

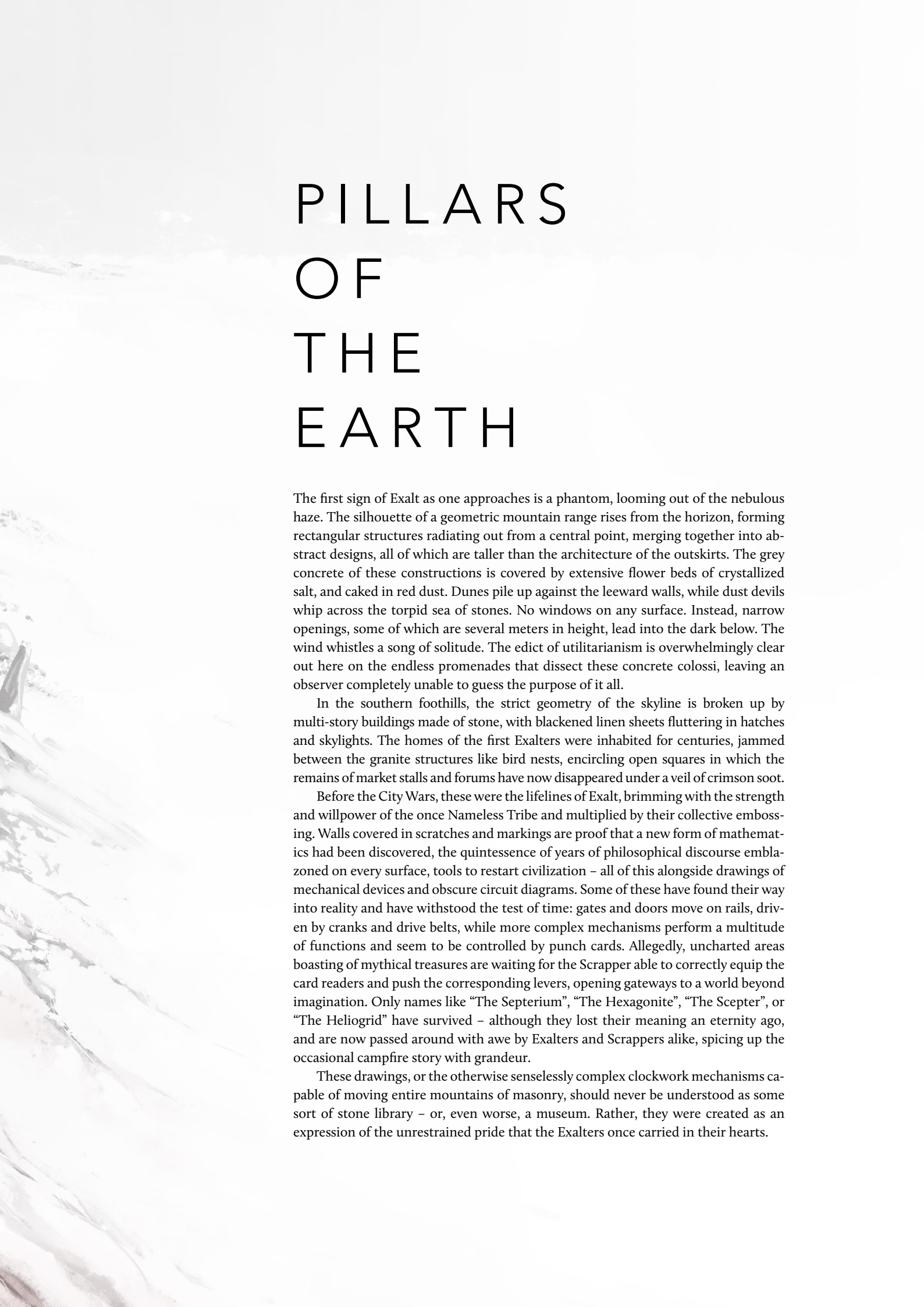
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PILLARS OF THE EARTH

The first sign of Exalt as one approaches is a phantom, looming out of the nebulous haze. The silhouette of a geometric mountain range rises from the horizon, forming rectangular structures radiating out from a central point, merging together into abstract designs, all of which are taller than the architecture of the outskirts. The grey concrete of these constructions is covered by extensive flower beds of crystallized salt, and caked in red dust. Dunes pile up against the leeward walls, while dust devils whip across the torpid sea of stones. No windows on any surface. Instead, narrow openings, some of which are several meters in height, lead into the dark below. The wind whistles a song of solitude. The edict of utilitarianism is overwhelmingly clear out here on the endless promenades that dissect these concrete colossi, leaving an observer completely unable to guess the purpose of it all.

In the southern foothills, the strict geometry of the skyline is broken up by multi-story buildings made of stone, with blackened linen sheets fluttering in hatches and skylights. The homes of the first Exalters were inhabited for centuries, jammed between the granite structures like bird nests, encircling open squares in which the remains of market stalls and forums have now disappeared under a veil of crimson soot.

Before the City Wars, these were the lifelines of Exalt, brimming with the strength and willpower of the once Nameless Tribe and multiplied by their collective embossing. Walls covered in scratches and markings are proof that a new form of mathematics had been discovered, the quintessence of years of philosophical discourse emblazoned on every surface, tools to restart civilization – all of this alongside drawings of mechanical devices and obscure circuit diagrams. Some of these have found their way into reality and have withstood the test of time: gates and doors move on rails, driven by cranks and drive belts, while more complex mechanisms perform a multitude of functions and seem to be controlled by punch cards. Allegedly, uncharted areas boasting of mythical treasures are waiting for the Scrapper able to correctly equip the card readers and push the corresponding levers, opening gateways to a world beyond imagination. Only names like “The Septerium”, “The Hexagonite”, “The Scepter”, or “The Heliogrid” have survived – although they lost their meaning an eternity ago, and are now passed around with awe by Exalters and Scrappers alike, spicing up the occasional campfire story with grandeur.

These drawings, or the otherwise senselessly complex clockwork mechanisms capable of moving entire mountains of masonry, should never be understood as some sort of stone library – or, even worse, a museum. Rather, they were created as an expression of the unrestrained pride that the Exalters once carried in their hearts.



SOME PLAIN OLD ADVICE

Alright, y'all better listen up, because I'm only gonna say what I say once. Nobody knows how big this whole shit really was. Most of the original outskirts are sunken entirely, red dust and all. If yer' comin' in from the west or north, you'll already be walking across them old rooftops before you even reach the center. That's the spooky part, all this flat desert is totally overrun by patrols. Cockroaches, Phosphorites, you name it. You've got their warbands drawing large circles across the ruins, scouting for antsy little shits like you who don't! Pay! Attention! Snap! Trap sprung, yer' dead.

You gotta stay keen when crossing the flats. There's only sparse cover out here, and if they spot you then you gotta retreat before they shove another vanguard up your ass in response. I know they don't go into the city much, some shit about ancient spirits and ghost stories and whatnot, but don't count on it. I've heard of warbands entering for surprise attacks or supply runs, and that always ends bad.

Anyways, back to the flats. Here's where you're gonna find a bunch of the dropshafts and hidden entries into the Radiance. Pay attention to the runes if you're looking for them. You can't read 'em? How is that my problem, cunt! You're the one who's spent his whole life hanging out in Liqua, I'm just doing my best to get you in, don't blame me for you being an idiot, alright!

OUTER PERIMETER

Right, this first elevation is what we call the Outer Perimeter. Looks like a weird geometric terrace to me, but that whole bloody thing is skewwhiff and peekin' out of the dust by a few meters. Tons of scattered tiny ruins up there to play hide and seek. This used to be part of the larger settlement, but now it's all gutted, just the framework still standing. Careful though. You got cover up there, but so do all these fuckin' cannibals. Don't just walk into a room like a namby pamby hopin' to not get eaten, dumbass, always keep a lookout, weapon at the ready. Don't come running to me if you lose an eye or an arm up there, cause I damn well warned you enough!

We ran two raids in 96' here, and that's the last I've heard of it, so I dunno how accurate this piss still is, but

you can look out for a series of grooves laid out in the pavement, if they're not all caked in this fucking dust by now, and follow 'em full swing towards the Inner Terrace. There's at least three broken passageways leading up there, some you can go up to with old staircases, others you've gotta rappel. It's your choice, but I'd go for the ropes, cause the stairs are too open and if some of those motherfuckers come at you from above, yer' all fucked.

INNER TERRACE

This is where shit gets nasty, brothers and sisters. I don't care that you have them fancy guns n' rifles on you, but if you get busted up in the Inner Terrace you're easily surrounded from all sides, without a chance to fall back. So split up, scamper away, and hide in whatever cover you can find, the best you can. Only move when the coast is clear, and I mean clear, the bastards are sneaky, so you gotta make absolutely sure, you got me? The whole fucking place is at least forty meters up, but at this point it's starting to be all serpentine and zigzaggy and shit, so you can find spots to rest n' reload, even catch some shuteye if you're ballsy enough. Your asshole ancestors may have used all this for the elites, with big royal houses and atriums, all that shit, but most of the rooftops have collapsed so you can look up at all those pretty stars and wonder how much longer you have to live. You won't find any bones here, my friend, and there's a reason for that too. Those damn cannibals devour it all, so don't think you'll run into any of your dead buddies here to pay them some last respect.

