

# Word of the DANCERS



A Tribe  Sourcebook



Dream Pod 9

# A Tribe 8 Sourcebook

## Word of the DANCERS

The Child and The Trickster, known together as the Dancers, are often overlooked by the other Fatimas, considered less important because of their chaotic nature. What the other Tribes do not realize is that the Dancers and their children, so strange in custom and so difficult to fathom, form the heart and the future of the Nation. It is in the growth of the Child and the insight of the Trickster that the most important lessons are learned, if the answers can be teased from the mystery and madness that haunts the two strangest of Fatimas.

Word of the Dancers is a Sourcebook and Players' guide for the Tribes of Agnes and Dahlia. Learn the secrets of their games and tricks and the power of their rites and rituals; meet their most important and interesting members and get a glimpse into the madness and uncertainty – as well as the potential for growth and hope – that lies at the heart of these two Tribes. Word of the Dancers is the third of the Wordbooks for Tribe 8, and contains:

- Information on the daily lives, rituals, and beliefs of the two most difficult Tribes.
- Dozens of important personalities within the Tribes.
- New Synthesis powers, including three new totems, four new Aspects, and many new treasures.
- Tips and hints for Weavers and Players alike to help bring the Dancers to life.
- An epic story that shows both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Dancers and their children.

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From Laura: To my Joshua. Without his blood  
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From Moyra: To Dave, who put me back into the  
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## Chapter one: In the Wings

Behind the curtains there is a dance that leaves as much blood spilt as any play performed upon a public stage. What you do not know will hurt you, what you do not know will kill you, what you do not know will not give you joy. So open every box, look behind every curtain, and be ready to dance with either laughter or a blade.

- Dahlian saying.



## All my Toys

### From the reflections of Agnes the Child:

That one is my current favorite, with her red curls and the bright way she smiles. She makes me laugh. They grow up so fast, though, and their touch becomes too thin for even me to hold, and so I must search out others who are attuned to my touch.

My last favorite — or was it the one before her? They blur together so easily in my mind, like too many marbles spilled from a pouch at once. But that one, Hyrin, was so pure in Wonder it almost pained my heart when she grew up. Almost. There is always another Child for me to favor. There is always more life to be found.

If only my Sisters understood! My time will come, and my Tribe will reveal truths long buried under the bones and ashes of yesterday. The camps are gone, the sun still rises, and we will breath life into the world.

## The Shadows Cast by the Dance

### A letter from the Lady of Rahntoh:

My dearest little boy, It has been far too long since you've warmed my side, and all of my orifices miss you terribly. However, I must regretfully call upon you again to perform a service that shall keep you from me for a longer time yet.

The mission I have to ask of you is quite simple for one of your talents. The Walking Things on Vimary disturb me. Before they can become a thorn in our side we must test them, must find their measure, and must do so without waking them from their self-absorbed slumber. I wish for you to test the ones they call the Dancers, the Little Child and Her Sister of Insanity. They trouble me the most of all, for I cannot know them, these Dancers that are the heart of that little Nation. It is there, in the beating pulse that shudders uncontrollably through the lives of their people, that we will find of what these beings are truly made. Go now, my pet, and test them. See how bright their laughter really is.

## The Trouble with Dolls

### From the reflections of Dahlia the Trickster:

It is always funny when those who hate us see more clearly than those who claim they love us. The Beasts are plotting against us, my little Niece and I. They know that it was I who taught our children to laugh again, taught them not to take the yoke of living so seriously that they could not dance or grow. Mary touched their souls and purified them so that I could touch their spirits and make them light.

I could halt the momentum of this plot with only a breath, but Agnes is not fully in Her own yet, and allows the rejection of my Sisters to weigh upon Her. Perhaps living through this storm will teach Her how to throw off their hands and reach for what She wants. After all, no growing comes without a little pain. I will, as always, be dancing in the shadows, just out of sight, and will ensure it does not go too far.

### Word of the Dancers

*Word of the Dancers* is the third of the Wordbooks for the Tribe 8 roleplaying game. It details the world of the two youngest and most elusive Tribes in the Nation: the Tribes of Agnes the Child and Dahlia the Trickster. This book expands upon the material presented in the Tribe 8 Rulebook and Vimary, and gives Weavers and Players alike essential material for incorporating the Tribes of the Dancers into their cycles both as Players and Non-Player Characters.

The first four chapters show the world of Tribe 8 through the eyes of members of the two tribes in question, as well as through their allies and enemies, and the last two chapters give detailed information on different ways to use this in-character information within a game. The stories presented are tightly interlinked, just as the fates and lives of members of the Tribes are - in a complicated Dance of joy and madness.

## Chapter two: The Word of Dahlia

For Dahlia, Caravan, Tribe and Nation, dancing in joy and jubilation.

Pillars fall and Fates unwind, but Truth and Illusion forge in kind.

In their fetters and fruitless yearning we shall sow our seeds of yearning,

When Wonder sprouts deep in Child's eyes, Tricksters weave it through the tribes.

Behind the masks of this World After, Dahlia sings in gales of laughter.

Spinning the feet of Freedom's own over all the horizons we call home.

- a Dahlian travel round



## Web of Secrets

From the notes of Shahana of Bazaar:

Listen to the wind.

Night and day, voices whisper in bleak corridors. There are echoes in the smallest sound, tunneling down the winding streets of Bazaar to the lowest emporiums. There, sundry lives spill their hearts in drink and loosen their tongues in seduction's kiss. Down by the lapping waves of the river: tide in, tide out, bringing smuggled goods and smuggled lives. Testaments of covert rendezvous brush the bobbing heads of wheat in the fields; reaching up, you can pluck secrets from the air like wishing seeds, tuck them in your pockets to see what germinates, what blooms.

I am Shahana, and stealing these whispers is my trade.

There are ears open even in sleep, for the River has its own secrets. They are flotsam, jetsam on the tide like smooth-washed stones and water-worn wood. They may wear the costume of poor players, but Dahlia's children know what lies behind the masks of ordinary things. String in your mind the web of this world; compile its topography. The spider cannot catch you. For all its many eyes, false movements, like false knowing, will always spin a spider towards a false prey. Others pay me handsomely for the knowing I possess. Such trust they give, when all the while I could be sending them to the spider's maw!

But of course that's not good for business — except when it is.

## All the Puppets in the Show

I have eleven twisting paths of knowledge that have grown thick and reliable with time and my careful pruning. Through all the winding streets of Bazaar, through the web of roads that knits Vimary together, they unfold like birch branches, generating new branches of their own and new leaves to help them bring the light of knowledge back to my central store.

Only eleven now. I used to have twelve, but there's a price that must be paid when you rise above the forest. Every caravan's scout knows that height is the best perch, but to be so tall and see so much attracts the most vindictive of lightning. I have been growing a new shoot. She managed to push her own inquisitive head through the pages of my bark, and accomplishments like that should be rewarded.

This Doll. My little Forgiver exaggerates the doom of its loss. I do not doubt its value for her preservation, but perhaps it would be a lesson well learned for the Nation to experience the wrath of the Child. She is disregarded by the Pillars and stifled by the Fates. Only Dahlia understands that Agnes is as much Fatima as Her Mother was — something Raissa should recognize especially well. Still, there are too few Marians left in the world with valuable information still unrevealed to let any fade away just yet. And their trust must be earned, not bought. I shall send my fledgling in aid. Soon to be a woman in her own right, Korain would make an excellent Stealer. She is courageous, bright and crafty, though her youth makes her rash. This matter shall make an excellent test to temper her, to see if she is worthy to flourish in the shade of my guild.

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster



### Shahana, Little Trickster of the Whisper Stealers Guild

Once of the Golden Wheel, Shahana is a living trick upon the whole Tribe. When she reached the age of 30 summers she convinced everyone that she had married an Evan and left the caravan, against all tradition, to live with him. Instead, as soon as Shahana broke from her caravan, she installed herself in quarters near the center of Bazaar, and took to doing the work of the guild which she had founded.

Now well into middle age, Shahana is the undisputed head of the Whisper Stealers, and sits at the center of a vast web of knowledge and information. Of course it is not easy to run a ring of spies who would just as soon spy on her or each other as upon anyone else, but Shahana wouldn't have it any other way. The subtle interplay of secrets, lies, deceptions, half-truths, and painfully gleaned information is the best game she can conceive of and she loves it more than life.

Highlights: Determined, Intelligent, Devious.

Attributes: APP +1, CRE +2, INF +2, KNO +2, PER +1, PSY +1, WIL +1, HEA +1, STA 30.

Skills: Combat Sense 1/+1 Disguise 2/+2, Dodge 1/0, Etiquette 1/+2, Forgery 2/+2, Grooming 1/+1, Hand-to-Hand 1/0, Human Perception 2/+1, Interrogation 2/+2, Investigation 3/+1, Leadership 2/+2, Lore (Tribal, Fallen) 2/+2, Music 1/+2, Notice 3/+1, Read/Write (Tribal, Dahlian Code, Yagan, Evan) 2/+2, Sleight-of-Hand 1/0, Sneak 2/0, Streetwise 2/+2, Theatrics 2/+2, Synthesis 2.

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster

## The Play

I have traveled all this long black night through the heart of the Discarded Lands. I move on swift feet, on the surface of the River's currents, and even the sun in all its raging fire has not beaten me to the Caravan of the Red Dawn. A Keeper told me once that this sun of ours moves 20 clicks in the breath of a moment. Poor deluded fools. They do not realize that nothing exists that is swifter than Dahlia.

Down below, bodies streaked and stained in the blood-rust dust of the road move in twisting, languid movement, flickering firelight illuminating their skin like harvest moons. Limbs akimbo are all angular and strange, yet somehow the dance, set to the heartbeat of a single kettle-skin drum, remains fluid and soft edged. Pristine gleaming silver masks, unmoving and blank, hover above painted skin in peculiar disconnection. Down below there is a spirit moving into freedom from the confines of his former body. A Death Masque.

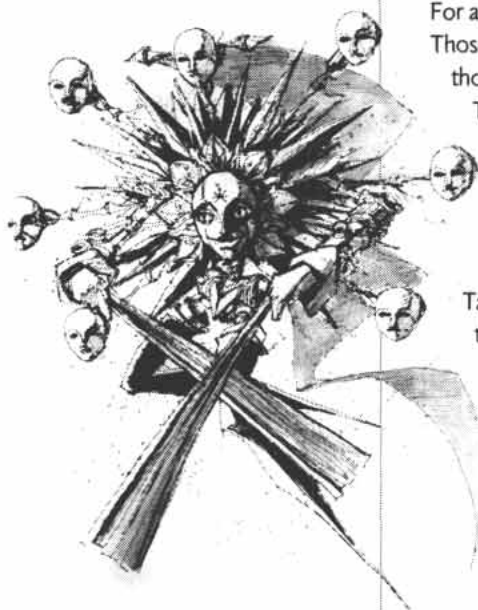
As I descend the last hill, there in the center of their rhythmic circle I can see a pyre, an outline of a body woven in bedding hay and bundled wood. The form within is still and unmoving. It does not wake and rail and protest like the living dead do. Near the body wail figures in common dress, speaking words too far away to hear. Although they appear mourning lovers, they are only players of the parts. The lover, if he exists at all, is dancing in the throng.

This is a Dahlian's private play, and I am loath to interrupt it. Korain, my persistent shoot, is in the body of the dance. When she catches sight of the disguise she thinks is the true me, she will come. I will tell her that she shall be given a chance to prove herself. I will tell her of the task I have in mind — better yet — I will tell her Dahlia Herself has set it. It's always amusing to see the eager youths scramble to seize Her favor.

## Friends and Family

## The considerations of Korain, Dahlian in Crest:

So Dahlia has a game of hide and seek for me. A doll — so small a thing to find on a road as wide as Hers. All the fields and forests of Vimary may not be tilled and sown and reaped by Dahlia's hands, but they change and bloom and grow because of Her joy. I'll have to search every bend and hollow, for in Her test it may not appear a doll at all but a stone, a leaf, a sword. It will be where I least expect it, or right under my nose. By the rules of the Trickster? It may even be me.



For a test set by Dahlia Herself, to be performed in such a time, I will need help. Those whom I can trust as Dahlians trust. Help from every caravan — or better yet, those, like me, with the freedom to move with any caravan that pleases them.

Talmique — sister of my caravan, heart of my heart — she will not refuse me, and more, knows those in the far lands where I have never gone. Slake too, my aunt's first son, though blood moves the spirit less than caravan wine, he will help if only for the adventure of it all. Both, like me, are in Crest, and have the same license to move unfettered.

Talmique and I took Crest together, almost five summers ago. We gathered feathers through the forests in the weeks following Tamta, stitched our phoenix wings thread on thread in the same heartbeat. Under the harvest moon at the end of that summer, one after another we vaulted through the circle fires to singe our wings for freedom and transformation. In so doing, our caravan released us to the Tribe, to choose and map our own route. Five years so quickly gone, this Tamta we'll leave our Cresting years behind and take full Flight on the strong and swift wings of the life-caravan that we choose, and that chooses us. These sly Whisperers will have me yet. Talmique and Slake and I, Cresters all, will reveal the doll, win the day and be Dahlia's own this Festival.

## You Only Hurt The Ones You Love

I was born into the Caravan of the Golden Wheel. Although our footsteps never landed on the same spot twice in all the years I traveled with them, we always climbed north through the territory. We'd wind our way through the Evan homesteads and Joanite training grounds, up to the Seven Fingers and often beyond. I can tell you, both tribes are often far too serious. Who needs to be tied down day in and day out? As much as we moan about their gravity, their sense of adventure and human drama strikes the chords of the soul to ring bright. Every caravan knows its audience, and the Golden Wheel played at epics. Vicariously, we lived as families with history and soldiers of triumph and courage. Playing at their duty we were free to leave ours behind.

So now that I'm about to tell Slake and Talmique of the quest set before us, I draw on the sense of urgent purpose that every epic is built upon. After all, I can't tell the others about the Whisper Stealers. What kind of secret-keeper would I be to give such information without a price? I myself only stumbled upon them by Her luck. And besides, I know the Lady will enjoy the grandeur of the tale.

"Come closer now — the wind need not hear my revelations. Do you know how many would trade the season's best crafts to hear my words? You understand that I only tell you two because you are my most trusted and I cannot manage this alone. Mother Trickster has come to me Herself this last night, in the sleeping folds of The River. Embracing me within Her fans, She whispered through the orbs of passing worlds, the pockets of divine slumber, saying that only we on the verge of exchanging our lives' patterns are worthy to take this challenge. Only we, distant from the cradle of family and comfort, might see the true implications for the people of Vimary."

I take my pause. Slowly I glance left, and then carefully right, and once quickly over my shoulder before I slice my voice in half and quicken my words for effect. "An artifact is traveling through the lands at the hands of an infiltrator. In it lies a piece of the Child's Essence, and were it to be lost — dire consequence! — the capacity of the Tribes for hope and laughter and growth would be lost. 'Find the image of the child,' She said, 'find it and bring it to me, and with it you shall bring the salvation of the Nation.'"

## To the Wilderness I Wander

Through the eyes of Talmique, Dahlian in Crest:

"We'll be the talk of Tamta! — and offered the reins by the Lady Herself, no less. I know my steps in this dance already. You remember Benedict, my mother's eldest? Four summers ago, he Flighted with the Caravan of the Morning Star. The last letter he wrote to me was sent by my Aunt Helen from the trading outpost on the other side of the South Tier bridge. His caravan was going on an expedition to the Outlands with the Tinkers when he wrote, but Helen does not travel swiftly since her sickness took hold. She and others stay at the outpost and watch everything that happens on the river. Nothing can come by way of the bridge that she does not see, and few boats escape her sharp eye. Had I been foolish enough to steal this treasure out from under the Lady and Her sisters? I'd get it and myself as far away from the island as possible.

"I'll go and pay Benedict and dear old Aunt Helen a visit. If anyone tries to get the doll out of Vimary it will end up in my hands."



### Korain, Dahlian in Crest

Korain learned her lion's heart from the Joanite heroines she portrayed in adventure epics as a child. Although adept on stage, she won the caravan's praise by her tale spinning, a skill that was kindled and encouraged by her great grandmother Salina, the Caravan's Mother and a tribal Lore Keeper.

Recently, when Korain while trying to set up a particularly devious trick on someone she thought was a reclusive and stuffy old Yagan in Bazaar, she managed to catch the rare sight of Shahana out of disguise. Although she has never let on that she knows Shahana's identity, her discovery has led her to the realization that the Whisper Stealers do indeed exist and she has been sniffing around in an attempt to sign up. Though Shahana finds Korain well suited to the guild, she thinks the girl's impulsive idealism may lead her into trouble.

Highlights: Overconfident, Curious, Idealistic

Attributes: AGI +1, CRE +2, INF +1, PER +1, WIL +1, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 25, ULD 4, AD 3.

Skills: Combat Sense 1/+1, Dance 1/+1, Disguise 1/+2, Dodge 1/+1, Haggling 1/+1, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Human Perception 2/0, Investigation 2/+1, Leadership 1/+1, Lore (Dahlian) 1/0, Notice 2/+1, Read/Write (Tribal, Dahlian) 1/0, Sleight of Hand 1/+1, Sneak 2/+1, Streetwise 1/+1, Theatrics 1/+1, Synthesis 1.

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster

## In the Shadow of the Rakers

From the memory of Slake, Dahlian in Crest:

"You allow yourselves to be flattered. Think for a minute! If the Nation's safety is at stake, do you think the Lady would leave it to the hands of you and yours alone? This tale is missing some essential twist. Either it is a lesson to be learned, a test of skill and cunning, or it could be that you are not the only one to be given the task. We must move quickly if we are to win this game.

"I suppose the outpost is worth looking into. However, this artifact, if it is what you say it is, is one of the most valuable items in the Nation's possession. If I had such an artifact and knew both its value and its contraband nature, I would take it to the center of all mazes. There is no better place to find a buyer or a secret trove than in Bazaar, and because all the caravan's routes begin and end in that labyrinth, it's the best place to start. There is information to be had there on all things in the city — and we will find it out."

## Vouchsafe

A spy in the shadows hears Korain speak:

"And that's why I involved you, dear cousin. You've always been more adept than I at deciphering the rules of the game. You can always find the hidden stories behind stories. I'll stay on with you in Bazaar. No fear, Talmique, dear heart, I'll arrange to be in constant touch with you. I have a friend in the Envoy Guild who owes me a favor or three. You know they move faster than anyone does, and although all of the envoys have sworn oaths of discretion, she can be trusted more than most. You'll know her by the track of rabbit paws across her face, just here, and can entrust her with your private word. She'll have it to me by the breath of the wind."

Taking leave of her compatriots, the secret-teller even brushes me as she passes. To them I am rough and crumbling stone; my illusion is their truth and they do not know I can hear them. Fools to think there is any corner of Bazaar where secrets are safe. In these shadows I make my fortunes, and there are those who will pay dearly for my knowing.

## The Dark Trade

The observations of Korain, Dahlian in Crest:

As twilight falls, the music and madness of Bazaar sift away. Vendors in the squares trundle home to count their coffers. Dancers, entertainers, beauties and beasts make their way underground to drink holes and flesh markets, leaving the winding ways quiet and empty. Few dare to linger in the ominous shadow of the Skyrealms' reach. From up ahead, as Slake and I make our way to the northern emporium, two figures, squat and Tribal, dare to wait a while under the belly of the ominous dark. In the quiet, the Tribal's voice comes, soft and persistent and deep in pitch.

"Don't look at me so plaintively, I've given you my offer. I know it's not your fault. You were very brave to leave your people to come for the father, but you have to be practical. They'll never let you wander through tribal lands in search of him, and even if you did find him, who you think would take your word over his? They'd probably take you on Hom, but should your sweet bundle be subjected to that wretched life? I know a poor dear who has desperately wanted a child but her body cannot provide her one. It's best for all involved; your burden will be lifted, the child will be given a chance of survival, and she... she will be overjoyed."

With a heaving sob, the bedraggled squat turned into the night, clutching her hands to her breaking heart. The Dahlian trader slipped between the ribs of a broken building with babe in tow, and Slake and I a half-step behind.

## To the Tower

### The midnight whispers of Riah of the Onhom Path, Black Marketeer:

Hush now. Hush, child. Your gurgles and cries are nothing but sweet bait to every beast hovering above. If you bring the wrong one down, your sacrifice is in vain and my best efforts with it. Suckle this valor-root, and find a simple peace, for you'll find no more where you're going. Know that even though your people do not believe, you are watched over by the One Goddess. I am giving you a chance to join Her when amongst your own people you would not. It is with this knowledge that I can do what I do. Know too, that the relics that you buy, though they seem like rubble to both your nation and mine, will buy the safety of a great many people. Listen to me now, as the rough beast comes to claim you — should you return restless, remember that it was your own blood that sold you first.

## Dealing with the Devil

### The observations of Slake, Dahlian in Crest:

Before I can stop her, Korain leaps at the trader in the darkness. Wrestling the child away, she accuses the woman of treason. Through the smile of steel the whispering rasp replies. "Idiot girl. Keep your voice down. Screaming in these shadows is a quick invitation to death. Give me the child." Although I glance overhead into the ominous void, nothing seems to stir.

"I don't feed children to beasts." Korain spit out, her voice, but not her anger subsiding. "This child is a matter of law, not of death. I'll have the Watch upon you. Every Law-Giver in Bazaar will clamor to have your case."

Now close enough, I could see through the night to identify the woman: Riah of the Onhom Path. She laughed at Korain, though the charges were fierce. "You are not so stupid to think that Sheba's children will mount offense with me over a child bred of a savage and a miscreant. You're a Dahlian. You can't possibly be so naive to think that they do not already know. You've never seen a half-breed, have you? Think about it. You have been to the flesh emporiums and know that there exists in the Tribes all manner of desire. How could one or twenty children of mingled blood not exist? And who's to clean up after Tribals who are not wise with their appetites? The honorable Joanites? Lovers? Mothers? Children? These bastards have but one value and so the task is simply left to those who barter best."

"That may be," my cousin says with a smile, "but even so, it is a law you will never find in any Sheban's book. There's not a single Advocate, Law-Giver or Judge that would own up to that particular approval before a crowd. They would, I think, consider this a matter of public law and I doubt they'd smile on any Dahlian presuming to write Law." There was a long pause and the wind — or something even more sinister — howled through the upper floors of the building whose bowels surrounded us.

"Not so naive after all. Very well, then, keep the child. He can be your burden. Let's hope it's not too heavy for you to complete your Flight." And with a smile, she gestures, palm up. "For your silence, this: You must be seeking something to have stumbled upon my shadow. Name the information you need."

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster



### Riah of the Onhom Path, Black Marketeer

In the early years following her Flight to the Onhom Path, Riah was considered something of a prodigy. Since joining the Black Marketeers, however, her rising ambition has led her into confrontations with Xanith, her caravan's Little Trickster. Only certain acquired information has allowed her to escape going the way of the Fallen.

None of the Black Marketeers have ever admitted to having met their guild's Little Trickster, but all of them are sure that one exists. Members of their circle have a habit of quietly disappearing or being quickly exiled from their own Caravans when they step out of line or give up too much information about the guild. Riah has decided that if the position exists, there's no reason she can't step into it, but so far the Trickster has always managed to be one step ahead.

Highlights: Ruthless, Ambitious, Deceived

Attributes: AGI +1, APP +1, CRE +2, FIT +1, INF +2, PER +1, PSY -2, WIL +1, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 25, ULD 4, AD 3.

Skills: Camouflage 1/+2, Combat Sense 2/+1, Craft 1/+2, Disguise 1/+2, Dodge 1/+1, Hagglng 2/+2, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Human Perception 1/-2, Intimidate 1/0, Notice 1/+1 Seduction 1/+1, Sleight of Hand 2/+1, Sneak 2/+1, Speak 2/0 (Squat, Keepspeak), Streetwise 2/+2, Theatrics 1/+2, Trade 1/0, Synthesis 2.

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster



## Talmique, Dahlian in Crest

Small, wiry and remarkably introspective for a Dahlian, Mique could have been lost as a child among the chaos and tumble of the Golden Wheel if not for her deep friendship with the much more outgoing Korain. For a while, her mother and Little Trickster worried she would never find her place on the path of the Trickster, but as she got older she came into her own with a sinuous style of dancing, and earned special renown for her juggling tricks and fire-eating.

Although always considered by the Caravan to be out of Dahlia's favor due to her lack of prowess with Illusion, Talmique's love for her Fatima is deep and sure, and surpasses that of any of her friends. In her heart, she dreams of the wild hills and the rolling waters of places far away.

Highlights: Thoughtful, Kind, Devoted.

Attributes: AGI +1, APP +1, BLD -2, CRE +2, FIT +1, PER +1, WIL +1, STR 0, HEA +1, STA 20, LD/AD 1

Skills: Athletics 1/+1, Combat Sense 1/+1, Dance 2/+1, Disguise 1/+2, Dodge 1/+1, Dreaming 1/0, Grooming 1/+1, Human Perception 1/0, Investigation 1/+1, Music 1/+2, Notice 1/+1, Read/Write (Tribal) 1/0, Seduction 1/+1, Sleight-of-hand 2/+1, Sneak 1/+1, Streetwise 1/0, Survival 1/+2, Theatrics 1/0, Synthesis 1.

The gleam in Korain's eye told the trader the bargain had been met. "I am looking for something that is presently being smuggled out of Vimary."

Riah laughed with a hard joy. "You'll have to be more specific than that, girl. I cannot count the things that come and go."

Curling her voice into an ominous tone, Korain replied, "Something belonging to the Lady and Her Sisters."

This won a wry and curious smile from the trader. "When they travel towards Westholm, a few of the Sail sometimes move people in and out of Vimary. None of us in these parts would be so slow as to steal from the Fatimas. Dahlians may be reckless, child, but we're not daft."

## The Outlands

## Through the eyes of Talmique, Dahlian in Crest:

The South Tier Bridge's shadow falls heavy on the squalor that calls itself a community. My shadow is only a speck on the dark slash across Horn, but no one there lifts a face to see me. Perhaps it is an Outcast who has made off with the doll. It would make for a good game, and I think I would be pleased if that was the way the plot played; Mother says the castaways have much to learn about standing on their own feet. My own Little Trickster says they'll never learn, that even the lost Dahlians think that their island holds more freedom than Dahlia's embrace. They call for liberation, forgetting that it was Her joy that liberated the spirit of the elders from the drudge of the camps. Poor lost children, to be tethered so by desolation, filth, disillusion and despair.

## Close to The Heart

## From the lips of Helen, hobbling Tinker:

Come in, dear, come in. You'd think that the winter would leave well enough alone, wouldn't you? More than two months gone and he's still howling around the edges of the river, just to put cramps in my old legs. Drink your tea, dear. It's my special mix; it'll have you right as rain in no time. I tell you, them squats come from all around at the first red leaf falling, just for a sack or two of my concoction to get them through the great white cold. They'd just about sell their firstborn for the recipe, but I tell them it'd anger the spirit if I told. A few of them seen Dahlia Herself a couple of years back, and you should have seen them go howling into the night. She don't come around so often, cause She knows it ain't good for business.

I don't know why She would, either. Morning Star does good work out there in the wild. They bring back plenty of furs and skins and even sometimes bags of that crazy stuff from the World Before. I never did really understand them, though; they don't work like all the rest of the Caravans. Poor things, to be out of Dahlia's favor like that. Between the Discarded Lands, them blasted Rust Wastes and here, they hardly even get back to Bazaar but for the Liberation Plays and Tamta.

To be honest, before your brother went and joined up, I always wondered if they was all the people none of the other families would take. You know; better the back end of Vimary than the Island of the Lost. I guess though, some people just carry so much lust for adventure and danger that they don't have any room for common sense — no offense to your brother, you understand. Sometimes they don't even stick together! Groups of 'em go out into the wilderness on their own. Scouting parties, I guess. . . but who ever scouted for months on end? I'm sure you'll do better, dear. You always was the one with the sense. Take with the Caravans of Bone Road or the Onhom Path. Circle free with the Tinkers or the Heartland's bright beat. Stay close to the winding city and you'll stay close to Dahlia's heart.

## From Benedict

Folded in the pocket of Talmique's coat:

'Mique,

Mother tells me that you are aching again to be on the road, to travel and see the sights that only those who wander wide and free can ever know. She worries about you, thinks that you yearn to leave the embrace of Dahlia. I know better, little sister. I know why you wish to wander.

On these roads and in these wilds Dahlia is with us always. She is the wind that rattles the leaves against the branches of the trees and the singing song of every season passing. She is the rush of the river as it roars and pounds. She is the dying light of the sun that paints the sky in spilt wine and burnt orange at every fall of night.

Do not let them blind you. Even in the cage of the camps many feared to break free, but Dahlia threw open the gates to give us the world. We can't let them make a cage for you in Vimary.

Dream and dance, my sister, and someday you will join us.

## Creation's Way

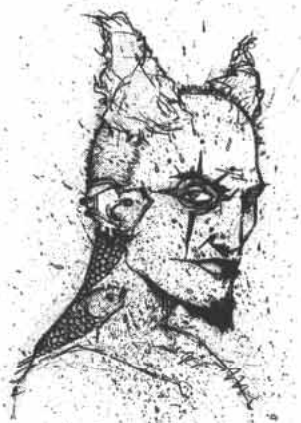
The observations of Slake, Dahlian in Crest:

A winding road that leads everywhere and nowhere at once, Creation's Way is littered with carts and a multitude of people in a beat-banter of bartering; it's part of the fugue that composes Bazaar. Here, the best and brightest of the Dahlian artisans hock their wares. There are always members of most Caravans present, so I mill through a tumult of carts, dropping the scent of curiosity for those in the know and willing to sell.

Old Em of the Sail is selling that which all the Lady's dancers crave. Soft, flimsy, fluttering in the wind, there is no other material like it. She calls it silk, a name as soft and caressing as the fabric itself. The Sail learned the arts of spindling thread and weaving from the Evans in Griffentowne. Spun in silk, functional clothing becomes an art form; a rarity in tribal cloth. Magdalen's children covet the texture of it, Evans finger it enviously. It is said only one person in all of Vimary has the full knowledge of its making, and that five adults each generation are apprenticed in only a single part of the process.

As I ask her if she has any dolls for sale, I watch her eyes. Nothing but smiles in them as she pats me on my cheek and tells me no, that dolls are best made of weaver's cotton.

A few steps past her, a Joanite Templar tells a harrowing tale to a busily sketching Bone Road artisan. Before parting they will have decided on a design for a suit of Pellis Armor. Having learned much from the Yagans, the Bone Road produces a singular kind of multifaceted artist. The Dahlian will tattoo the design upon the flesh of a living cow. After several months of conditioning, the cow will be slaughtered, skinned and served at a feast in the Templar's honor. The skin, by skills learned from the Pellis Artisans, will be tanned and preserved. Afterwards, it will be crafted into a supple suit of leather, splendid in personal legend.



### Slake, Dahlian in Crest

Born of the Sail, Slake is as lax and changeable as the water of the Great River. Through his Cresting years he's dallied with every Caravan in the Tribe, but truth be told, he'd just as soon Crest forever, belonging to everyone and no one at once.

Always looking for the angle, the upper hand, the trick beneath the magic and the face behind the mask, he gets himself in over his head by pointing out the ploy he's discovered to anyone watching.

Although some excuse his incautious words for thickness, Slake drops the little bombshells on purpose; he considers it a test, and a means of concealing more valuable observations he's made.

Highlights: Sly, Friendly, Paranoid

Attributes: AGI +1, CRE +1, INF +1, PER +1, PSY -1, WIL +2, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 25, ULD 4, AD 3.

Skills: Acrobatics 1/+1, Athletics 1/0, Boating 1/+1, Combat Sense 1/+1, Disguise 1/+1, Dodge 1/+1, Gambling 2/+1, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Human Perception 1/-1, Investigation 2/+1, Music 1/+1, Navigation (Land) 1/0, Notice 1/+1, Read and Write (Tribal) 1/0, Seduction 1/0, Sleight-of-hand 1/+1, Streetwise 1/+1, Theatrics 2/+1

## Careless Capture

It's true that the Caravans are competitive, but the artisans are always willing to teach each other if it means creation that's beautiful, innovative or profitable. Whether knowledge is bartered or exchanged, tricked or stolen, the end products are spectacular. You'd think the other tribes would mind us in their market, but it doesn't usually turn out that way. Strictly speaking, we don't make their goods. That artisan won't guarantee that the Templar's armor won't rend at the claws of a Koleris, but come hell or high water the wearer will make heads turn when in attendance at the Challenge.

It's like that with Dahlians — each Caravan learns and caters to the audiences on its routes. It's the only way to make sure our pockets stay filled in the long run. Besides, because we all only get together at festivals, the caravans are like night and day to each other. Most of the other tribes don't trust us, but it's really just because they can't pin us down. When I ran with the Sail, the Evans and Joanites in Westholm were like our second cousins, but I understood and trusted Squats better than I ever did a Sheban. Every Dahlian has a different conception of the Tribes. I don't think there's any caravan that doesn't spend some time with the Evans or the Joanites, but nobody understands the Yagans like the Bone Road or the Lovers like the Heartland. Nobody but the Onhom Path can really stand the Shebans. Our sisters in the Nation are never truly close to us, but those we know the best are those we love the most.

Too caught up in weaving webs of my own thoughts, the tumult surrounds me before I hear it coming. A thunder of sound, shouts of a thief as the Watch crashing into the road before me, spilling carts and wares under their clumsy feet. . .

## The Show Must Go On!

From the boasts of Jass of the Heartland, Interventionist:

. . . and that Slake just stood there like a daft child and let them take him. He only started to scream up his innocence when they cuffed him upside the head and shoved him in a sack, dragging him down the alley for a beating. Now, we couldn't have any of that, 'cause this is the kid Malicat wants for the Guild. I'd been tiding up the River all afternoon, just waitin' for a chance, and I duck into that hole in the wall and come out the mouth of the alley looking like Old Elena, straight into the path of the brutes. I get knocked sprawling and when I jerk up, open my eyes — all full of fright and confusion — I open my mouth and let choke-cherry stain froth out and down over my chin.

You should have seen the horror on good Cap'n Tern's face when he sees who I'm looking like. Old Elena might be half-blind and half-deaf and half-mad, but it doesn't change the fact that she's Judge Dirus's husband's mother, and you know how protective the judge's been since John passed last fall. Aara's in before you know it, wetting her hands in the cherry blood and screaming for the nearest healer, the nearest Law-Giver, for Judge Dirus herself! She beats the Cap'n about the chest and as I'm rasping out a fine blood-choked gurgle, damned if half the Cap'n's regiment don't turn their tails and run! Better yet, the other two drop the sack and grab on to the Cap'n — better to blame than be blamed. Doesn't take long before Pierre's got some Agnite kids helping him pull the sack away from under the cart and switch it for a new prize. The switch made, I heave up and cough and sputter and spit, calling Aara off:

"Child! Child! Don't be bothering the man! Somebody's got to keep law in this town. Ain't his fault I couldn't see a donkey if I was staring it in his face! Girl! Get off him and calm yourself. You got to know that messin' with the wrong people will get you nothing but a pile of dung! Get over here and help me home, now." Last I saw was the Cap'n cuffing his men in the head and dragging the sack down the alley. Ain't nothing better in the world than being part of the Players, I tell you. We get all of the plot and none of the tragic ending. But I'd give up drink for a month if only I could have seen the Cap'n open up the sack to beat on his new bag of horse pucks!

## Speaking with Hallucinations

### The bruised thoughts of Slake, Dahlian in Crest:

From the stillness outside the rough burlap womb I find myself wrapped in, the voice comes ragged and wry, "You broken?" Looking out, I see a face I've seen before, tattooed with a maze that spins a chaos to its features and split with a grin to match.

I can feel a sheepish smile edge across my face as I emerge from the bag with the knowledge I've been saved. "Little more than a few bruises."

His face falls serious, the mask of his flesh stretching the cast of his forehead and jowl. "Bruises, you say. Well that's a serious business. No hope for you now, I suppose. You'll surely be dead by morning."

I can't decipher if his words are jest or threat, but if he, too, simply wanted me dead, I'd be dust already. Better to play the game than play it straight — always. I cast my face in grim resignation, making his expression the shattered parody of my own. "I know. Better I should have lost a leg or two than suffer these grievous wounds. One can survive the loss of something as trivial as a head, but bruises? — fetch a Yaga daughter and call for my Masque."

His jaw scowls in a mourning cast and he clicks his tongue, rattling teeth against the metal that loops through his lower lip. "Oh, but son, the Mask does not come when you call Her. Mechanical players can not tell the Feature's role; entrance and exit are the province of the Stage Caster alone. Our characters are merely incidental to the plot."

For a moment, in his words and the devious gleam in his eye, I wonder if he might be the Lady Herself. Surely though, he'd have much to gain if I thought he was, but at the same time, Her dance too would benefit from the rhythm of my mistake. Good playing in Her game if I thought him to be one of my Lady's masks and I turned out in the end to be right. Each being equal in Dahlia's way, my tongue says what it says. There can be no knowing. "Well then, in that instance, if it's to be a case of province, then it is only my providence. My strength of character is that I persevere."

He purses his lips together, considering. "Not severe at all if you shall live."

"But living's death if life becomes severe."

And with that, he claps me on the back and laughs, his face twisting and spindling into a horror of joy. "Stay away from the Watch, lad. They've got orders to make an example of you. It seems the message is meant for a friend of yours. She's poking into bruises that aren't yours."

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster



## Malicat, Little Trickster of the Players Guild

Although Malicat is not the first Little Trickster of the Players Guild, few can even remember his uninspired predecessor. Once a motley band of fools that wandered the paths of Vimary doing morality plays, the Players had very little influence. It was Malicat who taught them stealth and cunning, and Malicat who taught them that if the audience does not know that they have seen a play, they will not know they've been played.

Malicat may seem random in his choices of interventions, but he has an intensely structured sense of the way the world should work — and that structure is a labyrinth of chaos. Much more than a brilliantly creative mind and a wicked tongue, he is a much-cherished mentor and teacher. A favorite of Dahlia, it is he who first received the gift of the Dance of Masks, and although a few outside have since learned it, the highest concentration of those who know its steps are found within Malicat's circle.

Highlights: Cunning, Wry, Unpredictable

Attributes: AGI +1, APP -1, CRE +2, INF +2, KNO +1, PER +1, WIL +1, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 25, ULD 4, AD 3.

Skills: Athletics 1/0, Camouflage 1/+2, Combat Sense 1/+1, Craft (Masking) 2/+2, Disguise 2/+2, Dodge 2/+1, Grooming 1/-1, Hagglng 1/+2, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Human Perception 2/0, Investigation 1/+1, Leadership 1/+2, Lore (Tribal) 2/+1, Notice 2/+1, Read/Write 1/+1, Sleight-of-hand 1/+1, Sneak 1/+1, Streetwise 2/+2, Teaching 2/+2, Theatrics 3/+2, Synthesis 2 (Dance of Masks).

