

DEGENERESIS



EXALTERS



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HUMAN BEINGS
IN A MOB
WHAT'S A MOB TO
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WHO DON'T
BELIEVE IN
ANYTHING?

- KANYE WEST & JAY-Z

CHRISTIAN GÜNTHER, MARKO DJURDJEVIC & LIAM FOLEY



The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a large piece of machinery, with several bright yellow, glowing lines and shapes. These lines form a network of interconnected paths, some of which are rectangular or square in shape. The overall effect is one of a complex, futuristic, or perhaps industrial environment. The lighting is dramatic, with the yellow glow providing the primary source of illumination against the dark background.

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THE NAMELESS TRIBE

Eshaton. Death a billionfold. Darkness. Time grinds to a standstill. Out of nowhere, survivors cross the barren Earth, wrestling for food, water, and a glimpse of hope. They find nothing. The angry hand rises, clutching a charred rock. The stone crashes down, splitting the skull of the weak who stand in the way of the strong. Such is life. Such is the Era of the Beast.

One tribe ventures out along the menacing curve of the Reaper's Blow, in search of a place to settle, in search of a home. The parched soil is blasted by fire and heat, the landscape depopulated, and life in the ruins is nothing more than a hellish symphony of chaos. But they keep on walking, aimlessly, always walking, for staying in one place is no good. The older ones clutch the younger, senses sharpened, always on the lookout for danger, eyes hollow, bodies emaciated. What year is it? Nobody knows. Nobody cares. Seasons have disappeared into a hopeless smear, survival is the only thing that occupies the mind. There aren't many of them left, and their language has devolved into primitive grunts. All they can do is stare and nod, or burst into rage when rations are scarce or disagreement is at hand. They are nameless. What good is a name when everyone they meet is an enemy to either be killed or run away from? They have no origin. Who needs to be remembered in a world where the dead pile up into mountains by the roadside?

A blue lighting bolt cuts through the charcoal curtain that blankets the sky. Over there, in the distance, a skyline appears, solid, dark, foreboding, tempting. The Nameless Tribe packs their belongings and wades through the plains of ashen soot, closer and closer. The leaders sense the allure of the concrete structure ahead, the followers can only think of the safety of their kind. Soon they will enter. Soon they will change the world.

The Nameless Tribe reaches the outskirts of this monolithic diorama, stepping into the tombstone of their destiny. One of the warriors raises his torch, follows the geometric markings along the granite walls with his fingers, all the way to a staircase that drops off into stygian blackness. Warmth billows from the hole, like the breath of the mother whose name he never knew, stinging him like the beard of his father who gave his life so that his son could live on. The warrior takes the first step. One after the other, the stairs light up as his mind fills with unknown courage. He knows he is meant to be here, and it is the only thing he knows. As he calls for the others to follow along, they signal back at him that they have found entryways of their own, further out. Another flash cracks through the clouds, and they all agree. They will descend. And once they emerge, they will have a name. They will be Exalters.

THE SPARK

Exalt is the concrete manifestation of one of two competing philosophies born of the same mind. Getrell saw in one the continuity of cultural evolution, cleansed from its ancient and supposedly harmful patina: the survivors of the Eshaton should take fate into their own hands and find their own way through the endless darkness ahead, with only tiny support provided so that they would be able to defy the alternative, which would be far more dominant during the first few centuries of conflict and chaos. This other idea passes the scepter to the old elites. The best of the best, the epitome of Bygone humanity, would be embedded in the cradling frost of the Dispensers to withstand the incoming centuries of turmoil and prove their worth in the wake of the end times.

Exalt was not created as a mere habitat, but for a purpose. It wasn't driven by childhood ideals, nor the beat of loud trade humming through the plazas, not by stories of failure and great luck. Instead, it was kept on track along a predetermined path and steered by something unnatural and deeply inhuman at its core. The city is a milestone on the road to the former ideology, the fundamental philosophy of Free Spirit – a spell the Nameless Tribe would fall under and rise to sweep the world with.

ACCELERATOR

Nobody alive today knows who first awarded the Exalters with their name, but it's fitting – there is no question that the Clan was so damn quick at everything. At a time when the surviving generations of the Eshaton's aftermath were still constructing rat traps out of wire and broken chair legs, or mauling each other with crude iron clubs, the children of the Exalters were assembling in newly erected multi-story buildings made of sharply cut granite, discussing ethics and arithmetics in teacher's collectives. The keys to their progress were small, highly specialized groups, each of which consisted of a wide variety of opposing personalities that nevertheless seemed to be in perfect alignment with one another. Scholars among the Exalters were more astute than their most clever Streamer counterparts, because their ideas were prone to merge, clearing one mental barrier after another instead of staying locked in pre-established principles. In a miniscule span of just a few years a simplified, basic form of mathematics emerged that had been overlooked in the previous millennia.

Meanwhile, Exalt's warrior collectives moved like a singular body, swaying back and forth, reminiscent of a swarm of starlings in the sky, always aware of one's position in space, sensing who had their gun at the ready, and who was backing off to reload. The high priests, on the other hand, celebrated the power of the spirit and toppled the concept of tradition. More psychologists than ideologues, they turned the search for meaning inward, guiding their followers on a journey towards personal transcendence. Lastly, the traders recognized the wealth that came from a flow of goods and saw the potential that even this ravaged country brought with it. Exalt prospered while packs of roving Gendos roamed the perimeters of what would later become Justitian's territory. It seemed like a miracle.

It wasn't.

It was Exalt itself, the monolithic structure beneath the new city, beneath the marketplaces, schools, stables, and the towering residential buildings, that influenced these advancements. When the first members of the Nameless Tribe descended and explored the sprawling network of halls and corridors under their feet, they hit another level deep below. A frozen sea of black columns erected on a hexagonal grid lay there, too precise to be of natural origin. The so-called Basalt Plain spread out before the eyes of the explorers, dead and dark. There was no treasure to be found here. In fact, nothing happened for years.

Then, one day, four warriors journeyed down to the Basalt Plain from different access points, and, for the first time, the strange black pylons came to life. Nobody yet offered their arm to any of these pylons, the first embossing wouldn't take place until months later, but the Clanners understood. It had everything to do with Constellations. Those who were marching through the corridors at the right time and in the right configurations were allowed to explore secret and previously locked compartments of this subterranean realm, as the different sections of the Basalt Plain were activated by people who entered via the correct access points.

In due time, the Clanners became bolder and dared to climb the pylons, causing the Basalt Plain to stir in its endless slumber – and the city in Exalt's underbelly earned a name that suited only too well. The Grindworks.

Those who survived and mastered the challenges of the maze emerged from the Grindworks forever changed, as a living part of a synergetic group. United.



THE INHERENT FLAW

The oldest scholars of the Exalters still remember the creed they all once adhered to. It was the object of their ultimate devotion and the root of the Free Spirit movement, which eventually blossomed into the powerful magnetism that radiated from the city state and called others into its fold. According to the ancient teachings, this knowledge was passed down from the Creator, the Benevolent Spirit who had gifted the Grindworks to his chosen Tribe.

The average human doesn't want to be free. He wants to be safe. Subordination is therefore the consequence of every hierarchical structure that can provide protection. The lamb willingly walks towards the slaughterhouse to be sheltered from the wolves. But for the lamb to fear the wolf, the wolf must first exist. If no danger looms ahead the innermost yearning for liberty breaks to the surface, so any prolonged period of peace will cause unrest and lead to the circulation of radical ideas.

This dichotomy of human nature dictates conflict on the axis of freedom and safety, with prohibition and rebellion eternally tugging and pulling for control. Unity, on the other hand, cannot emerge without the two aspects in coexistence; both are necessary, and both offer solutions from which a prosperous society may arise. They are the key ingredients of all civil interaction. Any form of unity, however fragile it may appear, is better than the degeneration into the cruelty of war, where each side simply attempts to stamp out the ideals of the other.

In the Bygone past, such a state could only be achieved via the latitude of oppression, not via the longitude of cooperation. Synergies were forced upon mankind, never to be chosen by the individuals themselves. A government will only ever coerce its citizens to do what the government considers best, thus creating subservient automatons that do their bidding instead of intrinsically motivated individuals who cooperate because it yields the best possible mutual outcome.

This is not unity achieved through free will. It's slavery. The act of coming together must happen voluntarily, not through obedience to a higher structure, but therein lies the problem. Humans by nature are unaligned. The tyranny of life predicts that all individuals are equidistant from one another by facets defined in their personality traits. This is the inherent flaw of mankind's design.

TWENTY TWO.

The Concept is the defining characteristic of each human entity. At its core it is an immutable personality archetype which exists on a spectrum of emotions encompassing everything a human being can do. Whether the deeds of an individual are considered good or evil, virtuous or sinful, is entirely relative to the perspective of the observer; the Concept itself is irrelevant in the calculation. Being born an Abomination doesn't imply that all the actions one performs will be ultimately vile, instead it simply exposes the emotional framework in which this particular creature will act, according to its own possibilities and problem solving skills.

The downside: Concepts are static and unchangeable. A human born a Mediator will eventually die a Mediator. All a lifetime of learning will do is thread patterns of behavior out along a noncognitive spindle, but it will never pivot the axle towards something truly new. The extremes may differ, but the true nature of the Concept remains constant; a fixed, deadlocked lodestar, turning everyone else into distant planetary contemporaries orbiting out of reach.

Therein lies the downfall of mankind: as unity cannot be achieved due to the mental stagnation of the individual, the uncountable souls are left to float as solitary stars through an infinite night. However, Concepts are finite. Under certain circumstances they align, drawing from the same well of fluctuating ideas and creativity, allowing two souls to come together if they belong, welding them into a unit that instinctively shares a common goal. In the ocean of possibility that is the never ending cycle of birth, life, death, this process repeats a thousandfold, day after day, without anybody even realizing its truth – leaving man to create many words to describe such an event: Passion. Zeal. Love. Luck...

