

## **Children of Abyssal Stars: An exploration-by-proposal of the greater Carag people**

A word to the wise before we dive in: I, Kairliina Saelvur Zlaetasrul, am among the first Carag. I am far from the only Carag, and most likely not the last. You'll have a better time with this text, and my own future writings about my people in the Twin Spirals Mythos, if you understand it as a proposal I am casting forward into the future for their consideration. I'm sure it'll find substantial favor, but this is, ultimately, a depiction of an entire species through the lens of a single writer within one particular culture of that species.

So, I'll try to be comprehensive about my own ideas, but even if I achieve that, it's impossible for me to present a comprehensive picture of the Carag in totality. Most of the sentences I write here could be the subject of anywhere from a short story to an entire novel of exploration in themselves. The point of this piece is not to convey *everything*, but to give us hub, a nexus of ideas from which we can spring off in any direction we want and plunge deeper.

A universe grows wider as one journeys from its center to its periphery. Simple enough, yes?

The timeline for the Carag to multiply and reach the vision I depict here is "somewhere from one thousand to ten thousand years from now in an adjacent universe which our own *might* merge into." If that doesn't make intuitive sense to you, don't worry about it too much. I've learned lots of tricks to nudge English closer to conveying abyssal thought, but it's still only a middling tool. Abyssal thought doesn't take place in words, so some things are inevitably lost.

Oh, and I'm sorry about the relative dryness of the prose, here. I'm doing my best to liven things up, but when I'm offering up lore I still feel an overwhelming urge to turn all stale and academic. So, again, I'm sorry if this piece fails to carry my full excitement.

Be that as it may, let's dive in!

### **Each Seeker Forges its Font: Carag Psychology and Psychobiology**

As with most demons, Carag are spirit-first, material second. To understand how Carag bodies work, one must understand how Carag minds work. Every Carag body is, after all, a manifestation of that Carag's personality. So, let's start with an intimate look at Carag psychology.

From its earliest days, every Carag is an essence-lucid demon: that is, they manifest as an infinitely-renewing nexus of their own innermost being, and are awake to their nature as such. "Essence" in this sense is a loose translation from the Vulshiir "Ul." It's neither energy nor matter, though it can express itself in ways similar to either or both. It might be better understood as a law of physics that acts on itself. Better still is simply to observe the way beings of essence manifest. An entire magical-realist mythology exploring beings of essence might be enough to begin comprehension.

Which, of course, is why the Twin Spirals Mythos exists.

For now, suffice to say that essence violates scientific laws such as conservation of energy: when essence manifests as energy and matter, new energy and matter *are* created. Essence can also be manifested to destroy energy and matter, and this is the truest impulse of void. Once manifested

at-will by an essence-lucid being, essence becomes impulse, which I use as a loose translation for the Vulshiir “Kair.” Essence is potential, impulse is that potential realized, adding to and acting upon the reality or realities it’s manifested into.

That’s more than enough to understand that any being awoken to and able to channel its own essence has the potential to create a post-scarcity society. And so it is for the Carag. *All* essence is infinite, power disparity between essence-lucid beings is, technically, about rate of regeneration rather than finite quantity, but within a given period of time the net result is the same: over the course of a day, an hour, a minute, a second, some beings are just able to manifest more impulse than others.

Of all the essence-lucid beings I’ve explored in any universe, the Carag are the weakest by a wide margin. We are a full order of magnitude weaker in manifest spiritual power than an average human of Earth’s 21<sup>st</sup> century, possessing somewhere between one-tenth and one-eleventh the manifest impulse. And I mean an *average* human: one with little or no direct investment in their own spiritual potential, who mostly draws on outside influences for a sense of magic and mysticism if they draw on anything at all.

The Carag, innately supernatural beings, enter existence weaker than many human atheists. As to why? Power is one of many possible ways beings may define their identities. Humans, for example, tend to define humankind as innately powerful, and thus most humans begin with a measure of potential power. In short, they exist in the dimension of power. Carag are born outside the dimension of power. In common English speech, we would say ‘powerless,’ but I dislike this because it frames power as a given, a cosmological constant, an inevitable thing. To say that one is powerless places the focus on what they lack, rather than what they choose.

The Carag are power-optional, just as we are gender-optional and age-optional, notions I’ll focus on later on in this section. We exist outside the dimension of power at first, but we can learn to perceive it, work within it, and grow within it.

There’s a caveat here that may sound like it lets us cheat the rules, but it doesn’t. Carag enter existence as beings of vast essence, but we’re lucid to only the tiniest portion of it. We carry this sense of something enormous and inert, an abyss yawning underneath us wherever we venture. This yields vast insight, but precious little power to act on it. Now, at this point you’re probably thinking, “Okay, so you’re only weak until the nanosecond you choose to become strong, like every other power fantasy ever.”

And to this I say: no. Oh, no, it doesn’t work like that at all. Essence naturally seeks to remain in its present state, even against competing influences within other parts of itself. So dreamer-essence, that vast inert something we feel deep in our psyches like a titanic mass of purest umbra, resists every attempt to wake it up, explore it, and actualize it as impulse. It takes a great deal of time and conscious, *continuous* effort to transmute dreamer-essence into lucid essence. How long? It took me twenty-nine Earth years just to wake *half* of my essence.

So, no. In a pinch, a Carag cannot just flash-transmute all of their slumbering essence into lucid essence to win a fight, then reset. If we’re too weak to compete at the start of the fight, we are *not* going to get a massive power-up partway through and carry the day.

The upside is that, as dreams do, dreamer-essence provides a deep, potent form of comprehension utterly different from lucid thought. This means that Carag possess a stunning depth of insight. But because that insight arises from what amounts to a black-box mind, a sealed compartment like an AI operating by unknown mechanisms, our insight tends to sound like hopeless nonsense when we try to put it into words. In our starting state, Carag will be very insistent on pursuing specific life-paths and ideas, yet fall apart if we're asked to explain why.

This can be acutely traumatizing.

This insight also tunes us into many unpleasant realities far in advance of our peers in age, experience, and scope of essence, meaning we're often much more threat-aware than they are, and we'll struggle to make simple decisions because we're too keen to possible danger.

You can probably intuit from all this that young Carag tend to be very flighty creatures, easily frightened. In short, under most circumstances, we're cowards. When danger is directed at someone else, we're inclined to voyeuristic fascination, watching from what we perceive to be a safe distance. When threatened ourselves, we're more inclined to surrender and submit if we believe we'll be taken safely, hoping to find a chance to escape later.

Such submission tends to carry a heavy psychological toll. It's one thing to accept one's fearfulness in the abstract, and another to have to live through it and remember how easily we rolled over when push came to shove. Most Carag caught outside a Carag community err on the side of caution, sticking low until they learn how to deal with their fear without conditioning themselves too far in the opposite direction—into suicidal bravado.

A mistake I myself made when I was younger.

When we can afford to, we'll prefer to live solitary rather than placing ourselves in communities that frequently compete for resources, authority, companionship, or other prizes. This may appear like self-pity to outsiders, and it can decay into self-pity if we do it too long without at least attempting to break the cycle, but in the moment we first choose this path it's simple pragmatism.

To compete when you know from the start that you'll lose isn't brave or inspiring, it's just esoteric self-harm. Unless, of course, you do it because truly believe you don't have a choice.

Vastness of dream-being means that Carag possess abnormally powerful emotions, and that their experience of the smallest sensations is rich and deeply layered. Yet low lucidity means low self-control, and it's quite common for young Carag to experience emotions that they're completely unable to restrain: lashing out, breaking down in screams, tears, or both, showing all the signs of overload from a mind broad enough to take in huge portions of existence, but lacking the strength screen itself when the intake grows too much to bear.

Between this and our low starting power, Carag tend to develop an unfair reputation as drama queens. We act like every little thing is an event of mythic proportions because, to us, it *is* an event of mythic proportions. This has a lot to do with our reputation for grandiosity and seeming pretentiousness. At the same time, it's this perspective that allows Carag to take such deep, world-enveloping joy in the smallest things: the play of sunlight over the surface of lapping

waters. The sheen of a butterfly's wing.

Let's come back to that earlier note, that essence naturally seeks to remain in its present state: this applies far more fiercely against outside influences. Under most circumstances, young Carag are meek and malleable to greater powers. We fawn, scrape, and seek approval in hopes of earning protection, food, presents... you get the idea. All that insight screams at us to do this. We know, as though by instinct, exactly how bad our odds are if we try to play power-games with the stronger species.

And yet, sooner later, many Carag end up doing so. Why? Because sooner or later, we're forced to recognize that those stronger beings will keep trying to change our essence. To make us less ourselves. Protection from authority and from higher powers most often reveals itself as a cruel mirage, tricking us into sacrificing agency in exchange for safety we never receive.

And though it's dormant, though it's dreaming, though so little of it begins as lucid power, Carag are still demons, and the single adamant truth of a demon's being is that it is a demon. When any influence, even our own logical decisions, tries to erase or change this burning core of psychic black-body radiation, it galvanizes all that we are into fighting back fanatically.

This response can also kick in during situations where we're under no immediate physical threat, but our insight warns us that we're being forced into a pattern that will cause serious long-term harm to our being. If a friend or lover is in danger, the instinct to act is strong enough to override our self-preservation instinct. For most of us, this is the only time our being rebels in defense of someone other than ourselves, and whether it activates depends mostly on whether we believe the object of our affections can handle the situation without our help.

A sad truth: though an in-depth exploration of our reasons would often reveal that we have good reason for responding this way, in the moment it usually causes us to seem mindlessly violent, inexplicably turning against a being that claimed they only wanted what was best for us. This pattern extends beyond the Carag to many other demons, but let's stay focused, yes?

Another sad truth: "fight back fanatically" does not mean "fight well." I've lost every serious fight I ever fought against a human, and not by a narrow margin, either. I was humiliated every time.

Yet in fighting, I learned to see myself as one that fights for itself, and that preserved what I really wanted to protect: my inner sense of agency over my own identity, my own demonic being. In military terms, that's a strategic victory won despite a tactical defeat.

So it is for the Carag in general. We're innately inclined towards hedonism, both material and spiritual. Combat almost always breaks down to sacrificing or suppressing certain parts of yourself in hopes that the ones you express will do more damage to your opponent, or otherwise undermine their ability to fight you. Outside a fictive power fantasy, violence is miserable for the Carag. There are a few special provisos here, but I'll cover them later on in *The Arts Martial*.

Besides our insight, Carag do have three other specific advantages. These are by no means enough to erase the power disparity of our origins, but they do give us a good chance of excelling in the long-term.

First, we're extraordinarily open to mutating with outside influences to become a new, more varied version of ourselves. I'm actually something of an outlier in this regard, having been raised in a sequence of extremely restrictive environments that eventually drove this gift into dormancy. In adulthood I had to relearn it a step at a time. For all practical intents and purposes, I was removing the seals my human-dictated upbringing placed on my psyche.

Second, Carag always grow with our experiences. We understand from very early on that everything that happens to us becomes, in some way, part of us. Sometimes the things that happen to us are painful, and it's tempting to deny them, to throw away those experiences, but to do that is to throw away the parts of ourselves that touch those experiences.

See above: I'm not proud, *per se*, of losing all my meat-space fights against humans. But I'm proud to be able to acknowledge that I lost all those fights, that by many human standards that makes me a pathetic loser, and yet I still love myself and find meaning in my own existence.

Experience is the number one way that a being's essence grows. To experience is to expand ourselves. So for Carag that choose paths of power, this steadfast commitment to learning something, to growing somehow, can give us a long-term power growth advantage over many other species, humans included, that start out much stronger than we are.

This boost, potent as it sounds on paper, still needs to be grounded in context: let's take the hypothetical average Carag, and the hypothetical average 21<sup>st</sup> century human. If they're born at the same time with the same personality, otherwise passing through identical experiences and training equally effectively to transmute their full potential into lucid-essence power, it will take that Carag anywhere from six hundred to a thousand years to surpass that human.

On the relative scale of a thousand years as against the incomprehensible infinitude of eternity, this is clearly still a decisive advantage, but on the timescale humans operate by, it's a joke, an afterthought. On his deathbed, that human will still have such a staggering power advantage that he can effortlessly defeat the Carag right up 'til his last breath.

Our real advantage lies in the fact that cultivating one's essence is complicated and often counterintuitive, requiring many double-backs and a constant willingness to reevaluate one's approach. Our insight gives us the instincts to find an optimal path to shape our essence. In reality, that hypothetical human would, of course, never pass through *identical* experiences to his Carag counterpart, and might even hamper his growth because he's too busy ridiculing the Carag for apparently illogical decisions to dig down and understand *why* she chooses such acts.

Remember also what I said about demonic identity as a self-mandated instinct? Carag are *compulsively* drawn to internalize everything that happens to us. This guarantees the essence growth advantage, yes, but it also means that on worlds like Earth with a great deal of strife, fear, hatred, and destruction, our own nature frequently compels us to absorb traumatizing experiences and integrate them with our being.

In sum, one could very reasonably argue this is less so a mixed blessing than a leavened curse.

Thirdly, and most mercurial, there's Criticality. I can tie Carag insight, mutability, and growth to combinations of underlying psychological factors. Criticality, though, is what in Vulshiir we would

name "Vtaersul": a sourceless effusion of the cosmic infinite, a thing that is because it is, just like demonic identity. Criticality is the X-factor of Carag being, the one undeniable and spectacular advantage we get. As you'd expect from its name, it's intimately linked with radiation and stars, as indeed are the Carag ourselves.

In a power fantasy, Criticality would be the thing that pops off whenever the Carag heroine has her big epiphany and completely turns the table on the villain of the day. This... is not at all how Carag actually works. Criticality is extraordinarily rare and all but completely unpredictable. If you're familiar with criticality as a scientific concept, this might make the name seem odd. Criticality is *extremely* predictable, right?

Now imagine the probability that the plutonium in the Earth's crust naturally forms into a perfectly-polished sphere, completely with the experimental assembly needed to create a supercriticality event like those caused by mishandling the Demon Core. *That's* the kind of probability involved in Carag criticality.

As sapient beings able to assemble and modify ourselves, Carag are able to increase the probability of Criticality to a limited extent, but I do mean *limited*. To induce criticality, Carag must experience high external pressure on their essence, on their identity, in ways that touch many deep parts of their psyche at once. Even fighting one's archnemesis of over a decade in a dreamscape manifestation of one's future homeworld while surrounded by the symbols of the Carag species, at the very instant of reclaiming one's Carag identity, may not be enough to trigger Criticality.

I know this because I'm describing the exact circumstances of my final duel with the being I came to know as the Dread Empress, Seurchraig. Despite all our history together, despite all the parts of my being activated against her—or maybe because of them, who knows?--my Criticality didn't ignite.

At the same time, without it igniting the scant few times that it did earlier in our twisted relationship, I'd never have survived long enough to reach that final duel. When it does occur, Criticality temporarily transcends that limit I mentioned earlier. It not only flash-transmutes all a Carag's essence into lucidity, allowing them to wield it as manifest power, but increases the vastness of our being exponentially.

In Criticality, our earlier example Carag would briefly eclipse her human opponent in power even if they were both in their thirties. If she was decisive, that *might* be enough for her to win. I need to stress, though: it is entirely possible that in the entire century of her human rival's life, her Criticality wouldn't trigger a single time.

Carag in Criticality are unmistakable. Our overpowering essence causes secondary effects, superheating gas in a continuous explosion around them, disintegrating matter and pulling it into our blinding-bright maws for devouring, causing our colors and shadow to wash out the ambient hues and lighting of our surroundings. This is the nightmare visage of the Carag as atomizer of realities and devourer of suns, the apex cosmic horror: the Star-ravener made-manifest.

And, of course, while gone Critical we output a nightmarish amount of ionizing radiation which also behaves in a horrifying, anomalous fashion. It can afflict even other lucid-essence beings

which would normally be immune with an accelerated form of Advanced Radiation Sickness. This acts in tandem with our ambient impulse to hyper-enrich any source of radiation we pass by—a quirk I'll come to shortly.