## The Poor Players

From Korain's letter to Talmique:

Every click I moved across Vimary made me sick to think how quickly the doll could be slipping farther and farther from our grasp. Needing to speed my steps, I sloughed the child off on an unsuspecting Evan's doorstep with a note full of tragic love and baleful consequence. They drink that stuff up and will raise him well. I couldn't deal with the wailing brat any longer. 'Mique, how do the other tribes manage to raise children without a caravan's aid? It's no wonder they do so little traveling when the needs of a child are so heavy to bear.

I was fortunate enough to make it to the Sail before it departed Westholm. Only Dahlia knows how I would have caught up with them once they'd set adrift. The sun was sleeping by the time I arrived in the city, and the last lines of the play were unfolding when I finally set foot in the square, the night flickering with bonfires and the laughter of the audience.

On a wide-bodied wagon bed, grotesquely caricatured masks and voices floated and swiveled over grandiose movements in a melodramatic re-enactment of that trial that took place in the Sunken City some weeks past. Although a completely irreverent farce, even the Joanites laughed until tears rolled down their faces. However, when then the judgment was passed, the leaping fire-shadows lent an ominous cast to the stern and twisted features of the High Judge. The convicted's mother screamed and railed at her child, who had betrayed both parentage and Nation. In less than a skip of the heart, the laughing tears had turned to grievous weeping. Dahlia's children know how to tug the emotions like puppets on a string. Now you know and I know that that's not how the story unfolded, but the Sail has the liberty of license — how is Westholm to know? It is the Sail that imprints Vimary's history into Westholm memories. In a generation when few in the core of Vimary's heart remember the truth of the case, it will be this play on the Westholm children's lips that makes a legend of it. It's a better story in the end, a better truth.

## All the World

After the applause faded, crates of cargo were handed down from the wagons.

Everything always fetches a prettier price when the buyers' hearts are made vulnerable by a performance. It's all about timing. I followed the wagons down to the river. My muscles ached from the journey, but I helped them untether the binding lines to lift the bonnets free. In pairs on pairs, they lifted the wagon box-beds from their wheels and turned them up on end; a somersault of wood in air. Portaged on firm shoulders down to the shores of the river, they were fitted and bolted side on side. Others, up the hill, separated the wheels from the axles.

As the youngest children in the caravan sorted through the bonnets and released them from their frames, I could see that there were two distinct varieties. The first, light cloth, was unfolded in three layers, and laced together tightly by the hands of the oldest members of the Sail. The others, made of an oiled heavy canvas, became long thin sacks before my eyes as the children opened them and ran, filling them with air before they tied them off. Like fantastical snakes, they ran them down to the water's edge to lash them to the sides of the box-bed frame. With a heave, the grid formed of wheel axles was hefted into the air and anchored into holes in the wide flat stage. Hand over hand the light cloth was hoisted for a sail and secured.

Dear heart, I wish you could have seen it. You and I wondered at it so many times, in the cocoon of quilts when we were children. It really is the embodiment of the resourcefulness of all of Dahlia's children and a marvel to behold. In one grand, well-choreographed dance set by the joining of voices in rounds of wordless song, the Caravan of the Sail was transformed from a trundle of carts to a single, seaworthy mass.

It would have been perfect, if not for the whispers I could hear in the chorus of voices, whispers that dispersed like milk-thistle wishes in the wind every time I came near. They have secrets that they don't want me to have, Mique, but if the secrets are about the doll, I will chase the wind to catch them.

## Among the Reeds

### The recollections of Korain, Dahlian in Crest:

The Sail moored the ship on the south bank of the river for some reason, in the middle of the next day. When I poked around to find out why we were stopping, a lithe, long-limbed dancer named Dian showed me a series of fine cracks in one of the wagon beds and appointed me to seal them. He talked to me for hours as we worked, and, charming as he was, I may have been occupied, but not fooled. Everyone works in a caravan, but this kind of work is almost always given to those who are wanted out of the way. Few Dahlians have the patience for filling cracks.

There was a sense of anticipation tugging at the underbelly of their evening's laughter. In the early tilt of the moon, I let them see me drowse with wine and tumble off to bed. Several hours in the darkness, long forgotten, I slipped off the boat into the rushes. Down the bank, surreptitious in the moonlight, Laran, the Sail's Little Trickster, was dancing. In the reeds before him, two of his own were gathering the frogs and cicadas that rattled in the night. Their pouches filled, they returned and rolled smooth river stones over the sacks until the angry sounds of the creatures were silenced. Reaching into the bags they coated their hands with the crushed pulp and painted their skins before joining Laran's dance.

As they called on the River the night crept to a slinking hush. All I could hear was the sound of my breathing within, but the water stirred and quickened as a thunder-canoe pressed the shore. The trio of Keepers in it looked uneasy in the unnatural silence. Laran approached them, pulling a package from his pouch. In silence, he met the boat at the shore; in silence, he handed it over. With a gruff nod from one of the Keepers, the water scurried around the canoe that heaved away in the night.

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster



### Laran, Little Trickster of the Sail

Dashing, daring and full of panache, it was Laran's charm, stunning good looks and undulating dance that won him the Sail. An adventurer at heart, Laran has little time or will for the underhandedness of trickery. Like all Little Tricksters, however, Laran understands that lessons must be taught. His lesson is that life is an endless array of experiences waiting to be tasted and touched, if only the Tribes would lay down their burdens and give themselves over into joy.

He believes that lessons can come easy as the wind and the waves, and that people are taught best by example. Most of the Sail seem to agree with him, as together under his fatherly ways the Sail has forged itself a family that has inherited his love of drink, laughter, adventure, dancing and his particularly adaptable stride in life.

Highlights: Swashbuckling, Charming, Quixotic

Attributes: AGI +1, APP +2, CRE +1, FIT +1, INF +2, PER +1, PSY +1, WIL +1, STR 0, HEA +1, STA 30, UD 4, AD 5.

Skills: Acrobatics 2/+1, Boating 3/+1, Combat Sense 2/+1, Craft (weaving) 2/+1, Dodge 2/+1, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Human Perception 1/+1, Intimidate 2/0, Lore (Tribal, Squat) 2/0, Melee 2/+1, Navigation (Land, Water) 2/0, Ritual 1/0, Sneak 1/+1, Style 2/+2, Swimming 2/+1, Teaching 1/+1, Theatrics 2/+2, Synthesis 2 (Puppet Show).

## A Bit of a Thistle

The River drew the sound into its current so well that I didn't hear the footsteps behind me until it was too late. Laran's hands seized my shoulders, and though I tried to wrench and run I was caught fast, pushed forward into the water while I thrashed and gasped for air. Dunked once, twice, and just before the third time I could hear the sound flood back into life again, the thunder canoe in the distance, the symphony of the Outlands, and one of Laran's lackeys shouting something incomprehensible. This last time, I was in for but a moment before I was pulled back and spun around. Eyes on the visitation mark on my forehead, Laran cursed and dropped me into the river.

"Dammit, she's one of ours. Who sent you, little whelp? Who are you spying for?"

I tried to back away, but only bumped into the legs of the third. I looked at them all, coiled up my courage and spit my words at them. "You hurt me, and you'll be sorry. Others know I'm here, and more than that, I know. . . we know what you've given to the Keepers."

His anger boiled and he lunged forward grasping me by the collar and lifting me up so my feet could only kick at the water. He looked at me closely. "I know you, little spy, you're Isobel's child, from the Golden Wheel. Aren't your coffers full enough without mucking about in the business of other caravans?"

I narrowed my eyes and tensed my body, looking him full in the face, pushing my fear away. "I'm not a child. I Crested with Phoenix years ago, and have the Lady's blessing to go as I please. I do not interfere with the business of caravans until the caravan dares to turn its profits at Her expense." I spit in his face. "Take your hands off me."

Although I expected his anger to flare again, a strange expression came over his face, confusion, curiosity, and finally amusement surfaced in a laugh as he set me on my feet and wiped at his face with the back of his hand. "Child, someone has given you false information. Dahlia knows of our business with the Keepers. Where do you think the silks of Her fans come from? They are the only ones who have the knowledge to fix the Silk Weaver, or do you know of a caravan or tribe that has unraveled the secrets of the World Before?"

## A Missive to Westholm

A-

I hope this finds your hands before  
it is too late. One of the three you  
asked me to watch for showed up  
the day before last, and proceeded  
to make herself a threat to our  
Little Trickster. For a moment it  
appeared like she might have placed  
a noose around her own neck, but  
he seems to have taken a shine to  
her "incorrigible impetuosity"  
and now considers her a fledgling.  
She has promised him her silence in  
turn for his aid. I dare not move  
against her now.

Turn back.

The river is watched.

-D

## In Need, In Deed

### A letter from Slake, Dahlian in Crest:

Korain,

The old cat was right. We drowned one of the Watch in drink last night to expose this plot: that brute that seized me in the square? His name is Tern Luther'on and last week he was called up to the Tower of the Northern Star to take orders from one of the Jacobi'ons in the Cavalry. He came back telling his men it was a matter of "divine principle" that anyone bearing the description of you, 'Mique or I should be apprehended at once. As best as I can determine, whoever is behind the theft knows we're getting close and have deceived the Joanites into thinking us fugitives. They've got us pegged for treason, Korain, so keep your masks shifting until I can get this sorted out. I'm heading north with the Onhom Path to see if I can track our Jacobi'on down and find out who's behind it all.

I don't know how long the Caravan will afford me protection. Crester I may be, but Xanith's been on my back since I got here. She's got me cleaning up after the horses and running for water, always looming over my shoulder with an oration about the responsibility of caravan members to each other and the single spirit of the Onhom Path. Either she's trying to shake me loose, or trying to give me what the Evans call a "work ethic." How very un-Dahlian of her. If you ask me, she and the rest of the Caravan have spent too much time doing court dramas and rubbing elbows with the Shebans. It's made them all starch-stiff. Only one easy heart in the bunch really, by the name of Falta Xanith'on. Lowest of the low, he says that Xanith has always been hard on him. I suspect the only reason he stays is because no one else will have him. . .

## Even When it's a Lie

### A letter from Xanith, Little Trickster of the Onhom Path

You're right about this child, Malicat. He has promise and resolve, though if he's to be of use to either you or I, we'll have to work on his subtlety. He relies too strongly on common Bazaar games, teasing out information through a drink or a trade or a gamble. He does not understand that although our job as tricksters is to illuminate the folly of others, we cannot allow ourselves to be branded fools as well. The features of Dahlia change in the shadow of the Pillars; we require a subtler shade of trickery. He, on the other hand, makes himself the axis of attention — it took less than two days for the caravan to gauge that there is some treasure he seeks in addition to his amnesty. Something in textiles, as he seems especially interested in cloth and toys. Joanite eyes narrow on his back and suspicion follows in his wake. Never fear, I am keeping close eye on him, and have won his confidence in disguise. By the work of day he hears my instructions and lectures; by the fires at night he speaks with his vulnerable 'new friend' and I hear the clues he lets slip in his tales.

I do however, have other reasons for writing. It appears I may require the help of your Players; children in Heartfelt have been dying in inexplicable circumstances. Evidence indicates tribal culpability, and fear and anger are growing out of control. Thaim'on and I think it is time for we on the Onhom to assume the investigation, as the embrace of the Law has been able to offer little comfort.

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster



### Xanith, Little Trickster of the Onhom Path

Xanith could be easily mistaken for one of Tera Sheba's children, an image which she prefers to cultivate. Although the services of the Onhom Path have been kept secret, High Judge Shay Thaim'on has frequently held Xanith up to his colleagues as an example of what Dahlians could be if only his tribe would make the effort. Xanith finds herself walking the line between pariah and power. However much the other Little Tricksters consider her a stodgy enigma, her influence and ability to deal with the Lawgivers is valued highly.

The secret that both the Dahlian and the Sheban make efforts to keep under wraps is that they are lovers. In the heat of his passion for her, Shay remains blind to her manipulations of the folds of justice, and affords her more liberty than is perhaps wise. Xanith enjoys her role as a backbencher in the game of Tribal politics, and while she revels in manipulating his ethical boundaries, has herself not escaped several transgressions of the rules of Dahlia's game.

Highlights: Focused, Vigilante

Attributes: AGI +1, APP +1, CRE +2, INF +2, KNO +1, PER +1, PSY -1, WIL +1, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 25, UID/AD 4.

Skills: Athletics 1/0, Combat Sense 2/+1, Craft 2+2, Dance 2/+1, Dodge 1/+1, Hand-to-hand 1/+1, Human Perception 1/-1, Interrogation 1/+2, Intimidate 1/0, Investigation 3/+1, Law 2/+1, Leadership 3/+2, Melee 1/+1, Notice 2/+1 Read and Write (Tribal, Dahlian, Sheban) 2/+1, Theatrics 2/+2, Synthesis 2 (Puppet Show).



## The Water and the Wild

### A page from the journal of Talmique, Dahlian in Crest:

Benedict sleeps now. It's funny. Even though he's a full grown man, his face still softens in sleep to remind me of the child he was, curling under wagon quilts to tell me fantastical stories of the world outside of Vimary. Tonight, under the Goddess' wide expanse of stars, he told me again of the world beyond. All this day he took me through the wilderness showing me the clues of the earth and the forest, of the things that mark the passage of animals and people that I have never known.

Since he was a child, he has collected the pieces of the world and tried to put them together like the painted puzzle-blocks that we Cresters make as Counting gifts for the Young Ones. Yesterday, Vesprus put her arm around my shoulders and told me all about the horizons that the Morning Star calls home, but even she could not answer all my questions. Today Benedict filled in all the spaces that his Little Trickster could not patch. He knows so much that I am tempted to tell him what I am looking for - but unlike the little boy who showed me the pictures in the stars, we are not part of the same caravan. His loyalty no longer comes first to me.

I'll sleep on it. Sleep and decide in the morning.

### A missive from the North.

The contingency has backfired. Rather than stopping the wretched boy, the Joanites have merely lured him north. Be advised, the Seven Fingers are no longer safe. More resourceful than I had anticipated, the boy is digging about and is coming perilously close to uncovering the work we have done.

So, once more, my plans have changed and I will not yet be able to meet with you directly. Do not fear. My rendezvous is still in place and you shall not be denied. I've sent word to our mutual friends and they agree that instructions will be waiting at the Bridge, on your horizon. You will know him by his scars, but be warned that he is not to have the prize, else all is lost.

-A



## Knife in the Dark

### From Talmique's shock-strewn letter to Korain:

Half in and half out of sleep, it's like that waiting moment before you take the stage at Liberation — outside, the whole Nation holds a common breath in hush and there you stand in darkness. The power is before you and the personal behind, that moment where all you are is the pure spirit of metamorphosis. My senses shivered as a tremble of movement fluttered from my throat to belly, excusing itself as dream's anticipation. But something was wrong — my senses filled with a fetid smell of grime and viscous oil. When I opened my eyes, my nightshirt had been cut open and the expanse of my skin, smeared with paint, was stretched out before me on the cot. A squat hovered above my chest, his head bald and his face dripping in a network of horrifying scars.

He held a cruel looking knife, blue-white bone, carved with an angry hand. I lurched sidelong to the floor and swung the legs of the cot against him. As the knife skidded from his hand I saw into his eyes, and they were dismal with a hollow hatred and a clutching sorrow. Korain, they'll haunt my nights. They were the eyes of those who live beyond our Lady's joy; they are eyes that cannot dance. He lunged for me, but his head snapped to the side as his face exploded in blood. As Benedict's staff connected with his skull, his howl sounded more animal than human and he fled into the dark.

I'll write again soon, I promise. Benedict has had a look at this barbarous knife and he tells me we must talk.

## Palaver

### The counsel of Benedict of the Morning Star, Far Traveler:

The wind chilled as I walked beside my mother's only daughter. It spindled off the swollen river, tasting of rotting vegetation and moisture. She did not look at me as we walked, her face distant and troubled. She looked very little like the laughing girl I had once chased about the wheels of wagons. For a long time she had spilled out the story of this doll in a waterfall of words. She paused, our feet measuring out an entire field in silence before she finally sighed; "That must be why he came for me. I have no other plot so dangerous as to warrant my life. I must have stumbled too close. I can only hope we've managed to stop them."

I bounced the knife in my hand. I couldn't stand to hold the thing for too long; the carvings on the hilt writhed unpleasantly against my bare skin. You never actually felt them move, but move they did. It was sickening, like a mockery of Motion. "Perhaps," I said, and bounced the knife again. "Perhaps not. Either way we have to talk, 'cause you're paddling through waters too rough for you."

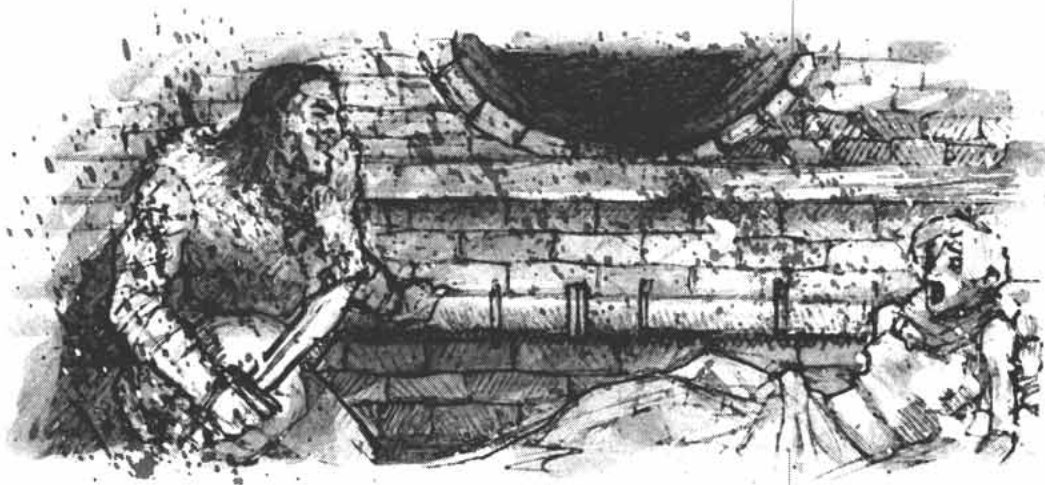
With a nod she walked over to a forked tree, and with a lithe jump settled like a cat in the branches. "Then let's talk."

Leaping up onto the branch above her, I let my feet dangle down into empty air. "This knife bears the markings of a band of squats, unlike any in the surrounds of Vimary. They belong to a dark tribe that lives far upriver to the south and west. They are a disturbing people. That they mean to kill you says clearly that there are too many tracks upon this path."

I felt her face turn up to me, looking through the branches with unasked questions. I knew she wondered how I had learned so much about places that I should never have been. "I met some once, when I went up the river." I continued, "On a mission." I left that to dangle before her. Eventually she would rise to the bait, I knew. It would be good for her to join the Dawn Trodders. Beneath her dancing scarves she had a watchful vigilance and an endlessly seeking curiosity. Hers was the temperament to journey far and learn the things that the conservative among the Tribes feared. She would be a scout and a spy without equal.

For now, however, she stayed focused upon this doll, the center of her current quest. "But why would squats want anything of our Agnes? Especially ones that live so far from us?" Her voice held the curiosity of a child, not the worry of a woman who had just nearly been killed.

A frown formed itself upon my face, a mask of thought. "I do not know." I bounced the knife in my palm and slipped out of the tree, "But I do know of someone who would." With that, we set off into the night, making plans to steal the serpent's fruit.



## 2. The Masks of the Trickster

## Who's Playing Who?

## The quiet tumult of Slake, Dahlian in Crest:

The feeling in this caravan is all wrong. I can't see it, but apprehension crawls all over my skin. This is the play's pause, when fate lays heavy in the air to conspire against the hero. This is the slip of the hidden card in a card trick. I'm being played. Falta Xanith'on is too eager, too convenient, too downtrodden and far too keen to associate himself with me, the known target. I don't know his angle, but I do know he's not who he seems.

Dahlians don't choose lives of misery. Dahlians don't choose the weight of lives measured with menial things. A true Dahlian soul would wither and die in those circumstances. Even if he were extremely tenacious, with a pallor as consistently downcast as his, he would have found himself quickly in exile. Dahlia doesn't teach us to wait for the tides of joy to wet our lives. Instead, when we find ourselves in drought, we dance up rainstorms of revelry; enough to blanket the world.

No, this is the moment to act — or be acted upon. Just enough information to move now. I have the name of the rider that ordered my arrest — Pious Jacobi'on. I've learned who she is, how she spends her days and when I can catch and lure her alone. I have seen enough of her to know that she believes her actions venerate the Warrior's way, but someone has played her for a fool. I have spent all this long night in ritual, and am at the ready. When she surfaces from that tower after morning prayers, I shall bait the Blade to the woods and by trickery's cunning unearth what trickery she has done.

## Into the Madhouse

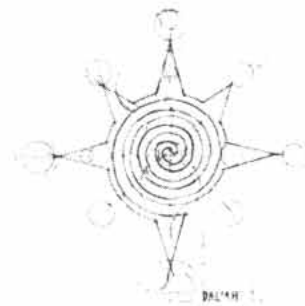
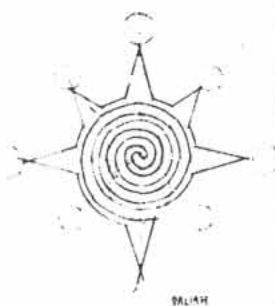
## Slake, Dahlian in Crest, laying in wait:

The predator does not know that she is prey.

Her breath pants in chase, and as she enters the clearing I have made, the River of Dream crashes around me like a torrent, my ritual complete. Slow and fluid in the dance, I rise from my cover in the underbrush and extend the reach of my spine, roll my shoulders back to present my full height. Tiding Dream to me, I will her to see me as I design myself, the gleaming, silent glory of Joan.

I open my eyes to look at her, expecting hers to be following the ascent of my illusion to the top of the trees, but instead she looks at me squarely. Sizing me up, she draws her sword and takes a step forward, "In the name of Joan who blesses my arm with the strength of Her virtue. . . " Dahlia, help me, I've bet my life on a single hand, and now I've lost. I coil inward, steeling myself for the cold blow of her blade, but the words hang hollow in the air, dissipating. In that moment, I am bowled over by a tidal force that threatens to unhinge my mind. Catching up the meager pond of my own work, its ocean rages through me, the trees bend to make way. A great body moves through the twisting, snapping branches and its metal gleams in the new day's sun; The Warrior comes.

Eyes widening, Pious Jacobi'on swings her sword up to clasp its shank in her other hand above her head, addressing her Lady. For a moment I almost believe too, but as the Dream continues to flood through the conduit of my body, I realize I have had help. Peering through the shadows of the trees is Xanith, rigid with focus. Her mouth opens and in resonance through the clearing the voice of Joan is heard: "You know nothing of virtue, child."



## Through the Labyrinth

### From Slake's letter to Korain:

She spilled her story to Xanith in mournful confession, her vainglory stripped away in pieces like her armor, her repentant heart left bare and vulnerable before our image of the Warrior. As I had suspected, she had been caught in a choking web of lies laid by the tongue of an informer. Calling herself Ailes Brûlante, the devious traitor told the Joante that the threat of our plot to bring the Nation to its knees was so great that were the mere news of it hinted to the Tribes, fear and panic would spread across the land like fire in the dry grass of summer.

When the image of the Warrior maintained Her trademark stoicism — merely shook Her great head in disappointment and turned away — the broken soldier wept tears into the earth. Alone, betrayed by her own senses and righteous pride, she backed slowly away from the illusion's path, the dampened soil, the spires in the distance and into the heart of the woods. Her sword, abandoned on the earth, was the last testament of her crucible.

I wonder what will become of her, and with her confession, I wonder if our punishment was too harsh. Xanith tells me that a warrior can not afford to be wrong in a matter of death, that her duty dictated a different path than she took. She says that although the failure lay with the Broken Pillar, left to the mercy of Joante or Judge, the price to be paid would be ours. That sometimes, because they build the law to save those who march in step, we who dance in chaos are not always protected by it and must, as a simple matter of self-preservation, take the law into our own hands.

## Wine, Woman and Song

### To the disgust of Talmique, Dahlian in Crest:

Benedict led me back to the training outpost and down the path a little ways beyond. He pointed through the trees to a gnarled old oak curled like a hunchback over a clearing, where he told me another of this darkly-scarred tribe comes now and again under the pretense of trade. Although the items he brings are somewhat valuable, the only purchase he seems to desire is the satiation of his lust for young female flesh. Warning me to stay silent and out of sight, Benedict slipped off of the path so quietly it was enough to wonder if he'd ever been there at all.

Now, in the nook of that same tree, my stomach curls as I watch the sight that unfolds before me. A squat of the same tribe as my assailant rests under that tree, the crown of his head creased with a circle of scars down over his face and neck, as if fire had once run like water over his skin. Surely a trick of the light against the movement of his muscles, the scars seem to twitch and move as if vile snakes were worming their way under his flesh.

His eyes are fixed on the young Fallen woman before him, filthy hands rubbing at the hare's pelt that hangs from his hips as he advances step by step. Her eyes are wary, resting upon his rough and ragged clothing. Although she keeps a cautious distance, she speaks in low tones that seem to only spur his desire. Although I can not hear them, the scene leaves a bitter poison taste in my mouth, and I can not stand to watch it unfold. I do not need to. His obvious pleasure in her young flesh gives me the means I need to make him spill the seed of his knowing.



## Step Into My Parlor

## The beat of Talmique, Dahlian in Crest:

I have never before known the exhilarating terror of the game, but as I come to the squat's tent to tempt him, my heart pounds in the rhythm of my drums. In the shifting saunter of my steps, in the tilt of my hips, I draw him out, my body the lure. He advances across the grassy glade in a beast's four-pawed crawl, slaving at the tongue, his teeth a poison yellow in the moonlight. The rhythm of my drum rocks and thunders my body. With every thump and sway he stumbles near and growls through his lust.

When the surging tide of Dream crashes out of the drum that has bound it, my body blazes for a moment before becoming the image that he can not resist. I embody his pinnacle of desire and trust. Before my limbs sink to lead in exhaustion from the dance and Dream, I reel his confession from him, baiting the fulfillment of his lust in trade for his information. His words spill from his mouth in a thick distracted tumble, telling me of the doll, of traitors in the Nation, of the rendezvous to come. I fall beneath his seething, filthy hands pawing at my skin, and call out sharply. Within seconds, Benedict's face and blade rise behind the filthy shoulder, and I hide my head to escape the flood of blood that pours from his slit throat.

## Demands from the Outpost

Ailes -

Read my words carefully, you  
dancing bitch.

This shit-covered, rank, old, ugly  
bastard wanted a price for his  
information, paid in flesh. That  
wasn't part of the deal. I'd have cut  
him open and sliced his heat from  
him if the contact wasn't needed. I  
might just come back and do that  
later.

No more messengers. No more go-  
betweens. I'm not falling for this  
shit. I call the shots now. You want  
this doll? Then you'll meet me up  
close and personal in the square  
south of the Winter Emporium in  
two days at dusk or you won't see it  
at all. And don't even think of  
double-crossing me, or I'll hunt you  
down and slice up that warped  
little body of yours — and I'll get  
our new friends to help.

- Hyrin.

## Tangled Web

Sweet Korain,

Forgive the stain on my words and the parchment and worry not, for it is not my life that bleeds away. Benedict even now drags the squat into a copse of trees, growing cold now that the last bit of life has leaked out of the slash across his throat. Know, my heart, that west to the river's end and south halfway to the horizon lives a dark tribe that nips our heels. According to the one we have slain, their festering ways have tempted the hearts of some of the Nation. As the delivery of the doll is set for the third day of Tamta, where only Dahlian feet spin, it seems the infection spreads even among the Trickster's children. There, in the chaos of our future, our prize shall be within our grasp.

## Heresy

From the mind of Korain, Dahlian in Crest:

Their letters came like a windfall, just as I was beginning to doubt the game. Talmique tells me the infidel is ours. What kind of Dahlian is so unwise as to try to play the Lady's strings? But 'Mique's right; no one but a Dahlian could know the road to Tamta. We ourselves won't know the way until it falls before our eyes in Dahlia's light. Slake served up the traitor's name, this Ailes Brûlante, and I myself have discovered little enough — until this moment. In the mountain of Salina's books I have found my piece. I cannot be thankful enough to our old caravan mother for leaving these writings to us. So few of Dahlia's children write things down; instead, stories pass from mouth to mouth through the generations.

This name is no more than a feather dusting at the truth, like the puns and riddles we fit into plays. I have found a World Before song, in which the singer threatens a skylark. The singer tells the bird how she plans to pluck its feathers, its beak, and its "ailes," its wings. In the Farnzay tongue, this traitor calls herself Burning Wing; she masks herself in our Phoenix. The others fly to me now. We three shall pluck you at Tamta, gentle skylark.

## In Pain, Hope

From the Book of Freedom, by Salina, Mother of the Golden Wheel:

I never knew the World Before. Most people of the slaughtered time were long dead by the day I was born. The few who remained in my early years were broken, mad husks, kept young by the Takers, who railed and frothed and wept into the earth. As a child I thought the World Before had been a maze of lunatics. In fact I often wondered if it had ever existed at all, or if it were some delusion that came in the veil of age. I was born in the shadow of the Takers, and knew nothing but fear and pain and filth and chains for the first seven years of my life. My body still bears the marks they left on me, though they are long faded by the winds and sun of freedom. The scars on my mind and my spirit have not been so lucky.

It was in a cowering winter when he came. Although his eyes held a deep and shaking sadness, they embraced something that I had never seen before. It was something I had never known, for even the word — hope — was not part of my language. He spoke only once to me, perhaps only once at all. Thrown back into the pens in a shaking heap, I could hardly stand. I had been cut in an exacting grid all down my body, in each square the Beasts had tested a new poison against my razed flesh. I was a tangle of burning infection, and in my fever he took me in his arms. Returning me to the barracks he whispered close, his breath a cloud in front of my eyes. "Hold, child, hold strong. She is coming."

## In Hope, Laughter

I wouldn't understand what he meant until days later. I awoke to a restless coil starting to build in my belly as I lay in a deserted corner. All around the room, the listlessness and depression that hung like a pall in the air was lifting. Everywhere the tempo was picking up, and one by one people emptied into the night. I didn't know what was going to happen, and the beat brought me out into the cold night air. Somewhere, over the wall in another camp, something was happening. A sensation of calm deliberation was expanding in the sky, like the air itself was knitting together. Just as quickly the air rent itself apart, reeling in a whirlwind. Debris was swept away, and the buildings began to quake and disassemble. Although we were not moved, pieces of wood and metal slipped into the funnel and were polished by its force, fused into one. Once more, the smells of waste and death were exiled and new ones, of far away lands and spring and life, came in their stead.

Each pale face turned up to the marvel that formed before our eyes, and in each face a light began to kindle, a light that I would learn in time to call joy. In the gyre of Her forming, the reflections of our faces became solid, swarmed and coagulated and forged upon each other and Her masks were born. All the eyes of all the faces of Dahlia opened, as did Her many mouths, and from them a sound came forth, sweeter than anything I had ever known. Her laughter, more infectious than any Taker's poison, ignited in our hearts, and we too began to laugh.

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster

 In Flames, Resurrection

She raised Her fans high into the air and snapped them open. The light of our laughter gleamed in their spread and burned a thousand times brighter. Wings of fire burst forth and Her companion, Phoenix, an eagle as bright as the sun, flew in freedom through the camp. His wings brushed the skeletons of buildings and the bodies of the dead. They scorched our chains and prison walls. All around us, our past of suffering, of despair and of pain, burned to cinders in a raging flame. Long into the night, we, the new children of Dahlia, fortified by Her joy, did what we had never done before and what we have not stopped doing since. We danced. Danced in Revolution. Danced in Freedom. Danced and wept and sang and shouted. Danced on the smoldering grave of the world we knew. Finally, we danced for the blessing of the New World that we knew would be built upon its ashes.

 Tamta**Sampson, Agnite Mascot of the Red Dawn, on the Eve of Tamta:**

Yeah, sure. You've been trying to track it down every year, what makes you think you're going to find it this time? The only way you're gonna see a Tamta is if you ride with a caravan. You can go ahead and try, my Little Trickster even says if you can find it, you can stay. She says once a long time ago when Agnes was brand new a bunch of the Children managed to find it and they had the best time ever! No, you're the bugface. You're just jealous 'cause you can't go. While you're getting beat up in Playground, I'm being treated like gold. They say it's bad luck not to have one of us riding with them. I get the best sweets and toys and get to play the best tricks on people — and I don't have to do anything I don't want to.

No. It's a secret. I can't tell you what happens. Well. . . Maybe if you give me that new knife of yours, I could tell you some. No not that one, the good one. You only get what you pay for.

Tamta is the biggest party Vimary's ever seen, but nobody in Vimary's ever seen it but Dahlians and us and them other kids way back when. It goes for three days and never stops. Remember when we made Sal give that pretty ring she found to Khronos so we could watch them pictures down in Theren's Den that time? It's kind of like that. Everything's full of color and moving all over all at once, though there's not any rabbits that talk like Keepers.

 Past Present Future

The first day is all about the past. Dahlians don't hold on to that much, so they get it all sorted out right away. All the Little Tricksters have a meeting where everybody talks over everybody else. Course I never seen it! Do I look like a Little Trickster to you? I wouldn't want to go anyway, 'cause they tell me it's about boring stuff like trade routes. But then after that they open up this huge area and everybody in the Tribe goes in and fights with everybody else. It's the funniest thing you've ever seen with all of them yelling and screaming and whaling on each other. It's one big, fall-down, drag-out, no-rules fight where everything that they got mad at all year comes out. If it don't come out on the Bitching Field, it don't come out at all, cause after that everybody forgets about it. They're too busy drinking and laughing and dancing. Oh — and all the people that were in love all year break up, and sometimes on the second or third day they get back together and sometimes they don't.

The second day is all about today, nothing before and nothing after. There's so much noise you can't believe it. The drums start up at dawn and go all the way through the night. When the sun's highest there's a Death Masque that the Bone Road does, but it ain't for a person, it's for the Turning. Turning of the year, dumb-head! When that's done, they dance and they spin and trade ideas and everybody pulls pranks on everybody else. All the caravans spy on each other, but most of all everybody laughs, even when the joke's on them. There's no crybaby bed-wetters like you in Dahlia's Tribe. Are too. I guess you don't want to hear any more, then.

Thought so. Third day's all about the future, of course. They have competitions and each of the caravans give their ideas for who gets to do what Fatima in the Liberation Festival, and all the Little Tricksters decide how it'll be. After that, all the Cresters take their Flights. They've been chasing the caravan they want all Tamta while the caravans that want them chase them right back. They got to be sure that the caravan they choose wants them good enough. They climb up on top of the Flying Tower and they shout for the caravan they want until the caravan comes down below. Then they leap into the air and if the caravan wants them, they catch them. If they don't, then. . . Splat! All over the ground!

It is too true. Maybe someday I'll do it myself. How would you know? Our Little Trickster says I can if I want to. She says Dahlia likes Agnes best so Agnites are as welcome as Her own and Agnes likes Dahlia best so sometimes She lets us stay on with our caravans. You'll see. I'll be seventeen and jumping into the arms of the Red Dawn when you're seventeen and changing diapers with the Barren.

## We Three

### The salutation of Korain, Dahlian in Crest:

I almost didn't make it here in time. Back up at the entrance I got caught up in a tumble between the Tinkers and the Red Dawn. You should see the mess! The Tinks rigged up a vat of flour by the side entrance. When the Dawn came through, Clouds! It's all over them, hair, clothes, gear, and with all their road dust, everything's coming up pink. There's a full-out fracas going on up there now and I ended up smack in the middle of it. Only reason I got out so fast is somebody pulled me out — a Little Trickster by her mask, though I don't know whose. I didn't even get a chance to thank her before she dove back into the fray with a lively laugh. Praise Dahlia, I love this time of year.

Now keep an eye out, you two, for anything off kilter. We've only got two days left to nab the turncoat and win the day. Let's go.

## What the Mask Doesn't Hide

### From the lips of Slake, Dahlian in Crest:

Don't look now, both of you, but there's a Dancer off behind you leaning against the wall at the edge of the pit. She's lank and gangly and not where she's supposed to be right now. In fact she's not who she's supposed to be. That mask she has on is made of plumes so red they must have been plucked from a cardinal's wing, and there around the eyes it's all painted a brilliant green. Now, quick, look before she turns back again.

See? She's of the Bone Road, and they don't wear anything so full of shine. A bit of yellow maybe, some white, but mostly they're stitched of earth and night and bone and moss. Besides, the Bone Road's all up top getting ready for the Turning Masque. I rode with them a while last year, and just about now they should be unloading their wagons. Everybody in Laila's caravan can do as they please the first night of Tamta but come the morning of the second day they're expected to prep for the Masque.

Quiet now, come over here and look at these Tinker Trinkets so I can get a better look. The slope of that green and the surge of the red. . . they look like. . . wings! Korain — Phoenix wings on fire!

Damn it, there she goes — don't worry. We'll catch her.

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster

## Pride of Place

From the words of Laila, Little Trickster on the Bone Road:

So that Slake is behind it, is he? That Crester that rode with us last year? Why would he want to frame you for a crime? Oh, oh, oh. . . I've the steps of this. This would be his Flighting year, wouldn't it? Make you the blameworthy in a plot against the Trickster's Circle; cast fickle shadows on the Bone. By hound and hare and hapless scheme, I know his hope. He's fledging to the Heartland. Those dogs have been trying to curry favor all season to get first stage at The Festival.

No, no my pet, bright heartbeat you may be, but I've an aching in my old bones that knows how the weather will change. Why should the Heartland have the prize? It is we that know that entropy's hand is the one that leads the fallow fields of winter back to the fertile blessings of spring. Leave the Heartland for the Mother or the Lover, for no yearning comedy shall touch the wrinkles of the Crone. No. No one knows the slink and rattle of Baba Yaga like the Bone Road, and I've learned a few tricks in my time that serve as well as a curse.

Bring on your chicks. I will see to their hatching.

## Tests and Trials

From the recollections of Korain:

. . . and suddenly, it seemed that the whole of the Bone Road was upon us with a howl and a dizzying spiral. Bodies careened and jostled against us in the bedlam. They screamed and wailed wordless cries that tumbled over tunnel walls in ritual preparation. The Bone Road believe that a Player must know, in the shadow of the Masque's stage, the thin line that separates the Motion of life from the Illusion of still death. Before a Masque this big, they fight and fist each other in brawls. They dare each other to death-defying feats of bravery to bring the face of mortality sharp before their eyes and kiss from it a taste of their own deaths. In a Bone Road Masque, the cowl of dark change and bright renewal doesn't only mark the loss of a year, a love or a friend, but of the Players as well.