Two larger sections split off from the Inner Terrace, situated north and east, Stellarium and Profundium. I know, I choked when I heard those names; why keep it simple when you can boast about how smart you fuckers once were? So, the Profundium looks like it was some sort of factory district, with lots of collapsed assembly lines, designated work pods, chimneys, but all that came down in the last century. A bunch of my esteemed fellows got rich in the early 20's and 30's hauling from here, half of it went to Tech-Central, other parts someplace else, but everyone was bitching about how someone had already stolen the most valuable salvage. You can read it all on the runes covering the walls. Oh wait, that's right, you can't.



Now if ya head over through the Stellarium, that's more like some architectural wonderland. It all looks the same in there to me, batteries of pods n' housing, but it was supposedly coated in golden foil and rare metals, depicting some whack star movement and crazy alignment stuff. Fuck me, I know jack shit about that nonsense, but it supposedly looked good. At least that's what the damn Scavengers who got here first and scratched them goods out of the channels say. You know where all this stuff went? Steel Monolith. Seen the insides of that place? Yeah, me neither.

I'm getting off track. Here's the deal: you gotta cross either the Profundium or the Stellarium to gain access to the Superstructure. If you need directions, just remember that the big spiky things pointing up, those Spires - yeah, look, you can see 'em from here - are in the center. Make sure to go towards them. There's no point in trying to yank yerself up the outer walls, and drop off like bird shit if you made it this far. Instead, sneak through here and find a way into the Axis Mundi, a narrow boulevard, straight like a die, that connects with the Vigil Fortress to the right and the Halls of Triumph to the left. This part is the most drawn out stretch without cover, and there's no way out once you're in. It's probably gonna be the longest mile of track your pansy ass has ever ran, and if you see something headed your way, there's only one thing you can do. Yeah, that's right, squeeze your damn asscheeks together and fight, or go down in history as some loser who tried n' failed.

THE SUPERSTRUCTURE

Bear with me. Last instructions. This is what everyone refers to as the Superstructure, some sort of original engine, or settlement, or some other bullshit that gave birth to all of Exalt. You can't find a brain under the sun who can explain in clear words how this place fits together, not even that smug asshole Bumblebee is bright enough for that. It's obviously all Bygone junk, but I bet I could teach a fucking Gendo to play chess before anyone figures out how this shit was built and started up.

I heard a bunch of stories that some of the big monoliths move, or slide, but I haven't seen it myself so I dunno if it's true. There's supposed to be some intervals by which

the thing becomes operational and rearranges itself, but your village wiseass could probably give you a better explanation. That's why y'all are here, right? You wanna get to the bottom of this. So here's what you do. Follow the Imperial Plaza, that massive area over here, all the way to the Palace. How will you find that? It's the biggest building in the entire place, dumbass, use your fucking eyes. After that, it's a 200 meter sprint across a big heap of rubble and debris. Watch your step, there's bear traps and what-not about, and sometimes a whole wall section will come down because you clumsy wankers kicked a pebble loose.

From there, you'll spot the Temple of the Creator, twisting out of the soot, with some faded images of their Bygone God flanking the entry. Don't go in there though, nobody's ever come out again. Take the walkway that forks off north and hit the Well of Fortune. It's a big black staircase leading down, you can't miss it. This is where you wanna go. Few stories below and you'll hit the Grindworks, but I guess you know about that shit already.

Alright, listen up, here's a last bit of advice just because I'm nice. Don't take risks in the Superstructure. You're at a disadvantage up there, you'll stand out like a sore thumb against the sky, and anyone pokin' about on the third or fourth floors will have you in their crosshairs and taken the shot before you know it. Don't waste time searching for treasure, there's been thousands of other grave robbers picking these parts clean, and they all knew what to look for; you'll just be running in circles after spare bolts till you get snatched. Next, keep an eye out for light sources. If you spot any, get the fuck away from it, it'll be a white phosphorous torch from an Irradiator pack. Those are Phosphorites, in case you don't know, and they're looking for intruders to spike onto their sacrificial altars. It's all for seasonal rituals, but I don't have a copy of their fucking spring calendar so forgive me for not knowing when they'll next show up to grab a few idiots like you. That's all I got.

So, you all set? Any more questions? No? Ok, so we're good on the deal. I wait for you here for exactly three days, and guide you back out. If you're not back in time, I'll claim your belongings and send your mothers a neat present. If you make it back, my cut is two thirds. No, it's not too much you dumb hedgehog, I told you - Cartel sevice costs ya!



THE RADIANCE

What remains visible of Exalt resembles a city of the dead. Civilization requires a critical mass of people in order to function, organizing food, regulating the water supply and waste disposal, and maintaining the heating systems. The City Wars tore up the finely woven social network of the Exalters, and the final exodus of thousands of inhabitants to Liqva did the rest.

Those who were left behind withdrew into the Radiance, the mostly-submerged outer ring of Exalt. Here lie the access halls that lead into the interior of the Grindworks. Hundreds of these buildings are grouped along the perimeter of an imaginary circle, each of them so large that several Surge Tanks could freely maneuver within, while the ceilings are lined with rails for heavy-duty cranes. Massive containers are piled up against the walls, many of them empty, some however feature table-sized hexagonal basalt slabs and prefabricated components made of plastic or phosphorescent ceramic.

Monumental gates, most of them locked, lead into the city's subterranean landscape, but these are not the only entrances. Occasionally one can find openings around five meters tall, portals without stairs, which are marked by the Exalters with line-based codes to pinpoint a route toward the embossing pylons. Additionally, drop shafts have been discovered that lead from the surface straight down to the Pathways that await beyond the Radiance. Every Exalter knows of these stairways and will ensure that this knowledge remains available only to their Clan, for many of them are hidden under sheet metal or behind the mechanical locking mechanisms installed by the first Exalters themselves, with their locations and disguises passed down through the generations.

Most of the Radiance's vast expanse is eerily silent, only the occasional groan of metal shifting with changes in temperature or the distant rumbling of the Pathways changing their configuration breaking the tension. Even the Exalters that make it into this first layer of the Grindworks mostly settle into awed silence from observing the immense power of their ancestors, to create and inhabit such gargantuan structures. But not everyone has the same reaction.

The northern segments of the great ring that makes up the Radiance are infested and inaccessible. Two minor Cockroach tribes, totalling almost 200 Sphingid Warriors and another hundred Feeders and Swarmers, have occupied a pair of hangars as nests. The locations feature direct access to the dustbowl on the surface, ensuring that patrols can be sent out to pick off anyone trying to slip through the net at any time of the day, before those captured are dragged back down to be sacrificed to the enormous humanoid moth effigy of the tribe's Totem beneath the surface, erected from the bones of hundreds of bleached skeletons. The screams of the offerings echo throughout the Radiance, carried unnaturally far by the strange undulating construction patterns. More reason for others to stay quiet.

THE PALACE

The majority of the colossal architecture lining the surface of Exalt are leftovers of its golden age and have fallen into disrepair, now nothing more than dilapidated ruins, with windows resembling featureless crevices and black holes. Red dust covers up floor tiles dyed with precious pigments, and walls once clad with golden fabrics are now faded and hang in tatters.

One building in the very center of the once-great city stands out by itself though. Like a bolt rising between two concrete monoliths, its plastered white front is dissected by tall window frames and soaring portals, but they are all walled up from the inside. The second floor is set back, and all of its window openings were equally sealed shut with massive bricks. On both sides of the monoliths, there are additional structures that appear to be staircases, constructed as if to provide access to one of the high entrances sitting in the concrete blocks.

Welcome to the Palace. This is where the fate of Exalt was once forged, where the Apexes inspected the blueprints of their latest technological breakthrough, sketched out battle plans on maps of the Borcan wastelands, and dictated the tenets of the legal system that had paved the way for the Exaltian paradigm. The Palace housed the Library, a register containing the raw details of all Exaltian inventions, technological and cultural, along with the Plenary, a meeting hall with towering golden walls in the heart of the building, which was said to have a direct connection to the Benevolent Spirit residing in the depths of the city. From the top level of the Palace, the Observatory allowed the Apexes to gaze out across their empire, advanced display screens showing landmarks and items of

interest projected directly onto the single, all-surrounding glass dome.

In the last days before the collapse, it became clear that the city wasn't going to last. Treachery and terror filled the ranks of the Exaltian leadership, and the humanitarian imperative began to rot and crumble. The Apexes saw that it was necessary to preserve Exalt's cultural heritage until a worthy successor was found to take up the torch of civilization. Every scrap of knowledge gathered by the Clan over its long tenure, blueprints, scriptures, inventions, and works of philosophy were hurriedly gathered from all over its vast realm and stored inside the Palace. Legends state that there are secret entryways into the concrete monoliths locked behind false walls, featuring Concept-analysis algorithms, automated security systems, and anything else the Apexes could dream up to keep the building secure. Behind the first barrier lie dozens of levels cloaked in absolute darkness and hidden behind movable barriers reminiscent of those deep below in the Basalt Plain. The perfect resting place for all eternity.