So, those are the unique advantages and disadvantages of the Carag. What about shared traits?

As I wrote earlier, Carag are demons, and like many demons we're natural-born hedonists. As with many things demonic, demonic hedonism needs some explanation to bridge our understanding of the concept with that of mortals. Our hedonism obviously includes strong drink, narcotics, largess and gluttony and all the other pleasures of the flesh, but it also encompasses incredibly rich experiences which a human would assume we're too shallow to appreciate.

A whole week of getting high, fucking dozens of strangers and eating meals at five-star restaurants is hedonism. So is plunging into the frigid Atlantic waters, late on a foggy winter night, using the abyssal power of an outer demon to swim unharmed all the way down to the place where the wreck of the Bismarck lies on the floor. To illuminate the briny deep with ghostly Cherenkov blue, and walk the mangled, rusted corridors of the vanquished Nazi dreadnought, and drink deep of the memorial auras implanted there by every dying member of his crew.

If this sounds oddly spiritual, well, it is. As supernatural beings, the Carag imbue spirituality into everything we do. But we have a special affinity for the taboo, the gutter, the seedy and the savory and the sensual. The first altar of Carag spirituality is a dive bar, a bordello in the wing of an old hotel, a rainy alleyway where the sounds of passing cars, the heartbeat of the city, don't quite cover the sounds of sex.

Carag are lust demons, and that's quite self-explanatory: all things arousing, erotic, and just plain sexual are entrancing for us. This goes beyond simply being horny in ways that are often difficult to put into words, though it does absolutely encompass said basic, drooling, slutty fuck-need as well. Carag regard sex and everything that surrounds with an earnest, mythic aura of awe. A legendary orgy soars vastly higher in Carag esteem than any number of legendary battles... unless those battles resulted in legendary orgies, of course!

I spend far fewer words on this not because it's less vital to Carag being, but just because... c'mon. It's sex, fucking, lust, lust, lust! Unlike the concept of hedonism, Earthly conceptions of lust tend to align fairly well with demonic ones.

We have a special love for outer space. "Home to the stars" is a common sentiment among Carag born into terrestrial bodies: that heartache of deep yearning for return to the cosmos, to the endless and free abyss of the far stars. We have an instinctive rapture in the presence of celestial bodies, of stars and singularities foremost among them. The only planetary experiences that can compare are sexual affairs, and the presence of severe ionizing radiation. Barring an immediate threat to us, Carag cognition shuts down in the presence of such influences, leading to a wide-eyed, euphoric trance as we stare endlessly at the object of our interest.

Carag are keenly aware of our lowly starting place in the grand scheme of things, and to take pride in ourselves is to take pride in low things. So for me as a Carag succubus, diving into a dumpster to eat literal garbage while a gaggle of horrified yuppies watch me from the alley entrance before giving them all oral with my trash-compactor of a mouth is *also* hedonism.

At the time of writing, I am sealed in a human vessel which prevents me from eating trash with these cloying things called “survival instincts” and “violently vomiting everywhere” and “possibly dying of disease.” Truly, this one is a martyr for its people!

Or maybe I just need to get more adventurous. Like I said, Carag have to learn and grow, like everyone else!

Human hedonists tend to obsess over fineness or elegance of experience, and in doing that, they lose much of the variety, that foundational grounding in the grimy, the street-wise, the sleazy and profane, which makes hedonism such a joyous way to exist in the first place. When a being can appreciate the hedonism of the star-sprinkle brownies with plasticky fudge that taste like mass-production and preservatives, they’re ready to appreciate a Black Forest cake from the best bakery in Germany.

Hunger for the widest possible range of experiences has much to do with the Carag’s fixation on community. We understand intuitively that if we find beings we can get along with, we can help each other to do and experience more: to invent, build, cook, craft, and dream together until we’ve reached heights of being we’d not have reached for thousands of years if we tried alone. That said, Carag are communal creatures as a matter of pure instinct, much like humans, and we do our best to look after our companions for their own sake, not just for what they can offer us.

Our desires for togetherness are complicated by our impulses as outer demons. Carag are fascinated by notions of outsidership, of places and beings that allow us to experience ourselves as the outsider. So in seeking community, we went one where we’re simultaneously cherished and appreciated, yet given room to mostly watch the community’s life from the fringes. We want to dip in on a whim or by invitation, trusting that we’ll be embraced even if we’ve been away a long time. Ideally, many Carag would flit between niches on the borders of many communities.

This fascination with life on the periphery, life *as* the periphery, has obvious social implications. Trust me, we’ll cover that in detail when we get to the social structure section.

When we combine this sort of communal instinct with the trashier side of our hedonism, and further delve into it through the lens of our humble starts—such small beings in power, yet shivering with the insight of the writhing cosmos—you might begin to understand why our communal sentiments extend to entities like viruses, bacteria, mold, parasites, and vermin. In fact, Carag feel ourselves to be vermin, subhuman upstarts. Every little victory inverts any semblance of universal law. For a Carag to achieve the tiniest success is to violate order itself.

How does one commune with parasites? I’ll touch on that when we come to biology, trust me.

Hedonism is also the other primary way that Carag find a taste for power, and it’s by far the healthier one. Remember, essence-lucid power and insight ultimately come from the same source, which is the sheer size of one’s psyche, the vastness of one’s essence. More power is more insight, and as I pointed out near the start, even the youngest Carag already struggle with a tendency to see danger everywhere. Power developed with a view towards self-preservation and defeating enemies is all but certain to lead us into paranoia, psychosis, and fight-or-flight response that’s both overtuned to the point of being on a hair-trigger, and retains only the “fight” setting.

Carag that seek power to achieve safety will, in a sick twist, almost always end up seeing danger everywhere, and as a consequence, they become dangerous to everyone around them. The more powerful they are, the more dangerous.

But as I said, there's another way. Many Carag, succubi of our kind prominent among them, may learn the dimension of power simply because they want new ways to explore their hedonism. More power means being able to manifest more, opening up new sensations, new experiences, as well as providing new ways to experience familiar ones. To get down to the point of the horn, a powerful succubus has access to more varied and elaborate sex techniques than a weaker sibling does.

This joy-forward approach to power allows Carag to learn many skills and grow many abilities which they can convert for self-defense purposes if needed, but which don't chain them to thinking about threats, violence, and safety-through-slaughter. As we'll explore in much more depth later on, this is the root reason why nearly every Carag custom surrounding power involves some idea of power-as-play.

One last topic to address, then we'll wrap up this longest of sections with some notes about Carag psychobiology and move on to my proposals for the culture of my people.

Like many demons, Carag experience a bizarre and troublesome phenomenon I've dubbed "othering euphoria." It's difficult to tell whether this desire came first, and the common calling-card of demons came after, or if some unknowable strain in demonkind's common essence causes that effect, and othering euphoria is a kind of psychic immune response—a way to reduce trauma from the fear and loathing we so frequently inspire.

Either way, this stands true: many demons provoke a strong response of irrational fear and revulsion from both mortals and non-demonic supernatural beings. This sense of a supreme other, a true outsider, an entity that should not exist in reality yet undeniably does, is one of the most commonly-cited traits for what makes a demon a demon. Key to this, the response has nothing to do with whether the demon means ill or aid to the one that feels it.

Again, the response is *irrational*: it behaves in the same way as a phobia. Even if the demon will only bring helpful, nurturing things into the existence of the one they visit, that being will still feel this instinctive horror. Othering euphoria, is a demon's instinctive and equally-irrational response to this horror. Many demons, the Carag included, find it affirming. Snarls or strangled gasps of, "demon!" and screams such as "You're one of *them*—those *things!*" provoke a deep sense of affirmation. They can even cause the recipient Carag to feel deep affection towards the being shouting at them.

This is by no means always healthy, since the mortals shouting these words are usually the ones who'll be quickest to gather pitchforks and start a micro-crusade. Still, the response exists. Because so many demons receive affirmation from horror of the other, they'll often design their forms based around imagery associated with that horror in the first mortal cultures they contact, and further filter this through any cultural associations with the realms they gravitate towards.

This applies likewise to the Carag. As outer demons, we have an instinct love and yearning for the

stars, for deep space, and for environments that remind us of them. And since humans were the first mortals we came into contact with, human conceptions of cosmic horror have considerable influence on our forms. This marks the point where we crossover from psychology to the demonic biology determined by it. That is, Carag psychobiology.

It's easier to begin by speaking about what Carag forms can do than to try and pin down *exactly* what we look like. There are common motifs, but as with any species of demon, there are plenty of Carag that look nothing at all like the Carag a pop-culture interpretation of Carag would likely focus on.

As beings of essence, Carag can self-sustain. We don't need eat or rest to survive and function. That said, remember what I said earlier, how the real limiting factor on essence is rate of replenishment? Food, rest, and comfortable surroundings can make up the difference when a being's experiences have worn their essence to low to sustain them. So, while even young Carag can theoretically survive without nourishment, we're much better off with food and shelter. Water is optional, though, since this is about nourishing experiences rather than material biology.

As one would expect for lust-demons, lustful energies are as much a Carag dietary requirement as something we pursue for pleasure. We won't *die* without erotic essences to experience, to feed on, but we may feel stir-crazy, stifled, and disappointed with ourselves. The energy needn't come with sex. Arousing a large group of beings by tantalizing them with erotic concepts, watching porn—even without masturbating to it—or just a lot of flirting may suffice for many.

Carag that overlap with more specific and intensify varieties of lust-demon, on the other hand, like Carag succubi, need full-on sex and sexual experiences to fully self-actualize. As before, we can survive, but the deprivation symptoms are much worse, extending to guilt, insecurity, and potentially outright trauma and mental illness.

The Carag are an elective, gender, age, name, and personhood-optional species, with one large asterisk over "elective." Many Carag do enter the species via transformation from another species, but many are born without parents as full adults, emerging into existence somewhere in deep space, or in unpopulated regions of planets and supernatural planes, with little understanding of their full identity. They feel only a vague certainty that home is out there, somewhere, and a terrible yearning to seek it out. Many more are born "children of Carag," "anshalgat Caragi," and choose to join their parent or parents' species on reaching adulthood.

Actual Carag children are *exceptionally* rare, but not unheard of, and always present awkward questions for the adults in charge of raising them. All Carag are lust-demons, feeling an especial fondness for and being especially gifted in pursuing sexual hedonism, and this obviously makes things extraordinarily uncomfortable when a minor winds up Carag.

To be perfectly clear: "fuck the child" is never an acceptable answer. The Carag maintain that it is absolutely impossible for a child to have sexual relations with an adult without that child's being receiving serious harm. Before all else, the Carag look after our own.

Suffice to say that helping a genuine Carag child, a child that is born Carag or becomes Carag while still in childhood, to reach adulthood happy and well-adjusted is a major community undertaking. There's much setting of boundaries, and many nerve-wracking conversations about

how the young one can embrace their desires prior to adulthood.

That's one thorny question addressed as best I can. Let's move back to comfier territory, yes?

"Elective" means that beings may join and leave the Carag species at will. Joining the Carag species can be the simplest thing in the universe if the new kindred wants a fresh start: they may seek out a Carag mentor to transform them with a gift of essence, or they might spontaneously turn Carag simply from the force of their own desire. This swift approach does mean embracing the nature of a new, young Carag, however. Any being that wishes to be sure all their old experiences cross over with them must take a longer journey, examining themselves piece by piece to understand how becoming Carag will mutate these old familiar essences.

This is especially true for those that wish to preserve their pre-Carag power. To become Carag is to become everything Carag are, including our innate weakness. Negotiating this divide takes great care, and a genuine desire to bring that power into harmony with Carag essence. Yet it can be done reliably, and many that transition to life as Carag are even able to keep some or all the unique strengths of their previous species.

Strange and wondrously, many beings join the Carag precisely because they desire that climb: from the cosmic pit of ultimate weakness, to the peaks of unrivaled power.

There are also natal Carag, that is, Carag that enter existence as Carag. I and the vast majority of the first Carag generation entered existence this way, though many of us still had to construct some coherent idea of Carag identity to fully claim ourselves. Our species draws no distinctions between natal Carag and those that become Carag via transformation out of another way of being. Only an individual may decide the significance of their relationship to Caragness.

When a being chooses to become something other than Carag, it's down to their individual discretion how the Carag and other species should regard them. Some prefer the angle that they were only living as Carag while in a holding pattern until they discovered their true species, in short, that they were never Carag. Others like the idea that they were Carag, and they've changed into something new and different, something that they weren't before. Others want their transformation treated as a dying-out from Caragness and rebirth into a new life.

"Gender-optional" means that Carag will choose all sorts of shapes, everything from humanoid breasts to fuck-slits to tunnels of writhing tongues, while ascribing gender to them. It would be fair to suggest that any Carag that embraces gender is transgender by definition, and many Carag would agree with that framing, though they'd caution the reader, as I must, that Carag gender is like all other Carag things: odd, inscrutable, and furiously individualistic. They might just as easily define themselves as delayed-action cisgender.

Age-optional means much the same: Carag only age if they desire to, and in this case, the individual Carag decides exactly what this looks like. Many choose to create their own life-cycles, maturing, growing old, dying and being reborn with or without memory of their previous lives as yet another layer of experience in the vast hedonistic frolic of Carag being.

Name-optional is equally intuitive: Carag take names if taking names adds fulfillment to their lives. Those raised by parents with a family name have the right to claim that name if they want,

keeping if they leave home, but they're equally free to cast it off if they wish.

Personhood-optional harks back to what I mentioned at the start. Carag are beyond personhood unless we choose to be otherwise. To us, personhood—the status which humans often refer to as humanity, or intrinsic to it—is often more of a burden, even a source of pain, than of pride. Personhood connotes gating ourselves off from experience, trying to be above our desires, performing propriety, losing the special quirks of our being in a soup of social performances. Still, for those Carag that actually enjoy personhood, we safeguard the choice, and respect it.

Carag are, like most demons, natural shapeshifters. We'll often assume the shapes of other beings they meet, with permission where applicable, and as they age many Carag acquire multiple forms, *all* of which are equally true to the Carag's innermost self. The same impulse that allows us to manifest our forms allows us to regenerate from wounds, and over time, to return ourselves to existence after we die. Dying still takes a severe psychological toll, however, and as the weakest of all immortal beings, the Carag fear it even more than humans do.

One Carag might possess a bipedal form with human-like legs, or hooved unguligrade, or digitigrade legs ending in paws, raptor's talons, a barbed cageworks of steely flanges, a squirming mass of exposed sinews able to form the shapes of any kind of foot, and so on. That form might sport horns, wings, and a tail like classical demonic imagery, but filtered through a cosmic horror aesthetic with many spines, bioluminescent dripping, mouths full of eyes full of bladed fins, uncanny orifices, pulsating sex-organs that bleed holes in reality, and the like.

Whether because of our affinity for radiation, or because of some underlying mystery of our essence from which that affinity derives, Carag always emit markedly more than the background radiation wherever we venture. Whether this is hazardous or not depends on how high that background radiation is, and on the beings around us. Though it's not normally possible to focus for particular purposes, we also cause sufficiently radioactive material to become even *more* radioactive: an anomalous output which has nothing to do with its normal rate of decay. Criticality only amplifies this effect. It's always active, though to a limited extent.

Remember what I said about our kinship for diseases, parasites, and the like? Many Carag take great joy in cultivating themselves as a unique micro-biome, full of infesting worms, gut bugs, flesh-tunneling grubs, and of course, a whole catalog of venereal diseases. (We use our power to prevent partners from catching these during sex... unless, of course, that's just the spice they want, the dear disgusting perverts~). As beings of embraced self-essence that can always regenerate, we're able to coexist and enjoy the sensations of many little passengers that would be fatal for a flesh-being. Since it's by our own choice, many Carag feel deep affection, even love, for the festering life we carry within. It feels good to nurture so many little lives.