Of them all, luck is the fundamental factor that brings together those who align naturally in archetype and spirit, who will cooperate willingly without needing to be cast into a predefined mold enforced by some higher authority. But luck is a fickle thing, and it can never be relied upon. The Grindworks was envisioned to eradicate it from the equation entirely, and artificially crystallize a new humanitarian imperative that synergistically belongs together, capable of fulfilling any task at hand. Not because they must, but because they may.

DEAD ON ARRIVAL

When Team Castor took a foothold in the northwest to establish the first phase of Project Tannhäuser, the Exalters were already miles ahead of everyone around. The Chroniclers of those days were occult fools, battered and hunted, holding onto a feeble root while their bodies dangled off the edge of oblivion. There was no competition – except for Team Castor.

The Sleepers of the first Cascade had all been primed with Argyre's alarm protocol during their 100 year cryostasis, implanted with the order to find, disable, and destroy the Exalt facility, for it was the obverse of the original plan. A humanity assembled under the ideology of Free Spirit opposed everything that Project Tannhäuser had been established for. Team Castor swarmed out, ready to bring ruin to their enemies. History has it they arrived too late.

By the time they found Exalt, the Nameless Tribe had already long-since settled in and started cultivating their newfound power. The Sleepers were on high alert, scouting the young city state from a safe distance, sifting the measly flow of data from the Chroniclers who had given them access to their hideouts, and searching for weak spots in the lines of this novel civilization, out in the East. Early probing attacks, taking the form of messengers and diplomatic representatives, were sent into the fray. They utterly failed to sink their fangs into the prospering society.

The Exalters seemed to be capable of deflecting the memetic influence previously used by the Sleepers to conquer swathes of territory with ease. Little did Team Castor know about the powers the Grindworks bestowed upon its people. Every time the Exalters descended into their underground obstacle course to run the maze and rearrange their Archetypes, any previously planted protocols dissipated. The gears of the Grindworks nullified the effect of Project Tannhäuser's control, rendering the Sociocybernetics' skills of infiltration and manipulation useless. All the Sleepers had left was raw firepower, but there were far too few of them to start a war. For that, they would need a stronger foundation, a civilization of their own that would be powerful enough to oppose Exalt's rapidly spreading ideas.

DIVISION

Getrell knew that his opponents would come for Exalt as soon as they caught wind of it. The taste of defeat on their rotten lips would be too bitter to stomach, the cross of guilt they were forced to bear for all of their wrong turns too heavy to ignore. They would never understand – not the ones who loved him, nor the ones who had truly defied

him. Their vision was blackened by axioms that had spun out of control and germinated a life of their own.

All plans of Exalt's construction were kept hidden from the board, but that wouldn't be enough. To ensure that Project Tannhäuser would fail, Getrell planted a mole within Team Castor's midst. Agent Daimondal, Free Spirit, was unfrozen with the rest of the 100 Cascade in Malmö and made his way across the salt flats with them, venturing into the ravaged domain of northern Borca. Instantly, he understood that the Exalters were the first stepping stone of something far larger and magnificent in scope, but that they would also need guidance on their path: their newfound greatness came at the price of innocence. They were like infants, thrust into a plan hatched a hundred years prior and allowed to take center stage in a global transformation that was supposed to keep the world occupied for the next millennium.

While his crew members excelled at expansion, subjugation, and solidifying relations with the remnants of a Bygone society in shambles, establishing tenuous connections with both the Chroniclers and Spitalians or running headlong into rampaging Anabaptist packs from the south, Daimondal set his eyes on the fabled city of Exalt itself. Month after month he travelled to the outskirts of the growing eastern realm, joining the ongoing philosophical discussions held in the open plazas, watching the inventors as they retro-engineered constructions, or following the footsteps of the warrior squadrons who left the safety of their home to protect the border of their expanse against encroaching savages.

The Exalters came to treat Daimondal as one of their own, and the Free Spirit in turn offered Getrell's wisdom to this blooming civilization. Then, one day, the high priests granted the Agent the right to descend into the Grindworks, to act as the bridge between past and present, to be a tutor and guide on behalf of the Creator, and to teach the Clan how to explore the seemingly endless labyrinth beneath their feet.

Daimondal knew of the defense systems in place, yet he still dared to take the leap. He was in possession of an incredibly valuable device that was critical for the journey: an Aegis helmet, capable of disabling the nanite currents circulating in his bloodstream for an extended period of time. These devices were sanctioned by Project Tannhäuser, and only Sleepers of the 700 Cascade and above were intended to have access to them, however two copies had been discreetly stored in the Dispenser of the 100s prior to

the Eshaton. One was in the hands of Team Castor, now clutched to Daimondal's shoulders, while the other was seized by the leader of Team Pollux as they set out on their mission to claim Bunker 16.

PIED PIPER

Daimondal's artifact allowed him to pass Getrell's red line and he scurried in and out of the Grindworks, leading those early explorers through the darkness before bringing them back out into the light. Every descent yielded new discoveries, unearthed new secrets, and propelled the Exalters into new developments. The facility was too vast to be mapped by one individual alone, though, and the Aegis was dangerous to use for more than a few hours at a time. Daimondal needed help. His eyes fell back on the campsites of Team Castor in the north; Mobilis, Liqua, all teeming with life, infested with Clans brought to heel by his fellow Agents who had executed their part of the plan with cruel determination.

The Malmö Dispenser had been made for the Sleepers, but they were not alone. The Cascade was accompanied by a veritable battalion of Palers who had supervised them throughout their torpid, hundred-year-long slumber; disfigured grunts spawned by Project Tannhäuser, obedient and submissive, like bloodhounds ready to be unleashed at the whim of their newly awakened masters. But this army of Guardians was only a mere three generations old, their conditioning still nascent compared to other bunkers which would remain sealed for centuries to come. These twisted souls could still be saved and brought back onto the path of self-determination. They were children, and Daimondal was their pied piper. Little by little the Free Spirit began to seed discord among the Palers, luring them toward Exalt, dropping a prophecy here, an enticing possibility there, tempting them with the promise of salvation.

The Exalters back home were prepared for the wave of wretched and scarred refugees defecting from Project Tannhäuser and led the new arrivals through the Grindworks one by one. In the process, the memetic poison they'd been infested with was sucked from the recesses of their mind and they emerged from the depths reborn and free, capable of witnessing the world before them with a new set of eyes. They were the first generation of Daimondal's Halos, and their liberation would inspire others to join the fray. Suddenly, Exalt was besieged by allies who were ready to defend its people with all their might. They were welcomed with open arms.

EMPIRE WITHOUT AN EMPEROR

Who rules over Exalt? The Sleepers to the northwest have no answer. They're unable to identify any governors or self-proclaimed kings, no dukes, landlords, war chiefs, or generals. Whatever the Exalters decide to do is done as a single unit, without petty qualms or layers of intrigue. There are no commands passed from above, no concrete verdicts spoken, and no codified rules of conduct to abide by. Diplomacy, as anyone on Team Castor knows it to be applied, simply doesn't work the way it should.

Everyone who deals with the city state faces a wall of conviction, impenetrable by means of manipulation or subterfuge. There are no loose strands at the corners of the empire which could be set on fire to cause upheaval from within. Any attempt at gaslighting leads to a dead end. From the outside, the Exalters seem like a hivemind, indomitable and invincible. Who can stand against such a bulwark of collective vigor?

The Anabaptists. The followers of Rebus position themselves as a hostile front, unwilling to trade their religion for a suspicious ideology that defies even the existence of the Pneuma and embraces the folly of materialism as a means to the end. Exalters are just another incarnation of the Demiurge, one that must be cast down with sharp iron. With every wave of Exaltian nonsense spreading west, the Anabaptists grow more fundamentalist in response. With their bidenhandlers drawn, the Neognostic movement carves a border along the dead riverbed of the Rain, sending an unmistakable warning to the Exalters to stay away from Cathedral City's zone of influence. Meanwhile, Mobilis and Liqua seal off the entire Northwest, geographically locking the empire in a chokehold. The strategy is straightforward: Starve. Them. Out.

But the Exalters don't need room for expansion; the city state's boisterous tenets cannot be contained. They unlatch their Ambassadors to soar across Europe, seeding Exalt's ideology in faraway lands. But the world fights back. The ideas offered by the Exalters are too volatile, too extreme, and radical change is always a challenge to established powers. Not all of the Ambassadors return from their missions as itinerant preachers in one piece. That's not enough to stop the spread. New enclaves rise in the wastelands, offshoots of the Exaltian paradigm, flying the banners of the humanitarian imperative. Right before the noses of Project Tannhäuser's Agents, Ferropol, one of their own fortified outposts, suddenly flips and declares itself a vassal of Exalt. It's a cultural revolution.

THE THREE PERIODS

If history is to be trusted – bearing in mind the potential motivations of the historians who scribbled down their muddled thoughts, which may not have been all that benign – Exalt's reign can be roughly divided into three periods, or set pieces. Each of them is unique and iconic enough to occupy a lifetime if studied alone, but as a whole they describe a sweeping ascension that leads towards a roaring climax, before ending in an explosive disintegration. Nothing today compares to the influence the city state once rocked the world with, and no other school of thought was ever forgotten and buried faster. The cultural theories that Exalt had kicked loose had to be torched, smashed, abolished, weeded out, and never be allowed to rise again.

During the first decades of their campaign of expanding the Protectorate, the Judges applied countless tools of oppression to trample any and every memory left of the Exalters. Outposts were demolished, refugees reeducated in prison camps, supposed Exaltian priests and ideologues publicly humiliated, and anyone who even dared to suggest that the city state was anything other than a malignant power clawing at the very manifestation of society as a whole was executed on the spot. Exalters were branded as foul, the embodiment of an utterly evil and rotten civilization, undeserving of anything but rejection and scorn.

It is no wonder, then, that there are no monuments left to describe their former glory, no public celebrations of their holy days, no streets named after legendary heroes that could serve as a reminder of their past, not even any bedtime stories for young children to aspire to. Instead, the Exaltian paradigm was purged from the Black Lung, the extents of their realm erased from every map, their scriptures tossed onto funeral pyres, and their surviving members worked to death as slave laborers, erecting the majesty of Uptown. One last insult before oblivion.

