liquids, but in the end the bones set poorly.

Love is strong, but without the strength of my body I was unmanned. The work for which I lived was beyond my weakened grasp. Unable to stand unaided or grasp the tools of my trade without shaking, I was like the most infirm of Yagans, decrepit and aged in my prime. My good wife, your mother, tried her best, but without my work the business lagged and we were on the verge of poverty. The craft I had perfected over years was taken from me and the tender ministrations of your dear mother, may her soul rest with Baba Yaga, did nothing to ease my pain. For truly 'the bones set poorly,' and I was unmanned as husband as well as father and craftsman. If I could go back I would never have accepted Telehan's aid, and would have given my all to avoid the pernicious snares of his kind.

I find that, scribbling on ragged parchment by the light of a waning moon, my mood has become bitter and filled with venom. I was never well suited to writing, being a man more at home with a hammer and anvil than pen and paper, yet committing my thoughts to paper calms the rage and hatred that consumes my soul. I hope that once you learn my fate, my son, you will forgive the foolish pride of your father and forgive me. But I digress.

In what I mistakenly believed to be my darkest moment, he came again. Telehan the facilitator again graced my home, for the first time since the Fatima-cursed accident. Though his full aspect is terrible to behold, a strange melding of a great leathery bird and a man, Telehan is one of easier Z'bri to deal with. His upper torso is as perfectly proportioned a semblance of man as such a beast can manage. The body and face are beautiful and unblemished, and it is even said that a few of the good women of Bazaar have fallen in love upon first sight of the beast, at least until they espied the heavy bulk of the remainder of his body.

Over the years I had crafted unique items for Telehan: leather harnesses inlaid with silver filigree, chain gloves as thin and light as lace, and for three seasons one year I beat and shaped steel from the old days into elaborate wall fixtures, which were neither window nor door, but each an unrivaled work of art. I found myself eagerly anticipating his visits not for the payment, with which he was exceptionally generous, but for the new and wondrous challenge with which he would next present me. In spite of his monstrous appearance, I truly thought of Telehan as a kindred spirit, one of the few who could understand my art in a way that no apprentice ever could hope to. Now in my greatest, darkest need he came to me again.

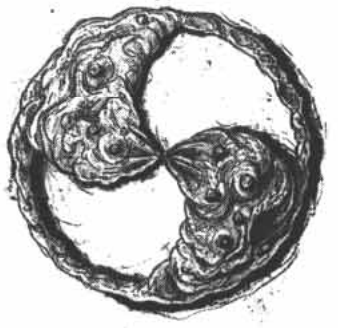
He was so engrossed in his latest undertaking, that at first he did not even notice my infirmity. Only after he had lain out his sheaf of parchment, made of almost transparently thin hide in the Joh'an manner, did he notice the cane supporting my weight. I told him of the accident and my injury, using those vile hateful words, 'the bones set poorly.' He seemed confused, and even after examining my crippled leg and strengthless arm, I think he had trouble understanding the importance of the injury. To the Joh'an, to whom flesh is as mutable as clay, it is hard to understand how fragile the human body truly is.

Telehan dismissed my misfortune with a wave of his hand and again turned towards his new enterprise. I reluctantly tuned towards the sheaves of parchment that he had scattered across my workbench, knowing my body would never be up to whatever the tasks the project would require. I was surprised to see that the parchments were nothing more than a dress pattern, though a dress unlike any I or the world had ever seen before. Engrossed despite myself, I stared at the pattern.

Thousands of interlocking hooks of steel, silver and bronze were to be laced into an intricate mosaic of form and function. A bodice of supple leather would suspend the mosaic from the torso of the woman who would wear it, allowing it to flow about or meld to the body as the wearer and the mosaic would allow. A hundred small thin straps could be tightened or loosened to shape the dress into as many different styles. As the wearer moved the mosaic would change patterns, flashing bronze, silver and steel in differing designs, creating an new and unique vision with each movement of the wearer.

He bade me good health and to be prepared to start work on the morn. With that he took flight and returned to his Skyrealm high above, leaving me with his sheaf of parchment and my pain.

Redemption



At the break of dawn he was back at our small shop, waking the household. My patron was accompanied by three of his serfs this time, all of whom were heavily laden with baskets of steel chain, deer hide and bars of silver and bronze. The three slaves bustled about the shop, arranging their baskets in an orderly fashion, completely oblivious to my protests. Telehan took me aside and, like an old confidant, fished a small vial of blue liquid from a pouch of leather that I had fashioned for him last year. The creature nonchalantly held the vial out for me, stating simply that he had bargained with Athriel to aid my work.

Athriel the dreamer. Amongst the Joh'an Athriel is regarded with as much fear as respect. Her knowledge of the world before and the world of dreams is said to have begun long before the Z'bri ever deigned to grace our planet with their presence. As a simple smithy, I knew nothing of such matters, only the rumors and stories I heard in the local taverns and markets of Bazaar. Athriel the Joh'an, queen of the ungovernable, mistress of dreams and collector of nightmares. Athriel of such terrible beauty that mortal men were said to have forsaken newly-wed spouses for but a sight of her. With what little I knew of Athriel I knew to fear her.

Yet Telehan had always talked plainly to me and true. Granted he was as self-serving and capricious as any other Joh'an, changing his mind as easily as a fisherman tacks to catch the changing wind, yet like said fisherfolk, Telehan always followed the fish. No matter which way the wind blew, he would always return to the object of his present obsession. For that reason I trusted that the strange potion Athriel had prepared would not be fatal.

Pain such as I had never known in my life assailed my form, causing me to writhe upon the floor of our shop in agony. Athriel's potion moved like fire though my body, twisting and snaking its way though my veins and arteries like a Joanite cavalry charge. My vision blurred as I gripped my head in agony, my limbs twisted and swelled like plump melons, set to burst. All the while Telehan regarded my suffering with impatience, his claws tapping a staccato beat on the floor of my shop, near where my sweat-drenched brow thrashed in anguish.

My torment seemed to go on forever, yet could only have lasted at most five minutes, before the pain resided and my wits returned. I struggled to my feet unaided, and realized that Athriel's potion had cured me, where the prayers and ministrations of the Evans had not. Even with my eyesight fogged by the brilliant afterimages of the ordeal which had healed me, I rejoiced. I grasped Telehan's arm with the renewed strength he had gifted me and thanked him, asking him foolishly how I could ever repay him. He looked at my hand and smiled sweetly at me. Telehan shrugged out of my grip, and gestured at his rolls of parchments and named his price and the time of my damnation. 'Three months, no more.' he stated simply, and left.

Purgatory

Day and night I toiled, consumed by the intricacies of the work, shaping and crafting the leather of Telehan's dress. I carefully bound each ring of steel, bronze and silver to its neighbor according to the dress pattern, more schematic than anything resembling a tailor's guide, that Telehan had given me. Periodically I felt my strength waning, and I was forced to repeat my painful rejuvenation by sipping from Athriel's potion. The pain would rack my body, forcing me to the floor. Yet after a time they passed and I returned to my work, revitalized and whole once more.

Not only my work was revitalized, once again I was a father and a husband, able to carry my son upon my broad shoulders once again and my wife to our bedchambers. Though you expressed misgivings, my wife, I knew you were secretly relieved that Telehan had repaired my wounds, giving me strength where the powers of the Fatima and efforts of the tribes had failed. In my arrogance I believed that my fellow craftsmen would wish me well, for we have all spent time working for the pleasure of the Joh'an, but such was not to be.

Telehan, the Facilitator

Formerly a minor Lord in House Sangis, Telehan was exiled years ago for reasons that he refuses to discuss. He has made his home in one of the mid-level towers in Bazaar, and spends his time brokering deals with his fellow Joh'an and the humans in the streets below. He keeps a small 'stable' of artisans who perform tasks for him in return for past favors, and is not above manipulating events to put someone in his debt.

His upper half is stunningly attractive, while his bird-like lower half provides him with incredible strength. He likes to keep part of his body in the shadows, ensnaring his prey with the exquisite beauty of his face and voice before fully showing them the object of their attraction.

Highlights: Persuasive, seductive, savvy

Atmosphere: Sangis

Attributes: AGI +2, APP +3, BLD +2, CRE +1, FIT +2, INF +3, KNO +2, PSY +1, WIL +3

Skills: Combat Sense 1/-1, Etiquette 2/+3, Haggling 3/+3, Hand-to-Hand 2/+2, Herbalism 1/+2, Read/Write (Tribal) 2/ +2, Ritual 3/+2, Seduction 2/+2, Streetwise 1/+3, Speak (Tribal) 2/+2, Trade 3/+2, Sundering 1

Edge: well-connected with both Tribals and Joh'an, many favors owed to him by people at all levels

A month after Telehan healed my wounds, I was out running errands for his hateful project. I was in need of leather and had commissioned a tanner near the sunken realms to prepare a hide, and was seeing to its delivery when I saw smoke coming from our shop. Dropping my package, I rushed headlong through the crowded streets of Bazaar scattering anyone who stood in my way. In a moment I was at the shop, in time to see it consumed by fire. My first thought, may your dearest mother forgive me, was for Telehan's dress, so obsessed with the work was I.

Then it dawned on me that you and your mother were still inside. I plunged into the shop, heedless of the flames, but was forced back by the heat and smoke. Again and again I tried, but to no avail, always the flames were too hot, though I fancied I could hear you both crying my name. All was lost, though not in the way I thought.

Again Telehan came to my rescue. Plunging like a mighty eagle he crashed through the burning sod of the building's roof, collapsing it inward. A hush gripped the street and I looked in amazement at the crowd around me, only then realizing that many of my fellow merchants were carrying torches and unsheathed steel. It had not yet dawned on me how my shop had come to burn, how my livelihood had caught aflame. My concern was for my family, and my work, though in all honesty I could no longer tell which came first.

It was with immense relief that I espied Telehan, wreathed in smoke as he left the building. He was carrying a limp form in his clawed arms, and I rushed forward calling out your mother's name. But as I got closer to the Joh'an I realized that the form I had mistaken for my wife was the limp formless shape of Telehan's dress. I cried out to him to go back for her, but he only stared at me in that peculiar birdlike manner of his, and calmly asked why. I begged, I pleaded, but always he answered why. I tried again to enter the building, but the flames stopped me. This time I was certain I heard your voice raised in fear calling my name.

I turned to Telehan and, shaking with rage, I accused him of this atrocity. Again he feigned confusion, and I launched myself at him, seeking to throttle the smug monster. Casually Telehan backhanded me across the street and turned to go, now bored by my antics. I watched his retreating form and my will broke. I wept openly, I begged him to save my family. Telehan looked over his shoulder at me, then at the flaming shop. I cried out, knowing that the building could not survive much longer.

Then Telehan was at my side, raising me to my feet. Somehow, I know not how, I heard my own voice promising to do anything, to come and live with him and teach his servants my craft. With a smug smile that I will remember always, he turned from me and casually gestured at the building, chanting softly in a strange tongue. And the fire went out. I turned to thank Telehan, and knew then what I had done. I was to accompany him to his fiefdom in the Skyrealms then and there.

Heaven

I was to find out what lay above the world we know, to travel into the forbidden realms that are made of the highest levels of the ruins of the World Before. Telehan swiftly took me away from the maddened and confused crowd, and I lost my bearings for a moment as we sped through the wreckage of the past. He pushed me towards a small opening in a rock face, and I crawled through, finding myself at the bottom of a tall well. The smell of corruption was thick in the air, and each of my steps caused a small cloud of dirt and rust to rise up, highlighting the rare ray of light that seeped through gaps in the crumbling walls.

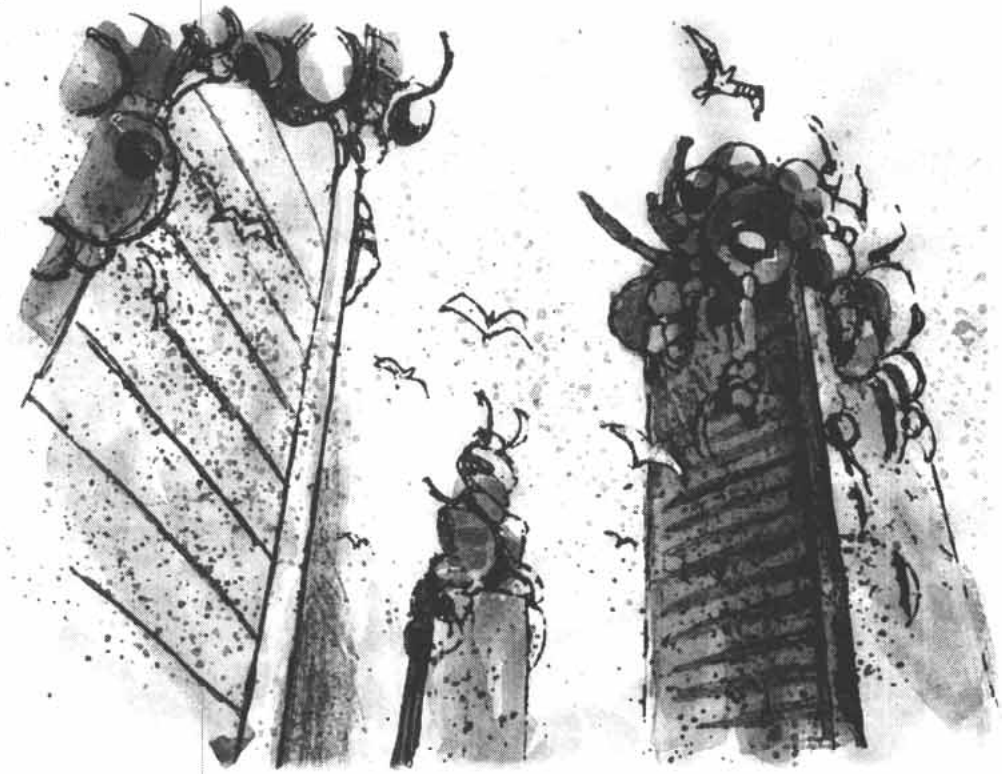
We climbed for what seemed to be ages. Despite my renewed strength, I found it difficult to keep up with Telehan's pace. He pushed me through a succession of wells and dark rooms, all filled with refuse and other things better left undescribed. I sometimes heard movement in the darkness, and it seems certain that only Telehan's presence kept whatever dangers existed on our path at bay.

I could not help but admire the craft and dedication of men from ages past, who must have toiled for many lifetimes carving steps and rooms out of the great towers of rock that are found in the region. Time and again we would come to an opening in the side of the spire, where I could look out and see the world from above, like a great bird. Some openings were still covered with a glass purer than any ever created by the Joanite Glass-smiths, and I marveled. Despite my fear, I was fascinated by everything I saw.

Telehan's realm was not as I expected it to be. It was half way up one of the tallest stone and steel outcroppings, the location of which, I would later learn, denoted the owner's station among the Joh'an. I expected a world of pain and horror to greet me; I did not expect the sumptuous trappings of a palace from the time before. Tapestries woven from a thousand colors of hair covered the walls, attached with bone pins to the steel framework of the spire. Above and below were vast open spaces, and I could just make out the indistinct shapes of other realms through the strange, pulsating slats that served as a floor. I knew that other Joh'an dwelled within the spire, and was amazed at just how much room Telehan commanded. His bed chambers alone were the size of the council chambers, and filled with hundreds of painstakingly embroidered pillows. At that time I didn't notice details, but I was later to learn that the pillows were of flesh, flesh that still breathed as though it were a living man's chest.

With a dramatic flourish, Telehan swept into the forge room. Arrayed before me were all the tools of my trade and many more that I had only heard talk of. The place was magnificent, the forge new and as yet unfired, the tools pristine and exquisite in their craftsmanship. My heart, which had expected to find no joy in this foul place, leapt at the sight of the forge.

My patron's first task was a simple one. He bade me to fashion a simple collar of steel and leather. He gave me leave to style it in any manner I saw fit, his only demand was that it have fittings for three thumb-sized gems and that I be comfortable wearing it. With that he left me to my work and my three new apprentices. For the third time that day I knew fear. I set to my task, intending to fashion an exquisite collar to set myself above my fellow serfs, and also to conceal a secret latching mechanism with which I could remove the collar at my leisure. I was confident that my skills would allow me to secret a latch within the metal of the collar, that none but myself would be able to find. Later that night Telehan returned to examine my work, and after attaching three blue gems to their mounts, he locked the collar around my neck, proclaiming me one of his stock. The other serfs applauded and hooted as if this was the finest gift in the world and, dumbfounded, I joined in.



Hell

Telehan tossed me the dress and bade me continue with my task, and left. After a moment's hesitation I commenced my work, first by brushing off the soot and ash, the last remnants of my earlier life, that covered the garnment. Then I set my apprentices, dullards and idiots all, to stoking the forge and fetching new rings of steel, silver and bronze. As they bustled about I removed the collar using the latching mechanism I had secreted into the elaborate pattern of the carvings. I stared at the trio of gems Telehan had affixed to the collar. Each was the size of a large man's thumb and, like flesh and bone, had some give to them. Pressing gently on the gems, one could feel them compress to a small degree before becoming hard and rigid. They were unlike any stone I had seen before, and they seemed to become brighter and more lustrous the closer I brought my hand to them. Unnerved, I vowed to keep the tainted gems as far away from my body as possible, and from then on I would remove my collar when I slept, secretly defying my new lord.

Bargain

Together with the Telehan's flock of twelve serfs, we served in the audience chamber. It was the site of a great feast organized by my lord to honor a visit by three of his closest friends. Telehan was entertaining a three Joh'an lords, each with their own retinue of Iv'chet. Athriel the dreamer and her deaf-mute handmaidens, the warmaker Kral'vvian, alone save for two hulking abominations, and a party of Flemis Z'bri. I knew some great undertaking was in the works, but also knew better than to inquire as to what.

Athriel I already had a healthy respect for, as daily sips of her painful rejuvenation potion, were the only thing that allowed me to serve my new master. The Flemis I knew of from Bazaar, enigmatic and strangely linked, of one mind they say, and not a sane one. One could not trust the word of the Flemis, the merchants said, because they really didn't understand the meaning of a bargain, and trade with them was best done through an intermediary such as Telehan. The third delegation was the smallest, but undoubtedly the most deadly — Kral'vvian the warmaker, flanked by his two vile abominations, hulking brutes created for one purpose alone — death. Hideous creatures, Kral'vvian's warriors were an awful amalgamation of Z'bri and man, for it is well known that Z'bri can be bound into unliving objects or animals, gifting the Z'bri with unearthly powers.

Kral'vvian's alien alchemists had succeeded in binding their unhallowed brethren to their human servants, creating these horrible brutes which were nigh invincible in battle. The Warmaker jealously guarded the secret of this arcane procedure, and after devouring his alchemists and slaying his entire flock, he pronounced himself lord of the Underrealm. Telehan once said, in an unguarded moment, that the Joh'an council considered sweeping the impetuous lord away, but coveted the knowledge the Warmaker held. Now, many years later, Kral'vvian held the Underrealm in an unyielding grip. . . but more of that later.

As I watched the ungainly abominations slaver and drool on the delicate pillows of the audience chamber I considered my lord's position amongst the Joh'an. Telehan was ambitious, but he was no fool; he neither coveted a position on the council nor the power to influence the Joh'an, at least not openly. Telehan the facilitator was a go-between, one of the few Z'bri who enjoyed traveling across Vimary and interacting with mankind. His mighty wings often took him to lands that even the oldest maps only hinted at and he was said to have allies everywhere, in every camp and every outpost. Often he would return with wonders that would make a Keeper green with the purest envy. But these did not stay long in his possession, as soon after such a trip, envoys of interested parties would appear, entreating Telehan for an audience. The vain Joh'an enjoyed exchanging favors with whichever party sought him out. It was said that half of Vimary owed a favor to Telehan, and the other half wished they did. Such was the game that entranced my lord, an intricate game of favor and power, that all Joh'an participated in but only Telehan truly excelled at, for he lacked the distractions of the others. Still this conference was unusual, even for him.

Telehan then dismissed the flock, all but myself, whom he bade to come to him. Tentatively I stepped past the other Z'bri lords, walking around the crimson-fleshed pillows. My master then introduced me as his new favored pet, the gift-maker. Kral'vvian looked me over in the appraising manner that only a warrior can, while Athriel stole glances beneath her lashes that took my breath way with lust. And the Flemis, well. . . who can tell with them? They seemed as oblivious to their surroundings as ever. Telehan then led his guests through his realm to the forge room, where I was surprised to see the forge extinguished and my apprentices disassembling and packing my tools into massive crates.