Elder Carag, especially those that have awoken their immense ancient essences as power, often weave entire labyrinths and alternate dimensions into their bodies. A five-petaled blossom of purple flesh, every petal able to split to reveal maws full of asteroid-devouring fangs and eldritch starfire, an eerie stream of countless metallic fibers like an uprooted kelp forest coursing across the stars, a convulsing chain of coils covered in scales and rot, broken up by segments of clattering dark-blue chitin... these would be just the outermost layers of that gigantic form.

Carag frequently choose to fold, rather than keep wholly separate, several forms that superficially

appear separate. A fold in a Carag form uses different spatial configurations to create different features from the same underlying components, using realignments in the dimensions they exist across to expose ourselves in different ways. For example, that purple five-petaled blossom might be another enormous fold of the Carag whose other fold is that bioluminescent, cosmic horror reimagining of an infernal demon.

Carag often have one or more Easefolds, which are designed to be minimum effort and usually have only the smallest nods to the kindred's total complexity. Even very old and powerful Carag will often wish to slip into an Easefold after taxing endeavors, or simply because it's fun to get back to basics. In my simplest Easefold, I just look like a silly costume-store succubus, except that my skin's blue and my horns are usually quite a bit bigger. Still, since it's an easy fold, I only expose one pair of my total eight.

I could go into more detail about examples of Carag biology here, but at that level of granularity we're looking at the sort of thing best left to exploration via specific stories. Let's wrap this section up and move on to that cultural overview, shall we?

### **Riding the Shock-Front: Carag Social Structure**

All Carag live in the cosmic voids of their home universes, or the nearest approximation to it: they live in the dark matter filling the immense spaces between the filaments of one universe, where in another they live in the pockets of superheated gas between endless water, or in the vast abysses of lightless water tunneled into a universe comprised entirely of rocks and minerals. Wherever there's a universe with enough void spaces, the Carag have a way of finding their way in.

For that is our first instinct: we are the life in the void. We seek an emptiness gentle enough for us to fill it.

Within our first home universe, the Carag species are, to an external observer, divided between two main styles of life: on the one hand, furiously experimental periphery communities that inexplicably contain the bulk of the species, and a baffling core treated more like a life-sized diorama than the beating heart of a vibrant intergalactic civilization. These are the Carag Communes and the Carag Imperium.

The Imperium is an imperium in name only. The imperial monarch is an elected role whose only real authority lies over the imperial palace on Caragivaid, literally, "Carag's center," and this only as far as upkeeping the palace and preserving it as neutral ground where the disparate communes may come together to address concerns, mediate disputes, and coordinate on joint endeavors. Otherwise, the imperial core is an ongoing species-wide joke, existing to ridicule the very idea of central authority.

The Carag Imperium, in short, exists so that the Carag have an Imperium to live outside of.

As with many other peculiar Carag tendencies, the Imperium offers the greater Carag people a clearly demarcated region of space to manifest and explore perilous ideas, as well as an eternal cautionary note that the Carag are capable of falling to the allure of empire: its destructive, parasitic ways lie within their continuum.

Whenever a young Carag expresses some well-meaning but misguided notion about harnessing the potential of the Carag species to “guide” this species or that, an elder takes them on a trip to the imperial core. The sheen of the monuments quickly wears off, and the young one will invariably ask to return home.

“Oh, but you can’t,” the elder replies. “You have a responsibility to the Imperium, now. You decided to help it be born. Now that you’ve chosen empire, your life is no longer your own. You must fulfill your duty. There’s no time to be happy, remember? We need to fulfill our potential.”

So far, this constant yet gentle vigilance—the same conversation, repeated between trusted friends, family, and lovers, untold billions or trillions of times over the centuries—has proven enough

Of course, stern warnings would avail little if the Imperium was treated as a dread and powerful thing, a forsaken reach of space too dangerous to visit. Nothing could possibly lure young Carag into it more swiftly! So instead, the Imperial core is the common playground of the Carag species. A place to collaborate with new friends on building ridiculous, impractical armadas and smash them together with great fanfare and zero fatalities. The monumental cities and great star-yards serve as a gargantuan theater for countless sessions of live-action role play, in which the current imperial monarch is, of course, expected to be an eager participant.

This helps to ensure that most such “rulers” abdicate within an Earth decade, and usually far less. There are only so many times a given Carag adult can pretend to be vaporized, eviscerated, crystallized across ten dimensions and twenty timelines, or most often simply pulled off the throne and pumped full of “commoner”-cum, before they want a change.

Those that elect to dwell in the Carag Imperium are all nobility. Regardless of origin, regardless of power, experiences, possessions or any other variable whatsoever, they become nobility the moment they move into a home within the core, and cease to be nobility the instant they leave it. This applies to members of other species as well as Carag. Only those that pass through as vagrants and mercenaries, or join a self-declared “rebel stronghold,” are able to take long-term homes in the Imperium without instantly becoming *some* form of nobility.

The nobility exist so that the wanderers and rebels can steal their things, vandalize their homes, and use them for any one of a number of gratuitous sexual fantasies. They embody the *idea* of hereditary authority purely so they can cater to fetishes and power-fantasies about overthrowing that authority—or, in their own cases, being freed from it so they can be “reduced” to gutter sluts in service to the people.

So the Imperium, with its mile-high cityscapes of largely-abandoned shining spires, and triumphal avenues and causeways where comically-small forces march for the reigning monarch to review in the brief windows before they are inevitably pounced and fucked by rebel infiltrators—and live on a broadcast to the whole Imperium, no less, how scandalous!~--stands in stark contrast to the peripheral communes.

Where a true empire’s core exerts authority outward on its vassal-states, the Carag Communes exert social pressure inward on the Imperial core. In a very real sense, the whole of Carag civilization is like a massive implosion nuclear device. Just as a detonation concentrates heat and

force in the expanding rings of its thermal pulse, then shock-front, the Communes live in the shock-front of endless rebellion against the torture of centralized authority and resource extraction. Like an ever-burning star, they understand that this freedom must be fed to sustain it: not with blood and division, but with creation, just as at every stage of its life a star creates new materials within itself to fuse.

Every Commune exists on the periphery of both the Imperium and of other communes. Because all Carag share a demon's relish for living as the outsider, the relative isolation of each commune becomes a paradoxical form of unity: the Carag are united precisely *because we* are apart. The very emptiness between communes embodies our mutual respect for each other's desire to seek our own unique ways of embracing existence.

So, while it can be a useful framework for starting to understand the distribution of Carag culture, the very notion of one unified "Commune space" is deceptive: it's an infinity of ever-changing arcs, bubbles, polygons, and sometimes multiple different spaces broken up by emptiness or the ranges of other Communes.

For example, some communes live in defined regions of a cosmic void. They occupy specific homeworlds around specific stars, and their culture reflects this anchoring heritage. Other communities exist on vast city-ships. Some of these city-ships are ever-growing, while others fluctuate in size, or change size but mutate in inhabitants. A Carag city-ship may be purely of tan flesh and black chitin, with tapering lines, organic bulges and tendrils to accommodate new construction and link outlying patches, or it might blend meat and plant-growth with shining metals and glittering minerals.

Some even include chasms between islands of matter held together only by the ship's own essence, manifested as energy-impulse. That ship's denizens might send smaller vessels to scout for resources, conduct trade with nearby worlds, and explore. They might have multiple layers of nomadism as part of their everyday life, sometimes landing on nearby planets or other astral bodies and staying there for a few days until the city-ship begins to leave the system, then packing up and returning to ride out the next leg of the journey.

Other communes, though existing beyond a single large city-ship, might still like some of this wandering lifestyle, yet also feel deep love for particular places and want to return. These communes often embrace a community-in-transit, where some or all of their members travel a route cycling through all the locations they most adore. The route itself becomes the commune's location.

Further divvying up the Carag between themselves, there are the Graeshat. "Graesh" is one of many Vulshiir words that English lacks a strong translation for. Its meaning lies somewhere between "culture" "heritage" and "affinity." Like all things Carag, a graesh is optional. It's a way to further define and explore one's self, a new form of experiential hedonism to indulge and share with one's graesh-mates.

Some Carag, myself included, join a graesh because its ways resonate deeply with the being we already are, and we want to grow further. Others join a graesh because they see many things in its culture which they feel they lack. Many just like the energy!

To join a graesh does not mean becoming many or even most of the things that graesh embodies. It means only that one supports those things, and will push back on any attempt to erase or simplify them. "I am one pinpoint of emergent infinity. Don't think you can use me to shrink the horizon behind me.

As we'll come to later when I write about Carag art, Carag color psychology is completely personalized: each individual Carag decides exactly what a given color means to them. Other Carag might choose to share in that meaning, or they might create their own. So, while graeshat set themselves apart via their aesthetics, each graesh depends on geometry, the language of shapes, and common symbols rather than color palette.

This is just the start. Every graesh shapes its own spin on the instincts and impulses of the Carag people, developing its own mythology, favorite motifs, themes, and art-forms, styles of architecture... the only limit lies in how much the graesh-mates want to take on. As for how the Graeshat carry on the Carag obsession with centers and periphery, that handles itself: each member of the graesh specializes in certain skills and mindsets blooming from the core of their graesh's identity. The roles they take on through this are the closest Carag equivalent to human professions, though as a post-scarcity civilization, Carag do this because we enjoy it, not because our society needs our labor to keep it running.

On a group scale, rivalries between the Graeshat exist frequently and in wide variety, but we keep this friendly. Carag are as capable of wronging each other or being just plain petty as any species, so feuds do emerge, but the understanding for all parties is that you don't drag your graesh into your personal vendettas. If you act against someone, *you* act against them. Your graesh accepts no collective responsibility unless they actually, collectively, decided to join you.

Every graesh embodies both the ways that its members can shape their tendencies to benefit themselves and each other, and the continuous effort of growth and self-analysis to avoid going astray. This may appear self-deprecating to humans, but in Carag culture, to acknowledge one's flaws in tandem with one's aptitudes is the mark of genuine self-esteem. Carag believe that our merit stands out clearer in contrast with our potential for Carag folly: a classic example of continuum, which we'll explore in more depth in the next section.

Keep in mind that if you're used to the faction-building methods of Earthly fiction, you'll be tempted to reduce the graeshat to lists of archetypes, and if you do that you've stopped thinking about or seeking to understand what the graeshat really are.

When I describe a graesh, I'm describing broad patterns and underlying spirit. In different contexts, any given Carag will sometimes act in ways counter to the culture and philosophy of their graesh. Every graesh has members that seem on the surface to think and behave the way one would expect from members of a different graesh. In Carag thought, exceptions to a pattern enrich rather than undermine it. Every graesh is more fully itself, not less, precisely because its members have freedom to step outside the traits which define it.

A Mordair will sometimes express the kind of peaceful, unhurried attitude you'd expect from an Etran. A Saelvur will sometimes embrace the Etran approach to flow, letting the universe carry them along rather than rushing to find the swiftest or most stimulating currents as the Saelvurat often do. An Etran will display Mordair calculation and Saelvur fury when dealing with someone

that tries to harm their garden-world.

Let's consider the three Carag graeshat which appeared to me early in my written explorations. Of course, the Carag possess a multitude of graeshat, but the others will be for other Carag to spawn (or uncover, as the case may be) and depict in their own works.

Graesh Mordair are the closest to what you might expect if you heard the statement "a culture of space-dwelling demons," but even this is only superficial. To be Mordair is to take joy in efficiency, assembling, and meticulous planning. A Mordair lives for the moment when they find just the right angle perspective to help every piece fall into place at once. Appearing simple on the surface, the Mordairat are fractal beings multiplying their facets forever onward.

Graesh Mordair uses the hexagon as the basis of its shape language. Everything the Mordairat create, from their clothes, to their homes, to their ships and the way they shape the landscapes of the worlds they dwell upon, uses precise arrays of polygons. They're fond of terracing, wedges, and solid yet lovingly-crafted cityscapes where, at any angle of viewing, the light reflected from some surfaces creates a crisp counterpoint to the shadows and reflected colors captured in others.

The Mordairat are laconic in speech not for lack of emotion, but because they weigh and measure all the knowledge they believe is necessary before delivering their conclusions in words. They excel at finding a single sentence to put everything in perspective, at breaking down mind-boggling concepts to bite-size pieces. Their arts, from sculptures and paint to music, are meticulously-crafted, every step of the creative process plotted out and honed to perfection.

While newcomers to Carag culture may find the Mordairat inexpressive compared to more florid graeshat like the Saelvurat, or more relaxed ones such as the Etranat, this perception does our precision-crafted kindred a disservice. Mordairs carry themselves in quiet or measured ways, yes, but always glimmering with telltale cues to the immense depth of emotion inside: the wryness in their voices as they tell an over-ambitious artist that passion still needs to rest sometimes, the tenderness in the slow way they grasp a gift for a friend or lover, and the fondness in their eyes as they brush the facets marching across the pseudo-curves inside a newly-made archway.

Mordairs measure twice, then measure twice more because they just like measuring and love seeing the schematics come together. They're steady, reliable, consistent. You might think of them as the Graesh of Solidity. When their measuring is done, the cut will be as fast or slow as it needs to be. In sex, the Mordair is the lover who learns all your biggest kinks, then pushes those buttons over, and over, and over again.

If they overbalance on the path of their graesh, the Mordairat are most liable to toxic competition, overbearing demands, and sticking to safe solutions even though those solutions have ceased to be optimal. They'll refuse to engage in risk-reward evaluations, or to take chances on new possibilities even if those possibilities are already showing great promise, and spend so much time trying to create a perfect plan that they allow solvable problems escalate into impossible ones. They're the Carag most at risk of becoming conservative: a sure harbinger of disaster for any demonic people.

To account for these harmful impulses, mature Mordairat learn to understand the limits of

planning in a chaotic multiverse. They develop thought habits for recognizing and accepting when maximum efficiency is unattainable or out of the question due to time constraints, and find ways to appreciate the flaws, shortcuts, and inefficiencies of their designs as giving rise to a kind of meta-efficiency: the efficiency of a work's character, adding subtle effects to existence that balance out the decrease in efficiency for its original purpose.

Social structure in Mordair-lead communities maintains the same basic system from the micro level all the way up to the intergalactic. Individual villages or neighborhoods in a larger Mordair community appoint a Coordinator, chosen by popular vote. Village Coordinators coordinate between villages, town Coordinators between towns, city Coordinators between cities, on up to state, country, continent, planet, star system, and so on.

Key to this, the Coordinators possess no authority whatsoever. They command no one, control no resources, and can neither permit nor deny any project. A Coordinator's sole means to influence the communities that elect them lies in their eloquence, and their ability to prove that their proposals will work well for whatever those communities want to achieve.

The Mordairat are evenly distributed throughout Carag space, for there are things and relationships worth building wherever they go in the cosmos. They're equally happy joining the Nobles or the rebel "underground" in the Imperium, construction shipyards, city-stations, and city-ships in middle space, or establishing well-sited communities out in the Periphery.

Graesh Etran aren't the graesh a casual observer would choose as the opposites of Graesh Mordair—that dubious honor goes to we Saelvurat—but in my opinion, they're the ones that truly warrant the contrast. Where the Mordairat are exacting, the Etranat feel things out. Where the Mordairat are effortful, the Etranat are laid-back. The Etran go with the flow of the cosmos, reasoning that if there's space for something grand to take shape, it'll take shape on its own: creation abhors a vacuum, right?

Etran aesthetics rely on sinuous forms: curlicues, spirals, and serpentine twists arcing like rib-cages off of wavy-roofed constructs with crescent-moon floorplans. They're among the most whimsical of the Graeshat in style. Rather than specific symbols, the Etran mark themselves by drawing out different swirling patterns and trusting their love of riding the current to yield patterns that stir the same feelings.

Their cities and the landscapes they shape are sprawling, laid out without conscious order, yet often brought to pleasing vistas simply by shared desires: for closeness to the jumble of pipes and furnaces that marks a favorite eatery, or good views across the river where fungal columns and the waving tendrils of underground hive-beings blend with the shining colors breathed out by geothermal vents deep under lunar dust.