The Judges were thorough in their purification of “undesired viewpoints,” and they had the support of the Spitalians and the Chroniclers to justify their cause. Once the eradication was complete, nothing remained of the Exalters save for a tiny shelter in Liqua, which would become the haven of their lineage over the next century in exile.

I. RISE

Exalt offered a safe space for any idea, however outlandish or extreme it might appear at a glance. The city state sheltered free thought and gave rise to an experimental philosophy that sailed on the outer fringes of what was previously imaginable. The society that was spawned in symbiosis with the Grindworks begat fruits of liberalism and self-determination unlike anything people had ever seen, backed by a flat hierarchy without leadership, a cornucopia in which every member of society was provided for and the concepts of wealth and poverty did not exist.

The beating heart of Exalt was the Grindworks, and it forged a model republic without compare, one that offered shelter to any and all who fled into its warm embrace. During its first decades the booming empire swallowed its surrounding neighbors with ease, yet it never even attempted to expand its borders through war and conquest. Instead, the adjacent regions pledged allegiance voluntarily once they became infected with the concept of Free Spirit. The population grew in size, now fed by a ceaseless flow of tributaries, all eager to bask in Exalt's golden light. The first period is marked by the city state's overwhelming success casting a blanket of peace and prosperity across Borca's cultural borders and beyond, forecasting a new dawn after the decades of darkness and carnage that was the Era of the Beast.

II. PEAK

Not even ten years into the 24th century, the mood across Borca suddenly shifts, and no one can pinpoint why. An uneasy period follows, characterized by spiraling escalations. It's unclear who the aggressors are in the moment, but the clashes between the subservient peoples of Project Tannhäuser and the polity groomed by Free Spirit are reaching new heights of ferocity.

Even while Exalt is brimming with power and proclaiming the birth of new inventions every other week, its foreign policy rapidly tilts from benevolence and openness to outright animosity. The city state's responses towards enclaves and settlements that refuse to adopt the humanitarian imperative become increasingly irritated and hostile. The Ambassadors deployed to these destinations no longer bring the Exaltian ideology, but instead demands for tribute and repatriation.

Overnight, peace as it was known goes from a certainty to resembling a brittle cladding, flaking off in rusty patches. The situation devolves into utter chaos when Anabaptist scouts report two Exaltian legions crossing the Rain, one led by Enceph and veering off toward the Janus Crater, the other helmed by Trice and marching in the direction of Noret, the forbidden domain of Gusev. What follows is shrouded in mystery, but records kept in the Emanatorium

of Cathedral City claim that Exalt openly called for a hunt of the Marauders – enigmatic creatures from the depths of time who nested along the fringes of Europe and stood accused of being the architects of Project Tannhäuser. While the northern legions under Enceph appear to be leading a successful assault against a monstrosity called the Vulture, the southern leagues run into surprise opposition deep within Noret's territory and are annihilated by a coalition of Enemy and Machine Men. But the defenders don't score a clean win: allegedly, Trice escapes the turmoil with blood-soaked trophies of her own.

III. FALL

Project Tannhäuser loses the rat race towards becoming the dominant ideology. Sleepers are uncovered hiding amidst the Cults and, with their secret identities blown, the Agents are chased down and exterminated. Others are hunted down by Halos and dragged to Exalt to be sentenced for their alleged crimes in mocking sham tribunals. A few manage to hold out, obfuscating themselves behind veils of obscurity, but they are certain that their time is running out.

Meanwhile, in the east, the Exalters have shaken any remaining shroud of modesty. Instead, the temptation to explore the deepest, darkest corners of the human soul in the hopes of unearthing lateral supremacy for the entire Clan dominates every aspect of daily life. The urge to break the seal of transhumanism is overwhelming, and Exalters happily volunteer for absurd experiments which are nothing but deformed and bastardized versions of the original humanitarian imperative.

The concept of the original sin is turned on its head, and the abolishment of guilt, responsibility, burden, and restraint become the centerpieces of every mental exercise – a far cry from the philanthropic thoughts of yore. Only hearsay has survived the catatonic state of these tumultuous days in which incest ran rampant across the bloodlines of the Exalters, telling of hereditary diseases eating away at the youngest generations, all while the most forlorn and vile acts of carnality were put on public display and lauded by an unhinged society that had lost its path on the crossroads of limitless opportunity. Ultimate freedom crested in total nihilism.

The addiction to the Grindworks was so profound that it occupied every hour of the Exaltian day; men and women cast their obligations aside only to descend into the maze to revel in yesterday's fleeting obsession or deconstruct tomorrow's pending trauma. It was the terminal powder keg. All that was needed was the spark that would turn it all to hellfire.

Cultrin.





THE CITY WARS

Daimondal is the booster, setting cascading possibilities in motion on every one of his forays through the Grindworks, and his liaison with Exalters rewards the Clan with the most impressive boons. With his Halos in tow he crawls through the massive halls of the Radiance, investigates the Pathways, cracks hidden portals, and crosses deep into the Basalt Plain. Nobody is as familiar with the sprawling underground city as the Free Spirit, who is convinced that Getrell specifically chose him for this mission. He's a puzzle solver and mapmaker, explorer and spiritual guide in one. Daimondal is obsessed with understanding the functionality of the Grindworks down to the last detail, charting out every nook and cranny, and calibrating the opening intervals of unknown sectors to correlate with the passing of seasons.

He's onto something. Conclusion: the vast subterranean network is a physical manifestation of the Creator's mind, the winding tunnels and serpentine intersections resembling the tangled neural highways of Getrell's own brain. The more Daimondal understands, the closer he feels to grasping the purpose of it all. Free Spirit. Agathopoiia. The Final Judgement.

But the Sleeper Prophet is just a mere cog in the greater

machine, a catalyst destined to accelerate the reaction but never truly integrate with it. The Grindworks is his tomb. It is Pandora's Box, from which Daimondal takes artifacts of immense power and places them in the hands of the people above ground, just as he was instructed to. Biometrically encoded relics now flood the study halls of the Exalters, alongside Bygone devices that do not always reveal their purpose at glance but require logical analysis to even activate, trigger mechanisms disguised behind riddles which must first be solved to unravel the deeper meaning hidden within. Among the treasures are polymorphic Corresponders bearing the shapes of animal medallions, the Triszyklion – allegedly the key to a hall the size of the universe – Jehammed's Will, and countless other bizarre contraptions that interact with the Sun Discs the Halos are equipped with, some emanating with the white noise of the afterlife, others buzzing feverishly as if they have been assigned an altogether different fate.

Decades pass, and the labyrinth is now imprinted within Daimondal's head, his memory a perfect carbon copy of the Benevolent Spirit below, yet the Sleeper Prophet keeps on digging, still shielded by his Aegis helmet, following an imaginary red thread that flickers be-



fore his inner eye. The Grindworks is shifting, changing, rearranging its dimensions, revealing sections that have never been crossed before. Daimondal realizes that his journey is infinite; he is a nanite-driven Ulysses destined to drift on the torrents of an amorphous black sea in eternal search for his beloved Ithaca – until the truth suddenly dawns on him. He's trapped within a monolithic Dispenser holding other Free Spirits that must be found and awakened in order for the plan to commence.

THREE FOR ONE

One hundred years have passed since Daimondal devoted his heart and soul to the maze, but it is only now that he encounters another just like himself. Enceph is the first to be redeemed from her eternal sleep and brought to the surface. Her arrival heralds the epiphany the Exalters have been waiting for and she is cheered on by the masses who crown her the cherub of the realm, the divine protector of knowledge.

Trice comes second. Daimondal loses two of his most faithful Halos during the awakening, devoured by the merciless pylons of the Basalt Plain. An agonizing loss, but the Sleeper Prophet expected no less. He is certain that the Grindworks is a series of balances and scales: for every re-

ward there must be a price. Nothing is accidental in this place, everything is predetermined, him, here, now, all of it a story that has already been written and one that must be adhered to like the blueprint of an intricate engine in order for it to function according to its design.

Trice and Enceph are the hierophants of a new era of enlightenment. They offer direction to the civilization hatched by the power of the Grindworks, positioning themselves as harbingers of vengeance and justice capable of pinpointing the ire of the Exalters towards the enemies surrounding them. The world is littered with opponents, and these malefactors must be punished and exterminated so that the humanitarian imperative can succeed. Three Corresponders are activated, each tuned to match the nanite stream of a target Marauder, and Trice and Enceph assemble the warrior squadrons of Exalt into two legions. The crusade of retribution begins.

Daimondal doesn't join them. His duty has not yet been finished, his quest not completed. He can feel his purpose drawing him deeper, a pulsing beacon pulling him ever closer to his final destination. He is lured towards the Sluice, hidden in the most remote sections of the Basalt Plain. The portal opens, and behind it, the Golden City awaits. Daimondal crosses the pristine shrine that has lain



untouched for centuries, searching for a sign of life in this algid crevice at the very core of the Grindworks. He finds it.

There lies Cultrin in a frigid chamber, covered in ancient cooling gels and frozen in time, dreaming of his imminent awakening. Daimondal charges up the Conflagration device and punctures the heart of the idle Free Spirit, jolting him back to life. Cultrin and Daimondal lock eyes. For a heartbeat they share the same plane of existence, for that is their destiny. Chicken, meet egg.

Cultrin rises from his grave and takes three stumbling steps – a newborn foal, his frail body still covered in the amniotic fluid of the womb that gave birth to him, but with a mind steeled by four hundred years of memetic drumfire. Daimondal bears witness to it all through eyes glazed over by nanite milk, his hands trembling from aspiration and every fiber of his being oscillating from the grandeur of the moment. But the Golden City demands its Price. The Sluice slams shut, swallowing Daimondal and releasing Cultrin into the world. Alone.

THE FINAL ACT

Cutrin is the embodiment of revenge, the final act, deliverance personified. He has come to engage the unrestrained capacity of the Exalters and charge alongside them to-

wards the summit. He is the spearhead and the Clan is the shaft; together they are a weapon flung into motion, unleashing its full potential without need for a hand to wield it – a leader for a leaderless tribe, a warlord, destined to vindicate humanity from its collective sin.