In the final hours of the city-state's reign, as explosions rocked the Radiances and the Pathways, the Apexes directed their brethren to leave and escape the unstoppable madness – the interlocking defense systems all had to be set from the inside. The Palace was sealed, and no Exalter has set foot in it since. But some of the rows of brickwork seem suspiciously loose. It can't be ruled out that Scrappers, or other delvers looking to get their hands on the haul of the millennium, have penetrated into the depths of the majestic building over the last few decades. Perhaps they never made it back out.

THE PATHWAYS

The upper floors of the Grindworks are a labyrinth of sprawling corridors and narrow halls that all too often lead to dead ends capped with sealing stones. Gates close with the passing of the seasons and cut off entire sections and familiar paths for months at a time. Legends have it that secret entrances will open within such isolated areas, revealing Free Spirit caches, data halls, or exits leading into the Basalt Plain, but any Exalter who has trapped themselves in an isolated area in an attempt to verify these claims has never been seen again. The Grindworks grants nothing for free.

Inside the maze, the energy supply is scarce. Countless corridors have fallen pitch black and are dead. However, some areas still spark to life and are suddenly active for mere days at a time. Floor panels light up when stepped upon, and binaural chants emanate from cloaked speaker systems. The merging octaves are a preliminary stage of memetic conditioning, a simple magic trick compared to the skills of a Sociocybernetic, but an effective one, caressing the mind with prismatic patterns, preparing it for what is waiting in the deep. The sensations are diverse: some feel nauseous, others are overwhelmed by inner focus. All feel the need to push on.

Further along, the corridors widen to form elongated halls furnished with silicate floor slabs and crystalline walls, revealing the cabling and Bygone technology shimmering through like the veins on the back of an old Paler's hand. Asymmetric glyphs etched into the tracks crisscrossing the floor point the way to other sectors, while double red lines indicate nanite Interferencers built into the ceiling. No Sleeper will pass here; at least not as long as the supply of energy is maintained. During specific intervals the walls come to life and show the reflections of those who once trudged through here with years of delay. Some of these ancient wanderers took the opportunity to leave a message for their descendants in the future, using sign language to explain to them how to traverse the maze – without knowing whether anyone would ever see their perished mirror image.

The closer one gets to an entrance to the Basalt Plain, and thus to an embossing pylon, the brighter the floor panels scintillate. Finally they begin to pulsate, cold white gives way to a dark red while fragments of whispered speeches mix with the ephemeral tunes of the labyrinth

– again just a foretaste, a siren call that indicates the beginning of the transition.

Experienced delvers of this convoluted underground jungle know that this call is not to be completely trusted. While the churning heart of the Grindworks lies deeper still, the test has already started. The enticing, transitory call leading one closer is treacherous and beguiling, and unless the listener is careful to always take their time and properly identify the true source of the sound, it is easy to go astray. Those who blindly follow the shimmering trails traced out on the ground, or who haplessly rush towards the melody of chimes mixed with gentle laughter, will find themselves instead trapped in an eternal loop, rushing around and around in circles and never making progress, until they break from exhaustion, forever lost in unknown territory. The Pathways claim the soul of another.

INTERVALS

It's bad enough trying to get into the Pathways unscathed, but it's even worse when one goes through all that effort only to find they've stumbled into a section which isn't even operational in the current season. Anyone unfamiliar with the ancient locking mechanisms and shifting segments will shatter their teeth in frustration trying to figure out why the portal that worked just fine last summer is suddenly a lifeless hunk of steel during winter. Any ambitious Scrapper cataloguing the entryways is prone to sinking into despair when he realizes that they don't even correspond to months correctly.

In fact, the opening intervals are strictly governed by the annual journey of the sun across the constellations in the sky, with the cycle resetting yearly at the First Point of Aries, the vernal equinox and therefore the beginning of spring. The cycle is controlled by an ancient mechanical calendar ticking away in the heart of the Grindworks, powered only by the heat of the Earth itself.

At any one time, six of the twelve branches of the Pathways are active: the current zodiacal segment, and then segments alternating off-and-on clockwise around the underground complex. Some daring or foolish explorers have been able to find entrances into the nominally dead sections in the off-months. Inside, they discovered that the defensive mechanisms were still perfectly active – and set at maximum hostility.



THE LAST HALO OF EXALT

Palers have become a rarity in Borca. Long gone are the days when Halos mingled among the Exalters and protected the Grindworks from intruders, serving as the paladins of the Sleeper Prophets who once held reign over Exalt. Today, a tiny force occupies Exit C-3 in the underground levels of Justitian waging a shadow war against the Chroniclers in their Cluster, while other splintered divisions wander in circles through the Stukov Desert in search of signs directing them to Dispensers said to be buried underneath the endless salt flats. But unlike those who basked in the light of Free Spirit, these Palers are still Tannhäuser loyalists, misled, devoid of a true destiny.

Kikirri is different. She's the last of her kind, lured towards Exalt by the fabled legends of yore. She intercepted a distress call, deep within her bunker community in the Pyrenees, originating from the faded ruin. A distress call from Daimondal. The very next night she abandoned her brothers and sisters and struck out northeast. The Grindworks has been her abode for twelve years now, the time spent striding through the meandering tunnels to try to understand the vastness of the maze and to capture its essence. She made good progress in the first years, advancing procedurally with extensive planning, mapping out

sectors and marking them once she had a clear idea of their scope and integral mechanics. Her portable algae tank provided steady nutrition, and she was able to collect water condensing in the grooves of the Pathways to quench her thirst. On the surface, she set up a series of small traps to catch the occasional rodent passing by. Not much, but it kept her alive. Luxury was a distant afterthought, and she teetered on the brink of madness. Others might have given up long ago.

But Kikirri was devoted, sheer faith driving her to grasp the seasonal algorithms that opened certain sectors while shutting down others. There had to be a rhyme to it all, a conundrum that would require a sharp mind to solve. Then, suddenly, about three years ago, the lights went out. The last trickle of the original power supply was cut off. Had one of the backup reactors powering the facility broken down? Kikirri didn't know. She was trapped in frigid darkness for two weeks, until she managed to short circuit her last remaining E-Cube chain and jumpstart the interlocking machinery. The burst of energy was only sufficient for two minutes of motion, but it was enough. Kikirri escaped, only to find that the surface wasn't any less hostile. Savages were scouring the ruins in terrifying numbers, and she

had to use her extraordinary senses of smell and hearing and every last drop of her survival skill just to avoid getting caught and being eaten alive.

The time since the power outage has been a cat and mouse game for Kikirri. She drifts in and out of Exalt, stealing supplies or trading an occasional haul for some urgently needed E-Cubes in Siege, before heading straight back through Cockroach infested territory, dodging patrols and descending into the Grindworks in a desperate search for Daimondal. Ever since her arrival she has felt the presence of the Sleeper Prophet, watching over her, beckoning her to release him. Sometimes she can feel the freezing touch of his fingers when she places her hand against a surface of polished black glass, reaching out for Daimondal through a mirror realm that she is unable to breach into.

Now, age is gnawing at her joints, her limbs have atrophied from the deprivations, and her mind has become clouded from over a decade in solitude. Even so, she has internalized every part of the Grindworks which she ever passed on her journey: no one can match her navigational skills in this subterranean realm. If only she made herself known to the Exalters so intent on breaching into the Basalt Plain.



FARNUK

THE DEVOURER

The Augurs of the mighty Cockroach Clan foretold his arrival hundreds of years ago; the erratic flapping of moth wings and the chirping of legions of crickets heralded his coming. A King like a God, a being of pure carnality untainted by doubt or any weakness of the flesh. Brotokh is a colossus, trapped in the deepest and most secure of the vaults the Cockroaches claimed for their tribes. His chains were broken a long time ago and he has worn the concrete of his cage down to its iron framework with vengeful blows. The passages into his nest are too narrow for him, the ceiling too low to stand upright. His fury bursts out of him in bone chilling roars, like the earth-shaking rumble of a building collapsing in on itself.

Brotokh is the Kingmaker. One day his mighty loins will spawn the Devourers, and they will rise to tear the flesh from the frail bodies of the Hammer Men, the Augurs whisper. His Broodmothers are cleansed in the black smoke of smoldering rubber, bathed in rare earths from the Reaper's Blow, and painted with colors distilled from elysian roots; each of them a warrior unto herself who has killed many times in the name of the Totems. Fertile creatures, mature, strong, and savage. Still not enough. Most of them are smashed and crushed by Brotokh's relentless force during their first mating ritual, and the King is left to drum their bones against the walls of his prison.

Those who survive, however, don't fare any better. They instead die giving birth to his gargantuan brood. Farnuk is one of these children, one of the first Devourers. More animal than man, he's a towering mountain of flesh and muscles driven only by a maddening lust for murder. He stomped through the ranks of the Hammer Men, cracked open their ribcages, and feasted on their still-beating hearts. Now he approaches his eighteenth winter: his terrifying frame has contorted as growth spurts have twisted his limbs into gnarled configurations. The gunshot channels riddling his chest have turned outwards like pink-spotted trunks, and the lead stuck in the wounds is

surrounded by deformed cysts, forming black bubbles that can be easily spotted. Patches of matted hair hang in long strands from his jagged skull; most teeth are splintered or have been driven deep into his jaw from years of gnawing on bloodsoaked femurs. Even the Augurs no longer have the stomach to praise his godlike beauty.