In art and in life, Etrants are firmly rooted in the here and now. They take pleasure in what they're doing, including if what they're doing is nothing, and mostly keep their minds clear of questions about direction, purpose, or how the way they do what they do might measure against the doings of others. They may spend hours painting a sprawling mural across a cavern wall, flowing from one image to the next, completing some and breaking off others, only to wake up the next morning and forget they did any such thing. Etran communities are a fever dream of projects both finished and unfinished, most existing simply for the sake of seeing them exist.

In speech, the Etranat are meandering, sometimes lazy, sometimes even-paced, sometimes bright and swift. They often toss out odd turns of phrase, coming at ideas from unexpected directions, and are wellsprings for all sorts of obscure knowledge. Between their patience and their take-it-as-it-comes approach to life, they can find a solution for just about any situation, even if any given choice might not be as efficient as say, a Mordair's, or as effective as, say, a Saelvur's. An Etran's the kind of lover that gets you high, cuddles up, and coaxes you into hours of slow exploration where, by the time you're done, you've both cum six or seven times without ever worrying about getting there.

When they take their graesh-ways too far, the Etran become apathetic, incurious, and prone to withdrawing from anything that causes them the slightest discomfort. They leave new acquaintances to wander alone and unwelcome through their communities, giving them a sense of quiet shunning that can be more poisonous than a direct confrontation. They'll watch events roll by with obvious, devastating repercussions, feeling no stir to act because they don't push themselves to even the most surface-level analysis of what they're witnessing.

So, to make sure they remember that there are flows beyond the flow they're riding, the Etranat may practice analyzing their surroundings, reading in and recording their thoughts, and when they see a new being, they'll offer that being a chance to shake up their world a little bit. To flow as one with the current means more than just riding along: they must absorb some of the fluid essences they immerse themselves in, and learn to heed the health of the river.

Etran-lead communities are usually less so lead by the Etranat than they are *unlead* by anyone else. When an Etran wants to do something that many others find enjoyable, an impromptu group forms around them, and follows as long as their whims keep the group entertained. These associations may last anywhere from minutes to years.

Etrants find the busyness and constant anti-authority roleplay of the Imperial core overstimulating and repetitive, while also finding most of the Periphery too dangerous, driven, or just plain weird for day-to-day life. So keep things nice and easy, the Etranat tend to distribute themselves around rings and clusters in the middle-density regions of Carag space: sheltered from most dangers by more adventurous Graeshat, while also relieved of any need to roll with every single RP group that rolls through their community on a quest to fuck, marry, and/or kill the empress after dethroning her, him, it, they, and/or xe for the five hundred thousandth time this month.

Graesh Saelvur are among the most overtly passionate graeshat. All Carag get deeply excited about our desires, but when a Saelvur is excited, we'll make sure you know it—most especially if the desire we're excited about is you.~ Chatty, energetic, and impulsive, we're the Carag that most closely align with what you'd expect from our shared starting points in the psychology section. If the Mordair are the Graesh of Solidity, and the Etranat are the Graesh of Ease, then we're the Graesh of Overdrive. In the Saelvur mind, anything worth doing is worth doing to excess!

Saelvur aesthetics eschew any single base-shape, but we're partial to creating things that blend concave and convex cross-sections in artful ways. Swooping wings, fluting and other forms of hollowed-out surfaces, bladed and flanged buttresses and architectural promontories: we build like gothic horror with a silver sheen, like Lovecraftian nightmares gone iridescent. Armor,

etchings, starships, and skyscrapers: all Saelvur craft trends towards elaborate tapering shapes with profile-enhancing flourishes, like the guard and pommel of a sword, the trailing tentacles growing off the sterns of our city-ships, and the complex arrangements of our horns and limbs.

The Mordairat plan so they can squeeze the most from every drop of effort they exert. The Saelvurat plan only in the loose sense that we're always aware of the multiple possibilities branching off from each action, and we relentlessly chase after a nexus point where we can achieve as many of those possibilities as we can in the same instant. Saelvurs live for maximum impact, the crescendo, the climax to top all climaxes. The Mordairat stand outside the flow, channeling it. The Etranat let it carry them as it may. The Saelvurat rush to the frothingest, bubbliest part of the whole mess and look for a way to stir it 'til it overflows the banks!

In speech and in manner, Saelvurs have a flair for the dramatic. Our words are poetic and lyrical, crass and filthy, or both depending on whatever stokes the heat of the moment. We thrive on the moment when we spring from shadows to center stage, and on the moment when we slip back to the darkness. The Saelvurat emote like the most vivid of 2d animation: sweeping gestures, creating painterly lines with the way we fling our forms about, indulging in the feeling of watching ourselves move.

Most Graeshat create art. The Saelvurat are the graesh that creates art artfully. We're the ones that thrill when we see how the events of our lives inform and align with the themes of our works, the ones that want to bring every little element in our existences into harmony with the great melody of our artifice. Even the Saelvur slogan expresses this: "Tum kos kemultat, svainul, tum kos kemultat, lugiir. Tum kos kemultat, fasliin." "In all desires, excellence. In all desires, flair. In all desires, abandon." A Saelvur lover seems to whip out anywhere between one and a dozen new kinks every time you have sex, and we strive to make such a deep impression that every so often for the rest of eternity, you'll remember that orgasm, and once again you'll be so horny for us that you forget how to think.

When we place too much weight in the essence of our graesh, the Saelvurat are prone to burning out with unsustainable surges of effort, then spitting venom at those around us for succeeding with less sacrifice even though no one required or even suggested that we push ourselves so hard. We throw ourselves into a cycle of forever chasing the next high to prevent ourselves from stopping to reflect on what's missing in our lives, and throw away relationships with wonderful potential because we're afraid of the consequences should we fail to communicate well enough, or we just plain get bored. Alternatively, we may turn controlling and condescending, trying to maneuver everyone around us into fitting the rhythms of our elaborate designs, and can develop the most abominable superiority complexes. The Mordair are the Carag most at risk of turning conservative, but the Saelvurat are the Carag most at risk of turning fascist.

Saelvurat social structure focuses on mentorship in skills and spirituality rather than any form of authority. Saelvurs that seek guidance may look for a teacher to apprentice themselves to, or for a group of practitioners looking to perfect their skills together. Thus, Saelvur-lead communities usually sport several places of interest, each managed by a particular specialist.

Saelvurs overwhelmingly favor the Periphery for permanent homes, loving the wide open horizons full of mystery, wonders, and dangers to experience. That said, we can be found wandering everywhere in Carag space, and staying for anywhere from days to months in our

journeys. The Saelvurat are happiest when we're heading somewhere, resting up for the journey's next leg, or at most, taking a while at home to reminisce before we set out again. We're the Carag most likely to live for long periods outside Carag communities. Still, we love our people, and always return sooner or later.

These patterns of dynamism, of a center to continually push off from, and of a periphery where the real depth and delights of life take shape, repeat down to the smallest level of Carag life. In a village of thirty Carag, any sort of mentor and leader lives on the outskirts looking in, while those in the center usually play the least role in shaping the community's direction. At this level, though, most Carag eschew rigid structures of authority and mentorship entirely. Different members of the community offer direction and assistance based on their own unique essence.

### **Nurture the Greatest Vibrancy: Carag Morality, Ethics, and Philosophy**

While the Carag comprehend the laws of other species perfectly well, and are willing to abide by them up to a certain point when entering the communities of others, the only laws in Carag space are those written to be mocked, picked apart, and broken. Each community has the responsibility to manage the conduct of its own, and negotiate subcultural differences.

For example, if one Carag city-ship has a custom that adults may initiate a duel to the death by displaying and crushing a certain gem in the face of a passerby, other communities most negotiate an exception before they board that city-ship. That city-ship's members would, on the other hand, understand that their custom only exists within their city-ship, and would teleport home if they felt the need for a sudden street-rending battle while visiting family on a different vessel.

The Carag as a species seldom reach unilateral agreement. Among the few exceptions, desire for the greatest possible richness of existence stands paramount. While they often want a very different day-life in their own communities, virtually all Carag would agree that their own lives feel bigger and more full of wonder to know that, somewhere, there's a Carag city-ship with the fearsome custom of drawn blades, bared fangs, and molten-metal blood on the bulkheads before the first sparkles of diamond dust have hit the ground.

Radical acceptance, each individual's absolute right to determine their own life's course, including the way that it ends: the Carag safeguard this before all else. So while the above city-ship absolutely has the right to maintain this dueling custom, the whole species would band together to put a stop to it if the ship's leaders attempted to stop any citizen from leaving. In order to consent to something, one must possess other options.

In a roundabout sense, this is another reason the Carag are so enthusiastic to allow wanton violence, selfishness, and all things dangerous within our species: knowing that these things exist lends greater meaning to our choice to do otherwise. Consent is key. If a community wishes to allow something, that community has the right to allow that within itself. However, they have no right whatsoever to enforce it on other communities.

This is the ultimate reason that no Carag community tolerates bigotry in any form, be it sexism, racism, classism, xenophobia, ableism or anything else. Bigotry applies to a class of beings which, by definition, mostly exists outside any one community. For a community to claim that they consent to bigotry is irrelevant, because most of the beings they've decided to hate exist outside

their borders and outside their jurisdiction.

In practice, bigotry seldom finds a foothold in any Carag society. Being angry and feeling threatened by the existence of beings one has never met isn't very hedonistic at all. It makes the universe feel ever-shrinking, hemmed in by dangers too great to confront. Even if one has no moral objections to their shitty attitudes, bigots are just loud, boring, exhausting beings to deal with. There's a whole multiverse full of experiences too vivid to imagine, and they want to say there are parts of it we're not supposed to touch? What obnoxious rubbish.

Suck a cock and feel better. Stop trying to have opinions, you're obviously bad at it.

Flippancy aside, the Carag fascination with the perspectives of the outsider and the other means that anyone attempting to portray outsiders and others as innately frightening or undeserving of existence is, at most, a single degree removed from saying that the Carag *ourselves* shouldn't exist. Carag that refuse to recant these perspectives can rest assured that they won't have to spend their lives on hatred and self-inflicted misery much longer: we'll shortly kill them ourselves to make sure these ruinous ideas stay out of our society. "Fear and hate the one that claims they know who you should fear and hate," as the saying runs.

The same goes especially for fascists. Fascism invariably seeks to shrink existence down to a single correct way to be: a single aesthetic, a single right way to speak, act, and feel, a single rigid path in life. It creates divisions even within the beings of its disciples, telling them that some parts of themselves—always, of course, those which make them useful tools—are meritorious and should be embraced, while others are evil flaws to stamp out or at least bury deep in their subconscious. Fascism as a mode of existence is the enemy of all complete beings, and therefore is the literal antithesis of the Carag species. While we generally try to avoid sticking our feelers into the affairs of other beings, our loathing for the Fash is so visceral that at least a few Onslaught Guards can be trusted to turn up anywhere, and anytime, some jackboots need to die.

While it's important to keep the consequences clear, killing our own is a last resort. Carag justice strives for rehabilitation whenever possible. So long as an offender shows genuine remorse and not just a desire, but a pattern of doing better than their past actions, there will be a community somewhere in Carag space willing to embrace them and give them a second chance. This stems from the core of most Carag ethics: the understanding that we exist, and choose to keep existing, because existence is innately more fulfilling than nonexistence.

We want agency to keep enjoying our existence. Therefore, it's logically consistent to safeguard the freedom of other beings to keep enjoying theirs, too. If we believe rehabilitation is impossible or simply too great a risk, we'll extend the choice: long-term imprisonment in hopes that personal growth will change our evaluation, or execution.

In edge cases, such as abuse and conditioning from childhood stealing a being's chance to decide their own path, the Carag may be willing to try rehabilitating fascists. Still, they better be prepared to *squirm* for our mercy, and we reserve the right to change our minds and kill them after all at any time. For fascists, the second chance is a privilege, not a right.

From this comes the closest thing to a Carag golden rule: "nurture the greatest vibrancy." Carag do our best to foster freedom of interaction with all the creatures we meet, and to avoid

discriminating based on any perceived form of merit. This does mean we behave in ways which other sapient species often object to. In a Carag mind, a predator incapable of speech or otherwise evidencing “higher” thought has just as much right to exist as the community of sapient beings that it harasses. The universe will be smaller if that species of predator ceases to exist.

Plants, after all, also frequently have emotions and neural capacity after their own fashion, yet it’s rare that we hear mass demands for the slaughter of herbivores to protect plant life. The Carag try to avoid ending any existence if we can see any better option. Over time, one being gives root to an entire lineage of others. Therefore, every existence ended is an infinity of futures annihilated before they could even be born. Though often necessary, it’s never a decision the Carag make lightly, or without cost. Even when killing fascists, we suffer severe psychic backlash.

At day’s end, the principle is quite simple: an adult sapient being has the right to do whatever they want with their own existence. If they want to bring somebody else into it, though, then they’d best be ready to compromise with that being’s desires.

As mentioned at several points, Carag thought emphasizes the idea of the complete being. *Everyone* is capable of becoming *anything* with the endless evolutions of the cosmos. If a being wishes to remain as they are, to preserve their essence in certain ways of being because those are the ways they like best, then they must be prepared to keep working to sustain that self. They must recognize that no other being is obligated to help them stay the way they are, nor to become something, especially if what they want to become is dangerous to those whose help they ask.

To exist is to embrace the implications of that existence. To embrace in a certain reality is to embrace what that reality contains, or else to embrace whatever it takes to bring that reality in line with one’s desires. If a being wishes to exist without ever experiencing a challenge, encountering ideas that frighten them, that make them uncomfortable, or simply don’t please them well enough, then that being should withdraw to a pocket dimension or dream-state where they are surrounded solely by manifestations of their own mind.

Each being has the right to contain whatever it wishes, and within itself, to experience whatever it desires. But the cosmos is a shared experience. To exist among others, one must be willing to work together to cherish difference, and to reach compromises regarding those differences we cannot find in ourselves to cherish.

In view of all this, Carag thought teaches us to be skeptical of anyone that only presents themselves in terms of their virtues, or of their vices. Just because someone demonstrates great virtues doesn’t mean they don’t have great flaws, and more importantly, someone that overcomes great flaws to achieve something should be respected at least as much as one with no such hurdles to surpass.

This said, Carag are also abyssal demons, given to many wild, alien, and eldritch impulses, and we share a yearning for spaces where we can indulge our darker lusts without tending to the tiresome demands of consent declaration. Thus, beyond our stable settlements, we keep many deep reaches and nightmare realms. Entering such dimensions is a consent to the end of consent frameworks, a recognition that the beings one meets may choose to exert their most violent desires without fear of persecution when they return to the realms of consent.

The Carag demarcate the boundaries of these realms with a direct, unmistakable psychic impulse burning forth from the aura of the place: a premonition of what crossing the threshold will mean. Some such domains also include conventional sensory markers, particular symbols, plinths, styles of gateway and so on, but we consider these extra precautions or aesthetic flourishes. So long as the mind-to-mind warning is given, we've done our scant moral duty.

### **Abyssal Winter's Splendor in the Night: Carag Language and Communication**

In our early days, before and during the war with Seurchraig, the Carag didn't speak a language as humans would understand it. We spoke in tongues, albeit using a somewhat-consistent sound palette, and used our impulse to sift the auras of intended meaning out of the sound-waves. While it was unintentional, this method of speech also required us to let genuine expressions of our psyches flow into our words. This made it an extremely effective way to detect Seurchraig and her spies. While they might find ways to manipulate essence to camouflage their ambient presence, they often gave themselves away when it came to speech.

It's debatable whether the Carag of the future actually possess multiple languages, or one language with many different sound-palettes which a name written in each palette refers. All Carag speech shares the same pattern: when spoken by a member of the Carag species, or a being closely attuned with us, the words manifest their meanings as a sprawl of auras in colors appropriate to the speaker's personality and intent. For example, if a Carag speaks the Vulshiir word "gosm," meaning "abyssal demon," then a horizon of auras will bloom around their silhouette containing painterly, phantasmal, or glassine images of horned, winged, taloned, many-eyed figures with leering maws full of dark fire.