Cultrin's speeches crack the atmosphere of the Exaltian paradigm, grant focus to the empire, and lock their crosshairs on the conclusive target. There's a world out there, ready for the taking. The humanitarian imperative can only be truly victorious if enacted in totality – not as a gentle breeze or a whispered offer, but as an unavoidable ultimatum. Acquiescence or death. Exalt rumbles, spurred into action as it sheds the haze of a century of relativism. Cultrin is the lightning bolt of energy that ignites the golden civilization with ambition and determination. To become exalted, Mankind must be embossed. Every last one of them.

WRITTEN IN BLOOD

The City Wars engulf the Black Lung. Exalt unloads a relentless tempest of malevolence in an attempt to crush any opposition, its armies laying waste to the cities and settlements unfortunate enough to be in their path. The soldiers are empowered by the artifacts of the Grindworks



and equipped with the results of three centuries of dedicated engineering, their weapons manufactured with precision, their warrior squadrons acting in unison – an overwhelming force in both dedication and technology.

The attackers leave a swath of destruction, eradicating outpost after outpost, decimating the enemy lines and closing in on Mobilis and Liqua, the former strongholds of the remaining Agents of Project Tannhäuser. The Anabaptists do not tolerate Exalt's insolence and take up arms. From all over Franka and Purgare, Orgiastic packs flood back to the holy city to serve as a wall of flesh holding back the impending doom. Bidenhander and Spitfire clash with Free Spirit gear and high-velocity ammo on the battlefield of the century. The butchery that follows stains the soil and dyes it red for years to come.

But it doesn't end there. Noret answers and enters the conflict, activating its mechanized defenses. AMSUMO shock troops scramble to face the invaders, receiving aerial surveillance from an armada of Reset drones that darken the sky, all while the Convoy dispatches Enemoi Silencers who pick off Exaltian regiments from afar. Nevertheless, Exalt's fury is unstoppable. Mobilis is devastated, and the Sleepers caught and apprehended by Halo death squads are executed. Liqua has long since expelled the Agents of the Recombination Group that once gave birth to this settlement – but Cultrin's brigades don't know that.

The besieged city must now send its last reserves into the fray in hopes of weathering the storm behind its cyclopean walls. The attackers show no remorse, mowing down the youthful defenders like chaff before the Grim Reaper's scythe, only to bring their massive siege weapons into position. The stronghold of the Water Lords is on the brink of being wiped off the map...

REDEMPTION

The barrage of events that follows is hard to unpack. Cultrin disappears, and Exalt's armies are left stranded and without a rudder to steer the collective. But they won't give in. Even with their leader gone, they must bring the conquest to an end. That's what they were chosen for, but even more critically: it's their fundamental obligation as the liberators of mankind and the true conveyors of Free Spirit.

In this hour of madness, an unforeseen coalition between the battered remains of the Cults, Marauders, and the ravaged leftovers of the populace of the Black Lung turns the tide for the defenders. The Preservists set out and undertake a secret operation deep behind enemy lines to strike at the heart of Exalt's territory. They carry canisters brimming with artificial bacteria strains cultivated in Noret, weapons of mass destruction created by Gusev and designed to target the bloodlines of the Exalters,



already laden with countless hereditary diseases. The elite soldiers of the Spital bury their payloads and release them into the water supplies of the golden empire, with devastating results. Within days, a gruesome plague spreads across the remaining inhabitants of the city, harrowed by black blisters, fetid breakouts, and Exalters vomiting their innards onto the streets.

The Exaltian troops out in the field catch wind of what's happening back home. They've been backstabbed, and must retreat to resupply themselves or they'll be whittled down through simple attrition. But with Daimondal lost to the Grindworks and Cultrin vanished there is no one to guide them to the powerful arsenals stored within the Grindworks. Enceph failed once before in the attempt. Trice doesn't dare cross the red line and fall from grace in the eyes of the Creator. The remaining generals and warlords must act on their own volition, so they decide to do the unthinkable. They'll blow open the Pathways and create supply tunnels to the Basalt Plain. No more riddles. No more tests. They'll get to the bottom of everything, and take whatever they need to finish their holy mission.

Explosions shake the surface of Exalt. The population is horrified; the violent destruction of the portals is the highest act of sacrilege. Blasphemy amidst the collective. This mustn't be. The fallout of the event is remembered only as a bloody cyclone sweeping across the leftovers of a

collapsing empire, Exalter slaughtering Exalter in a futile attempt to halt the inevitable: Doom.

ESCAPE

Tens of thousands dead, entire countrysides depopulated. Exalt, the once golden city, now a rotten cadaver drowning in dust storms. The survivors of the cataclysm flee in droves from the ruins, clutching onto their last belongings. But where to go? The world hates them, and will not forgive. The refugee caravans are picked apart by marauding bands in the Black Lung and clubbed to death, while others get snatched up by Judges and are brought to budding Justitian in chains. Who would accept these uprooted people, who are responsible for so much sorrow, so much death, and give them a place to rest, offer up a seat at the hearth to allow for a new beginning?

Only the Liquans open their arms. In a way, the deserted and wandering Exalters share a fate similar to their own. A long time ago, the Liquans freed themselves of the corrosive influence of Project Tannhäuser, and had to forge their future anew in the absence of their progenitors. They more than anyone recognise that the Exalters were dragged into a war by machinations beyond anyone's understanding. Maybe a cooperation between the two fatherless peoples will be the sunlight of an early spring. After all, both were once part of a greater plan...

STILLBORN

The rise of Exalt was meteoric. From the mills of the Grindworks, a civilization without dead ends emerged – one that avoided failures and was inherently ripe with possibility. The years 2146 to 2482, more than three prosperous centuries, resembled nothing less than a golden age for the city and its people that could have been the blueprint for the entire Black Lung and, ultimately, Europe as a whole.

It's no longer even possible to comprehend how enormous Exalt's power was at its peak; the records of the fabled Archivists of Praha blow away as ashes in the wind in the wake of Chernobog's scorched earth campaign. What remains as public knowledge today is mere hearsay, diluted by a century of upheaval, ransacking, pillaging, murder, reconstruction, and plain old reeducation. Some boastful Alpha Wolf will claim that there are at least three places left on Earth that should be able to shed truth on the matter, pointing first toward the Cluster, then in the direction of the Spital, and finally drawing a mountain rune into the dust at his feet to give the bystanders a clue about the Alpine Fortress. But who would dare to enter these fortified bastions and steal the historical accounts of some forgotten empire from underneath the greedy hounds at the top of their Cults? Yeah, right. No one.

Cathedral City kept its own scriptures, but sealed them off as they do with all profane written documents. The Anabaptists hate the circulation of long forgotten ideas. But some knowledge remains, sourced from the Cult's own expansions westwards. Deep in the now overgrown Frankan hinterlands, buried under beds of moss and carpets of mangrove forestation, lie ancient ruin fields and monolithic structures, said to have resembled Exaltian architecture in their heyday. Today, they just look like a set of crooked and rotten teeth rising from the swampy muck. Not to mention the man-sized wasp nests also stuck to them, and the legions of termites which use the cracked walls as support structures for their clay chimneys. Decades of pheromone secretion have left dark grooves along the gray concrete. Exploring these wreckaged vistas is borderline suicidal, and no Scrapper worth his salt can say it would be worth taking the risk.

There are also bizarre reports hailing from faraway Hybrispania. Light-skinned Clanners who can barely speak the language of the Guerreros, and whatever they do sputter out is coated with a heavy Borcan accent, are

said to live in the woods. Allegedly, these tribes keep to themselves, but rumor has it that they are in fact descendants of abandoned Exaltian outposts, left stranded as the City Wars devoured the golden empire. Dirt Diggers with a lot of mileage on their backs regurgitate the same claims every winter at their annual stopover in Tech-Central: a blotted out network of roads once connected all these places, with Exalt at its center. Sections are still in use, many of them taken over by the Judges, while others have disappeared under heaps of settling dust or were gobbled up by the Primer's all encompassing flora. Tellin' ya, nothing fades faster than memories.

DISCONTINUED

Things are not what they used to be. Three generations have come and gone since the City Wars, and today most of the Clan is forced to eke out a life in exile as Imperfects, devoid of the glory of embossing, barely able to conjure up the supremacy of their bloodline through fading stories passed down from elder to youth. Only a select few Exalters have even seen the ruins of their former empire, let alone set foot in the Pathways of the Grindworks. This chosen handful then return to their tribe and confirm that the legend still holds true, that there is hope buried beneath the earth, waiting to be excavated when the time is right. Keeping the spark alive, if only just.

Past expeditions and plans of reconquest were ill prepared for the dangers lying in wait and failed to establish themselves in Exalt's ruins – the pioneers were overrun by savages, sold out by Scrappers, or simply got lost in the entrails of the Grindworks. At least three attempts were made in the last fifty years, but all met a somber end. It just wasn't the right moment. However, with the political landscape changing so drastically across the whole Protectorate in just the last four years, the Exalters see opportunity in the turmoil of the ongoing Clan Wars.

The current generation is feverish. Their culture has been abolished and ground into the dust, and they bear the burden of being forced to languish in the shadows as fleeting chronological annotations, all while other powers rise up in the slipstream of their own demise. The situation is intolerable and unnatural, considering the state of the world and the unfamiliar habitat they are all trapped in. Exalters have had to adopt customs they despise just to

PEDIGREE

The only thing still holding the Exaltian society together is their shared history and collective family tree, which traces its roots back to the synchronized groups once forged in the Grindworks. Today, even after more than a hundred years of suffering in exile, every Exalter can name his ancestors and describe how they excelled at their du-

ties, and all of them carry this knowledge around wherever they go.