Slake pushed 'Mique and I on to find the doll as he surged ahead, dragging most of the crowd with him. Within steps, wagons were tumbled, fists flew and we lost sight of him in the fray. We tried to slip away, but were caught up in the web again. A circle of calm bone masks hid the faces of those who owned the jostling, jabbing limbs. Poked and prodded, we were pushed towards a path of fire, bright seething coals of pain meant to taunt death and pull the River's current; for us it was only a trap. 'Mique squeezed my hand and let it slip free as she stepped forward into the flames. She turned towards those bone visages screaming and writhing in pain, as her clothes kindled tongues of fire over her skin. They surged forward in a panic, as they had meant only to deter and frighten us. Mique's best performance yet turned the tables sharply back upon them. In the chaos of their fear, I managed to slip away.



## Where the Eyes Don't Go

### The revelation of Korain, Dahlian in Crest:

Only the extras are straggling now in the rooms behind the curtain: Handlers, the Cresters fledging to the caravan, prop-smiths and set-hands under the fidgety direction of the Stage Caster. From the look of them, their eyes roving in every corner as they tend to last minute details, it seems they too have been warned of our coming. Flat against the wall, I edge my way past the wheels of a wagon and watch a moment. Their eyes move over the entrances, naturally. They glance over nearly every wagon, crate and bundle, though worry the edges of none in particular. Maybe Slake is wrong; they may not have the Doll at all. But... no. All eyes in motion. All eyes on all things, but carefully not on one. A wagon in back, so road-worn it might be a Tinker's. It's a gamble, but what isn't watched is always as important as what is.

Snaking behind anything that will serve me a cover, I make my way to the back. It takes less than a moment to slice the canvas bindings of the bonnet but as my hand breaches the inside the wagon and my fingertips brush the air, they shake with a power within. Its power is built on anger, a sense of driving, petulant fury. At last! Clambering inside the box-bed I hunt through the quilts and find the Doll, a mother holding a child, looking far less ominous than it feels. Almost out of the wagon — down! A streaking silver blade arcs before my eyes and I can drop down and roll under the wagon. Footsteps in chase around the wheels, as I surface and bolt away, expecting the chaos of the Bone Road to descend on me once more. But there is no shade of the fighting or the fire-walking left.

Where has the pit gone? I see nothing but labyrinthine tunnels in all directions. That one. It's as good as any other, now.

## Into the Tunnel

### From Talmique's letters to Benedict:

Once they'd realized that I wasn't really on fire, the Players of the Bone Road started to surround me, but Slake came through in the nick of time, blowing the horn that sounds the call of the Masque. The Stage Caster started shouting from one of the back rooms and the Players all ran to him in a hurry. By the time they realized it was still too early, we were gone — through the crowd that jeered and catcalled the Players' false start, down one tunnel and then another. Pretty soon we had no idea where we were.

In our rush, we almost bowled over a Little Trickster, or someone masked as one in cool white porcelain. In a costume that belied no caravan she helped us to our feet, asked us if we were looking for Korain. When we said yes, with no little fear that the Bone Road had us again, she pointed us down the right tunnel. We realized it could have been an ambush as the sounds of Tamta faded to the darkness of the tunnel, but our prize was worth far too much not to try.

## "Murder in the Dark"

There was so little light, but the glint of the knife shone like a terror in the traitor's hand as it sunk deep into Korain's heart. I was screaming, but Slake pushed me at the Doll that seemed to be tumbling far too slowly from the slackening hands of my oldest friend. Slake tackled the infidel and before Korain even hit the ground his blood too flooded out to soak it red. He howled, a mask of pain distorting the features of his face as the traitor tried to pull the knife free. Yank as she did, she could not release it from the bone of his thigh. Finally, she reeled and extended her bare bloodstained hands to me. She took a step forward and demanded the Doll.

Benedict, I was never so scared my entire life, but I stood tall, held firm and told her, "No. This doll belongs to Dahlia, and I will not allow your faithless hands to soil its power any more." Snarling, she advanced on me and told me that she had allies, and that by her word they would not only have me, but all that I loved, unless I gave it to her that moment.

## 2. The Masks of the Trickster

## Bait and switch

## The observations of Slake, Dahlian in Crest:

Pain. Pain so great I think I may get lost in the blackness that plays at the edges of my sight. She's going to kill 'Mique. She's killed Korain, and she's going to kill 'Mique and take the Doll. Not if I can. . . I lean forward and brace myself against the pain to lurch and grasp at the ankles that stalk my friend, but before I go there's a rustle of movement behind me. Rising with a limber ease that speaks of no ache is Korain, wound fresh and bleeding in her chest. She reaches up and pulls her cresting mask free. Stretching out her arm she holds it in her upturned hand. The footsteps cease in shock behind me.

The mask in Korain's hand begins to quiver and spin, singed tufts of feathers flashing from bright color to gleaming white light. It spirals dizzily before it comes to a sudden, disconcertingly quick stop. The face of Dahlia. Her mouth opens and the seed of a chuckle broods and lifts and begins to bubble up until She is laughing hard enough to rock the tunnel around us. From behind it, the other masks of Dahlia file out in a circle, and Her body unfolds within them, in all of Her glory. As She snaps Her fans open, the walls of the tunnel are doused in torch light. When I finally manage to tear my eyes away, I can see that there was never a tunnel at all. Instead, the gleaming eyes of the whole tribe are upon us.

The knife falls away along with the pain as I am raised to my feet by Her will. All of Her many faces turn to Korain, 'Mique and I, and smile with a grace that soars my spirit. In a voice caught somewhere between pride and amusement, She tells us to return the Doll to the Child. Going without a moment of hesitation, we slip through the crowd. Behind us Her voice calls out to Her children for judgment: "Tricksters all, tell me now and tell me true. What do we do with she who would stop the dance?"

## The Phoenix Flight

## The observations of Jass of the Heartland, Interventionist:

And it comes out of me, just like it come out of everybody all at once: "Phoenix Flight! Phoenix Flight! Phoenix Flight!" We're all shoutin' like one person and Our Lady smiles as bright as the wings of Phoenix himself, and gives us all approving nods. A handful of the Little Tricksters clamber on the stage and take hold of the traitor. They pull a mask and a winged cloak on her that're all covered in feathers — red and gold — and march 'her up the Flighting tower. Up, up, up she goes! Down below, torches, rags and bits of wood are thrown in to make a ravenous fire that licks hungry at the villainous traitor's face.

We scream and chant and howl calls that crash and rebound over the walls of the emporium and though the traitor holds fast to the rails, one of the Little Tricksters steps forward. With one swift, sharp kick to the middle of her back, the villain goes out in an arch over the flames, her wings fluttering out behind her! The whole Tribe takes one single breath together as she hovers above the flames in the moment. The whole way down she screams, and when the inferno finally swallows her into its burning belly her voice grows sharp and shrill like a dying hawk. The flames swell and burst until even we in the back can feel it warm our faces, fed on the flesh of her sin. Ain't nobody making a sound, now.

And there's Dahlia stepping forward and in Her path the flames back off. The embers and ashes of the woman's bones still smolder from the flames as The Lady calls up the air with a single flicker of Her fan. The cinders, they catch in the gust, twist into a funnel that spins and shakes with sparks. It takes less than a moment as they swarm into the form of a body, growing dense and fleshy. And now — Dahlia be praised! — its mouth opens in a scream of terror and pain. Bellow! Bellow and rail! To the stage! Motion and movement everywhere from tricksters all as we scream up in exultation of the Lady. Nobody, not nobody — not the Little Tricksters, not us Players, not even the charred traitor herself — knows if Dahlia brought her back or if she was never gone at all, and who cares anyway?

Let the villain muse it on it on the Island of the Lost if she gets that far. I don't need answers. Dahlia is the Fatima of all Fatimas and Her Ways are great and terrible.

## Welcome to Life as a Trickster

### The welcome of Shahana, Little Trickster of the Whisper Stealers:

Of course I lied to you. I lied to you, you lied to your friends and Dahlia Herself lied to us all. Praise Her, She knew what and where the prize was all along. You must admit it made an excellent plot for a Tamta play. Besides, my illusion was more truth than even I knew. When I told you that Dahlia Herself had set your task, was I wrong? The difference between truth and illusion are only ever clear in retrospect, so what's the harm in lying? It's merely the way of the Trickster. You have passed your test and are the talk of the Tribe. Few Cresters can count a year with so much gain. Tomorrow you and your friends can fly safe into the hands of the caravan of your choosing. More than that, you are the first Dahlian to ever find a place in my guild before their Flighting. Oh yes, we will have you. You've proven yourself well.

The Doll goes by Envoy this hour to the hands of an anxiously waiting Evan who is herself not an Evan. She will put it into the arms of the aching Child who is older than you or I, a Child who will find comfort in it, but will never be comforted. Soon you will see that the Nation is a spindling web of lies and deceit, pretense and duplicity, riddles and enigmas. You will understand that it is not merely Dahlia's tribe that spins this web, but every Tribe in the Nation. You will know that the only difference to be had is that it is only the Tricksters who take joy in the irony of truth, for we mark the steps of our dance to the beat of the Nation's dichotomous heart.

## The Tricksters' Heart

### From the notes of Korain of Sail, Whisper Stealer:

It was in that interlude of time uncounted that my feet left the Flighting tower and I gave my very body to the winds of change. The scorched feathers of my Cresting day slipped away behind me and with them, the years of my youth. Seventeen summers this day, five years without a family to call my own, my new home called and shouted and cheered below me with arms open for the catch. I looked out to the world as the air buffeted my fall and knew that Dahlia was with me in that moment, for I could see the whole horizon of Vimary, could sense the roads that I will someday travel and the secrets I will someday learn.

Caught in safety, the Sail rallied around and hoisted me to the feasting hall where I would greet old friends with new names; Slake of the Onhom Path, Talmique of the Morning Star. They've promised to keep in touch, for even on new paths, some games are too good to be forgotten. Besides, none of us have lost that last plot we've yet to unravel. Its finding should weave good drama; the mystery of a barbarian tribe that lives so dark and far away, yet covets our Agnes' toys. In the end, Shahana was right. I am only now beginning to understand how much the skeleton of the Nation is built on a vast network of lies and broken parallels. I am beginning to see too that, as a Dahlian, it is both my birthright and my pleasure to reveal and inveigle all as one.

## Chapter three: Word of Agnes

Get the Joanite to laugh, Get the Sheban to cry.

Get the Yagan to smile, Get the Evan to lie.

Get the Magdalite to love, Get the Dahlian to stay.

Agnes gives us all of that, Not later - today!

Excerpt from the Agnite game, The Nation .



## From The Flames, Rebirth

From the loose pages of Altara Ven's travel journal:

The snow is bitter, the trip dangerous, and Deus would find me the fool to have come, but I could not stay away. This cloak disguises me, the banished not welcomed at Agnes' Passion Play. The flickering flames of the Wicker Mary offer no warmth to the Eighth Tribe, only to the faithful.

I come not to be comforted, but to watch. My dreams led me here; Deus can not deny me my dreams. The Tribals are thick as usual, several bearing the marks of adulthood from Agnes' Aunts. One Joanite in particular stands firmly, a powerful intensity bright in her eyes. Hers is the face that worries Hom the most: the set lines of a fervent zealot. All hold an urgent tempo to their movements, like unsung music poised on wetted lips. Each Agnite's face glows in the euphoric joy I had almost forgotten. It is not an expression often seen on Hom, and rarely outside the dark embrace of Ile Perdue. Hewn from the innocent joy of the Child, they are beautiful even to my embittered, fallen soul.

Tonight Agnes will be reborn, and with that, Her renewal of hope to the Nation. I once counted myself lucky that I was a Child of the Child. For all of the Joanites' nobility or the Shebans' justice, they needed the light of inspiration that we of Agnes could give them. I would even put words to parchment saying that I felt pride in such a duty. Of course, now I know it all for the lie it is. But, as I see these faces turned up in joy... it is almost enough to make one reconsider.

The Chosen are now following the Procession of Delivery, their torches brilliant against the cold winter's sky. Each of those faces go willingly to their deaths, one last expression of devotion.

There are many faces here tonight, more roles than Dahlia has masks. Each has its own story and its own purpose in the River. Mine does not lie here with Agnes' blind followers, but in the brutal clutches of Hom. Agnes may be reborn tonight, but I usher in the birth of a future each day.

## Child Goddess

From the meditations of the Agnes the Child:

I can see the wicker effigy from here, its golden flax bright against the cool dusting of snow. They haven't lit it yet, but they will, and the bodies of the Chosen will fuel it into a passion. The blood of these few standing around Me will not quench the flame, but will instead inspire it to new heights. Their faith in Me, in our purpose in the Nation, will send the licking fingers of fire straight into the twilight.

I can also hear those who belittle My children and Our calling; those who ignore "words of babes" in lieu of "adult enlightenment." While they watch with lying eyes, I can hear their hearts' false beats. Do they think Me so young I cannot hear their deceit? Fools, all of them. The understanding of this moment is lost to their over-ripened minds, minds hung so precariously from old branches that they will fall any moment with a wet, flat sound.

This is a moment of purity, a single moment suspended like a droplet over the River of Dream itself. The ring it creates, rippling out further and further from this pinprick of Wonder, will spill over the Nation. It is something pure, innocent, untainted by false projections. Vimary hasn't known such an experience since My Mother left us. In a single breath I burst from Her effigy, reclaiming the virtue that is right, and in so doing, ignite the hearts of My Children. I am tomorrow. We will claim the future.

## When The First Ashes Fell

Feniwyn Bril, Child of Agnes, recalling the Birth of Agnes:

I can feel the flames against my face, so hot I'm afraid of losing the hair off my head. But I must stand close; I have no other choice. I would be less than myself if I did not try to reclaim every moment of Her birth, born from the false Fatima, the Wicker Mary.

Children though we may eternally be, we are not so naive as to think there was no wonder or innocence in the world before Agnes. We know the pure touch of Mary the Forgiver brought its own innocence to Vimary, and with Her passing a candle was extinguished that could never be lit again.

We tell that the last days of Mary were bleak and cold, filled with pain that no soul should know and few are strong enough to endure. She shed eight tears as She lay dying, one for each Sister, one for Her lost Brother, and one for the Child who was to come. With Her face wet, and Her shell growing colder, the Guides surrounding Her and Her essence being drawn away by the River, She rested Her pale hand flat against Her middle and whispered words lost to time.

The morning brought Mary's end, and the blood of Her followers ran quick as many took their own lives. But the children — the forgotten children of Mary's Children — gathered near the husk, reaching out to comprehend the loss of their mothers, sisters, fathers, brothers. They stood, small hands pressed against the lifeless hull of a dead Fatima, asking the One Goddess to ease their anguish, to still the fear in their souls, and explain why so great a loss was necessary.

Those tiny faces, distraught, pressing against the icy touch of death, wept into the puddles of blood. From these cries, from those tears, from their spirit the One Goddess answered them, taking pity on their tenuous sanity.

Agnes the Child burst from the corpse of yesterday into the hope of tomorrow. With the twin bodies of a doll and a bear, She compelled awe and bestowed hope to that lost little group. The River crackled around Her like lightning, flashing across the very corners of Temple, searing Her existence into Vimary. They stood before She who was Agnes the Child, until a solitary girl stepped forward. Wet eyes bright and her broken heart pure, she sought Agnes' hand, fusing their beings together, to enact a second birth: that of Wonder.

There was not a child left in the temple who did not join her fate with Agnes' that day, creating our Tribe. Those of Mary still living either left or pledged their lives to the Sweet Child. Too old to appreciate Her touch, they still possessed the right heart to fuel Her need for youth.

This is why I stand so near, why I hold myself so close to flames that would surely kill me as a Chosen. From their anguish came hope, and from my hope comes the future. The others, Her Aunts, divine though they are, do poorly to underestimate the Child. They do not hold our words worthy for contemplation, and turn their eyes away from our actions. The Tribe of Agnes does not decide what the Nation will be as the Fates do, and we do not hold it up as the Pillars enjoin. As Dancers, we breathe life into it, bestowing it with an animation that can only be expressed in childish laughter. They do us wrong to ignore us, and it will be their downfall.



## The Chosen

From the last confessions of Morodi, Agnité Barren:

I was always one of the smaller Children. I could not run as fast, or jump as high, and I never came up with any of the good games. I tried though, I really did. I tried to amuse Her as best I could, but I was never good enough. Once I brought a smile to Her face. It was when I gave her the doll I'd found. The other kids thought I was stupid to take it; broken and ratty as it was, it almost fell apart before I got it back to Playground. But I'd heard about the other dolls in Her collection. I knew Agnes would like it. She did, and She smiled, and it was worth everything. For one golden moment I was special.

It was a fleeting moment, and soon enough I was returned to the brunt of the jokes and the bottom of the pile. When I got too old to be of use, I was turned over to the Barren. It was more of the same. More mud flung at me, more rocks at my head, feet out to trip me. The only new things were the endless chores. But now I know Agnes loves me, has loved me all this time. I am Chosen, you see. I have been chosen to stand within the Wicker Mary for our Child's Passion Play. She will burst forth from the flaming shell of my body and be reborn for our Tribe. It will be me who brings Her forth. I am lucky. I am special. She loves me. I can see the torches coming for us. . .



## It's all Fun and Games

From the embittered passing of Hyrin, recent Agnite Fallen:

Look at them, dancing around like a bunch of simpletons. They leap among the shadows as if they were harmless, their laughter like tinkling glass. But I know better. The shadows are dangerous, and glass breaks. They all look so smug, thinking they know the truth. But I'll tell you the truth: the truth is no one cares and they only use you till you're spent. Then you're thrown away. I stood at Agnes' side and laughed and played in the long days of summer. I huddled by Her side as we told stories in the black nights of winter. I was the spark of life that carried Her tribe through good times and bad. Now I'm nothing. A spent thing. When I was in Agnes' graces, it never occurred to me that I would grow up. None of us understood, and it's not like anyone ever tried to explain it to us. Nobody tells Playground's children things that they don't want to hear, and in the protective shadow of Agnes' bear, childhood seems to endure forever.

What happened when I was Counted nineteen? I was cast into the Breeders. I went to Marmie, sobbing. She had seen it often enough to know what had happened. Maybe it happened to her once. The next night was my first with Kevin. It took six times before I could stop crying enough. Eventually I adjusted and realized exactly how good I had become. No, I wasn't a Child any longer. But I was special. I kept our tribe fresh with new blood. I kept us rich in the Children we all were.

I bore Agnes three children, twins my first catch, but a hundred children mean nothing when your last is born defective. The whelping brat, how did I know something was wrong inside his head? I just handed him over to the Barren and was done with it. Some Breeders like to see what they make, and I even know one girl who plays with them — but that wasn't me. I wanted no part of the crying monsters once I sprouted them. So when that stupid Barren brought me the lolling-eyed brat, how was I supposed to know what to do? Take it to an Evan, take it to Marmie, just get it away from me. If only I'd known Agnes was watching when I threw it down, its small head cracking like an autumn nut. . .

Agnes' touch was searing and righteous, far worse than any game gone wrong. Her claws raked my body, and the screams She put into my head still haunt me when I sleep. I was thrown to the Watch and waiting for the full moon. The full moon. When you're banished to Hom. I loved Agnes more than I loved myself. I lived for Her smile, I rejoiced in Her laughter, and I cried at the bliss of Her touch. And now I want nothing more than to watch Her fall with Her six aunts, the Deaths. I can see them, the Chosen, walking around Her as the procession to the Wicker Mary begins. I hate them. I hate them all. If only they could all burn! If. . . if only I could burn with them. But I have no devotion left in me. Only the hate She left when She ripped my soul along with my flesh. I'll have the last laugh, we'll play this last game. This is it, Agnes. You cheated, and now it's payback time. I got better friends now, friends that know exactly what You and Your Aunts are up to. Ready or not, here I come.

## The Believer

Raissa Gravkin, and her midnight reflections:

The rest of the settlement is sleeping, or they are at least quiet. This wind is cold, smoky, filled with a hard winter coming too soon. I can see the fires of Playground from here, burning brightly as the Nation's Children dance past any reasonable hour. The images that spurred me from my warm bed to this cool evening fill my mind again with an inexplicable fear and cause me to shiver anew. It began with a doll, crafted either of material from the World Before or simply the wild running of my dreaming mind. It was like nothing I had played with myself as a child, or seen in the hands of my companions, a doll of wondrous design. I held it desperately, though I didn't know why. A wind came, and without my consent and despite my efforts, it ripped the doll from my grasp, hurtling the soft body through the mists.

Night after night I have been driven from sleep by visions of darkness that rises up and swallows Vimary, stealing the life from our Nation. Tonight, the doll made its entry, and a small whisper down in my soul tells me this will not be a singular incident. Something comes, something I'm meant to deflect. I don't understand yet, but I will. I have to. In dreams, the screams were haunting. I have no desire to know what they sound like on this side of the River.

## Hand in Hand

### Walking with Elita, Favorite of Agnes, she speaks:

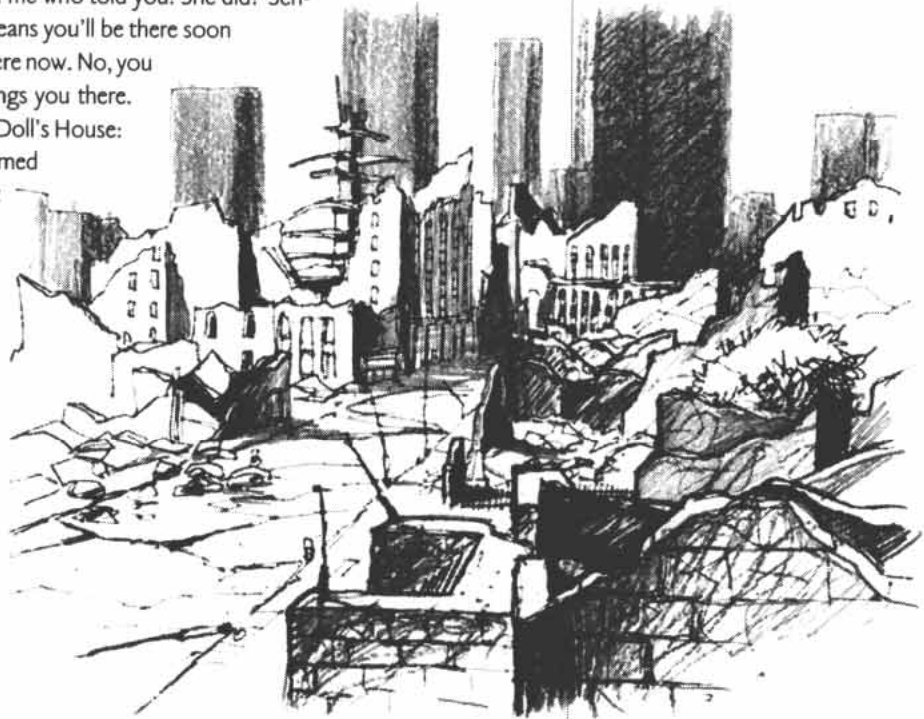
I know my time is limited. Most Favorites don't realize that. They think that somehow they're so special that they're going to outlast adulthood. I'll be Counted as fifteen next summer. No, serious, I mean it. Yeah, I know I don't look it. I like it that way. But I've seen them fall out of favor as young as eleven, so I'm not without danger. Agnes likes them young, untouched by the world, when they have more of Her innocence.

I do my best, looking for — and finding — the wonder She brings into our world. But it gets harder and harder each season, what with the Evans always trying to make us behave, the Shebans telling us to keep it down, the Yagans saying we can never understand the secrets and the Joanites always watching us. Sometimes we're too loud, I know. And lots of the Young Ones don't understand some of the greater mysteries, but then, we know things they've forgot or maybe never knew. Being an adult isn't so great if you've never lived.

Do they know what it is to lie flat against a green hill and have your Fatima spill the colors of summer into your soul? Do they know the sweet sound of the Child's laughter at a shared joke? Or the secret games She teaches you to play with Her and Her alone? And can they possibly understand the gentle swell your heart makes when you watch Agnes walk among the cribs, naming each child to bind them to the tribe? Doubtful. This is what it means to be a Favorite of Agnes, pleasures that only the heart can understand. They use their minds too much, and forget the beat of life.

It's because of all that that makes being a Favorite as dangerous as it is rewarding. No, serious. I mean it. It's rough. The higher you are up on the ladder, the further you have to fall when you miss the next rung. Bickering is fierce, ranging from petty to downright scary. No one wants to lose favor, but everyone wants to be the most favorite. You can get along for a while with everyone working as a team, but eventually you're going to have to push someone out, and then the fighting starts again. I've held my place for five summers now, and I don't plan on giving it up, not if I can help it. Like I said, I know my time is limited, so I have to take what I can get while I can.

The Doll's House? How did you find out where that was?! No, I won't stop shaking you until you tell me who told you! She did? Serious? Well. . . all right. That means you'll be there soon enough yourself. I'm going there now. No, you can't come, not until She brings you there. Let me just say this about the Doll's House: it has toys you never even dreamed were possible, sweets that make your mouth water just by looking at 'em, and laughter that'll make your side hurt. The Doll's House is why we fight so much. It's too pretty to say, and to lose it would ruin your whole life. No, serious.



### 3. Word of Agnes



#### Elita, Agnite Favorite

Elita was always bold. From the moment she came into Playground as a Child she knew what she wanted, knew how to get it, and knew how to keep it once she had it. Her raw and unfiltered desire, along with her often exuberant style, drew Agnes' eye to her nearly five years ago. It wasn't long before Elita had charmed the Fatima, and was taken in as one of the Favorites. Her position only makes her more insufferable and spoiled, and she knows nothing of patience, prudence, or restraint. When she wants something she takes it right there and then, and if she is balked then she turns her full attention to destroying whatever has gotten in her way. Despite all her flaws Elita can be a kind girl and a good friend, when she does not let her selfishness overrun her compassion. Unfortunately it happens rarely, and her friends often suffer as much as her enemies do.

Highlights: Resourceful, Manipulative, Determined

Attributes: AGI +1, CRE +1, INF +1, PER +1, WIL +1, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 25, UD/AD 4.

Eminences: Capriciousness and Inspiration

Skills: Athletics 1/0, Craft (carving) 2/+1, Dodge 2/+1, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Human Perception 1/0, Intimidation 1/0, Leadership 1/+1, Lore (Tribal) 1/0, Melee 1/+1, Notice 1/+1, Sneak 2/+1, Streetwise 2/+1, Theatrics 1/+1, Throwing 1/+1, Synthesis 2 (Wonder).

Equipment: A knife (AD +3), several nice toys, a beautiful scarf, and a bag of marbles.

### What A Wonderful World

#### Private thoughts of Lorna Hes, Agnite Loner:

I can see the Favorites tight in their little clutch over there near the spring. They're probably plotting somebody's fall, probably one of their own. Whatever. I don't need that. Agnes and me, we got our own understanding. Maybe She don't play with me all the time, and maybe She even seems to forget me from time to time, but that don't mean She don't love me. She's got a big world to inspire, and Her aunts don't make it too easy. Yeah, me and Her, we got our own understanding.

Like, last summer, wasn't it me who found the best honey? Yves even said it was the best. Sweeter than nothin' tasted before. And, the one time with the butterflies? Didn't I dance with the butterflies for a whole afternoon? That being right after someone said how sad it was that the butterflies had gone for the season, and look: She brought me butterflies. Forget all the fighting, and the crying, and the whining — I ain't into any of that. Just gimme a good ball, a stick to hit it with, a little space to myself, and I'm great.

Someone asked me once if it made me feel slighted. Slighted? I chose the path I walk on; I like being alone. People rub me wrong, and Agnes knows that. She don't fault me; I do Her work still and I do it good. See, I plant flowers. I go around Vimary and I plant little patches of flowers. Oh, yeah, they don't grow as good as no Evan's, but I keep my little bright patches well watered and green. I wander all over Vimary plantin' 'em. Then, when you're on your way to somewhere, outta nowhere springs this little bushel of flowers. Sweet lookin' and fresh, they put a smile into your face.

I made a little crown for Agnes once outta my flowers, and She put it on right then and there. She wore it all day and it never wilted or got smashed. It stayed lovely on Her delicate doll-head, round ears holding it just at the right angle. Elita asked me to make her one after seeing Agnes' in the Doll's House. That made me feel good, made me almost like her for a moment.

So, yeah, I made her one. Elita's didn't stay as nice as Agnes' had, and so I didn't make no more after that, even when they did pinch me. I didn't want the memory of Agnes' perfect crown to get all messed up by these dumb kids. Because, you know, me and Agnes, we've got our own understanding. She knows what I mean by that, and that's all that matters.

### Finders Keepers

#### Hyrin, vindicated Agnite Fallen, triumphant:

I've shown them, I've shown them all! They'll come to regret ever throwing me away — especially Agnes. I have Her stupid doll. And not just any old one from the pile, oh no. I was careful when I chose; I got the one She loves the most. It's old, from the World Before. I remember the day She got it, but I forget who gave it to Her. Some blank face that wasn't a Favorite.

See here? It's a mommy doll, softly holding a baby doll in her arms. Dumb, really, when you think about it. What does an Agnite need with a mommy, let alone Agnes, the best Child of them all?

Finding the Doll's House was harder than I thought it would be; they've moved it. My own weeks of searching turning up nothing but close calls and I had to follow Hesperrin through the caves before I found the new place they keep it. I had to toss a rock at her head to distract her while I went up the stairs, but I'm sure she deserved it for something.

Being up there. . . it brought back a lot of memories. I remember playing with Karla by the window with the little bricks. We'd build them so high. . . or over by the trunk, in the costumes. Me and Farall would pretend to be Joanites and "storm" the Fallen. Now I'm Fallen. I wonder, when Farall storms next, will he pretend my face is among his foes? And Agnes' flower crown, fresh as the day it was picked. How I'd longed to wear it, just once, and now was my chance. But the moment my fingers touched the soft blossoms, they wilted. In my panic, I crushed it, the fleshy petals turning brittle under my feet as I ran it over. Who cares, I wasn't there for pretty memories of yesterday, I was there for the doll.

I pushed and shoved and kicked over the whole stupid mess until I found what I was looking for. You can feel the power it possesses rippling over your hand like a sunburn. But I got it, and my friends will use it to make Agnes pay. And who did it all? Why, me, of course. Hyrin the Angry, Fallen Herite of Hom.

### Losers Weepers

**Screaming in fear, Elita, Favorite of Agnes, warns the tribe:**

I don't know, I don't know, but will you shut up!? Listen: something's happened. Stop it, I don't care if I'm bleeding, at least I'm alive — serious! Farall, he's dead. She killed him. I don't know if Karla's still alive, she's minus an arm, that's all I know. I just barely made it out. Now listen!

Someone's stolen a doll from Agnes, and not just any doll, it's Her favorite. I don't know who took it! Do you think I'd be standing here if I knew? Idiot, shut up. Someone was up in the Doll's House last night, because when we went up there to play, everything was wrecked. Stuff knocked over, pictures ripped, and the dolls. . . by the Child. . . you should'a seen the dolls. Everywhere. Serious. I don't know how She noticed so fast, but She did and then there was trouble.

Farall asked what was wrong when She started screaming, and he went right out the window! Karla didn't know what to do, so just stood there, and then her arm got lopped off. Then She came after me. . . I've never been so scared in all my life! She just kept screaming and screaming, shaking the whole House. You don't know screaming until you hear a Fatima scream. . . We have to find it, we have to find that doll. If we don't, I don't know what'll happen.



## Parting the Corn

**Raissa Gravkin, a troubled mind, on the road to Bazaar:**

The day was filled with distractions. My hands idled and fumbled as my mind spun backward to my dreams. I was brought to task twice before being sent out to the west field to 'be daydreaming elsewhere.' On my own, in the far-flung fields overlooking Playground, I was no less distracted. I could hear the peals of laughter lifting from the emporium, the sweet voices of Children jarring me like chords of music plucked off key.

I had thought, as is so often the way of confused nightmares, that mine would seem less ominous, less threatening, in the light of day, the stench of fear washed away in the dewy sunlight. But that was not the case; this was not that kind of dream. No, as I tilled the fields and brought to harvest the orange-fingered vegetables, my mind was assaulted again and again by visions of dolls, inky black desolation, and whispering screams that threatened to overrun my waking senses. In one particular moment, I would swear by the Sisters that I felt myself grow lighter, and a baleful wind whip at my skirts.

I know this is Her work now, and that I am meant to take on another burden. With the day done, the meal eaten and the animals turned out for the evening, I take myself to Bazaar to seek out a friend. Hopefully, with her knowledge of the River and its deceptive turns, we will be able to puzzle out a more obvious message from my nightmares. So I left my sisters tonight with the story of going to Bazaar to find a lotion for the sunburn on my nose, claiming a finicky desire for something Magdalite in craftsmanship. I made shy faces that sent the younger ones into giggles. Let them think I have found myself a lover. It will do them good to have a laugh over me, the oldest, the responsible, the dependable. It may be an excuse I can use again.

## As The Crow Flies

The easiest way to Bazaar is to cut across Playground. To go around, near the Stone Shores, gives you an extra hour of travel, two if you go east through the woods. My sojourn should not cause a problem for the Children; my face is known there. I work with my Evan sisters in the fields for their meals, and at the loom for their clothing. While I am not a deft hand at healing, I have accompanied my sister to many Agnite births, but of course, I have never seen the Hall of Seeds.

The broken teeth of the emporium's windows flicker with torchlight, the firepits only dull embers out here in the yard. I can see straight into their second story, a trick of the light or perhaps the clarity of the air. Whatever element grants me this line of sight is a happy one, and I can see the older Children, much like our Nannies, gathering the Young Ones together for the evening.

Sleepy laughter tumbles out, slow and languid after a good day of play. A small child is lifted into the air, and for one brief moment, she is framed and backlit. Her tiny expression is a tender one, the struggle of sleep over wakefulness: a sweet battle being lost. She is laid against the shoulder of a boy no older than twelve summers, his long hand rubbing circles into her drowsy back. A broken song filled with uneven voices comes from somewhere, explaining the virtues of fierce play, something about a bright star, and the rewards of smiles. I can't catch all the lyrics — their enthusiasm crashes against enunciation, confusing it all together so that occasionally it's just a choir of lusty shouting. It makes me chuckle nonetheless, and paired with the image of the towheaded Young One in the embrace of her tribal brother, I have the chance to momentarily forget my troubled purpose and destination.

## Step on a Crack

I must have been standing there longer than I had thought, or maybe the lights weakened my eyes, for when I took to my path again it was very, very dark. So dark, in fact, I didn't even see the girl on the path until we had already crashed into each other. Foul and filthy, her subterranean stench made my evening meal churn in the pit of my stomach. I cried out, she grunted, and I tried to keep us both upright by reflex. My hands came around her slight shoulders, our feet tangling despite my best efforts. As I fell onto her, she struggled frantically, wriggling under me so forcibly that I was unable to find a foundation to stand: she was everywhere and anywhere under my feet.

"What is it, is something wrong? Let me help you," Swallowing against the bile in the back of my throat, I reached out once more to ease whatever terror was chasing her. As I made contact with her foul cloak, shimmering pain laced its way up my arm and immobilized my mind. I stood, eyes wide, hand over her heart where she clutched something secret, something that locked my joints in primal fear. Unbidden, frightening, the mists of Dream overran the waking world and I saw Vimary as I have seen it in my nightmares these last months: lost, corrupted, flooded with black bile from the West. . . My eyes lost focus. I was forced into submission by the River.

## Breaking Mother's Back

**Hyrin, leaving the scene of the crime:**

It's dark, and this cloak smells like baby shit. I'm thinking about a bath so much, I don't see the Evan until we're tangled with one another, rolling on the ground like a bunch of Littles. I try to get out from under her, but her damnable conscience kicks in and she tries to "help" me. Her hand falls on the doll, and for a heartbeat I'm afraid it's all over. Days, weeks, months of planning because one stupid farmer can't watch where she's walking. I'll kill her here, right here. I'll grab her throat, I'll throttle her until her face is blue, I'll bash her head against the rocks, I can hardly think for the blood rushing in my head. I can't believe this — by the Child — I can't believe this! No! I will not be robbed!

But now she's stopped. Her eyes are glassy and there's this weird croaking sound coming from her as she starts to claw at her face. Now that we've stopped moving, I can feel the doll thrumming in my jacket. It beats like a second heart, pounding against my own in an eerie double-echo of life. Shoving the dirt-bitch off of me, I don't even bother to see how she falls. By the time she starts screaming, I'm already to the trees. . .



## Through Glass Eyes

From the visions of Raissa Gravkin:

I stand on a wind-wracked promontory, alone and dejected without knowing what I lost. Suddenly, spun out of dream-air like the gossamer webbing of spiders, comes my mother and her daughter. Together, they lift me aloft and turn my humble body towards the rising sun.

The veil of mortal limitation is lifted from my eyes, granting me inhuman sight to see not only the Nation, but the lands beyond. Slowly an inky blackness spills from the west, spreading like the semen of some foul beast. Its noxious fumes assault my senses, licking at my soul like a morsel to be devoured. Mother and daughter hold me aloft, protecting me so that I may witness the corruption of my people.

It fouls the sky, turning the brilliant sapphire into a twisted reverse image of health. Crops, made green and fertile by my own hands, wither and blow away on bitter winds. And the voices, oh... the voices... They beat me in a way I did not think was possible: my heart, my very soul, laid fertile for them to sink their sharp talons into, ripping until only bloody ribbons are left. There is no wind to bear me up from this destruction. Where I was an observer, now I am a wretched participant. I collapse to my knees and I know that everything is lost. Vimary will burn and my shade will wander its charred husk, forever without solace. We are all doomed. It is all my fault. I am the destruction of a nation.

I once had a body; now I am only a string of anguish, my mind falling apart like beads slipping from a broken cord. There is no hope, no hope, and as I beat my gory fists into my broken thighs, tears congeal on my cracked cheeks.

## Wonder's Blessing

A light penetrates my scabby eyelids, cracking them open to ooze as I try to find its source. It is a white, pure light, too blinding to be looked at directly. I must hedge my perception around it rather than into it, a fitting fate for the pitiful and unworthy creature I have been reduced to. It comes from the east, an unstained force, and I know it to be my Mother. Her gentle hand waves a green mist over the fires and the fetid water, the mist flowing from Her outstretched fingertips, restoring the world where it touches. A stand of corpses turns into pillars, the repugnant grove now blossoming into Her wooden temple.

But I am broken, disgusting, an impure thing that can not be looked upon. A thin green light floods my gouged eyes. I am standing. I am whole. There is not a scratch upon My body and I am larger than the highest Joanite Tower. I raise My right hand and examine its delicate structure, marveling at the power that rests in such a tiny and unassuming palm. My clawed feet stand clear of debris, far below the gentle upsweep of My dress. A warm smile turns up My porcelain lips.