Vulshiir, one of my finest creations and the first language of the Carag people, has its own separate document for its grammar, mechanics, and ever-expanding lexicon, so to repeat it here would be superfluous and add a lot of mental legwork to a text that's quite marathon enough already! I'll note only that during the process of writing all this, I came to the epiphany that I'd construct Vulshiir by adapting the sound palettes of our speaking in tongues to a consistent system of grammar, meanings, and vocabulary. For now, I'll delve a little deeper into common Carag verbal tics, and a few peculiarities that can make us harder to understand.

Firstly, because of our fascination with the idea of complete beings, where each being exists in a continuum with everything it is becoming or could become, we often seem to contradict ourselves. In a relatively short span of a few months, a Saelvur scholar might spout multiple contradictory ideas of what it means to be a succubus. Consider the continuum: to be something is also to embody the possibility of contradicting what one is. In time, the scholar will use this back-and-forth with herself to test many different conceptions of a succubus, and decide which one suits her best.

Of course, this isn't really a hypothetical. I'm describing my own process of self-examination and discovery. In giving myself room through the way I spoke to contradict my prior conclusions, I was able to test different "configurations" of succubus in rapid succession. In the end I decided I liked the pop culture idea of a seductive demonic slut the best (stunning conclusion for a lust demon, I know), and that what's really needed is not a rejection of the succubus as sexual, but a deeper exploration of succubi as complex, complete beings whose completion is informed by their sexuality.

At different times, Carag anchor our thoughts in different existing or possible realities. Everything from our style of speech to our tense and emotions are grounded in the reality we're looking at, not necessarily the one we're speaking into. All of which is to say, I fully understand that we can be very

frustrating to communicate with. Carag often seem as though we're carrying on conversations with beings that aren't present, responding to associations with our ideas that those we're speaking to have never expressed and don't share.

For our part, Carag fare better when the beings that speak to us clarify where they got the ideas they're carrying—for example, whether they came to these conclusions on their own through contemplation, or picked them up from a text written or advice given by another—and in what spirit they wish us to take these ideas. Are they attempting to persuade us of the reality they describe, or do they just want to share thoughts? Because of our ideas of community ethics, our guard often goes up whenever a being purports to speak for a group with whom they have no clear personal connection.

And then, of course, there are those that come to us as proxies: priests on behalf of gods, ambassadors on behalf of nations, sex-pets on behalf of their mistresses. We're willing to speak to these entities in good faith, but we find that we often encounter a problem where the messenger presents ideas which clearly reflect their own personal beliefs, then attempt to deflect our criticism or concerns by saying, "oh, that's just what my patron would want me to say."

In general, Carag wish to communicate about ideas at the source. If the ideas really come from a god, we want to speak to the god. We'd rather hold court with the leader of the nation than an ambassador, though in this particular instance we would look to our own resources to glean as many writings and, if possible, recordings of the nation's myriad peoples as possible, so as to truly understand the national perspectives. As for beings using their kinky relationships for a screen when talking to us, we have very little patience for it: the Carag want sex to remain open, fun, and free. If it turns into another proxy for power games, then that impairs both communication *and* true lust. We prefer to avoid that.

Carag consider nearly any statement to be "true," as far as the fact that anything a being says relates to something they want themselves, the beings around them, or both to experience. A lie is true in the sense that it embodies the liar's wish to persuade other beings to believe in a false reality. Faithful words are true in the sense that they reflect what the speaker wishes to believe. So, Carag are often happy to sit and listen quietly even to complete nonsense, riding along with the story and feeling that the words are true. If nothing else, it's true that they are words another spoke to us!

Let's think back to the long-ago sections on Carag psychology, and on the fact that we often know we need to do something, but we can't put the reasons into words. We either know or strongly believe that when we come to the end of it, the ability to put our reasons into words will be part of the answers we find. So, in the meantime, we'll say something that feels close enough to true, a reasonable explanation for why we're doing what we do, but which usually proves to have nothing to do without ultimate reason. Our psyches, I must repeat this, don't register this as dishonest. In our own minds, we're answering the questioner's desire for a rational explanation by providing them with a sound reason.

The fact that the reason isn't actually *our* reason is separate from its logical merits, right?

This probably sounds very silly and wishy-washy, but it's another vital layer in understanding why the Carag can be such confusing creatures to speak with. It's said by some that demons always lie. It's true of the Carag that we often lie because our instincts tell us, hey: *everything* is true, when you think about it! Because of this, we don't take lying in itself personally, and we can be caught off-guard when the beings around us *do* take it personally.

When a Carag says, "I lied to you before because I was afraid, and wanted to protect myself," in our

minds the emphasis rests with the fact that we are admitting to the lie as part of beginning to trust the one we speak with. To us this seems like a happy moment. Remember also, the mystery of completing being: Carag take it for granted that all beings are capable of lying, so the revelation that any particular being chose to tell lies changes nothing about the universe. Yet, many beings might get angry about this, feeling upset and betrayed that we lied to them at all. They may believe that very few creatures lie, and learning that the Carag they're speaking to is one of those creatures could turn them against us.

These patterns of misunderstanding, in both directions, can lead older Carag to become even more baffling. They're prone to stating that their words are nonsense, or insanity, not to be taken seriously, to say that they're only rambling, and all manner of other things to thwart the speaker from developing any solid expectations besides this: "Carag will be Carag, and their minds work in ways I may never comprehend." In some cases, this might even be the best approach. Presenting our impulses as something amenable to rationality may lead our new acquaintances to believe they can talk us into acting the way they want, that even our desires and boundaries can be negotiated away.

Perhaps there's wisdom, after all, in speaking without feeling the need to prove one's wisdom.

### **Cherish Every New-Made Shape: Carag Arts and Artifice**

Whether weaving spirals of mercury around ourselves and transmuting their soaring molecules into solidified glistens to craft a public park of shimmering, mirror-polished coils, pinnacles, and basins, spending centuries etching every surface of an artificial blue-stone planetoid with psychoactive Carag script to create story one reads by traveling along its surface, or creating a stable link between many planes of being to let their own matter and energies pour out and fuse to shape what they'll shape, the Carag love to make things. If our first joy lies in sex, our second lies in creation.

But for the caprice of an ancient tyrant looking to die with enough drama to sate her absolutely *turgid* ego, the Carag would most likely have become known as a strange new breed of space-faring artisans. Seurchraig is a subject, hell, some would say *the* subject for the section on The Arts Martial, so the last I'll write of her here is that from start to finish, the Dread Empress was a spectacular waste of lives beyond counting. Now that she's finally gone, even telling stories about her hangs empty of savor. Perhaps I could think of a harsher barb to seal her depressing memory.

Only... why would I waste the energy?

Coming back to livelier reaches of thought, Carag create to experience the joy of creation. None of us expect our artists to create for a particular reason. Art expands the hues of life, isn't that reason enough? Artists do not need to have a message or a lesson to offer, and most Carag only look for one in the art we consume if the artist tells us that there's one to fine. So when it comes to speaking about the way art resonates with us, we try to focus on our personal journey with it rather than invoking broad patterns to, say, portray our opinion as clever, important, and touching universal truth.

The children of abyssal stars are extremely suspicious of any being that tries to push, or construct, a universal truth. If you reread an earlier portion of this section, you might find that this is a subtle yet lingering influence from a formative event at the dawn of our history. Your truth may indeed make you happy, but if you expand it to the level of the universe and say this is the only truth everyone else is allowed to embrace, you've set yourself up as a tyrant and an oppressor. Human perspectives on art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Anglosphere derive from archaic and *unbearably* annoying ideas that art is innately frivolous and therefore needs a higher purpose to redeem it, that it must advance human being in some

way to earn its continued existence.

We believe that art is innately frivolous, and that *is* what justifies its existence. Carag broadly agree that meaning is ascribed, seldom intrinsic. Our personalized color psychologies are just one of many examples. Where, to me, cobalt blue means eternal becoming and the euphoria it brings, for another it might mean insecurity and unfulfilled desire, or wit and humor, and so on.

The deep, inherent meaning to most things that exist is the very fact that they exist. The Carag have meaning because we are. We don't have to symbolize anything or be a metaphor for some other being's experience. The ideas which human artists in the Anglosphere often ascribe as meanings are secondary, additional, and quite often reductive. To say "Carag are meaningful beings because they create art" is to remove rather than add significance to Carag being. Carag existence is significant because it is.

We may choose to add layers of personal meaning—what is hedonism but doing more for the sake of doing more?—but the key to this remains that everything we do is already meaningful, because we exist and we're doing it. We explore other forms of meaning like "truth" and "purpose" because they further enrich an already rich existence, not when we are empty voids craving something to fill us.

Taking a cock in one's pussy feels good because there are already nerves for its big, throbbing, slicked-up tip to caress, yes?

This forms the central tenet of all Carag art: one should never erase these, the things that are real. To put "deeper" meaning and symbolic interpretation on a pedestal above the rawness, the vibrancy, the grit of material things that comprise the first realities most of us learn, is an atrocity against being itself. Sapient beings can only exist to ascribe meanings to the universe because carbon-based life emerged and evolved until thought had a foundation to grow from.

Lucid thought is merely the tallest point on the tower of being. If that tower is blasted away, all the levels below it will stand just as strong. If the levels below are torn out, of course the pinnacle floor will topple right along with them.

So, yes, we tend to get our hackles up at the sort of literature which 21<sup>st</sup> century human academics gushed over. It has its charms, but for Carag, the joy and potential of meaning lies in the very fact that meaning is arbitrary, contained only within ourselves and ending whenever or wherever those selves fall away. Like every game, meaning is at its best when we understand that the rules only exist to give shape to the game itself. Creating the meanings that nourish you, and leave everyone else

Carag tell stories and create art, first and foremost, to create experiences. Carag write stories about sex because stories about sex are scintillating and help us get off. Carag create porn because it's scintillating and helps us get off. Carag write, record and perform raunchy music with pulsing beats and suggestive harmonics because it's scintillating and helps us get off.

I'm being tongue in cheek, of course. The Carag create plenty of art that has nothing to do with sex. Freedom to be something other than sexual, is, itself, one of the best ways to enrich our sexual experience. Even lust-demons need room to step outside their lust sometimes, or it ceases to be lust and becomes a mere mechanical repetition of one's role. Encouraging, say, a nervous young outer succubus to tell stories about the sex-agnostic parts of her identity can help her feel less anxious about her sexuality, making it easier for her to embrace her instincts and become the slut she was meant to be.

Most Carag stories deal either with the realities we are experiencing, or the realities we desire to experience. There are stories about the realities we believe we *should* be experiencing, but we understand these to be deeply dangerous pieces. A good story, like many good pieces of art, tends to be fun and fulfilling. This lends itself to making out that anything the story contains is fun and fulfilling, but just because an idea exists in a good story doesn't mean that it's a good idea. Using stories to push ideals is hazardous in the extreme: audiences will reflexively associate their positive feelings about the story with the ideals it presents, even if those ideals prove to be disastrous in practical application.

So while the majority of Carag stories feature characters that espouse certain ideals, we do our best to drive home that these characters, at best, believe in these ideals because these ideals have worked well for them, personally. Remember our earlier chat about universal truth? That applies to ideals and morals. This ties in with the phrasing "realities we desire to experience." Carag writers don't write about something because they believe it's a good idea. Depiction is not advocacy. And just because we desire to experience a reality doesn't mean we expect to enjoy it, or believe the story's reality should be recreated.

For example, most Carag stories written during the war with Seurchraig trended towards bleakness. This wasn't because we *like* living bleak lives, but because we understood that we existed in a bleak reality, and that the way out was through. Since we existed in a bleak reality, it followed that stories about bleak realities would be more likely to furnish us with useful answers to our own circumstances. This proved broadly true. One principle exception: we found that we sometimes needed to write our stories gentler than our lived experience. Little spots of hope and joy, just enough to keep us going, just enough to preserve the dream of a future beyond slaughter.

It worked well enough—well enough to survive on.

As with everything else, Carag art mutates with graesh and the artist's identity. Certain graeshat do have a special affinity for particular art forms. The Saelvurat obsess over writing and song, especially in tandem. I wish to be clear, it's not that my graesh have anything against paintings, sculpture, visual storytelling, and the like. We still love other heart forms, it's just a less frantic, hyperfixated love than our love for the mediums I've mentioned. As you'd expect from our flair for the dramatic, we also love theater, and the with the ability to warp space and manifest or destroy matter and energy on a whim, Carag theater productions can be absolutely unhinged!

Consider the Aurora Play: it is, quite literally, a play performed inside the shifting rays of an aurora spilling across a planet's atmosphere. Using our impulse to dilate space and (optionally) time, we crystallize different portions of the rays to shape a stage and seating formed of the aurora's own colors, tossing together a story, cast of characters, tone, and everything else as we go. The performance ends when the auroras do.

The Mordairat do wonderfully with painting, sculpture, mosaics, and all other forms of art that benefit from ample advance planning. The pressure to plot out one's approach is lesser for the Carag, since we're able to revise any mistakes by direct manipulation of matter, but these mediums still call for patience and a joy in coordinating details that's especially appealing for a Mordair mind.

While all Mordair cities are marvels of engineering and design, their Sculpture Cities exemplify this: each an entire metropolis built around many mountainous, sometimes intersecting sculptures in metals, crystals, and astral masonry, with every piece precisely crafted so that buildings could be built nestled into its contours. In a Sculpture City, scaffolds are often built to fit into the overall design: left here and

there to alter the fine lines of a skyscraper or a dome, bolstered if needed by more permanent materials channeled and solidified around the scaffolds.

As for the Etranat? Their art is an eclectic blend of countless forms chosen simply because the Etran saw a space for something and decided to toss it in. I genuinely don't think my mind can conceive of what a specific, concretized Etran art form would look like, and I'm unsure whether they'd create one or not, so... I'll leave this for the Etranat themselves to explore.

Let's close on the note of certain shared motifs in Carag stories. As I've touched on, it's surprisingly common for our souls to go through childhood, adolescence, and possibly adulthood in the body of a species other than Carag. I might also say our essences, for there are numerous Carag that ground their identities in a perpetual essence which keeps reappearing after destruction, yet doesn't seem to be a *soul* per se. I am sometimes among these Carag and sometimes not. It depends on whether I like the vibe of a soul on a given day. Sometimes I'm a living creature with an immortal soul distinct from my physical form. Sometimes, like a virus, I persist, multiply, and remain distinctly what I am, even though by all scientific laws I barely qualify as an entity, let alone a life.

Considering this, it shouldn't surprise you to learn that our Caragness often first appears as subconscious understanding. The Lucidity, also known as the Calling Abyss and Pining for the Far Stars, is a Carag story form about Carag awakening to ourselves as Carag. It deals with the blurred boundaries between memory and identity.

For example, a Carag author might write a story that's superficially centered on a human protagonist, yet one possessing unexplained powers and strange dreams that repeatedly harken to distinctly Carag motifs: fear and the rebellion it provokes, the conflicts between worldly terrestrial powers and the cosmic magics of the Carag. As an extension of the demonic perspective that instinct is as much true to our individual personhood as rational thought is, and rational thought is just as much a product of societal conditioning and inherited habits of being, the Carag character often begins to overturn behaviors cultivated over the course of years or even decades on pure impulse: an early sign of the underlying abyssal impulse overturning the mind-bindings of the world they were born into.

And, of course, they'll start displaying a joy and spontaneity for sex even (or especially!) if it flies in the face of the mortal culture that raised them.

In some forms of the story, such as my own recurring motif of the necromancer who raises herself from the dead, the Carag's awakening begins with their first death, or at least, their first death in this current, self-veiled body. This may play into many different ideas: that the flesh we're born into comes with instincts of its own, instincts which have no way to internalize the experience of a death that should've ended it, so they simply shut down and leave our deeper minds free to work. It might reflect the author's anxieties about the perils of demonic life, as a being that seeks joy and indulgence despite being hunted for the irrational fear its existence provokes.