Artisans of the Clan create talismans showcasing branching family trees covered with names, etched into anodized black metal, the basic shapes always resembling a hexagon. These tags are the last remaining ties to the Exaltian lineage, but they

also serve a greater purpose. The Exalters have been dispersed and displaced across the entire known world, some without any means to track down where they belong. With their identities concealed in the Protectorate, the metal plates allow them to identify one another and bring lost brothers and sisters back into the fold.

survive the massacre of their kind, begrudgingly following rigid hierarchies reminiscent of those adopted by their former enemies, keeping their mouths shut before authorities they never voted into power, and bowing their heads with indignity to appease a Supreme Judge who could wipe the remains of the Clan from the face of the Earth in the blink of an eye before his Sunday breakfast. The odds stacked against the Exalters today appear insurmountable, but the one thing that has never been revised, the one ideal that has never wavered, is their willingness to adopt their role as the chosen servants of change and emissaries of the humanitarian imperative, however mangled it has turned out to be.

EXILE

Fortune's gentle smile has twisted into a mocking grimace, and never-ending luck has been turned on its head. The enemies have triumphed, and even the memory of the gruesome feud against the omnipotent city state that gripped the Black Lung just a century ago has faded into obscurity. Today, it is only remembered by whatever scholars have yet to be brought to heel, either by the Judges in their desperate attempt at rewriting their own history, or from being assimilated as potential recruits for the Cluster. Exalt, once the homeland of a great people, lies trampled and plundered; infested by the seemingly endless hordes of Cockroaches and Phosphorites who've come to pillage the palaces of yore and decorate their verminous brood chambers in the finest fabrics, all while they rut on bedsheets made of ancient philosophical writings that were once composed to revolutionize society as a whole.

In a not so distant past, the Exalters were recognized as the apex of creation. Clans would retreat in fear or bow their heads to pay fealty and tribute to them. Today, the Exalters resemble demolished parodies of their own ancestors, just like the ancient statues in their old domain that now lie ruined and broken. They're food for the Cockroaches if

they cross their ancestral turf, and domesticated sheep in the eyes of the Judiciary, who force them to acknowledge the Codex without opposition.

And yet, the collective flashback of what they once were still echoes through their awakened minds, a spark of enlightenment stinging the face of the ignorance smothering them in this day and age. That's the problem.

THE OLD WAYS

The synergistic and unifying power of the Grindworks is still present, pulsating in the background of life like a distinct tune carried over from the haze of a long-lost childhood into the crystal-clear present day. It's nothing but a solitary stain on the map, besieged by cannibals and unspeakable horrors, and yes, it's busted and broken, the gears are full of sand – mountains of sand, to be precise – covered in blackened grime, and clogged up by infinite dust.

The backup reactors failed ages ago or were excavated, first by the Enemoid who descended upon Exalt's cadaver before anyone else could react, then much later by hawkish Scrappers who dragged their salvage towards Justitian. The detonations that shook the portals during the final hours of the City Wars have damaged the sentient spark hidden deep within the Grindworks almost beyond repair, knocked the built-in laser optics out of alignment, and shattered the centuries-old mechanisms used to manipulate sections of the subterranean compound. But the structure was designed to last for millenia. It can heal. It will heal.

However, to allow for this to happen, the Exalters must first regain their strength, and that is only possible via the embossing. To do so, they must cross the Black Lung, circumvent the enemy's signal lines, pierce deep into hostile and savage territory, enter the Grindworks, slaughter anyone who gets in their way, restore the failing energy supply, and, after all that, actually survive the challenges awaiting them on the Basalt Plain. Starting point: Liqua.



LIQUA

Five districts divide Ligua, but only one is held firmly by the Exalters. Neo-Exalt is helmed by the Water Lord Ziphod, a high priest of a declining culture that apparently has little to offer but exuberant worship of the razed temples of their own decaying past. The antics of Ziphod's legions are carefully orchestrated, however, and the drama they stage heralds the ancient Clan's swan song towards insignificance. From the soaring walls of his villa he has a splendid view of the looming water towers of the Basilisk and the mighty Aqueduct, both signposts of Ligua's formidable strength – strength that doesn't lie in the hands of the Exalters, where it belongs, but in those of their hereditary enemies. The fortifications around Neo-Exalt, which meander south and open toward Concentris, are all supposedly understaffed. The guards wear uniforms that are crude pastiches of those worn by the former Vigils of the Grindworks during the climax of Exalt's power. Their weapons, on the other hand, are simply ridiculous: primitive spears laden with lackluster decorations and slings, the latter carried around the neck like cords to represent some ambiguous military rank. In an actual fight, these buffoons would be more likely to choke themselves to death rather than defeat their opponent. Ziphod's pale lips twist into a narrow grin as he observes this display of pure hubris. This is exactly the picture of Exalt he wants to paint for the other Water Lords.

The view from the outside is enough to deceive most onlookers, but then there are Gaudica's spies. The quarter to the south of Ligua is on the opposite side of the city from Neo-Exalt, separated by Concentris and therefore kept out of sight. Its Water Lord, the popular Furor Cervex, likes to act as an urbane and tolerant world citizen, all the while selling his virtues off to the Apocalyptic Flocks who actually run his neighborhood. He's a great admirer of the Elysian gardens, not because they represent the righteous and just ideal of victory over the Demiurge, but because of the first-class wine made from their fruits, which is produced in small quantities and is almost entirely reserved for his own consumption. Whenever those pestering thoughts of the responsibility that comes with his prominent position get too loud to simply ignore, another bottle helps drown them out.

Nevertheless, Cervex's supposedly moderate views only last for as long as he feels in control of the situation. He has to know about everything happening in Ligua, and the brisk flow of information coming in via his spies, even the nonsensical little details, precisely ensures that his tranquility in paradise isn't put to the test. The intelligence that he gets from bribed Exalters only confirms what his

own informants in the district report: Neo-Exalt is a community trapped in stasis, so preoccupied with today that it can't think of tomorrow. Unfortunately, none of these spies are aware that Ziphod has them on file. They're compromised agents who have been fed exactly what he wants Cervex to hear.

Much of Neo-Exalt's corpus south of the dried up river bed is a sheer facade. The real district lies north of it, across the fortified bridges which can only be accessed by one presenting a black tablet of their family record. The buildings are modeled after the architecture that was prominent in Exalt: monolithic blocks carved from concrete, surrounded by brickwork and smaller structures that nestle there as if they were looking for support from the large pillars of earth. Power cables swing from building to building, and entire stretches of the main streets are illuminated at night. The youngest of the neighborhood are instructed in backyard reading rooms and small forums about the history of Exalt, and scholars debate and laugh in the squares. A touch of the good old days wafts through the quarter as an exiled people reminisce about their lineage. One that cannot be celebrated too openly.

IN PLAIN SIGHT

One might assume that the world beyond the river bed is the end of the rabbit hole, but in truth it's just one more layer of a much larger onion. The real secrets of Neo-Exalt lie far deeper. Leaving the district via the north gate, with the walls of Ziphod's villa rising up at one's back, a deserted path crawls through the river bed and across wide stone steps up to what must once have been an island. Here, the Memetic Walls of Ligua tower over anyone approaching, huge hematite steles, ominous in their design, origin, and function. But the Exalters know what they are. Any one of them who has ever witnessed the Basalt Plain of the Grindworks will undoubtedly recognize the material. They must be part of Exalt's legacy.

In fact, the Memetic Walls themselves are just the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the arcane structure lies an extensive network of halls and corridors, connected underground to the complex that later became known as Ziphod's villa. Much of it is flooded and used as a water reservoir, a grid of sluices controls the water masses, draining areas or sealing them again. One would have to be familiar with the chthonian Cauldron Cities of Nullpellia to draw the connection to its original designer.

Secret passages lead deeper into the facility, and again anyone who has strolled through the halls of the Grindworks will recognize the similarities. Light segments that

SUBOPTIMAL

The Grindworks is far away from safe and secure Liqua, and the journey perilous. Only a few expeditions successfully make it to the golden city – and not all of those that do reach the Basalt Plain will manage to achieve their embossing. The exclave needs an alternative. The Zodiacs form the living personification of the Grindworks – or, at least, whatever they can apply to the present day. They are the ones who weigh up the souls of their brethren, read their essence, and analyze the Exalters for their inborn Archetype, from past deeds and through current actions, before assigning them to a patchwork Constellation to be sent out on missions.

Despite their skill and knowledge, their assessments are prone to error for one simple reason: the 22 Concepts often overlap, and each represents a whole spectrum of behavior. There is no predefined method for an Exalter to tell an Adventurer from an Abomination; the Grindworks used to do this for them, and with perfect accuracy. A scholastic mind must rely on other methods. Reluctantly, the Zodiacs enter into

fragile, secretive deals with the soothsayers among the Apocalyptics to compensate for their own imperfections. Only the Tarot of the Ravens, drawn for each Exalter in a dramatic and occult ritual, provides the necessary reassurance that the readings are correct, allowing each prospective operative to be assembled into groups that fulfill the required Exalter Constellations of Ambition, Loyalty, Chance, Dogma, Destiny, and Revenge.

The price the remnants of Exaltian leadership must pay in return is steep. The Apocalyptics demand no less than information about the secrets of Exalt itself, as well as a cut from the hauls brought back from the Grindworks. The Iron Shrikes and Blood Birds are already rubbing their hands from all this new profit, but the greed on display is just a smokescreen for something far more nefarious. In a distant past, the Grindworks acted as a shield against the influence of Project Tannhäuser, as the facility cleansed the mind of all implanted protocols. This became the weapon wielded by the Clan that made them indomitable, un-

like all the other tribes that fell before the Sleepers.

However, their knowledge of the Archetypes allows the Ravens of today to seed their primitive memetic commands in the ranks of the Exalters of Liqua, subtly tugging the strings among the leadership to tip the balance in their favor. Without the relentless purification of the Grindworks these commands now sink in and take root, winding through the subconscious of those affected and releasing their noxious cargo whenever it suits their puppeteers. The delicate alliance between Apocalyptics and Exalters is growing more and more dangerous for the Clan.