I was confused and a little disoriented. If Telehan noticed my discomfort he took no heed, and explained not to me but to his fellows that I was to dwell with each of them for a season doing whatever work they saw fit. No harm was to come to me and I was to be returned at the end of the year as was the bargain. I know not what Telehan received in exchange for my gifted service, only that as the forge was moved to the very top of the spire to the domain of Athriel the dreamer, so too was Telehan's realm moved. In accordance with some rise in prestige Telehan was allowed to elevate his realm three levels, disassembling the tapestries and bone furniture that filled his rooms and raising them half an arrow's flight higher. I watched the entire realm be packed up and carried via roped pulleys to its new level of importance, all the while Telehan smiled enigmatically.

Dream

Athriel the dreamer is one of the oldest Z'bri dwelling within the Skyrealms. Such is her stature amongst her peers that she has chosen as her home the very tip of the tallest of the fallen monoliths which comprise the Skyrealms. From here she looks out across the lands of Vimary, feeding, and feeding upon, the dreams of the land's inhabitants. It is said she has molded her palace from the dreams and nightmares of all the inhabitants of Vimary, including her fellow Z'bri, and in my time with her I saw nothing to disprove this. She is especially fond of entering the dreams of Yagan priests and does so to flaunt the power she has over dreams, power that even the highest of Yagan priestesses can only aspire to attain. It is said that she thirsts for the souls of Yagans, and that her most prized serfs were once followers of Baba Yaga who were seduced by the visions of power that Athriel visited upon them, but with Athriel none can tell where rumor ends and reality begins.

My apprentices were instructed by Athriel's deaf-mute handmaidens to construct the forge at the very tip of the spire, where the fumes and heat would not disrupt the ambiance of Athriel's realm. The sky surrounded us on above and on three sides, a single slab of rock from the old world providing shelter from the elements. My time with Athriel was not to be easy, and I relished the time I spent at the forge for it was the only source of heat I had access to. Likewise it was with the greatest apprehension that I was forced from my work to partake of meals with the other serfs, for upon these occasions I was compelled to traverse through the land of Athriel's dreaming to reach the meal hall.

Unlike other Joh'an Athriel allows anyone access to her inner chambers, though few can bear the sights and sensations of these rooms for long. Her elaborate inner chambers are wreathed in elaborate tapestries woven from the flesh of human and Z'bri alike. Blind-deaf weavers work day and night teasing and coaxing the flailed skins of her victims into thin ribbons of flesh. Arcane instruments and vile concoctions are used to ensure that the victims' flesh remains supple and unblemished, even as it is peeled from the writhing muscles of its owner. Once the strips of flesh are peeled from their victims they are threaded onto a massive loom, where blinded serfs and Z'bri vassals weave the tapestries which adorn Athriel's citadel. Were the serfs not deprived the gift of sight they might recoil in horror at the sight of the loom of dream where Athriel's tapestries are woven. Massive beams of rusting steel and shattered bone hold the loom in place, while barbed chains secure the loom to this frame.

The loom, the reason I had been gifted to this land of horror, was a monstrous contraption composed of steel from the World Before binding the flesh, sinew and bone of a dozen or more Z'bri and serfs tied together by the arcane weavings of Athriel herself. It is hard to tell where one creature ends and another begins, and though each is asleep each screams with every motion of the loom, infusing the tapestries with terrible visions of nightmare and despair. The flesh strips are fed between and within the flesh, entrails and emaciated limbs of the bonded creatures with a sharpened shuttle of hardened bone. Screams mark the passage of each shuttle through the loom, through each chained creature in turn from one side

to the other. Other serfs tend to the loom's wounds while the shuttle is prepared for its return passage. In this painstaking manner the soft flowing tapestries which adorn the citadel of Athriel are produced. Parts of the loom were disassembled and brought to my forge for repair, a duty that always began with the gruesome task of peeling the caked and dried flesh from the steel.

Athriel's tapestries are much prized amongst the Z'bri and account for her political power amongst the Joh'an and their brethren amongst the Z'bri houses. Within each tapestry, it is said, lies the hopes, dreams and destiny of he whom gazes upon it. Each tapestry is unique and to the Z'bri each holds a fascination which is almost undeniable. A Z'bri lord will stare at a tapestry for hours, even days upon end, seemingly drawing inspiration and even prophecy from its depths. Even Vassals and chained Z'bri draw comfort or resolve from the presence of an Athriel tapestry.

My time with Athriel passed quickly and before I knew it Telehan returned, alighting upon the tip of the spire and instructing me to prepare myself for my second season of service. Rethil the Massive awaited.

Organ

Rethil the Massive had visited my lord months ago, when I had been exchanged for some unspecified service. I had heard of the creature, a renegade Flemis whose body occupied three twisted levels of one World Before monolith. No rumor or story could have prepared me for the reality of the creature. Rethil was a monstrous entity that had swollen to encompass the rusting support beams of its lair, and the flesh of its bloated body pulsed and writhed across the floor, ebbing and flowing with the creature's breathing. The audience chamber was carved into the great belly of the Z'bri, allowing the massive entity to look down upon those it allowed to speak with it. A host of housekeeping serfs carve great slabs of flesh from the walls of this chamber to ensure that Rethil does not engulf the alter room, as he has much of the remaining three levels. These gifts of meat are given to feed the serfs in a grotesque parody of the Fatimas' communion with the flesh and blood.

Rethil is the only Z'bri widely known to have removed himself from the Flemis consciousness and none know how or even why he attempted such a feat, only that the Flemis hate and fear him for it. Rethil is a melancholy lord prone to fits of brooding that can last weeks on end. What little pleasure he derives from his existence revolve around his thirst for new experiences. He can bud off small contingents of his own flesh which he sends about the land to experience the wonders and terrors of Vimary. He then absorbs the flesh and minds of these small pieces of his body, exhilarating in the rush of new knowledge. Rethil is also rumored to enjoy assimilating the minds and memories of strangers, and on two occasions I saw him devour hapless residents of Bazaar who were captured and brought before him.

Still his realm is not safe, for as I said Rethil is a melancholy and capricious lord. Occasionally his flesh will extrude tendrils, plucking a serf from within his realm and absorbing them into his flesh. The influx of experiences, passions and fears of the serf revitalize the creature for a time, but the experience of one of his serfs is very much like that of all his serfs, and he soon wearies of the taste. Visitors and captives are a fine change from the constant diet of serfs and Rethil relishes the taste of each new addition, often sipping the consciousness of a new addition for months before finally consuming the emptied shell of the captive. Rethil is a great storehouse of knowledge and it is said that he was the first Flemis, though few believe this boast. What is known is that the Flemis bear no love for Rethil, but have as yet made no concerted efforts to dislodge him.

My time serving Rethil was spent constructing great blades of iron for his serfs, with which his servants carve and mold his immense body into their home and their sustenance. The blades were easily constructed but my craft was sorely tested by the cables of iron I was also commissioned to create, that were used as catgut to bind the seeping wounds the serfs hewed out of their master's flesh. My time with Rethil passed slowly as I was unable to mark the passage of the days, for no sun penetrated into the belly of the Joh'an lord, where my forge burned. Yet eventually my imprisonment ended and Telehan fetched me, blinking, back to the light of his land.

Betrayal

I was surprised to see that Telehan's land had not only risen a full arrow's flight higher, but had migrated to another spire entirely. From this new location, Bazaar and the home of the seven tribes were little more than a dull blemish on the ground far below. It seemed that my lord had been advancing his stature and importance while I was away. Telehan led me into his new audience chamber, which I saw was triple the size of the one I remembered two seasons past. He reclined upon a huge mound of pillows and lay quietly as three serfs oiled and cleaned his wings to a gleaming finish, while two others applied a slick lacquer to his hair, repairing his elaborate hairstyle. He watched me for a while, then gestured to a serf to bring something forward.

I was surprised to see the dress I had labored on so many months ago, wheeled in on its frame. The dress was almost complete, and only the few adjustments were required to complete it, mostly a matter of fitting it to the wearer, whoever that was to be. Telehan seemed to guess the question in my eyes, and standing, clapped his hands together briskly. From one corner of the room a set of tapestries parted and Athriel entered, quiet and graceful as a dream. At her side was Kral'vvian, the Joh'an lord I was promised to serve next. I knew something was about to happen, but not what — only that some terrible purpose was about to be culminated and that somehow my presence was pivotal. Telehan gestured to me to step forward, and he instructed me to fit the dress to Athriel's body: this was to be his gift for the blessed union of Athriel and Kral'vvian, a union that would bind together two powerful Joh'an leaders.

Never had I heard of such a thing. The Joh'an were unique in that each lord shunned the others, preferring to exist as unique entities. This alliance, like a Tera Sheban marriage, was without precedence. A binding of the Dreamer and the Warmaker would have repercussions that the whole of Vimary would feel, for while the Joh'an are powerful, they are also insular and without a guiding purpose. Kral'vvian, who has long espoused the elimination of the human blight, would change this. With the political savvy of Athriel behind him he would force the Joh'an out of their stoic apathy and into bloody action against the tribes.

I was helpless to do anything but assist my lord, fitting the dress for Athriel. It was but a moment's work and the dress was set about the Joh'an's form, draped like a shimmering rainbow of glistening metal. Bronze, steel and silver ringlets moved as one, tinkling melodiously as she, if such she truly was, swirled about for her audience. In spite of the peril this spelled for the tribes and the land of my birth I enjoyed the look of amazement that crossed the faces of the Joh'an lords as they watched her model the dress, the culmination of my work as a metal craftsman and a reminder of all that I had lost.

The Flawed Gift

Alas it was not to last, for Telehan had one further duty for me this day. He stepped close and, ordering me to lower my head, released the lock on my collar — the collar that held the three unearthly gems he had affixed when I began my service almost a year ago. The very collar that, in my pride, I had fashioned an unlocking mechanism within, and which, in infinite vanity, used to remove the collar in private — a secret betrayal of my lord's wishes that I thought would remain my secret. Such was not to be, for my deception was to be revealed here and now.

Telehan stepped towards Athriel bearing my collar as the final gift, a complement to the fine dress which she so obviously took pleasure in. She smiled at my lord and presented her neck for him to affix the collar. For a moment she looked confused, then opened her mouth as if to scream, but now sound issued from her slender throat. Instead her handmaidens, until then dumb, cried out in pain such as I had never heard before, and am likely to never hear again. Athriel tore the collar from her neck, shattering the delicate filigree and threw it at my lord. He stood slack-jawed, staring at her as she railed at him.

"The gems are flawed" she screamed, and as her ire rose her beautiful body shifted and melted, becoming a monstrous insect-like creature. "There are gaps, painful dreamless absences, hateful holes in the work" she howled again, then fled the chamber. Kral'vvian followed her, his teeth bared in anger, and I was alone with my lord.

Telehan was confused, but his confusion lasted only a moment. He picked up the broken collar and immediately ascertained the purpose of the mechanical apparatus concealed beneath the locking bolt. He turned on me then, and asked if I knew what I had done. I quaked in fear but answered none the less, for only complete honesty could spare me from his wrath. Telehan sighed deeply and like a disappointed parent confided in me the purpose of the dream stones: to record the dreams and aspirations of the wearer as they slept and in my case to immortalize the feelings of a craftsman as he worked. I had tainted the stones by removing the collar as I retired to sleep. The taint left painful gaps in the stone, forever tainting it and the dress it was intended to complement.

Now Kral'vvian would expect my life as payment and Athriel would never consummate the alliance between the three lords, for she was flighty and it was unlikely that she would return to a course of action once it was abandoned. He told me this in confidence, knowing that I would never tell another living soul, for this evening I would die.

Stepping closer he gathered me in his arms, and, sweeping aside a tapestry, launched the both of us out into the open sky. I cried out in fear, but he was silent as his powerful wings carried us away from the Skyrealms towards the forests surrounding Vimary.

As we flew Telehan regretted that I would now be unable to serve within Kral'vvian's Underrealm, a land where few traveled. He was curious as to what his companion was up to in his realm and why he would petition for the use of a metalcrafter. He explained that the Underrealms were like unto the roots of the mighty trees that were the Skyrealms; vast chambers of massive old-world stone and steel that spread beneath the earth like roots, supporting the weight of the Joh'an lords. Kral'vvian the Warmaker lived within the vaulted, unlit caves of the Underrealm and there bred his mindless abominations for some sinister purpose. The Dreamer and the Warmaker were to unite in some grand scheme that Telehan the facilitator had set in motion, without knowing the objective.

My one-time lord sighed then, and descended into the forest, towards a small group of buildings. Throwing me to the ground, he told me that he was not without compassion. He would spare my life, and though Kral'vvian would send warriors to seek me out and slay me, I would be safe here. I asked him, pathetically, why I deserved such leniency.

"Because you have served me well."

With that he left me with the small clan of squats where I now live.

Atonement

That was thirteen winters ago, and without the benefit of Athriel's drugs, my body has wasted away. I can no longer work in the fields and I can barely lift quill to parchment to scribe this record for you, my son. I thank the Fatimas that I forsook that the Dahlian caravan happened by this spring, for I fear that I will not live to see another. I beg you not to judge me too harshly now that you have read this journal, for I never meant to abandon you to the capricious whims of fate. I trust that you and your mother, if either of you still live, can find it in your souls to forgive me, for as the time draws short I find that I need your forgiveness to find peace.

Go with the Fatimas and pray that my soul does as well. I loved you both.

Chapter seven: System

Do you seek to know me? Then you must know yourself.

Before you look outwards you must turn in to what you already know.

Everything can be read on the face of the student,

And the teacher learns more than the taught.

Read my face and my words, teacher.

Hear what lies between the sounds.

- The Lessons of Kt'aalsik

Old Arts

The Z'bri sometimes whisper among themselves about half-remembered fragments of abilities they shared before the closing of the Fold. They do so only among trusted confidantes, as they would come to suffer terribly if their conversations were known to Z'bri society at large. The memories they share are hazy at best, and rumor has it that the knowledge was forcibly stripped from their minds a long time before.

Much like Synthesis, it has been conjunctured that the Old Arts opened the user to the River of Dream and allowed the user to draw sustenance and power from it. Yet the Old Arts held a vital difference, for they contained the potential for Sundering as well. The knowledge of the Old Arts among the Vimary Z'bri is limited to conjecture and rumor, and the Baron has been known to deal most harshly with any caught attempting to experiment with the ideas.

What is known is this: the Nomads, a group of enlightened Z'bri, practiced a strange form of ritual which they called the Old Arts. They used this power to pierce the Fold between the worlds, unfortunately creating a hole through which the demons poured. The Old Arts were a heightened awareness of the flows of energy in all of the cojoined worlds, permitting the Nomads to not only merge with the Fold, but to control it.

From what little is known, the Old Arts could be used to shape the flow of dream, much like Synthesis can shape the flow of reality. They were not intended to be used for destruction, but for creation. They were developed over eons, or within the shadows of a moment — no one is quite sure, for even the nature of time is mutable in the spirit realms.

The only remnant of the Old Arts still understood and used is the technique of focussing a Z'bri's being into a special kind of Heartstone at the moment of its death. Only the most powerful of Lords are capable of this feat, and it takes both time and intense concentration to do so. Once the ritual is complete, at the moment of the Lord's death, a Heartstone of unusual and brilliant power is formed.

These stones are imbued with mystical significance by the lesser Z'bri, and there is a strong taboo against Z'bri possession of one of these Old Stones. It is said that the Old Arts not only draw a Z'bri into the Heartstone entirely, but that they imbue the stone with special powers, useable only by those with the proper knowledge and experience.

The Baron has forbidden all study of the Old Arts excepting the ritual of the Heartstone, reasoning that any tampering with the Fold may only decrease their access to Sundering and the River of Dream.

Sundering

The Yagans keep close tabs on the Tribes' antagonists, for they know that detailed knowledge of the beasts will give them a strong edge in the future. With the help of Magdalite spies placed within the H'l Kar and other Z'bri strongholds, they have been attempting to catalogue the powers and abilities displayed by the monsters, perhaps in the hope of finding ways to counteract them.

Their efforts have recently revealed new Aspects used by each House. Whether these are the results of new research and discoveries or simply abilities that had not be observed and reported to date, it is impossible to say.

Sangis Aspects

Even today, the Z'bri of House Sangis retain some of the sublime essence that their kind possessed before the Closing of the Fold. Ephemeral, entrancing and often impossibly beautiful, the Sangis are likewise impossibly cruel, feasting on the torment and pain of humanity. Over the generations, they have developed numerous new Aspects surrounding this essential nature.

The Calling

When a Sangis comes into contact with a human being, be they tribal or otherwise, they can plant a small portion of their essence within that person. The seed is planted through a kiss, requiring skin-to-skin contact. After that 'deposit' has been made, the Sangis maintains a very low-level empathic link with their victim, usually only strong enough to convey the knowledge of the victim's death. A Sangis may have only one seed planted at any given time, but the connection can be severed at will. It must be reinstated, however, with another kiss.

When the Sangis wishes, he may recall his current victim to his side. If the compulsion is strong enough, the victim will blindly cross any obstacle to reach his master. A WIL roll is required to break free of the compulsion once the call has been sent out, at a Threshold of 4. The seed can be sensed, but only by those with a Synthesis skill of 3 or above.

Perspective

Triggered by touch, the victim's sense of aesthetics is switched around. Everything that they once thought was beautiful they now perceive as horrifyingly ugly, everything that once revolted them they now perceive as emminently desireable. The level of attraction/repulsion to any specific thing is equal to the level of the previous emotion.

An opposing PER roll is made, with the duration of the change one day for every point of Margin of Success. A Fumble on the part of the victim causes the effect to last for an entire month.

Melanis Aspects

The brooding Melanis are fascinated by knowledge, regardless of its type or provenance. They are equally fascinated by its applications, which can often lead to new discoveries. They spend their time dissecting reality in an attempt to uncover its power, though their real motives are often hidden behind layers of secretive and enigmatic experiments.

Inspiration

Because it has few obvious effects, the Aspect of Inspiration long remained hidden. In retrospect, it is obvious that the knowledge-obsessed Melanis would develop rituals and Sundering abilities designed to boost their capacity to acquire new knowledge. This Aspect allows the Z'bri using it to draw on outside energy and life force to enhance their KNO or CRE Attribute by +1 for a number of turns equal to their Margin of Success.

Shaping

Melanis are probably the closest thing the Z'bri have to an artisan or crafter class. They are the ones producing the tools and artifacts that the Z'bri desire, especially when they cannot obtain it (by force, subterfuge or trading) from the humans. The Aspect of Shaping was not often witnessed by human eyes, since it is almost always used within the deepest chambers of the Melanis monasteries, where the proper sigils and ritual symbols are permanently inscribed within the walls of the forge rooms.

The Shaping ritual forces a thing or pile of raw material to shape itself into a form desired by the Melanis. For example, a pile of bones will merge to form a cage or blade, or a human begins to change shape to twist into a beast. The material to be shaped is placed at the center of the room, within an intricately drawn symbol. It then starts to float and glow slightly as it begins to flow toward its new form.

The Melanis artisan must oversee the entire process, keeping focus to direct the evolution of the material being shaped. The larger or more complex the object being Shaped, the higher the Threshold. Each point of Margin of Success reduces the time required by one hour; if more than one artisan works on the piece, each tests separately against the Threshold. If successful, its Margin of Success cumulatively reduces the time required.

Shaping Table

Threshold	Task	Time
3	Simple Weapon or Tool	9 hours
4	Complex Weapon or Tool	16 hours
5	Simple Construct	25 hours
6	Complex Construct	36 hours
7	Simple Symbiot	49 hours
8	Complex Symbiot	64 hours

Koleris Aspects

Violent and aggressive, the Koleris have nothing but burning hatred for the Tribes and delight in causing them as much agony as possible. To this end, they have continuously honed their fighting abilities, even going as far as to develop new Aspects with the aid of the Melanis, intended to bring more destruction.

Holding

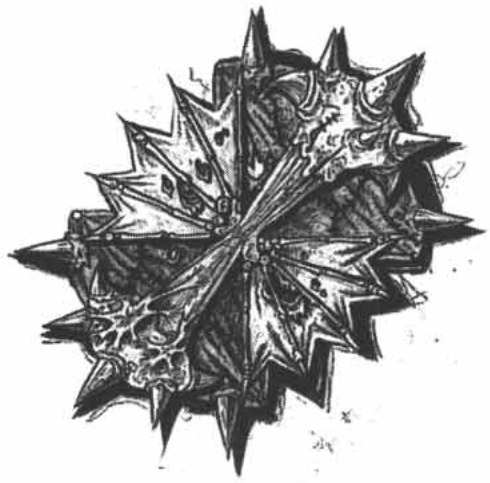
Though the action-obsessed Koleris prefer an opponent that fights back, they have been known to find it useful or pleasurable to prevent their intended victims from running away. The Aspect of Holding allows a Z'bri to completely paralyze an opponent but with a single glance.