Farnuk's time is up. But he's still good for something. The ruins of Exalt are haunted by enraged spirits who do not tolerate the living next to them. Only a creature hailing from their plane of existence can persist, or so says the prophecy of the Myriads, the teeming Flood of Cockroaches. Whatever, the Augurs are creative and oftentimes completely bonkers.

Months ago, Farnuk drove a brood of chosen warriors into the labyrinth of the Radiance to find a new breeding cave. Heads exploded around him in a thick fog of blood, and the thunder of high-velocity bullets burst his eardrums. Something tore out Farnuk's left eye. The giant tugged at the chains linking him to his warriors, giving them no chance of escape. Mercilessly he kept on pummeling his own men until his knuckles shattered into splinters held together only by hardened flesh, and there was nothing but viscous gore dripping from his cruel hands. The Exaltian snipers paused their assault. What they saw playing out before their naked eyes exceeded anything they could ever imagine.

Suddenly, the stampeding monstrosity turned on the spot and fell into a shambling run, tumbling over and over, dragging five demolished human corpses in his wake as he charged towards a wall. Instead of slowing down, Farnuk smashed through a large piece of metal cladding that hid an entrance to the underground corridors and plummeted into the unknown levels below. When he hit the bottom, a resounding crack escaped into the massive hangar above, followed by a wet and guttural scream. Now he's down there, trapped in the blackness.

He won't survive long. He can't. Right?



THE BASALT PLAIN

There are eight known sections of the Basalt Plain, and they spread apart in fractal coils beneath the Pathways and the Radiance. According to some of the ancient maps, which have been refined by the Exalters over the centuries, these sections intertwine, in some areas only a hand's breadth apart from the next. Maybe there are Paler Sun Discs out there, or as-yet-undiscovered mechanisms within the Grindworks, that allow for the barriers to be lowered manually. Additionally, there are also blank spots on the maps that could easily be filled with at least two more inaccessible sections of the Basalt Plain.

Those who find access along the Pathways walk down a wide staircase into a senseless black vault. The staircase is embedded in a cubic monolith, which also supports the ceiling at a height of ten meters overhead. The floor and walls consist of hexagonal structures, some of which are extended to create columns that transform the area into a landscape of stoney waves, whole rows rising up to assemble like impenetrable granite barriers. It's impossible to wrestle any sense out of the array of shapes, but the Basalt Plain is yet to be activated.

The first pylon is not far from the entrance. A hole the size of an arm at chest level and a shimmering glyph mark the ominous black stele. Once the area has been powered with energy and someone dares to push their arm into the opening – in unison with three other participants in different parts of the Basalt Plain – the transformation begins. The stone jolts to life, the hexagonal structures break open into ever smaller partitions twisting and turning inside out as they flow over the arm and lock it in place. The Ambrosia of the Sleepers is just one variant of Getrell's nanite technology; a different one now infuses the offered limb, impregnates it with the finest nanofilament, analyzes – and makes a final decision. If all four subjects are suitable for the imprint, the Plain awakens.

Ramparts and pillars sink, landscapes swell, and the basalt formations ignite into an ocean of light. Colors surge across the hexagonal shapes and coalesce into a pixelated blue and cloud-covered sky, as more walls of columns grow to conjure the green haze of a forest clearing while unlit pillars emerge from the ground to simulate the silhouettes

of imposing tree trunks. If the subject moves, the landscape slides away from under him as if he were racing along, even though he did nothing but take just two careful steps. One wrong footfall can easily toss a subject into the air or crush them between two pillars slamming together.

The pictorial representations flash rapidly, fueled by the desired embossing. Walls appear like marble or flowing water, and glowing portals lead into alien worlds. Animals that only an AI would dare to dream of scurry across the clearings – column by column rising and submerging as the creature moves along, like an effigy on a screen that is passed from one hand to the next. Everything here is lethal. Even if it's just an array of columns that travel vertically and show a three-horned deer rushing by, their movement speed is in accordance with the object depicted. Once the deer notices the onlooker and lowers its blurred head, the colors oscillate through a prismatic adaptation and quickly flare up in a cascade of alarming incandescence. Now there's only seconds left before a wave of columns crashes towards its target and the projected deer impales him with its virtual antlers, pounding him to the ground with a shattered rib cage.

The binaural chants introduced in the Pathways condense as the Basalt Plain opens its plethora of mesmerizing imagery. Originally, Getrell's memetically coated epigrams were deposited here and clad in the phonemes of a vocal synthesis AI. Over the centuries the protocol optimized itself into a symphony of interlaced synthetic sounds – from which one might discern “THE HOUR OF THE EIGHT” or “HYBRID BEACON”, while another will bear witness to the shamanistic formula that was muttered during their birth – turning them into memetic templates, stripped of their true intention and trimmed down for effectiveness. Likewise, on the pillars themselves, where previously clear symbolic images were supposed to lock a subject in place by driving psychological anchors deep into their mind, voluminous surfaces now flicker, sometimes resembling a wall of flesh adorned with zipper-like rows of bared teeth, other times displaying a fan of colors and soothing lights travelling across cerulean blue surfaces, thus evoking the buried feelings of a solemn and peaceful childhood.



ARCHETYPE

The Basalt Plain forges Constellations. A minimum of four subjects who descend must choose the Constellation into which they will be shaped via their selected entry points: it is exactly these points and the abstraction of the paths connecting them that have survived as glyphs of Alignment throughout centuries of Exalter tradition. Only within the belly of the Grindworks, though, is it possible to observe their true meaning. The Alignment symbols are simply star maps, tracing out the inlets of the Basalt Plain and the path that must be taken through it.

While the delvers choose which Constellation to embody by changing their entry points, only the Grindworks itself decides on whom to emboss which Concept. Each challenge is adapted and tailored to fit the mental shifts the participants will undergo; forcing them to adopt unfamiliar thinking patterns and embody new ideals in order to survive. Anyone too inflexible to withstand the trials is discarded.

In the midst of monolithic ruins, the ADVENTURER learns of his crushing insignificance in the broader scope of reality, and how the great idea of discovery outclasses everything else. But every step towards the unfamiliar must be bought with arduous effort – ceilings descend on him with the flickering projection of a cave collapsing upon his head, and strange, block-shaped creatures chase him through the corridors of the underground city. In every situation, danger must be weighed against the potential gain of knowledge: to move outside the red circular perimeter of the otherworldly animal with its blue scales and dandelion plumage would be a betrayal of the Concept. Such treason is punished.

The CREATOR erects defensive walls and palaces with a flick of his finger, and watches from the perspective of a god as they are eroded by time or torn down by hordes of grotesque iconoclasts. The sun races overhead and tectonic plates split open beneath him as he struggles to make his mark on the world. If his creations are swept away by floods or sink into the ashen rain of an erupting volcano, he too will be erased from existence. Shattered between

the pillars, the next one who descends on this segment of the Basalt Plain will have to scratch the remains of his predecessor away from the staircase before they can start their own embossing.

The MENTOR sees himself surrounded by lambent columns featuring the abstract projections of people, singular representations of friends formed from his mind, fear and disapproval on their sterile faces. Peril is approaching from all sides of the Plain: herds of wild animals or alien civilizations whose villages grow into cities within seconds and spread like cancer across the world. One's own flock must be instructed; only when armed with knowledge and shielded by his ideology can they increase their own influence and ensure their Mentor's survival.

The MARTYR experiences similar scenarios, but he is expected to launch ahead and inspire others with his selfless acts. Only when all dangers have been overcome, and the facial constructs of the pylon signal joy, is he allowed to complete the embossing.

The challenges are as varied as they are manifold. Without data access to the outside world, and totally unable to make any comparison with reality, the Grindworks dreams up ever more bizarre situations, strange worlds with their own laws and new emotional spectrums for its constructs whenever it believes to have recognized gaps and black spots in the human psyche which need to be filled. For those who face the embossing, this is an extremely dangerous moment, because it is not always clear which reaction the Grindworks considers appropriate to the corresponding Concept. One wrong turn can transform this mystical realm of animated pillars into a terrifying and vindictive machine that will stop at nothing to rid itself of the unworthy intruder.

EMBOSSSED

If the Exalter survives the challenges along the lines of his new Concept, he will arrive at the final embossing pylon. Once again the frenetic hexagonal shapes slide around his



arm and send a tsunami of nanites through his body. Biases change, a door opens within the darkest compartment of his brain, and a new spark of the soul comes to life while the old one is discarded and suffocates in oblivion. Guilt flakes off like a snake's skin. All previous experiences remain, but they are reevaluated by a freshly minted mind, put into perspective through a lens that is composed of entirely different viewpoints and goals. It's as if observing the life of someone else, who looks and sounds identical to oneself, but yet stands distinct.