I sense it a breath before the shimmering sweet pain begins up My left arm. The doll. I look, and in my grasp is the doll — My Doll — the tool used to destroy My lands. It infuses Me with such a sense of wonder that I am caught, fascinated. The tender expression in the mother's face, the rapturous smile the babe offers back: an innocent moment captured in a toy from a time before now, from a world before now. There is hope in this plaything, a power greater than even My own.

The white light flashes again, but My glass eyes are able to look into it now. The wooden temple, having served its purpose, cracks with a dry sound and collapses in on itself. Yes, Mother, I understand now. I shall heal the land in the your name, Mother. For I am the daughter of Mary, the Forgiver.

## Turn Over All The Rocks

Elita, Favorite of Agnes, takes command of the situation:

I don't care; shut up! Now you're going to do as I say and you're going to like it, or you're going to get this stick up your ass sideways — do you understand me? Good.

You, with the teeth — Linnet — take seven others and close off the lower tunnels. I don't want nothing getting through. Get more help as you move, but leave who's here with me.

Now you guys, you four go west and seal off the gates to the pastures. You five go east and do the same, and post people along the way. Don't tell nothing to no one outside of us. Just do what I tell you and we might make it through this alive.

That leaves you and me. Agnes? I have no idea and I like it that way. Until I can find some answers, I don't want to be in Her sight at all. This is some serious stuff here. We need more people, and then we're sealing off the front. Do I what? No. . . no I don't think any of this is going to help, but it's at least something. If we do nothing, it'll only get worse.

## Playing In The Shadow Of Fear

You guys with me. You heard? Good. We're going to cover the front. Cemone, round up the Young Ones and get them into the Cribs. No Cee Cee, you're too young — go with Cemone. Vi, I want you to start turning out bunks. No one here would have been stupid enough to do this, but maybe someone was dropped on her head recently.

Where's a runner — I need a runner! Good. What's your name? Jasen? Sure, whatever. I need you to run the perimeter of Playground. See if you find any camps, anything. Shut up, listen, and don't make me smack you again! Try to find any sneaky camps, something that doesn't look right, something that someone tried to hide. When you're done with that —

What? Outside? Just screaming? Serious? All right then, let's get her!

## Nowhere To Run, But Everywhere To Hide

Hyrin the Angry in her escape:

That stupid dirt bitch is going to get it, wobbling around, screaming her head off. Can't she see the Children pouring out of the emporium? Can't she see the call for blood written on their faces? I know that look — Agnes knows. She knows Her doll is missing, and here I am, not forty paces away.

There's no way to make the deeper trees in time, and these light saplings are only useful combined with this putrid cloak. It's dark enough to hide me from the long eye, but that will mean nothing once they swoop down. I need to hide, and with nowhere to run, I wonder if my present from Agnes still works.

Grabbing the birch, I chant the old rhyme under my breath and squeeze my eyes shut tight, waiting to feel the River swell around me. The doll grows warm next to my skin, nothing uncomfortable, but a tickling like the pins and needles in a hand waking up after being pinched asleep. My ears become stuffed in a familiar sensation as the world dissolves around me, and I know I've done it. I can feel a cold smile run across my mouth. Suckers. Find me now.

Secretly lodged in that place between Here and There, I slit my eyes open and peer through the milky vision of my ritual. They're on the Evan now, fists and feet flying as they drag her down. I know most of those faces, even through this dimmed vision. Hard lines in soft faces still dimpled from their time in the Cribs. It's all I can do to keep my laughter in. I've done it. And I've gotten away with it.

## Old Nightmares Revisited

**Feniwyn Bril, child of Agnes, taking things into her own hands:**

Elita would be upset if she knew that I did not follow Cemone, but this is too important to play the dutiful child. The screamer's shrill song becomes quite clear once we leave the main hall, and painfully distinct out into the Yard, but its piercing notes come to an abrupt end as we fall into a ragged line near the fire pits.

Some of us breathe heavy, some of us whimper, and others simply watch silently as the woman lays sprawled in the dirt. Nearly all of us have something in our hands, though I can't seem to recall picking up this pot. I catch my own reflection on its shiny side and notice with a distant distraction the wild element in my eyes. The woman, while no longer screaming, is now babbling incoherently. We, as a huddled group, push forward, each of us straining our ears in curiosity to hear her muddled words.

"... doll, doll, My doll, and I will have it. . . My doll, Mother. . . the black, Mother, the black. . . and the power, such power. . ."

A low, threatening murmur begins in the back and ripples across the knot of Children. My own voice joins the questioning. Did she say doll? Her doll? Does she mean our Agnes' doll? I can see Elita's fingers flex against the jump rope she's holding. Whatever she does will determine what this mob will do. If she turned around and let the insane woman be, so would we. But if she. . .

The woman's face turns blankly in our direction, blind eyes rolling in her round head. It lolls from side to side, like it should topple off any moment. I can see. . . leaves. Her hair is mostly up, but tangled with dry leaves down the back. The muscles in her collarbone bulge as she tries to control her movements, lurching left then right before falling again to the ground. But I've seen enough. I saw the tattletale markings.

Silently pressing my will, I let the River carry it to others. They begin to stir, emotions catching the River's current that I push forth. She has our doll, our Agnes' doll. I look into their faces, sure to hold their eyes, moving the crowd forward. Can't they see that? Their eyes begin to open wide, the River lapping at their souls by my handiwork. She tried to take our doll and it has made her like this. Their feet begin to shuffle forward in increasingly urgent steps. Can't you see what she is? Don't you know what she's done to us? Breath is now a thin sound through clenched teeth. The River begins to extract its toll on me, pain lacing itself inside my head. "She's taken our doll!" Fists start to ball up, fingers wrapping tighter. "She has it! Get her! Grab her!"

And I hit, and I kick, and I smack her with the pot and I sink my teeth into her. Can't you see what she is? Don't you know what she's done to us?!

## Because I Said So!

**Elita, Favorite of Agnes, brings answers before her Fatima:**

I'm amazed Puck got this together so quickly, but then leave it to him to rush for theatrics. He's got the lights going, the railings filled with the right people, Agnes' chair in place and the floor cleared. Well, mostly cleared. That kid should have been Dahlian, serious. The others take care of the Evan while I make for the Shell. I've got to talk first; if someone else grabs it, who knows what'll happen.

Taking the steps three at a time, I notice a Little following me. What's her name again? Feniwyn? We both lurch for the Shell, but as I have the longer arms, I win. Holding it in both hands, I turn to survey the crowds. The Gym is pretty full, and I can easily spot the important faces up front. Feniwyn makes a lunge for the Shell, but I elbow her out of the way. If she wants to stand up here with me, she has to wait her turn to talk. I mean, serious. I have the Shell; I get to talk. She should know that by now.

The Evan is still spooky-quiet, but at least her eyes have life back in them. While we were hauling her in, she didn't make a peep, and some of us weren't too nice. I can't tell which is worse: her shrieking or this. Someone makes a rude noise on the left landing, and loud laughter echoing harshly against the old walls. Boys, seriously. Everything feels wrong. Too tight, like any moment it's going to split. Even the laughing feels wrong; everyone is trying to pretend too hard. Feniwyn makes another grab for the Shell, and I make another elbow jab. Now she's pouting with a bloody lip.

The Jungle Gym falls quiet as Agnes approaches. She comes to us in Half, just the Bear. This is not a good sign; this means the Doll is lurking somewhere. This means that Agnes is seriously mad. When She sits at Her place, the gleam from Her bladed fingers glint light into my eyes and make me squint. Even still, I thrust the Shell into the air, demanding my Turn.

"Silence!" My voice didn't crack. Good. "I've got something to say now, and you all better listen. I am Elita, Favored among the Agnites! I am what youth is, what wonder is, what innocence is!" I got the speech right and I'm pretty proud of myself. I mean, I don't make it all the way through that often. "Someone has wronged our Agnes, someone has stolen from our Agnes!" Even though they all know, shocked gasps go through the crowds. A few of the Young Ones try to dart for the floor, but their keepers are good at keeping a hold of them. "That someone is this bugfaced, bed wetting, fake-mommy!" I'm on a roll.

The gym goes insane, but I keep my smile small. The Doll's House and this — this is what it means to be a Favorite. Agnes sits impassively in Her chair, looking from me to the Evan, then up at the roiling crowds above. I wish She'd came Whole. It makes me nervous. "We all heard this Evan screaming, we all heard her say she had the doll. She said it was her doll, right? Didn't we? Who heard it?" Several hundred voices scream in righteous unison. The Evan makes some weak protest, but I've done this before and she hasn't, so I shut her up quick by waving the Shell at her.

Her voice grows a little stronger, but I drown it out with my story. I explain my sad, sad tale, starting with Farall's death and Karla's arm, through my courageous efforts to organize Playground, right up until the Evan started screaming. I come out looking good. Serious. They eat it up, they do, screaming and hooting and hollering all in the right places. I call for swift action, forget the Shebans! We can take care of this ourselves! We can take care of this thief! If she's stolen from us, from our Sweet Child, is it Tera Sheba's job to fix it, or ours? Ours!

Agnes shifts in Her seat, and suddenly the Shell is out of my hands. I look up, thinking that brat Feniwyn is trying something again, when I see the pink skirt of the Doll arcing across the air.

Agnes has the Shell.

## Mother May I?

**Raissa Gravkin, hurled before the Agnite court, attempts to compose herself:**

Ropes, tight, pulling me down. A cacophony of sounds echoing back and forth in the small space between my ringing ears, too many at once to hear singly. I bleed, torn, but I am not broken, despite Agnite feet and Agnite fists. I can see the leader, that red-headed girl, on another platform. The shell she waves around seems to imbue her with a sense of authority.

It's impossible to stand upright, but I can manage a sort of slouch, with my neck twisted down by a crude collar. As I pull and tug at my confinements, a harsh laughter builds from deep within me. Scrawled in bright paint at my feet are the "Rulz." It's a short list, only one through five. Number five, in letters twice as large as any of the others, is: Agnes Is Always Right. No, tonight it is the mirthless laugh that dances between the fine edge of hysteria and madness.

There are Children everywhere: yelling, shouting, throwing things from above. The scene might be humorous — from the outside. On the inside, I know it for the deadly, unchecked game of children with absolute power. My life is in their hands.

## Yes, No, Maybe So

**From the streaming consciousness of Cee Cee, Young One:**

I'm hot. I was playing in the hall when they all ran by. Playing. We was playing with the ball, and it was red and I like the color red; it is like the taste of berries, red is, and now that guy is shoving me! Hey, don't shove me! So I'm shoving him back, and now he kicked me, but Cemone made him stop. I like Cemone. Cemone is nice, when she isn't chasing you, and why are we here again?

Oh! There She is! My Agnes! I love Her furry feets and Her sparkling eyes. There are Her feets. I just got the picture of her feets put on my arm the other day. It still smarts, and Cemone thought it funny that I wanted feets, but I like feets and who is that lady they're dragging in? She has chains around her neck and that girl just shoved her onto the ground. Why are they shoving her, Cemone?

She is a bad lady! Cemone is booing her! I am booing her too. Booo! We don't like you! What did she do, I wonder. It's loud here and that lady is ugly and oh, there is Elita and Elita has nice shiny eyes too, like my Agnes. Elita has the Shell, so that means Elita gets to talk. I will listen really good with my ears because I have great ears for listening. She says that that ugly lady took My Agnes' doll! Lemme go, lemme go! I'm going to smash that bed wetter and poke her eye and kick her in the gut and make her give my Agnes' back Her doll! We don't need the Shebans, no! We can take care of it ourselves, yeah! Lemme go!

My poor, poor Agnes! Look at Her feets, they are sad feets and not the happy feets they should be. Why is that ugly bugfaced bed wetting bugger eater still here? Why isn't she giving us back my Agnes' doll? Lemme go, Cemone! It's my Agnes' turn to talk now, because She has the Shell. Agnes is saying that this ugly, bad, stupid, bugfaced, bed wetting bugger eating lady is going to find our doll — Agnes' doll — because the ugly, bad, stupid, bugfaced, bed wetting bugger eating lady says that she doesn't have it. She'll find our doll and then she'll give it back and then we can play again. Playing. I wonder where my ball is. . .

## Gimme, It's Mine!

**Cemone, Child and babysitter, observes the judgment of Agnes the Child:**

The shell lifts into the air supported by dainty porcelain hands. A hush falls as our Sweet Child looks out across the emporium. The only constant sound is the trapped woman's labored breathing. All eyes are on Agnes. I swallow against the boiling tension in my gut, one hand on my little friend.

"A terrible, terrible thing happened today, my Children." Agnes speaks to us now, and every single ear is turned to Her doubled choir of voices. "A doll, Our doll, was stolen from Us." Shouts, tears, fists waving into the air, my own throat spitting a boo and a hiss for the accused. I have to restrain Cee Cee from rushing the floor. "You are away from the eyes of my aunt, the Mother." The Doll sneers down at the Evan, the Bear's maw grinning at a wicked angle. My own heart beats fast with a satisfaction I didn't know I needed. Down on the platform, the woman's shoulders sag. "And you know what they say: out of sight, out of mind. . . We will gladly replace you into Her graces if — you give me back my Doll."

Something cold and creepy slithers around Agnes' voice, and it strikes a raw nerve within each of us. Feet fidget, Cee Cee leans back into me, and eyes shift around. The air is thick with the demand.

The Evan's voice is quiet and raw, dragged out across jagged rocks of bitter emotion. We can't hear her up here, but I can see Elita's confused expression. Agnes motions to silence her with a wave of Her scissored hands, but the woman presses on. Squawking something out, she tries to stand but is kept down by the tethers. It's all very confusing. A murmur runs around about 'lame excuses'.

Whatever story she's trying to feed Agnes, our Child seems about as impressed as the murmurers. "Well then, if you don't have it, your visions," the word is flung like an insult, and again I feel that deep satisfaction when the woman flinches. "Your visions must mean you are meant to find it." Again, the dual faces of Innocence and Wonder smile wickedly. For the first time I'm afraid. Really, truly, and deeply afraid. It's a game gone very, very wrong. I look around quickly and happen to make eye contact with the Little down next to Elita. Her pinched little face reflects the hammering in my chest. She knows it, too. But where I'm afraid... she seems exalted.

"I will have my Doll back," Agnes continues, turning to extend Her attention to all of us. Voices start small, then build in strength as they wash forward from the back. "We will not be played the fools — no one steals from Agnes! No one!" The roar is deafening; it makes me dizzy. In one lightning leap, Agnes takes to the air and lands before the Evan, finger pointed at her chest. It's a whisper, and yet I know we can all hear. It wraps itself around each of our souls, connecting us to the land between awake and asleep. "You will find my Doll, woman, or your life is ours. Vimary will feel the blade of this insult against Agnes, but you have this one chance to stop the blood from flowing so freely."

A coppery taste fills my mouth and I realize I've bitten through my lip. As Agnes sets the shell down at the woman's feet, the bindings vanish like wispy smoke from around her. Awkward, bewildered, she stands, flexing her hands. Very calmly, Agnes explains, "Now this is a very important game. Don't mess it up." Agnes has healed the Evan. This scares me even more.

## Darker Games To Play

### Twisted in frustration, Feniwyn Bril plans:

That stupid, stupid Elita! How I hate her! How she will pay for this! My darling, sweet Agnes, led astray by that rust-haired brat. If only she'd let me speak! But, oh no, she has to use this as an opportunity to grandstand. Well, we'll see who's standing when this is all over. Accidents can happen in times of crisis.

I'll take care of that later. What I need now is... yes. She'll do fine. Small, quiet, with large eyes that reveal too much of her soul. Yes, too eager to fit in and too timid to oppose me, that one will make a perfect checker piece in this all too important game.



## 3. Word of Agnes



### Cemone, Child of the Child

An easygoing girl, Cemone is open with her opinions and ideas, but keeps her own council when pressured by others. She wants no part of politics, perhaps watching one too many faces disappear from the meal table over seeming innocent squabbles.

Currently, a babysitter, she has no illusions about her place in Playground and no real desire to change it. Quite content with her middle of the road status, she is happy to spend her time with the Young Ones, telling them droll little jokes that they do not understand but that they laugh at anyway. Someday she'll make a very good Breeder and knows it well enough that she rarely fears becoming Barren. Cemone will make an excellent First Mother.

Highlights: Trustworthy, Observant, Dry-wit

Attributes: AGI +1, APP +1, BLD -1, INF +1, KNO -1, PER +2, PSY +1, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 20, ULD 3, AD 2.

Eminences: Capriciousness and Inspiration

Skills: Athletics 1/0, Craft (Paper folding) 1/0, Dodge 1/+1, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Notice 1/+1, Sneak 1/+1, Streetwise 1/0, Theatrics 1/0.

Equipment: Various toys, a torn up book, a doll that she keeps hidden near her sleeping hole.

## Crossing Fingers

Gershell, confronted with Feniwyn Bril's calculating anger:

She wants me to do what? I'm no spy! I can't do this, I don't want to do this, but she's promising I'll make friends. It'll make me popular. People won't pick on me, they'll stop stealing my toys, they won't push me into the mud. How does she know all this about me? Can all this really happen if I help her?

There's something scary in her eyes, something swirling like too many finger paints mixed together. I try to look away, but she grabs my chin — we're about the same size even if I am older. I swallow and feel tears in the back of my eyes. Feniwyn makes an effort to smile, but I can see how much she hates my crying. If I do this, will it make me stronger? By helping Agnes and Feniwyn, can I really break the little mold I live in? Feniwyn smiles at me again, for real this time. It's a feeling I've never known before: true friendship. We make the pinky-swear, giggle over it, and part ways. This is it! This is my chance! Can it really be this easy? I'm so glad Feniwyn and I are friends now.

Gershell, Agnate Child/  
Victim

The world of the Child is a confusing one, filled with both the triumphant joy of a sunbeam in the spring, and the pain of deceptive secrets told in the dark. Gershell does not handle this world well and spends most of her life in the depths of sheer terror. Picked on and pushed around by the Children, her role in society is often tentative and shifting, depending on how cruel the current leader of the pack is.

She broke tradition when she spent an extra three years among the Young Ones, her slight build helping to blur her age. Each day is filled with an uncertainty for Gershell: will she conquer the day, or will the day conquer her?

Highlights: Shy, Eager to Please,  
Kind Hearted

Attributes: BLD -2, CRE +2, KNO -1,  
WIL -2, STR -1, HEA -1, STA 10,  
UD 1, AD 1.

Eminences: Inspiration

Skills: Craft (Finger painting) 1/+1,  
Dodge 1/0, Human Perception 2/0,  
Lore (Agnate) 2/-1, Notice 1/0,  
Sneak 2/0.

Equipment: A broken doll, a hidden  
blanket she sleeps with at night, and  
various pebbles chosen for their  
brilliant colors.

## Promise!

From an amused Feniwyn Bril:

When unfocused minds remain cluttered, it's amazing how easy it is to arrange what you want. Take my darling Gershell here. Her longing to be recognized as an equal — and not the plaything she really is — makes her spring into action at my words where a more grounded child might consider them closer. Think about what I am asking: to play guide to our unwanted guest, and report back to me everything she does, everything she says; each movement she makes and each thought she airs.

And does she really think this is going to garner her favor with our Child? With anyone? No one else would be caught dead in the company of that filth, but to Gershell's small mind, I've unselfishly given her the key to her future. Let her tag around behind the trash while it wanders around Playground. I'll fix her, then fix Elita, then find the doll and reap in the glories of Agnes. Really, children can be so stupid.



## Playing Grown-up

### The bewildered state of Raissa Gravkin:

With my wounds healed and my mind calmed, I still find it difficult to reflect on the last two hours. From vision to geas, my peaceful world has been turned into a nightmare that I am forced to survive.

The Child Gershell has plied herself to my service as a guide through Playground, but clearly her will is too weak and her eyes quick to tear to be of real use. But her heart shines bright in her large eyes, and I can't help but feel sympathy for her. No one else is going to make such an offer, and she may prove useful after all. My glimpses of the future come not when I call, but when they are the most inconvenient, and it would be good to have someone to watch for me. Besides, my duty to the Nation is to heal and nurture, to coax the small seed into a large bloom; to cleanse the soul of transgressions so that it may walk the soil of Vimary without regrets. I may be of more help to Gershell than she to me.

## A Shell Game

### A wary Gershell reflects:

Feniwyn told me she'd do this. She told me this woman would try to win me with gentle smiles and soft words. Ha! You can't fool me! I know who my real friends are. Stop trying to find new games for me to play, because I know them all. I'm an Agnite and we invented every game there is. I'll show you our fields, our halls, the relic-filled rooms of our emporiums, but don't think you're my friend. You're going to find our doll, not buddy up to us. Remember, your life is ours until you find it for our Child. I just wish... well, I just wish her eyes weren't so nice. Or her smile so sweet. I'm glad Feniwyn warned me, or else I might have fallen for them.

## You're Not The Boss Of Me!

### From the observations of Raissa Gravkin:

Doors have been flung open to me, and sights I never thought to see — honestly, never knew existed to be seen — are now picture-framed for my viewing. I have spent many days here at Playground, either in the front hall or out in their fields, and the kitchens of course, but never before has the Tribe been so laid open to me. I've been charged to find this doll on loss of my own life, and while I'm no High Judge, I know that the first place to start is the scene of the crime.

Things are so different on the inside. The bud, while green and lush in spring, does not reveal its true colors until it blooms. Our conception of the Agnites is so slight, so very basic, only half of what is really there. Most in the Nation believe only chaos holds council with these capricious children, and order and structure are things they leave for others. While I can not deny the validity of such a statement in essence, the rigidity of certain Agnite ways, their customs, rituals and ceremonies, leave little room for error. The dance they step is delicate, an intricate pattern that needs to be learned quickly for sheer survival's sake: things such as Young Ones averting their eyes when a Breeder passes near. Barren are only to be remembered when a baby needs a diaper changed or some similar odious task, and everyone is to regard those who play with Agnes, Her Favorites, with respect. For such simple rules, they are strictly adhered to. No one steps out of place, and everyone knows her dance partner's next move.

Each grouping, for the most part, remains insular with few exceptions. The Young Ones and Littles play in the lower fields, the Breeders stay to the Hall, the Barren drift from chore to chore and the Children oversee it all. With the exception of the Children and Agnes Herself, there is very little mingling between castes. It is an order each babe of three understands innately, and one I need to learn quickly if I am to find any answers.

## The Young Ones

### From the streaming conscience of Cee Cee, Young One:

After breakfast we get to go play out in the meadow where all our toys live. Like the flowers and the trees and the balls and the blocks. Blocks! I love blocks. But Parres got the blocks first, and didn't you know I always want the blocks?!? So now I'm pushing him and he's pushing back and we knock over his stack and I don't even care. I want the blocks and now look what you made me do! I got blood on my shirt and now it's made the color wrong. You're dumb and I never want to play with you! Ever!

Well... okay. But I get to stack all the green ones. I like green. It's like touching the grass when it's wet still. Yeah, here, you can have yellow. Parres is fun when he isn't pushing my nose into the ground. I play with him lots, I do, and I sit with him at the lunch, and he even lets me eat his orange sometimes because the seeds get stuck in his teeth. But I don't sleep next to him at nap, because he farts and that's gross.

I hope that Agnes comes to play with us today. Maybe it'll make Her feet less sad if She comes and then the toys can get up and dance by themselves and She'll forget that ol' doll. I like it when Agnes comes and plays with us. Who is that over at the end of the gate? Is that Gershell? Gershell, Gershell, Gershell! Come and play blocks with us and why are you with this dumb lady? She can't play, ever! Gershell, you can have the blue ones because you liked the blue blocks, remember? Come play with us, Gershell — blue blocks! Whaddya mean you have to show this dumb lady around? Gershell, we want you to play with us. But, Gershell, the blocks... yeah, I guess. Bye.

## The Bullies

### From Breell Yeth, slight child among the Agnites:

I've already given Shane my muffin this morning, but it isn't enough. It's never enough. He's twice as big as me and four times as ugly, but I don't say that out loud. It's always the same: he makes fun of my lisp, he gets the others to laugh with him, they call me names, shove me into the dirt — mud if he can find it — and then I cry. But I'll show him, I'm not going to cry today. Not even a chin-quiver. I've been practicing. I go down to the caves and practice my Esses and Tee-Aiches. I'm pretty good now.

First he has to make fun of my hair, too yellow he says. Like pee. I ignore it. I can do this. Then my freckles and my brown eyes that he says are the color of baby shit. I keep my face down, but I don't make it look like I'm avoiding him. I find something interesting to look at by my feet.

"C'mon Breell, say ship," he asks. "Thip", I say. Snickers start. "Now say secret." I make a small pucker of my lips, but he yells at me: "Say secret!" "Theecret." The snickers swing into wild laughter. I can feel my face getting hot, but I refuse to cry! I try to edge away, but Shane blocks off my escape with his bulky body. "Say slit." This is their favorite. I bite my tongue. I'm not going to do it. Can't make me. Closing in, Shane grabs my chin and yanks it up. He asks, quite softly, again. "Thit." It's all the boys can do to keep from rolling on the ground, leaning on each other and slapping one another like this is some joke they've just made up and not something they do every day. Shane just smirks down at me, then with one barksy laugh, shoves me into the dirt.



### Cee Cee, Young One

As with many Young Ones, Cee Cee is heard before she is seen. Cee Cee (she may have had a longer name at one point in her short life, but she's since forgotten it) is a bright girl somewhere between five and six. Her world-view, undisturbed by such things like politics, cause and effect, or tact, gives her an almost painfully honest opinion on everything her bright little mind can understand.

Anyone who stops to listen to Cee Cee will be told a story about whatever is currently occupying her busy little mind, in fluid sentences that move from topic to topic without the complications of segues. Though they come through the rambunctious words of a Young One, her stories are often quite entertaining and occasionally contain insights that adults would do well to listen to.

Highlights: Energetic, Innocent, Candid

Attributes: BLD -2, CRE +2, KNO -1, STR -1, HEA 0, STA 15, UD/AD 1

Eminences: Capriciousness and Inspiration

Skills: Craft (Painting) 1/+1, Dodge 1/0, Notice 1/0, Sneak 1/0, Synthesis 2 (Naïvete).

Equipment: Various toys, blocks, and paints.

I'm waiting until they are good and gone, since it's pointless for me to get up until then. The times I've tried, they just turn around and shove me down again. Like I'm supposed to sit here all day or something. I'll have to practice more in the caves, then maybe Shane will leave me alone. Looking downhill, I watch that Evan and Gershell move among the Young Ones. Oh, if only I could be there again! No one made fun of my lisp, and all you did was play. If only, somehow, I could go back. There were no Shanes then. Wiping a dirty hand against my wet face, I roll over and stand. But I guess I didn't wait long enough, because I can see Shane coming back, and I know running only makes it worse.

Thit.

## The Squealers and Tattletales

### Straddling the bower of a tree, Ewin watches Breell Yeth's torment:

Lookit her. Lettin' that Shane shove her around. So what if she's got that lisp — we've all got problems. The trick is to make it work for you. So she's got a problem with her words — big deal. She's at least twice as tall as me, and you don't see me getting shoved around by the likes of Shane. Naw. I play by my own rules. Take Shane. He's got a dirty little secret. He don't think no one knows he hides behind the Breeder's hall and peeps through a crack. But I know. Or that Garen, friend of his. That bed-wetter sneaks into the Cribs late at night and crawls into some Nursemaid's lap to bawl. He thinks she's keeping his secret, but I know. It's all about knowing just a little bit about everyone to keep them off your back.

Cheating? Sure, but the rules change often enough that I can get away with it. Short guys like me gotta watch out for themselves, because no one else is gonna. You'd get stepped on quicker than a Barren in a dogpile. So, when someone tries to turn the heat up on me, well, I just remember a little secret, and there you go: it ends up that my nose stays clean. Do I feel bad sometimes? Never. Never, never, never. It's a kid-whomp-kid world, and everyone's playing for keepies. If I let my guard down for even a second, I'd be sure as shit gone. Naw, I keep on my toes and live to spy another day.

Just lookit that Breell, will ya. Bawling like some Young One. Don't she know that crying makes Shane worse? And see? He's heard her and is turning around. "Hey Shane! Yeah, you can see me in here. Why don't you pick on someone else? You don't want me to tell, do you?"

## The Victims

### From the broken psyche of Gershell, Child and victim:

I've done something wrong. I didn't follow sharply enough, I didn't watch closely, I didn't hear the important pieces in her voice; somehow, somewhere, during the days I've spent with her, I did something bad. Whatever it is I've missed in Raissa — I mean, that dirt-bitch — Feniwyn is mad at me for it. I've crawled up here so I can cry in peace.

Bazaar is a tiny pinpoint of dancing light to my left; the brilliant torches of Solitude blind the guilty with their truth-seeking light to the right, and straight ahead, like a speck against the velvety blackness, the fabled Wheel of Hom. What is it like to be Fallen? Is it like this block of pain in my heart? This feeling, this knowing, that I am stupid, dumb, weak? That I fall short of the mark, that I fail Agnes everyday?

Feniwyn doesn't have to remind me. I know it every day of my life. If only I was smarter! Or taller! Or had brighter hair or lighter eyes — something! But I am just sorry and pathetic. Worthless. Useless. Nothing I do is right, nothing I say is important. I can't even do this simple thing correctly. I let Feniwyn down, I let the Tribe down, and I let Agnes Herself down. Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. And look at me now — crying. Baby. That's all I am, a big fat baby. They should throw me in the Creche and forget I even exist. I hate myself — hate! Who do I think I am, anyway? I'm tired of being me. I want to be someone else. I want people to step aside like they do for Elita or Puck; I want to be clever like Feniwyn; or have everyone like me, like Cemone. Who am I? A big, sniveling, whiny, bed-wetting baby, that's all.

## The Scouts and Scroungers

Olly, scout for Agnes, talks of his adventures:

So, see, I find stuff. Big stuff, little stuff; stuff that don't work, stuff that makes lots of noise — stuff. I was part of that group that found the new emporium last winter. Well, if you must know, I was actually the leader. Oh, shut up, it's true! See, I know every tunnel there is to know in Vimary. Not just the ones here in Bazaar, or even the ones from under Playground, but all of them. Can you keep a secret?

I've even been to Hom. See, there's a set of tunnels that branch off the main line and break out under the river and come up on the other side. Oh, sure, they're kind of dangerous. Cave-ins along both sides, that one little bit where you have to swim under the boulder, and I guess the dark could spook a lot of people, but if you just get over all that, it's great fun!

You have to be quick if you want to be a Tunnel Runner, though. Slowpokes get left behind and left behind means lost — if you believe in "lost." I don't. Lost is just a bed-wetter's way of running from something new, something they're scared might bite their ankles. Lost? Naw. You're exploring! But it isn't for everyone, and only the gritty make it, though everyone's got to try it once just to say they did. There's just something about the hollow plink of a water drop hitting forgotten stone, and the echoing sound your feet make sliding down the mossy banks that makes me glad to be an Agnite. And the stuff you can find is amazing. Some of my greatest toys come out of those tunnels.

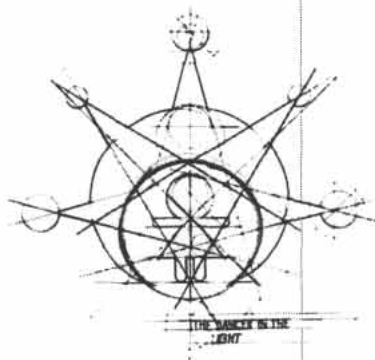
Don't believe me? Well check this out. See, you put a little pebble here, then you press this lever, and it makes the dog leap through the hoop and he dumps it into this barrel! It's the only one in all the Nation, and I found it in the tunnels.

## The Dahlian Mascots

Dris, Agnite Mascot to the Caravan of the Sail, speaks while moving through Bazaar:

The road is hard, but it isn't an impossible living. I move with the Caravan of the Sail, and it's an envied position, let me tell you. We've got the longest route to cover and we have to do it in a smart fashion if we want to turn a profit. We have to get out to Westholm and be on schedule to get back in time for Tamta. Not very Agnite of me you say? Think about it: the discovery, the adventure, the plays — these are filled with equal parts Wonder as Illusion. And what's wrong with a wonderful illusion? A play on words, I know. It's a talent I've picked up from my Dahlian friends. Agnes beats in my heart, but Dahlia has Her way with my tongue.

Hare walks beside me with firm strides, and I in turn walk with the Caravan. I've seen the edges of Vimary that are only bedtime stories to my brothers and sisters, but even though my eyes travel far from Playground, my love is for Agnes. I gift the Nation with Her touch, blessing each of our Caravan's productions with Her spark of life. There's Laran, he's the Little Trickster of the Caravan. I should go tell him that the Magdalite in the fourth stall is willing to trade high for a bolt of fine wool. How do I know? Call it a lucky guess.



## The Breeders

From the observations of Raissa Gravkin:

I have had to part with Gershell, forgoing her company for Agnite custom: Children are not allowed to enter here. As an outsider and with permission from the Child Herself, I may enter the Hall of Seeds, but Gershell's innocence is not to be compromised. The spectacle before me rivals any story to come out from Xstasis. They call the first time Breeders lay with one another "crushing in the seed." I have little doubt these naively sensual creatures know anything other than the more brutal paths of the act itself. You can hear them behind their curtains, grunting and moaning under the pressure to produce new blood for their Fatima. An animalistic quality hangs in the thick air, both compelling and offensive. Clothing seems to be optional in these warm rooms, as skyclad youths wander the corridors. Such sights do not embarrass me; I am a mature woman given to Eva's ways of fruitfulness. But when a young man of nineteen summers leers at you from an archway, the glistening end of his thick vine bobbing, I dare any matron not to blush. Swallowing hard against the rising heat, I quickly search out the one they call First Mother. I've been directed towards the back of the complex, past open couplings on couches, and the unlikely sight of Breeders playing a game of Muggsy. Even in this bower of fertility, they still keep their child-like ways.

## Mama-mine

Marmie, First Mother, speaks to Raissa:

"Oh, you. I wondered if you'd come here you've been everywhere else. Think you're going to find any answers in here? You look a little . . . flushed. Water?" It's great fun to watch her try and be so cool, so collected. An ecstatic cry makes her jump. I slide my smirk into a smile. "Come further in, it's quieter. We call this the Toybox. We, after all, make the greatest toys of them all here: babies. Once you've caught, you stay in these rooms. Too many eager girls, trying to do their part, do it once more often than they should, and lose the fruit of their labors.

"Me? I'm about six months along. This will be my twelfth child for our Agnes. It's how I hold First Mother. I've the current record of live births." I can't keep the smug pride out of my voice, not that this outsider will understand. "The Cribs are just beyond those doors, and the Birthing Room here. Yes, two girls in there now, I think. I don't know, I lose track. On an average, and with what Hesperrin. . . well, we get about five new babies every full moon. Two of them will make it. Harsh? The demands of the Child are harsh. Only the strong survive." This Evan, she's a smart one. Her expression is blank, but I can see her eyes roaming. Well, we've nothing to hide here. We don't have the doll. What would we have to do with dolls? We're the most dedicated children of Agnes anyway. Do you think squatting in bloody sweat is a great joy? It's a lot of hard work. But it gives our Child children, something She needs. We'd be the last to steal anything.

Our little tour takes us past Bethny and Kari, the two of them very big and tussling over some bauble. I shove them apart and take the bracelet, slipping it casually up my own wrist before toting the Evan along. "Huh? Oh, that. Sometimes we get gifts delivered to us by the Children. It's usually a first come, first grab sort of thing, but my position allows me certain privileges." And it's such a nice bracelet, the glass beads catching the light just so as I twist it round.

"Breeders are an Agnite apart, and as such, we get a bit of special treatment, sure. We get the better toys, we get the richer sweets and — " I shake my wrist at her again. " — we get things like these. The important thing to remember, though, is you do it all for the Child. You can't let your head swell like your belly. We had a real good girl here not long ago, real promising. She had twins, but then her third child was born simple and she went too far and killed it. Agnes came down on her like lightning in a thunderstorm, even though Hyrin was a past Favorite. A Breeder killing a child like that. . . You can't think you're better. You're like a great draft horse, working for the tribe, until one day they put you down for being too old and unable to lift the burden." I know my smile is sad, and I can see pity in her eyes. But it isn't my death that brings the downward cast to my lips, it's the thought that someday I won't be able to provide for my Agnes.

"You're free to walk the halls if you like, of course. Oh, seen enough? Happy playing, then."

## The Barren



### Marmie, Agnite Breeder

Slow and languid in motion, Marmie knows how to make babies and how to do so better than just about any other Breeder. What she lacks in smarts and sophistication she makes up in dedication and a kind of unsophisticated sensuality that reels on teasing the male Breeders into doing her will.

She is currently the most influential Breeder, having produced more healthy babies than anyone else, and she works very hard to keep her status. Though she is not very innovative or politically savvy, she is able to keep to a timetable and keep her biological clock on schedule as well.

Highlights: Sensual, Conniving, Complacent

Attributes: APP +1, FIT +2, INF +2, KNO -1, PSY -1, STR 1, HEA 0, STA 20, LD 4, AD 3.

Eminences: Capriciousness and Inspiration

Skills: Craft (sewing) 1/0, Dodge 1/0, Hand-to-Hand 1/0, Human Perception 1/-1, Intimidate 1/0, Leadership 1/+2, Lore (Agnite) 1/-1, Notice 1/0, Seduction 1/+1, Theatrics 1/0.

Equipment: A few dresses that are an Agnite Breeder's idea of sexy, several pretty toys, a painting made by a favorite lover.

### The Barren, Welly, setting the table for the afternoon meal:

Welly is tired. Welly is sad. But Welly is always sad. Sad. Plate, cup, fork. Plate, cup, fork. Welly has to get it right, or Welly will get kicked again like last time when Welly got it wrong. Plate, cup, fork. Wind is blowing strong, blows hair in Welly's eyes.

There is that Evan, the one called dirt-bitch. She is coming out of the Hall! Oh, how Welly wishes to be in the Hall again. Plate, cup, fork. There are no kicks in the Hall, only babies. Welly helped in there once, where the sounds are soft and everything smells musty. Welly is big, Welly is strong. Agnes said Welly make big, strong babies. Plate, cup, fork. Welly was good in there, Welly made a lot of friends. Nice friends with nice smiles for Welly. But... but Welly do something wrong. No girl catch his big, strong baby. Plate, cup, fork. Plate, cup, fork. Plate, cup, fork.