An Opposed WIL test is made between the combatants; if successful for the Z'bri, the other party is unable to take any action (but otherwise remains fully conscious) for a number of turns equal to the Margin of Success.

The Burning

The Koleris are already violent fighters, but they nevertheless have developed a new Aspect to become the ultimate berserkers, even if they have to be destroyed by it. The Aspect of Burning lets the Koleris use its reserves of energy in a single moment to grab a second wind, causing them to fight on with renewed energy and vigor regardless of their wounds.

If successful, the Margin of Success is added to all combat-related rolls for a number of turns equal to the Sundering Skill Level of the Z'bri using the Aspect. As a side effect, the Z'bri's body burns hot to the touch, and has been known to ignite extremely flammable material (such as dry parchment or spilled oil). Once the effect is over, the Z'bri's body ignites, causing 1d6 Flesh Wounds to itself.



Flemis Aspects

The hive-like Flemis frown upon Individualism, and their use of Sundering reflects this. They can send out distress signals (immediately calling any nearby Flemis) and communicate telepathically, being among the few who still remember the Ancient Z'bri languages. Most of the special Sundering Aspects they have developed since the Closing have followed this same philosophy.

Body Severing

Used on a group of victims, Body Severing detaches the minds from each body and lets a human Collective form, able to control all bodies through cooperation. This allows a group of people to act as one, or allows one body to provide experiences for the entire Collective. Unfortunately, Body Severing ultimately destroys its subjects: each victim must make a WIL test (Threshold 4) every hour while in the mortal Hive Mind or go irrevocably insane. Fortunately, if the victim stays sane, they may make an additional WIL test (Threshold 6) to reenter their body and remove themselves from the Collective.

Body Severing is based on INF against a Threshold of 8. The Margin of Success is then rolled against by the victims, using a WIL Attribute test. Because of its difficulty, Body Severing is usually only used on willing Serfs, in which case there is no Opposed Test against WIL. If the targets are unwilling, only those minds failing the Opposed test are Severed. The specific effects of Body Severing should be roleplayed by the affected victims, or the cunning Weaver.

The Curse of Freedom

Rarely used, the Aspect of the Curse of Freedom causes a genuine fear among all within the Flemis Mind. When the Curse of Freedom is used, the Flemis is forcibly ejected from the Hive Mind and given a single body in which to survive — a fate worse than oblivion to many in the Collective.

The Curse is based on WIL against a Threshold of 6. The Margin of Success is then rolled against by the victim, using a WIL Attribute test. Interestingly, use of this Sundering ability on any non-Flemis, human or Z'bri, completely nullifies any mind control acting upon the target, and the target receives a +2 to any WIL tests for an entire day to resist any such attempts.

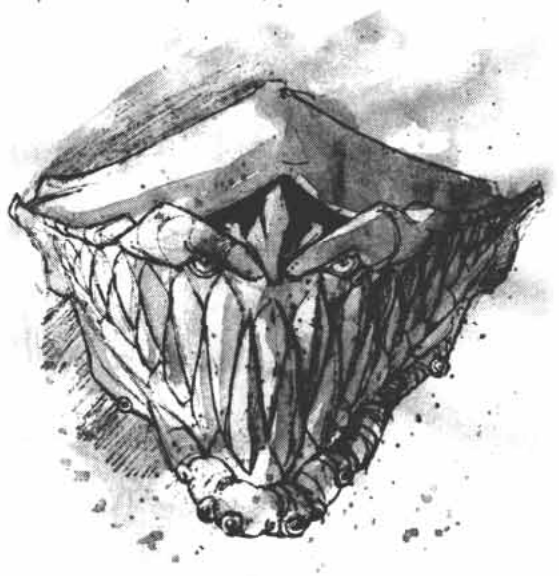
Taint

Sundering is not native to this shore of the River of Dream, and its use leaves an imprint of some sort within the structure of the objects and beings it has affected. The Tribes usually refer to this as the Taint, an otherworldly feeling of wrongness that is hard to explain or locate, but which is felt by all. A Taint is usually a mild effect which fades over time, except when deliberately left behind by a Z'bri, either by its very presence (see below) or through the use of exceptionally strong Sundering.

The Taint left behind by the movement or presence of a Z'bri is weak and fades within minutes. Experienced trackers (Skill Level 3 or more) can use this remanant of Atmosphere to track down a creature for 1d6 minutes after its passage, if they attune their minds to it (no movement, full attention focused on the trail).

Taint is much stronger in living beings that come in contact with a Z'bri or something once owned by a Z'bri, possibly because of the stronger connection created with the River of Dream. Almost anyone can tell that a person has met with a Z'bri up to several hours after the meeting itself. If a person has spent more than 48 hours straight in contact with a Z'bri or within a Z'bri's residence, the Taint becomes a permanent part of them, and will not fade on its own. The victim's personality begins to shift towards the particular Z'bri Atmosphere involved (A Sangis-tainted victim becomes more promiscuous, a Koleris-tainted victim becomes more violent and aggresive, etc.), and the Taint can only be removed through meditation and aid from someone with a Synthesis level of 2 or higher.

It is possible for a Z'bri to deliberately Taint someone or something, much like a dog or cat would leave its odor to signify passage or ownership. These people and items are obvious to anyone with any degress of Synthesis, and even those without the skill feel a sense of strangeness or wrongness about the person or object. Oftentimes that wrongness can be both repelling and enticing, drawing people towards the victim. Traps are often laid that way, with a Tainted object or person infecting all those who approach or come into physical contact. (See **Book of Legends** for the story of Mahakala's Ring, an example of a Taint-trap artifact)



Possessions

Before the Closing, it is said that Z'bri crossed the River of Dream to come and inhabit the bodies of humans, so that they could experience the material world. No one is sure whether this is truth or legend, but it is known that possession can occur. This is different from Chaining, since the human host must willingly make room for the additional consciousness. Some Z'bri take the time to pervert their chosen vessel, so the vessel takes them in willingly.

The rituals needed to accomplish possession are long and exhausting, but once completed let the Z'bri temporarily leave its husk and ride the body of its human vessel. The degree of control afforded over the host depends largely on the cooperation of the latter and the length of the ritual.

Some Z'bri have perfected the ability to ride within a human without the vessel noticing, looking out through their eyes and hearing through their ears. The ritual is similar but slightly more involved, since the intended victim remains unconscious throughout the entire process. The Tribes are always wary of people disappearing for a few hours, returning without marks or any memory of what happened to them.

The success of any attempt to possess a human mind depends on many factors, not all of which are easy to quantify in game terms. In general, the higher the rank of the Z'bri or his Sundering Skill, the easier possession will be. The higher the Willpower of the intended victim, the harder it is. The duration of the ritual depends on the distance to the victim and the purity of her mind, both of which require more effort and time to conquer.

Talismans

In many ways, the Z'bri society is a mirror (albeit a distorted version) of the Tribal one. Just like the Tribes, the Lords fashion medallions and talismans to bring certain effects into play. Most often Talismans are used as gifts from the more powerful Lords to enhance the power of favored Iv'chet or even chosen Serfs.

Unlike the Tribals, who receive enchanted pieces of their Fatimas, the Z'bri Talismans are constructed of fleshy bits and bone parts, and sometimes metal as well. Regardless of their intended function or origin, they are organic — some are even alive and possess a low consciousness. These tend to be disturbing, with chattering teeth or large eye that follows the action around it.

The basic effect of most Talismans is to give minor Sundering powers to their wearer, either boosting their Sundering ability or giving them new Aspects that they would not otherwise wield. The former type of Talisman gives a +1 modifier to Sundering rolls. The latter enables the use of one particular Aspect — which is bonded into the Talisman during its forging ritual — at a Skill level of 1. Higher levels are possible, but extremely rare; no one, man or Z'bri, has ever heard of a Talisman carrying an Aspect at more than Level 3.

Talismans can be bonded to a particular owner, making them useless for anyone else. Bonded Talismans can always be tracked by their owner, though their exact location will remain somewhat nebulous. It is rumored that there are human beings — possibly Tribal, possibly not — who bear Z'bri Talismans. Any human attempting to use a Talisman will automatically be stricken with a Taint of the same House as the forger, at the equivalent of 48 hours exposure (requiring intervention, see previous page).

Rituals

The Z'bri perform many complex rituals, a good number of them evolving along with the specific Houses. They are not House-specific for the most part, but certain Houses are acknowledged to have better skill at some than others. Rituals, like Tribal and Fallen ritual Synthesis (**Tribe 8 Rulebook** p. 174), take a varying amount of time, but always require intense concentration on the part of the participants. Any break in that concentration can have unforeseen (and usually unpleasant) results.

There are a great number of rituals performed by the Z'bri. Some of the more common examples are listed below.

The Chaining ritual is probably the best known of all Z'bri rituals, if only because its victims are encountered so often by the Tribes. It requires two victims and a number of hours (or often days) to perform, draining the ritualist of a good deal of energy. This ritual can only be performed by those Melanis with the Chaining Aspect.

Most Z'bri are sedentary. They do not like to move, and prefer to consolidate their holdings in one location. When they do need to change residence, however (either as a result of conflict, alliance or gain in position), they use a "pied piper" ritual to draw their Serfs to them and facilitate the changeover. This ritual calls all of the serfs bonded to the Z'bri towards the Z'bri's new location, eliminating the need for mass transports. This ritual is available to all Z'bri and is widely used. This ritual can also be used as a version of a "call to arms," drawing all humans loyal to a Z'bri to an area to aid him in battle or another vital endeavour.

Z'bri society is by no means a unified one, and conflicts and alliances are common. As a result, ownership of the human chattel changes over time, a fact which led to the highly elaborate ritual ceremony which bonds serfs to a new overlord. This ritual can also be used when a prized serf is given as a gift, and is not intended to be used for immediate consumption. There are two versions of this ritual, one intended as a mass group-bonding, something akin to a brand, which also imparts a vague sense of loyalty to the new owner. This marks the serf as belonging to a specific House or Lord, and limits the ability of 'poachers.' The second version is a very personal bonding, used on Chosen Serfs, which ensures not only perfect loyalty, but that the serf's soul will return to the possession of that specific Z'bri until something happens to sever that bond.

The intricacy of the ritual for Talisman creation depends entirely on the complexity and power of the Talisman being created and the ability of the caster. A low-power Lord may spend an entire month on a basic Sundering-aid talisman, while the Baron could easily create an Aspect-talisman within a day or two. There are rumors (but then, there are always rumors) of a sect of Melanis who have been hidden away in the depths of the H'l Kar for years, attempting to bind all the Aspects into one Talisman. If such a thing were true, it would give its wearer power over even the Baron, but would surely immolate any who dared to touch it, human or Z'bri, not trained in its specific use.

Atmospheres

Atmosphere is a subconscious, continual use of Sundering that affects those within the Z'bri's close proximity. Atmosphere reflects the creature's House affiliation and is as much a part of their existence as breathing is to humans. The Atmosphere of a Z'bri is felt whenever one is present, but it also extends to the immediate location around it (filling a small building, for example). The effect is cumulative, and the Atmosphere of several Z'bri will be much more distinctly felt when they are within close proximity to each other.

Sangis Atmosphere

The Sangis are perversions of nature, attracted to all that is corrupted and taboo. Their shapes, while alluring and sometimes even beautiful, are travesties of nature. They take pleasure in corrupting honorable traditions and deeds into twisted parodies of themselves. Around the Sangis one cannot help feeling attracted to all that is perverse and forbidden. The seed of corruption lies within all, most of the time deeply buried, but the Sangis' mere presence is often enough to draw it out in to the open.

The first hint of the presence of a Sangis nearby is often a yearning of some sort, almost always based on an intimate need or desire of the character. If they find someone attractive, the target of their affection will suddenly seem more desirable; if they have a favorite food or drink, they will suddenly wish for it. As the Sangis draws closer, the desires become stronger and often more than one will begin to grow concurrently. Once in the immediate presence of the creature, the desires are strong, nagging incessantly at the mind. Constant impulses to reach and simply take what's needed must be constantly repressed, and victims often feel varying degrees of sexual arousal.

Those in the presence of the Sangis must roll their PSY Attribute against a Threshold of 3. If the roll succeeds then the Player Character is unaffected, though she will still feel the effect to a certain degree. If the roll fails, the character must choose one need that she must fulfill within the next 24 hours. The bigger the MoF the more perverse and twisted the desire must be. If conflict arises, the Weaver has the final say over what desire is appropriate in the situation.

Sangis Atmosphere Effect

MoF	Effect
1	Minor yearning
2	Minor need
3	Strong yearning
4	Strong need
5	Compulsive need
6	Compulsive behavior, may require strong physical restraints to halt.

Flemis Atmosphere

Those encountering the Flemis have described the eerie power they seem to have to drain the will of those nearby, even suppressing the powerful instinct of self-preservation. In the presence of the Flemis, one is almost over taken by their insect-like existence, where the individual becomes lost in the masses. Flemis seem to draw the victim's mind in, sharing his thoughts and hidden desires. Under the most extreme cases, one can no more hurt a Flemis than he could cut off his own arm.

Approaching a Flemis is a disturbing experience for the unwary. One can feel a presence nearby, but there is no one around. One can hear voices chattering in the distance, but the silence is oppressive. By the time one is in presence of the bloated creature, the voices are a dull roar in the back of the mind, and shadows seem to flow around the corners of the eyes. Thoughts appear unbidden within the conscious mind and then disappear just as abruptly. A feeling of peace and oblivion, a sort of daydreaming, tries to take over.

Any character attempting to take an action against a Flemis member must first roll an Opposed WIL test against it. The MoF becomes a negative action modifier to that action as the character is frozen in place by the hypnotic presence of the bloated Z'bri. Once the character passes the WIL test, however, she may act normally for the duration of the scene. One test may be made per turn.

Flemis Atmosphere Effect

MoF	Effect
1	Minor hesitation
2	Hesitation and reluctance
3	Strong reluctance to take action
4	Finds it difficult to take any action not willed by the Flemis
5	Mind shared with the Collective
6	Temporarily lost in the Flemis Collective

Koleris Atmosphere

The Koleris are known for the high intensity of their emotions, especially the more violent and destructive ones. Even the slightest insult is enough to warrant a blood bath in the presence of a Koleris. Though they restrain themselves with complex codes of conducts to conform and fit within Z'bri society, they exude anger and rage to a point where it becomes easily infectious.

Koleris are easy to feel, even from a distance. People become more volatile, more easily annoyed. The air grows warmer, even in the midst of winter, though it is no less cold outside. As the Koleris draws closer, the impulses become stronger, the need to examine consequences forgotten. Skin becomes flushed, respiration faster. Once in the presence of the creature, the victim's emotions run wild, constantly throwing the mind off balance. Strong impulses to rend flesh and bathe in blood must be constantly repressed and kept under check.

When a character first comes into contact with a Koleris, she must roll her PSY Attribute against a Threshold of 4. If the roll fails, then the character will automatically act out an impulse and any non-violent action incurs a -1 penalty. If the roll is a Fumble, the character is overtaken by the boiling emotions of the alien creature and immediately attacks the closest living being with savage fury, regardless of friend or foe.

Koleris Atmosphere Effect

MoF	Effect
1	Impulsive comments, often offensive
2	Offensive comments
3	Belligerent
4	Openly rage and rant
5	Will start a fight at the first opportunity
6	Will find any excuse to kill or destroy the closest living being or object

Melanis Atmosphere

Knowledge and memories are the staples of the Melanis. So strong is their thirst for new information that they draw images and memories from the people and things around them without even attempting to do so. Some Melanis have tried to profit from this and use the Old Arts (what they remember of them, at any rate) to reap knowledge from the minds of others while in their presence.

Melanis Atmosphere is probably the most insidious of the lot. Many of its effects, especially from a distance, are easily dismissed as normal fatigue and distraction. Once the creature is nearer, though, a victim can feel her thoughts swirling, trying to vanish and disappear. The victim becomes easily confused, and great concentration must be exerted to maintain a grip on the moment.

For every encounter with a Melanis, the Player must roll her KNO Attribute against a Threshold of 3. If the roll fails, the character losses one memory or piece of information per MoF. These memories are lost for a couple of days, or completely lost if the roll fumbles. The lost memories are at the Weaver's discretion (suggestions are found in the table below).

Melanis Atmosphere Effect

MoF	Effect
1	Irrelevant minor fact forgotten (yesterday's lunch)
2	Minor fact forgotten (friend's father's name, birthdate)
3	Personal fact forgotten (name, Tribe)
4	Important personal fact forgotten (banishment)
5	Past and reason for being here forgotten
6	Total (but temporary) amnesia

Joh'an Atmosphere

Atmosphere is part of the Z'bri's very presence in this world, and being exiled from their kind does not change that fact. All Joh'an retain the Atmosphere effect of their House.

Their presence so near human settlements have forced them to develop a new trick, however. Though Atmosphere is an involuntary Sundering effect, it can be withheld with an effort of the conscious mind, much like one can block respiration for a few moments. The practice is unpleasant for the Z'bri, and they will use it only when necessary.

If a WIL Attribute or Sundering Skill (whichever is the lowest) test versus a Threshold of 5 succeeds, the Z'bri can completely suppress its Atmosphere for a number of hours equal to the Margin of Success. If the dice roll is tied, all Atmosphere effects for the next hour are cut by half.

Hunter Atmosphere

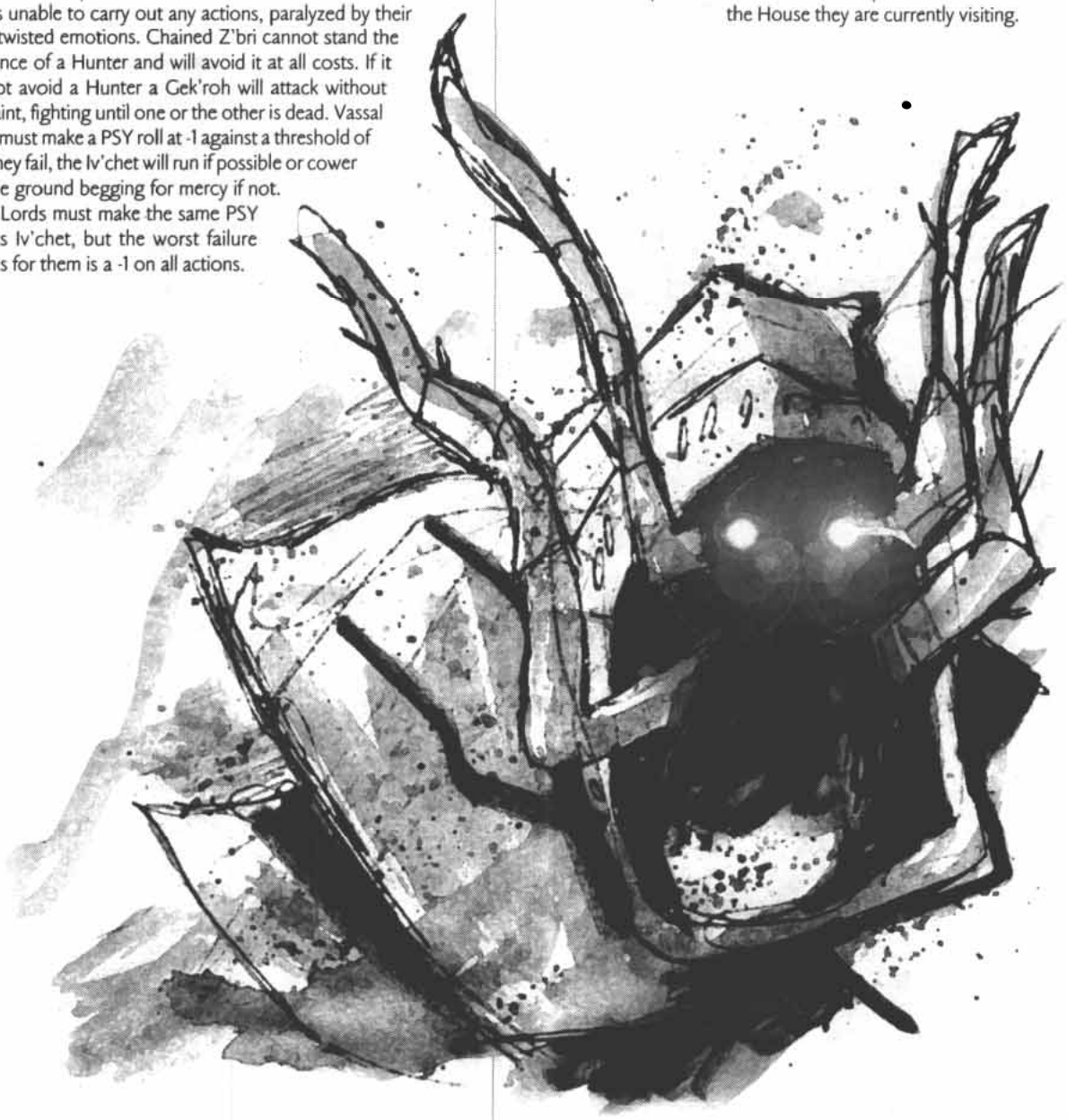
While Hunters do not actively use Sundering, they are still Z'bri. This means they cannot avoid the Atmosphere that their nature unconsciously creates. In the presence of a Hunter feelings of guilt and sorrow are overwhelming. Those in the presence of a Hunter need to make PSY rolls against a Threshold of 5, modified at the Weaver's discretion to mesh with a Player's past actions. Grief or guilt over a past crime afflicts those who fail. They suffer a -1 on all actions while accompanied by the Hunter. Yet the Hunters are also about redemption, and Player Characters who make true restitution for their crime will be at +1 for the remainder of that session.