When the humans emerge from the Grindworks and reconnect, they have reformed into a perfectly balanced group of their chosen Constellation. Their mindsets have been altered, but they are united in purpose. They are destined for great things, and working together they will be capable of even greater thoughts.

CONSTELLATIONS

Prior to the City Wars, Exalt's Spires were fully charged, and its reactors immediately compensated for any voltage drop. The Grindworks was fully operational. It ceaselessly sculpted and fused Exalters according to their Affinities, priming them for predetermined tasks and spitting them out into the world, serving as the accelerant for the fire of their technical, cultural, and sociological progress.

Exalters bound together by AMBITION marched ahead to build temples and defenses or establish vast supply systems stretching across the former empire. No project was ever deemed too overwhelming for them to try.

Meanwhile, those connected by LOYALTY forged a pact with the population to ensure their well-being and to guide them on the axis of the soul, physically as well as spiritually. Great personalities blossomed within the city and heralded a golden age of unseen compassion.

CHANCE, on the other hand, spawned talented and daring explorers and researchers who recognized a world full of opportunity and developed methods to grasp every promising prospect ahead.

Those who were primed to follow DESTINY devoted themselves to the Grindworks in order to unlock its deepest secrets, penetrate Getrell's plan, and salvage the Free Spirit gear from obscured areas.

Under the banner of DOGMA Exalters were raised into high priests, philosophers and ideologues who distilled Exalt's ideas and tenets into traditions and spread them like Manna over neighboring domains. Step by step they converted other tribes and peoples to follow the ideal of a free mankind united as one.

Finally, the cadres of REVENGE spread their black wings and came down like angels of vengeance on those who opposed Exalt's humanitarian imperative. The Agents of Project Tannhäuser were their primary target, but the Anabaptists proselytising amongst their people were quickly determined to be a threat, along with anyone else who dared to disrupt Exalt's ultimate goal.

DEPLETED

Times have changed. Large parts of the Grindworks are now at a standstill. The mysterious cyclopean towers all across the remains of the city are in fact kinetic stores in which elevated stone blocks slowly sink to the ground from their original starting position, the friction steadily converting into a constant supply of electrical energy. A common feature of these Spires are the external feed connections – a portable Petro generator would be enough to kickstart the embedded motors within the towers, pulling the stone slabs back to the top via an electromagnetic lifting mechanism and thereby slowly returning dead areas of the Grindworks back to at least some semblance of functionality.

Anyone attempting to undergo the embossing today should know which towers belong to which Constellations, and what part of the Basalt Plain they supply. A power outage would interrupt the ongoing challenges – and reactivation is a perilously volatile prospect, because the memory system of the Grindworks would be left in an undefined state; was it just about to reward or to punish?



THE MILL

The Radiance and the Pathways, along with the Basalt Plain in the depths, run along an imaginary circle. Broad corridors – called Spokes – protrude towards the center. All of them are sealed. Many have tried to dig or blast through the meter-thick portals, but any application of heat or friction seems to fuse the fine-pored material into some kind of unknown polymer. Pickaxes just bounce off. A few months ago, Cartel Scrappers equipped with slow rotating drills penetrated about arm-deep over the course of several days without breaking through. The arrival of the Cockroaches that followed the sound of detonations in the area eventually forced them to retreat.

According to the most ancient of Exaltian legends, lying at the center of the Spokes is something simply referred to as the Mill. Supposedly, everything comes together here, where it is controlled and evaluated. The metaphysical human flour produced in the Grindworks is said to be baked into bread within the Mill. Whatever that means.

THE SLUICE

The heart of the Grindworks is hardly eager to cast its secrets into the hands of the filthy Clans. According to legend, whatever is hidden behind these colossal portals, each weighing several metric tons, will only unfold at the arrival of the 1000-year-olds, on the day they present their final judgement of mankind's future.

But even legends need to be fed with a log of wood every now and then so that the smoldering blaze of remembrance doesn't crumble into ash.

Maybe that's all the Sluice is, a log on the fire, or perhaps it's just a simple flaw in the system. The northernmost portal into the Mill is as tall as five men and easily wide enough to allow for a Bygone freight barge to pass through. From the outside, it looks like a tombstone slammed down on top of a grave, and whenever it moves no hinges are visible; it must be running on some hidden arrangement of rails. Scrapper runes have been painted across the surface with broad red brushstrokes, the central

image showcasing two human-sized stick figures, one of which has been scratched out with a black cross. Whoever the artist was, it's clear that he tried to make the cross look like bones by suggesting joints at each end. On the far right, sitting in a field of triangular shapes and stamps depicting a broken circle, letters the size of a palm spell out the word 'SLUICE'.

The portal unlocks and opens up at what are apparently random intervals, but anyone who has spent time in the Grindworks knows that nothing truly happens by chance here. A supposed coincidence only means that the underlying algorithm is still unknown. That kind of ignorance can be fatal.

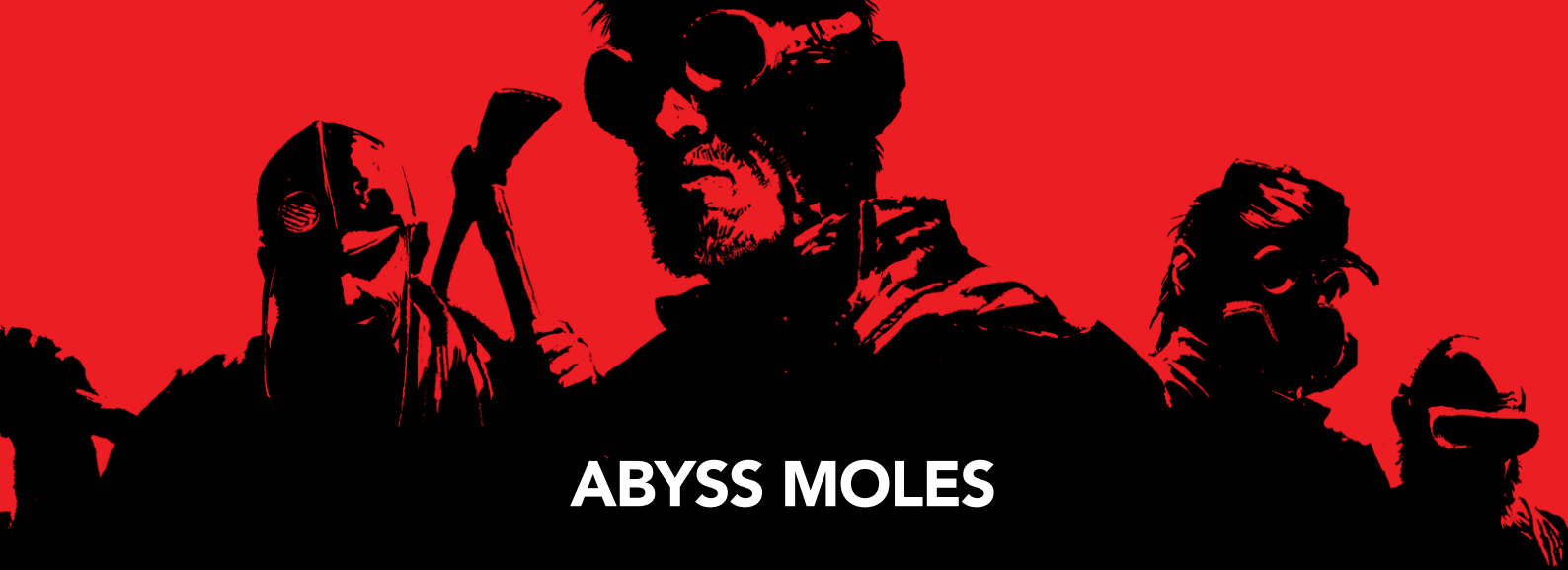
A rumbling noise can be heard echoing through the Pathways. Suddenly, the Sluice slides open a hand's breadth, light blue luminescence penetrating the steep gap, followed by a wave of sterile air that sweeps over those who have gathered in front of the portal. It is impossible to move further alone, but with a united application of force the entrance can be pried open just far enough for a man to squeeze through.

Behind it, a mesmerizing hall awaits, the jet black walls covered with golden strands that branch off in strict geometry to form a complex wickerwork. The blue light emanates from the ceiling and the floor and permeates the entire space; it swallows any shadow and facial features lose their contours and expression, leaving only the whites of the eyes to stand out like glaring marbles.

Another portal fills the wall on the other side of the great hall, but this one is closed for now. Only when exactly two people dare to enter this place at the same time does the game begin: the Sluice slams shut, and as soon as it clicks into place the opposite gateway opens.

THE GOLDEN CITY

The light abruptly changes, now revealing the warm orange of a soothing sunrise. The hall behind the portal is shrouded in pitch black nothingness at first, until, one by



ABYSS MOLES

Bosch knows what's up. If the Liqun Ambassador yapping in his ear for the last few years has such a rabid boner for those Exaltian ruins, there's gotta be more to the story than just some old-fashioned homesickness. Sure, he can have his men escort the Ambassador's finely dressed dandies into cannibal territory, rake in some cash and snatch a third of the haul in return – compensation for the psychological stress the Dwarven King must place his boys under, you know – but that's not enough. Let these Exalters clear the way and dance around a little with the Cockroaches while Bosch calls for his

Officer Brimstone to attend a secret meeting. Think about jumbling together a mining crew in Cavernis, load them up with some proper equipment, bolt cutters, heavy-duty drill bits, jackhammers, explosives, portable generators, you know what. Just a suggestion. But it sounds like an order.