So Welly here now. Welly Barren. No big, strong babies for Welly. This make Welly always sad. Welly wanted to make lots and lots of babies for his Agnes, because Agnes needs babies. Babies that Welly didn't know how to give. Her. This also makes Welly sad. Welly failed his Agnes. If Welly had made babies, then Welly'd really be something! But Welly did not. Plate, cup, fork. Maybe Welly be like friend Morodi. Maybe Welly be Chosen next turn and Welly be in Wicker Mary. Maybe Welly get that right for his wonderful Agnes. Plate, cup, fork.

## Beyond The Shattered Looking Glass

### Jonathan Abrams, Keeper held among the Agnites, speaks to Raissa and Gershell:

What? By the Child's chipped face, what could you possibly want from me? Toys that dance and sing and flash little lights? You look a little old to be playing with things like that. Is it for Gershell?

Oh yes, I know your name, child, I know the name of every one of you wretched little vermin who swarm over me with pinching fingers and little cries of, "I want this! I want that!" I hear your names when you speak to each other, and I remember everything you say. I don't miss much, because up here I have little enough else to do but make flashing toys for over-privileged, under-disciplined knee-biters. As for you, I know you aren't an Agnite. That much is plain as the scars on your face. What I want to know is what a woman like you, who has some wisdom in her eyes, is doing in this monkey cage. Don't you fear ending up like me? A dancing ape prodded out of life for the amusement of an uppity assortment of walking gears?

Close your mouth, Gershell, you'll catch flies. Yes, I dare talk like that about Her Mighty Agnes-ness. She doesn't remember that I'm alive, so I've little danger of being spanked for my naughtiness. There are some advantages to being out of sight and out of mind, you know. I can mouth off to anyone however I want, because once you've been the slave of a doll that can blast down walls with Her horrid shrieking brat-fits, you don't have a lot of fear left.

That's uncommon of you, ma'am. I don't think that anyone ever cared enough to even ask how I felt, much less put their neck out like that. But no, I don't think there is any point to me trying to run. Agnes has forgotten about me the way She forgets about all Her toys. I can sit on the shelf and work on my toys, some of which are for me and not the brats, but if I ever try and get up and brush the dust off, She'll smash my head with a hammer.

I know, and I know you meant it too. Doesn't matter though. I'll stay here and stay alive. Bad as it might be, it's better than being dead. I don't have all that mumbo-jumbo religious crap to comfort me about my soul like you barbarians do. So I'll stay alive, I'll keep making toys, and maybe someday I'll make something that will make all this time and trouble worth it. Till then I'd get gone, the both of you. If you were found up here we'd all end up like butterflies, with our wings pinned down. And you watch your back. Things here are never what they seem, and the last person you can trust is someone who's innocent.

### An Eye For An Eye

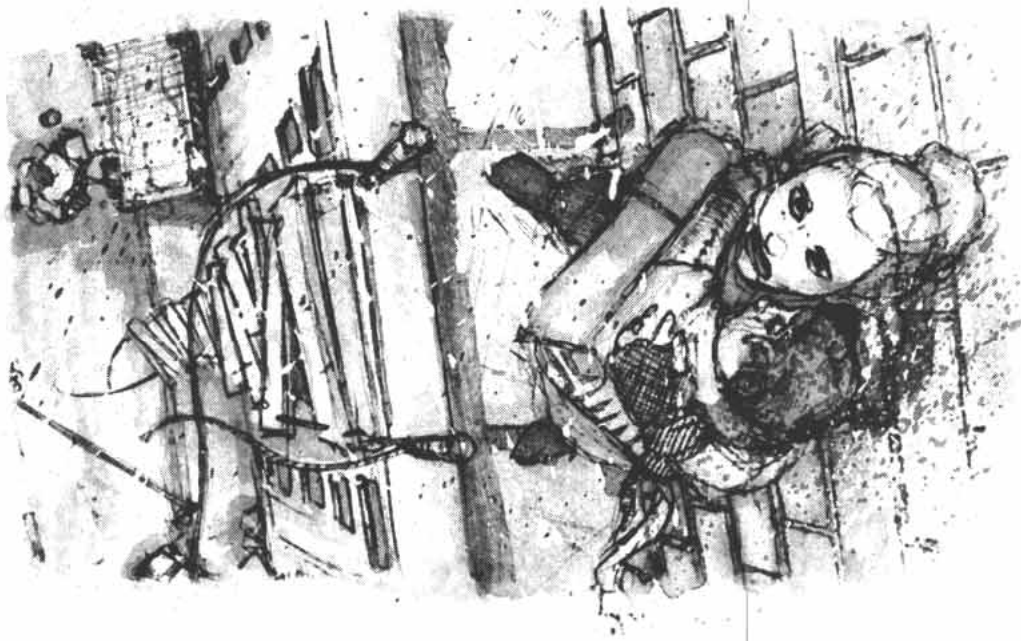
#### The reflections of a frightened Gershell:

I heard the snap before the boards gave way under my feet. It was like flying for a moment, suspended between one breath and the next. I was walking beside Raissa — and then we were falling.

I lurched for the rope and someone overhead started to scream. I don't know what Raissa did exactly, but I felt her arm wind around my waist and she held me tight. Over and over in my ear she yelled, "You'll be fine, I won't let you go, I have you!," pounding, pounding into my head over the shrill, panicky screams.

The bridge swung through the air over the emporium and crashed into the rough support. It crushed my hand till it bled, but I held on; the screamer wouldn't leave my mind clear enough to do anything else. I could see a group forming under us and a couple of faces peering down from above. We had been the only ones on the bridge. The screamer screamed.

Crawling up one rung at a time, Raissa hoisted me over the edge before pulling herself up. With wild eyes she slapped me soundly across the cheek. I stopped screaming. The screaming stopped. Shaking, sniveling, I looked over the edge and saw my death dangling over the courtyard in a broken rope. She's gone on to find answers, but I'm still here, unable to leave this spot. He tried to kill me. I wasn't supposed to see them, but I did, hovering over the knots. He tried to kill me. I think the screamer is going at it again.



## When The Heart Refuses To Mend

**Standing in a twilight-filled grove, Feniwyn Bril:**

I have stormed and I have carried on, these woods shaking with my rage. But now is the time to rein in my passion and calculate the shortcomings of my previous actions. I have been sloppy, too simple, letting others do my work when clearly the task must fall on my own shoulders. I can not send children to do a Child's work.

The bridge was cut, but somehow they survived. How you can cut hemp inaccurately, I'll never know, and nor will Christin have the leisure to learn from his mistake. The ankles of that whelp thrum against the supports in subterra. Let a scout find his moldering flesh and wonder at what crime he committed to earn such punishment. His pathetic wails relieved some of the anguish in my soul, but not enough to dispel my disappointment.

For this miscarried situation persists! The abomination still breathes, my ally has yet to find the doll, and Agnes' attention still wavers from the Vision. Barb offers me nothing from Council, so I don't know how far news of our troubles has carried, but for now it seems to be contained. I will feel the farm-bitch's heart give its last beat in my hand before I let her leave Playground! When I think of what she is, what she keeps sacred. . .

I can still see my mother's bloody hand, reaching out towards my father's already cooling carcass. Only then did she remember me, small, against the wooden pillar of Her temple with knuckles clenched white against my lips. Her eyes, losing focus as life dribbled from her wrists, reached out to enfold me in her macabre embrace.

Her words still sound so clear in my memory. "She is gone, my darling baby. The Forgiver is gone. Come, so that we may join Her." Mother, oh mother, why! Mother, don't you understand that I was scared? Can you know the terror that ran free in my veins as your crimson hands reached for me? And that when you slumped to the ground, your forgiving knife clattering at my bare feet, can the shade of your memory understand that I was left with no relief? You left me, Mother, you left me alone! Alone, Mother, alone! Small! Frightened! Alone! Mother, Mother, why? Please!

Teddy, Teddy, come to me in this grove, hold me in your strong arms, ground me in today and send these memories back to the yesterday they've dragged themselves from! Oh, Teddy, what would I do without you? Without our Agnes? Oh, Mother, why? Yes, I should sleep, Teddy, you're right. I wear myself thin with such fervency, I know. But I must. Just as I had to take Agnes' hand that long-ago day, I must pursue the Dream. Yes Teddy, I am comfortable. I am always comfortable in your lap. I know, I can never be alone when I have you and our Agnes.

## Our Little Secret

**Shane to his friends, lurking in the shadows of Playground:**

Shaddup, Arnie, or they'll hear you! By the Child, if I have to come over there and thrash you good. . . Better. Now, stay low. Geez, Garen, I already told you: we have to snatch that crybaby Gershell and fix her good for bawling to that dirt-bitch. She snitched out on us, and now that bitch is walking around like she has eyes in the back of her head. Well, we'll show her. We'll show 'er good!

We just gotta wait till it's dark enough, then run in, grab the brat, and get in a good kick to the dirt-bitch if we can. Will you just trust me? I got my sources, that's why. We're not supposed to mess the dirt-bitch up more than a kick here and there; my friends have bigger plans for her. I dunno, maybe we'll be there. Our job is Gershell the Crybaby. We get to have her all to ourselves.

## Pushing Up Through The Soil

**Zoe Gravkin speaks with Raissa in the fields:**

Run off on you, has she? Can't say as I'm surprised, dear. That's what happens when you take up with one of Agnes' children. They're terror and tumult every one. Every once in a while they'll say something to you so soft and sweet that for a minute you'll think you're talking to one of the Homestead kids, but sure as they grow, there's a joke on you in it somewhere. A doll? Oh, no wonder you can't find her. That's probably all she was after in the first place. It'll turn up once she's bored with it, trust me. That's an Agnite, got something in her head and she's off and gone.

They're wild and undisciplined, that lot. If it weren't for very patient Evan hands, there wouldn't be one scrap of food to be torn between them. Why that field there — hardly anything but green shoots now, but come August taller than any Agnite with heads of corn bobbing in the wind. Those three acres will keep the children in bread clear through winter. We tried to teach them how to farm. Try each generation as I understand it, but Agnes won't hear of their time being spent in the fields. Every time we start up lessons there's someone calling for a game of Hide and Seek or Wide and Wild. We can barely keep them at a table twice a day to get some nourishment in their bellies as it is. You'd think some of them would be interested in the future, but it's like they don't think it'll ever come. You'd think as they get older and they start to look grown. . . but no. Poor things turned to stud horses and slaves. We try our best to guide them, but where there's no gardener to cull them, weeds will choke the best little flowers.

## The Cheese Stands Alone

**Janie, hiding behind a clump of bushes, has a good laugh over the Evans:**

Those Evans, what do they really know? Not a thing. Listen to them parse up and divvy out Playground like that. They think we need them? They think we need their foods or their weavers? Agnes would provide for us if they didn't. They think they're helping, but they're just being used. If they only opened their eyes they'd see that. Who needs wilted green things all in straight rows? Agnes shows us the berries of spring, the honey of summer, and the wind-blown fruit of autumn. We'd hardly starve. And, in the winter we'd, uh, we'd. . . Well, we wouldn't have to sit at long tables where you get elbowed, that's for sure. That's an Evan game, that whole table thing. If Agnes would just let us, we'd eat whenever we wanted, wherever we wanted. But I guess Agnes thinks it's more fun to have these Evans tagging along behind us. I don't get it, but I don't have to if Agnes does.

But that Evan, the one they call Raissa, she's lost Gershell. How do you lose someone as hangy-on as Gershell? Jumped, like anyone believes that. I should let Elita know. Elita was right to have me follow the dirt-bitch.

## Playing Rough

**Shane, leader of the pack, breaks Gershell's innocence:**

Look at the stars, girly, it might be the last time you see them. Scared? Should be. Know what we're going to do to you? We're going to play a little game. Oh no, you're not! No running away before the fun begins. Sara, Juel, grab her arms. Give them a hand if they need it, Garen. Arnie, hold her head up. Just grab her hair and pull back. There you go.

Hi, Gershell. Let's have some fun, okay? No, no, keep looking at me. I want you to know why we're playing this game. It makes it more fun that way. See, you've made some people really angry, Gershell. You were supposed to help Agnes, support Agnes, watch over Agnes. But you buddied up to that dirt-bitch, that bleeding furrow, and sold us out. Oh, you bet I know all about that. You think you were invisible crying to her like that at the bridge? You didn't think we'd see that? Then you're dumber than I thought. And you deserve everything you get. Cheer up, Gershell. . . this is where the fun begins.

## The Reluctant Accomplice

**Arnie, under Shane's watchful eye, breaks Gershell's trust:**

I don't want to do this any more. My tummy's all twisty. There's too much sweat and blood and fear in the air. It's choking me, stuffing itself inside my nose so that I can't breathe anything else. Look at her eyes. Oh, Gershell's eyes. They are begging me to stop this, rolling all around, but always coming back to me. I can't wrap my hand around her hair any tighter. Each strand is pulled taut, her struggling forward, me pulling back. It's a fight we both know she can't win.

Shane shoves at her, tired and dirty, but with a scary look on his face. We all hold her down, Sara, Juel and I. We hold Gershell down just like Shane told us to. Sara looks like she might cry, Juel looks angry, and Garen hovers around with some smirky look on his face. Me? I'm going to be sick soon.

There is something dark in Shane's eyes. His face twists into hungry lines, but it's afraid too. He knows he shouldn't do this, but he's doing it anyway. It sits in the slash of his mouth, still moist with Gershell. He's older than any of us by several summers. We thought he knew what he was doing. . . but does he? Why is there this madness hovering around us then? What is he doing to Gershell, and why does it seem wrong? This doesn't belong on a page in a storybook. Stories aren't supposed to have whimpering little girls, or sweaty boys covering her. They're supposed to have happy endings. This is not a happy ending for Gershell. Don't look at me like that, Gershell, I can't help you. There's nothing any of us can do. I don't understand and I'm scared. Shane said we were going to have fun — this isn't fun! Pinning Gershell down so he can roll all over her is not fun. But what can I do? I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Just. . . close your eyes. Stop looking at me like that!

## Due Rewards

**Juel breaks Gershell's will to live:**

Hurt her. Hurt her good. Hurt her for me. I'm not going to be like her. Hurt her for me, Shane, hurt her for me. I'm not going to let myself be used like this. No. I'm not going to let people move me around like I don't have a single idea in my own head. Hurt her, Shane. Show me what happens to stupid people, Shane. Hurt her. You were stupid, Gershell, stupid. It's your own fault. You let Feniwyn talk you into this, and this is what you get for messing up. Not going to happen to me, no. Never. Not after this. You deserved this, Gershell. Stupid.

## The Forgiving Child

**Gershell whispers her last words:**

Breath, almost gone. Lightheaded. No air. No blood. Hurt. I hurt. I don't feel anything any more except for one blanketing pain. I can't make anyone happy. I failed Feniwyn, I failed Agnes, and I've even made Shane mad. Whatever he wants with me, I'm doing it wrong. It isn't working. When he strikes me again, I don't even feel his knuckles breaking my skin. I just feel one pain. He crawls off of me, they all let me go, and I'm free to look up at the stars. They're so bright. I don't know if I've ever seen them this bright. They're like tiny pinpricks of faith gone far, far away, shining unreachable in their own world. That one there, burning the brightest, that's mine. It's left me now. I can see Arnie looking worried, Garen's dark smile, Juel's face is hard and Sara bites her lip. Shane is cursing as he pulls his shorts back on. If I roll my eye just so, I can see blood all over him. My blood. I didn't mean to upset anyone. I just wanted friends. I'm sorry.

Things are dark. I don't understand. Sara swims into my vision, tears splashing down her nose. Lifting my broken wrist, I try to lay my hand against her cheek. Don't cry, Sara. I forgive you. I Forgive all of you. None of us understand anything until it's too late. Raissa was my friend. She's just trying to help us. All of us. Even our Agnes. Help her too, guys. Help Raissa. She's a good friend to have. Maybe you won't fail like I did. . . The brightest star is me. Hello, Teddy, are you here to walk me across?

## The Brightest Star

### Raissa finds the forgiver:

Faster, child, run faster! If what you say is true, Gershell may not have that much time left. I can just make out shapes in the tiny hollow. Faster! But we're too late, aren't we? There is too much blood on the grass. The children are huddled in a knot over something. That boy, a young man really, what was his name? He has the most blood on him, and something heavy hangs thick in the air. I shove them out of my way, away from the body lying flat on the ground. Oh, Gershell! This is my fault what did they do to you because of me? Her lips are blue as if strangled, I can see bruises already welling up on her pale skin, and her skirts. . . These Children! I can't see straight for rage. What have they done to her! Gershell, Gershell, can you hear me, child? Please Mother, help her! Gershell!

But yelling does little good. She can't hear my voice from where she is now. Her lips move, and a smile parts her mouth once more. As the last bit of life leaves Gershell's eyes, her hand rises to the cheek of her companion, streaking tracks of gore. The child, Sara, I think, recoils as if struck, slapping her hand over her face where Gershell's blood dries. Horror and confusion share equal parts across in her eyes. The rest have made a wide arc around us, rooted in fear around our tableau.

They've killed her. They've killed her because of me, because she was weaker than themselves. Rage sweeps through me again. My days trapped in Playground crystallize around this moment, sleepless nights shatter the stillness in the power of a single scream. No child escapes my lashing tongue. Shane cries. Sara is already wailing. A third is starting. The bastards. I hope that someday their innocent veil falls, and understanding drives them into insanity.

## The Darkest Hour

### Raissa Gravkin and her midnight reflections:

Wandering, I don't follow the progress of my feet. I just let them fall, one before the other, into a path of their own making. I've buried Gershell in the Evan fields, saying a prayer to the memory of our Mother and Her lost soul. I turn back each leaf of my memory, trying to pluck understanding from this tangled vegetation. There is an answer in here somewhere, I simply need to find it. I cannot let Gershell's life be for nothing. The air is rank in these caves; however in the name of the Child did I end up here? It's cold — I should have brought a wrap. A door?

What is a door doing here? Whoever saw such a thing? And it opens so easily. . . where is this? A toy room? Some secret stash for the Children? No, it is much more than that. Much, much more. I can feel Her here. Her touch, Her caress, even an echo of Her gentle laughter. This is Agnes' room. A refuge for a doll; a doll's house.

There are stacks of toys! Toys with wheels, elements of costumes, entire piles of miniature bricks that interlock; a box of things I can barely make out, but look like things that Keeper had. And dolls. So many dolls. . . their miniature eyes all peer down at me. There is a single mound of dolls, taking up one entire corner of the room. It has a depression in the middle, just large enough for someone to sit inside.

## 3. Word of Agnes



### Feniwyn Bril, The First Child of Agnes

Once, Feniwyn was a happy child, daughter of loving Marian parents.

Then Mary died, her parents committed suicide, and with them went Feniwyn's world. Then Agnes was born and a wave of love and pure joy swept over Feniwyn as she became joined with Agnes. Agnes' coming saved her life, and in return, Feniwyn gave her life in service to Agnes. Feniwyn became the foremost of the First Children, and for a time was Agnes' right hand.

Agnes, however, eventually grew bored with Feniwyn, and ceased to give the girl Her attention. Feniwyn became filled with a jealous rage, convinced that Agnes owed her better than this. Now Feniwyn is determined to make everyone pay for her pain. Feniwyn, once a child of Mary, and the first Agnite, cannot forgive, and has gone mad with resentment.

Highlights: Fanatic, Obsessive, Deceptive

Attributes: AGI +1, BLD -1, CRE +1, INF +1, KNO +2, PER +1, PSY -2, WIL +2, ULD/AD 3.

Eminences: Capriciousness and Inspiration

Skills: Athletics 1/0, Combat Sense 2/+1, Crafts (drawing) 2/+1, Dodge 2/+1, Dreaming 2/-2, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Human Perception 2/-2, Interrogation 1/+1, Intimidate 2/-1, Investigation 1/+1, Leadership 2/+1, Lore (Agnite) 4/+2, Melee 1/+1, Mythology 2/+2, Notice 2/+1, Ritual 2/+2, Sneak 2/+1, Streetwise 3/+1, Swimming 1/0, Teaching 1/+1, Theatrics 3/+1, Synthesis 4 (Wonder, Naivete, Hide n Seek).

Equipment: Knife (AD +3), several notebooks, the best toys in Playground.

### 3. Word of Agnes

Just as I ignored my feet, I ignore my actions until I am nestled tightly into the doll pile. Reaching out, I finger this one, tug at that one to see its face better. A few cascade into my lap. Each and every one is a representation of a mother and a child. None of the figures match those in my dreams, however. I didn't expect any to. That set is, after all, stolen. I have no doubt that it is real — it is as real as any of this madness.

The Child is trying to understand, I think. Trying to close the schism between Herself and Her Aunts. She is the only one of their kind brought into this tortured world as we are: by birth. Is this what I saw in Gershell? In her last smile, was there a reconciliation between two splintered worlds? Hope is a powerful tool when used in the right hands. It heals and mends like no other salve. Can Agnes bring such subtle power to us? Is that what I saw in Gershell's eyes before they went dull?

### Sibling Rivalry

#### Feniwyn Bril, First Child of Agnes, confronts Raissa:

The moon is high when I find my way to the Doll's House. Gershell's body couldn't be found, which is a pity. I wanted to see how Shane killed her. I could use a good laugh. Is someone already here? Everyone should be asleep. Closing the door behind me, a movement from the corner catches my attention. She stands up, moonlight casting itself around her body like a sheath, eyes bright with unholy light. I can hear a guttural snarl rip itself from my throat.

"What are you doing here?! How dare you intrude upon this sacred place with your filth! Filth!" I lurch forward, my fury boiling, spittle making her flinch as it splatters against her face. I find her neck, her pale and eminently breakable neck between my hands. Vaguely, I can feel her hands taking purchase on my body. "Do you really think I don't know what you are? Do you think yourself so smart as to fool an entire Nation with your blasphemy? I know you — if I was deaf and blind I would still know you for what you are. Marian!" I hurl the word at her, wrestling her down to the ground where I can pound her skull against the floor boards. Dolls fall into obscene copulation, one atop the other as I bring the bitch down.

"I stood there as my mother slit her own wrists, I watched as my father plunged the dagger into his own belly, and why? Because the forgiving touch of Mary was gone. Forgiving? A lie!" She drives her knee between us, but my frenzy still gives me the edge. I will club her brains from her head! I shake her and slap her and rage down at her until the sight of her face swirls in my angry head.

"They left us, all of us, standing there cold and afraid! You, you Marian, I've known you since the first night you tramped into our Playground. You thought to fool Agnes, but you could never fool me: Agnes never knew Mary, but I did. Oh yes, I knew Mary and no one felt it more bitterly than us. We, the First Children of Agnes, we few remaining. We took the Doll's hand as She came to Vimary, each of us swearing to serve Her to our last. And serving Her means ridding. . . ourselves of. . . you. . . and. . . your. . . kind!" I punctuate each word by beating her head against the floor, my hands still choking the air from her lungs. Life begins seeping out of her. I can see it: that particular glaze over her eyes, the way her mouth works with no sound. I laugh at her weak struggles. Why did I think this so difficult? Why did I send anyone else? I could have taken care of her myself long ago.

"You can't stop us, Marian, no one can. You'll die tonight never seeing Agnes lead this Nation to its destiny." I have to work harder to keep my hands around her throat as she works her own up around mine. She's pushing my face away, hoping to break my hold. Her arms are longer; this becomes more of a struggle. The webbing between her thumb and finger finds itself in my mouth as she shoves my head back. I let my teeth sink in until I taste the coppery flow of her blood.

In one burst of energy, she flings me off and sends me across the room. The trunk I crash into is thick and unyielding. Before I can gather my wits, she's run from the room, door banging behind her. Bitch! My feet are unsteady, and the world shifts too much as I walk, but I start a chase.

## Truth In Light, Understanding In Truth

### The Marian, Raissa, struggles for understanding:

My breath is raw and painful over the tortured tissue of my throat. Who would think such small hands could hurt a grown woman so? But then, those weren't the hands of a Child if her story is to be believed. Madness, sheer madness! Could she really be the First Child of Agnes? If what she says is to be taken as truth, that would make her far older than myself, and clearly she is a child of no more than seven summers! But... could she be? Her eyes believed it, and her fury was a righteous one. Could it be?

I pass under the gate of Playground, hopefully unseen or that girl will be upon me again, no doubt with help this time. This grove, this stand of saplings, this is where it all started. Running into that girl, and my second vision... But of course! Oh, how could I be so blind — so stupid! Gershell needn't have died if only I had thought clearly. That girl had the doll! I felt it myself, beating through that decaying cloak and down into my soul, wrenching visions from my dreaming eye.

I hope I am not too late. I cannot be found here, and I think I see movement near the main gate. I'll lose myself in these trees and hopefully into the Evan fields before they have time to catch up. Mother Mary, guide me now from the hatred of Your grand-daughter!

## If This Letter Speed

### Excerpts from a letter penned to Shahana of the Dahlians:

I am safe now, home in my own hut laid cold these last five days. No one on the plantation knows I'm here. I've hidden the candlelight well. Shahana, a great danger walks the roads of Vimary and it is disguised as a doll. And not any doll, but the favored toy of Agnes the Child, infused with Her power and endowed with Her influence. It was stolen from Playground in the still of the night, sprinted away before the Children had chance to give chase. My dreams and searchings in the River have whispered the thief's name into my ear and burned her visage into my soul. Her name is Hyrin, a Child recently exiled to Horn. Take this information not as a thin thread, but as a solid fact.

Shahana, I write you this to ask for your help. I've been your confessor for many years, and our standing is good. This is the fate of our Nation, Shahana. Something from the West threatens us, and needs this deceptively powerful artifact. Whoever wields this toy holds our mutual future in her hands. I call upon the sisterhood of the Dancers, and the benevolent touch of Mary — help me find this doll. Please.

-Raissa

## 3. Word of Agnes



### Raissa Gravkin, Marian among the tribe of Eva

Raissa never knew her own mother, a woman who died in childbirth. Raissa's father remarried, producing five daughters. Quickly, Raissa fulfilled the role of watchful older sister, burying her disappointments in life in work. When the dreams began, she felt herself being drawn into the River by forces greater than herself — and Eva. The richer in detail her dreams became, the more often they came true.

Fearing for her sanity, Raissa undertook a quest that led her into the heart of Duskfall. Among the shades of the world, her feet turned down the path towards the temple of Mary the Forgiver. There, she beheld the broken shell of her one, true Mother.

A powerful dreamer, her control over such matters is something entirely different. It has set Raissa at the edge of her sanity, a narrow beam she cannot afford to slip off of.

Highlights: Stoic, Responsible, Harried

Attributes: CRE +2, INF +1, KNO +2, PER +1, PSY -1, WIL +2, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 25, UUD/AD 3.

Eminences: Purity and Life

Skills: Combat Sense 2/+1, Dodge 2/+1, Dreaming 2/-1, Hand-to-Hand 1/0, Human Perception 2/-1, Interrogation 1/+2, Intimidate 2/0, Investigation 2/+1, Leadership 2/+1, Lore (Evan) 2/+2, Lore (Marian) 3/+2, Melee 1/+1, Mythology 2/+2, Notice 2/+1, Ritual 2/+2, Sneak 2/+1, Streetwise 3/+1, Teaching 1/+1, Theatrics 2/+1, Synthesis 3 (Clairvoyance).

## Chapter four: Curtain Call

Every play comes to an end with the curtain's fall;  
The stage silent, empty and forlorn  
Only the whispers of players past remain.

So sing, caper and cavort, while you have your time  
For in the end there comes The End, to every fancy rhyme.

-The Last Lines of A Solstice Reverie, Oft-quoted Dahlian Play



## Planting The Dagger Firmly

Louis, Dahlian Messenger, inquiring after Raissa:

The small Evan plantation is humming with activity like bees in summer. There are more farmers here in the square than out in the field; seems I'm not the only one here with an objective.

"I seek the one called Raissa Gravkin, if it please you, dear Aunt." I smile at the Matron, letting her matronly heart flirt with my youthful expression. A group of children surges around me. While Agnites are not uncommon in Evan establishments, and especially not one so close to Playground, I find enough Children armed with weapons to raise my interest.

A small girl, dark-haired and rather fragile looking, has madness in her eyes. She steps forward when I ask the Evan Matron for her daughter's whereabouts, mad flickers of derangement dancing like marionettes in her gaze. The mad-child informs me that the 'faithless wretch' has fled Playground and her 'mission.' And that they too are searching for her. Their endeavor looks far more dangerous than mine, what with the wild waving of pikes and swirling of bolos. Me, I only come armed with a message. The Evans are in a flutter. Raissa has not been with them as she was under the eye of Agnes Herself. They fall to speaking amongst themselves, and I have fallen into the shadows.

The air shimmers softly around the tight knot of people, the disparate heights between Agnite and Evan glaringly obvious. Like the best of illusions, Agnes Herself materializes in their midst. The dark-haired one moves quickly to retain her leadership, grabbing the Blessed Bear's large arm and arresting Her attention. Spinning her words fast, she works Agnes into frenzy. In Her rage, She condemns Raissa, absent of course, to death by Her own Hands and those of Her Children. I wonder what Eva might feel about this. The whole pack dashes off, frothing at the mouth. Very interesting, very interesting indeed.

## Tag, You're It

The observations of Tark, Dahlian Envoy, delivering his charge:

The Watch is thick today, like they know a secret the rest of us aren't privy to. I go about my business, but this damnable doll keeps fluttering inside my bag as if it were alive itself. Spooks my bones cold, it does, but then what else should I expect from a doll of the Doll? There's my contact, just where I was told to meet her. She looks nervous, but if the birds twitter the truth, her life hinges on this doll's return. "Do you help the Child?" It's the phrase I'm supposed to give her before passing the satchel over. She nearly falls into my arms grabbing for the bag. It beats between us like some live thing caught in the throes of passion. I'm glad to be rid of it: some secrets aren't worth knowing when the price is your life.



## Lost And Found

**Raissa, the false Gravkin, pleads for her life:**

I have it. At last! That familiar tingle begins up my arm, but can't seem to reach my soul from its prison of canvas and leather. I am grateful, for to lose myself again to a dream here, in the middle of Bazaar, now. . . The Dahlian is like smoke, dissipating before I can thank or condemn him. I turn resolutely towards Playground. If She still craves my life, at least I have fulfilled my duty to Her and Our Mother. No one can fault me once I enter the River once and for all.

But what's this? Too much is happening around me: people shouting, people pushing, a path being made wide down the main street. Something large looms on the horizon, pressing the crowds back. Agnes and Her Children. Can She feel the doll? It jerks the bag from my hip, trying to take to the air in wingless flight. I make eye contact with Her, something sinister flashing in the Bear's expression before Her scissor-fingers point me out. I only have this chance, a moment before they see me to act. My heart hovers between beats, my life hanging on its next pulse.

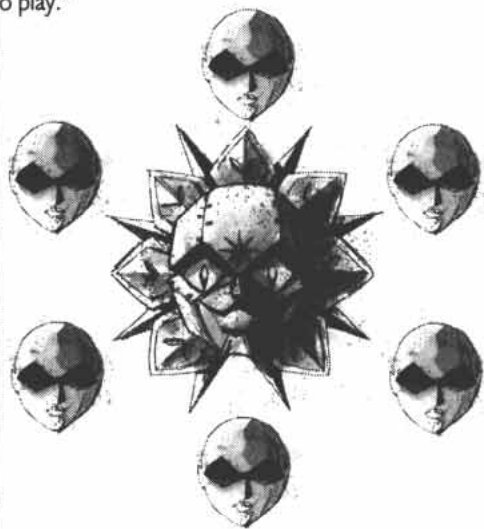
Before the Children have a chance to crash on me, I fall before Agnes, supplicating myself before Her and Her retinue. I mutely thrust the doll above my head, a gesture echoing back to that mad evening with the shell. I've come so far since then, and I want to think that Agnes has, too. Maybe I haven't given miracles up completely after all. "Agnes, dearest of Children, I left Your Playground to retrieve this, as so ordered by Your words. Your Doll, returned to You by my hands."

## The Little Teapot

**Druella, Captain in the Watch, reigns in control:**

By my sword, it's Agnes! Here, in the middle of this chaos! "Agnes, Sweet Child, can Joan's warriors be of service? It would be our pleasure." I wore my particularly nice breastplate this morning, and now I am glad. I glance down at the woman, Evan by the looks of it, splayed before the Child with some dusty bag in her hands. Children throng around the Sweet Child, one particularly pinch-faced and dainty thing looking livid. I can tell that this woman's life balances precariously on childish whim. "Sweet Child, has this woman done you ill? I shall throw her to the shores of Horn myself if she has insulted a single lock of hair on Your precious head. Dear Child, speak so that I may serve."

Agnes takes the bag from the woman's hands, gesturing that the Evan can go free. Getting to her knees, the woman makes a humble retreat to a respectful distance, face downcast. She's crying. Turning upon us, Agnes commends our prompt response. I can't stand any prouder. Reaching into the bag, Agnes pulls out a most beautiful doll, casting its crude package at the Evan's feet. As She raises it into the air, a cold splash from the River touches us all. "Come on," She says to Her Children. "We have games to play."



## Hate, The Sharpest Of Weapons

From the ravings of Hyrin the Angry:

No! This simply can not be! That Dahlian outmaneuvered me, delivering the doll into that dirt-bitch's hands — who gave it back to Agnes! Everything I worked for, everything I was promised and promised to others: gone! Just like that, snap! And then, of all things, the Little Bitch let her live! Well, my dagger is sharp and my arm is sure. Agnes has been lenient this day, but my mind is in a passion and there is no calm answer for it. Raissa Gravkin won't leave Bazaar under her own power. When that is done, I'll return to that hovel of Horn, where I will continue my campaign against the Charming Brat and Her Aunts. Yes... yes. This wasn't a failure, just a minor set back. I will have my day yet. I will not be thrown away again! Come here, sweet Evan. I promise to make it slow and painful.

## To My Coy Mistress

A letter from Veniri, Oneida spy:

Most passionate Lady, the test has run its course, though I am not sure how complete the results really are. We failed to gain the artifact from the Child, as there is more going on under the skin of Vimary than even I had suspected. These are a strange people, Lady, full of avarice and stupidity one moment, and strong and sure as steel the next.

The Child seems to be little more than that, a child, stubborn, blind and willful. She was ready to slay Her own people for spite and nothing more. There is, however, something in Her that worries me, something about the way She holds Herself that tells me that She is starting to roll a cocoon about Herself; perhaps making ready for a change to a stronger self.

The Trickster, however, is a different matter altogether. She is mad, Lady, truly mad. I think She knew the game we were playing with Her all along, and orchestrated the dance of Her Tribe to make it go on longer, to lead it out to the proper number of beats and steps. Even now I am not sure She does not know of our spies, or our intents. Of all the Fatimas I fear Her the most.

The one bit of good that came from this whole debacle. The girl Hyrin is so tangled in our webs and in her own hate and envy that she will do anything for you, or for my other Mistresses. In that we have won a victory, for a spy such as she is a rare thing indeed.

## Nails On Glass

From the recollections of Lady Elendal, Sangis of Rahntoh:

I wonder now, sitting with the letter from my favorite pet before me, what this Lady Dahlia is truly like. How can She know the pleasure of a laugh if it does not shake Her breast, stretch Her lips or make all Her many eyes water? My face, this face of flesh, is made to laugh. Her face is no more than a mask, and masks do not change. How can this Child grow? She too is nothing more than a mask, a doll and a bear made of metal. Things do not grow; that is the province of flesh. These things worry me. Perhaps it is time that I moved to the Council and took my worries to them.

At least I can take comfort in this: I now know the measure of these two strange creatures. I know their step; I know their pulse. I know how to make them scream and sing and I know how to make them die. All it will take is a little bit of time, a little bit of patience, and a laugh that will ring out in mockery of the Dance, and all will fall apart. Without the Dancers the Nation of Vimary will fall, though the other fools know it not. They watch their Warrior and their Judge so closely, they worry over their Fates and follow all their whims, and they leave their hearts open and unprotected. What fools these Fatimas be, to guard that which is strong and leave that which is best and brightest unguarded and ready to be despoiled.

## Chapter five: Trickster's Truth

Which is the truth?

The mask or the face that wears it?

If the mask is what makes the world dance

And the face is hidden always,

Then is the mask not reality and the face illusion?

- Dahlian Saying



## TRIBAL CYCLES

Inside every Dahlian caravan lies a whole world of mystery, deception and strangeness waiting to unfold. The interactions between the caravans add more layers and levels, until the Tribe becomes an ever-changing mess of tricks, games and plays. This section presents Players and Weavers alike with information to help bring the Dahlians to life.

The Dahlians are the most flexible Tribe and contain the most variations of temperament, aptitude and outlook. It is easy to weight the cycles towards the elusive and complex nature of the Tribe, and to use their easy adaptability to color a campaign. The key to using this versatility while still remaining true to the Tribe is to understand the themes and moods that make Dahlians who they are. By staying true to the basic ideals of Dahlian life, the many different faces of the Tribe can be used to add diversity to the basic truths of this mysterious group.

## THEMES

In every Dahlian's heart beat several conflicting ideals and goals, not all of which can be meshed together smoothly. Paradox is inherent in much of the Tribe's outlook on life, in which illusion can be reality and freedom is combined with paranoia. Some learn the dance well and prosper; others however, step poorly and find themselves cast out or ground under.

The following themes all have a place in every Dahlian's life, but not all are equal in importance to every member of the Tribe. In a similar vein, while these themes should be remembered while playing Dahlians, there is no need to try to incorporate all of them into everything a Dahlian does. These are the forms of the dance that shapes the lives of Dahlians and their Tribe — but any Dahlian will tell you that the dance only comes alive when form is left behind.

## TRICKERY

For Dahlians trickery is a multifaceted thing. First off, it gives the Tribe one of its primary centers of power. Few Dahlians could ever hope to fight a Joanite face to face, and the Tribe lacks the central power base of the larger Tribes like the Evans and Shebans. However, when a single cunning Dahlian can trick an entire village of Evans or patrol of Joanites into chasing their tails until they die of exhaustion, it shows that the power of the Tribe rests in its versatility. Of course, this power is not always used with wisdom, and many of the Dahlian tricks become spiteful, malicious and pointlessly cruel.

The other force behind Dahlian trickery is described in two sayings common in the Tribe: nothing worthwhile comes easy, and no one should ever take a step without looking first. These two ideas are deeply set into the mind of every Dahlian. For this reason, the worst tricks are played on those who are searching for knowledge or those who are looking for a way to improve their lives.

Many Dahlians have spread rumors that Caravans carry powerful artifacts that can make one rich, powerful, or charismatic — and The One Goddess pity anyone foolish enough to come into a Caravan looking for them. Also, anyone looking for knowledge beyond the ordinary had best be prepared to face endless rounds of test and trickery before gaining her prize. It is a common saying among the Tribes that a Dahlian will trick you until you laugh, learn, or die.