The Hunter Atmosphere has a particularly strong effect on Serfs and other Z'bri, the terrible nature of the former making them all the more susceptible. Serfs who fail their PSY roll find themselves unable to carry out any actions, paralyzed by their own twisted emotions. Chained Z'bri cannot stand the presence of a Hunter and will avoid it at all costs. If it cannot avoid a Hunter a Gek'roh will attack without restraint, fighting until one or the other is dead. Vassal Z'bri must make a PSY roll at -1 against a threshold of 3. If they fail, the Iv'chet will run if possible or cower on the ground begging for mercy if not. Z'bri Lords must make the same PSY roll as Iv'chet, but the worst failure means for them is a -1 on all actions.

Disguise

The last use of Synthesis that the Hunters have become adept at is disguise. They have learned how to conceal their form and the unnatural atmosphere that constantly surrounds them so they can move about undetected. They have been forced to become so as a matter of survival, as they are called to travel through human and Z'bri societies on a regular basis.

Whether using it to appear as humans, Z'bri or to make themselves appear more impressive and intimidating, the Hunters have a +2 on all Appearance-related uses of Synthesis. They generally wear a form-concealing cloak inscribed with mystical runes and patterns, and concentrate their efforts into shaping a human face and eliminating their Atmosphere as much as possible. They do the same among the Z'bri, though they adapt their face to emulate the preferred form of the House they are currently visiting.



Chapter eight: Weaver Resources

Take me to the edge of darkness
Lead me on the hallowed path
Walk with me through dark'ning shadows
Bind me with the ancient craft

Weave your world of start'ling wonder
Aid me when I falter, fall,
Through this life of weeping sorrow,
Answer my beseeching call
- To the Lady of The Dance

Weaving the Z'bri

The Z'bri were once part of the endless cycle of life, the ethereal and sublime beings the tribes' ancestors dreamt of and prayed to in the years before the End Times. Since they were trapped in an earthly prison of their own making, the Z'bri have become twisted parodies of their once glorious nature, pure souls now turned corrupted and evil. They sulk in shadows and plot against humanity, their sole desire to either leave this reality, or burn it to the ground. At the same time, the Z'bri are not two-dimensional monsters without dreams or goals. Yes, they are driven by twisted desires and a burning hatred, but underneath still lurks that ephemeral essence that makes them wondrous and angelic creatures. There is a reason why the ancients happily gave themselves to the Z'bri.

The Z'bri revel in their aura of danger and mystery, and in the fear and terror they cause with their presence alone. They understand that the fear of the unknown is more powerful than anything they can create, and they manipulate that human failing to the utmost. They see the tribes, and Vimary for that matter, as theirs. They have granted the tribes freedom, but they can take it away at a moment's notice. Unfortunately, even under the solitary leadership of the Baron, most Z'bri are divided. Some of the younger, ambitious Lords seized the opportunity to rise in power by betraying their masters, while others skulk in silence, harboring a desperate hatred towards the blasphemies called the Fatimas and their chosen people.

The Present

The current détente with the tribes has created some infighting between the four houses of the Z'bri. The Koleris have begun secret dealings with squat warlords, arming and training them, hoping to bring war to the tribes without overtly breaking the peace. Count Lothar has been seen dealing with Count Valk of Melanis, while his minions quietly annex more and more unclaimed land.

The Sangis household has been threatening civil war, something the Baron desperately wants to keep secret. Young Sangis have been plotting behind the scene to increase their personal power and extend their influence over ever larger circles, and they are proving harder to control every day. Through debts, honor or outright threats, the Baron has kept them in line; the question is, how long can he continue to do so?

Some Z'bri have defected, and spend their time hunting down their fellows. These Hunters are reviled among their fellows and are considered abominations by both the Z'bri Houses and the tribes. Some humans who have met them offer them a grudging respect and leave them alone, but all maintain a healthy skepticism toward the beasts that would slay their own.

The Flemis have begun using their skills as infiltrators and spies to plant informants in the other households and in the tribes. What they intend to do with the information they gather is anyone's guess, but will surely be used to advance the plans of the Hive.

Finally, the Melanis are said to be trafficking with a small cabal of Keepers, not to mention slowly forcing every other house into debt to the sly Shadow-Cloaked. These Melanis are interested in the technology of the Keepers, while the Keepers hope to use the Z'bri magics to find a way to combine flesh and machine.

Understanding the Beast

The Z'bri are the perfect villains of **Tribe 8**. While they are beasts of darkness and despair, sublime creatures of darkness and horror, there is also much more to them than simply bestial aggression. The Z'bri are a difficult foe to weave properly, and it is very tempting to take shortcuts at times. It is easy to fall to stereotypes and make all of the beasts into powerful, sadistic and bloodthirsty combat machines, while they are in fact much more complex than that base concept.

Player encounters with true Z'bri should be rare, eerie and mysterious, disturbing and alien, and at the same time uncannily familiar. We've all been afraid of the dark that presses in on us, usually because of the visions our imaginations project into that impenetrable netherworld inside our closets, or in dark forests and alleyways. The Z'bri are those waking nightmares incarnate.

Use elements from your own (and your Players') fears and nightmares when describing the Z'bri and their homes. Feel free to bring in elements and inspirations from other sources; do not let yourself be confined by the game text. If you want your Z'bri to be more biblical, apocalyptic angels and demons fallen from grace, then do so. If you would rather have them be more along the lines of aliens from outer space, or weirdling beings eons of years old, then feel free. More than anything else in **Tribe 8**, the Z'bri are yours to play with, yours to mold into whatever form best fits your definition of absolute terror. However, never let them become easily accessible or commonplace, even in a Cycle centered around Z'bri hunting. Once they lose their sense of mystery they become cheap Hollywood creatures that wouldn't even scare a young child.

It should be unnecessary to mention that Z'bri should never be allowed to be used as Player Characters.

House Flemis

The silent Flemis are unique within the world of Tribe 8. They are a thousand souls in a thousand bodies, merging, combining and splitting apart in almost random combinations. To be many is to be one; to face one Flemis is to face them all.

Weaving the Flemis

By incorporating the Flemis into a Cycle, you are taking on the seemingly difficult task of calmly portraying a vast being consisting of a million minds. Fortunately, this does not have to be as difficult as it sounds! By remembering some common aspects of the Flemis, Weaving the Collective should be only as tough as running the rest of the Cycle.

Telepathy: realizing the telepathic ability of the Flemis is a good beginning to unnerving your players. When speaking as a Flemis, do not simply talk aloud with the Players' understanding that they are "hearing" the speech in their minds. Try inserting feelings and emotions into their characters, or even allowing a sharing of the Characters' thoughts with each other. If the Flemis is angry, let the players know their characters are getting agitated. If one Character is jealous of another's love interest, have those feelings extend into the rest of the Player Circle; at the end of the day, each Character is tainted with an unspoken jealousy.

One Mind: all Flemis are one, and any communication or actions should reflect this. Whenever you speak as a Flemis never say "I." Always use "We" or "Ult'maht . . . Skkr . . . " If the characters encounter a Flemis serf or an Z'bri exile, try using a style similar to the narrative found in the Flemis chapter, where the distinctions between the self and the Collective are hazy and often confused.

Symbolism: never let your players forget they are in the presence of the Flemis. Use symbolism to enforce the Collective and the House's goals. When in Flemis territory, or before an encounter, try foreshadowing with the presence of an anthill or a wasps' nest. Perhaps the characters notice their surroundings becoming less distinct and more bland, or their horses' hooves begin to strike the ground in perfect unison. They pass the ruins of what was once a magnificent line of statues, now rusting away and looking all alike. Incidents such as these will put your players on edge without pointing at a direct threat, supporting the strangeness of the Flemis.

Manipulation: directing all of Vimary from behind the scenes, the Flemis should cause fear in even the bravest character. Instead of face-to-face encounters, let the Players think others are the major influence, only to reveal the workings of House Flemis later on. Drop subtle evidence of Flemis involvement, like some of the symbolism above, and see if the Players figure it out.

Themes

Your decision on a theme for the cycle, or even a single session, is important. **Tribe 8** is a game of symbols and atmosphere, and following a common idea throughout the adventure is an excellent way to support this.

Individual Freedom: you can horrify your players with House Flemis' nearly complete lack of freedom. This holds especially true for the Fallen, whose individuality led them to the Eighth Tribe. Pitting the characters against the massive Collective will only reinforce their ideals of freedom. If the characters are Tribals, you could play with the idea that the characters are only as free as the Flemis, since thoughts against the Fatimas lead to exile, just as thoughts against the Collective lead to re-absorption. Perhaps a Tribal Player Circle encountering the Flemis could begin the path to the Fallen!

Unity: for any player circle there is a definite benefit to cooperation. Many groups, especially Joanites, band together as a fervent whole. What if the Player Characters joined a tight-knit band of Fallen, a band that becomes increasingly extreme — so that to contradict their goals could possibly mean death? The only way the PCs can bring sense to the group could be to confront the Flemis, using their horrid unity as a mirror to the band's fanaticism.

Ranks and Hierarchy

Through their lack of individuality, the Flemis become the most unique of the Z'bri, and thus the idea of Iv'chets and Lords seems unfitting. Each tier of Flemis receives a brief mention below along with notes concerning statistics. In addition, two new Flemis powers of Sundering are provided in the system chapter (see p. 91) to further enhance the unnerving edge of the cancerous House.

Architects

These Flemis construct many of the Z'bri buildings, including those of the other Houses. Immense organic machinery and other items are also produced, ever utilitarian and without any artistic qualities. While the Collective governs the broad strokes of Flemis architecture, occasional glimmers of individuality can appear. The Melanis are particularly interested in this, and many study Flemis creations hoping to find exploitable features in the oppressive Hive Mind.

Architects tend to have high PER, from +1 to +3, and even a slight hint of CRE at +1. Their bulk often increases as if to reflect the massive buildings they create, and most Architects have a BLD of at least +4.

Messengers

Messengers are the most varied of the tiers, acting in any needed role from couriers to soldiers. As such, their numbers hold the most possibilities for individuality. Messengers are habitually recycled through the Collective to cleanse their minds.

Attributes for members of this tier are as varied as their positions, though most have at least an AGI +1. Skills include whatever the Flemis specializes in, though combat skills seem to be prevalent among all Messengers.

Breeders

Sluggish and nearly mindless, Breeders are closest to the unanimity of the Collective. Unfortunately, a spark of individuality in each Flemis keeps the entire House from stagnation, so the Breeders are treated poorly not only by other Flemis but the Collective itself. These Z'bri perform the needed tasks of keeping the Serfs multiplying and working, tending to their butchering if necessary.

Breeder attributes are typically at the low-end, though their bull-headedness often grants a WIL +1 or +2.

House Sangis

The House of Sangis was created by those Z'bri who first heard the calling of the flesh from their stale lives beyond the fold. Lust drew them to this world, where they seduced, reveled and destroyed. The Sangis have grown and evolved since this time, both through the camps and under the Baron's current rule, but their roots in the basest desires of the flesh have remained powerfully motivating and stabilizing.

Of all the Houses, the Sangis are most comfortable in their earthly bodies. They have learnt much from their exploration of the sensations of the flesh. This knowledge has not only come from their perpetual search for different physical pleasures, but also from the spiritual, if momentary, release they constantly receive whilst indulging their desires. The constancy of their pursuit for and the frequency of their fulfillment give the Sangis a distinct and infectious vibrancy amongst the Z'bri. This confident dynamism helps them retain their peak position amongst the Z'bri Houses.

Weaving the Sangis

The Sangis are decadent beasts of pleasure and pain. Bringing them into a Cycle means bringing your Players face to face with amorality, decadence and sheer abandonment of any sort of restraint. The Sangis are beautiful and repugnant at the same time, and portraying that antagonistic combination can be difficult even for skilled Weavers.

Lust: the need to reproduce is one of the most powerful compulsions experienced by all living beings, and the Sangis have incorporated it to the core of their way of life. Even the ugliest of Sangis (by human standards, of course) will exude an aura of raw sexuality that is difficult to ignore. Try to depict a new Sangis using enticing and even romantic terms and ignoring any true physical description until last, where you can brutally offer a counterpoint with some gross physical detail.

Sensation: the Sangis are addicted to sensation and are always looking for new things to experience. As a result, they prefer to toy with their prey, humans or otherwise, rather than destroy them: killing is so. . . *passé*. Watching the suffering of the prey, its futile attempts to escape, the ingenious ways it devises to slash back at its tormentors, these are somuch more exciting.

Apathy: the Sangis find it difficult to maintain a high level of stimulation. As a result, they often fall into a kind of apathy which drives them to abandon the daily mundanities of their lives in favor of experiments and deep contemplation on how to reach ever-higher levels of pleasure and pain. This occurs particularly often with the older Sangis, who remember well the earlier days of their existence in this universe.

Corruption: the Sangis are masters of corruption and subtlety, touching a person's mind slowly and with tenderness, to break down the barriers they have constructed around their innermost and darkest desires. The Sangis are eternally patient when it comes to a project like this, choosing to slowly mold a human to fit their desires over time, rather than ripping them to shreds like the Koleris. A child is the best material for this form of rape, the Sangis entering her forming mind and spreading his taint.

Themes

A few basic themes show themselves in storylines featuring the Sangis. These can be used as the basic themes for your entire cycle, or even show up briefly for one session. Whichever way you use them, do not forget the power that raw emotion can have on your Players and their characters.

Power: the Sangis are fascinated with the Fallen, for the very fact that they are free from the outside constraints of the Fatimas. This grasping for freedom excites many of the Sangis, and they take great pleasure in bending the freed Outcasts to their own will. The possession of Porelyn (see **Children of Lilith**, p. 91) is but one example of something that happens much more frequently than anyone wants to admit.

Desire: the Sangis are beings of lust and desire, their needs driving them onwards to ever-greater heights of decadence. Their overriding compulsion for sensation has led to distraction, with many of the courtiers focusing solely on the moment and stabilizing their current positions, leaving the other houses and lesser Iv'chets to plot and scheme in peace. Even the Baron has been known to succumb to this ennui, joining the older Sangis in their pursuits. The younger, rasher members of the house tend to be more wary, and in recent times have been stepping away from the court and its orgiastic pleasures, turning their attentions to the tensions brewing elsewhere.

Intrigue: the Sangis' need for power extends throughout their society, and they prefer to achieve their goals through guile rather than overt action, regardless of their position within Hl'kar. The Baron rules over all of the Z'bri, but he is still of the Sangis at heart. While the rumblings within.his house have been distracting him in recent times, he is still the spider in the middle of the web, pulling at the strings. Should the Players run into him or one of his own, they will invariably end up doing exactly as he wishes them to do, be they aware of it or not.

Vogue: "vain" would be a qualifier that could be applied to almost every Sangis. To many of them, the latest fashions are more important than inter-House politics or the outside world. They will spend hours directing serfs creating a new flesh dress for the next social affair, with nary a thought for the events that could transpire there.

Vogue also represents a Z'bri's standing in Sangis affairs. Subtleties of interrelations are consider crucial in all dealings, regardless of whom is being delt with. To act rashly or boldly is left to Koleris and others who lack social graces. To act in such way is to degrade oneself in Sangis society, dropping the tactless and rude creature down in the pecking order. All Sangis thus take great precautions (and great pleasure) in making things happen their way without ever appearing to do anything.

Corruption of the Tribes: the Sangis are fascinated by the Tribes, and they spend countless hours in subtle efforts to infiltrate and corrupt them all, especially the eighth. The game is to achieve the desired result without ever appearing to act directly. End examples of Sangis manipulations can be as diverse as decadent Tera Sheban Judges, Fallen abusing themselves to excess in Ile Perdue, or loathing-filled Magdalite overindulgence.

Sangis sometimes concentrate on just one individual, trying to awaken compulsions hidden deep within the soul. The individual might not even notice at first how his dreams are changing, or how she always seems to be around the object of her temptation. The horror lies in the growing desire bought about by a character's gradual corruption: it is easy to blame evil influence for these desires, but the horror comes in recognizing that the darkness is as much a part of the person as it is of the manipulator himself.

Subgroups

In the aftermath of Tibor's defeat Z'bri society slipped into a Feudal hierarchy, a natural outgrowth of their desire for slaves and followers. At the very top of the heap is the Baron, an old Sangis who has ruled the Z'bri since Tibor's death. He is the undisputed lord of the Ziggurat, and has become extremely adept at playing the various Houses against each other, while still maintaining control.

Below him is each House's Prince, and it is Prince Fa'Cul who rules the Sangis. He presides over a Senate that meets regularly. The relationship between the Prince and the Baron has always been rocky and tumultuous, and intrigue is common. Under the Prince rest a hierarchy of Lords and Iv'chets, with precedence and power determined by deadly intrigue and back-stabbing.

These middle ranks of the Lords include Knights, Dukes, Counts and magistrates. Knights usually belong to one of the Orders of the Phalanx, and ride with the Koleris warriors into battle when needed. Dukes are responsible for a number of Serf Hamlets that spread over a bordered area. Counts are simply Dukes who belong to the Prince's entourage. The Sangis have a disproportionate number of Dukes, many of whom were granted the title without land or Serfs as favors from the Baron.

The Baron keeps an entourage about him at all times, filled with synchophants and adulators. His creatures flatter and scheme, each trying to claim and keep the place of favorite. The entourage contains Sangis from all branches of the House, including Talons, Sirens and Skincrafters, along with the Baron's current lovers and the Prince of the House himself. The Baron changes favorites and lovers frequently, using the turmoil thus created to weave his own plans in comfort behind the scenes.

Members of the entourage tend to have high APP, from +2 to +4, and good INF. They have numerous social skills, usually at a very high level. The Baron has been known to play with the cruder members of his house for a while, but they never hold his attention for very long.

House Koleris

Rage and anger, fury incarnate, the Koleris are violent and aggressive. They express themselves through self-mutilation, giving the gift of pain as a high honor. Their hatred for all life is kept firmly in check by their devotion to ancient traditions and laws, but sooner or later emotion will always win out over reason. Of all the Z'bri Houses the Koleris have nothing but burning hatred of the tribes and delight in causing them as much agony as possible.

Weaving the Koleris

Of all the Z'bri trapped on Earth after the closing of the Fold, it is the Koleris who suffer worst in their prisons of flesh and bone. While other Z'bri sated their lust for the Seed in orgies of physical sensation, the Koleris found epiphany in destruction, the wild instant of agony and desperation as a living body was torn apart. The slaughter in the camps was like a terrible, whirling dance as Koleris spirits leapt from body to body, killing and being killed in turn, locked in a lover's embrace with death.

The closing of the Fold changed all that. Now, a Koleris whose body is destroyed is lost forever, unless a mighty Lord is present to transfer the spirit into a new vessel. This alone is agonizing, robbing the Koleris of truly experiencing the Seed. Worse yet, however, is the Baron's truce with the Tribes, forbidding the Koleris from venting their fury at the death of great Tibor. The warrior Z'bri are like great, starving beasts, chained by the Baron's authority while a feast of raw, red meat is set just out of reach. In the wastes of the Slaughterfields the Koleris circle one another warily, desperate with hunger for the Seed. A single misstep can set off a frenzy of slaughter, with the vanquished forever gone and the victor's hunger merely sharpened for more.