Brimstone is back to work the week after. He puts a sergeant of his, Nibbler, in charge, and the gruff Scrapper is quick to assemble one of Sphincterburgh's legendary mining crews – the Abyss Moles. One month later and the team of highly trained Scrappers descends into the Radiance,

waiting just long enough for the Exalters who inhabited the area to disappear. Down below, the Abyss Moles immediately kick into high gear; what's with all this labyrinthine bullshit? They're not here to play games, Nibbler wants to get through the walls and floors, and he's not interested in keeping this place pristine like it was some famous world heritage site. Straight tunnels are best, and anything that can't be drilled just gets blown up, easy! What's with that damn music whining on in the background? Fuck it, just put on your ear protection and keep going!

one, light elements along the ceiling also awaken. From the central point, a mellow and welcoming morning mood spreads through the air.

A landscape – or, rather, a city set into a landscape of roving hills – emerges from the darkness on the floor. The diorama is rectangular, measuring at least ten meters wide and twenty in length, hundreds of square meters in total. A glittering river bisects the city; real water, or just a projection? There appears to be movement in the streets, like watching an ant colony break out from its protective hill. Vehicles scurry along the splendid avenues, and life fills every available space, yet everything is smothered in silence. The broad streets all extend like the spokes of a wheel from an innermost assembly of buildings that resemble the towers of Exalt above ground, except that the representations down here glisten like white marble, in contrast to the eroded and weathered structures above. Large squares and plazas are flanked by parks, surrounded by more spires and splendid arcades. Banners flutter in an imaginary wind.

If one touches any building, all they'll feel is stone and dust beneath their fingertips. The details, the movement, the green of the parks, all of this is just an illusion, a play of light transmitted by a battery of hidden projectors mounted in the ceiling. A handful of stories about the Grind-

works claim that some of these miniature buildings can be pushed in or pulled out, causing the ongoing projection to adapt, and the cityscape to drastically change.

Maybe all of this has to do with the algorithm, with the Price...

THE PRICE

But even if no one messes with the buildings, leaving the simulation to play out at its own pace, the flickering picture changes anyway. In the blink of an eye the veridian trees turn brown, shedding microscopic leaves that flake like dust through the streets, being tossed up again by speeding miniature vehicles. The tranquilizing light first diffuses, becoming softer, dimmer, until it switches over to shift towards a brighter and harsher hue – all in the matter of an hour at most. Winter is coming to the Golden City, and time is running out for its visitors.

Nobody has lived to tell whether this constitutes a trap or an opportunity. The only thing that is certain is that the portal leading outside will only open when exactly one of the two visitors enters back into the Sluice. If both are there, nothing happens. Two people enter, only one leaves. Consensus or struggle.

Whoever steps outside carries on the legend, the fate of the one that stays remains forever unknown.



FREE SPIRIT TECH

ENCRYPTED

Every Scrapper, Chronicler, or even just anyone looking for a lucky break rejoices anytime they get their hands on one of Exalt's leftovers – at least, for a few moments. Then the realization sets in: they can't get the damn thing to work. It wasn't enough for the artifacts to be locked away in the Grindworks, they also had to be calibrated to ensure any that were lost or captured could never be used against the inhabitants of the golden city.

All Free Spirit artifacts sourced from the Pathways have been integrated with nanite-based locking systems designed to interface with those who have undergone embossing in the Basalt Plain, and automatically gain the Biometrical-ly Encoded (8) Quality. Only those who have been embossed, Sleeper or human, or who have the technology or skill to overcome the security measures can use these items.

Constant access to the Pathways allowed the Exalters to dedicate vast amounts of resources to exploring the enigmatic and mercurial territory, an effort which paid off in spades by rewarding the city's inhabitants with heaps of artifacts and technological marvels. Even as the rest of the world allied against them, and the hordes standing in their way began to outnumber them ten-to-one, the tools available to Exalt's Imperatives still tipped the balance in their favor. But those days are over, the Grindworks left grazed and empty in the wake of plunderers and bandits who tore out every bit of salvage they could get their hands after the calamity that befell the empire.

These treasures were scattered across the world, with Praha Republika turning into a drop off point for stolen relics during the height of the City Wars. But not just there – artifacts from the Grindworks are now clutched in the hands of isolated enclaves and degenerated outcasts unaware of the power in their hands, or sealed away in hidden vaults never to see the light of day again. For the Exalters of today, only a few options remain to track down these powerful items.

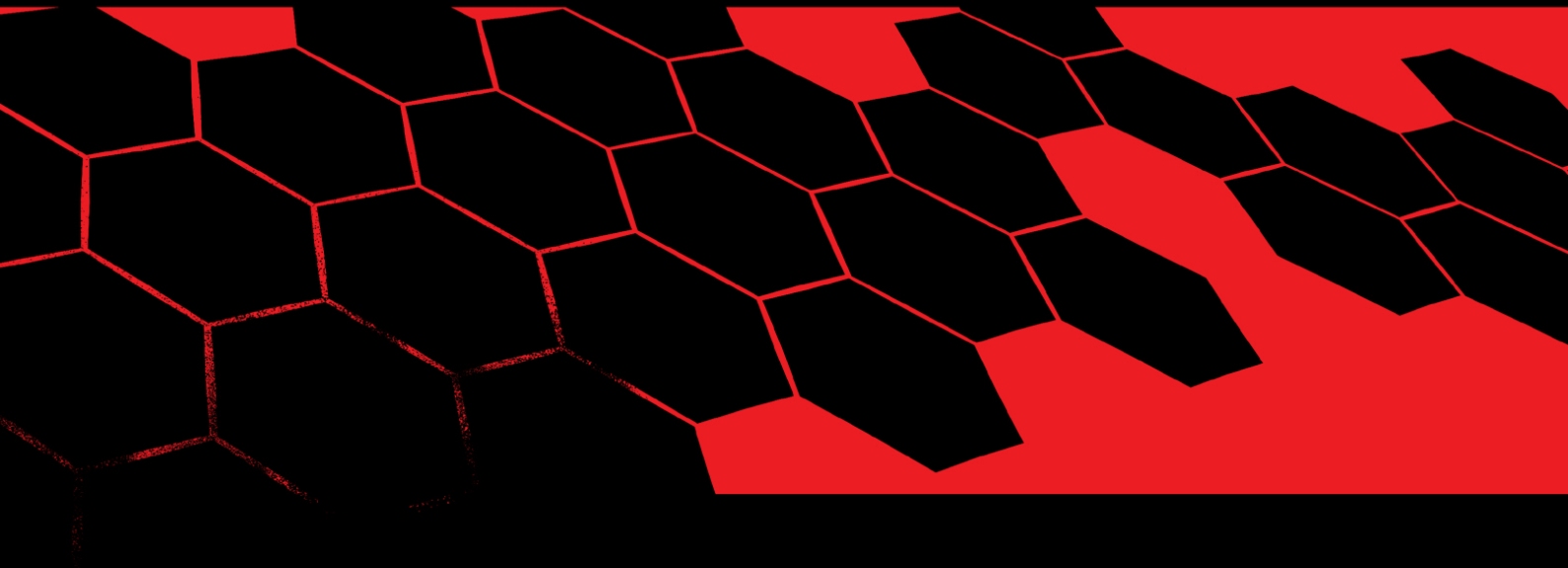
Vigils spread out from Liqua to reconnect with the precious sons and daughters of the lost civilization, and occasionally return bearing instruments of great significance – an event always met with profound humility – another piece of history making its way back into the hands of the chosen people.

Beneath Liqua, in the caverns and tunnels inhabited by Enceph and her remaining Halos, a stockpile is slowly growing, consisting of every item or weapon that will aid the Exalters in their eventual Exodus. It's only a matter of time before the collection reaches critical mass.

THE CHALLENGES

The gifts of the Grindworks were never given freely, instead, they were always tied to challenges generated deep within the core of the machinery. Only faint information of these automated test sequences survived the purge of the Exaltian civilization, some of them bearing ominous names like "The Trial", "Divinity", "Clairvoyance" and "Opportunity". Nobody living today knows how many of these challenges once existed, let alone which ones are still operational after a century of steady decline. Most sequences lie in dormant slumber, requiring not only raw power to be jolted back to life, but also additional knowledge, such as walking a predetermined track through a section of the Pathways, emulating the correct tune in a specific area, or pressing the correct configuration on a board of panels in the Basalt Plain, to even activate.

Tales of varying complexity travel among the ranks of the Exalters who concern themselves with the functionality of these challenges, some of which can only be solved through hermetic understanding of the Concepts in relation to their respective Alignments, or work in correspondence to logical parameters of arithmetic and geometry, while others require abstract thought, cunning, and keen visual perception to be solved accordingly. Each sequence is different, and often enough the difficulty will adapt over time, making a successfully solved test almost impossible to crack a



second or third time. What is unclear, however, is whether the difficulty of a sequence resets itself once a new challenger arrives.