## BEAUTY

A Tribe of crafters, performers and traders, the Dahlians make their living through beauty almost as much as the Magdalites do. As these are the two Tribes most concerned with going beyond mere survival to create something fresh and lovely, the issue of beauty is a point both of connection and of contention; whereas the Whore's Tribe loves beauty for its own sake, or for the political power it brings, the Dahlians love beauty for its capacity for transformation. Dahlian beauty is closely tied with illusion and perception; what is beautiful to one person may not be so to another. Thus Dahlian creations result in intricate and stylized art as well as freak shows and houses of mirrors which challenge the limits of the body and the mind. A Dahlian will often find splendor in the odd, bizarre and disgusting that others would be hard-pressed to understand. Forever attempting to make the world around them more beautiful, the Dahlians' strange concept of beauty can make their work very disturbing to those who do not share their aesthetic. Very few Tribals appreciate it when a Dahlian makes them over into a living work of art.

## EXPLORATION

All of the Tribes have some interest in the Outlands and in exploring the world around their small island. However the increasing conservativeness of most Tribes limits their exposure to the Outlands to short trips for food or small groups of spies and scouts. The Dahlians, on the other hand, spend a great deal of time and energy exploring and discovering the Outlands and their peoples. Most members of the Tribe have been into the Outlands at some point in their lives, and there are even a few who spend more time outside of Vimary than inside of it. As a result Dahlians lack the extreme Vimary-centrism of most Tribals. Where other Tribals tend to be content where they are, Dahlians are always looking for some new adventure.

The Outlands are not the only thing that Dahlians explore. The Tribe as a whole tends to be curious and willing to use their considerable talents for travel and infiltration to get into any place that they are curious about. At any given time there are Dahlians exploring Hom, the Rust Wastes and the River of Dream. The Dahlians are not usually long-term spies and diplomats like the Magdalites, but they know the lay of the land, and the secret places of the world, like no other Tribe. No Dahlian is content to rest upon her laurels, however, and the spirit of motion in a Dahlian's heart is always urging her to find and explore something new. As a result the members of the Tribe often seem restless and flighty, always wanting to fly to the far horizon.

## 5. Trickster's Truth

### FREEDOM

Compared to members of the other Tribes, Dahlians have a great deal of freedom. They are not tied to one place, or even to one family. Their role as merchants and traders brings them into contact with a wide variety of people and ideas. They are free to move, to talk and to trade in ways that no one else on Vimary can match. Even more importantly, Dahlians are able to make choices about the direction of their lives. They choose their caravan; the same thing, fundamentally, as choosing their family. Unlike most Tribals, they have some say in their profession and can do what they feel they are best suited to do.

The result of all this freedom is a kind of anarchy that surrounds Dahlian life, a rejection of the controlled and conservative pattern that most Tribals follow. Even inside the politics of the Tribe there is a great deal of personal freedom, as most important issues in Caravans are resolved by rants and votes. The fact that this freedom makes the other Tribes react with righteous indignation only makes the Dahlians laugh and flaunt their freedoms more openly.

### MIND CONTROL

The combined faces of beauty, freedom and exploration make it easy for outsiders to assume that the Dahlians are a free and happy Tribe. The reality, however, hides a much harsher face under the smiling mask, largely because of the role of Dahlia Herself. More than any other Fatima, the Trickster is personally involved with Her Tribe, and is able to be anyone or anything at any place or any time. Every Dahlian lives with the knowledge that Dahlia is watching, always.

Dahlia wants Her Tribe to be happy and free, to dance and to obey Her will instantly and without question. To enforce these laws, Dahlia watches Her Tribe with all Her eyes and power. The result is that Dahlian smiles are often too brittle, and eyes that should be laughing freely are giggling with trapped hysteria. For all their freedom to move and to talk, no Dahlian is free to do, or even to think, anything that is contrary to the will of Dahlia. Those that do, find themselves burned to ashes and cast out.

### ILLUSION AND TRUTH

Dahlia is the Mistress of Illusion, and all Illusion is Her will. To many Dahlians illusion is more important than truth, and to some radicals, illusion is truth itself. The will of the Fatima is more important than empirical reality, and thus any one of Her illusions is the embodiment of truth. After all, what the rest of the world holds as reality can be changed by illusion, so whose power is the greater?

This does not, however, mean that Dahlians accept any fabrication. While the will of the Fatima is reality to them, a lie told by any outside the Tribe is just another puzzle to be solved. Many Dahlians refer to the difference by using the word illusion to mean something that is true without being real, and a lie is something that is neither real nor true.

### MOOD

As with all things in the Tribe, the mood of a Dahlian campaign is one of mingled forces. In almost every aspect of Dahlian life lies a dichotomy, and every extreme is balanced by an opposite force. For every bit of freedom there is abusive control, for every bit of joy there is paranoia. In the minds and hearts of Dahlians illusions and truth mix together until no-one can tell the Dancer from the dance.

### JOY

Though the Dahlians can be disturbing, terrifying and repulsive, their Tribe is very much a Tribe filled with joy. The absolute love of life, motion, beauty and freedom gives the Tribe a real vivacity and hope that often seems absent from Tribal life. When Dahlians dance, they do so with their whole hearts, and when they cry they do so with their whole soul. Life in the Tribe is a play, and Dahlians are bound and determined to play their role so well that it breathes and sings.

In game terms, Dahlians are often found in places of light and motion, surrounded with music and color that seems all the more bright and alive against the grim backdrop of Vimary. Dahlians never trudge or droop — they run and dance, moving with their whole body. Given to large gestures and expansive (and often wordy) phrases, the Dahlians are a perfect opportunity for a Weaver or Player to ham up her acting. After all, most Dahlians ham it up whenever they can.

### INTRIGUE AND PARANOIA

Though they may seem like joyful and exuberant people much of the time, there are other moments when the Dahlians laugh a little too hard and a little too loud. All too often the slightly wild and always hyper-alert eyes of the Dahlians make their laughter seem more frantic and forced than genuine. In a Tribe where everyone can be anyone and the Fatima is all-present, it is very easy to start losing one's grip on reality and even start to doubt the motives of loved ones. The result is that there is always a sense of paranoia about the Dahlians, a kind of jittery uncertainty that cannot be thrown. The Tribe itself makes this worse through the endless tricks, games and plots that they hatch to keep each other on their toes.

The result of all the lies and games is that every Dahlian is, at any given time, involved in intrigues of endless and bewildering complexity. Anyone who deals with Dahlians for too long will also be drawn into this web of games and deceit. The Dahlians, however, are brought up on the games and know how to play them. Members of other groups rarely come out without being severely burned. No few Tribals have found themselves cast out of the Nation as the result of a Dahlian "game."

## REBIRTH

Birth and Rebirth are painful things. All humans are born of blood, water and agony, and many Dahlians believe that humanity can only be reborn from those same forces. Dahlia Herself accepts this, and She and Her Tribe are willing to undergo blood, pain and fire in order to find that perfect surge of new life. The Tribe tends to focus on this aspect, the burning away of the false world and the false self to be reborn in Truth.

Learning is a vital part of growth, and is one of the reasons for the many seemingly cruel pranks that Dahlians play. Unlike Shebans or Keepers, Dahlians are not after facts as much as they are searching for understanding. Being able to list out a string of laws and the names of parts of a machine is not what is important to a Dahlian, it is figuring out where these things come from, how they work and where they're going to be the most useful. Dahlian learning is understanding that brings change and growth, no matter how painful it may be.

## DAHLIAN LOCATIONS

Dahlians can show up any place with little or no warning. This, does not mean that the Tribe is without a center, however. Bazaar is the true heart of the Tribe, the one place where all caravans pause at least once a year. Every Caravan is also a moving home, a center for its own small group. Not just a collection of wagons, a caravan is part extended family and part wandering town. Though small groups of Dahlians can be found anywhere, the standard place for them is in their chosen caravan.

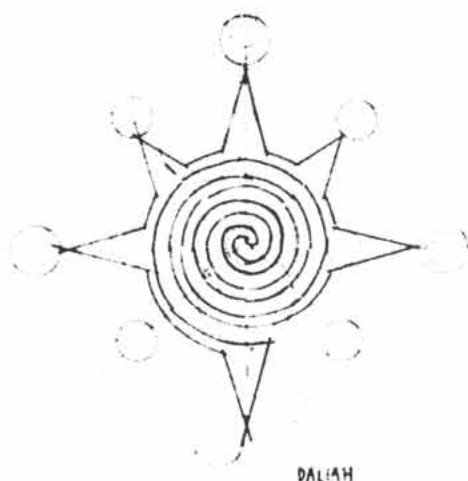
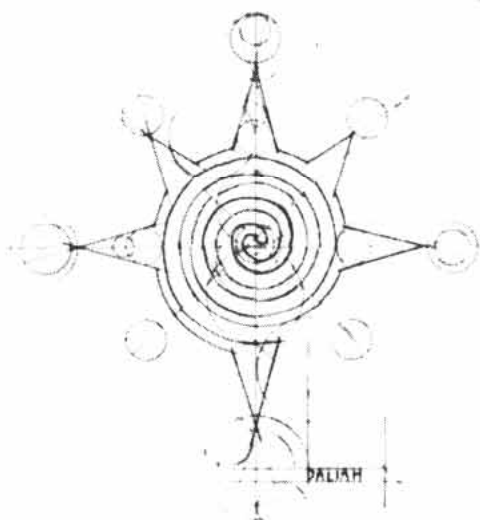
## BAZAAR

Once upon a time, Bazaar was formed by Eva as a home where all the Tribes could meet and pool their abilities and resources — but, as any Dahlian can tell you, things change. Bazaar now belongs to Dahlia and Her Tribe in ways that the other Tribes never really see. Bazaar is the hub out of which all the caravans operate and every caravan (save some of those which travel the Outlands) comes to Bazaar at least twice a year. In the depths of the Emporiums the Dahlians have stashed goods, props, crafts and stolen treasures in a kind of central bank for the Tribe. It is in these areas that the Dahlians come together as a Tribe. One can often tell how many of the caravans are in town at any one time by counting how many bizarre and unexplained things happen during a given day.

Most of the Guilds also maintain 'bases' in Bazaar, training schools where they can pass along their knowledge and wisdom to the otherwise dispersed Tribe. A few of the older Dahlians stay at these centers as full-time instructors, but most of the teachers and students wander in and out in waves; few want to stay still for too long. Those who do stay, however, can easily become very rich and powerful, which is an unusual thing in the Tribe. They trade a bit of their freedom for control over the stores of the Tribe, which gives them power and respect beyond their numbers.

In addition to the Guild members, there is a caravan that never leaves Bazaar. Run by Anaky, the Hidden Caravan exists to spread wonder, fear and a bit of magical uncertainty throughout the town that Dahlia has claimed as Her own (for more information on the Hidden Caravan see *Vimary*, p. 88).





## INSIDE A CARAVAN

A Dahlian's caravan is home. Every wagon and every tent is known and loved, and every member of the caravan has worked on, ridden in and played around every last little bit of equipment in the moving town. That equipment varies widely from caravan to caravan; most caravans have a set of flat-bottomed wagons with two or four wheels and canvas tops, but the types vary according to need. The Caravan of the Sail, for example, uses modified wagons that they can turn into a giant raft upon which they move up and down the River. Some of the caravans that deal with Keepers have old wrecked autos drawn by horses.

How a caravan is run varies a great deal between individual groups. Most caravans are rather loosely organized, with a great deal of democracy integrated into the process. General issues confronting the caravan are often confronted by discussion around the central fire, but something as official as a full vote is rare. Little Tricksters are respected and honored, but usually do not run the caravan by brute force; their tools, rather, tend to be example and influence. When a Little Trickster invokes the Will of the Fatima as the reason for a decision, however, everything else goes out the window. No Dahlian who remains a Dahlian ever argues with that statement, which gives Little Tricksters more power than they would otherwise have.

Caravans tend to be noisy places, full of talking, singing, storytelling and plans for trades and deals. Everyone makes a great show of being happy and alert at all times, for being quiet and alone for too long is to invite suspicious eyes and the wrath of the Fatima. Almost every caravan has actors, merchants, animal handlers and even a few who do grunt labor to get the caravan's work done. Of course, given the nature of Dahlians and their love of playing roles, who does what can shift from day to day — and even from moment to moment.

To outsiders, the caravan is a very different place. Half a parade of wonder, half a bazaar of terror, a Dahlian caravan can be turned into nearly anything, thanks to the wonder of Illusion. A caravan that is open to visitors becomes a wonderland of crafts and music, tasty foods, wondrous sights and plays and music beyond compare. If an outsider goes someplace where she shouldn't be, or if the caravan decides she needs to be taught a lesson, the atmosphere can change in a heartbeat. The shadows grow deeper, the smiles turn to leers and soon the outsider will find herself in a twisted land of freaks, monsters and nightmares. There have been tales of some who went too deep into the darker side of a caravan, who never came back — at least not in any recognizable form.

## TRADING AND CRAFTING

Alongside the Magdalites, the Dahlians have some of the best crafters in Vimary. It is very rare, however, for Dahlians to actually make an entire item themselves. Rather, they make crafting a part of their trade. A Dahlian will trade some small thing for another thing of plain make, then take some time and improve the item, trading it away for twice the price she paid. Dahlians getting plain leather belts from Yagans and trading them to Joanites as decorated sword-belts is one common example of this practice.

Sometimes the Dahlians will study with artists of other Tribes to make truly extraordinary items. An example of this is the Bone Path's Pellis Armor. Inspired by the Yagan Fleshers and Pellis Artisans, it is a forging of the arts of different Tribes. Dahlian crafters tattoo a design onto a cow while it is still alive, then have the Yagans slaughter the cow once it has grown to the proper size. The Yagans cure the hide, and then the Dahlians use special methods to turn the tattoo into a very subtle and beautiful visual design on an item (usually decorative armor) made out of the leather.

Dahlians are also, among all the Tribes, the finest master weavers. They alone know the secrets of making silk cloth, and that practice makes the Tribe (and the Caravan of the Sail in particular) wealthy. The other most common crafts in the Tribe are instrument making, leatherwork, carving, embroidery and toy making.

## THEATER

Although the themes of Dahlian plays vary greatly, and are heavily influenced by the audience for which a Caravan performs, their theatrical style maintains several common elements. Masks are almost always used in performances to punctuate a cast of stock characters that serve as standard archetypes, in both praise and parody of the Tribes of the Nation and their adversaries.

Dahlians often draw on Tribal life for their plots, both in an effort to lend realism to their illusions and to use their illusions to affect change in Tribal society. Unless the play is recounting a specific legend names are always changed to protect the guilty, although the pseudonyms may be nothing more than riddles or anagrams of the original. Few legends survive a Dahlian portrayal intact, for as the main disseminators of culture in the Nation, Dahlians see no shame in applying their own special brand of creative license.

The use of ritual Synthesis is common as a pre-performance warm-up, the duration and intensity of which varies according to the importance of the play. Intended to augment the creativity, agility, or influence of the players, similar but smaller rituals are enacted by the stagehands as they move through the performance and through the audience. In fact, as audiences are so accustomed to omitting these non-performers from their awareness when watching a play, the best pickpockets and thieves of the Tribe are found in their ranks.

Conjunctural Synthesis used for on-stage dramatic effect is surprisingly rare. Most often used for the Births in the Liberation Plays, occasionally Dahlians use it in an effort to shock their audience from the traditional heavily stylized portrayal. Every now and then a Dahlian play will come off the stage and move into the audience, becoming indistinguishable from reality.

## RITUALS AND CEREMONIES

Though they often treat them with less formality than the other Tribes, the Dahlians have several life rituals that help them solidify their identity and their place in the universe. Many of the Dahlian rituals involve color and motion, and all are filled with a sense of life and vibrancy. This does not, however, mean that they are any less important in the lives of the members of the tribe, for these rituals form the bounds of a Dahlian's life and give a semblance of structure to their otherwise chaotic world.

## VISITATION

The moment of birth is very important to Dahlians, as the defining moment when the soul comes into the world and joins the Dance under the hand of the Trickster. Because of the difficulties inherent to giving birth, the Dahlians always want an Evan nearby for the birthing. The spread-out nature of the tribe makes it impossible for a Nurse to always be present at the birth, however. Whenever this is the case, the Ritual of Visitation is performed. This simple ritual involves a short chanted song, a plea from one of those close to the mother, for Dahlia Herself to come and help bring the child into the world. The Ritual is always answered, but whether it is answered by Dahlia Herself or by a Little Trickster wearing Her mask is never known. In the eyes of the caravan it doesn't matter; they simply accept it as Dahlia. In any case, the survival rate of babies who are Visited upon their birth is the same as those who are born with Evan Nurses present. (Which is much higher than a child born without either.)

## THE CREST

Of all the Tribes, Dahlians alone are able to choose their families. They do not do this randomly, however, or while they are still too young to understand the nature of their choice. Dahlians ride with their mother's caravan from birth until their twelfth year, and are treated as a member of that caravan.

Once the child has passed her twelfth birthday, the child's mother and one of her mother's caravan brothers take her away to perform a small private ceremony. The children who are of age go out and gather feathers, ribbons and whatever else catches their attention. They use these items to fashion wings and masks in the image of Phoenix, the Dahlian totem. Their parents then construct a hoop, raise it into the air and set it on fire. The costumed children jump through the hoop, seeing how close they can come to the flames without burning themselves. It is considered a good portent for a Crestor to singe her feathers without actually letting them get set on fire.

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After the ceremony is over the initiate is considered a child no longer, but a youth on her path towards adulthood. The Crest is then granted leave to move from caravan to caravan, trying out her talents and personality in each group to see which fits her best. While she is in her Cresting years, the youth is the responsibility of both her mother and the Little Trickster in whose caravan she currently rides.

### THE FLIGHT

The Crest lasts for five years, during which the youth tests the caravans through which she moves while the caravans test her in return. Finally, during the Tamta following the youth's seventeenth birthday, she goes through the Ritual of Flight to gain her new family and the Tribe's official recognition of her as an adult.

The ritual is performed on the last day of Tamta and is both simple and startlingly dangerous. The Cresters climb a specially constructed tower in the central area of the gathering. Wearing her Cresting feathers, she calls out the name of the caravan which she wants to join. Trusting that they choose her in return, she flings herself from the tower, towards the caravan she has chosen. If the caravan has accepted the youth as one of their own, they catch her (often with the aid of Motion). If not, the youth falls to the ground, unassisted. Those that are unfortunate enough to survive the fall are considered a member of no caravan, and often do not last long before being cast out of the Tribe completely.

If the youth is caught she is taken into the caravan and greeted with a kiss by every member of the caravan, now her new family. Some caravans have additional initiation ceremonies to bring the new adult more fully into their ranks, but many just take their new sister off and let her learn the subtler points of her new life as she goes.

### DEATH MASQUE

Death is a great cause of consternation among Dahlians. Their love of life and motion makes the sudden stillness of death a difficult concept to deal with for those left behind. On the other hand, as Dahlians consider change and transformation positive events and as they do not allow themselves to dwell in sadness for long, the event of a friend's passing is celebrated as well. The Death Masque is the means by which the Dahlians disperse their grief, revel in their own continuing lives, and celebrate the chaos of Dahlia and the life cycle. It is unthinkable for a Dahlian to willfully prevent a friend from passing through the Fold, and the Tribe will go to whatever lengths necessary to ensure that the formal Tribal death rites are performed by a Yagan. Following the standard rites, the caravan draws aside from the rest of the Nation to hold the Masque.

The Death Masque is an impromptu play done in full regalia and masks, the highest dramatic form of Dahlian theater. The size and complexity of the Masque depends upon how well-regarded the deceased was within the Tribe and caravan. When a Caravan Mother (the eldest woman in a caravan) dies, the Masque can

go on for a full night. Every member of the caravan is given a chance to act out a scene from the life of the departed, and one by one, as each scene ends, the player returns to the throng of dancers. Completed by a song sung by the whole caravan, the group draws on Synthesis as a whole and sets the pyre ablaze.

On two occasions the Death Masque is used for something other than an actual death. First, each year at Tamta, a Masque is done for the turning of the Dahlian year. Second, when a member of the caravan is to be cast out, the caravan will perform her Death Masque before her just before she is confronted by Dahlia's anger. The message given is very clear; the newly Fallen is dead in the eyes of her former family.

### FALLEN CYCLES

The Dahlians are always interested in the Fallen, in ways both positive and negative. The Fallen are free and strong and so can be admired, but are also unprotected and so make easy prey. While interactions between Fallen and Dahlians may be fairly commonplace, they are never boring.

### DAHLIANS AS ALLIES

Able to move anyone and anything to any place at nearly any time, Dahlians can make invaluable allies to the Fallen. In the harsh winters of Hom, especially, a Dahlian willing to run a Joanite blockade to bring healing herbs and food can be a lifesaver. Dahlian Envoys are sometimes willing to work for the Fallen, and this is often the only way that one of the Eighth Tribe can get a message to someone in the Tribes. Perhaps most importantly, Dahlians are wonderful sources of information. Of course, even their friends have to pay a price for the information they gain, but the rewards are often worth it. Finally, Dahlians are able to give the Fallen the thing that is in the shortest supply in Hom — laughter and beauty. A joke, a story, or a small and lovely trinket can often make the difference between a broken heart or a chance at healing.

### DAHLIANS AS ENEMIES

Though they make less obvious enemies than the combat-ready Joanites or the wary and watchful Shebans, the Dahlians are terrible foes, rarely content with an enemy's death. Unlike the other Tribes, a Dahlian who hates a Fallen is unlikely to ever confront them or interfere directly. Rather, she will start to spin a web of lies, pain and illusion around the Fallen's life that slowly strips her of any ability to trust or know what or whom to believe. Tricks and traps that lead to the character driving off or killing her own loved ones are considered some of the best games. Dahlians prefer to gain their revenge through the slow workings of madness rather than out and out confrontation.

## DAHLIANS AS NEUTRALS

Forces of change and chaos, the Dahlians seem as random as the wind to those around them. As a result, most of the Tribe remains fairly neutral towards the Fallen, neither loving nor hating them. Small favors, good trades, cons and little tricks are the order of the day when the Fallen meet Dahlians on neutral ground. Though they might not take a deep interest in the members of the Eighth Tribe, most Dahlians are always looking for something to amuse them and are likely to see the Fallen as likely paths to fun. How the Characters deal with this treatment will largely determine how the Dahlians react to them.

## CHARACTERS

Creating a Dahlian Character can be a challenging thing, as it is easy to fall into stereotypes of silly tricksters and thieves. The key to creating a compelling Dahlian is to remember the sense of deep spiritualism, the love of beauty and the sense of freedom that make the members of the Tribe unique.

## DAHLIAN CONCEPTS AND CHARACTER CREATION

When creating a Dahlian Character it is important to think about the stages of her life, especially in the context of her place in the Tribe. Every Dahlian is a member of a caravan, which is more important to her than the family that she was born into. Each one of those caravans is a world of its own, with its own peculiar interests and traits. Those foci influence a Dahlian, helping give some shape and form to her interests. A Dahlian's birth caravan can be as important as the caravan she Flighted with. A member of the Bone Road who joins the Golden Wheel at her Flight, for example, will be considerably more grim and somber than her Golden Wheel sister who was once a Tinker.

A Dahlian's caravan does not tell everything about the Character, however, as there are a myriad of jobs within every caravan. There are players, traders, wagon masters, scouts, crafters, musicians and a million other small jobs that make up the soul of a caravan. Many members of the caravan are cross-trained and talented, but most do excel in one area above others. If they enjoy their role and perform it to the best of their ability, then all is well. If it is for the best of the caravan and they do not enjoy it then they had best learn to toe the line. Everyone in Dahlia's Tribe is supposed to be happy, after all.

The next key to figuring out a Dahlian's inner self is to decide how she personally balances the many masks that every Dahlian must wear. Caught between duty to Dahlia, caravan, and her flamboyant and often rebellious sense of self, a Dahlian walks a fine line between many different extremes. How does the Character deal with the requirement for a constant appearance of joy? Does she understand the importance of growing, even through pain? How does she deal with the conflicting messages that come with being free to mock and question the other Tribes but having to bow down, without question, to her Fatima?

Finally, once the Character's past has been hammered out, her goals need to be decided. Dahlians often seem content just to wander, and sometime this is even true. Most Dahlians, however, have goals and motivations just like everyone else. Giving a Character something to work towards always helps to bring them to life. Dahlians' goals are as numerous as the stars, but many within the tribe find their focus in the search for wealth, skill and freedom.

## DAHLIAN SOCIETY

The most important thing by far, for every Dahlian, is Dahlia Herself. There may be no other Tribe that loves their Fatima as much as the Dahlians do, for the Laughing Lady can be a wonderful, beautiful goddess who blesses every life with freedom and joy. At the same time, however, every member of the Tribe lives in fear of ever making a misstep and landing on Her bad side, for doing so is a sure and speedy road to destruction. Fallen Dahlians are ravaged by the withdrawal of Her love and only those who can find their own sense of freedom live for very long.

After Dahlia the most important thing in a Dahlian's life is her caravan. After her Flight a Dahlian's caravan is her family, her friends, her village and her shelter. There is a deep bond between the members of a caravan that is closer to true empathy than most real families ever find. In addition to the love of the caravan, the routine of the caravan also influences the Character. Every caravan has slightly different rituals, slightly different specializations and foci influenced by the Tribes that they deal with the most often. This also leads to many other Tribals having a very different impression of Dahlians, based upon which caravans they have interacted with.

Far after the caravan's importance comes that of the birth family. When a Dahlian joins her caravan she does not completely forget about her blood mother or sisters. Blood ties are important, as they help bind the caravans together into a Tribe. The truth is, however, that ties of blood, while important, are seen as much less real or binding than the ties of a caravan. Of all the relatives in the blood family the most important are the mother and siblings, then the mother's brothers and finally the father. Very few Dahlians consider their father's family to be related to them in any meaningful way.

The final layer of Dahlian society is the Guilds. Most Guilds are public professional organizations that cross caravan lines to give mutual support and interest to certain specialized crafts and jobs. These guilds, such as the Envoys, are often much like clubs, and while they influence a Dahlian's skills and connections, they do not play as deeply into her loyalties as either caravan or blood family. In addition to the professional guilds there are also secret guilds within the Tribe. The secret guilds are usually specialized conspiracies or groups that serve Dahlia in a secret and often slightly sinister manner. There are no guilds in the Tribe that Dahlia does not know about, and most of the guilds are smart enough to know this. In the secret guilds, such as the Whisper Stealers, the emphasis on loyalty and devotion is deadly serious, and is often powerful enough to overcome even caravan ties.

## 5. Trickster's Truth

## CARAVANS

There are several dozen caravans crossing the island at any time, but not all are of equal stature. Listed here are some of the more outstanding or well-known caravans in the Tribe, along with the special qualities, views, and specializations that make them as unique as any clan or family. There are many caravans not listed and even those listed here do not always follow the same paths or trade the same things. Dahlians go where the wind and the Fatima will them.

**Caravan of the Sail:** The Caravan of the Sail has one of the longest routes of any of the main caravans, for they make the long trip from Westholm and parts of the Outlands to Bazaar. This long and often dangerous journey is managed on the boat wagons that the Caravan is famous for engineering. These wide, flat bottomed wagons can be hauled by horse overland, or can be turned into a massive barge capable of carrying the whole Caravan and its stock down the Great River. Because of the dangers inherent in the long journey and because of their close connection with the autonomous folk at Westholm, members of the Sail tend to be independent and tough. They have a reputation for resourcefulness and cleverness, though many say that the members of the Caravan find themselves far more clever than they really are. The Caravan deals mostly in foods and finished goods from Bazaar in exchange for silkthistle, herbs and rare trinkets from Westholm and Outland Squats. Most of the masks used by the Sailors are made of canvas, but they also like to design clever variations based on themes of wind and water. In Westholm their plays retell, with mockery and a good dose of creative license, recent scenes from the heart of Vimary.

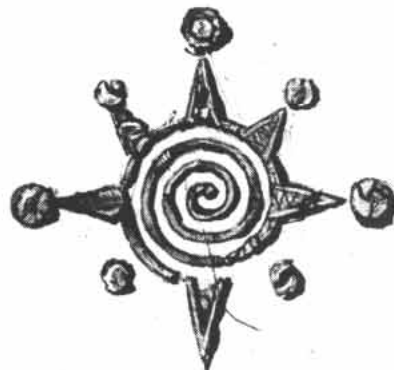
**The Bone Path:** Generations of close contact and trade with Yagans and Shebans have made the Bone Path one of the oddest breeds of all the caravans, and other Dahlians sometimes find them macabre and morose. Walkers on the Bone Path have a twisted sense of dark humor that leaves people chilled and uneasy. They often focus their talents on creating works of art and plays that reflect their values of tradition, their concern with death and the possibilities of rebirth. Speculative and metaphysical in a tribe of fools, they are often mocked and maligned. No one, however, can doubt the grandeur of their Death Masques, or the fact that they seem to have the deepest understanding of the nature of growth and rebirth in the Tribe. The Caravan deals mostly in worked leathers, which they get from the Yagans and decorate themselves, and in beef from Yagan butchers. Their masks are always made of polished bone, and neither their masks nor their clothing ever contain bright colors apart from white or yellow. Unsurprisingly, their plays and productions tend to focus on black comedies, dark tragedies and morality plays with supernatural elements.

**The Red Dawn:** Moving between Bazaar, the Rust Wastes and the Discarded Lands, the Red Dawn are looked on with suspicion because of their wide dealings with Keepers and the Vimary squats. Their caravan looks like no other, as most of their wagons are made of old vans and trucks, and pulled by horses and oxen (some few of them can run under their own power, thanks to some elaborate Keeper-style jury-rigging, but that information is a close-kept secret). Almost everything they own or wear has a slight red-brown stain from their time in the

Rust Wastes. Members of the Red Dawn are the most technically inclined of all the caravans, most know Keepspeak and a few even learn Keeper skills, though that too is concealed. They trade trinkets and items (and sometimes knowledge) to the Keepers in exchange for food and drugs from Bazaar. Red Dawn plays, based around the death of the old world and the birth of the new, revolve around the theme of their mixed love and fear of the World Before. All Red Dawn masks are made of metal.

**Tinkers:** Perhaps the poorest and most motley of the Caravans, the Tinkers are also the most utterly chaotic. Where most Caravans follow some type of regular trade route, the Tinkers wander as a ragged band wherever and whenever they please. No one quite knows when to expect the patched up, slapped together wagons of the Tinkers to lurch into view — no one is quite sure if they want them to, either. The Tinkers are invaluable to the Tribes, however, as they are masters at repairing anything broken and can restore nearly any kind of valuable to its original state. They are also known as the worst liars, thieves and pranksters of the Dahlians. Quite often they are welcomed in to fix that which is broken, then kicked out just as soon as they are done. The Tinkers never seem to mind, and continue on their way with suspiciously bulging pockets. Tinker masks are made of whatever they can steal and cobble together in an artistically pleasing way. On the rare occasions when Tinkers actually get to put on a full show before being run out of town, they do pure bawdy slapstick that leaves the audience either red with offense or weeping with laughter.

**The Golden Wheel:** Controlling the routes between the triangle of Evan lands, the Joanite towers and Bazaar, the Golden Wheel is the richest and most populous of the Caravans. They have so many members and so many wagons that they often divide into two (or even three) different groups, making a double circuit of their domain. Of all the caravans they are the most focused on physical possessions, and are known as sharp dealers and shrewd judges of value. With the best made and appointed wagons of any caravan, the Golden are always quick to find any opportunity to advance themselves monetarily. Their plays tend to focus on epics, including grand sweeping battles and historic family dramas that appeal to the Joanites and Evans. They tend to be rather moderate and pro-establishment; after all, the wealthy are rarely as insistent upon change as they could be. Golden Wheel masks are commissioned when a member joins the Caravan. Often made of glass, silver, or chrome, they are always exquisite and looked after with lavish care.



**The Heartland:** In competition with the Bone Road and the Golden Wheel for the wealthy trade routes to the north of Bazaar, the Heartland currently handles most of the trade in food, herbs, drugs and fine products from the Magdalites to the Evans and Bazaar. A caravan of sensualists and hedonists, they are considered to be the laziest of the Caravans, always taking the shortest routes and staying close to urban areas. They are, however, acknowledged to be among the best musicians and poets in the Tribe, and are powerful dreamers as well. All of their masks are made out of soft leather, exquisitely carved and covered with embroidered tassels. Their plays focus on romance and erotica.

**The Onhom Path:** Dealing almost exclusively with the Shebans and Joanites, the Onhom Path has found an odd niche in Dahlian society. Often considered the most conservative caravan, they appear as traditional and law-abiding crew, trading books, paper and relics to the Sunken City, then bringing fish and vegetables back to Bazaar. Few know that the members of this small and reclusive caravan earn most of their wealth through assistance to law enforcement. In extreme capital cases, such as rape or murder, or when the pay is too good to give up, the caravan will take up a case. Moving into the crime scene, they use illusions and plays to drive out the guilty. A favorite Onhom trick is to use illusion to make a murder victim return from the grave. The "ghost" accosts and accuses people until the murderer breaks and runs — right into the waiting arms of the Law-Givers. For the Onhom Path, the game is made better by the fact that the Shebans have actually come to believe that the Onhom are on the side of justice. Embracing their own ideas of justice, however, the Onhom Path will sometimes dispense their own punishments or hand over someone that they feel *should be* guilty, rather than the person that is lawfully so. Their plays tend to revolve around intrigues and courtroom dramas. Their masks are made from pressed parchment, and are invariably blazoned with an odd image of Dahlia's face, with one of Her eyes covered with ribbons.

## GUILDS

Many different guilds have grown up in the Tribe. Along with the remembered ties of blood, they help to unite the Caravans into a Tribe and fulfill special functions for Dahlia.

**Envoys:** This well-known and respected guild operates out of a central hall in Bazaar, and has members in almost all of the Caravans. The Envoys are a guild of messengers who offer the fastest and most secure communications inside Vimary — and beyond the borders. Envoys can be hired by anyone, and they promise fast and secure delivery of letters, messages and even small packages. If they ever have violated trust and read or misdelivered a message, no one has ever reported it. All Envoys are at least mildly skilled in Motion, and are gifted runners and trackers in addition to their dreaming talents. A good Envoy can get a message from Westholm to the Rust Wastes in a single day, several times faster than most others can make the journey.

**The Music Makers:** This professional guild is the center of musical training and the creation of musical instruments for all of Vimary. It is said that even Keepers have come to the Music Makers in order to learn their methods. While most Dahlians can at least fiddle out a tune, the Music Makers are dedicated to a deeper exploration of music. They collect and refine songs and tales from all over Vimary, writing them down in a synaesthetic notation system invented by Allegra, their current Trickster. They also have ties to many other guilds, including the Glass-smiths and Weaponshapers of the Joanites, and the Pellis Artisans of the Yagans, with whom they work to make better instruments. As the Music Makers explore intellectual and artistic horizons rather than physical ones, many of the other Dahlians have difficulty understanding them. No one, however, doubts their value or the prestige that they bring to the Tribe.

**The Black Marketeers:** An open secret, a guild that everyone suspects exists but no-one is quite ready to acknowledge, the Black Marketeers are a group of traders and sellers. While all Dahlians are known for dealing in things that make most Tribals a bit nervous, the Black Marketeers will deal in anything — so long as the price is right. There are even rumors that they trade Squat babies to the Z'bri in exchange for the perverted toys that the beasts are capable of making. Ruthless and efficient, the Black Marketeers do not let anyone get in the way of their business, and most of the full members of the guild are in deep enough that they would even betray their Caravan if they were pressed. No-one, not even the members of the Marketeers, is fully sure why Dahlia allows them to peddle their tainted wares up and down Vimary, but She must have some reason. Some even say that Dahlia walks among them as one of their own.

**The Dawn Trodders:** This secretive guild was formed by Dahlia Herself to explore the Outlands and learn as much as possible about the Squats and Z'bri that lurk beyond the dim light of Vimary. The members of this guild often pose as Envoys, and are away from their own caravans for extended periods of time. The protection of Dahlia and the chaotic nature of the Tribe allows them to maintain some degree of secrecy, however. Every member of the Trodders spends at least one month a year in the Outlands, usually in small groups that work their way into Squat communities to learn the local languages and customs. Unlike many of the caravans that go into the Outlands, the Trodders are not interested in gaining an economic advantage over the Squats. Rather, this guild is dedicated to learning about the various cultures of the people outside Vimary, and developing a networked system of allies.

**Whisper Stealers:** Most of the time, even the Dahlians dismiss the Whisper Stealers as nothing more than a myth, some distorted shadow of the Black Market or something equally prosaic. This guild does exist, however, even though most of the members do not know that they are members. Run by the reclusive Shahana, the Whisper Stealers are the collectors of secrets. There are only twelve full members of the guild at any one time, and those twelve maintain a network of contacts who are sometimes given partial knowledge about the guild and its activities. The guild is dedicated to uncovering everything there is to know in the Nation, from the deepest secrets to how much rain fell in Westholm last summer. There is little that they cannot find out, given enough time and motivation.

## 5. Trickster's Truth

**Interventionists:** This guild grew out of the Hidden Caravan in Bazaar. They took the game that the Hidden Caravan played there — using illusion to make the whole town into a giant and moving play, puzzle and trap all in one — and spread it across all Tribal lands. The Interventionists are dedicated to the idea that life is but an ongoing legend, and that the play onstage and the play offstage should not be separated. Placing themselves in the path of real-life drama and intrigue, they use their craft to warp events into something entirely new and wonderful. Sometimes they do this for no reason other than joy and trickery, but other times their plays have a definite point. A greedy member of the Watch, for example, may well find herself the main character in a drama about how avarice has the propensity to destroy a woman's life. On the other hand, a Fallen woman struggling to stay alive could become the lead in a play about how the little things in life bring true joy.

**Children of the Flame:** A radical guild comprised largely of Little Tricksters and powerful priests of the Tribe, the Children of the Flame are the devotees of Phoenix. They seek to bring a baptism of fire to Vimary, to burn everything to the ground (including themselves) so that something new can grow from the ashes. Though they could hold a powerful position within the Tribe, they keep themselves secretive and hidden because they know that the if the other Tribes discovered their mission it could lead to the whole of Dahlia's people being wiped out. For now they spread chaos and dissension wherever they can, doing their best to prod the Tribes towards distrusting each other and the Fallen, spreading fear and rumors of war. Though they cannot act publicly, every one of them is a powerful Synthesis user who is given special gifts from both Dahlia and Phoenix. Subtle and dangerous, they watch the world while slowly building a pyre of lies, hatred and misunderstanding. One day they hope to be able to touch off a spark that will set the whole thing to flame.

## SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES

**Attributes:** Among the Dahlians, the prime attributes are Creativity and Influence, with Perception running close behind. The Dahlian focus on social interaction, trickery and illusion leads to the prominent display of agile minds, smooth tongues and sharp eyes. Many dancers and physical performers also have decent Agility and Fitness scores, as they learn how to manipulate their bodies with astonishing ease. Most Dahlians tend to be slightly on the small side, as size is not considered important in the Tribe, resulting in low Build scores. Of all the attributes Psyche has the most variance within the Tribe, as happy and adjusted Dahlians are quite spiritually sound, but the paranoia and uncertainty of the Tribe drives many subtly mad.

**Skills:** The most common skills are Crafts, Haggling, Theatrics and Navigation. Almost all Dahlians have these skills at some level, as they are all central to the Tribe's way of life. Other common Dahlian skills include Dance, Sleight of Hand, Music, Disguise, Survival, Streetwise, Squat languages, Notice, Sneak, Animal Care, Trade, Gambling and Human Perception.

**Synthesis:** Synthesis is fairly common among Dahlians, though slightly less prevalent than among the Agnites. Many Dahlians are adept at using Synthesis, and several people in every caravan are able to use Conjunctural Synthesis at least well enough to enhance plays and performances. As a result all Dahlians are comfortable with Synthesis, and a high number have low levels of Conjunctural Synthesis skill. Little Tricksters, of course, have higher scores and some of those chosen by Dahlia are among the most powerful priestesses in Vimary.

**Merits and Flaws:** Sense of Direction is the most common perk in the Tribe, though several of the more famous actors from the Liberation Plays also have Fame at low levels. Of the flaws, Liar, Paranoid and Secret are all too common in members and ex-members of the Tribe.

## THE RIVER OF DREAM

Almost every caravan uses Synthesis every day: to speed and ease their travels, and to cast various illusions to trick or delight. The almost casual use of Synthesis often seems wrong in the eyes of the other Tribes, as though a precious gift was being squandered on games. The Dahlians themselves would admit that their use of Synthesis is often in fun but would say that it is not squandered in the least; using Synthesis in common life is the best way, to many Dahlian minds, to celebrate the sacred nature of the gift.

## ARTIFACTS

The Dahlians are skilled crafters, and when this combines with their often casual Synthesis use and the constant presence of Dahlia in their lives, the Tricksters have accumulated a great number of minor artifacts and trinkets. By and large they lack the truly powerful items of the other Tribes, but make up for it by having a vast array of lesser items.

**Messenger's Boots:** One of the most common artifacts in all of Vimary, several dozen pairs of these boots exist. Created by an Envoy leatherworker and a Little Trickster, Messenger's Boots are tanned leather and made to fit high on the leg of the person they were first made for. When worn, they grant a character the ability to travel one mile a day further than she would normally be able to, and also keep her feet from ever growing sore.

**Drum of a Thousand Dreams:** This small hand drum is covered with images of a woman dancing around a wagon, painted in remarkable detail along the sides of the drum. When this drum is played as part of ritual support of someone in the River of Dream (see **Tribe 8 Rulebook**, pp. 162-63) it doubles the MoS achieved in the Ritual roll.

**The Veil of Mists:** This long, purple silk veil shimmers as though it contained the spirit of a star, and is made of a weave so fine that no Tribal can match the work. It is said that Dahlia Herself made it and gave it to a young boy who earned Her love, just before She was forced to kill him. While wearing the veil a Character cannot botch any sneak roll and will never lose equilibrium from botching a Conjunctural Illusion effect.

**Masks of the Chosen:** Though few know it, every Little Trickster is given one of these masks when they join the priesthood. Elegant and simple, these masks made of smooth white porcelain are mirror images of one of Dahlia's faces. It goes without saying that these masks are guarded with the Little Trickster's life and hidden with all her skill. When the mask is donned by the Little Trickster to whom it was given, it allows her to speak with Dahlia's voice and gives her +2 to all Synthesis rolls while the mask is worn. If anyone not authorized to use the mask puts it on, or if a Little Trickster uses it counter to the Fatima's will, she draws Dahlia's full personal attention. Weavers are encouraged to be creative and cruel when deciding how Dahlia deals with the offender.

## IMBUING

Some Dahlians who use Conjunctional Synthesis have learned how to temporarily imbue an item with Synthesis. To do this, they must create and prepare an item (with Crafts or another suitable skill) and then cast their Synthesis effect into the item. The stored effect has a maximum MoS equal to the Dreamer's Synthesis skill rating, which results in most items being of little power and used more as toys or distractions than anything else. The imbued item can only be used once, but can then be re-imbued by its creator. The most common uses of Imbuing are the Puzzle Boxes that Dahlians give to Agnites, though trapped books, spring boots and other minor items are all widely known.

## ASPECTS

Dahlia can be a harsh and demanding mistress but She is also one who can give gifts beyond price when She is pleased (or sometimes for no apparent reason at all). She has taught secrets of Synthesis and Dream to those Little Tricksters and guild members who have pleased Her.

## THE DANCE OF MASKS (DAHLIAN, INF:THRESHOLD 5)

The Dance of Masks allows a Dreamer the ability to take on the look, mannerisms and voice of a person trusted by a single target. Whenever anyone looks upon the Dreamer, they see and hear the target's trusted person. The Dreamer cannot actually choose who she will look like; that is decided by the first target of the aspect. Once the 'mask' is in place, however, the Dreamer will immediately know who she looks like and gain an intuitive grasp of the correct reactions for her new role. Everyone seeing the Dreamer sees the new visage. The duration is determined by the MoS. The Player should also keep track of the result of her roll, as whenever she comes into contact with a new Character, or gives others reason to be suspicious (Weaver's discretion), those she meets may roll their PER against the Dreamer's MoS in order to try and penetrate the illusion.

## DANCE OF MASKS DURATIONS

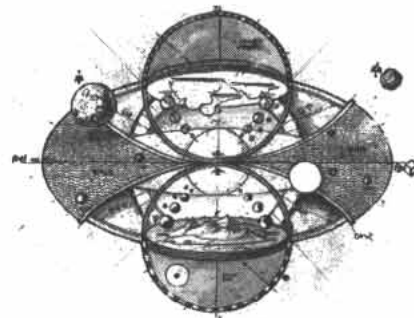
| MoS | Duration          |
|-----|-------------------|
| 0   | Five minutes      |
| 1   | Fifteen minutes   |
| 2   | One hour          |
| 3   | Three hours       |
| 4   | Twelve hours      |
| 5   | Twenty-four hours |

## DAHLIA'S DOORWAY (DAHLIANS, AGI:VARIABLE THRESHOLD)

This Aspect grants the dreamer the ability to make a temporary hole through any barrier. This barrier can be the top of a locked chest, the wall of a house, or even the side of a mountain. The Threshold depends upon the thickness of the area that must be passed through, based on the following chart. The size and duration of the hole are based on the MoS, as shown below (though the Dreamer can make the hole smaller than the size rolled, if desired). Note that a Dreamer can close the hole whenever she likes. A person or object inside the hole is not crushed by the hole closing; rather, she is ejected onto the side closest to her when the hole is closed.

## DOORWAY THRESHOLDS

| Threshold | Thickness  |
|-----------|--|
| 3         | A thin bit of wood, such as the top of a box or desk.                        |
| 4         | A door or thin wall  |
| 5         | A heavy door or a standard wall  |
| 6         | A thick and well made wall   |
| 7         | A 25 meter section of collapsed tunnel, a major building's foundation        |
| 8         | A mountain   |
| MoS       | Effect   |
| 0         | A peephole that lasts only a few seconds.                                    |
| 1         | A hole large enough to get a hand through that lasts for up to a minute.     |
| 2         | A hole large enough for a child to squeeze through that lasts for 5 minutes. |
| 3         | A hole large enough for an adult that lasts up to 15 minutes                 |
| 4         | A hole large enough for a horse that lasts up to half an hour                |
| 5         | A hole large enough for a big wagon that lasts up to a day                   |



## 5.Trickster's Truth

### TOTEM

Phoenix, who rises from the ashes, is the Tribal Totem of the Dahlians. A bird of fire that blazes across the sky with life and light, Phoenix is beautiful and bright beyond description. Those who have seen Phoenix in their dreams often spend large portions of their lives trying to describe, in one medium or another, the pure glory of the Eagle of the Sun. In addition to being beautiful, Phoenix is also fearless and proud, never hesitating to join a challenge or a test. After all, what has Phoenix to fear, when it knows that even death is just an illusion and that after any fall it will rise again from the fire?

There is another side of Phoenix that few ever see, the powerful need to burn everything to ashes, that it may rise again. It is this, as much as Phoenix's bright beauty, that makes it a companion of Dahlia. In the stern, golden eyes of Phoenix the world has become soiled, dirty and unworthy. Just as Dahlia would, Phoenix wants to burn the whole world and let new life grow out of the ashes.

Though few Dahlians have ever seen Phoenix, even in dreams, his presence is felt throughout the Tribe. From the rituals of Crest and Flight, to the love of bright colors and free spaces, the echo of Phoenix's will can be seen in all aspects of Dahlian life. As a Tribe, Dahlians love their totem, though they might love him all the more for his distance, as it can be hard to love something so bright that it burns you when it draws close.

### ATTRIBUTES

|     |    |     |    |     |    |     |    |     |    |
|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|----|
| CRE | +7 | INF | +9 | KNO | +5 | PER | +6 | PSY | +5 |
| WIL | +8 | STR | +4 | HEA | +6 | STA | 70 | UD  | 19 |

### SKILLS

| Skill        | Level | Attr | Skill              | Level | Attr | Skill     | Level | Attr |
|--------------|-------|------|--------------------|-------|------|-----------|-------|------|
| Combat Sense | 4     | +6   | Hand to Hand       | 6     | +7   | Mythology | 6     | +5   |
| Theatrics    | 5     | +9   | Dodge              | 3     | +7   | Lore      | 7     | +5   |
| Notice       | 5     | +6   | * (River of Dream) |       |      |           |       |      |

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

Hooked Beak (UD + 20 damage), Spirit Flight (can carry up to 12 passengers into the River of Dream), Brightness of the Sun (anyone who tries to attack Phoenix must first defeat it in a opposed roll of WIL vs Phoenix's INF), From the Ashes (if Phoenix is ever killed it will rise again within a moon, unless the remains are so utterly destroyed that not even ashes remain), Feather of Fire (Phoenix can grant a character one of its feathers. So long as the character has the feather on her person, she halves the intensity of any fire that would damage her).



## MINOR RITUALS

Dahlian life is full of songs and games, but few of the other Tribes would say that they had any real rituals to speak of. That, however, is because most others do not realize that many of the songs and games so popular within the tribe are, in fact, their rituals! Masks, songs, games and even minor tricks and bits of sleight of hand are used to delight the Fatima and the spirits and thus gain little boons and benefits. Below are listed a few of the many Dahlian rituals.

**Nimble Fingers (also known as Beauty's Kiss):** To perform this ritual a Dahlian takes a coin, a washer, or something else flat and shiny and dances it across the back of her fingers (as slowly as she has to). While it dances, the ritualist asks the light which glints and gleams off the shining and dancing coin to help guide her fingers in making a craft as beautiful as itself. The ritual grants the Character a +1 on her next craft roll.

**My Mask, Your Mask, Our Mask:** One of many pre-performance rituals, this is most often done before the Liberation Plays or other important large-scale venues. For the day before the performance the actors take turns stealing and swapping their masks until everyone in the show has had everyone else in the show's mask in their hand at one point or another. If everyone has had everyone else's mask, then all the players get a +1 to their Theatrics roll. If, however, they forgot (or excluded) someone, that person gets a -1 on their Theatrics roll.



## NPCs

The Dahlians are a rich and diverse Tribe, full of individuals who can be impossible to categorize. Here are a few of the more common types, along with stats to help Weavers make quick NPCs or for Players to use as basis for PCs. Note that these statistics are the base minimum for a character in that role, and individual NPCs will be more powerful.

### LITTLE TRICKSTER

The Little Tricksters are the priests of Dahlia and the heads of Her caravans and guilds, as well as Her most trusted spies. The Little Tricksters that run caravans tend to be very responsible (for Dahlians) and assume a maternal role over everyone in their caravan. Using influence, guile and a love of games, they keep some reign on the chaos of Dahlian life — or set it free upon those they wish to punish.

Little Tricksters who are not heads of caravans are often semi-secretive about their roles, as they tend to be wandering spies and tricksters who do work that Dahlia does not want to be too closely associated with Her Tribe. Masters of disguise, misdirection and illusion, they are clever and resourceful individuals who often delight in the chaos and confusion that they sow.

**Highlights:** Charismatic, devious, centered.

**Attributes:** AGI +1, APP 0, BLD 0, CRE +2, FIT 0, INF +2, KNO +1, PER +2, PSY 0, WIL +1, STR 0, HEA +1, STA 30, UD 4, AD 4

**Skills:** Combat Sense 2/+2, Craft (Various) 2/+2, Dance 1/+1, Disguise 2/+2, Dodge 2/+1, Dreaming 2/0, Haggling 1/+2, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Human Perception 2/0, Leadership 2/+2, Lore (Tribal) 2/+1, Melee 1/+1, Mythology 1/+1, Navigation (Land) 1/+1, Notice 3/+2, Riding 1/0, Ritual 2/+1, Sneak 2/+1, Streetwise 1/+2, Survival 2/+2, Teaching 1/+2, Theatrics 3/+2, Trade 2/+1, Synthesis (Metamorphosis) 3

**Equipment:** Several masks, a pouch full of trinkets, knife (AD+2), Mask of the Chosen.

## 5. Trickster's Truth

### PLAYER

The most public face of the Dahlian Tribe, save only for the merchants, the Players are the actors who put on the shows and Liberation Festival plays for the Tribes. Dynamic and vibrant, they love to be the center of attention, and most are happier the more roles and the more times they get to play. It is an unfortunate side effect of their obsession with the roles they play that many of them lose some of their sense of self, becoming more and more obsessed with the masks they wear and less and less concerned with their real face.

**Highlights:** Enigmatic, bright, conceited.

**Attributes:** AGI +1, APP +1, BLD -1, CRE +1, FIT 0, INF +2, KNO 0, PER 0, PSY -1, WIL 0, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 20, UD 3, AD 3

**Skills:** Craft (Masking) 1/+1, Dance 1/+1, Dodge 1/+1, Grooming 2/+1, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Human Perception 1/-1, Music 1/+1, Notice 1/0, Streetwise 1/+2, Theatrics 2/+2, Seduction 1/+1

**Equipment:** Mask, several small favors given after shows.

### CARAVAN HANDLER

There is a lot of actual organization and control that goes into the running of a Dahlian caravan. While the Little Trickster sees to the people, the Caravan Handler is left in charge of the animals, wagons and the nitty-gritty of making sure that all the equipment and trade goods the Caravan hauls around do not end up breaking down. As a result, Caravan Handlers tend to be hard-headed and practical people, often unimpressed by the chaotic natures of their sisters.

**Highlights:** Stubborn, practical.

**Attributes:** AGI 0, APP 0, BLD 0, CRE +1, FIT 0, INF +1, KNO +1, PER 0, PSY +1, WIL +2, STR 0, HEA 1, STA 35, UD 3, AD 3

**Skills:** Animal Care 1/+1, Haggling 2/0, Notice 2/0, Theatrics 1/0, Animal Handling 2/+1, Hand-to-Hand 1/0, Riding 1/+1, Craft 2/+1, Intimidate 1/0, Survival 1/+1, Dodge 1/0, Navigation (Land) 2/+1, Tinker 1/+1

**Equipment:** Ropes and harnesses, various tools to keep everything in good repair.

### STAGE CASTER

While the players strut and fret their hour upon the stage, it is the Stage Caster who makes sure that the play as a whole goes well. This means that she has to make sure all the props and costumes are right, that the backstage politics stay under control, that the Synthesis effects being used go off correctly, and a million other small details. While most players love the show for the part they play in it, the Stage Caster loves the show for the whole drama of the thing. Though most become balls of nervous energy before a show, they would not dream of doing anything else.

**Highlights:** Organized, panic-stricken, tense.

**Attributes:** AGI 0, APP 0, BLD 0, CRE +2, FIT 0, INF +2, KNO +1, PER 0, PSY +1, WIL 0, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 25, UD 3, AD 3

**Skills:** Craft (Theater) 2/+2, Craft (Costuming) 2/+2, Dance 2/0, Dodge 1/0, Grooming 2/0, Human Perception 2/+1, Leadership 2/+1, Notice 2/0, Theatrics 3/+1, Synthesis 1

**Equipment:** Costumes, masks and a million pounds of nerves.

### ENVOY

The messenger's guild is known by all Tribes, and even by several outside the Tribes, for their ability to get any message to any place near Vimary in less than half the time that anyone else could. The Envoys take great pride in this reputation, and become nearly fanatical about their calling. However laid back and chaotic they might be when not on a run, an Envoy on a mission becomes single-minded and utterly driven to deliver the message — no matter what might get in the way.

**Highlights:** Fast, proud, dedicated.

**Attributes:** AGI +1, APP 0, BLD 0, CRE 0, FIT +3, INF 0, KNO 0, PER 0, PSY 0, WIL +1, STR 1, HEA 1, STA 30, UD 5, AD 5

**Skills:** Athletics 2/+3, Combat Sense 1/0, Dodge 2/+1, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Melee 1/+1, Navigation (Land) 2/0, Notice 1/0, Riding 2/0, Sneak 1/+1, Streetwise 1/0, Swimming 1/+3, Theatrics 1/0, Synthesis 1

## HANNAH THE TWISTED, FALLEN DAHLIAN CONTORTIONIST

Born on the Tinker's path, Hannah was a scrawny, knobby child who could literally tie her lanky body in contortionist's knots. Happy beyond compare, she moved through the roads of Vimary in her formative years with a band of grotesques known as the Children of Joy, who reveled in the oddities of the flesh. During her Cresting years, however, she had trouble finding a slot for her oddly angled body and mind. To her, the exhilaration of other Dahlians seemed dull and dim when compared to the carnivalistic blade of her birth caravan.

In Flight, she turned to the Bone Road in pursuit of the connection between emotion and Dream. Driven by a fanatical devotion to Dahlia, she believed that it was only a matter of time before her knowledge matched her vision and she could discover the means to empower the tricksters to imbue Joy by mere touch. Then, surely, Mother Trickster would love her warped body and crystal mind best of all.

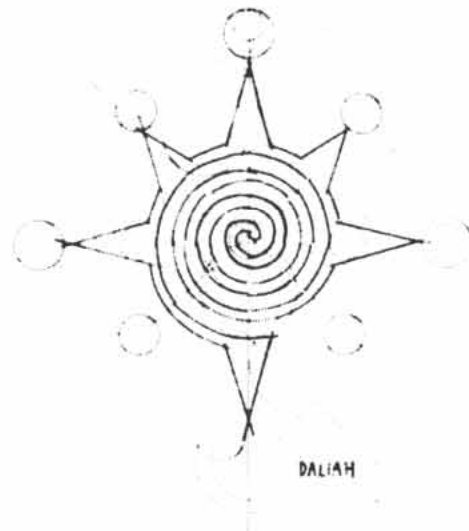
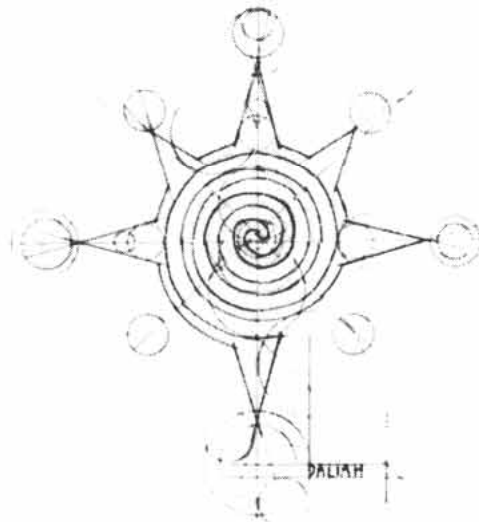
In Bazaar, when Venri told her of the Doll, she jumped into the deal. Knowing he could never find her hidden in Tamta, she believed that the artifact contained enough power to test her theories. For if she could distill the essence of the Wonder from the Child's toy, she knew she would find herself in reach of her goal.

Right or wrong, Hannah believes now that the mask of Joy is merely a pale funhouse mirror reflection of the mask of Hate. No one on Hom can figure out if her allegiance lies with the Herites or the Doomsayers, for she has spent the time since her burning forging a bridge between them. Her burgeoning cell, Ebon's Light, conjoins members of the two outlooks towards a common goal: Planning the destruction of the Fatimas through spiritual warfare. Her once beloved Dahlia will be the first to die.

**Attributes:** AGI +2, APP -1, BUI -2, CRE +1, KNO +1, INF +2, FIT +1, PSY -2, WIL +2, STR, HEA, STA, UD/AD.

**Eminences:** Mystery and Illusion

**Skills:** Acrobatics 2/+2, Athletics 1/+2, Combat Sense 2/0, Dance 1/+2, Dodge 2/+2, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Leadership 2/+2, Melee 1/+1, Notice 1/0, Riding 1/+2, Sneak 2/+2, Streetwise 1/0, Theatrics 2/+1, Synthesis 2.



## Chapter six: Playtime

Jackie doesn't play anymore  
Her spirit has gone to the shore  
To wash away in the water.  
She is not Agnes' daughter  
So she had to go away  
Burning, screaming, with no more play.  
-Agnite Chant



## TRIBAL CYCLES

The Agnites can be the most challenging of Tribes around which to base a cycle, as the Tribe defies many traditional elements of roleplaying groups. Few Agnites undergo great quests, raid Z'bri lands, stand up to the Grand Council, or become deeply involved in inter-Tribal politics. This is not to say that these things do not happen, but they are considerably rarer for the Children than they are for other Tribals (or for the Fallen). Because of this difference in focus and activity, Agnite cycles take a good deal of planning to run. An Agnite cycle can be very rewarding, however, and is well worth the work.

Every one of the Tribes has a different way of looking at the world. The Joanites are centered around honor and glory, the Magdalites around sensuality and truth. There is a fundamental split between the Agnites and all the other Tribes, however; in the end, all the other Tribes are based upon an adult mindset. The Agnites are not. Even those Agnites of adult age tend to have a child's outlook on the world, with all the peculiarities that such a viewpoint entails. Agnites are not just short adults, or adults who play with toys. They are children, and as such, they are truly a force unto themselves.

## THEMES

Whenever a Weaver is attempting to integrate Agnites into a campaign as a major element she should always give some consideration to the themes and moods of the Agnite Tribe, as well as to their very peculiar role in the Nation. Doing so will help to add a new dimension to any cycle, and can serve as a powerful tool for throwing a new light upon the life of the Tribes. After all, there are very few things that will poke holes in sacred cows more effectively than the questions of a child.

## INNOCENCE

One of the most important themes to any Agnite campaign is innocence. Agnites are, by and large, an innocent Tribe, in the sense that they lack worldly sophistication or large amounts of experience with the world outside Playground. Even in the eyes of adult Agnites the world is a vast and mysterious place full of endless wonder and terror, with something new to be discovered just around the corner. Agnites are largely left outside of Tribal government, to Agnes' anger, and so are free from the taint of hypocrisy and authoritarianism that has marked the Tribes in recent generations. As outsiders and ignorant youths the Agnites are largely confused by the political actions of other Tribes, and their sometimes pointed questions show their own innocence as well as the hypocrisy of others. Agnite innocence can also lead to actions of kindness that few members of other Tribes would consider. Many Fallen have been given gifts of food and toys by the innocent Agnites — things given without guile, duplicity, or secondary motives.

Innocence, however, is a two-edged sword. While the innocence of an Agnite may lead them to moments of beauty amid the chaos of Vimary, it can also lead them to actions of horrible

cruelty. All unknowingly, ignorant of others' pain and innocent of any knowledge of consequence, Agnites can become forces of destruction. For every Fallen that has been given a gift by a wide-eyed Agnite, there is a Fallen who has been prodded with a pointed stick while she lay dying in the mud — just to see what might happen, and if this toy is broken or not. Agnites are the most innocent of the Tribes, and that innocence leads to both beauty and murderous ignorance.

## HOPE

The world of **Tribe 8** is a bleak and barren place. The Z'bri rampage to the North, foes move against the Tribes to the South, and inside Vimary there are endless stories of pain, anger, bitterness and fear. Though humanity came out of the camps generations ago, the mark of the brutality endured there still remains. Ringed with lies, hate and fear, the Tribes and the Fallen often feel trapped and hopeless.

The Agnites, however, lie on the other side of the coin. Agnes and Her Tribe know nothing of the camps save what they have been told in stories around the fire. To them the past is truly dead, a thing outside their experience. To Agnites reality is the present and the future. In their eyes the world is a place of endless opportunity, a place to grow and change to their own will. As a Tribe the Agnites know nothing of failure, because they have never been sorely tested. Having never bled from the crushing blows of life, they look to the future with optimism undimmed by experience. Thus the Agnite heart is often full of hope for the future. This leads to the Agnites having a brightness and vivacity that the other Tribes often lack. For many in Vimary the hope of the Agnites, the faith that children show, is a source of comfort and inspiration.

## BRUTALITY

Torturing rats with a hacksaw and pulling the wings off of flies are common recreations among Agnes' children. It is a hard thing for adults to understand, but there are few things crueler than a child with no sense of control or consequence. In the midst of the innocent wonder and wide-eyed hope of the Agnites there is also the face of the bully who lives for the tears of a victim, or the pervert who holds a puppy's face in a puddle until it drowns. This horrid and apparently pointless brutality stems from several sources. For many Agnites it is a phase, part of their coming to understand the world. They learn about cause and effect and gain a sense of self and personal power by seeing what happens when they do "this." For many once or twice is enough, and after they realize that their pet rat is never going to move again they start to move away from cruelty and senseless destruction. Others, however, become addicted to the rush that brutality brings, the sense of power and control that children often lack. Those Agnites who define themselves by their capacity to do harm and to force the world to conform to their will are among the most horrid and vile creatures on Vimary. They have no sense of right and wrong, nor control or proportion, and they know that so long as they do not anger Agnes they can get away with murder.

## KINDNESS

Growing up in a world in which many define themselves by their capacity to cause harm, it would be easy for the Agnites to become nothing but little monsters — out to hurt and exploit everyone to the best of their ability. It is one of the central paradoxes of the Tribe that many Agnites do not fall into that trap, or at least not completely. Sudden and unexpected acts of kindness, sometimes from the very person who was being brutal and cruel a moment before, can come out of nowhere with heart-stopping sincerity. For no reason and with no expectation of reward, a child will offer up something dear and important to them, then skip away. It is this kindness, this ability to give without any thought of self, that the other Tribes think of when they look to the Agnites.

## GROWTH

All children grow up; the question is what they become and how hard they fight against that change. As a Tribe the Agnites are fighting against growing up tooth and nail, kicking and screaming the whole way. In an Agnite's world everything revolves around childhood and the Child. Becoming old means being cast off, being sent to a boring life of drudgery and pointlessness. The future is unknown — and while that makes it exciting, it also makes it terrifying. Agnites know nothing of being adult, and so they fear it.

Agnes, too, has gone a long time without growing. The Child often seems to refuse change as stubbornly as the members of Her Tribe. In Her heart, however, She knows that Her current state cannot last, and as much as She fears growing up She also yearns to join Her aunts as an equal and to take up Her destiny. This deep wish in the Fatima's heart inevitably finds an echo in the heart of Her Tribe. Those closest to Agnes often find themselves looking at the adult world around them and wondering how they could join it, and where (or if) they would fit. The mingled fear and excitement of this possibility is the razor upon which Agnites live. Those who reject it too forcefully are damned to be children forever. Those who embrace it too fully risk being made into scapegoats for the Fatima's uncertainty.

The Agnites are a Tribe with a destiny. They will grow up, and when they do, they will change the world — it will be up to the Tribe if it is for the better or the worse. However, until their decision is made, the Agnites will be caught on a teeter-totter, balanced between childhood and the adult world. In the end the choices they make will help to determine the fate of the Nation.

## THE CHILD GROWN

In the concluding book of the Children of Prophecy cycle, *Trial by Fire*, Agnes the Child is subjected to the attentions of the Melanis through the duplicity of Her Aunts. In the aftermath of tortuous experiments, we see the marks of change in the Child, a subtle movement towards an older and less naive Agnes: a shift from childhood to pubescence. She is no less innocent, but is more aware of its intrinsic connection to Her nature and is angered that Her Aunts would plot to rob Her of Her essential nature.

After the *Trial by Fire* cycle, Agnes begins to come of age and has no intention of allowing Herself to slip back into the role of ignored child. She will come into Her own eventually, but wants to find Her own path, not have it dictated to Her. One of Her first trials will be to try to fully unite all the different aspects of Herself, keeping Her innocence while taking up Her Mother's strength. This unification of personality becomes outwardly marked as the two parts of Her physical self, the Doll and the Bear, become unified into one form.

Agnes burns with a desire to be recognized as a full equal and this is reflected in the attitudes of Her tribe. The conflicting emotions and times of trial will not be limited to Agnes; the Tribe as a whole will have to deal with the pains of change, and it will eventually be reflected in their social structure. This change might well be greeted with enthusiasm by Breeders and Barren who cease to be neglected, but will almost surely anger the Children who currently hold all the power. How the Tribe deals with these changes will depend upon Agnes and upon the rest of the Nation. Good leadership can make a transition easy; poor management or opportunism can make it a nightmare.

## MOOD

The mood of Agnite campaigns and characters is the most dualistic of all the Tribes. The Agnites are all that is best and brightest of the Tribes: their innocence, inspiration and hope for the future. At the same time, however, they represent the dark mirror of everything that the Tribes try to hide from themselves: brutality, betrayal and fear.



## MIRROR MIRROR

Children are born mimics who learn from what they see, and Agnites act as a mirror of the actions of others around them. Thus an Agnite's (especially a young Agnite's) actions will often be a reflection of the actions of those around her, especially those that she admires. This mimicry allows the Weaver to highlight the actions of those around the Agnite, showing how they look through the eyes of children. A Character who murders an enemy while an Agnite is watching may later see that Agnite killing someone else in an utterly pointless fashion — because the Agnite did not know the reasons for the first killing, and may have assumed there were none. On the other hand, a Character who performs an act of kindness may see Agnites repeating the act, often with as little reason as they would have for the murder. Players of Agnite Characters should consider choosing up a role model, someone they can emulate and whose actions they can put a new spin on.

## UNCERTAINTY

In a world by, for, and of children there is little that is certain. A child can vacillate all day between two choices, not sure whether she wants the Dahlian puzzlebox or the Keeper doll. The same uncertainty applies to more important choices as well. Agnites are almost constantly faced with choices to make, about who they are, who they want to be and what they want to do. The anarchic nature of the Tribe only heightens the uncertainty of these choices, as no one can ever be sure from one day to the next where they will stand or who will stand with them. As a result Agnites tend to avoid choices whenever they can, pretending they do not matter or that they have more important things to do. Often the ones playing the hardest and yelling the loudest are those who are the most uncertain about their lives. Bringing an Agnite to the point of actually making a decision can be a hard and painful thing, as can the decision making itself. Weavers who want to show the effects of uncertainty and avoidance of responsibility can easily use Agnites and their deliberate refusal to acknowledge choices to bring home the fecklessness and pointlessness of a life lived without making hard choices. Agnites can also be used to show the price paid when a choice is made — for no matter what is chosen and how wonderful it might be, something else is always left behind.

## SPONTANEITY

The flip side of the hedging and hemming brought about by uncertainty is the lightning fast spontaneity of the Agnite mind. Though Agnites avoid major decisions, they are also capable of flitting from point to point and of making minor decisions with breathtaking speed. The often stream-of-consciousness decision making style of the Agnites can be difficult for more linear-minded adults to follow. Where an adult moves from point to point in a logical progression, a child is more likely to make intuitive leaps between subjects that are only tangentially connected. Children rarely do things for no reason at all, but the reasons they have and the speed with which they come to odd conclusions can be a shocking thing to see. Agnite campaigns

are full of sudden shifts of focus, actions taken up without much (or any) thought and tenuous connections of reason. Agnites act as a force of chaos, and their sudden and spontaneous shifts can easily make the best laid plans of Fatima and man go awry. Capriciousness is an Agnite eminence for good reason.

## EROLIC

Play and games are very dear to the Agnite heart and there is often a sense of lighthearted fun about the Tribe. Of course, what an Agnite calls fun might not be what any sane adult would call fun, and some of their games can be quite horrific. However even in the middle of the worst offenses most Agnites maintain a sense of play, a sense that what they are doing doesn't really matter because it is all just a game. In bright moments this can be a wonderful way to lift spirits and bring some comic relief to a game that has grown too heavy. The Agnite getting into a game of chase with a gaggle of geese over breadcrumbs can make anyone smile a little. On the other hand the giggling and gleaming eyes of an Agnite who is playfully dropping burning hot metal bits onto a captive's skin can put a more sinister cast on the face of children's play.

## HORROR

Agnites know the face of horror like few members of other Tribes. To the Agnite mind, the world is a vast and often frightening place. Added to their lack of experience is the fact that most Agnites feel helpless before the forces that can come to bear upon them. While a Joanite will fear Z'bri, she at least can try to fool herself into thinking that her training and skill at arms can help her survive. Agnites rarely have such confidence to fall back upon, and as a result feel the utter helplessness of true horror. The dark things of the world are very present in the Agnite mind and the darkness scares them in a bone-deep way that can often lead them to the point of paralysis.

For others, Agnites can represent horror in one of two ways. On one side of the coin, though it can be overdone, there is little that reinforces the ideas of cruelty and horror as much as the sight of suffering children. The Tribes often look to the Agnites for hope, and so seeing a child twisted by the Z'bri can be a deep and profound shock, a blow against hope itself. The other side of the coin is that Agnites themselves can become the subjects of horror. When children turn on a character and render them powerless, taunting and tormenting, it can be a profoundly horrific experience.



## 6. Playtime

### WONDER

In the eyes of the young everything is new. That which is not horrid is bright and wonderful beyond compare. To an Agnite a place as familiar as Bazaar, practically their back yard, can be a place of endless exploration. A trinket can be a treasure of rare worth, shown proudly to a group of admiring friends. Agnites can find wonder in anything and everything. Bright descriptions, focus on common things as being somehow fantastic, first time encounters and a sense of discovery and joy can help bring home the Agnite sense of wonder. Agnites are able to inspire others to see these things as well; by their simple joy in life children are able to move men and mountains to feats that none would have thought themselves capable of.

### LOCATIONS

Agnites can be found crawling over every corner of Vimary and even toddling out into the Outlands as scouts for various groups. The heart and home of the Agnites, however, is in Bazaar and Playground. It is in those two places that most Agnites are found. To Agnites, Bazaar is the back yard and the vacant lot way out back. Playground is home. The pitter-patter of little feet and the mocking laughter of children can be heard all throughout Bazaar, even in the deepest parts of the Emporiums.

### PLAYGROUND

There are a few outside Agnes' Tribe that think they know Playground; passing through once or twice they think they have a handle on the rather small area. They are wrong. Playground is not just the home of Agnes - it is also Her personal playground, and She uses Her power to rearrange Playground to suit Her whims. Any time the Fatima or Her Favorites get bored with the current layout of Playground, or if all the good hiding places have become too well known, Agnes changes the whole thing to restart the game.

Though the layout of Playground changes at the Fatima's will, there are several features that remain constant; all that changes is where they are in relation to everything else. There are always areas of blacktops with courts and play areas marked out with carefully drawn lines of chalk, paint and whatever else the Agnites can get their paws on in order to mark off their personal territory. There are endless secret hiding spots scattered throughout the building, tunnels and the small wilderness area just outside the main blacktops. Many of the Children make their lairs in these areas, building temporary shelters and hiding spots to store their favorite toys. It is quite common for traps and alarms of various types to be set up around these caches, and attempts at theft often result in pain and humiliation for the would-be toy snatcher. Also, though the other Tribes would be surprised to learn it, there are also several garden and field areas in and about Playground where the Barren nourish food for the Tribe. Though they are nothing compared with Evan fields or Yagan slaughterhouses, these out of the way areas are able to produce enough food that the Agnites do not have to rely totally upon trade or charity to fill their ever-hungry bellies.

Playground is an ever-shifting wonderland, filled with endless surprises. It is as much a friend as it is a house. By the time they are older Children most Agnites have scoured every inch of the Playground and know it like the back of their hand - even when it moves about. For outsiders Playground presents a much different face. Either it seems a harmless place full of children's squabbles, games and pains (and thus not much worth looking into), or it becomes a nightmare trap from which there is no escape. Even the Dahlians fear being trapped in Playground when the Agnites are mad at them, for it is rumored that an entire Caravan disappeared into Playground years ago — never to be heard from again.

### THE EMPORIUMS

Most of the Emporiums belong to the Tribes as a whole, at least publicly. Under the surface, however, the areas are shared by the Dahlians and the Agnites, both of whom know the millions of tunnels, switchbacks and secret routes better than anyone else. While the upper levels of the Emporiums tend to be safe enough, the lower levels become secret bases and toy storage for Agnites. The Children trap these areas, and unlike the traps in Playground they are not simply painful or humiliating. Every month someone trying to loot an Agnite toy nest ends up dead in some grisly and unpleasant way.

To the Agnites the Emporiums are the empty lot out behind the house. Unlike Playground they are not really safe, but unlike the big wide world they are not too dangerous and scary to face. As a result the older Children tend to view running through the Emporiums exploring, stealing and causing havoc, as a form of proving themselves. Their knowledge of secret ways and their ability to fit where an adult cannot pass makes them the ghosts of the marketplaces. Appearing out of nowhere to taunt, steal and play, they can then vanish before any angry adults can discipline them.

### FALLEN CYCLES

As with all things forbidden there is a strong attraction-repulsion complex built up around the Fallen in Agnite minds. The Fallen are something mysterious, something worth finding out about; at the same time they are something dangerously unknown. The Fallen are also unprotected by the laws of the Nation and so are all too tempting as targets for the crueler games that the Agnites like to play.

### AGNITES AS ALLIES

Any Fallen who befriends an Agnite can gain a resource of great value. On the practical side of matters Agnites are sneaks, snitches and spies without equal. The fact that they are often overlooked and rarely suspected of any serious crime allows them to pass unnoticed almost anywhere in Tribal lands. Their love of gossiping and chatting with their friends about the things they have seen makes them wonderful, if somewhat incoherent, sources of information. That they are often innocent enough to be used as dupes is something that any Fallen who is desperate

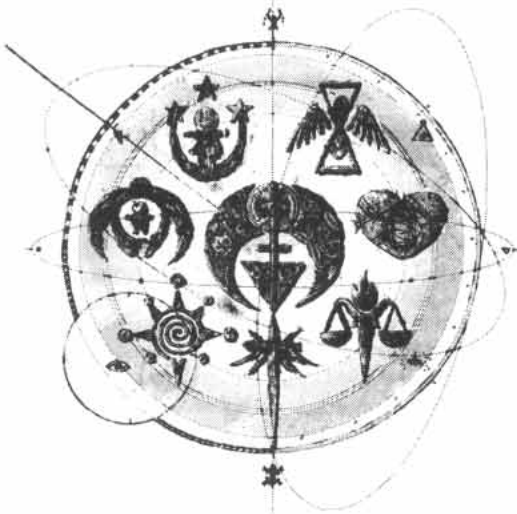
enough will realize in short order. On the less practical, but no less valuable, side of the friendship is the laughter and joy that a Child's bright innocence can bring to someone who is suffering. Sudden and unexpected kindness, moments of comedy and a surprisingly understanding ear are all services that many Agnites are more than happy to provide for their friends.