The closing of the Fold and the Baron's truce have left the Koleris in an intolerable position. They cannot sate their needs amongst themselves or in battle against the Tribes. In the past, the Baron sent prisoners, serfs, and the occasional Chained Z'bri into the Slaughterfields to provide some measure of bloodshed for the Koleris, but lately these gifts have become increasingly rare. It is only a matter of time before the warrior Z'bri are unable to contain their hunger. Whether they will turn upon one another and consume themselves in an orgy of carnage, or unleash their fury on the Tribes— or their fellow Z'bri — only time will tell.

Sliding Along the Razor's Edge

The Koleris have often been described as beings of murderous fury barely held in check. This is, in fact, literally true. Where a Sangis might keep serfs close at hand to sate its need for pleasure and pain, the Koleris must instead resort to self-mutilation and howling rage. They are torn between the desire to abandon themselves to their fury and the need to remain in control, lest they become prey. A Z'bri that loses its control and lashes out wildly at its fellows forfeits its status and opens itself to delicious but often fatal retribution. Thus nearly all Iv'chet Koleris constantly strain their Equilibrium to the utmost, pushing as close as they can to the raw, primal essence of the Seed within themselves.

When Koleris meet and interact, it is always a careful dance of custom and protocol, each side seeking to force the other over the edge. A momentary loss of control would force the Koleris in question to provide wounds or serfs to the "victor." The giving and taking of injury is the basis for interaction and status among the Koleris. Low-status Koleris must offer wounds to those of higher status, allowing their superiors to taste pain and flowing blood, while the lesser can take little pleasure in a single, unresisted swipe of blade or talon. In cases of great disparity of rank (such as an Iv'chet approaching a great Lord or Captain), or if a loss of control is especially great, the Koleris in question must forfeit a gift of serfs for the victor to slaughter at his pleasure.

Worst of all, however, is when a Koleris loses its Equilibrium entirely and Chains himself with its own rage. (This is not to be confused with the formal Chaining rituals of the Melanis — see the **Tribe 8 Rulebook**, p. 179 for rules on the Sundering System and the consequences of Z'bri losing Equilibrium.) A Koleris that Chains itself forfeits its status, indeed, its very existence, becoming prey to be hunted and killed.

Powerful Koleris Lords and the Captains of the many Orders are very different from their Iv'chet vassals, having large herds of serfs and retaining their ability to leap from body to body, sating their needs much as they did during the time of the Camps. This gives them an iron hold over the Iv'chet, ensuring loyalty with awards of flesh or the promise of reincarnation into another vessel in times of battle. Koleris Lords don't cling to their rage as desperately as the Iv'chet, but instead savor it as it was truly meant to be.

Iron Bonds of Ancient Custom

Because the Koleris find the seed in fleeting instants of violent death, many different philosophies and methods devoted to the specific act of killing have spawned numerous customs and rituals, some dating back to well before the opening of the Fold. These different paths to the Seed formed the foundations for the many Koleris Orders, and these traditions help the warrior Z'bri hold onto their identity in the face of their overwhelming hunger. Though each order has its own litany of customs to follow, there are three ancient tenets expected of all warrior Z'bri: forsake no oaths, respect and obey the mighty and let no blood go unspilled. The Baron and the Koleris Lords use the first two tenets to hold the Serpentine Shadow in check, regardless of the conflict this causes with the third tenet. As this paradoxical conflict wears away at the minds of the Iv'chet, the Koleris hold fiercely to their traditions when all thought and reason has been lost.

Most of the current Koleris Orders have their roots in the time of the Camps, or even earlier, in some cases. As their thwarted rage wears at their reason, many details of these ancient traditions risk being lost or corrupted. The Melanis, who have long walked in the Koleris killing fields to release those Koleris who Chain themselves in war, also maintain records of the customs of the warrior Z'bri, giving the Koleris a touchstone to what they once had been. So far, the Melanis have named no price for this service, but the Koleris acknowledge their debt to the monks, and it has caused some concern in the courts of the Baron.

Wearing the Scars of Status

The Koleris exist within a strict, self-imposed hierarchy that is determined by fighting skill and physical power alone. Koleris within an Order constantly seek to demonstrate their skills in serf raids against rivals, swelling their own herds and enticing Koleris of lesser stature to join them in forming a pride. Prides exist to protect the prideleader's serfs and bolster his reputation. Within the pride there is constant jockeying for status, as higher-status pridemembers have larger claims on the pride's herd. Duels among pridemembers are an almost daily event. On a larger scale, prideleaders within an Order determine their status based on the relative size and power of their pride, and the status of an Order depends on the size and effectiveness of its prides. As a result, a shift in power even at the pride level can sometimes send ripples that can be felt as far as the Ziggurat, and vice versa. Koleris Lords at court jockey for status in Prince K'ark'oom's retinue as fiercely as any lowly pride member, each seeking to undermine the rest. The ambitions of the Lords are played out on the Slaughterfields, as prides are sent into rival lands to raid and destroy. Occasionally, as with the Flemis and their campaign against the rebels in Abonom, a Koleris Lord will seek to boost his status by gaining favors or alliances with members of other Houses, dispatching prides to fight someone else's battles. The Order of the Leviathan has had great success with this tactic, gaining considerable status in a short time by fighting for the Flemis.

Koleris Iv'chet wear their status on their skins, displaying the scars of countless battles and Blood Gifts from lesser Koleris. Some of the most influential warriors in the Slaughterfields have their hide hanging in tatters from countless exquisite wounds.

Tides of Rebellion

There are signs that the uneasy balance in the Slaughterfields is becoming increasingly precarious. Low-status Koleris, unable to claim serfs to sate their passions and teetering on the brink of madness, have turned against their masters in open rebellion, tearing off their skins and making war on the Tribes in open defiance of the Koleris Lords and the Baron. These fearsome creatures primarily haunt the deep forest of the Duskfall, but a very few have made their way into the desolate reaches of the city, torturing and killing any human they can find and pitting their deadly skills against the Joanites that stalk them.

Most of these Koleris are little more than berserkers, seeking to glut themselves on murder, but others act with purpose. Some go so far as to leave the corpses of their kills amid the wastes of the Slaughterfields, hoping to inflame the other Koleris into throwing off the authority of the Baron and joining in the killing. It is whispered that some of these rebels may even have the support of one or more Koleris Lords.

Themes

When Weaving stories involving the Koleris there are several themes that can be used to create interesting and powerful stories:

Honor: Koleris derive honor from being true to the customs and dictates of their Order, and by following the three great tenets. The warrior Z'bri are always mindful of their honor, because more than anything else it helps anchor their minds against the stresses of their thwarted passions. A Koleris that cannot hold itself to the traditions and expectations of its order is not worthy of status or reward. Though Koleris concepts of honorable behavior would likely horrify a member of the Tribes, in some ways their behavior is no different from their most hated enemies, the Joanites.

Rebellion: the Koleris' vulnerabilities after the Closing have left them pawns at the mercy of the other Houses and even their own Lords. Trapped in a suffocating, rigid existence, it is no wonder that certain desperate Koleris renounce their very identities and rebel against the oppressive rule of their masters. This conflict, ironically, resonates somewhat with the plight of the Fallen, who have broken from the iron grip of the Tribes to make their own destiny.

Hierarchy

In keeping with their purpose as the warriors of the Z'bri and the foundation for the Phalanx, the Z'bri army, House Koleris is organized along military lines with a clearly defined hierarchy.

The Prince

The title of the Prince, currently held by the Koleris K'ark'oom, belongs to the greatest of the Koleris Lords, who also serves as the commander of the Phalanx. The Prince's court is comprised of the Captains of the most powerful Orders and their retinues.

The court's members tend to have high AGI and PER, from +1 to +3, and above average FIT. They also have powerful WIL to maintain their temper under check. They are master of the combat skills, which they have honed to near-perfection over decades of killing and slaughtering.

The Captains

The Koleris Captains are powerful Lords who have won the right to lead a given Order in service to the Phalanx. Just as with the lowliest prides, a Koleris Captain must be constantly vigilant to threats of usurpation from other Lords in its Order.

The Captains have stats similar to the members of the court but are slightly less powerful. They often have increased INF and WIL to be able to lead and control their blood-hungry troops.

The Lords

Every Order in House Koleris is controlled by a number of Lords, who serve their Captains directly and individually command as many prides as their status allows. The Lords form the Captain's staff when the Phalanx marches to war, and lead their prides into battle.

The Prides

The Iv'chet of House Koleris are organized into prides, each prideleader allied to a particular Lord of the House. The pecking order within each pride is subject to change at any time, as the pridemembers constantly test one another's worthiness and ability.

Beyond a specialization in combat skills and a constant rage, there is little to differentiate the members of the Pride from other low-ranking Z'bri.

Melanis

The mysterious Melanis are likely to become the wildcard of any campaign involving the Z'bri. They are secretive, even toward their own kind. Their shapes are frail and delicate, with impossible limbs hidden within elaborate cloaks. They whisper dark knowledge amongst themselves, and appear and disappear almost at will. Their detached attitude hides a deep passion for knowledge for which they are ready to sacrifice anything.

Weaving the Melanis

Paradoxically, the Melanis are perhaps easier to weave than the other Houses. Their secretive manner hides most shortcomings, and inconsistencies in their words or actions can be waved away as part of experiments or the mistakes of imperfect servants. Most of the time, the Players will be dealing with the Melanis through one of their creations.

Constructs: the Melanis are the Z'bri's closest equivalent to engineers and craftsmen, and they have perfected the art of creating tools out of living flesh. Their constructs, biomechanical tools built with bones, muscles, nerve fibers and ligaments rather than cogs or bolts, can be found throughout the lands inhabited by the cloaked creatures. Their eerie functionality echoes the tools of Man and provides a disturbing and alien mirror to the world of the Tribes. Whenever the Player Characters visit a Z'bri outpost, they are likely to see the Melanis' handywork.

Symbiots: the Symbiots are the Melanis' favored servants, created out of dozen of bodies, carefully dissected and rearranged into more efficient forms. Any hapless Tribals will be more likely to encounter these creations than the Melanis themselves, though the latter will never be far, observing the encounter and taking notes. Symbiots act as assistants, companions and guardians to their masters.

Themes

Most of the stories featuring the Melanis will be centered on one of three themes, secrecy, knowledge or debts.

Secrecy: the Melanis are renowned for being obscure and complex, and this should be reflected in the manner in which they are portrayed by the Weaver. They will either be silent and disturbing, or extremely talkative, like cackling mad scientists, but they will rarely surrender information, unless it suits their own purposes. They appear out of nowhere and vanish just as easily.

Knowledge: the drive for knowledge is at the center of the Melanis' core philosophy. They are dutiful students of the Seed, and warriors or courtesans second to that drive. Many spend their days in contemplation, searching for the secret that will allow them to unravel creation and transcend to a higher state and meld Seed and Goddess. In short, the Melanis are seeking the ultimate secrets of the universe, and to them no piece of data is useless.

They are constantly observing, taking measurements and notes, and otherwise probing for answers. They often speak in the interrogative, asking two questions (sometimes rhetorical, often not) for each piece of information they contribute. They pull tools and instruments out of their deep cloaks at the most inopportune moment, using them without ever skipping a beat in the conversation or event at hand.

Debts: the Melanis' many skills are much in demand throughout the Houses, and they are owned many favors in return. They always uphold their part of a bargain, but expect the other party to do the same. No one ever knows when a Melanis will call in a marker, or why, but it is generally to perform some action or retrieve an object that will bring new information as opposed to any overt power.

Orders

Melanis society is divided into monastic Orders, each searching for its own brand of enlightenment. Though all Melanis profess disinterest and apathy when it comes to politics, behind closed doors the Orders are a viper's nest of deceit, jealousy and intrigue. The internal skirmishes of the Orders are deadly, following no rules saves ambition and envy.

Standing among the Orders is based on accomplishment and mystical acumen. Age and experience matter little, only results and discovery bring power and status. For this reason, Melanis are sometimes desperate for some fragment of data that might allow them to complete a cherished theory that will bring them good fortune at the next council, even if this piece of data must be grabbed from a lower Initiate or an imperfect human.

Bek'rx

The Bek'rx are the largest Melanis Order and are thus responsible for many of the myths and legends told about the Melanis. The Order believes the key to all reality is imbedded in the Seed, and that Creation contains the clues needed to tear apart the veil that separates reality into its two spheres. As a result, they are the ones that have formed the Melanis' stereotype of the researcher obsessed with gleaning any new bit of information.

The Bek'rx are feared even by their fellow Z'bri. They constantly need new subjects for their experiments, and they care little of the provenance of their subjects, or their race. Even fellow Z'bri must remain vigilant, though this a secret well guarded by the Order.

The Bek'rx are characterized by high CRE and KNO Attributes, though high levels of INF are also known to occur among the higher ranks of the Order. Skills are typically oriented toward intelligence and knowledge.

V'hen

The reclusive V'hen are among the most secretive of Melanis. They rarely emerge from the territories they control to the north and the east. Among the Melanis, and even the Z'bri in general, the V'hen are brokers of information and knowledge. They are adept at moving in shadows and usually easily elude anyone wishing to keep track of them. It is said that the V'hen visit even the Tribes' territories in their quest to uncover secrets and plots.

Insatiable curiosity is one of the failings of the V'hen. They prowl the night and shadows looking for knowledge and often collect secrets they should not be privy to. It is because of the scholarly, and insidious, V'hen that the Melanis are distrusted by all.

The V'hen are characterized by high KNO Attributes, though high levels of PER are also common. Skills are typically oriented toward intelligence gathering and stealth.

Qh'far

The Qh'far is the smallest of the Grand Orders. They are the warrior-monks of the Melanis, serving both the Council of Deacons and the Prince. The duty of the Qh'far, first and foremost, is the defense and protection of House Melanis — a task all Qh'far are oath-bound to. They are not loyal to a single Z'bri, but to the House as a whole. It is whispered that the V'hen and the Qh'far are actually one Order, and together they form a hidden inquisition.

Though they share the Melanis' physical characteristics, the Qh'far members are of strong build and powerful to behold. Skilled in armed combat, they are masters of mounted warfare, riding specially constructed Symbiots to battle. They ride in small parties of four and have small keeps scattered though the dark wilderness. When not patrolling, the Qh'far practice and meditate.

The Qh'far tend to have high AGI and PER, from +1 to +3, and above average KNO. They are master of the combat skills, among which the ability to ride specially constructed symbiots into battle (use the stats for War Horses, page 190 of the **Tribe 8 Rulebook**, but add a melee weapon or two).

Joh'an

The Skyrealms are Z'bri lairs housed high above the streets in the tallest buildings of the World Before. They were long believed abandoned after the Revolts, and to a certain extent this is true: most of the structures are empty. Some Z'bri, however, have returned to their old homes; known as the Joh'an, they are renegades and victims of devious plots that have managed to escape. Exiled from Z'bri society, they are content to observe the tribes and amuse themselves with petty diversions, though some are plotting their return to the H'l Kar.

Weaving the Joh'an

The Joh'an are probably the easiest Z'bri to bring into a tribal campaign, for they are living right next to the Tribes. There are many reasons why a circle would want to explore one of the towers from the World Before, or why a Z'bri would need to come down from his high perch.

Exile: all Joh'an are exiles from mainstream Z'bri society. Some have chosen to voluntarily distance themselves from the crowd, but most have been forced to flee from their lives after a failed coup or other plot. This makes them bitter and melancholic.

Individualism: the Joh'an are highly individual creatures, even the rare Flemis; no one can predict their motives and goals. This enables the Gamemaster to mold them exactly to his needs and to the campaign at hand. Likewise, their power level can be easily adjusted to fit the circle's strength and resources.

Closeness: the Joh'an are living right next to the Tribes. This makes them more aware of the daily life of the humans than most other Z'bri, and also makes them privy to secrets that certain parties would rather keep under wrap.

Themes

The Joh'an are unique among the Z'bri, choosing to live near humans not bound to them. Instead they choose to make their homes in the Skyrealms above Bazaar, interacting on an almost daily basis with the Tribals and Fallen living and working nearby. The themes brought into play by the Joh'an are unique as well, approaching a Tribal style more so than any other factions or House.

Individual Freedom: the Joh'an understand the pressures of servitude more than any other Z'bri, as they have actively chosen to leave their homes in the H'l Kar to remove themselves from the unending political machinations of both their former superiors and underlings. Many actively acknowledge the Fallen and their travails, finding the free humans fascinating on a number of levels.

Understanding: the Joh'an seek to understand humanity on humanity's own terms, descending from their sky-borne palaces to deal directly with the inhabitants of Bazaar. Many, such as the eloquent K'taalsik, actively seek out interested Tribals and Fallen, to participate in debates and discussions of their philosophies and ideas about the Nation and society as a whole.

Serfs

The Serfs, humans that live within the lower levels of Z'bri society, are the ones that keep their kingdom going. They are the key component for Z'bri feudalism, for it is the number of Serfs each Lord possesses that determine its rank and station. Serfs provide the Z'bri not only with nourishment and entertainment, but also serve to anchor their masters' ephemeral natures. The pain and despair that are part of Serf's daily life allow the Z'bri to exist without contact to their spiritual homeland. The Serfs are both a resource and a commodity.

They toil in the fields planting crops or harvesting bodies, and a few Chosen ones serve as companions, soldiers, bodyguards, assistants or messengers. Life in close proximity to the Z'bri means pain and torment, but the Serfs make a bodily sacrifice in exchange for the salvation of their souls. Their bodies are twisted and shaped, molded to the desires and whims of their masters, but their souls are spared from oblivion and are being reincarnated through the dark magic of the Z'bri.

Weaving the Serfs

Fearlessness: many Serfs have no fear of death. They know they are to be saved from the Sea of the Lost when their current body dies and shaped towards the image of their masters. This lends them the strength to undergo terrible torture and face unmentionable abominations.

Deformities: Serfs are generally easily recognized by the lesions and deformities that mark their flesh. Placed there both by their beast measters and by the hardships the serfs must endure (disease, arduous labor and poorly cared-for injury), the scars and half-healed wounds identify a serf as thoroughly as tattoos do a Tribal.

Themes

Campaigns featuring the Serfs center around a number of themes, each playing a vital role in the world of the Z'bri's slaves. A cycle focussing on a serf village, or even including an encounter with a serf or two, will necessarily feel very different than campaigns using only the Tribals and Fallen. The serfs not only understand the domination of a supernatural master, they openly welcome that domination as the best way to live.

Pain: many Serfs become overwhelmed by despair and torment, for their lives are all too short and painful. They must constantly be reminded that they have a past before their birth and a future after their death. Some Serfs lose their fear of death, but the doubt is always present at the back of their minds.

Slavery: all Serfs belong to their Z'bri Lords. They are property, even currency, a measure of a Lord's status and power, and must rely completely on their masters for protection. While most accept this state of affairs as a simple fact of life, there are those who subconsciously yearn for freedom, like all human beings. They are the ones whose mind snaps at some point and force them to attempt to flee, and they make great Player Characters or plot hooks.

Trust: the Serfs are perhaps the best example of misplaced trust. Despite repeated torture and brutality from their overlords, they continue to venerate them and fulfill their every whim in the trust that they will be rewarded with extended lives, as well as continued existence after death.

Subgroups

While serfs from different Houses have much more in common with each other than with Tribals, Fallen or Squats, they are still subject to the same sort of variation seen within the Z'bri themselves. The serfs owned by each House tend to have different duties as well as styles of living, and their personalities and actions reflect this prejudice.

Soldiers of the Koleris

The Chosen of the Koleris are violent people of rage and passion. Like their masters, they learn the subtleties and intricacies of the Koleris social code, sublimating their rage into the orderly behavior that etiquette demands. They live by the warrior code of their masters.

Some serve as smiths, forging weapons for their masters' use, others are spies or assassins. Still others serve no function in their short lives beyond bearing the brunt of their masters' unleashed rage when it cannot be restrained any longer. The gladiators are allowed to vent their own fury in public combat, fighting grisly battles to the death for their masters' vicarious enjoyment.

The soldiers tend to have good AGI and PER; they also have powerful WIL to maintain their temper under check. They know several combat skills but little else, and are fanatical in battle.