Ariadnes have specialized in reviving these dead augmentations of the underground sprawl in hopes of unearthing boons that haven't been picked clean yet. But not every challenge yields physical results. There are enough documented instances, in which the Grindworks will offer riddles, insights, or even displays of imagery and sound to award success, often leaving the challenger to his own devices, with even more questions than answers at his disposal.

REIGNITION

The Grindworks needs a tremendous amount of voltage to galvanise its vast array of internal defensive systems, actuate its motive engines to shift the structures of the Basalt Plain, and operate a multitude of environmental controls. All of this hungrily drains the reserves away to nothing. When the great complex was in its prime, there was no issue – a dozen miniaturized nuclear reactors loaded the massive kinetic battery towers, the so-called Spires, with more than enough watt-hours to keep the engines below running all year round.

However, these devices are gone. Whether ripped from the ground by the Enemoi in their mad dash to scavenge the golden city as a sort of late revenge for the atrocities of the the City Wars, scrounged up by Scrappers in the years after, or simply through decades of wear and tear, the number of reactors fell to just one, the reserve power generator called the Fulgur. This tiny piece of Bygone magnitude was still enough to maintain emergency supply, and just a week of uninterrupted current exchange was enough to recharge the batteries for a Constellation to run through the Grindworks and make it out again in one piece. Then Zander, the luckless Scrapper, unplugged it one day and dragged his unbelievable find back to Justitian; no more power.

For the Exalters making the arduous pilgrimage back through hostile territory to the hallowed halls of their ancestors, whether looking for spiritual transformation, embossing, or to excavate unknown artifacts, this was a crushing blow. Without even the trickle of energy, the passageways and tunnels were now well and truly dead. Knowing that a harsh future awaited their creation, the designers of the city had prepared for this eventuality – it would just take a bit more work on the Clan's part.

Nestled at the base of each of the battery towers, hidden behind a sliding panel to protect the delicate circuitry beneath, is a jack featuring every power connection imaginable. E-Cube slots line up next to more primitive plug sockets and simple silver plates designed to extract kilowatts from inductive power cells. As such, every expedition to the golden city must also haul along its own electricity supply, whether a generator and enough Petro to run it, a brace of E-Cubes, or any other esoteric system allowing them to reset the Grindworks.

ANIMUS VOX

Each of the towering Spires, when the internal pulleys are wound up to their maximum height, can animate half of the Basalt Plain in a single cycle – although if more are charged up, the drain is spread out amongst the buildings and the duration of activation extended – along with powering up a single quadrant of the Pathways. Each Spire requires at least 300 Quanta to be fed into its internal systems through any method necessary to wind up the counterweights.

Due to the heavy generation systems required, several bases have been set up in the ruined buildings of the Inner Terrace, disguised from outside view and marked out by Exaltian symbols. Contained inside are small Petro generators capable of charging up E-Cubes for use on the Spires. Every month, another of these bases turns up empty, picked clean by Scrappers while no one's looking, requiring another group to haul out a replacement.



DELVER'S CREST

A chromium crest sits flush with the wearer's head, linked to a control unit adhered to the back of the neck providing both an anchor point for the magnetic fields keeping the delicate apparatus in position, and aiding in the computation required for the device's purpose. The ring, appearing solid in construction, features a brim of miniature cameras steadily capturing the environment around the user and sending the torrent of data back to the main unit for analysis. The predictive algorithms inside the system examine the scene in an instant, determining whenever a danger is approaching, whether it's a bullet about to be fired or a basalt pillar initiating a security protocol, ready to crush an intruder against the walls of the Grindworks. As soon as the threat is recognized, a series of laser beams are emitted from the crest in the direction of the oncoming force, granting the wearer an early warning system from any angle.

After a brief training period to learn how to best ex-

plot the crest, an Exalter using it gains a bonus of (+1) to their Passive Defense and +1D to their Active Defense from any attacks or threats less than 25m away at all times, unless they are attacked from directly above or below. The system is vulnerable to false-positives, as its behaviour is based on a simple image-recognition system, and so it is possible to fool it with artifacts that deceive electrical observation, or even a simple mirror.

ISFET'S ORBIT

This jet black circular object with a wide opening at its center grants the user the means of witnessing the Grindworks from an alternate vantage point. When the artifact is brought into the Basalt Plain, the outer edge of the opening suddenly comes alive with bright red light, thousands of tiny laser emissions projecting miniscule light

beams into the interior of Isfet's Orbit, allowing the user to track the companions of his Constellation within the expanse of the maze. Each member is represented via a blinking dot moving closer or further away from the red embers of the orbit. With this map at hand, the user is able to navigate the Grindworks and always know the position of his fellow Exalters.

However, the user must be wary of their surroundings; it's easy to get drawn into the flickering red light show hanging in the air between their hands, and ignore the dangers the labyrinth poses. One wrong step is enough to cause the Basalt Plain to respond. Unfavorably. Isfet's Orbit grants an Exalter +4D on their INS+Orienteering and INS+Perception rolls within the Basalt Plain, but -2D to AGI+Mobility and PSY+Reaction. If their body is lost along with the artifact, a rescue mission is immediately sent back into the Basalt Plain to recover it – the item is too valuable to be simply abandoned.

PASIPHAE'S STRIDE

A delicate exoskeleton woven from carbon fibres that attach to the frame of a wearer like spider webbing may seem unimpressive at first, until its potential is unleashed. Powered by a simple E-Cube, streaks of fluorescent lights converge from the limbs towards an area above the solar plexus. Exalters unfamiliar with the system can injure themselves during their first movement with ease, as the apparently spindly material suddenly solidifies and enhances their movements with predictive servos, granting significant extra power to kinetic performance at the cost of fine movement control.

While wearing Pasiphae's Stride the user adds +4D to BOD+Athletics, and adds 4m to their movement distance, but receives -2D to AGI+Mobility. However, these devices were specifically created to be used by Exalt's guardians, the Vigils, in rapid-response situations, allowing them to reach crisis zones within the city limits faster. As such, when the integrated system detects that the wearer is traveling beyond the borders of Exalt, the joints seize up and lock in place, instead giving a -4D penalty to BOD+Athletics and removing 4m from their movement bonus as they must now struggle to overcome the mechanical locks and gears.

PATTERN WEAVER

A glass monocular that covers one eye and an earbud, linked together by a gossamer-thin wire, make up the Pattern Weaver. Powered by the body-heat of the user,

the data analysis algorithm contained within the microscopic unit automatically searches for patterns in the area, whether it's the rhythm of a sound, the words chosen by a speaker, or the attacks of an enemy force. The information is relayed to the user through rapid fire speech or iconography appearing on the monocular or through the earbud. Additionally, the Pattern Weaver will attempt to automatically complete the pattern, choosing the most likely follow-up to a given sequence of inputs, allowing the user to use the prediction to their advantage. When wearing the device, an Exalter receives +2D to PSY+Cunning, along with +1D to INS+Empathy.

STARLINKS

For most Constellations, it's more than adequate to be able to talk and deliberate in person over a planning table, drawing up designs or exploring new ideas, then returning to their own homes for privacy and rest. Not all of them, though. For Exalter Constellations chosen to infiltrate enemy enclaves, or sniper teams designed to sneak deep into hostile territory and eliminate key targets, finding the chance to speak freely to one's allies can be an ordeal in itself. As such, certain groups are implanted with Starlinks, tiny transmitters inserted just over their vocal cords that link to speakers placed against the jawbone.

These devices, recovered from a cache in the Pathways, allow the user to subvocalize communications to their teammates – by simply thinking of a phrase, it is broadcast to the squad, completely eliminating the chance of being overheard speaking in dangerous situations. The problem; there is no way to discern between messages sent to the rest of the group and simple internal thoughts. As such, Starlinks can only be given out to the most closely linked of Constellations, who are comfortable potentially sharing every aspect of themselves for the sake of the mission.

WRAITH MODULE

The Chroniclers would claim to be the first pioneers of their sound-based weaponry, their screeching Vocoders and thundering Cascaders being the most dramatic modern examples of the technology. However, the painful volume and harsh frequencies used in their equipment are simply patchwork fixes to skirt their lack of understanding for the tools the Exalters once used to great effect during the City Wars. Based on the audio generators integrated in the Basalt Plain's testing apparatus, these spiked poles tipped with speaker systems output a deep, booming

soundscape, rhythmic thumping interlaced with intricate synthesized melodies, haunting vocals reciting unintelligible phrases, and electronic noise. When planted in the ground by an Exalter, using the small control panel to tune it to the appropriate wavelengths for the surrounding environment and setting a time delay that allows him to escape, it creates an impassable wall of disturbing, nauseating, and fear-inducing sound which renders an entire area inhospitable to living beings. Many of these artifacts still sputter on long after their batteries have been drained to a trickle, and are often the source of ghost stories and other tales about Exalt to this day.