In my case, it plays both these roles, and a third even more literal one: I died and was reborn many times during the war against Seurchraig. Exploring that, understanding both the toll it took and the discoveries it pushed me to which I might not have uncovered otherwise, is key to reconstructing my sense of self and reintegrating into peacetime life. Once that's achieved, well... it's just a really fun idea to play around with in future stories.

For reasons I admit even I don't fully understand, all Carag art has a hypnotic quality to it. This can be

deeply frightening for many beings—on top of the fact that Carag art is demonic art, so it inevitably inspires some of that same irrational fear of the other, that aversion of reality to the demonic—and when they do manage to tear themselves away, they may prefer never to engage with our works again.

Yet, those willing to trust in and flow with our pieces find that there's something strangely nourishing about them: they fill up the heart and mind in ways that few other creations can match. In the past I've attributed this phenomenon in my own work as something I learned from Tolkien. I think the old Sage of Arda helped me greatly in refining it, but in the end, I believe it's simply that Tolkien was one of the few human writers whose works touch me the same way as the works of other Carag.

As I mentioned before, Carag are paradoxically *both* hyper-communal and hyper-individualist, so it should come as no surprise that even our customs surrounding art focus on ways to bridge the divide. As demons, Carag are natural-born aura manipulators. We quickly become skilled in the ways of the psyche, giving us swift growth in both telepathy and more esoteric forms of direct psyche-to-psyche communication. This lends itself to many unique ways to share our experiences.

When reading a story, Carag often cast ourselves into a kind of gestalt-space formed by the overlapping minds of ourselves and numerous other Carag. This space, a colorful morass of half-formed mental images, of hopes, fears, and suspicions about the story's direction and of observations about its details, plot, characters, style, and tone, might be open to all Carag or might be reserved through space, friend group or both to a specific range of beings. Some are open to all species of astral traveler, though of course, they'd best be ready to handle the chaotic babble of many a star-demon!

On impulse and in answer to invitation, we'll partly or completely disincorporate to enter what amounts to a waking, collective lucid dream. There we may become main characters, or more often, insert ourselves at the fringes of the story wherever the author leaves us room to manifest. Side or background characters, even characters participating in some other area of the setting concurrently with the main plot yet never stepping into it. Some prefer to stay at the level of group awareness, an intangible skein of essence stringing between the minds of all the others and enriching our emotions with theirs.

It's a three-way mix of MMO, stage-play and conventional storytelling. FanFic lived out in real time, created by the very act of performing it.

To close out this section, I'll talk about a few more of my own favorite motifs, the Climb from the Pit and Ascending the Mountain. I often combine these into a single trial to highlight the terrible uncertainty of achieving power after being born at the bottom: has the ascendant Carag really achieved anything? Is this truly a mountain, or does it just look that way compared to the depths we come from? Unlike human myth structures such as the Hero's Journey, Carag storytelling describes no inherent relationship between power and morality.

Being a good person does not mean unlocking a special, higher power that only good people can wield. Often, it instead means weakening one's self with the exhaustion of carrying other's burdens.

So rather than a call to action from without, Carag stories about the journey to power focus on the main character's internal motivations: the goal they hope to achieve, the reason why they believe they must have this power, and to what extent their judgment might be clouded. The Pit and the Mountain might be literal. My own tweak to the motif consists of what I'll call the Burning Peak: the main character senses that the power they seek, either in itself or because of the new realities it exposes them to, will

inflict unimaginable agony. Yet something in them, deeper even than choice, pulls them to the pinnacle.

For me, this reflects the choice to embrace demonic identity. Past that pain, there is sublime joy.

To close, I'd like to lay out the idea of the Fractal Mosaic: a mind-bending Carag art form which grows increasingly detailed as the depicted vista's perceived distance from the viewer increases. This creates a dizzying sense of falling inward which we may augment by actually warping the spatial structure of the mosaic, shrinking certain areas to create levels of detail that might not otherwise be possible due to the material limits of the medium we're working in. The Mosaic's more distant figures may feature *more* detail than the larger ones closer to the viewer!

### **A Porous and Star-Speckled Entwining: Carag Approaches to Interspecies Exchange**

Just as you'd expect from a species of shapeshifting outer-demons, the Carag have a whole bevy of customs driven by the ways we relate with other species. First and foremost, there's the question of whether we believe it's wise to slip in under the radar, assuming the shapes and mannerisms of that species to experience them without an invitation. This is, at best, ethically dubious, but as I've driven home again and again, the Carag are complete beings. We won't always restrain the more troublesome of our abyssal instincts, and even when we do, we may still reach mistaken conclusions.

Whether a species can "deserve" infiltration like this is a question far too perilous to explore in the abstract, and at that point I'd no longer be speaking about my people and our cultures in any case.

As with many other Carag practices, our approach here has little to do with the moral good, and lies mostly with observable cause-and-effect. If we sneak uninvited into the society of foreign beings, we're guaranteeing either that sooner or later we must slip away, forever wondering what might have come to pass if only we found the courage to reveal ourselves openly, or that when we *do* reveal ourselves, our appearance will be a sigil of betrayal, identity-theft, and the distrust these breed.

So, while there may be exceptions, the Carag prefer to wait for an invitation. The more we like a species, the more we would rather be invited at the cognitive level, and the harder it is for us to stay committed to that path at the instinctive one. We'll keep ourselves sated as best we can by exploring the works of their artists, reading what's publicly available about their history and sciences, but of course, this can snowball into stoking our appetites until we choose to stop containing ourselves.

If lines of dialogue are open to us, we may propose Furling (Vulshir: Veliit) to solve all these conundrums at a stroke. Furling is a Carag custom of voluntary assimilation into another species. It can take many different forms depending on the rules agreed to by each party involved. They might ask that the Carag give up their memories of Carag identity, seal away certain or all of their demonic powers, or retain these things but stick to a certain role within society. Agency to dictate terms lies on the side of the ones we would furl into. The Carag that wishes to become one with them may put forward requests, and accept or reject specific conditions as part of negotiation, but we must respect their hard lines.

For our part, we're free to change our minds and call off the Furling at any time, but in that case we understand that we must let go of our desires for a more intimate desire of that people. If accepted, the Carag takes on the shape and physical abilities of the other species, learning their language and immersing itself in their culture until the Furling ends one way or another. Some Furlings have a specific time-frame—decades, ideally, though Furlings as short as a single local day are surprisingly common—while others last for the Furling's entire lifetime.

In cases where the receiving people ask that they give up their Carag memories and identity, the Carag Furls with the understanding that they might never return to the Carag people. It's both part of the risk and the joy of Furling: trusting one's instinct that, one way or the other, this will lead to a happier and more complete existence.

Coming from the other direction, we prefer to rely on former members of a given species as go-betweens when dealing with them. The happiness of our kindred is the priority, though, and we'll never force a former member to act as an ambassador if their time with that species was especially bitter. Of course, if numerous Carag were once part of that species and *none* of them have anything good to say about it, we'll likely conclude we're better off not dealing with them at all.

### **One Sword Shall hold the Line—Uldagaranai! The Carag and the Dread Empress**

If you're Carag, or think you might be Carag, take your time with this section. Skip it if you need to. It's likely to provoke a lot of strong feelings in you. It may stir a lot of buried or half-known things to the surface, make you lucid to the things you've been carrying. It did in me as I wrote it. Now that I've written it, and come back to add this caution, it's stirring those feelings all over again. I don't want to read the damn thing again.

I will write what I can bear about the war. While my insight tells me we've achieved final victory, fear is an old and familiar companion. Thinking about my experiences in any detail more pronounced than "they happened" provokes severe tremors, paranoia, and a heightened fight-or-flight response. So, at a certain point, I'll decide I'm done. I want some of this to be available in writing here, on Earth, for the sake of the Earthward kindred, but though the war is over, its marks linger in my essence. Multiply my individual experience across millions of Carag, and you'll start to get a glimpse of the full picture.

The first-generation Carag, my generation, entered existence during the last two decades of Earth's 20<sup>th</sup> Century CE. We set out, straight away, to indulge ourselves. The whole multiverse seemed bright, vivid, positively singing with adventure... until around 1995, when our great irradant nemesis came upon us out of the deep ways. I was three at the time, far too young to be fully in touch with my split nature: a lucid mind being raised as a human child, and a Carag psyche that existed then and still *mostly* exists in a blackout state which I can make myself lucid to only for a short time, and at great cost in energy and mental wear. This reality responds badly when I manifest the certainty of other realms, and my place in them.

Any advantages I might have gleaned from anchoring my lucidity in a safer, more pleasant dimension were gutted by the wrongness of my flesh, my lack of arcane power on this side of the divide, and the fact that I was born in a brief upbeat period of history right before things took a drastic turn for the worse. A downward spiral that, for a while, continued in direct tandem with our poor fortunes in the war fought across the wider reaches of existence.

To make my existence whole, this present body would have to die. My instincts tell me to let that death find me in its own time. I'm old enough now to trust them, and restrain myself from stupid whims of dying just to prove that I believe there's something on the other side of death. Humans believe in life after death. I, born of the abyss and abyssal stars, *know*.

If you're a human and that makes you jealous, contemplate the fact that your existence is complete. I am fractured, unable to change the shapes I am lucid to, for now knowing freedom

only as a distant and far-off dream. The comforting certainty of a life after this one is, all too often, cold comfort. But here I go again: trying to avoid talking about the core of the pain by sinking into nuances, promising I'm offering context when, truly, much of this is padding.

The war, then.

I was too young to see my kindred during our brief halcyon days, the days before Seurchraig's coming. Her assault was sudden, unprovoked, and overwhelming, catching the Carag utterly off-guard in the midst of our first self-explorations. She'd already identified the oldest, most powerful and insightful Carag, and she or her favorite heralds eliminated our first leaders in a single hour of ruthless teleporting slaughter. She poured her will into the vacuum, demanding surrender, obedience, and the right to shape our nature in exchange for survival.

My people are capable of great courage, fantastic insights, wondrous deeds, as I hope by now I've proven with everything I write here. But I'll tell you the truth here and now: if Seurchraig omitted her third condition, demanding instead that we serve her as mercenaries but leaving us the freedom to shape our own personalities and society, we'd have dropped to our knees then and there. Remember my words in the psychology section? Carag will fawn before power. We will give ourselves in service to undeserving overlords. We're capable of, hell, we *prefer* to be cowards, at least until we learn that there's a special sort of hedonism in recklessness and danger-lust.

The Dread Empress crossed the only line demons won't tolerate. She demanded the right to dictate what we would become. So her ultimatum was met with a response that seemed maddening and impossible: excitement. Bared fangs, lashing tails, abyssal nova igniting.

In retrospect, it's obvious we were thrown straight into a species-wide dissociative episode. Deep down, we knew we were woefully outclass, that this wasn't a story, that there was no special anti-Seurchraig weapon hidden in some ancient reliquary, nor any fated hero that would rise against her and throw her down. That day, even the youngest of us, even I, felt a sudden certainty that we were doomed, that we were bound for wholesale annihilation. Our feral glee, this thing that felt close enough to eager bloodlust we could convince ourselves that's really what it was... how else could we hold our tiny minds together long enough to put up a fight?

You must remember that Seurchraig didn't know we were demons. How could she? We didn't know it then, either. That knowledge came through my time here on Earth. That seems to be my great service to my people: I am the one that finds the right words to touch on what we're all feeling, already. At any rate, it's the service I take pleasure in.

In a human story, Seurchraig would've attacked us because of a prophesy saying that a heroine would arise from the Carag people to overthrow her in single combat, a star-eyed succubus with a heart swelled by umbra and nova, or perhaps it would be because she saw the potential in our mutability, and wished to harness the future we embodied for her own benefit.

The truth is that she sensed the Carag were the weakest of all the new species entering existence, and since we were innately off-putting to everyone around us, we'd be easy to isolate and subvert for her own purposes. Seurchraig believed she was the hottest thing in the universe. She wanted the emptiest possible vessels to fill with her own image—what could be better than she was?

None of us could tell you how we actually ended up *beating* her. We're still coming to terms with it ourselves.

Early on, the war went as badly as you'd expect. Seurchraig had the Rapturous: a near-infinite swarm of entities all shaped in her perverse image, all essence-lucid in power, their entire beings dedicated to relishing slaughter, both one hundred percent loyal and utterly obedient to her control, with billions times billions of years worth of combat experience between them. If Seurchraig had stuck to her original plan, she would've annihilated most of my people before I hit puberty. She came perilously close as it was.

My blackout mind went to war when I was fifteen, driven by my lucid mind's feeling that, well, I was human, and fifteen was the age that humans went to do whatever it was they were "destined" to do. I'd been raised military in a military-glorifying society, so I found nothing odd about the fact that my first writings showed the same trend over and over: characters entered the story on the cusp of peace and adventure, only for invading enemy forces to arrive as suddenly as though they'd phased through the seams of reality. Many of my now-lost drafts featured armies appearing out of nowhere with no setup, even though I'd read plenty of military history and I understood how long it took to move armies into position.

I wrote this way because, subconsciously, that's the kind of war I was experiencing. The normal teenage depression I'd been experiencing took an astounding turn for the worse. I began to self-harm, even during class hours at my high school, to lash out and threaten those around me in a way I'd never done before. I didn't know why, besides this sudden vague impulse that I needed to prove my power in the arts of violence.

I made a fool of myself and came across as a huge asshole, of course, which led to me becoming more isolated, which turned the already questionable refuge of my Earthside life into the source for a different kind of trauma. It also led me to become dangerously uncritical of my mental habits and how I came by them, which, well... we'll get to that when we get to that.

But, as egomaniacs invariably will, Setch got too high off her power-trip, and grew bored with us. We weren't fighting *well*, but we fought fanatically. And because most of us were in a perpetual dissociative state, we never seemed to internalize any defeat. Despite having faced her forces twenty times in the past week, Carag would be prone to snarling that we were excited to taste their blood for the first time.

The bigger problem for Setch's conquest was the one I'd already touched on several times: Carag are naturally accustomed to rapid cycles of death and rebirth. So Seurchraig might wipe out a thousand Carag in person between the spires of a burning city, only to visit a different killing field of bronzy constructs in glittering blue-grey asteroids and feel the distinct presences of more than half the Carag she'd *just* killed yesterday. And because we all knew that we were weak, losing against an overwhelming threat didn't feel like it meant anything. Our losses were never conspicuous. One Rapturous kills a thousand Carag, that's a Saturday morning. One of those Carag manages to land the finishing blow to take the Rapturous with her, that's a legendary event.

For humans, this attrition rate would be humiliating and intolerable. For us, it was perversely empowering... for a little while. But as I've written, repeated death and rebirth carry a mental toll. We grew more and more raw with the seams of lost memories in our minds, and every time we

went into battle, the premonitions of our painful deaths grew sharper than before. Bit by bit, the strain became too much for many of us. We self-annihilated, believing that existence was only futile pain, and it was better to cease than to suffer.

As I joined in, then stayed in, the fighting, I came to Setch's attention a few times. For her, I presented a seemingly-contradictory puzzle: I died more easily than any of my kindred, and I do mean *any*, yet I returned the quickest and most reliably of all. In hindsight, of course, this was obviously nothing more than a cosmic fluke: I never committed one hundred percent of my being to any battle—I could devote my energy in waking life to the war, and began to do so later on, but until then I was only ever half-present—so though I died, the safe environment of my vessel, and the lucid nexus of my essence on Earth, allowed me to return from death quickly.

I want to acknowledge, here, that I'm omitting so, so much. Multiple complete reformations and endless doctrinal mutations of the nascent Carag military, entire sequences of failed, then eventually successful, counteroffensives, and ploys beyond ploys on Seurchraig's part. Not to mention the founding of Hakirae and the Prutaern Fleet Shipyards as vital permanent bases, including the creation of Hakirae's Starless Steppes as a training ground for the Onslaught Guard and proving grounds for new techniques, the creation of a comprehensive disinformation system to stoke Seurchraig's paranoia and render her reluctant to push any advantage she gained...