Workers of the Flemis

The Serfs that serve the Flemis scurry like ants, united in purpose and in action. Their Chosen are not actually part of the common mind that the masters of the hive share, but they nevertheless seem well-attuned to their masters' will. These Chosen serve as general-purpose servants to their hive masters. They dig the hamlet's tunnels deeper into the earth, swinging pickaxes and shovels in perfect unison. They carry their enormous masters on great palanquins formed from the bodies of other Serfs. They carry messages to other lords, sometimes singing the message in torturous harmonies. And when their usefulness is expired, they become a meal or find their bodies incorporated into those of their masters.

The workers have high BLD, from +1 to +3, and good FIT. They generally suffer from poor WIL and CRE, as they are dependent on their Z'bri masters for most important decisions.

Lovers of the Sangis

The Chosen of the Sangis are the playthings of their elite masters. Their bodies are like works of art, sculpted by their lords into forms they find pleasing. They are creatures of desire, serving to slake their masters' thirsts while seeking the fulfillment of their own cravings. They are givers of pleasure and pain, and the tortured victims of Sangis enjoyment as well. They are also artisans, shaping and being shaped in order to serve the Sangis idea of beauty.

The Sangis Serfs tend to have high APP and little else, save perhaps a high PSY. They are skilled in the arts of seduction, and generally know at least one craft perfectly.

Novices of the Melanis

The Chosen of the Melanis work beside their masters as assistant and scribes, ensuring that tools are close at hand, helping to restrain unruly subjects and recording the Melanis' findings. Often enough, they serve willingly as subjects for these experiments as well.

The assistants tend to have high KNO and PER, much like their masters. They are among the few Serfs who are literate, being able to read and write the strange cursive script of their Z'bri overlords.

Gek'roh

The Melanis created Chaining when the camps swelled with prisoners. They first empowered Serf hounds, called Mithrops, by tethering the Serfs to animal counterparts. The Melanis continued refining the process, eventually merging two creatures into one form. Melanis monasteries, brimming with monstrosities, competed to prove their menageries superior in both uniqueness and quantity of their creations.

Weaving the Gek'roh

It would be easy to use Gek'roh as simply another powerful monster adversary, but in truth they are much more than that. The fact they are half-Z'bri opens a myriad of possibilities that would be foolish to ignore.

Instinct: Gek'roh are creatures of instinct. Even those that *manage to find part of their consciousness often find themselves* slave to their bestial needs and desires. While the Gek'roh can sometimes control those Instincts for a while, it is still a beast at heart, completely amoral.

Pain: the Chaining process is steeped in brutality. Torture breaks the Z'bri's will and shatters its mind, forcing his subject to desire release. The pain is so great that Chaining becomes a blessing compared to the devouring agony. Both victims have known unfathomable anguish, and in reliving the other's memories, they repeat their own in lurid detail. A Gek'roh lives in constant and unabiding pain, the two halves of the beast desperately striving for release.

Madness: many Chained have not yet escaped the maddening waterfalls pinning them down. Some survive by unleashing the animal rule — judgment through instinct. Others do not fare so well. They tear into their own flesh, ripping out bloody morsels in a furious dance to separate themselves from the forced union of Z'bri and animal. This madness can manifest itself in a number of forms, sometimes subtle. . . and sometimes not.

Themes

Harmony: regardless of whatever truce exists in a Gek'roh's shattered mind, the animal and Z'bri aspects never reach complete harmony. They either allow the animal dominion because its raw emotion is comfortable suffocation, or they embrace the starving violence and revel in oure animal instinct. In either case, they flock to the easiest forms of expression: rage and pain. The fight to achieve harmony between the two halves of their being is a constant struggle.

Evolution: from their encounters with other Chained, some have surmised that the Gek'roh can evolve. Their need for peer association is great: younger Chained attack everything, but the older seek companionship with other Gek'roh or animal breeds. Left to their own devices, they are increasingly reaching an inner harmony and find purpose in shared existence.

Purpose: the pain eventually heals, if only partially. Without anger irrationally blinding them, the Chained look within themselves for purpose. The animal and Z'bri mind draw closer together out of a need for survival; pain is no longer the common thread. The Gek'roh transforms, experiencing ideas alien to the Z'bri (the desire to procreate and understanding nature's balance).

Hunters

Renegades and rebels, the Hunters are traitors to their own kind and abhorred by all other life. They are Z'bri in appearance, but something utterly different in mind and manner. The monsters each have their own distinct personality and presence, and should be used carefully within a cycle. Their levels of power, enabling them to kill their own kind, could easily outbalance a Player Character group as either enemy or ally.

Hunters and the Seven Tribes

The Hunters have little time for the Seven Tribes. They are aware of the deal made between the Fatimas and the Baron to end the war, and they despise the Fatimas because of it. For their part the Fatimas ignore the Hunters as they try to ignore everything else Z'bri. This attitude might end if the Hunters decide that their crusade against their unredeemed brothers may be helped by revealing the Fatimas' duplicity to the Seven Tribes. Paenitere, especially, is aware of the growing Templar push for a crusade, and may decide to help the issue along.

Zelos is usually unapproachable by all, but he once rescued a lost Joanite child from the clutches of a Sangis patrol and returned the boy to his family near Westholm. The mad Hunter and child, now a young templar, still share a strange bond. Quaerere deals through intermediaries and under Synthesis disguise with many of the shadier elements of Vimary society, always collecting information and looking for signs of Z'bri corruption amongst the tribes. Ashash'in keeps an eye on the Magdalite ambassadors sent to the Ziggurat by the tribes, and it his work that allows their messages to return from the H'l Kar.

Hunters and the Fallen

The Hunters are aware of the importance of the Fallen through their contacts with the Guides. Thus they labor to protect the Eighth Tribe from corruption by the Z'bri, while at the same time diverting the Z'bri from the coming threat of Fallen retribution. A number of Hunters, most notably Foris and Paenitere, have dealings with the Jackers, using their Synthesis to disguise their true forms. The aid they provide is mostly in the form of information, but sometimes they will accompany a Jacker cell on a raid to the H'l Kar if the goal is important enough to warrant their presence.

Magos deals with the Doomsayers on occasion, especially Veruka with whom he has found a fellow spirit. The old Doomsayer saw through Magos' Synthesis disguise, and the two now regularly meet upon the River of Dreams.

Hunters and the Z'bri

The Baron and other Z'bri are aware of the Hunters. The Baron regards them more as a nuisance than a real threat, so while he has placed a substantial reward on each of their heads, the Baron does not bother himself greatly with their activities. The Melanis differ with the Baron on the danger posed by the Hunters, and deliberately pursue them. In general the Melanis are aware that the purpose of the Hunters is not to destroy them so much as prevent them from destroying the humans before they are too powerful for the Z'bri to resist. Count Nemerath of the Melanis is also aware that Magos specifically seeks his destruction and recovery of the great artifact he conceals. Eth'ian of the Melanis and his allies have also run into the Hunters in their quest to reopen the fold. Two of the Cabal's membership have died so far, one untraceably in his room in the Melanis caves, another torn to pieces as he traveled to the Ziggurat. In turn the Cabal seek not just to prevent the destruction of their plans but to also capture a Hunter to learn what they know of the closing of the Fold, mistakenly thinking them connected to the Openers.

Hunter Synthesis

Unlike other Z'bri, the Hunters do not use Sundering, as the pleasure and destruction that Sundering brings are anathema to them. Instead the Hunters have returned to Synthesis, manipulating that from which they came. In many ways, their present skills echoes the Old Arts.

The one exception is Magos, who pursues knowledge of Sundering to better combat his unredeemed brothers. The Hunters, because of their unique nature, require no rituals or trances to wield Synthesis. Other than lacking the human restrictions, the Hunters use Conjunctional Synthesis as explained in the **Tribe 8 Rulebook** on page 165.

Hunter uses of Synthesis have an unearthly feeling about them, though it is much different from the alien wrongness exuded by their brethren. Anyone nearby can feel it, though they likely won't be able to explain their feelings. Direct use of powerful Synthesis effect by a Hunter can and often has strange unplanned side effects; hunting parties, upon reaching the site of a recent battle, have reported seeing plants blooming in the middle of winter and other strangeness.

The Hunters are particularly adept at countering Sundering. They are allowed a +1 to such rolls.

Chapter nine: Critters

From ghoulies

And ghosties

And long-legged creepies

And things that eat flesh in the night

Sweet Agnes, deliver us!

- Playground Prayer

Things That Go Bump In The Night: Bestiary

The Z'bri, while nasty, are not the only things that haunt the nights on Vimary. All manner of beasts roam the countryside, some of Z'bri or Fatimal making, and others not. Many of the Z'bri creations listed here are known to the people of Vimary only through legend and myth, and many have never even crossed their minds. These creatures are the subject of tales told around many a campfire, and hushed stories told to children in the dark of the night.

Koleris: Viceweed

Six feet tall at its largest growth, the Viceweed is similar to a milkweed in appearance, with four large five-foot leaves spread out along the ground. It grows along the borders of the Slaughterfields, and feeds primarily on human flesh. The plant feeds for a month-long period at the end of its life, consuming as many humans as possible within that span of time. At the end of the month the plant dies, its seed pod exploding and casting its seeds to the winds. It emits as many seeds as the number of humans it ate, for each seed contains the soul of one of the unfortunate victims. The plant attracts its victims with screams and cries, the soul inside pleading with anyone approaching to save it. If a victim approaches, stepping on any of the leaves, these immediately snap closed. They start to crush the victim, and the digestive juices begin their work. Should the target hesitate, a center leaf, shaped like a human arm from the elbow up, unfolds and waves about, looking very much like a person being sucked into the center of the plant itself.

Once a victim has been caught (successful grabbing attack), it suffers one Flesh wound for each round of struggling as it is crushed and digested. Beating the viceweed's attack roll result with a Strength Attribute test will allow one to escape.

Attributes

AGI	+1	BLD	0	FIT	+4	INS	n/a	PER	+3
WIL	n/a	STR	+2	HEA	+1	STA	30	UD	8*

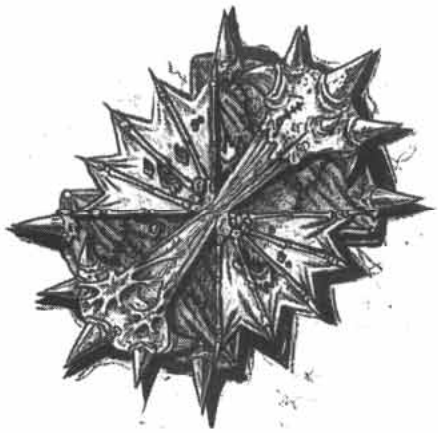
*+ natural weapon

Skills

Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.
Camouflage	3	+1	Hand-to-hand	3	+1

Special Abilities

Grabbing Attack (x8 Damage), Crush/Digest (automatic Flesh wound per turn)



Koleris: Ripper Ants

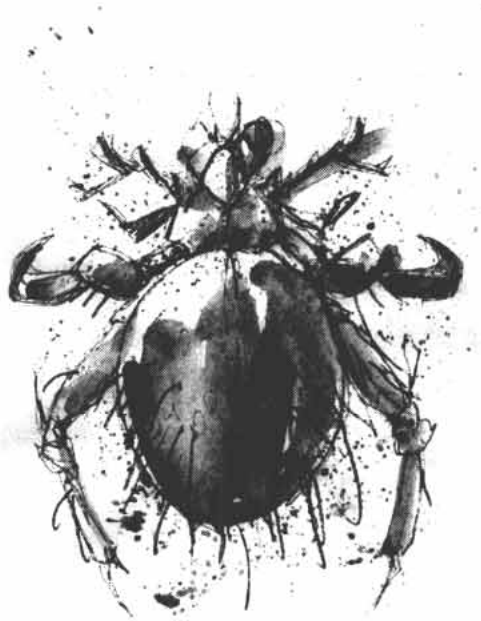
Colony insect-like creatures, ripper ants inhabit part of the Slaughterfields, where their huge mounds dot the landscape. They appear as a ravenous swarm of grotesquely large army ants, which devour anything in their path with a chittering noise. It is believed they are used to dispose of the remnants of corpses — what has not been consumed or salvaged by the Z'bri and their serfs, that is.

Ripper Ants Swarm

Aggressiveness	3	Damage/turn	3
Damage Threshold	20	Random Horde Size	5d6
Basic Swarm Size	500		

Sangis: Bloodweeper

The Bloodweeper, although rare, is a parasite that affects both tribals and serfs. It resembles a normal tick, approximately 1 mm across, with a shiny white carapace. It lands on a victim's eye and attaches itself to the cornea, causing irritation. A proboscis is then plunged into the eye, and the tick begins to drain the vitreous humor from the eyeball itself. Unless the creature is removed, blindness will soon follow, along with incredible pain. The tick excretes a red substance as it feeds, which makes it appear as though the victim were crying blood. Total time for complete consumption of the eye is roughly a week, though blindness occurs after only one day, and irreversible blindness after two. The eyeball withers away, collapsing in on itself and eventually recedes into the socket permanently.



Sangis: Rapine Viper

The rapine viper is a serpentine predator created by the Sangis for their amusement. It feeds on human flesh, but has no mouth. Rather, it ingests its food by osmosis through its skin, from inside the victim. The viper enters the host through any available natural orifice (it does not create its own). Vipers are five to eight feet long at maximum growth, but they can use muscular contractions to expand up to twice their length or width, or to contract to one-fifth of either. Spines flip up to hold it in place once it is inside the victim, and the creature then excretes lubricant with digestive properties to melt the flesh around itself.

Attributes

AGI	+1	BLD	-2	FIT	0	INS	0	PER	+2
WIL	0	STR	0	HEA	0	STA	25	UD	8

Skills

Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.
Hand-to-hand	3	+1	-	-	-	-	-	-

Special Abilities

Infiltration Attack (no Damage, but enters the victim), Digest (automatic Flesh wound every two turns)

Melanis: Dermic Mite

The Dermic Mite is a parasite but it is also a weapon, which many believe has been perfected by the Melanis to fulfill their mysterious needs. The creature enters the body of its host through the skin, through what feels like a small insect bite, leaving an itchy, red welt. The mite then slowly travels under the skin to a fingernail, where it lodges itself. A small proboscis is pushed out from under the carrier's nail. The mite carries a substance — poison, disease, or experimental substance — which is transmitted to whomever is pricked by the proboscis (anyone touched by the carrier with that hand). The mite can be removed by cauterization or a salt water soak. If the proboscis is simply pulled, however, it will break off, leaving the mite in place. The carried substance will then infect the carrier, who would otherwise have been unaffected.

Melanis: Sampler Drone

Another curious Melanis creation, the sampler drone is a mosquito-sized creature developed to collect blood samples from humans. There is only one known swarm in existence, but the creatures always travel in groups of six or less. The drone injects a poison at the beginning of its attack to paralyze the victim. If stung, the latter must roll a Health Attribute test against a Threshold of 6 or be paralyzed for a number of turns equal to the Margin of Failure. The drone settles on the victim and sucks out approximately half a liter of blood. This amount of blood loss is generally not dangerous (-1 FIT for a day), unless multiple "samples" are taken. The drone's abdomen swells to accommodate the blood, often reaching a diameter of 20 cm. Sampler Drones have a very distinctive hum, caused by their disproportionately large wings.

Sampler Drone Swarm

Aggressiveness	2	Damage/turn	*
Damage Threshold	*	Random Horde Size	1
Basic Swarm Size	1d6		

*Special; see description

Melanis: Symbiots

The Symbiots are the most horrific of Melanis constructs. Like all things Z'bri, Symbiots don't follow a set pattern, allowing you freedom in designing and using symbiots in your cycles. Some are simply "assistants" grafted to rooms or dissecting tables as helpers. Others are used as sentinels or warriors, granted full mobility.

Attributes: Symbiots have the typical ten Attributes. CRE, INF, KNO, PSY and WIL are traditionally low, but could be as high as +2 for certain Symbiots like Vox. Physical Attributes are always high, with AGI and BLD at +4 minimum (representing a Symbiot's various limbs and mass).

Skills: Skills vary depending on the purpose the Symbiot was created for. Most have at least one Skill at level 3 (some rare Symbiots have more that one Skill at level 3) and at least four at level two.

Abilities: by virtue of their uniqueness, Symbiots have widely ranging abilities. Some excrete poisons or other sedatives from pincers to calm patients, others are hard-wired to kirilan databanks of information. Armor (+5 to +15) is common in the form of exoskeletons, as are melee weapons (AD +10). A rare few are able to project bone-shards of varying lethality (Weavers should just pick and choose a comparable Ranged Weapon for stats).

Flemis: War Machines

Deep within Duskfall, in barren stretches of the H'l Kar, and even in the Rust Wastes, a handful of grotesque War Machines still exist. Terrible amalgamations of Flemis psyche and human flesh, these titans spend much of their time in a fitful slumber. When awake, most likely disturbed by the unwary, the War Machines quickly shake off their torpor and are once again consumed by violence. The Flemis minds are still aware, much more so than the Chained, and it is this awareness that leads to their violent despair.

There are rumors in the H'l Kar that the massive trident erected in Abonom is a way to project control over these War Machines. If true, the Rakh Hive may eventually rule H'l Kar and eventually all of Vimary.

When using a War Machine in a Cycle, you must be careful to keep them both terrible in psychic and bodily presence. Not only are they gargantuan in proportion (how large is up to the Weaver), but each Machine suffers from different psychoses driven by hate, fear, and loneliness. You should take care to make each Machine unique and even pitiful or *human* (with a thousand human bodies, surely some semblance of mind remains). With their incredible size and temperament, you are advised to keep War Machines very rare. Below is an example of one War Machine inhabiting the Rust Wastes: Ggrgr.

Ggrgr

A serpentine behemoth, Ggrgr was named by the few Keepers who have survived an encounter; a slow and viscous gurgling foreshadows the slaughter this War Machine brings. Finding peace beneath the steel ruins, Ggrgr is occasionally awakened by scavenging Keepers. It snakes through the rust and scrap like a worm in soft dirt, bursting from below a Keeper trike to consume the victim in a torrent of gnashing limbs, steel, and teeth. While it is a feared beast, the human souls which make its body still possess a shadow of the Goddess, for the Ggrgr's blood seems to heal even fatal wounds. There is a Keeper legend that War Machine's blood can halt and even reverse the effects of Baba Yaga's rust plague.

Attributes

AGI	-2	BLD	+12	FIT	0	INS	0	PER	0
WIL	+3	STR	0	HEA	0	STA	90	UD	10

Skills

Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.
Combat Sense	3	0	Dodge	5	-2	Hand-to-hand	4	-2

Special Abilities

Bite (x20), Thick Hide Armor (+15)

Gek'roh: The Mithrops

The earliest known attempt at Chaining, Mithrops are Z'bri bloodhounds whose tracking abilities are second-to-none. Mithrops are Serf-animal pairings linked together through fleshy umbilical cords. Despite their horrific appearance, their tortured creation is the least deleterious of the forced-mating methods. The Serf retains his memories and identity while the animal's mind is all but obliterated. The lobotomized drones serve as an extension of the Serf, obeying his mental commands as limbs would, augmenting his senses or extending his defenses through claws and fangs. If the animal supplies the Serf with heightened senses, then the umbilical cord leads to a thin miasmic mask covering the Serf's face. If the animal's role is one of defense, the cords extend into the Serf's arms.

A Serf's umbilical cords are permanent fixtures, though he can voluntarily remove them from his animal counterpart. This occurs when the animal is ill or dying. Since the Serf's mind performs the animal's autonomic functions — breathing, heart-rate, etc. — removing the tether kills the drone. Only Melanis can create new animal satellites and reattach severed tethers.

Attributes*

AGI	-1	BLD	+1	CRE	-2	FIT	+2	KNO	0
PER	+3	PSY	-1	WIL	+1	STR	+1	HEA	+1
STA	35	UD	+7						

*The above are Serf Attributes. Animal statistics vary, though the Weaver can use the Animal and Creatures section in the **Tribe 8 Rulebook** (pp. 190-192) as a baseline. Umbilical cords have the following stats: BLD -2, HEA -3, STA 10, Armor +5.

Skills

Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.
Combat Sense	2	+3	Dodge	2	-1	Hand-to-Hand	2	-1
Navigation	3	0	Notice	3	+3	Survival	2	-2

Special Abilities

Based on animal counterpart

Gek'roh: The Weres

Chaining humans may be a quick matter, but the Melanis enjoy inflicting pain regardless of their victim's breed. Unlike Z'bri, however, Serfs undergoing this process are not criminals. They are either loyal servants, unlucky, or both.