When using the Wraith Module, the Exalter must first tune the device to the surroundings, using a Combination of INS+Perception (2) and INT+Science (3) to analyse the area and modulate it to achieve the desired effect. Following that, he has just (3) Rounds to rush out of the machine's 15m effective radius before it activates and fills the space with sound. Following that, anyone caught in range must roll a Mental Defense with a Difficulty of (6) against the device once per Round. Should they fail, they lose (8) Ego Points, and are struck with hallucinations and haunting visions conjured up by their mind's eye. If they fall unconscious within the Wraith Module's radius, they lose (2) Ego Points permanently when they reawaken, and can barely muster up the willpower to crawl to the edge of the effective range. Armor is useless against sonic attacks, but earplugs or other hearing protection can reduce the Difficulty by (-4).

GATEWAY

These items are given only to the most skilled of the Exalters, as only twenty-two were ever recovered from the Grindworks during the first days of the Clan's exploration into the underground complex. Taking the form of a flat, onyx-black disc, the Gateway is instantly recognizable to Palers and those with knowledge of the bunker-dwellers as an object akin to a Sun Disc, although nothing like it has ever been unearthed in a Sleeper's domain. Each of these items is branded by a Concept symbol etched into the top face, but appears otherwise inert when held. Only when in the possession of an Exalter embossed with the respective Concept, one to each of the recovered plates, does the Gateway spring to life. A quiet hum fills the air, and the symbol on its surface begins to emit a golden glow.

When each Gateway is activated, a corresponding surface located somewhere in Exalt suddenly lights up with the same symbol, representing a new section of the ancient

city which can be opened up and activated when the device is brought near. As such, each time a suitable explorer stumbles out of the Grindworks, their mindset shifted and altered to match the requirements of the remaining Gateways, they are quickly set on their new, most crucial task – exploring the city, navigating the many traps, trials, and tribulations that await those delving through its secret hallways, and finding the location their Gateway opens.

Over the course of Exalt's history, many of these items have been used to discover great gifts lying in disguise amidst the many towers, tunnels, and unexplored areas of the city. Each time a Gateway was successfully used, the entire Clan felt the benefit. Now, however, only a few remain in the hands of the Exalters. At least six plates are suspected to have fallen into the hands of the Cluster, while the others have disappeared without a trace. The Mentor, the Martyr, the Healer, the Mediator, and the Hermit remain. As of yet, the Clan has had no members emerge from the Basalt Plain with the Concepts and the skill to use them.

TYPE-97 RIFLE

After the Exalters met their end, the Judges were quick to capitalize on the opportunity to capture one of the sources of the Clan's power – the Steel Masters: three united tribes of masterful blacksmiths, craftsmen, and gunsmiths. However, whether out of loyalty to their old patrons or merely due to a lack of equipment, the Steel Masters until this day have never replicated the designs that they once provided to the Exalters, instead regressing their production of arsenals to crude black powder driven muskets. Effective, but not nearly as devastating as the old armaments used by Exalt's warrior squadrons.

The Type-97 is a self-loading rifle, capable of lobbing a dozen rounds downrange in the time it takes for a Protector to charge, load, aim, and fire two musket balls. Once, it was the mainstay of the Exalter forces pressed into battle against the irredeemable peoples of the Black Lung and their oppressive Sleeper masters, churned out by the Steel Master workshops in Ferropol and Exalt, using a gunpowder mixture designed by some long vanished Exalter Constellations. There are only a few examples left in working condition, but they still remain powerful weapons when placed into the right hands. Black Judges are in possession of at least three dozen of these along with numerous crates of ammo in pristine condition, acquired through unknown channels and dealerships.

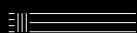
VOLT-LANCE



A blue glow on the casing indicates that the cartridge is ready for use, the powerful battery inside its polymer frame now brimming with power. The Vigil rams the spiked projectile into the mouth of the tubular Volt-Lance, before rapidly opening the firing chamber at the base of the weapon and pouring in a charge of gunpowder, packing it down before sealing the cover shut and pulling back the cocking handle. A long process for just a single shot, but as the Exalter takes aim and prepares to fire, he knows it was more than worth it.

When the cartridge is launched, the internal batteries surge to life, beginning to discharge along the metal spike protruding from the front end of the casing. When this spike penetrates into the flesh of a target, the circuit is completed, and electrical power begins to surge through the body, fraying the nervous system and delivering charring burns under the skin. The projectile can only penetrate armor with a rating of (5) or less, and will simply be deflected from anything more protective.

AEGIS HELMET



A metal collar sits on the shoulders and presses against the neck. Dozens of pinpricks of pain all around its circumference confirm that the device has connected to the wearer's system, driving a series of anchors into the skin to spread its nullifying payload. The world begins to collapse inwards as the holographic helmet display flickers to life, enhanced perception crumbles away to leave only blurred vision, an overbearing ringing in the ears, and the taste of iron filling the mouth. Movements slow to a crawl, and the constant sensation of power and energy flowing through the nervous system fades over into the rapid thump-thump of a panicked heart. Sudden inflammations and aches, no longer suppressed by the nanites flooding through the veins, flare up and draw a grunt of agony from the sore throat. Eventually, the effects stabilize, settle down, ease off. A shuffling, hesitant gait pushes the wearer past the red line of agony. No effect. It worked.

When the Aegis is placed onto a Sleeper's shoulders and the helmet forms its distinctive dome-shaped membrane of black monofilament, the probes that it pushes into the skin emit a short-range command signal to the nanites inside the wearer's organism, each microbic machine used as a relay to propagate the emission throughout the body. The purpose of the order is simple: shut down until the transmission stops. Instead of rushing to

and-fro to repair and enhance, the nanites are now simply carried by the bloodflow, passive and useless. In this state, the Sleeper no longer gains any benefit from his nanite enhancements, no more rapid healing, no more resistance to disease and infestation, no more memetic escalations. In this state, he is just as capable as a normal human – less, even, as the machines begin to pile up inside his body, risking severe harm if the Aegis is used for too long. Every hour that the device is active, the wearer takes (1) Damage, which cannot be reduced by any method. If the wearer takes any Trauma Damage through wearing the Aegis, it cannot be recovered.

Why would any Sleeper go through such dire disadvantages? Because with the Aegis in place and activated, they are indistinguishable from a normal human by technological means. Interferencers simply produce an annoying buzzing sensation in the ears, as opposed to the agonizing experience of crystallizing nanite blood ripping out from within the body. Optical systems which can use the metallic content of the body to distinguish Sleeper from man simply glance over the wearer and ignore him. This device is the only way for a Sleeper, or a Free Spirit, to enter or leave the Pathways intact. To date, only the Sleeper Prophet Daimondal has ever used one of these legendary devices on his forays through the Grindworks, but there are more of them, hidden in yet undiscovered RG facilities somewhere under the Earth. God knows where.

Additionally, in order to offset the lost capabilities caused by the nanite swarm being disabled, the Aegis incorporates a powerful analysis package that constantly examines the world around the wearer, showcasing the results in bright red glyphs on the inside surface. It is capable of solving intricate equations, performing complex structural simulations, and illustrating the optimal design solution for even the most difficult of problems. The only problem; the helmet does all of this and more at once, and reports the data in a format most could never hope to interpret. Only through study and practice can the user learn to decipher the script into anything usable, and it takes intense concentration to only pay attention to and remember the important details. While wearing the Aegis, the user can turn any INT+Engineering, INT+Science, or INT+Medicine roll into a Combination with INT+Focus or INS+Primal by spending (1) Ego Point. If he succeeds the first roll on Focus or Primal, he adds +2D to the second Skill, and carries the Triggers through as normal.



EXALTIAN WEAPONS & ARTIFACTS

Name	Effect	Enc.	Tech	Value	Res.
Delver's Crest	Enhances defensive reflexes, Biometrically Encoded (8)	1	V	3500	3
Isfet's Orbit	Improves navigation within the Basalt Plain, Biometrically Encoded (8)	1	V	50000	6
Pasiphae's Stride	Enables rapid movement at the cost of precision, Biometrically Encoded (8)	-	VI	25000	5
Pattern Weaver	Detects patterns in the environment and people, Biometrically Encoded (8)	-	VI	6000	3
Starlinks	Enables silent communication between a Constellation, requires surgical implantation, Biometrically Encoded (8)	-	VI	40000	5
Gateway	Opens unknown areas of Exalt when used by the right Concept, Biometrically Encoded (8)	-	V	15000	4
Type 97	Dist. 40/200m, Dmg. 13, Mag. 10 (7.62), 2 Slots, Salvoes (2)	2	IV	7500	3
Volt-Lance	Dist. 20/60m, Dmg. 2, Mag. 1 (Special), Enc 3, 1 Slot, Armor Piercing (5), Fatal, Extended Reload (3 Rounds)	3	V	10000	3
Volt-Lance Spike	Internal Cell(120Qt), Connector in the base fits an E-Cube	-	V	500	3
Aegis	Hides Sleeper nanites from detection, and also analyses the world and provides a deluge of information and assistance	2	VI	150000	-

BAPTISM
OPPORTUNITY
DIVINITY
THE CRUCIBLE
LIBERTY
DECONSTRUCT
CULTRIN'S ASC
DAEMONI
AIRVOYANC
DIVISION
REBIRTH
THE TRIAL
PATH OF THE
DIVISION
FOOTLINE

ONE AND SIX