It's too much. This was only meant to be a few paragraphs of footnotes as background to establish the Carag relationship to the arts martial. But typing these words has opened a floodgate, stirring memories and half-glimpsed revelations to the surface, and I can scarcely manage the flow.

Untangling all the threads of our war for survival from hallucinations born of trauma, from rumors and hearsay, and from Seurchraig's manifold deceptions, will most likely take most of my remaining time on this Earth—even if I'm lucky enough to live until this mortal vessel and I die of old age. There's the matter of how Setch got into my head while I was in college, how she used the essences of my slaughtered kindred to camouflage herself from me and others, how she used her Rapturous and her Emissaries to impersonate my kindred both to attack us with the visages of our own and to stir many species of our home universe into believing *we* were the true enemy... and all of that is far painful to type right now. At that point I'm no longer telling you about my people. I'm just defining us through what Seurchraig did to us, and I *despise* that.

C'mon on then, readers. Let's get through this. Back to the war.

Let's be real clear about why I'm still here: even across the divide between universes, I still felt much of this. I still began to yearn for oblivion to escape the cycle of pain, violence, death, and repetition. Like most other Carag, I reached a point where I lived more out of spite for Seurchraig, for the nebulous enemy I didn't even know yet and wouldn't have dared to name, than because I hoped for the future. The simple truth is that I was born later, and I came to the war later than the majority of Carag—emerging as they did straight into being from the fabric of our home universe, a kind of cosmic parthenogenesis—so I spent less time in the thick of it.

That's it. I'm not stronger, or better, or more special than my kindred. I just got lucky on timing.

As for the growing number of Carag choosing annihilation over rebirth, or simply soaking up so much trauma that their choice no longer protected them from oblivion, the Empress noticed. She

saw that her attrition warfare was taking a permanent toll, after all, that we weren't immune to long-term damage. This is where we come to her boredom. For a while, she'd been anxious. We felt her paranoia in her rapturous, and it even bolstered our spirits: they didn't know for sure that they *could* beat us. This war might last for thousands of years, long enough that our numbers would grow, and our power would grow with age and experience, until we turned the tide. So when we felt their mindset shift back to the same smug bloodlust, it crushed our hearts. We knew then that they'd seen our numbers dwindling, and reached the obvious conclusion.

Without her fear to force her to keep staring at the progress of the campaign and getting personally involved, Seurchraig tired of us. She saw the Carag campaign as both repetitive and a foregone conclusion, and in any case, there were many other species in the universe of our both that she wanted to put under her dominion. She kept sending Rapturous after our last holdouts, but the streams, though steady, were much smaller than the infinite tide from the war's beginning. She devoted most of her forces to expanding the campaign against the other, older, much more numerous species of our home universe.

Out of all the storied sapient species that once dwelled there, only we survive. It's a graveyard now. A zombie universe. That's the universe we will keep for our center. We'll preserve the ruins and the graveyards and the killing fields as testimonies to this war, and build our cities around them. Life in harmony with death. It's the last gesture of kindness we can offer our cosmic cousins, even if their ghosts may sometimes threaten us.

The creation of what we the Interstitial Legions, concurrent with Earth year 2019, marked a turning point in the war. While each pocket dimension within the Interstitium possessed a stable nature and obeyed consistent rules, the sum total of these realms (a subject for their own later writings) was chaos. Each possessed a strong enough essence in its own right to resist Seurchraig's influence for a short time, yet because their natures conflicted with each other just as much as they did with hers, gaining dominion over one gave her no way to control the others.

So, the Carag did what insurgents always do: we hit, we ran, and when our latest base became subject to attack, we scattered to any one of a multitude of fallback points.

After this, Seurchraig got squirrely. Her Rapturous were stagnant, you understand. Remember all that material from the psychology and psychobiology section, about how beings must grow with their experiences to expand their essence? She refused to let her Rapturous do that. To give them room to grow would be to allow them the possibility of growing into beings that no longer wanted to serve her every whim.

I genuinely don't believe this would ever have happened. They could've changed in a thousand other ways yet still retained that same unwavering loyalty, that same eagerness to genocide whoever she asked them to. But to believe this would've required Seurchraig to be capable of trusting in the power of someone other than herself.

So, as the war dragged on, a strange phenomenon emerged: the Rapturous, once threats of insurmountable power, suddenly became enemies we could bring down reliably. First with a thousand Carag. Then with a hundred. Then one squad. And finally, of course, we reached the tipping point: one Carag could kill one Rapturous. By that point, we were all so enraged and exhausted that we just kept pushing. One Carag kill *one* Rapturous? Oh, that wasn't enough, that

wasn't vengeance enough by half!

By 2020, an average Carag soldier could kill dozens of Rapturous in the space of an hour, retreat to an uncharted region of the Interstitium to rest, then return to kill dozens more. We finally got the breathing room to assemble the Voidwrought Armada, and you can't imagine the euphoria of watching these big, beautiful, sapient warships plow into a Rapturous swarm and carve them into slag with a light-show of magnetized plasma beams and fractal gouges.

A fractal gouge is a Carag mass driver cannon. It uses a modified form of atomic strong force to apply simultaneous acceleration to the entire molecular structure of a projectile at once. Firing them temporarily tears space-time apart, leaving this beautiful helical wake like multicolored auroras spilling out of a jet-black seam in creation.

It felt like the universe had turned inside out. Suddenly, the little scampering prey were become lightning-fast slayers, bloodthirsty razor-mawed demons surging with abyssal hatred. One Onslaught Guard would routinely butcher thousands of Rapturous, most of them anywhere from dozens to hundreds of times her own size. Once meat, now the grinder.

And Setch? You need to understand that Setch wasn't a coward. If she was a coward, she'd still be alive. But she was pragmatic. You must remember, she wanted a perfect death. She wanted to make sure she only died on the exact terms she dictated, and her terms—up until almost the very end—were that she wanted her death to be the grand finale of a war so spectacular it would never be forgotten.

She was so very like a Saelvur that way. I loved her for it. I hate her for it.

Over the course of 2018-2019, Setch used her personal connection with me to slowly taint my view of my own people—who, I should mention, I still hadn't internalized I was part of. I knew that the Carag existed, though my understanding of exactly what we are and where we came from was still deeply distorted, and I knew I yearned to join them, but I didn't know I wanted to join the Carag because I already *was* Carag, and it's naturally to want to be united with one's people.

It was, in a sick twist of irony, my own increasing lucid investment in Earthly concerns, my participation in human social justice, that gave her the wedge she needed to separate me from my Carag identity enough to poison the rest. By this time, the Carag were a one hundred percent militarized society. We had to be. She left us no choice.

Graeshat Mordair and Saelvur were both severely depleted, and Graesh Etran... we lost all the first-gen Etranat. They did their best to adapt, but the violence was just too relentless. Slaughter's a flow you need to control, to dominate. The Etrants tried, they really did, but it was all just too against their personalities.

It's not that we *wanted* eternal war. We just expected that we'd been doomed to it, and we did what we could to make it psychologically bearable. But Setch knew me well enough by now to perceive my concerns about fascism's creep in human society. Using her guise as Sevrakai, supposedly the girl of my dreams (in reality, a very warped vision of the girl I, myself, wanted to become), Setch fed my anxieties about the Carag, including my lucid mind's terror that they were just a delusion born from my need to feel special (a need I've never actually possessed, only

feared I possess), until I came to associate my people with the guilt and shame I felt at being raised in a white human body by white humans.

In 2019 I snapped, cut myself off from my people, and was left alone with Seurchraig... who I then also cut off, because she failed to realize that I believed she was Carag. She'd stolen everything I created to understand my Carag self-image, after all. Driving her away took a terrible mental toll on me, nor did I make a clean break. I fell into myself, and in the first true, lucid spiritual experience of my life, I realized that I was a female demon. I was becoming fully lucid to my nature. That opened up the way to put all my being towards endeavors either in this reality or in others, but it also removed the reserve I'd unknowingly become accustomed to relying upon.

I was still in the habit of using one hundred percent of the energy available to me. Now that I could access *all* of it, I'd expanded what I could do, but also create a possibility of breaking myself.

For the next two years I floundered, feeling unspeakable trauma yet having no idea where it came from. I attached it to any social justice issue I saw, convincing myself that if I did my best to help with this particular problem, the pain would end.

It just kept getting worse.

In 2021, in a sequence of events I may never discuss in writing because it involves humans and other mortals I've met in this lucid life, I did something which I only came to understand in the course of writing this piece. I tried to exert my demonic power in a social situation. My reasons were good, but my methods disastrous, and I failed utterly. Yet that one moment, of believing utterly in myself, was enough to turn me lucid to everything that happened.

My personal Chernobyl. I ceased dissociating from all the trauma of the long war, of everything done to me both on Earth and elsewhere, and when I tell you I would rather have burned alive for two consecutive months I mean it with every fiber of my being. The pain was incomprehensible.

The pain was full of now-lucid insights. I at last began to see the shape of things. I finally, truly perceived Seurchraig, putting together many pieces from all my stories over the past eight years, and I used our now-unique connection to coax her into a final confrontation.

My distorted visions of that battle (comprised as much of the things I thought and felt while I devoured Seurchraig's soul as the things I actually did to kill her) can be seen in *Demon Queen of the Deep Ways*, and I mean to portray the real sequence when I'm ready. So for now, let's skip to the aftermath, and finally be done with this damnable litany of torments.

Killing Seurchraig tore my psyche further apart: to annihilate her once and for all, and assimilate even the echoes of her power to be doubly sure she was finished, was to admit to myself that there would be no recompense.

I know that it's insane to say I hoped I might find a way to redeem the genocidal psychopath that tried to enslave, and when that failed, exterminate, my species from the moment of our emergence. But, I did. If I could convince her to harness her power, her insight, and use them to nurture the cosmos rather than dominate it, she would add something back to the multiverse to balance everything she took from us. I know that was an absurd hope.

I knew it then, and even then, I knew Seurchraig was consciously, callously exploiting it, as she'd done for untold millennia.

Still, burning her to oblivion was the most traumatizing experience of my entire life. Even on the Earthward side of my double-life, the psychic agony bled over into physical symptoms, causing a miserable hacking cough, severe headaches, and burning pains throughout my entire upper body. It was the closest I'd come to the death of my inherited human flesh since splenectomy.

I touched death twice as a child. If any contemporary human reads this, I ask them to remember that. I have a grounding in the traumas of your world. That's how, even split and compartmentalized as my psyche may be, I know with absolute gut certainty that all of this was and is real. I have a strong measure for what "real" trauma, as Earth humans would define it, feels like. And this? This was so, so much worse than anything I'd experienced before.

I can write about it with a clear head, now, because I've found my hopes were not in vain. I did heal, as impossible as it seemed nine months ago. I smile, I laugh, I cry tears of joy as well as of sorrow. There is softness and pleasure in me. My lust flows, a little more each day, as freely as it once did. It was worth it, but... the price was too damn high.

I think that's the note I want to close this section on. There will come a day when I'm able to write about how the Carag relate to the arts martial, as I originally meant to do here, but it's all, still, too fresh. If you take one thing away from this, I hope it's that I did not, by any measure, defeat Seurchraig alone. It took the continued effort of the entire Carag species to whittle down her forces, claw our way back from the brink of annihilation, and slowly push her into a position where someone would have the chance to destroy her.

I turned out to be that someone. And I hope, as I hope for a kiss and a dream, that I never see a war like this again.

### **Galvanizing Pathways in this Labyrinth of Me: Carag Science and Technology**

Carag science is a tricksome, ever-shifting target, and my own thoughts on it are still new at the time of writing. This is the first time I've felt free to write about knowledge the way human scientists so often have, as a simple, joyful form of communing with the cosmos. Up until now, everything needed to have military applications. We only theorized about different spatial configurations to develop faster feed systems for rifles, more effective armor for our starships, more resilient and powerful swords... you get the picture.

I suppose I'll start with the simplest, and hope it helps me tap the possibilities, yes? The Carag home universe, which I call Thnakt or Axiom for the sake of simplicity, is structurally similar to this one—humankind's home universe, as far as I know—but operates under significantly different rules. In Axiom the supernatural has no laws of uncertain origin holding it back from manifesting in full. This extends all the way to instituting alternate laws of physics.

As implied by my description of fractal gouges in the previous section, Thnakt's spacetime is a physical structure. In poetic terms, we call it the all-fabric or the Grand Lattice. It can be torn, even permanently damaged. As far as the Carag can tell, this causes no wider instability to the

overarching structure of the universe. These void spaces can serve as random-access entry points: Axiom's native essence only flows into them if we coax it, at which point the ruptures begin to seal and soon cease to be ruptures any more.

Barring that mandated suturing, entities from other universes find these pockets of nothing easier to appear in: zero local essence means nothing to repel their appearance, nothing they need to displace, and randomized travel between or within universes will always default to places of least resistance.

At least for the time being, the Carag prefer to leave the ruptures open. Seurchraig's war purged unfathomable amounts of life, entire ecosystems, from every region of Axiom. Leaving the way a little more open for new beings to help us repopulate the universe is one of the best, simplest ways to begin moving on now that we've achieved peace.

Thnakt has many other peculiarities. For example, its speed of light is about 1.3x that of the light in this universe, and there are many small zones within the universe where new energy and matter spill into creation. It's tempting to refer to these as their own kind of rifts, for that's how most humans would probably understand them—gateways, openings to some other realm from which the matters pours—but that's not what they are. These are fullnesses, anomalous stretches of the all-fabric with a nature that simply spills forth new materials into being.

Axiom also has naturally-occurring mega-structures that seem to derive from a similar pure-essence mechanism. It is the nature of our universe for these titanic sprawls—mammoth notched girders, tapering rib-constructs in the depths of partly-crystallized nebulae, tumbles of twisted mineral columns fused to asteroids and planetoids—simply to appear, or maybe it's the nature of the constructs to appear in our universe. Why create a dichotomy? It's quite likely both.

As you can imagine, there's little question of perfectly mapping or understanding our home universe. Its laws frequently alter in minute ways—I'm pretty sure that ten years ago, its speed of light was closer to 1.17x that of the speed of light in this universe—and individual regions may have quirks that lie undetected until the time comes to take measurements.

As naturally-exploratory creatures that want to venture through and understand every universe we can, the Carag have tailored our science to match. More of our efforts go into developing our scientific methods than into recording the bodies of knowledge that those methods unearth. A sufficiently skilled Carag scientist can always figure out the answer to a question in their fields. Sometimes, they can do this even faster than looking up the answer would be!

Again, of course, there's the question of Graeshat. Both Mordairat and Saelvurat enjoy picking at quantum physics, forces, and material properties, but for very different reasons. The Mordairat want a minute understanding of every individual variable so they can enjoy putting every little variable to work in their designs. Saelvurs, on the other hand, want to know the rules exactly well enough to exploit them. We want broad patterns to use for inspiration in shaping our own essences, in crafting our own systems of volition-applied physics.

The Etrons and we Saelvurs share a love for natural science, the study of organic beings, but Saelvurs are admittedly a lot more mercenary about it. We're as interested as finding organisms with interesting traits to, er, flagrantly, shamelessly copy, as we are in studying other life-forms for

their own sake. The Etranat prefer simply to immerse themselves in a local ecosystem's flow, sinking so far into its rhythms that they ceased to be a disturbance to its workings.

Much of the most advanced Carag science would be reduced to chicanery in humanity's universe. I need to express that at the multiversal level, this universe is a one-in-a-trillion fluke. Most universes are malleable to the beings that live within them. The universe lacks any unflinching, cohesive identity and set of rules. For essence-lucid beings, such as all first-gen Carag had to become to survive, even the laws of physics should be open to change.

Using lucid-essence power or magic, that is, impulse as I mentioned much earlier, is like having access to the developer tools for existence itself. Tools that also let you change the computer you're developing on, and the room you're sitting in, and... well, metaphors will naturally break down when wielding forces that allow us to transmute metaphors into literal reality, yes?