How bitterly ironic it would be for the former esoteric offshoots of the Free Spirit program to rise up and hold sway over Getrell's chosen. For the Exalters, the benefits still outweigh the risks, and it's not like the Exalters have any choice but to engage in this pact with the Demiurge at their door; for the first time in over a century, the old spark of greatness can be felt again. The hour to reclaim their lost glory is nigh.

are completely identical to those buried beneath Exalt are embedded into the walls, and transparent floor panels laid out across some kind of metallic gutter, just like those in the Pathways, reveal the arcane technology hidden beneath. Delicate strands of copper hang down from the ceiling like roots, more neural fibers than wires. Within the "Test Field," a cavernous room shaped like a featureless cube thirty feet long and wide, pillars reminiscent of the Basalt Plain have been set up, enveloped in bizarre nests of intertwined cable mesh and surrounded by a vast array of sensors. None of it works anymore. If there ever was a spark that animated these devices, it was extinguished long before the Eshaton.

This is the realm of the Sleeper Prophet Enceph and her Halos, and it's also the closest she'll ever get to Exalt's technology again. Her last attempt had her breaching the

Pathways beneath the city and stumbling headlong into Getrell's cruel red line. She was scarred beyond recognition as her own nanite blood burst from her pores in crystalline fractal loops, trapping her in limbo between the planes of agony and death for what felt like an eternity until her Palers finally rescued her from the judgement of the Creator. They shared their knowledge of Getrell's manufacturing facilities with her. Her body was fragmented, her mind eaten up by incessant doubts, and she had to spend decades underground until she finally realized that her penetration into the Grindworks was the equivalent of reaching for the forbidden apple from the tree of knowledge. But Enceph wasn't destined to be Eve, no, she was just a mere cherub. With that understanding, she had to define a new objective.

Ever since, Enceph and her Halos have been tutor-

ing the remaining Exalters. They select individuals that show promise and reveal to them the secrets of the Clan's manifest destiny. Based on a patchwork assembly of maps compiled from expeditions into the subterranean realm, covering the city both above ground and below, along with knowledge extracted from the oldest surviving members of the Clan, they can explain the movement patterns of the sectors within the Grindworks, their seasonal opening cycles, how to interpret the ancient scriptures, and even how the Basalt Plain prepares the spirits entering for the embossing. Thus, Enceph created the first Ariadnes, Exalters carrying the knowledge of the Grindworks' endless maze – even if they have yet to lay eyes on its true form.

Enceph only nudged the first stone, the Exalters caused the chain reaction by themselves. Today the so-called Vigils comb the villages and towns of the Black Lung for scattered descendants of the old empire. In its golden age this caste guarded the Grindworks against outside influence; now they bring lost members of the Clan back together in Ligua. The Zodiacs forge Constellations from these wayward souls, guided by the Imperatives, who work solely towards the one final act: the Clan's exodus and triumphant return to Exalt. It was only through their ceaseless advances that after a century of standstill the first Apex was able to rise from the Grindworks once again: an Exalter trained toward their Constellation and embossed by the pylons. Perfectly matched to their purpose and free from the burden of conscience, just like their ancestors.

THE BATTLEFIELD

Ligua and Exalt are at opposite ends of the map, roughly 100 miles apart as the crow flies. That's not terrible, just over a week of marching along the Protectorate's Fortified Roads, and then a little extra. If it weren't for the obstacles. Three years ago there were still two viable routes. One cut through Justitian and meandered further east towards Chalk Breach. For a long time this was considered the safest access, passing innumerable Judge outposts and watchtowers. Famulancer platoons ran their patrols all around the Spital, securing the Klawen and other parts of the border, and Arnsberg – well, nobody attacks Arnsberg unless they have a distinct death wish. But the unprecedented Cockroach assault on Chalk Breach upset the fine balance of power. Now, the East is on fire, and the winds are driving the flames of hate West.

The other route leads past Ferropol towards Siege, into the deep South. This one is still secure, at least for now. Siege itself is a bulwark, defended by everything the Protectorate has to offer. The Judges line up along its walls as clouds

of black powder smoke blow through the streets. Hellvetics gather at the gates, their immaculate white Harnesses scarred by corrosive phosphorus. The smell rising from the city is overbearing, a stench of death and disease accumulating within this massive cauldron, filled with humans desperate to hold their realm against the savage hordes pounding on their door. The latest onslaught of flesh, claws, and bones has been repelled, but the next one is already in the making, a furious tide rushing straight out of the Cockroach hatching chambers. For the Exalters, this is an alarm blaring with desperate urgency, but there's no other option. Still, they've made it this far, they need to keep going.

They must set out again. Just another 30 miles through overgrown landscapes and ruined canyons, past breeding caves that echo with the whimpers of pregnant females, guarded by adolescent monstrosities baring their sharpened teeth. Not even the most hard-boiled Cartel Thugs would dare to tread here without some major firepower as backup. But the dangers are quickly taken care of; a grenade tossed into one of the burrows, a detonation, dust billowing towards the Exalters, an eerie silence. The uncharted path through the cannibal hinterlands has just been made a little safer for the next Constellation. Now for the rest of the way, the group must squeeze through gaps between cooled lava flows, traverse primeval tunnels, wade through knee-deep muck and red silt, then finally crawl back into the fading light of the day and take cover outside. Hooded figures march past them in a rigid, unnatural lockstep, too close! They should have noticed the Exalters – they must have been intentionally ignored. Luck can't be bought, it must be awarded. Hopefully it will last until they reach Exalt.

The Exalters passing through this treacherous territory rely on a network of campsites established by Apocalyptic Woodpeckers and Bosch's best boys, both of whom are in league with Pherxies, the Liguian Ambassador residing in Justitian. Dozens of such hideouts have been sprinkled along these deserted and alien vistas in the past decade. They are hidden in dropshafts, behind fake walls in ravaged ruins, or just under some strewn out sheets of rusted metal and dead foliage.

Scrappers and Apocalypitics alike offer themselves up as scouts and pathfinders in exchange for fat piles of Drafts, but only Thakor, the Skull Eater, can be trusted to always keep his promises. He hails from the Cockroach Clan, and every fiber of his body is trimmed for predators, yet he speaks the language of the Protectorate. A former champion of the Cartel's Pit Fights, he spent his time between brawls stalking the endless tunnels of Tech-Central, picking up a thing or two, before returning back into the

wild. His speech is still halting and simplistic, and his voice sounds as if he were constantly chewing gravel, but more unsettling is his gaze. His eyes pierce anyone they land on, hunting for signs of weakness in those he interacts with. The beast remains strong within him, and if he sees a chance, he goes for a kill instead of a deal. Still, at least he's honest about what he wants, more than can be said for the Cartel or Apocalyptics.

A few winters ago he fought his way to the top of a small Cockroach offshoot and demanded the right to breed a tribe of his own; dragging a group of females along, he moved deep into the wasteland and erected his own nest in the ruins. He realized that the strangers from up north were more useful to him when they provided him with food and weapons than if he ate them. Since then, he has guided several Exalter expeditions through the uncontested realm of the Cockroaches to Exalt, and managed to get them back out again afterwards.

INTO THE RUINS

For the Cockroaches who in their most recent surge have laid claim to all of Exalt's former territory, the ruins of the fallen city state are of little value. They avoid the monolithic blocks, mumbling about the ghosts of the past who'll come to hunt them down and tear them to pieces. The only things that can lure them in are reckless adventurers who attempt to get into the cracked city themselves. These interlopers must be brought down, for the Totems demand a feast.

However, the large armies of Cockroaches have their eyes on the prize. The Protectorate hangs in front of them like roast meat on a skewer, ready to be picked clean. Any Exalters who manage to make it past enemy lines and breach deep into their former homeland only have to worry about occasional warbands, but can avoid larger altercations altogether. At any time at least five Constellations, led by multiple Apexes and equipped with Free Spirit technology, are on the move in and around the ruins. They map the area, record damage, plan the arrival of the Exodus from Liqua, and hunt down any strangers with the utmost brutality. The corpses are hacked apart, their skulls and limbs set up along patrol routes of Swarmers. Effective against the primitive savages, but not so useful against the Phosphorites. Stories tell of Bale Lords using the ruins of Exalt for their own sacred rituals, and judging from the luminescent warriors infesting the area they seem to be true, therefore the Constellations using the Grindworks as a base must constantly be on high alert. This isn't a civilization, yet. It's a smoldering battleground that will drown in blood before it can be cultivated again.

Each excursion in the danger zone lasts between two weeks and a month – longer would require the Constellations to bring more supplies than they could effectively disguise. Even when Cartel Thugs have been paid off to wait just beyond the Cockroach patrol routes in hidden dugouts, keeping dried food and tanks of water close by to allow for restock missions launched from inside the city, the time limit is still kept low for a more psychological purpose. The eternal vigilance required to avoid being spotted, along with the omnipresent knowledge of the tortures that would be enacted upon the delvers should they be found, exerts an immense mental pressure on the Exalters. Although shielded behind high-tech gear excavated from the Grindworks, the primal understanding that a fate worse than death is near strikes icicles into the heart. Best to cycle the expeditions out on a regular basis, and keep them sharp.

Communication in the ruins is an involved process, due to the secrecy required. While standard radios may be used in the more secure regions, closer to the heart of the great city, in the outskirts the harsh noise of static would bring Swarmers right to one's camp. As such, subtle visual methods must be used instead. Polished sheets of metal are deposited in precisely calculated locations, angled to allow for rapid flashes of reflected sunlight to be bounced between various camps in the ruined region, but appearing to the normal observer to be nothing more than oddly shiny scrap. On moonlit nights, when the Cockroaches return to their chambers to rest, special compounds are burned to create bright white smoke that stands out in the dim light, the patterns and gaps in the trail tracing out messages at a distance.

For the duration of their stay in the territory, each Constellation establishes a base camp in one of a number of defined safe areas. Safety here is, of course, relative, but a spot off the usual patrol paths is at least an improvement and helps reduce the risk of a Phosphorite ritual stumbling their way into the Exalters's dugouts while they're sleeping. Low-priority expeditions simply use discarded ruins as shelter, fastening camouflage fabrics over any openings to ensure the faint glow of their cookware doesn't seep out. For high-intensity or more dangerous missions, though, the Exalters break out their salvaged equipment, providing the Constellation with a cloaking tent. The multifaceted panels of the device are each small projection screens, displaying a live projection of the environment on the other side of the shelter. It can be spotted with a trained eye watching for movement that doesn't line up right, but it's more than enough to fool the patrols.