## AGNITES AS ENEMIES

Even the Z'bri are hard pressed to match the absolute amoral and spiteful cruelty of an angry child. It is easy to alienate an Agnite, as even a casual dismissal or hot word can turn a child's heart to spite. Once angry, an Agnite can become a living nightmare to the Fallen. Though they lack the blatant power of Tribes like the Joanites or the Shebans, Agnites can more than make up for that with a creative cruelty that focuses less on death and imprisonment and more upon making life truly miserable. Spreading lies and rumors, poisoning drinks, stealing important possessions and hit and run assaults with painful but non-lethal weapons (like dartguns) are all just starting points for angry Agnites. To make matters worse, not all Agnites even need a reason to hate and persecute the Fallen. Unprotected by the Nation and often subjects of resentment, Fallen make logical targets for Agnite cruelty. Many Agnites start with pulling the wings off of flies, move up to drowning dogs and end up experimenting with Fallen.

## AGNITES AS NEUTRALS

Most of the time Agnites do not think about the Fallen enough to care about them one way or the other. A Child's life usually focuses around her Fatima and clique. Anything outside Playground is a minor thing, worthy of attention only for a short amount of time. Though Agnites may have an initial fascination with the Fallen, very often it wears off once the newness grows stale. A bitter enemy or close friend of one day may give a Fallen a cold and uncaring shoulder the next. In the end Agnites are creatures of the moment, and unless something is in their line of sight they are unlikely to care very much.



## CHARACTERS

Creating Agnite Characters is a unique challenge. It is difficult to make a child who can fit in with a group of adults and still remain a child. It is slightly easier to make an adult Agnite, but even then the unique nature of childhood in the Tribe will give the Character different feelings and attitudes than any other member of Tribal society. Agnite Characters, more than any other, will be defined by their age, both physical and emotional. The latter tends to be much younger than the former. Careful attention to where an Agnite rested in the social ladder and her peculiar way of dealing with eternal childhood will help develop a personality for the Character that will make her more than a cut-out 'kid.'

## AGNITE CONCEPTS AND CHARACTER CREATION

More than the other Tribes, the Agnites know their Fatima, for they play with Her on a regular basis. Where an Evan of Westholm might never have seen Eva Herself, every Agnite sees Agnes almost daily. Also, where other Fatimas tend to be distant and authoritarian, Agnes is all too present in Agnite life. She is the most powerful Child, the undoubted master of Playground — but She is still a child. Because of Her unique position and relation to Her Tribe, Her relation to the Agnites is a very special thing. Most Agnites, at one time or another, have had the complete and utter joy of being the apple of Agnes' eye, Her most beloved and bright thing — even if only for a second. For one small moment the Agnite was the best friend of a living goddess, and that memory is not easy to shake.

Of course, Agnes is also a mercurial and self-centered creature who will love members of Her Tribe one day and beat them with a stick the next. As She is the center and source of Agnite life this behavior leads to a particular level of uncertainty about cause and effect among the Children. Being good is no guarantee that you will be treated well, and being rotten and cruel will often garner rewards. Once they get past a certain age many Agnites begin to resent this, as they have enough contact with members of other Tribes to gain a sense that it is not the way things could be. Because it is the way things always have been in their lives, however, they are not certain what to do about it and usually end up taking out their anger on others. Saying that the average Agnite is a turmoil of confused love and hate is a vast understatement.

The result of all this confusion is that few Agnites know exactly where they are going in life. They all know that they want something: the love of the Fatima, the respect of their clique, a place to go to stop the pain, or even to take up a place in adult society and earn the respect of others. While they know that one of those goals would make them happy, they are rarely certain which one they really want, or how to go about getting it.

## AGNITE SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Unlike any other Tribe, Agnite society is based on classification by age. There are no families, guilds, clans, or even Caravans. To an Agnite the whole Tribe is their family, but some members of the family are closer than others. That closeness is based almost entirely upon age — little else matters. Some Littles and Children will associate with each other, but there is always a sense of separation between them. If you are a Child you play with other Children, if you are a Barren your friends are other Barren and you do as the Children tell you. Trying to buck the system is to invite scorn, pain and beatings at the very best, and the wrath of the Fatima at the worst.

Within each age group there are certain cliques based upon authority, power, common interest and Playground politics. Despite the fact that the squabbles of children may look small in the eyes of other Tribals, the truth is that they can be deadly serious and can crush a heart or a life as surely as any Magdalite intrigue. Survival requires friends. In the rough and tumble world of Playground, groups of friends find a way to survive, and sometimes thrive, by filling a niche. None of the cliques are formalized groups with an identifiable structure; all are associations of the moment that are ruled by personal charisma and the ability (or lack of such) to beat the snot out of others.

## GROUPS AND CLIQUES

Who you play with and what games you play are all-important to Agnites. Associating with one group will get you beaten, associating with another will ensure that you are the one doing the beating. The following is a breakdown of the various age groups of the Agnites, and the Cliques that spring up inside each group. Though there is sometimes some spill from one Clique to another, crosses between different groups happen less often. Age is not something that can be ignored in the Agnite ranks.

## YOUNG ONES

The youngest of the Tribe, the Young Ones are still in the Crèche. Young ones are utterly creatures of the moment, and they have never known any discipline or control aside from the will of Agnes. They have very few Cliques, as they have yet to come to an age where politics and personal prejudices are fully imprinted in their minds. This is not to say they all play together peacefully, for fights and feuds are common; it is simply that they lack the attention span and sense of self to hold to any grudge for too long. The young ones are the most protected, cherished and spoiled of the children of Agnes, but because of their baby status lack any real power in the Tribe. Most are happy to play all day and laugh at the jokes the Children tell them.

## LITTLES

Between the ages of 6 and 9 there is a transitional phase for most Agnites that is not easily defined in terms of age group. At this point in their life the children are grown enough that they want out of the Crèche, at least part of the time, but are not quite fully Children either. These Littles, as most Children and Breeders call them, are often let out to play on their own for short periods but have to stay close to a caretaker of some sort and return to the Crèche at night. By being able to play with the bigger kids, but still being sheltered and nourished, the Littles are able to figure out where they fit in the world of the Children. The point at which someone stops being a Little and becomes a Child is a very individual thing, as Littles all mature at different rates. Because of their transitional status Littles have no real cliques of their own, but many become members of the Cliques of the Children they play with.

## CHILDREN

The Children form the bulk of the Tribe. Old enough that they do not require constant supervision and care in the Crèche, but young enough to still be fun for Agnes to play with, they are the body, head and heart of the Tribe. Because they are old enough and free enough to make their own ways and to start to hold grudges and yearn for power, position and love of the Fatima, they are the group with the most Cliques. Most Children's Cliques are based around who plays with whom. Someone who plays with the head bully, for example, is considered to be a Bully by everyone else, regardless of whether or not she actually participates in the violence. The Cliques are not solid units, either, and there are often rival factions within each group.

**Bullies:** One of the most identifiable of all the Cliques is the Bullies. The leaders of the Bully Cliques tend to be larger and older than the other Children, and use their physical size and sheer nastiness to intimidate everyone around them. Most Bully Cliques are based around one Bully and her hangers-on, who are often younger and smaller Children relying on their "boss" to protect them. The gang mentality and backing of the boss lets even small Bullies pick on kids who would never lie down if the Bully was not backed by the might of the Clique. Bullies are famous for their use of teasing, beatings and even torture, which tends to be very creative, on other children. No one in Playground ever says that if you stand up to a Bully she will back down. Most Bullies are all too willing to have a fight, and some even come to enjoy being hurt as much as they relish hurting others.

**Tattletales/Squealers:** Many of the younger and smaller children lack the physical size or meanness to be a Bully, or the independent personality to be a Loner, and so they bond together into mutual protection rings. They are based around spying on and reporting other Children (and just about anyone else they can find dirt on) to whomever is best able to get their target into the most trouble. Big enough transgressions are reported to Agnes Herself, and Tattletales are the cause of more Agnites falling than any single other factor. Smaller transgressions are reported to Bullies, the heads of influential Cliques, and even the Favorites who have an ax to grind.

Much like Bullies, the Tattletales rely on fear to protect themselves, but for Tattletales it is a fear based on the powers of others rather than direct physical punishment. Despite the subtlety of playing snitch in an environment with few hard and fast rules, most Tattletale groups know enough ways to get someone punished, betrayed, or exiled that everyone on Playground comes to fear the sneering phrase, "I'm gonna teece!!!"

**Loners:** The least numerous type of Child, Loners are those that cannot or will not fit into a Clique. Refusing to play with others or wanting to have personal space are a kind of crime on Playground, and those who do it are often exiled from the group. Loners are often picked on, as they have no one to back them up. A few, however, have enough personal strength or smarts to avoid becoming the bottom dog on the social ladder. Those who make it on their own are feared and respected by the Cliques, as someone strong enough to stand alone is a rare thing indeed. Most Loners play little part in Playground politics, however, as they are out of sight and out of mind most of the time.

**Victims:** These Children have found a type of freedom and power in rolling over and playing punching bag for every Bully. They always seem to have "hurt me, I won't tell" written across their face. They survive in two ways: by learning to take a hit, either emotional or physical, without flinching too much, and in becoming the favorite of a Bully or other powerful figure. If they can manage to become a favorite they gain some degree of protection — letting themselves be victimized by one group so that the group will keep them from being hurt by others. Many Bullies, after all, like to think that they are noble, and so will keep anyone else from hurting the ones they hurt. Either that or they just don't want anyone else to break their toys. Those who cannot get under the dubious protection of a Bully or group of Tattlers end up like a dog that has been kicked too much: constantly sullen and cringing, expecting a blow to fall at any time. Some of them even come to like it.

**Babysitters:** On the fast track to becoming Breeders, the Babysitters are the Children who take care of the Young Ones and the Littles. By and large they are able to stay close enough to Agnes and the Favorites that they suffer relatively little from the harsher side of Playground politics. As a result of that shelter and their work with the babies they tend to be gentle and kind, easy to talk to and with a ready ear. Of course they are not without their own plots and motivations, as being a Babysitter is a very comfortable job and there is always competition for the position. Most Babysitters are close to the Breeders and tend to be a bit older than most Children, averaging 16 years old.

**Golden Kids:** Where the Bullies and the Tattletales work off of fear, the Golden Kids gain their power through charisma and natural leadership ability. A typical Golden Kid Clique is based around a strong central leader with a group of other Children who are drawn to the way their leader does business. The leaders of the Cliques tend to be physically attractive, dynamic and fearless enough to stand up to Bullies, Tattlers and even adults from other Tribes.

Some of them are genuinely good kids who want to help make a safe place for their friends. Most, however, are selfish and only interested in using their followers to increase their own power. The two kinds can be hard to tell apart, as even the most rotten of the Golden Kids can turn on a big smile with all the sweet and innocent charm of a whole crèche full of Young Ones. In any case, most Golden Kids tend to be hunting for a position as one of the Favorites, either because they love their Fatima, want to help, or just want the power.

**Scouts:** This Clique is the stereotype of Agnites held by the other Tribes, as they are the questioning, thieving, irresponsible children who are most often met outside of Playground. Obsessed with lurking, searching, finding and exploring, these Children are the most likely to leave Playground (even for extended amounts of time) in search of a new tunnel to crawl down or a new room to strip bare. Part of their obsession stems from an honest love of exploring, and part because sometimes the only way to deal with the pressure cooker of Playground is to get out. When they are in Playground Scouts have a good deal of power, mostly based on the fact that they often have the best toys to trade or even give away — loot taken in their journeys. These toys, when combined with their stories and the obvious amount of guts it takes to leave Playground for long periods of time, make Scouts respected and even loved. Most Agnites try their hand at being a Scout at one time or another, but most do not have the talent — and sheer luck — that it takes. The lucky ones realize it before they get themselves killed.

**Favorites:** The undisputed rulers of Playground are Agnes' Favorites. These Children are as close as the Agnites come to a priesthood, and everyone knows that their connection to the Child makes them untouchable. That most are also trained in Synthesis by Agnes Herself and are taught special and secret powers, about which they make constant cryptic and vaguely threatening references, only increases their power. At any given time there are only ten Favorites (though the number fluctuates slightly with Agnes' will) and they spend large amounts of their time playing with Agnes Herself. When there are teams chosen for group games the Favorites are always on Agnes' side, and their team always wins. Though every child on Playground knows better than to beat Agnes in a game, the fear of the Fatima is often in competition with fear of the Favorites. Those that Agnes grows angry with go away and are never seen again. Those that the Favorites grow angry with are seen again, but usually not alive or sane.

## BREEDERS

Outside the Children, the Breeders are the most spoiled of the whole Tribe. Willful, self-centered and petulant, the Breeders try to use their special status as the makers of Children to compensate for the freedom they lost when they stopped being Children themselves. Even though some Breeders are as old as 30, not one of them is really an adult. They never mature, never learn to look beyond themselves or their immediate needs, and never care about anything other than their own pleasure and keeping Agnes happy.

## 6. Playtime

To a Breeder, babies are little more than a measure of power and respect. No Breeder is allowed to keep a child, as all children are sent to the Crèche to be raised communally. As Breeder status is based upon the number of healthy babies produced, those who cannot make children fast enough know that they are just one miscarriage or sick child away from being declared Barren and reduced to slavery. Those who have borne many children lord their position over the others, being pampered and tended to hand and foot by the Barren and lower level Breeders. In every group of Breeders the most influential is known as the First Mother. She is the queen of her little cell, something that everyone is kept painfully aware of.

In general female Breeders are considered 'better' than male Breeders, as it is the female that gives birth to the body. In fact, most Agnites (even some Breeders) are hazy about what role the male actually plays in conception. As a result, the Breeders are run by the females who bear the most children, generally keeping their favorite male mates as their second in command. Both males and females will do nearly anything to keep their positions, and there are constant low-grade accusations of causing miscarriages. None speak them too loudly, because when Agnes hears, the results are rarely anything that any Breeder desires.

**Nursemaids:** The only major clique within the Breeders are the Nursemaids. Those Breeders who have trouble giving birth, but who are good at raising children, are put into the Crèche to help the Children raise the babies that other Breeders have given to the Tribe. Though they are on the bottom of the Breeder social scale, the Nursemaids have a connection with the Young Ones that the other Breeders lack. As a result the Nursemaids are often able to get various Cliques of Children, or even a few of the Favorites, to help them with any serious problems — including other Breeders who push too far.

## BARREN

If an Agnite is not chosen to be a Breeder, or can not produce well enough to remain a Breeder, she faces the horror of becoming a Barren. Virtual slaves to the Children and Breeders, the Barren are the refuse of the Child's Tribe. In Agnes' eyes, and thus in the eyes of Her children, the Barren are not children, do not make children, and are nothing more than wastes of skin. Barren have little to no protection within the Tribe and being insulted, stoned and tortured are all common fates for those who fall into this trap. When they are not living toys for the Children, the Barren do most of the scut work for the Tribe: lifting and carrying, doing the unpleasant tasks of cleaning out the latrines, pulling weeds out of the gardens and fields and doing all the endless repetitive tasks that let the Children play all day. Few Barren make it beyond the age of 30. Either they burn out and die, are killed by the Children, or break down and flee to Hom. It is no accident that so many among the Fallen were once Barren.

## DAHLIAN MASCOT

There is one other possibility for an Agnite facing becoming a Barren, though few think about it before it is too late. Many Children, when they are into their mid or late teen years (before 17), will go on a trip with a Dahlian Caravan. Agnes fully supports this journey and the Dahlians are always happy to have an Agnite along, as most Dahlians believe that the Children bring good luck. Some of the Children who go on these trips find that the life of a Caravan suits them better than Playground ever did. These fortunate ones are given a chance to join the Caravan and avoid becoming a Breeder or a Barren. In order to join a Caravan the Child must first ask Agnes for permission, which is most often granted without question. The Agnite then rides with a Caravan as their Mascot, doing some light work but mostly being the spoiled child of the whole Caravan. Then the Agnite goes through a Flight (see Flight, p. 72), to become accepted as a full member of the Caravan.

As Flighting is a Dahlian coming-of-age ritual, if the Caravan catches the Agnite, she becomes an adult. No longer considered a Mascot, she is considered (although still officially a part of Agnes' tribe, with the Eminences and Aspects that go along with that status) a full member of the Caravan, assuming all the rights and all the responsibilities that come along with it. As with most of the rest of the Nation, children are considered to be of the mother's Tribe, and thus the children of female Mascots are Agnites and are returned to be raised in Playground. A Mascot who fails the Flight and manages to survive returns to Playground, disgraced, and will likely join the Barren soon after.

## THE FIRST CHILDREN

At the moment of Mary's death and Agnes' birth, there were twelve children at the side of the new Child Fatima. Those twelve children were caught up in the massive energies released by the death and birth of a Fatima, and all twelve were forever changed. They all were close to Agnes from the start, able to hear Her thoughts and feel Her emotions, just as She was able to hear and feel them in return. In the strange new world in which Agnes found Herself, the First Children were Her first and strongest friends, guides and links to humanity. All of the First Children grew powerful in Synthesis, becoming equals of the most powerful priestesses of the Yagans. But the most profound change was not revealed for some time — the First Children do not age, either physically or emotionally. They are tied so deeply to Agnes that so long as She does not age, they cannot age either. No one, not even Agnes Herself, knows what will happen to the First Children if She ever does age or grow. For their part, the First Children are not eager to find out. The years of childhood, of hiding from their own Tribe and others, have driven them all mad, and they will do anything they can to keep Agnes, and thus themselves, forever young. It is a bitter irony that before Agnes can grow those who helped Her through Her first steps may have to die.

The First Children are a secret group among the Agnites, and other than Agnes Herself, no one knows that they exist. From time to time one of the Favorites has become suspicious, but those who have pried into the matter have always suffered unfortunate accidents. The First Children live in the shadows of the Tribe, never getting too close to anyone lest their secret be found out. As a result they are largely anti-social, power-mad and angry with and about everything. They represent the worst aspects of Agnes' personality, given form in flesh and blood.

## SKILLS AND ATTRIBUTES

From the Littles to the Barrens there is a great spread of attribute scores, and little can be said about that statistics of the average Agnite. The Tribe does, however, have a few tendencies and each age grouping has a few common denominators. Players and Weavers using these guidelines are encouraged to remember that they are only guidelines, and there can be vast differences between even children of the same age and clique.

**Attributes:** Most members of the Tribe tend to have a low Build, as Agnites tend to be a bit on the small side, though some Barren can be nearly as large as the average Joanite. As Agility and Creativity are both valued by almost every group in the Tribe they tend to run unusually high in Agnite characters. In addition, members of certain Cliques have general features: most Bullies have a higher than average Build, Golden Kids have a high Influence and Loners tend to have a high Willpower and Psyche. Victims tend to have a low Psyche, while Babysitters tend to have a high score in the attribute. Breeders tend to have decent Appearance and Knowledge scores. Finally, most Barren have a good Build and Fitness while they are still young, but years of neglect and abuse lower their Psyche and Willpower as they get older.

**Skills:** While many Agnites pick up various skills by experimentation and example they are not the most highly proficient Tribe, and most Agnite characters will thus have a large number of low-level skills rather than any single skill at significant levels. Skills that are common in the Tribe are Athletics, Crafts such as toymaking and painting, Dodge, Notice, Sleight-of-Hand, Sneak, Streetwise and Throwing. In addition Bullies tend to have Intimidation, Golden Kids have Leadership, Scouts have Navigation (Land), Breeders have low levels of Seduction and Barren often have Agriculture.

**Synthesis:** Agnites are very comfortable with Synthesis and some of the Young Ones have grown up close enough to the Fatima and to the Favorites that they never realize that conjunctural Synthesis is not something that most people have common everyday exposure to. Despite their level of comfort, however, few Agnites learn high levels of the Synthesis skill. The one exception is the Favorites, all of whom have considerable talents in the Skill and who normally have at least one Aspect.

## THE RIVER OF DREAM

Many Agnites do not learn the difference between Dream and Reality until they gain experience with the world outside of Playground. They do know that the River is a different place than the world they walk in everyday, but they do not develop the perspective that it is a special, separate, or different place from the physical. To the Agnites, the River simply *is*. From their youngest days Agnites play near the River, in the flexible reality of Playground, and the Child sometimes takes Her friends and playmates to see parts of the River that only the highest priestesses in other Tribes ever see. Though most members of the Tribe are not Conjunctural Synthesis users, all the members of the tribe have a natural and instinctual connection to the River that allows them to perform feats that ordinary members of other Tribes would never dream of.

## ARTIFACTS

Several of the toys and trinkets that the Agnites carry about and stash in secret hiding places are not just bright and flashing amusements. They are, in the eyes of the children, an important part of life and a way to make dreams come true. For that reason many "toys" in Agnite hands become minor artifacts. The fact that Agnes Herself often keeps favorite toys for a time then casts them aside also leads to there being a great diversity of Fatimal medallions of odd and varying forms. Favorites often carry dolls, clappers and crayons that are Fatimal medallions — and woe to the person who belittles them or tries to touch them without permission. A few of the more interesting treasures of the Tribe are listed below.

**Puzzleboxes:** Actually imbued by Dahlians and Agnite Mascots riding with Dahlian Caravans, these wooden cubes are intricate puzzles. The object of the puzzle is to figure out the secret combination that opens the box up and releases the bit of Dream trapped inside. Some of the boxes are color-coded, some have word puzzles and clues, and the most advanced models are bare of any hints as to the solution. Most of the time, minor Illusions or bits of Inspiration are trapped in the box, making a beautiful or uplifting "prize" for the Agnite who opens the box. Some, however, are used as booby traps or as a way of storing a nasty (though usually minor) shock for someone who tries to do the Agnite harm.

**Hurters:** One of the uglier artifacts of Playground are the so-called "hurters." These nasty treasures can take just about any form, but are usually based around a toy or bit of junk that looks somehow threatening, with sharp edges, ugly colors, or garish features. No one knows when the first hurter was made, but since they came into being they have been the favorite toys of Bullies. A hurter is simple enough to operate: a threatening phrase or gesture is made with the toy and then it is touched to bare skin. Upon contact, horrible pains, as many as can be imagined by the hurter's wielder, are inflicted on the victim unless she can pass a WIL test against a Threshold of 5. If she fails the test every point of MoF is subtracted from all of her actions, as a wound penalty would be. Hurters leave no physical marks, nor cause any physical wounds, but the psychological effects can be profound.

## 6. Playtime

**Mother and Child:** The Artifact whose theft nearly drove Agnes mad, this seemingly inconspicuous doll is actually a treasure of wondrous but subtle power. It is, and will probably remain, Agnes' favorite toy. This Artifact has become the focus of the Child's dreams and hopes about Herself and Her Mother. So much love, fear, and Fatimal Dreaming has been focused on this ragged little doll with its even more raggedy little child, that it has become a force of its own. Whoever holds the doll will find a dramatic and twisted destiny coming upon them, whether she would have it or not. In Agnes' hands, the doll will help Her to achieve Her potential. In the hands of anyone else the doll's effects are up to the Weaver, but should be the beginning of an epiphany of some sort. Sudden reversals in fortune, sudden discoveries about the self, and quick reversals of position would all be common effects for someone who had even temporary possession of the doll.

### ASPECTS

The Favorites of Agnes often learn special tricks and games from Her. Sometimes they are able to teach these to other children, but by and large a Favorite would rather die than give one of the "pukes" any of their special secrets.

### HIDE'N'SEEK (AGNITES, AGI: VARIABLE THRESHOLD)

This Aspect uses Dream to help the Dreamer hide and sneak in situations where such actions would normally be impossible. When using this Aspect, the Dreamer is able to use impossibly small cover to fully hide herself, as well as to vanish behind nearly anything. For example, a Dreamer the size of an average adult could use Hide'n'Seek to hide behind a single book as though it were a large bookshelf, or behind a sapling as easily as behind a full grown oak. Note that Hide'n'Seek does not grant the Dreamer invisibility, nor does it make her soundless; silent movement still requires Sneak rolls. The Dreamer gets a bonus equal to the Aspect's MoS to all Sneak rolls, and is able to make Sneak rolls in situations in which stealth would normally be impossible (such as sneaking from pebble to pebble across an empty courtyard in full daylight). The Threshold depends upon how small a cover the Dreamer wishes to be able to use.

| Threshold | Cover Useable  |
|-----------|--|
| 4         | A barrel, a desk, or something half the size of the Dreamer.                     |
| 5         | A bag, a footlocker, or something one-quarter the size of the Dreamer.           |
| 6         | A book, a jar, or something about a foot square.                                 |
| 7         | A maple leaf, a bump in the floor, or anything else at least a few inches across |
| 8         | A pebble, a blade of grass, or just about anything easily visible.               |

### LUCK (FOLLOWERS OF HARE, PSY:THRESHOLD 5)

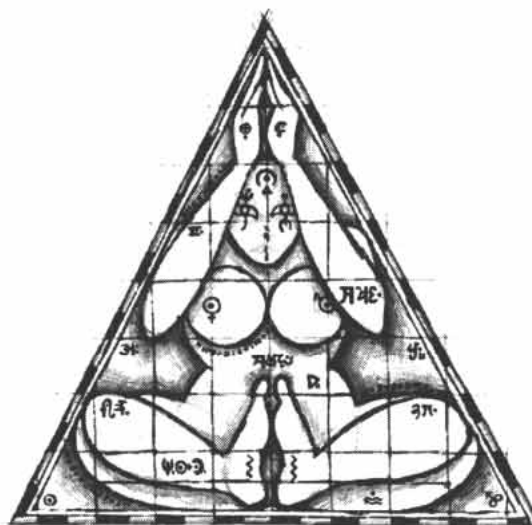
The other Aspect that is known to Agnites is not taught by Agnes Herself, but by Hare, the first Totem of the Tribe. Hare only teaches those who please it by being quick and clever, which often includes the best of the Scouts and the Dahlian Mascots — something which is behind the Dahlians' belief in the Mascots as 'lucky charms.'

By invoking this Aspect the Dreamer can grant herself or another a temporary period of unusually good luck. The effects are usually not noticeable, and can easily be attributed to circumstance, and so it is common for Dreamers with this Aspect to keep their power to themselves and use it quietly for those they like. For a time period based on the Synthesis MoS chart (Tribe 8 Rulebook, p. 165) the recipient of Luck gains a bonus on their rolls: extra 5s rolled add +1 to the total, just as a 6 would normally. Thus a roll of 6, 5, 5 on three dice would have a final total of 8 (6, +1 for a 5, +1 for a 5). A roll of 5, 5 would have a final total of 6 (5, +1 for an extra 5).

Because it is tied in to Hare's Moon Magic, Luck can only be used on any one person once for every full cycle of the moon (about 28 days).

### TOTEMS

The Agnites have two Totems, both of which are much loved by the Fatima and by the members of the Tribe. Hare, the older of the two Totems, is the totem most loved by the Scouts, the Golden Kids and the other independent members of the Tribe. Teddy is the totem of the Young Ones and Littles, as well as of the Children and Barren, who need comfort more than anyone else.



## HARE

Born from Mother Moon with his eyes open and his ears keen, Hare is one of the cleverest animals. Fearless and tricky, Hare can change colors with the seasons, climb trees and outrun most other animals — at least over a short distance. Hare is also wise, as he keeps his ears and eyes open and stays quiet while all of the bigger things blunder about and call out with great voices. Those who follow Hare are often clever scouts and spies. The older Children say that Hare can teach good children many lessons about Luck and Games as well, lessons which he learned from his Mother Moon.

Hare befriended Agnes while She was still very young, and taught Her that sometimes it is more important to be young and quick than old and powerful. It was a lesson that Agnes learned well, but one that has also worn thin with the passing of time. Now Agnes is starting to become jealous of the greater power and respect of Her Aunts and She is growing more and more distant from Hare and his lessons of watching and learning. Only time will tell if the two will reconcile, or if Hare will leave Agnes as She grows.

**Highlights:** Quick, clever, lucky

**Attributes:** CRE +5, INF +3, KNO +5, PER +4, PSY +10, WIL +6, STR +6, HEA +8, STA 105, UD 15.

**Skills:** Combat Sense 4/+4, Dodge 5/+5, Hand-to-Hand 2/+5, Lore (Spirit) 4/+5, Lore (Omens) 6/+5, Mythology 4/+5, Notice 5/+5, Sneak 6/+5.

**Special Abilities:** Burrow (Can dig a passage into the River of Dream for up to 12 characters); Blessed of the Moon (can give himself or one target the benefits of the Luck aspect with an MoS of 5); Clever Ears, Sharp Eyes (can overhear any conversation within a mile radius, or find any hidden object in sight with a successful Notice roll)

## TEDDY BEAR

There are times when Agnes and every member of Her Tribe yearn for comfort, for the tender words and love that only a mother could bring. Teddy came to Agnes and to Her Tribe to try to help fill that void. Teddy is a cub of Den Mother (*Word of the Fates*, p. 111), but he is a disobedient and rebellious child who identifies far more with Agnes than with Eva. The fact that the child of the Evan Totem is a Totem of Agnes increases tensions between the Tribes, leading the Evans to claim all the more urgently that they should be able to guide the Agnites. Teddy and the Agnites alike do their best to ignore the claims.

Teddy is much like his mother, a Totem of warmth and kindness. He is the Totem that Agnites turn to when in need of comfort and love, and it is said that even Agnes Herself finds Her soul eased when cuddled up against Teddy. That Half of Agnes is a bear only heightens the closeness of the bond and Teddy does everything he can to try to get Agnes to accept the loving and protective aspect of the bear that is half of Her body.

**Highlights:** Rebellious, Loving, Protective

**Attributes:** CRE +2, INF +5, KNO +4, PER +3, PSY +7, WIL +9, HEA +8, STA 110, UD 21

**Skills:** Combat Sense 3/+2, Dodge 2/+2, Hand-to-Hand 5/+2, Healing 4/+4, Intimidate 4/+9, Lore (Spirit) 4/+4, Notice 3/+3, Survival 4/+2.

**Special Abilities:** Bear Hug (On a successful attack Teddy may try to hug the target. The target and Teddy have an opposed STR vs STR roll, and if Teddy wins the target loses all actions until she manages to break free), Claws and Teeth (UD +10 damage), Hold to the Bear's Back (Teddy may carry up to 12 passengers into the River of Dream), Sacrifice (Teddy may take any wounds that another suffers onto himself with a successful Healing roll vs a Threshold of 4 for a Flesh Wound or 5 for a Deep Wound)



## RITUALS AND CEREMONIES

Agnites have a peculiar relation to ritual and ceremony. As children they are given to reenacting many small but vital aspects of their lives in a ritual manner, taking meaning from the comforting and endless cycles of repetition that fill their days. Many of these personal little ceremonies become magical in the hands of Agnites, due to the faith that they put into them and the fact that Agnes Herself approves of them. Because every member of the Tribe gives birth to their own rituals, there are hundreds of them, based around every aspect of life. Generally their effects are small, such as a +1 to a single roll of a skill, to a slight sweetening to the taste of food, or luckily keeping all of one's teeth through endless games of hurling. Weavers and Players are encouraged to come up with a few little rituals for each Agnite Character, small repeated actions that show important aspects of the Character and what she cares about.

Because they have so many small rituals, most Agnites feel less need for the formal rituals that other Tribals practice. They do have a few large-scale rituals, however, and they put their whole heart into all of them, bringing them to life with the pure faith of the innocent. Some of the formal rituals of the Agnites are listed below.

### THE BINDING

Agnes takes children from Squats, from Fallen and even occasionally from other Tribes, to be a part of Her Tribe. The Ritual of Binding was born in order to integrate these foundlings into the Tribe completely. In this simple but powerful ritual, Agnes comes to the crib of a baby in the Crèche while all the Young Ones and Nursemaids gather around. Agnes then lays one of Her Doll hands upon the babe and claims the child as Her Child, Her Friend and gives them Her love. When Agnes is done speaking all the gathered assembly comes forward, in a solemn and silent line, to greet the new member of the Tribe. No matter who the baby was before the ritual, at its end she is one of Agnes' Children, a full member of Her Tribe and marked with Her Eminences.

### BIGGER DAY

When a Young One or Little becomes a Child, or when a Child becomes a Breeder (but not a Barren), the Tribe throws a party called "Bigger Day." On this day the newly aged character is the center of attention, and Agnes Herself often (though not always) arrives to help celebrate. There is always lots of food, games and a great deal of vomiting and other fun. At the end of the party the age group that the child is leaving presents her with some small presents, then bids her farewell. A leader of the Agnite's new group (First Mothers for Breeders, the leader of a Clique that was impressed by the new Child while they were a Little for Children) then greets the new member and takes them to their new sleeping place. For the week after Bigger Day no one may torment, tease, or steal from the new member of the group. After that week, however, all bets are off.

## TAKE OUT THE TRASH

This ritual introduces a newly made Barren to her new role in life. In this ceremony the Barren-to-be is brought into her current living hole by a friend or acquaintance. There she finds all of her things gone, stolen if they were valuable, or destroyed if they were not wanted. Several Children then rush forward to grab the victim. She is carried out of the Children's sleeping area to the Barren's area and cast on the ground. Without a word, the other Children turn and leave. Agnes Herself then appears behind the new Barren and lays Her hand upon her, pronouncing that her fun time is over and that she will never bear children. From that moment on the Agnite is truly barren, and is unable to have children so long as she remains in Playground.

## NPCs

The Agnites are a rich and diverse Tribe, full of individuals who can be impossible to categorize. There are a few generic types, however, that can be useful for stock characters when dealing with the Tribe. Following is a list of templates that can be used as the base for characters from the Child's Tribe. They can be used as-is for minor NPCs, or added upon to make Player Characters or important Non-Player Characters.

### YOUNG ONE

Young Ones are usually heard before they are seen and while they're there they never stop moving, talking, prodding, or questioning. A world-view undisturbed by things such as politics, cause and effect, or tact gives them an almost painfully honest opinion on everything their bright little minds can understand. Anyone who stops to listen to a Young One will be told a story about whatever is currently occupying her busy little head. Though it comes through the rambunctious words of a Young One, those stories are often quite entertaining and occasionally contain insights that adults would do well to listen to.

**Attributes:** AGI +1, APP 0, BLD -2, CRE +1, FIT 0, INF 0, KNO -1, PER +1, PSY 0, WIL -1, STR -1, HEA 0, STA 15, UD 1, AD 1

**Skills:** Craft (Games) 1/+1, Craft (Painting) 1/+1, Dodge 1/+1, Human Perception 1/0, Notice 1/+1, Sneak 1/+1, Throwing 1/+1

**Equipment:** Various toys, blocks and paints.

## CHILD

The heart of the Child's Tribe, Children are the wild things, the frightened things, the confused and inspired things that most think of when they think about Agnites. No two children are ever the same, as they come in all shapes and sizes, from near adults to near babies, and their psychological states run the gamut privileged positions from psychotic to martyr. Most Children, however, would rather run in packs than be alone, so where you see one Child there are most likely several others watching.

**Attributes:** AGI +2, APP 0, BLD -1, CRE +1, FIT 0, INF 0, KNO -1, PER +1, PSY 0, WIL +1, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 20, UD 3, AD 2

**Skills:** Athletics 1/0, Craft (Various) 1/+1, Dodge 1/+2, Hand-to-Hand 1/+2, Notice 1/+1, Sneak 1/+2, Streetwise 1/0, Theatrics 1/0, Throwing 1/+2

**Equipment:** Various toys, a torn up book, a doll that she keeps hidden near her sleeping hole.

## BREEDER

A mixture of spite and self-satisfied indulgence, the Breeders are a combination of innocence and primitive sexuality that is disconcerting to most, and overly attractive to a few. Breeders take pride in their appearance, as the ability to attract the best mates allows them to keep their

Breeders that cannot produce often enough will soon find themselves cast down with the Barren, and so they take pains to do anything to stay fertile. Though they may resent the position of Children in the Tribe, most Breeders are still proud of their contributions and are lulled by the cushy luxuries they are able to enjoy. A Breeder will do anything, including murdering and betraying Agnes, to keep from having to do the hard and thankless work of a Barren.

**Highlights:** Sensual, conniving, complacent

**Attributes:** AGI +1, APP +2, BLD 0, CRE 0, FIT +1, INF +1, KNO -1, PER 0, PSY -1, WIL 0, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 20, UD 4, AD 3

**Skills:** Craft (Sewing) 1/0, Dodge 1/0, Gambling 1/0, Hand-to-Hand 1/0, Human Perception 2/-1, Intimidate 1/0, Leadership 1/0, Lore (Agnite) 1/-1, Notice 1/0, Seduction 2/0, Theatrics 2/0

**Equipment:** A few dresses that are an Agnite's idea of sexy, several pretty toys, a painting made by a favorite lover.

## FAVORITE

The chosen of Agnes are the best and the worst of the Tribe rolled into one. While the average Child is self-willed and a little blind to the needs of others, the Favorites are overly spoiled and callous. At the same time, however, the Favorites are the leaders, peacekeepers and unofficial marshals of Playground. There are many among the Children who owe their lives, or at least their sanity, to the timely intervention of a Favorite. Of course, there are a large number of Fallen who found themselves on Hom after crossing a Favorite.

In addition to their privileged social position and personal charisma the Favorites are trained in synthesis, and serve as the closest thing to a priesthood that the Agnites have. Those Favorites who maintain their position for long enough become very strong in Dream, having the power and potency of Evan Shamans or Joanite Templars, with none of the restraint or control that the other Tribes instill in their priesthods.

**Highlights:** Resourceful, manipulative, determined

**Attributes:** AGI +1, APP 0, BLD 0, CRE +1, FIT 0, INF +2, KNO 0, PER +1, PSY 0, WIL +1, STR 0, HEA 0, STA 25, UD 4, AD 4

**Skills:** Athletics 1/0, Craft 2/+1, Dodge 2/+1, Hand-to-Hand 1/+1, Human Perception 1/0, Intimidation 1/0, Melee 1/+1, Leadership 2/+1, Lore (Tribal) 1/0, Notice 1/+1, Theatrics 1/+1, Throwing 1/+1, Sneak 2/+1, Streetwise 2/+1, Synthesis (Wonder) 2

**Equipment:** A knife (AD +3), several nice toys, a bag of marbles.

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