Weres are force-mated Serfs, the next evolutionary step following Mithrops. They are also antecedents to the Gek'roh (though far more savage) and must be controlled lest they run riot. Even on missions, an Iv'chet pack master accompanies the Weres and directs their actions. Due to their savagery and near-berserk temperament, the Melanis employ these creatures to overwhelm and obliterate enemies. As such, the Were's animal-mate is most often a bear, though wolves and giant cats serve well for their speed. Additionally, proud Melanis pack masters often fuse trophy bones and skulls into their Chained's thick hides; some Weres adeptly use these trophies as weapons.

Attributes

AGI	+1/+2*	BLD	+5/+3*	FIT	+2	INS	+2	PER	+1
WIL	+3	STR	+3/+2*	HEA	+2	STA	60/50*	UD	5**

* The first value is for bear Weres, the second for wolves and giant cats.

**+ natural weapons

Skills

Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.
Combat Sense	3	+1	Dodge	2	+1/+2*	Hand-to-Hand	3	+1/+2*
Intimidate	2	+5/+3*	Notice (Tracking)	1	+1			

Special Abilities

Bear: Bite (x6), Bear Hug (x12), Claws (x8), Bone Protrusions (x6)

Wolf/Giant Cat: Bite (x8), Claws (x7), Bone Protrusions (x6)

Serfs: The Kun'il, Demon Hounds

Though the Z'bri take their greatest pleasure in specifically human flesh, other creatures have not totally escaped their monstrous attention, and a handful of corrupted animal species now haunt the H'l Kar. Of these, perhaps the most fearsome are the Kun'il, huge monstrous dogs that serve the Z'bri as pets and bloodhounds. Their baying strikes terror into the hearts of Serfs and Iv'chet alike. They look like giant wolves with dark gray hides, glowing green eyes, and huge slavering maws bearing three rows of teeth.

Attributes

AGI	+3	BLD	+6	FIT	+3	INS	+1	PER	+3
WIL	+2	STR	+4	HEA	+2	STA	65	UD	13*

* + natural weapons

Skills

Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.
Combat Sense	2	3	Dodge	2	3	Hand-to-Hand	3	3
Notice(tracking)	4	3						

Special Abilities

Bite (x10 damage), Claws (x8 damage), tough hide (AR 5).

We Are The Souls Of The Earth: NPCs

The following are (generally) important characters, most of whom have been introduced in the previous chapters. Some are provided as interesting encounters for your Players, while others will play a much larger role in stories to come. As always, use them as you will. If the plot requires a character to have a certain power that they are not listed as having, feel free to add it. Do not let yourself be confined by the numbers!

Flemis: The City Heypacht

If you wish to use Prince H'pakht, Divd, or Getwn *before* the final events of the Flemis chapter (pp. 34-46), their physical and mental statistics are provided below. For Weaving these characters *after* the events, simply use Prince H'pakht's mental attributes in place of the humans'. Because H'pakht is so ancient and knowing, his ability to control two separate bodies at once is perfect; however, his knowledge of morality and other human qualities is often lacking.

Prince H'pakht, Flemis Exile

H'pakht is an ancient Z'bri, one of the earliest to cross the Fold and corrupt the mortal world. Throughout his long history, H'pakht has placed the ever further goal of knowing the Seed above any worldly concerns, such as political or physical power. Having known both ultimate power as the City Heiypahct and near-oblivion at the hands of the Nomads, H'pakht is both utterly arrogant and paranoid. He sees the other Z'bri as beneath his knowledge and worthy only as servants. Humans are below even this stature, and are mere toys or useful flesh.

After the events of the chapter, H'pakht leaves his "tiny hive" and begins to explore the human lands in the pair of human bodies, wondering if the Seed is to be found alongside humanity's Goddess rather than the self-absorbed Z'bri of H'l Kar. As Weaver, your options for using H'pakht in a Cycle are nearly unlimited — and as devious as H'pakht himself.

Highlights: eerily friendly, condescending, obsessed by the past.

Atmosphere: Flemis

Attributes: APP -1, BLD +8, CRE +2, FIT +2, INF +2, KNO +4, PSY +2, WIL +4, STA 80, UD 8, AD 8

Skills: Combat Sense 1/0, Human Perception 3/+2, Interrogation 2/+2, Intimidate 3/+8, Lore (ancient Z'bri) 3/+4, Ritual 3/+4, Seduction 2/-1, Speak (Tribal) 2/+4, Survival 3/+2, Sundering (Body Severing, Flesh Assimilation, One Thought) 4

Edge: ancient knowledge predating the Houses, presumed dead by the Z'bri of H'l Kar.

Divd, Favored of Skkr

Divd's mind is tangled far beyond that of most Flemis serfs. Possessing a powerful psyche, his natural ability to resist the weaker minds of the Collective shocked the entire Skkr Hive. Skkr was so impressed that he absorbed Divd into the Hive Mind, and with Divd's survival a new creature was born. A being with a mind no longer human nor Z'bri, but something balanced in between.

Divd's psyche is so strong, in fact, that Weavers may wish to allow his mind to control H'pakht's discarded flesh, possibly even harboring poor Getwn's intellect inside his own mind. A frightening Cycle could revolve around the Players initially helping H'pakht (in the guise of two human lovers) fend off the attacks of a mindless Z'bri (actually Divd and Getwn, trying to reclaim their bodies and live in peace), only discovering later they are aiding an ancient horror and opposing true love.

Attributes: AGI +2, APP +1, FIT -1, PSY +4, WIL +2, STA 35, UD 3, AD 3

Skills: Dodge 2/+2, Lore (Flemis, Skkr) 4/0, Sneak 2/+2, Sundering (One Thought) 1

Edge: Inhuman knowledge of Skkr and the Flemis Collective.

Getwn, Rakh Serf

A mindless serf to the Rakh Hive, Getwn suffered from a failed experiment to tie human minds together. As a result, Getwn and her birth-mates were reduced to near vegetables, only capable of the most basic activities. It was during her simple work in the organ fields that Getwn was startled by her eternal lover.

The sheer power of Divd's mind severed Getwn's ties to her birth-mates and opened her up to a world of individuality. Stunned by the sudden influx of memories from her past lives, Getwn willingly fled the Flemis to be away from the horrible Z'bri and live as one with Divd. Unlike Divd's unstable mind, Getwn retains more humanity than even some Tribals, a fact which causes her to suffer immense mental torture while trapped in H'pakht's discarded body.

Attributes: CRE +2, FIT +1, PER +2, PSY +1, STA 30, UD 3, AD 3

Skills: Human Perception 2/+1, Leadership 1/0, Lore (Flemis, Rakh) 1/0, Notice 2/+2

Edge: vague memories of past lives — the most lucid are from the World Before and the Camps.

Gek'roh: Ry'shall

Rules exist to breed exceptions. Regardless of Melanis skill in stripping away personalities and memories, a Z'bri's Sundering ability often comes to play in Chaining. In Ry'shall's case, its formidable abilities with Exsanguination formed the horror roaming Duskfall today.

The Koleris Ry'shall was a vocal opponent of the Baron (who effectively emasculated the Koleris Hordes). Following a failed coup attempt, Ry'shall's sentence was to undergo the rarest of punishments, Plague Chaining (to frogs). Ry'shall, however, possessed the foresight to protect itself against Chaining decades ago. Unfortunately, it did not anticipate Plague Chaining and its unpredictable outcomes. Following the process, Ry'shall found its mind intact and housed within its blood — even though it emerged of dubious stability. By exsanguinating itself, it could leave its multiple forms and either inhabit one large beast, or a group of smaller animals. Ill-prepared for Ry'shall's unique transformation, its Melanis-tormentors fell to its gift and provided a vehicle of escape.

Since earning its freedom, Ry'shall has stolen into Duskfall, where it preys upon anything living. Although comprised of sentient plasma, Ry'shall needs bodies to survive. By Exsanguinating enemies, it creates an empty vessel for its fluid mass. Its new form lasts for several months before falling to complete decay. As such, it uses every opportunity to inhabit fresh kills, turning a need into a habit.

Ry'shall has several forms. It can possess a pack of diverse animals — from small rodents to wolf-sized mammals — or it can inhabit a larger creature — a bloated human, a horse or a cow for example. In both instances, people often mistake the decaying monstrosities for Zoms.

Ry'shall: Plasma Form

Attributes: AGI +1, APP -3, BLD -1, CRE +1*, FIT -2, INF -3*, KNO +2*, PER +1*, PSY -1*, WIL +3*, STA 20, UD (None)

*Stats are the same in all three forms.

Skills: none usable

Ry'shall: Single-Form Body

Highlights: dedicated, eerie, silent

Attributes: physical stats depend on the host form, though the Weaver can use the Animal and Creatures section from the **Tribe 8 Rulebook** (pp. 190-192) as a baseline.

Skills: Combat Sense 3/+1, Dodge 2/Variable AGI, Hand-to-Hand 3/Variable AGI, Intimidate 2/Variable BLD, Lore (Z'bri) 4/+2, Melee (if in bipedal form) 3/Variable AGI, Navigation 2/+2, Notice 3/+1, Survival 2/+1 , Sundering (Exsanguination) 3

Ry'shall: Plague Form

Aggressiveness	3	Damage/turn	6
Damage Threshold	35	Random Horde Size	2d6
Basic Swarm Size	20		

Melanis: Prince Vl'dus

Having the unenviable position as Prince of House Melanis, Vl'dus is nearly an outsider among his house. Most see the Prince and the other feudal Melanis as necessary concessions to the Baron, and if it was up to the Council, the Melanis would exist outside the perverse court of the Baron.

Although Vl'dus technically outranks the Deacons, he knows better than to run contrary to their wishes. This does not mean that Vl'dus is a sycophant puppet — he is not. Vl'dus is coldly calculating and ambitious. For him, the Melanis must regain their rightful position as leaders of the Z'bri. In the tradition of the treacherous Teth'us, Vl'dus plans to usurp the power of the Baron. He is wise, however, and knows such a plan will take years. For now, he is simply observing, having told no one of his plans, and is sizing up his future opponents and allies. In this he sees the Eighth Tribe as a perfect tool.

Highlights: coldly calculating, analytical and patient

Attributes: APP +2, CRE +2, INF +2, KNO +3, PER +3, PSY +2, STA 25, UD +6, AD +6

Skills: Combat Sense 1/+3, Disguise 2/+2, Etiquette 2/+2, Hand-to-Hand 3/0, Human Perception 3/+2, Interrogation 2/+2, Investigation 2, +3, Lore (Court Intrigue) 3/+3, Lore (Tribes) 1/+3, Lore (Z'bri) 2/+3, Mythology 2/+2, Notice 1/+3, Read/Write 2/+3, Ritual 3/+3

Edge: Vl'dus has blackmailed certain key Sangis and Koleris counts; the loyalty of the Melanis counts and dukes tired of the Council of Deacons.

Sangis: Prince Fa'Cul

One of the most talented skincrafters, the most feminine and recently crowned Fa'Cul is an enigma amongst the Sangis. Until recently the Baron's favorite artist and a minor duke, she has been appointed over the ambitions of several other dukes to lead the senate as Prince. It was soon noted that her subservient manner with the Baron belies her cunning and ability to lead the Sangis in her own right. In truth Fa'Cul was appointed to bring about the Baron's wish to deal with his enemies within the Z'bri Houses. Fa'Cul secretly heads a new force amongst the Z'bri, the Beauties, its members drawn from the elite artists loyal to the Baron, who use their skincrafting ability to possess others to spy on possible traitors and deal with the growing sedition.

Highlights: feminine, sly, cold, capricious, commanding, depraved

Atmosphere: Sangis

Attributes: AGI +2, APP +3, BLD +3, CRE +2, FIT +3, INF +3, KNO +2, PER +2, PSY +2, WILL +5, STR +3, HEA +3, STA 55, UD 12, AD 12

Skills: Combat Sense 3/+2, Dance 2/+2, Dodge 2/+2, Etiquette (Z'bri) 3/+3, Grooming 2/+3, Hand-to-Hand 3/+2, Interrogation 3/+2, Intimidate 3/+3, Leadership 3/+3, Lore (Ancient Z'bri) 2/+2, Melee 3/+3, Notice 3/+2, Read/Write 3/+2, Ritual 2/+2, Seduction 3/+3, Speak (Tribal) 3/+2, Tactics 3/+2, Throwing 3/+2, Sundering (Appeasement, Soul Stealing, Chaining, Exsanguination) 3

Edge: Baron's favor, contacts of Sangis Skincrafters, leader of the Beauties

Sangis: Duke Belz'ey

Heading the unofficial old guard of Dukes against the influences of the other Houses and internal change, Belz'ey's group is slowly stirring from the apathy of their overindulgence. Belz'ey is a schemer and is playing an elaborate game with the Baron, whom he would never betray, with Count H'x, who he fears and uses, and with Sl'Onis, whom he humors but holds in little regard. Belz'ey's first and foremost desire is to uphold the Baron's position over all the Z'bri. He also wishes to see the current Counts lose their elevated status, returning to the old rule of the Dukes. Lastly he wishes to see the last Prince, who was his friend — and was damned when he was chained — revenged, and his vengeance is focused on Prince Fa'Cul for the role she played in this.

Highlights: cunning, traditional, decadent, pompous, determined, vengeful

Atmosphere: Sangis

Attributes: AGI +1, APP +3, BLD +5, CRE +3, FIT +1, INF +3, KNO +2, PER +2, PSY +3, WILL +4, STR +3, HEA +3, STA 65, UD 14, AD 13

Skills: Combat Sense 2/+2, Dance 2/+1, Dodge 1/+1, Etiquette (Z'bri) 3/+3, Grooming 2/+3, Hand-to-Hand 3/+1, Intimidate 3/+5, Leadership 2/+3, Lore (Ancient Z'bri) 3/+2, Melee 2/+1, Notice 2/+2, Read/Write 2/+2, Ritual 3/+2, Seduction 3/+3, Speak (Tribal/Fanzay/Magdalite/Squat) 2/+2, Tactics 2/+3, Sundering (Appeasement, Soul Stealing, Chaining, Shattering) 4

Edge: Long-term supporter of the Baron, Leadership of the Sangis Dukes.

The Swords In The Stone: Weapons and Armor

Though the Z'bri prefer to rely on their own bodies to inflict and experience pain and damage on others, they have been known to use weapons and armor (still completely organic) when times call for it. The Melanis, in particular, are fond of creating new and unique items during their experiments.

Flemis: Living Armor

It is a little known fact that during the Age of the Camps, the Z'bri sometimes used their own bodies (or at least the ones they currently occupied) in their experiments. It is surmised that the first Flemis Living Armors came into being at that time, perhaps as a result of a grotesque dueling practice of the Koleris.

A Living Armor is, quite simply, a Flemis whose body can house and protect another's. The ritual to create such an unholy fusion of tool and creature is a long and drawn out one, involving the vivisection of a Flemis drone and several serfs whose organs and bodily fluids are then used to keep the Z'bri alive in its new state. As a result, Living Armors are rarely encountered and are generally offered only to high-ranking Lords or their most devoted warriors.

Externally, an unoccupied living armor looks like a heap of dull, inanimate, tan colored flesh, though color variances have been known to occur. It must be periodically fed by pouring blood or other organic fluids (at least a liter) through one of its openings, or it will withdraw into a coma-like state from which it is difficult to awaken.

To call the Armor into combat, its master stands before it and intones a short litany, augmenting the ritual with a brief burst of Sundering. It then steps unto the Flemis creature, which awakens. Glistening tendrils shoot out from its pores to grab the wearer as the skin literally climbs over the body of its owner. No human can survive this process, though it is surmised that the Z'bri keep trying with various serf breeds. Once the process is complete, the Z'bri warrior is covered from head to toe (if applicable) with a self-aware armor that moves with him and takes the brunt of combat damage.

Living Armor carries its own mass, so there is no effect on the Z'bri's movement or agility. The Living Armor's Stamina of 50/100/150 and System Shock of 8 are used for calculating damage. Penalties due to Wounds are applied to the Z'bri as normal, since the wounded armor slows the bearer down. Living Armors are unaffected by poison and do not ned to breathe, though fire and electricity affect them as usual. If the Living Armor is Overkilled or otherwise dies, it releases the Z'bri inside.

Koleris: Bile Cannon

One of the vile battle tools of the Koleris, the Bile Cannon is a human serf, missing legs and arms, whose viscera have been manipulated through a Sundering ritual to produce only corrosive stomach acid and bile. A muscle command forces it to shoot a stream of acid from its mouth. The bile cannon is generally wielded by Koleris Serfs, for it needs to draw nutrients from another human to which it is attached by an umbilical cord. The bile cannon is semi-sentient and capable of aiming itself, and therefore uses its own Firearms Skill.

Bile Cannons are somewhat close-ranged but the splashing stream of corrosive liquid means that the weapon requires little aiming, bathing the target in searing liquid (this is why the Firearms Skill is so high). Best of all, the acid continues to corrode whatever it has landed upon for several moments. The target suffers the attack's effects for a number of combat rounds equal to the original Margin of Success of the attack. Damage is calculated using the original MoS, minus one for each additional turn after the first one. For example, a MoS 4 attack would use MoS 3 on the second turn to calculate damage, MoS 2 on the third and MoS 1 on the fourth and final turn.

Attributes

AGI	0	BLD	-2	FIT	0	INS	+3	PER	0
WIL	0	STR	0	HEA	-1	STA	20	UD	0

Skills

Skill	Level	Attr.	Skill	Level	Attr.
Firearms	4	0			

Special Abilities

Acid Attack (x10 Damage, Range 5 meters, 5 shots/day)

Sangis: Sanguine Blades

In the days before the Closing, when the Z'bri fought over the plunder of their new-found existence, many weapons were created. Those whom would become the Sangis Skincrafters fashioned living flesh and bone blades from Z'bri and human bodies alike to be used in the fighting. Conflict and time have seen many of these blades die and with the closing of the Fold the spiritual powers of the lost Z'bri realm have been no longer available to create more of these weapons. All the blades are fashioned from bones and surrounded by living flesh, except for the bared cutting edges or piercing points. The bone is covered in disturbing patterns of swirls and symbols, sometimes barely visible and in others boldly etched in dried blood. The bone edges are stronger than steel and wield a jagged razor sharp edge. The flesh shafts and handles are coarsely callused, and warm to the touch. To properly grip any of these weapons you must allow the thorns on the handles or the tentacle-like straps to cut deeply into your flesh.

There are two types of these weapons. The first and more plentiful ones are smaller or worn ones, known as the *Za'var*. The others are larger and feature ears and eyes in their construction. These latter blades, or *Za'vin*, are essentially a form of chained Z'bri. They must be fed a steady diet of blood if they are to survive. They have personalities and through fleshy links to their wielder enhance some attributes and abilities. All these blades exude a sickly sweet perfume.

Za'var have the same statistics as a comparable normal weapon (see **Tribe 8 Rulebook**, p.140) with a +8 bonus to Damage. If they hit and penetrate the armor enough to scratch the defender they always cause a flesh wound because of the pain of the living blade fragments in the wound. They cause an additional light wound each day as the fragments grow and fester until the victim is healed with Synthesis or the area is cut out. Za'var also act as a -1 situational modifier to Synthesis to the wielder or those targeting her.

Za'vin have the same properties as Za'var, as well as unique properties based on the weapon. Amongst the Z'bri (as many have been given as gifts or bribes to other Z'bri Houses) these weapons all have names and special abilities. In a handful of cases along with the chained Z'bri, the heartstone of a recently slain Z'bri was crafted into the weapon adding to its potency.

As a guide to the Weaver, all the Za'vin grant the wielder a +1 to +2 bonus to Combat Sense, +1 to +2 bonus to Sundering Rolls, +1 to +2 bonus to Hit and Parry, +5 to +10 bonus to Damage. The blades also have a Willpower of 2 to 3 and a Psyche of +2 to +3. All act as a conduit to the Sangis Sundering power of Appeasement, granting it at level 1 or adding a level to the wielder's ability with it.

The Za'vin are all able to exsanguinate a victim to whom they have done a Deep Wound. When a Deep Wound is done, a free and automatic Exsanguinate roll should be made using the Za'vin's Willpower. The Weaver should feel free to add other special abilities as they wish to add character and potency to these rare beings.

Serfs: Plague

Serf hamlets are hotbeds of plague. Most Serfs die of illness before the age of 30, and in hamlets devoted to excavating mass graves the life expectancy is much lower. Most insidious, however, are those hamlets where the Serfs are carriers of a disease that does not actually affect them. Any of the sample diseases in the **Tribe 8 Rulebook** (p. 152) can be found among Serfs. Some reports even indicate that at least one hamlet is infested with Kola's Plague, though the Serfs show no symptoms!