EXALTERS

“Across the mountain range that splits the Crow’s nest in two, I met a people unlike any other. They were not to be bought off by gold, nor were they interested in wealth, despite them living in a city that rivaled Tripol’s best districts. They dressed in garments of the rich, yet provided for everyone around, and I found no soul driven by greed or tempted by mortal sin. All they lacked was humor, to make them likable.”

– From the Sacred Journal of the Libyan; Document of the Great Crossing; 2162

CREDO

Once you were kings, destined to shape the course of history, guiding humanity toward the light of unity and independence, washed clean from the immortal sins of the past, a branch of civilization so bright and healthy that it bore only golden fruits. Today, barely anyone even remembers your once proud name. You hide among filthy peasants, sleep next door to conniving Liquans, trade with oppressed Stukov merchants, and are forced to admit coarse Anabaptists to your sacred sanctums. They all spit on your heritage, eye you up like cattle, completely unable to grasp the glory of your lineage. Your kind is forgotten, stamped down into the dirt, its universal achievements scratched from the surface of the Earth and cast into oblivion.

Now Judges stride along roads built by your people and Chroniclers feast on your inventions, while Scrappers split the remains of your empire and sell it off as construction material. Savages nest in your former home, multiplying like rabid animals and defecating on the broken throne of your crumbled grandeur.

The world has abandoned you. You’re the only one left who keeps the memory of what once was, and how it was supposed to be. If you could just reach out and reclaim the lost territory, guide your people back into the ruins to rise and rebuild, then there would be no strife, no Justitian, no Protectorate, no Cathedral City – only Free Spirit.

FRACTURED

Hair matted white with zinc oxide, features chalked, all in remembrance of the holy union with the Palers that once intermingled with the Exaltian bloodlines. But your Clan is fractured into a myriad of splinters, and nothing will piece the great image back together if you don’t do it yourself. A century ago you were legion, today, your people are merely a couple of thousands strong. Too few to change the burden of defeat, but enough to reignite the spirit of revolution. Wherever the gilded city once held dominion, survivors remained, carving out a niche under the radar of their old enemies. You must find and reintegrate them into the corpus of your Clan, to feed its dwindling numbers.

You know they’re holding out: some bold and proud like the exclave of Liqua, some subtle and hidden in faraway bases somewhere in Hybrispania, Franka, and the Balkhan, the fire of Exalt still smoldering all across Europe. Around crackling campfires, bathed in the flickering light of ancient electrical lamps, or under the pool of moonlight seeping into an underground cave, stories of the great golden empire are whispered between remaining family members. Tales of wondrous exploits, towering buildings, victorious armies, all serving precisely one purpose. To fuel the driving principle of the humanitarian imperative, and to never allow for its flame to be extinguished. Exalt must rise again.

SKILL BONUSES

Exalters find their strength in adaptability: Clan members may choose any five Skills to be considered preferred at character creation (MAX +1)

THE APEX

PREREQUISITE: INT+Focus or INS+Primal 10, Both of their chosen Concept’s defined Skill Bonuses to an Action Number greater than 8, Embossed

In the golden age, the Exalters had no need for the rigid, well-defined rank structures that characterized many of the Cults and Clans of the world. Instead, they achieved the ultimate goal of the Free Spirit program – a flat, shifting hierarchy where everyone naturally settled into the role that best suited them, a people united by their individuality, never submitting to another based on the intangible concept of “authority.” With the Grindworks out of reach, though, this potential was lost, and it became clear that the Exalters would need structure to survive. Even so, they didn’t lose track of their once-great nature. They remembered the Apex.

To become an Apex, the Exalter must shed the rigid mindset of hierarchy and understand the true nature of being a Free Spirited individual, a state which can only be achieved after many successful embossings in the Grindworks. His Allies, Authority, and Resources Backgrounds rise to (4) and cannot decrease below this point, and he has +2D to all interactions with his own people. Additionally, due to his new mindset brought on by dozens of Conceptual shifts or many experiences in a variety of Constellations, he can easily merge with any Alignment – even if he isn’t fully in Affinity. Whenever an Apex joins a group following any Alignment, he does not contribute or receive Aversion penalties, even if his Concept is in Aversion. However, he additionally does not contribute to Affinity bonuses.



1 - IMPERFECT

PREREQUISITE: -

EFFECT: Imperfection is a stain. Everyone is born with it. The Grindworks once alleviated this terminal flaw through the process of embossing, and guided the Exalters towards the peak of human capacity. No longer. Today, the Clan is riddled with Imperfects, in fact, the vast majority of Exalters are nothing but a shadow of their former self, having never experienced the powers bestowed by the Grindworks, nor undergone the mind-altering modifications of the Basalt Plain.

Unless an Imperfect is chosen to travel to Exalt and fulfill their destiny, they can only advance through the regular hierarchy established in the Liquan exclave, rising in the chain of command and recognized by their personal accomplishments yet always frowned upon as second rate examples of their role – a faint approximation of a true Exalter.

EQUIPMENT: A gilded token bearing Exalt's symbol, to identify their allegiance to other members of their Clan; Can only access equipment up to Tech III

2 - SOLEMN

PREREQUISITE: INT+Legends 8, INS+Empathy 7, Secrets 3

EFFECT: The Exaltian paradigm must survive, and it is the Solemn who carries the torch of remembrance. Acting as secretive priest of the humanitarian imperative, Solemn travel the world, spreading the seed of Exalt's ideology in hopes of reigniting the Clan's former strength of cultural domination. Theirs is a mental conquest that puts them at odds with established power structures, and it is for that reason that they must act alone.

Solemn excel at infiltrating advisory positions in politically opposing enclaves and support contrarian viewpoints, slowly building up radical counter-movements by converting groups of people who fall under their administration. Therefore they make excellent ambassadors deployed by the Clan who can upset the rigid dynamics of hereditary enemies and cause friction across their domain of influence. But the Solemn must act with utmost care, otherwise their head will end up on the chopping block.

EQUIPMENT: Solemn require money for bribery and manipulation. They receive (+3) Resources which they can spend freely to achieve their current milestone. However, each failure reduces the Bonus by (-1). If it drops to (0) the Solemn is called back to Liqua for readjustments.

2 - BENIGN

PREREQUISITE: INT+Medicine 6, INT+Engineering 6

EFFECT: The core philosophy of the Exalters recognizes no difference between the human elements of the empire and the equipment, material, and constructions that make up

its infrastructure. All of the pieces of the grand puzzle have their own blemishes, conditions, and breaking points, the only difference is whether blood or oil flows through them. After all, just as an engine can be sent into a workshop, so too can a person be sent down into the Grindworks and return as an improved, refocused version of themselves. It's all the same, in the end.

As such, the Benigns turn their skills towards the construction and repair of all machinery, organic or technological. They are the surgeons stitching Exalt's warriors back together after a battle, just as much as they are the engineers piecing together advanced weapons of war. Whether holding a red-hot cauterizing rod or a white-hot welding torch, the Benign is right at home.

EQUIPMENT: Medical and technical tools (+2D to INT+Medicine or INT+Engineering); Pattern Weaver

3 - VIGIL

PREREQUISITE: CHA+Expression 6, Any Combat Skill 6

EFFECT: The trajectory of glorious success has been shattered, the Constellations have splintered, and the Clan was dispersed across the face of the Earth, washing ashore in remote areas with no means of finding the way back. Now the Vigils must set out from Liqua and travel the countryside in search of the scattered branches of the bloodline; only when all of the lost members are once again connected, will the reborn empire flourish.

The Vigils must also guide Exalters chosen for the embossing through the Clan infested territories beyond the borders of Siege. Their role as guardians never ends, and a Vigil must stand to his last dying breath to ensure the safety of his people. His conviction is crucial. Whenever he must safeguard other Exalters, he regains (3) Ego Points as the memetics laced into his brain jolt him with determination. Additionally, when he acts on behalf of Exalt and in its defense, his Resources and Authority Backgrounds rise to (4) until the threat has passed.

EQUIPMENT: Pasiphae's Stride; Sword engraved with the glyph of Revenge; Type-97 Rifle; Exalter battle armor (Armor rating 3, Enc. 1); Frag Grenade

3 - ARIADNE

PREREQUISITE: BOD+Force 6, BOD+Athletics 4

EFFECT: Even before he ever laid eyes on the mystical pathway, he had studied all of the existing legends passed down by those who came before, lived vicariously through their countless journeys into the Grindworks, and was instructed through rigorous training at the hands of Enceph's Halos how to survive in the dangerous environment



HIERARCHY AND RANKS - EXALTERS



beneath the surface. When the time comes for him to make the trek across the hostile terrain standing between himself and Exalt, he will be ready to descend into the Pathways and take his place in his destined home.

In critical situations, such as when a Constellation must be assembled for a desperate mission, the Ariadne takes on a different task. He descends into the Basalt Plain once again, but not to be embossed. It is the Ariadne's duty to escort someone else through the obstacle course towards their destination; in this fashion, the chosen Exalter will have a weaker affiliation with the Concept of choice, but it's better than risking death in the tumultuous forest of pylons below. Meanwhile, the Ariadne has his own problems to deal with – the augmented systems don't recognize the unexpected presence, and attempt to wipe it out.

EQUIPMENT: Recreated map of Exalt and calibrated compass, including notes on the Pathways (+3D to INS+Orienteering in the ruined city); Delver's Crest

4 - IMPERATIVE

PREREQUISITE: CHA+Leadership 8, PSY+Cunning 8,

EFFECT: In the truly egalitarian society of Free Spirit, there was no room for archaic hierarchies, only voluntary responsibility. With the changing of the seasons and the monumental fall of the Exaltian paradigm, the survivors had to resort to the concept of leadership, manifesting itself in the role of the Imperative. They must act to keep their people united without the benefit of being able to rely on the unifying principles of the Grindworks. A difficult task, one the Imperatives must handle with grace and understanding, balancing the needs of the individual against the needs of the Clan in all worldly affairs.

The problems are ubiquitous. Too many variables cloud all clear thought. Even so, the Imperatives must rise above and declare the best course of action, or they will only prolong the suffering of their people. Any decision is better than stasis.

EQUIPMENT: Hexagonal seal of authority, black on one side and gold on the other (+1D CHA+Leadership against other Exalters); Hierarchy

5 - ZODIAC

PREREQUISITE: INS+Empathy 10, PSY+Cunning 9, Authority 5, Secrets 5

EFFECT: In a time long forgotten, Constellations naturally arose from the ranks of the Exalters. No fatherly advice was needed, no overseeing figure, it was simply a consequence of life. Today, the Grindworks is almost inaccessible, and the simple, hands-off approach is no longer viable. Not all Constellations can rely on the luxury of having their Concepts

shifted and altered to suit the optimal configuration, and the few that do must immediately be thrown into the fire and tested in dangerous circumstances. For once in their great history, the Exalters now have to be selective and elitist towards their own.

It is the task of the Zodiac to determine who amongst his people is suitable for embossing, who will do the most good when their Concept is re-aligned. They assemble expeditionary groups to Exalt, assign duties, and provide instructions as to which Alignment is required to propel the Clan onwards. Alongside that, though, the Zodiac also traces out whatever Constellations he can using the resources available to him; instead of molding others to form the perfect grouping, he must simply choose the right individuals to meld together. It's an imperfect solution for an Imperfect people, but for now there's no other option.

EQUIPMENT: Old texts passed down from previous Zodiacs granting them the Potential Memetic Teachings 1, and giving +2D to attempts to discern an Exalter's Concept

5 - CONCORDANT

PREREQUISITE: Apex, Chosen by Exalt

EFFECT: The common person is defined by their Concept, a given set of characteristics determining every facet of their response to outward stimuli. The Concordant, however, has been chosen by the Benevolent Spirit of Exalt to emerge as something altogether more profound. He becomes the embodiment of a chosen Alignment, carrying all of its Concepts in Affinity within himself, able to switch between the varied structures of his personality at a whim. At a moment's notice, he can shuck the limitations of one mindset as easily as changing clothes, shedding any memetic shackles that have been placed on him without having to resort to the cleansing effects of the Grindworks.

Concordants are known as avatars of Revenge, Ambition, or Destiny, forever trapped within the confines of their Alignment, yet uniting all aspects of a Constellation within a single soul. There is no way back for them once the metamorphosis is completed, and such divinity comes with a price. With every shift of his personality the Concordant loses the fetters of his former self, as he closes in on a transhuman state of being. He can't regain Ego Points via any of his Concepts, as none of them are dominant anymore. Battered by conflicting thoughts of a multitude of identities struggling for control, he will only regain Ego by following the purpose of his Alignment. The Concordant automatically gains the respective Constellation bonus for his Alignment.

EQUIPMENT: KERES; Ancestry; Seal allowing the Concordant to call up to 6 Vigils to his side in pursuit of his Alignment.

EXALTERS OF NOTE



PROTECTION

Pherxies denies any connection to the Exaltian bloodline, instead posing as a proud Liquean whose family tree can be traced back six generations. To perfect his camouflage he even exchanged his usual entourage of Vigils for regular Orgiastics from Gaudica, and stalks Justitian with four of them in tow, all of them clueless about the Ambassador's true dealings behind the scenes.

PERXIES, THE LIQUAN AMBASSADOR

One look out from his veranda across Justitian's Ambassador Quarter is enough for Pherxies' bowels to turn with disgust. Endless mess and choking smog, there's no rhyme or reason to the way this city sprawls across the plains, nothing but mold growing on rotten bark. Not to mention the insufferable political morass that one is forced to deal with in Uptown.

Oh well, everything happens for a reason. Pherxies swallows the bile, and continues to play his game, on his own terms. His diplomatic position grants him exactly what he needs: contacts. Plenty of them. However mischievous they might be, at least they're good for something: leading his people back to their promised lands. Let the Advocates call him the well-mannered Liquean herald and invite him to their egomaniacal castles – their houses are dwarfed by what the Ambassador's ancestors were once able to achieve, anyway.

So be it. The ones with the brain can always be found at the bottom, accumulating under the heel of oppression exerted by the Judiciary. The Judges can't hold a candle to the potential that runs through the hands of Bosch or the members of the Carrion Birds. Typical. Authoritarians blinded by their own imaginary greatness, incapable of sensing the opportunity of voluntary collaboration passing before their greedy fangs. Pherxies won't be duped by his own title. He knows whom he must work with to further the goals of his people.

A trip to Tech-Central here, another over to the Harbor, a smart conversation with the right kind of middlemen, and the next expedition into the contested territories southeast of Siege is under way, all financed out of Pherxies' war chest: skimmed profits taken straight from Liquea's water supply, or forged money transfers that the Ambassador is entrusted to oversee on behalf of the Water Lords.



IRONY

Dekkah sabotages the progress of her people by latching onto any new group arriving in the ruins. The Grindworks is her addiction, the transformation of her innermost being a constant temptation. As much as she wants to help her Clan rise back to power, she is helpless to resist the allure of the Basalt Plain. One for one, like her imprisonment in the Sluice taught her.

DEKKAH

Twelve campaigns through Cockroach infested territory. Dekkah remembers every one down to the last intricate detail, watching the night sky from her hideout, the stars above, like her, the cornerstones of passing constellations. Yet all of them are fixed, static, unable to rewrite their own destiny. Dekkah is different. A brand new life, a new perspective, a new set of ideals, it's all only a breath away, waiting for her on her next cycle through the Grindworks.

Dekkah can no longer conjure the syllables that composed her original given name, and the features of her parents have faded into dark compartments of her brain. Nothing about them was special enough to be remembered after she passed through Exalt's maze for the first time. It was like playing with a deck of cards, but knowing the draw ahead of everyone else. Ruler today, Destroyer tomorrow, Righteous another day. She can be the missing card that leads to a successful deck, whenever she wants.

The Grindworks requires four individuals to initiate its inborn mechanisms, but the road out here is fraught with danger. Not everyone survives the trip. Whenever four become three, she appears at their side, guides them to the entry ports, and descends into the darkness with them. She's discarded countless iterations of her soul already in the pursuit of improvement, one more is nothing to cry about after she reemerges from the depths as a profoundly better version of herself.

The only problem comes when she watches an intact group head down into the Basalt Plain. She mourns the lost potential; it's like an opportunity to create a fresh life has been ripped from her by her own brethren. Easy fix. All she must do is ensure that four never arrive together at their destination, so she can join their Constellation. See that trap over there? Not a Cockroach set up. That's Dekkah's...

ZIPHOD, THE WATER LORD

Ziphod knows many things. He knows that his heritage lies in an empire that once held the entire world in its grasp, even though he never witnessed its true power nor spoken personally to those that have. He knows that the Clan Wars are just a charade put on by the Judiciary to dissuade anyone from taking an interest in Exalt's old homeland, for that could lead to the true heir to the throne of Borca rising up once more and toppling their fragile Protectorate – no faction that once managed to stand up to the Exaltian empire in its prime could be held back by a gaggle of untrained and uncultured savages! Most importantly, though, he knows that despite being an Imperfect, despite his youth, despite it all, after he descends into the Grindworks for the first time, he will emerge to take his crown as the newly appointed Emperor; it's what he deserves..

Very little of what Ziphod knows is the truth. Exalt was powerful, yes, but the young Imperfect's imagination has run away with itself and constructed an entirely false narrative, going so far as to deny the existence of the Clan Wars themselves. He has even failed to understand that once the Exodus is finalized he will just be one of many in a truly egalitarian society instead of the one at the top. None of these delusions are of any concern to his handlers. In fact, they're perfectly happy playing along with his fantastical reality.

While Ziphod is the nominal Water Lord of Neo-Exalt, the real governing happens behind the scenes and beneath the surface, guided by Enceph, her Halos, and the Zodiac Ulthus. Ziphod is a paper tiger to draw attention away from the actual goings-on. That's not to say that he isn't a capable puppeteer; his own surface-level political machinations manage to keep the rest of the city wrapped up in knots, but all of his expertise and planning is based on false assumptions. What a shame.



CHEAPER TO KEEP

Ziphod's ego would shatter in the face of the truth: denial of expectation, the worst torture imaginable. Should the youthful puppet leader ever find out that he's being played by his own people, his only remaining instinct would be to take revenge on the ones who fooled him. There are powers out there who know what's going on, though, and they want to let him know...

LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE

What is to become of the Exalters, one hundred years after their fall? A people ravaged by hereditary disease, disassembled, patched together by mythical stories of ancient potency and greatness yet steered by nothing but a ruptured leadership and aimless without the all-defining principles of the machine that gave birth to their kind.

Imperfection runs rampant among the final host of this glorious civilization. Psychological damage passed down across the generations of survivors has taken its toll, along with the bittersweet taste of having soared too close to the sun before their wings were set ablaze. Have they learned from their epochal failure, or are they still

just driven by the overwhelming appeal of the humanitarian imperative? What will become of them in a world that has abandoned freedom for safety? What could they accomplish, now that Cultrin no longer holds sway over their souls? Can peaceful coexistence with the peoples of the Black Lung ever be possible again, after all of the atrocities that lie in their shared past?

The truth is out there somewhere. They must've been chosen for a reason, otherwise, none of this makes any sense. The Exaltian paradigm must be explored to its finality, or the most pressing questions may never be answered. With Project Tannhäuser in shambles, and the Sleepers of the

Recombination Group destroyed or hiding in the most remote corners of the Earth, opposition as it once was is nowhere to be found. Maybe Exalt in its first iteration was nothing but the birthing pains of Free Spirit; it's entirely possible that a new beginning will yield a truly golden future for all of mankind.

All the Exalters need now is a guide. Daimondal. The Sleeper Prophet who started it all, whose echo still lingers in the remains of the Basalt Plain, whispering, tempting the delvers to search for him, to locate his position down there in the endless darkness. If only they could find him, just like how he once found them.

THE NAMELESS TRIBE