In addition to the sample diseases given in the **Tribe 8 Rulebook**, a handful of other infectuous diseases are particularly common among Serfs:

Digger's Cough

A fungal infection of the lung, Digger's Cough is most common in agricultural hamlets. The fungus that causes the disease grows on the leaves of certain food plants, releasing spores when the leaves are disturbed (as during the harvest). The spores are inhaled and grow in the lungs, where they can eventually cause death.

Contagion: 5 (airborne)
Onset time: 2 weeks
Virulence: 6
Effects:

Success or MoF 0: minor cough

Failed roll: severe coughing with blood in sputum (-1 action penalty until treated; Healing Threshold = MoF+2)

Fumble: gradual deterioration of lungs (one Flesh Wound per day until treated; Healing Threshold = MoF+4)

Flesh Eaters

Caused by a bacteria found in mass graves, Flesh Eaters is an infection that causes the deterioration of skin and other body tissue.

Contagion: 3 (from skin contact with infected corpses)
Onset Time: 4 days
Virulence: 4
Effects:

Success or MoF 0: minor blemishes on skin for 1 week

Failed Roll: bleeding sores on skin (APP reduced by 3 for MoF weeks, possibility of secondary infection at Weaver's discretion)

Fumble: large open sores and muscle damage (APP reduced by 5 and FIT reduced by 2 for MoF weeks, APP reduced by 1 permanently; definite secondary infection)

Hunters: The Arms of Righteousness

As the Hunters do not use Sundering they rely on the Guides to forge their weapons. The Guides do so secretly and only in return for payment in Z'bri heartstones. One reason for the secrecy is that the Guides realize that they would be inundated with requests for weapons from the Fallen should their skill in this area become known. Each weapon is forged of this world but directly attuned to the spirit of the Hunter who wields it. Only Magos carries no weapon, relying on his mystic powers rather than physical force.

Foris

Foris' bow is made of living wood, his arrows fletched with leaves and tipped with thorns. As long as a target is in the forests around Vimary nothing growing will protect them. Natural cover never affects shots, with arrows even flying around tree trunks. Nor do targets in the forest have to be visible. As long as Foris is aware of the target's presence he can fire at it without penalty.

Acc +2, Never Fumble, DM 20, Range 25/50/100/150

Ashash'in

Ashash'in wields two knives carved from living bone, which can mutate to match whatever disguise he is in. From earrings to swords, there are no limitations as to what shape or size the knives can achieve, except that they will always have a sharp point. The knives are so sharp, they can halve a target's Armor, but they do only half damage because they cause clean cuts.

Acc +3, Parry +2, AD+15, Armor Reduction if desired

Zelos

Zelos has no subtlety; his 'knife' is a massive, curved sword forged from steel from the World Before. Heated by Zelos' rage the blade glows burningly bright in battle, becoming hotter and hotter as Zelos' bloodlust rages uncontrolled. The Intensity of the heat is 3 plus 1 for every foe that Zelos kills, adding extra damage to his blows (see fire rules, **Tribe 8 Rulebook**, p.153).

Acc +1, Parry +1, AD+30

Quaerere

Quaerere hides a multitude of needles under his robes. The needles are carved from splinters of tainted steel from the Rust Wastes, and are flung in bundles of six. Those hit must make a *HEA roll, Threshold 3, or be infected by a rotting disease. The* disease reduces BLD by one every two days until the sufferer reaches -6 and dies. Only a Guide can cure the disease.

Acc +2, Fumble Never, DM 10, Range 5/10/20/40

Herne

Herne does not use the bows and spears he carves for his own purposes. Instead, he gives the finely-balanced weapons to those who aid him, as a token of thanks. While the only thing special about the weapons is the skill of the crafter, it is enough. The bows and arrows are so well made that they seem to instinctively find the center of their target, and the spears fly straight and true, despite the skill of the weilder.

Bows and Arrows: **Acc +1, Fumble Low (roll 1d6 if Fumbled, actual Fumble on 4-6 only), DM 15, Range 9/15/35/80**

Spears: **ACC +1, AD +14**

Paenitere

Paenitere carries a staff that appears to have been built from a panoply of scrap; wood, crystal, bone, metal and even less identifiable junk make up the staff's composite structure. Paenitere can locate anyone he has ever touched with the staff — as long as they are on Vimary — by planting the staff in the ground and concentrating. The staff also absorbs weapons that it parries into its composite structure if the MoS of the parry is 3 or more. These weapons are lost forever.

Acc +2, Parry +3, AD+20

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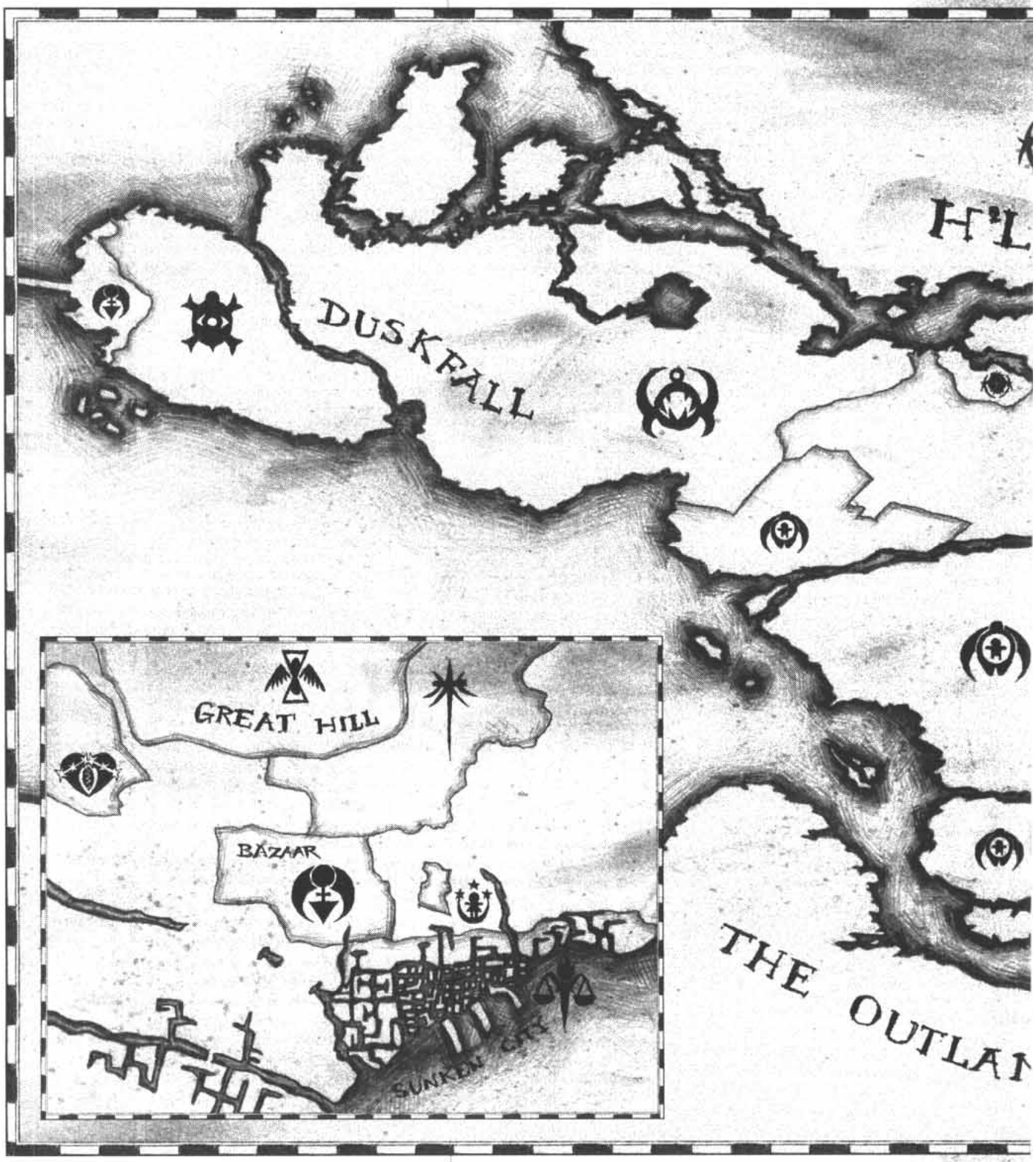

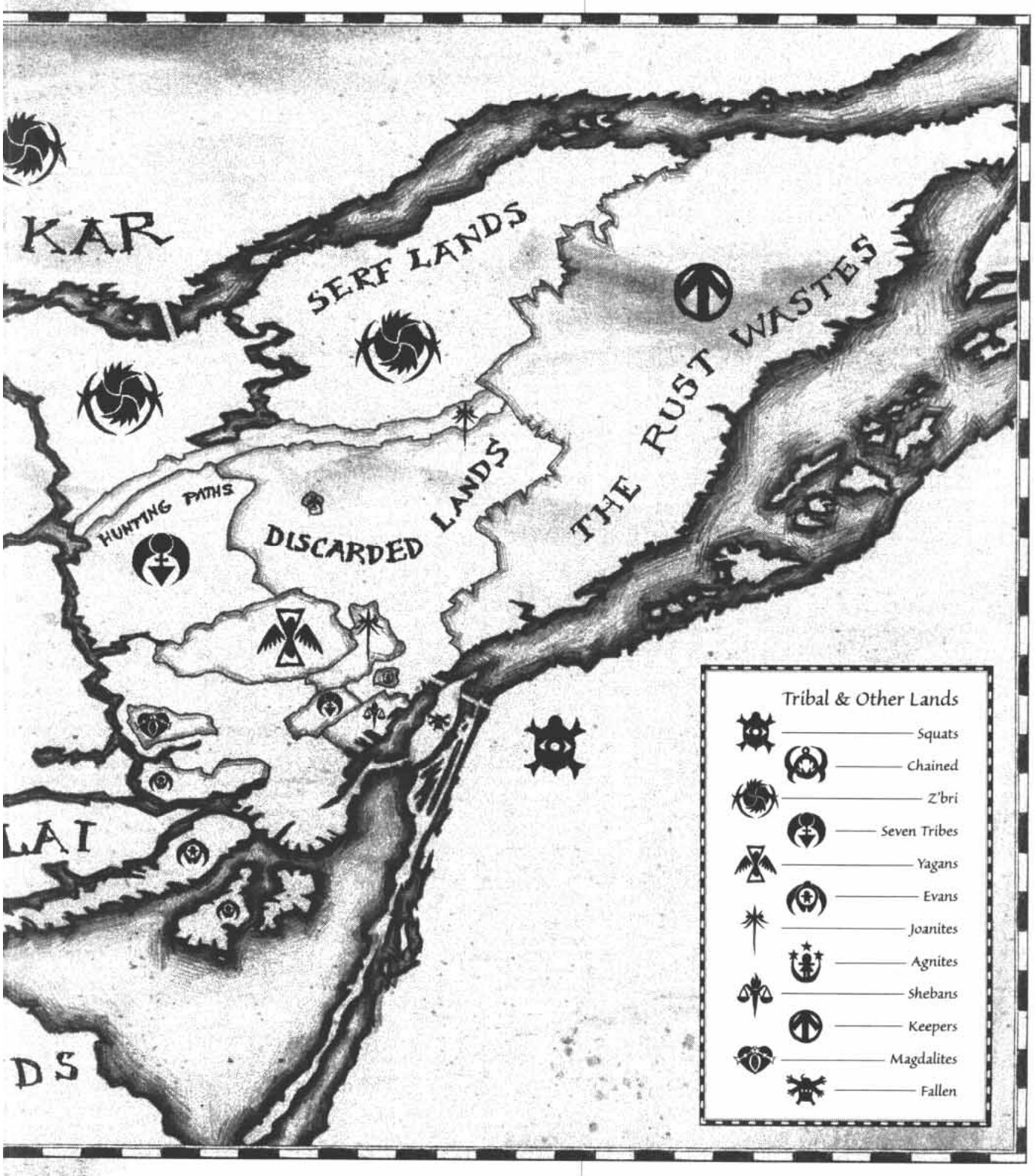
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Yagans
Evans
Joanites
Agnites
Shebans
Keepers
Magdalites
Fallen

Weaver's Aid: Z'bri Reference Table

This table is a listing of almost all of the Z'bri who have been mentioned in the Tribe 8 books, up to this point. The information included is what has been revealed in the books — the missing pieces are free to be played with as the Weaver sees fit. **Name** is, obviously, the Z'bri's name. **Byname** lists any secondary name or nickname used to refer to the beast. **Rank** gives you the rank they hold within Z'bri society, and **House** is their affiliation. If there is no listing for house, it is usually because the Z'bri existed in a time before the houses had formed. **Aspects** list the powers they are *known* to have, **Reference** gives you the book and page number where you can find the most information about them — usually their character sheet. The final column, **Status** is used to keep track of which Z'bri are still living, and when the others have died. A listing of 'presumed dead' indicates either that the Z'bri was created for a campaign in which he was available for combat with PCs, or they are listed in a book as having 'vanished.'

Name	Byname	Rank	House	Aspects	Reference	Status
Abiyar	-	-	Sangis	-	Vim 81	active
Ahr'hbaat	the Unforgiving	Joh'an	Sangis	Appeasement, Exsanguination	TC 64	deceased, TC
Ashash'in	the Doe-Eyed	-	Hunter	-	HotZ 70, 111	active
Az'lr	-	Iv'chet	Flemis	-	HotZ 43	active
Baron	-	High Lord	Sangis	all aspects	RB 72, Vim 118	active
Belz'ey	-	Duke	Sangis	Appeasement, Soul Stealing, Shattering, Chaining	HotZ 19, 108	active
C'arhis	-	Prince	Melanis	-	Vim 123	active
Ch'kroth	-	-	-	-	Vim 12	unknown
Druze	the Raging	Gek'roh	Flemis	-	RB 71, HotZ 74	active
D'sher	-	Iv'chet	Melanis	-	HotZ 46	active
D'vron	-	-	-	-	Vim 44, 97	presumed dead, Vim
E'lz	-	Iv'chet	Melanis	-	CoL 17	active
Enakratt	-	Gek'roh	Melanis	-	HotZ 74	active
Eshlazi	Yrthranivak	Joh'an	Sangis	Appeasement, Soul-Stealing, Exsanguination	BoL 53	presumed dead, BoL
Etarian	-	Duke	Sangis	Appeasement, Soul Stealing	WA 20	presumed dead, WA
Eth'ian	-	-	Melanis	all aspects	Vim 123	active
Fa'Cul	-	Prince	Sangis	Appeasement, Soul Stealing, Exsanguination	Vim 119, HotZ 108	active
F'hl	-	Iv'chet	Flemis	-	HotZ 42	active
Foris	the Green-Handed	-	Hunter	Synthesis	HotZ 70, 111	active
Garreed	-	Gek'roh	Melanis	-	HotZ 74	active
Gek'roh	the Fated	Gek'roh	-	-	HotZ 72	active
G'f	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	CoL 17	active
Haiyshar	-	Gek'roh	Flemis	-	Vim 121	active
H'pakht	-	Prince	Flemis	-	HotZ 35, 106	active
Hrik'skrr	the Flayed One	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	HotZ 26	active
Hsh'don	-	-	Sangis	-	Vim 46	active
H'x	-	Count	Sangis	Appeasement, Soul Stealing, One Thought	Vim 117	active
Icz'Tyr	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	CoL 17	active

Name	Byname	Rank	House	Aspects	Reference	Status
Illiam	-	Iv'chet	Sangis	Appeasement	WA 35	active
Jhin'ko'var	-	Captain	Koleris	-	HotZ 30	active
J'zell	-	Iv'chet	Melanis	Animation, Chaining	WA 22	deceased, WA
K'ark'oom	-	Prince	Koleris	-	Vim 120	active
Kely'san	-	Viscount	Sangis	Appeasement, Soul Stealing	CoL 91	active
Kr'ksul	-	Captain	Koleris	-	HotZ 28	active
Kt'aalsik	-	Joh'an	-	-	HotZ 5	active
Kynit	-	Iv'chet, Knight	Koleris	Exsanguination, Shattering, Appeasement	CoL 88	active
La'torn	-	Iv'chet	Sangis	-	CoL 17	active
Liecc	Kti	Iv'chet	Flemis	-	HotZ 41	deceased, HotZ
Ll'Enh	-	Joh'an	Flemis	-	HotZ 42	active
L'oath	-	-	-	-	Vim 21	unknown
Lothar	-	Count	Koleris	-	HotZ 8	active
Magos	the Wise-Eyed	-	Hunter	-	HotZ 71	active
Mahakala	-	Gek'roh	Melanis	Animation, Chaining	BoL 54	presumed dead, BoL
Max	-	Gek'roh	-	-	CoL 93	presumed dead, CoL
Miscreant	-	Sky Lord	Sangis	Appeasement, Soul-Stealing	Vim 27	active
Morr'd	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	HotZ 60	active
Mur'Dk	-	Lord	Melanis	-	CoL 17	active
Nbk'zzar	-	Iv'chet	Melanis	-	CoL 17	active
Nemerath	-	Count	Melanis	-	Vim 122, HotZ 8	active
Paenitere	the Shadow-Cloaked	-	Hunter	-	HotZ 67, 111	active
Peeler	-	rogue	Sangis	-	Vim 113	active
Q'l'rukk	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	HotZ 32	active
Quaerere	the Glowing Brand	-	Hunter	-	HotZ 70, 111	active
Que'uen	-	Lord	Koleris	-	HotZ 59	active
Rakh	-	Prince	Flemis	-	HotZ 40	active
Re'Qum	-	-	Sangis	-	Vim 118	active
Ry'shall	the Blood Horde	Gek'roh	Koleris	Exsanguination	HotZ 74, 107	active
R'Zor	-	Lord	-	-	Vim 23	deceased, Vim
S'Cur	-	Lord	Melanis	Animation, Chaining, One Thought	CoL 94	active
Skkr	-	Prince	Flemis	-	Vim 121	active
Sk'ksul	-	-	Koleris	Shattering, Exsanguination	Vim 120	active
Sl'Onis	-	Knight	Sangis	Appeasement, Soul-Stealing, Exsanguination	HotZ 16	active
St'g	-	Iv'chet	Melanis	-	CoL 17	active
Styn	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	CoL 17	active
T'phalus	-	Joh'an	Sangis	Flesh Appeasement, Soul Stealing	RB 73	active

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Name	Byname	Rank	House	Aspects	Reference	Status
Tartarus	-	Lord	Melanis	Animation	Vim 34	active
Tct'lu	the Ancient	Lord	Flemis	-	HotZ 42	active
Teth'us	of Melanis	Lord	Melanis	-	HotZ 49	presumed dead, HotZ
T'grath	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	CoL 61	presumed dead, CoL
Therial	-	Lord	Sangis	-	HotZ 61	deceased, HotZ
Th'gra	-	Lord	-	-	CoL 58	presumed dead, CoL
Thok'et	-	Knight	Sangis	-	HotZ 62	active
Tibor	-	Lord	-	all aspects	RB 21	deceased, RB
Tot'lynd	the Wretched	Joh'an	Melanis	Animation, Chaining	TC 78	presumed dead, TC
T'sser'ion	-	-	Koleris	-	HotZ 11	active
Uckr'ou	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	HotZ 29	deceased, HotZ
Ult'maht	-	Iv'chet	Flemis	One Thought, Flesh Assimilation	RB 72, Vim 121	active
Vak'lor	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	CoL 61	presumed dead, CoL
Valk	-	Count	Melanis	-	HotZ 8	active
Velen	-	Iv'chet	Melanis	-	CoL 83	active
Viz'lx	-	Iv'chet	Melanis	-	HotZ 16	deceased, HotZ
Vl'dus	-	Prince	Melanis	-	HotZ 52	active
Vys'Arky	-	Lord	Unknown	-	CoL 56	deceased, CoL
Vytor	-	Deacon	Melanis	all aspects	Vim 122	active
X'aqr	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	HotZ 27	active
Yil'qrr	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	HotZ 33	active
Y'k'krr	-	Captain	Koleris	-	HotZ 30	active
Yv's	-	Iv'chet	Melanis	-	CoL 17	active
Zelos	the Bloody Knife	-	Hunter	-	HotZ 70, 111+F68	active
Zor'lt	-	Iv'chet	Koleris	-	CoL 61	presumed dead, CoL
Z'vatis	-	Lord	Melanis	Animation, Appeasement, Chaining	CoL 94	active

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