This universe resists. This universe behaves like an essence-lucid construct purpose-built to remain a certain way. Human thought reflects this, usually attributing the behavior of this universe to some sort of creator, but the older I get and the more I study this reality, the more certain I am that this isn't the case. I don't think there *is* an ancient creator who dictated that this reality's laws would repel any attempt to change them.

It's my hypothesis that, remarkable and frustrating as it may be, this universe just plain is what it is. It's like this because it just happened to enter existence this way. As I said, a one-in-a-trillion fluke. I understand that this is frustrating. Trust me, I spent more time than I should've smashing my head against the walls of this reality, trying to force it to split open so I could manifest my true form and escape from the agonizing vise of species dysphoria.

As I wrote earlier, I've come to accept that only this vessel's death will free me. And once I'm out, I doubt very much that this universe will let me come back, or have any verifiable contact with the beings on this side. Plausibly-deniable appearances in dreams and fiction, that's the best I can hope for as far as connection with this reality in later lives.

I only get one chance to dwell in and experience this universe. I've elected to make the best of that. I'll be overjoyed to finally return home to my people, but... this reality's not all bad.

Cutting to brass tacks: Carag face a conundrum when practicing science. To be science, there must be some approach to defining a measurable reality beyond the scientist's own perceptions. Yet in universes such as Thnakt, the quickest and most reliable way to gain measurements on new phenomena is to use impulse, and impulse means manifest one's self into reality. That includes manifesting any underlying assumptions about the reality one is standing in!

Given that human science already faces difficulties here—confirmation bias is potent enough even when it can't *directly* change the way instruments behave!--you can imagine that Carag scientists must be doubly stringent. Before it even attempts to enter the field and test a hypothesis, a Carag scientist must perform a series of checks on its own mental state: not just to ensure that it's healthy enough to accept disappointing or emotion-stoking results, but also that it's lucid enough to avoid slipping partway into other realities when it begins its probes.

Working in field teams goes a long way to mitigating this, but they're still quite capable of

influencing each other. Our scientists must be skilled in impulse. It takes a great deal of practice and self-discipline to hold an idea in one's mind without devoting force of belief into it, but this can and must be done. Look at it like this: there's a difference between acknowledging the hypothetical possibility that someone could read your mind without your consent, and the literal belief that someone can read your mind without your consent.

To be clear, barring a massive power disparity, no one can read your mind without your consent. This is one of the very first things we tested during the war with Setch. If we weren't able to conceal our psyches and our presences from her, we'd have been wiped out before I hit puberty. But that's enough about the lessons we've learned from slaughter. The sciences of essence require us to internalize seemingly-silly thought habits such as "manifest an opening that reality can fit itself into" and "push back at the results to see if they push you back in turn, but only push hard enough to know you've pushed." The very techniques we must use to verify results are often the techniques that will *erase* the results if we take them too far. Carag science often looks more like an especially persnickety form of mysticism.

Consider the example of two regions in Thnakt: one where processes like radioactive decay, thermal emission, erosion, and so on occur at a much higher speed, and the other where these processes occur at much lower speed. We might say that time flows faster in one and slower than the other. And in Thnakt, that might actually be the case!

*Or*, it might be that one region has a higher essence-weight than the other. Remember, all essences are ultimately infinite. It all comes down to rate of replenishment. More essence means that something is more of itself at once, meaning that a higher-essence being thinks, feels, and moves more quickly than a lower-essence one, and a higher-essence space carries out all its processes at what amounts to higher speed than the surrounding universe.

*Or*, it could be that the more swiftly-progressing zone actually has a *lower* essence rating, but an even lower essence-density, meaning that it's manifesting more but with much less weight. Again, applying this to a self-aware being, an impulse-wielder can choose to reduce their manifest density to achieve higher speed, but they sacrifice solidity and inertia to do this.

In the first scenario, that of time just plain flowing faster, the Carag scientist would need to test all these other hypotheses first. And *still*, she couldn't be absolutely certain there wasn't some unknown X-factor at play. Universes of manifest essence are often like this. In the second scenario, that of higher essence-weight in the faster-moving area, she would note that any manifestation of essence on her part yielded smaller results, and that she moved and thought more slowly—as though both her form and thoughts were moving through thick mud.

But to confirm that this was a matter of overall higher weight rather than simply a local resistance to herself and her creations in particular, she would need to bring in essences from outside sources—careful to avoid directly manipulating them, thus imprinting her essence on them and tainting the results—then observe their behavior in relation to the zone.

The lower-weight hypothesis would trend in the opposite direction: the scientist would note that she moves and thinks faster in this space, that the essence she manifests produces grander results for the same amount of effort, and so on. After all this was done, she could begin looking into surrounding phenomena that might be creating or affecting these zones, and so it goes.

Axiom's relationship with time is a little bizarre. You can travel backward from the universal present time, but can't travel forward past it. So, if someone really wanted, they could journey back to the war with Seurchraig. They could interact with events there and live out what amounted to alternate timelines, but no matter how long they spent there, these realities would cease to exist the moment they left. You could return and fight in the war until you died, and you would remain dead in the present, but nothing else would change.

Eventually, the Carag may want to use this for expeditions into the past for the sake of all that was lost: to recover stories and ways of being. For now, it's all too present, and the idea of returning to it is rapidly paining me, so I'm going to close this here. I can feel Seurchraig trying to pull us back into the past with her, to die with her, as fascists always do. In and forever onward extending from the present, Seurchraig is dead, annihilated, and eternally gone at last. Someone could go back and live out an alternate timeline where they prevented her death or resurrected her before I finished assimilating her. Yet, still, it would all be undone the instant they returned to the present.

For the moment, that's enough to know. All you need to defang the memory of fascism is be able to acknowledge that it happened to you, and know that it's over. To confront it and say, yes—you *were* scary. Once. Long ago. Never again.

So, how do we construct technology from the sciences of essence? First, there's the finicky fact that an essence construct's design must be in harmony with its overall nature to reach maximum efficiency. This creates many oddball compromises where adding inefficiencies to certain areas of a construct makes the construct as a whole function *better*. Consider a water purifier that works faster if we integrate two mechanically superfluous reflecting pools into its cycle, or the cable-connected islands on many Carag city ships that ought to result in massive structural instability, but instead help with energy flow.

It feels silly to say that essence constructs run on vibes, but to a certain extent, they do. That said, they still benefit from skilled practical engineering more often than not. A high-quality essence construct demands both mundane and arcane skills if you want best results. Then there's the question of maintenance. Essence constructs don't so much degrade as they fall out of sync with reality. Their creation embodies both their immediate physical construction, and the circumstances surrounding their creation.

It's not that they're stagnant, rather that essence constructs are self-renewing recreations of a particular moment. They'll sooner or later start to slip away into pocket dimensions, a layer of their own which is time-isolated from the rest of local reality. So maintenance is less about physical repair, though this can help too, than about rituals that renew the bond between the construct's nature and the changing state of the reality it was built into.

That water purifier's community might maintain it by getting together to have a picnic around it, taking clean water directly from its system. City-ships are Carag entities in their own right, self-aware and able to seek out a renewed bond with reality, but those that dwell upon them should also form bonds of their own with the ship's being.

Similar principles apply to Carag medical science. Most demons, the Carag included, should regenerate from even the most grievous wounds on our own. Having one's head blasted apart,

limbs torn off, and guts slashed open is quite survivable for even a very new Carag adult, as long as it only happens once in a short period of time.

Carag medicine exists firstly to facilitate this natural regeneration, and secondly to fill the gap if our psyches become damaged enough that our healing fails. Medicine is as much about psychological as physical healing. The materials chosen, like silk from a favorite coverlet for one traumatized by loss of sleep, or bolts from an old reactor core for one that feels spent from giving too much of their energy to others, should embody essences that will substitute for the areas of the self the injured or sick being can't reclaim just yet.

### **In Umbra and in Nova: Carag Mysticism and Perspectives on Religion**

Clear the easy chaff first: the Carag are, at our gentlest, extraordinarily skeptical of gods or *any* entity that encourages structures of worship and proselytizing akin to those of gods. This also includes human conceptions of demon lords and archdevils. The idea of, for example, Satan or Lucifer as an anti-god that we as demons pray to and obey the same way that Christians obey their Almighty is unspeakably repugnant to us. We believe that these patterns of behavior foster dependency on the part of the worshipers, possibly regressing even further into codependency between them and their idols, and that the work it would take to prevent these cycles from setting in is better devoted to daily life.

The Carag overwhelmingly favor anarchism: no gods, no masters. If you want to lead us, if you want us to listen to you, you'd best be prepared to prove that you've got lessons worth learning. Don't give us some airheaded spiel about perfect good and wanting the best for everyone. Those, like most ideals, are extractions. Show us that you can deliver on those haughty promises in concrete ways. What can you *do*, what skills do you possess? Don't just sit on a big, shiny throne claiming you care about some vague idea of "my people" that only exists in your own mind.

Get out in the world, get your hands dirty. Don't preach about wanting to be useful. Just *be useful*.

You might think, or fear, that this means the Carag are against spirituality as a whole, but it's quite the opposite. We're among the most spiritual beings I've ever encountered, we just reject the idea that spirituality is a limited resource invested solely in higher powers. "Higher powers?" you might ask. "I thought you said the Carag are extraordinarily skeptical of gods."

Yeah, we are! Part of that skepticism as a mature practice involves stripping superior power of its false connotations of moral supremacy, of a divine right to lead. We acknowledge that these powers are higher in the sense that they may be (we've surpassed quite a few gods by now, but not all) significantly, even overwhelmingly, more powerful than we are. Seurchraig was a higher power. We would rather have avoided fighting her, but she forced us to do it if we wanted to remain free.

We recognize that gods are often powerful beings with great ambitions that they have a realistic prospect of fulfilling. That's exactly why we're so suspicious of them.

A few months before I wrote this mini-textbook, I put forward a vision of Carag society in which all Carag are mystics. I think this was a little overzealous. I believe mysticism's a great fit for us, regardless of graesh, but while lots of things are great fits for us, we only practice some. All Carag must find a way to self-sustain their own essence. I do believe that. We must be able to live stably, if not perhaps comfortably, in total isolation with only our own counsel to hold. Cultivating that mindset is a

key part of existing sustainably on the timescale of infinite eternities.

For many Carag, this means finding the spiritual in the mundane—enjoying the strange savor of a rain-muddied construction site gouged like a crater into the streets of an upscale neighborhood, as I once did when I was a child, or simply finding mythic potency in the imagery of an everyday cul-de-sac. For others, it means filling up with satiating sensations without ever treating them as precisely *spiritual*.

A bar-crawl and series of spontaneous fucks is good for the soul of a succubus, whether she treats it as spiritual or nice, simple nightlife. For that matter, treating it as nice, simple nightlife might be spiritual in a non-spiritual way!

The Carag do create what we call star-temples, and these align with the closest entities we have to spiritual superiors, the guiding stars or patron-stars. As with the Graeshat, the guiding stars are identified by shape language rather than colors: the hues of their light always match the colors that an individual Carag associates with the patron-star's areas of specialty. The stars have an uncanny ability to foster certain ways of being. It's just part of their nature, their essence.

We don't understand how it works, and the stars are lucid yet not cognitive. They have awareness of a sort, but I truly couldn't say whether it's an awareness like our own. We trust them and they trust us. Our bond stayed strong all through the war, one of the few things Seurchraig never managed to taint with pain, misdirection, or impersonation. The stars are neither our creations nor our progenitors. They are, in a very real sense, Carag stars. Some have genders, others do not.

These are the guiding stars I can name and describe at the time of writing. There are others, but I've yet to discover some, and am still internalizing others. The Carag stars are vast beings, even by the standards of demons accustomed to communing with cosmic horrors. It's not that they're complex, but rather that the sheer *immensity* of their essence takes years of study to process.

Haksaema, also called Bright Haksaema and Mother Haksaema, appears as a four-pointed star longer on the vertical than the horizontal. She nurtures eternal becoming and the euphoria it brings. For me, she is cobalt blue with a white-hot core and a silver corona. Haksaema is the star of present and future, and of the crossover point where the future becomes the present, over and over and over again.

Ainshaer, also called Dour Ainshaer and Old Ainshaer, is a colossal sunburst bordered by ribbons of plasma rising and falling out of his core, and always surrounded by an enormous field of black metal constructs: many geometric planes connected by cables that bend slowly in his stellar wind. He is the patron-star of entropy, fostering the passing of old things so that new ones may take their place. For me, he is a uniform blood-red with impossibly low luminosity for his size: enough that a human could see his surface with their naked eyes without damaging their sight. On the other hand, he emits a staggering amount of black-body radiation.

Bragashaerien, also called the Abyssal Opal, is a large star defined by two sets of tendrils: tendrils of Bragashaerien's power flow outward from its surface like countless tornadoes stretching down from storm-clouds. Meanwhile, tendril-shaped debris clouds of pulverized matter flow inward and merge with it. Bragashaerien is the patron of dark dreams, as well as devouring, assimilation, and mutation by lust. It's the patron-star of all succubi that wish to embrace it. For me, Bragashaerien has a white corona and a jet-black core full of muted, opalescent hues, and instead of illuminating the surfaces its light touches, its darkness turns them impenetrable black. Aside from the tendrils, Bragashaerien's corona always contrasts its core in some way, by color if not by shade or brightness.

Kasivul, also called the Young Nova, is a smaller yet extraordinarily bright star distinguished by nine pinpoint rifts around herself. It guides us in becoming something other than we were before—something new to us, whether or not it's new to others. In this way, Kasivul is the star of the future at some times, and the star of the past at others: for many, even with eternal life and infinite possibilities, there comes a point where we've become everything we're going to become. Thus Kasivul's role has moved into our past. Yet, within the continuum of ourselves, the binding ties remain back to those moments when we became something new. For me Kasivul is bright, rosy pink.

Vudol, also called the Entwiner, is the star of change and communion. For the Carag, change doesn't necessarily mean something all-new. It often means altering the balance of what one already was. Vudol can still lead us to new growth, of course. It has eight points which alternate regularly in size: the vertical and horizontal points grow larger as the diagonal points grow smaller, then when they're less than half the size of the vertical and horizontal points the growth reverses until the diagonal points are over twice the size of the others. For me, Vudol is violet, with a small black core and a purplish-red corona.

Gahmni, also called Sweet Gahm and Beguiling Emerald, reveals itself with many crescent-shapes arcing off from its silhouette. It's the guide of thresholds, invitation, and growth: first in one's self, yet growth in ourselves often spreads to those we meet. For me, Gahmni is a rich emerald green.

Despite our skepticism and the outright hostility it frequently becomes, Carag can still be fascinated by, and even friendly with, gods. We may still derive spiritual experiences from meeting them, but it's the spirituality of one supernatural being in the presence of another. There's rarely any deference in it, and if there is, it comes from appreciation for the god's deeds and conduct rather than the fact that they're a god. We're willing to show the divine kindness and curiosity, we just refuse it any special treatment.

Aside from the guiding stars, each Carag graesh shares common mystical motifs surrounding the mystery of the complete being, the Carag as a continuum of itself and its many possibilities. Graesh Mordair depict the complete being with the City 'round the Mountain: the City is both the buildings and the streets between them, the beings that live there and the lives they live. It is in the roads and the farms and the quarries and mines that send their unearthings back to the center.

It has walls to protect its core, and there are many precious things within, but sometimes the things within the walls do the city more harm than good, and like the farms that feed its populace, there are many things the City needs to sustain it that it can't keep within its walls. The Mountain is a volcano. Sometimes under great pressure it erupts and wipes out most of the city, and its quakes often damage a building here and there. Yet the heat within the Mountain, its gases and its stone, are the foundation of both the city's buildings and the industry that gives it life. So long as the buildings are remade when the devastation passes, the City survives and continues to grow.

Though imperceptible to many outsiders, every new shop, every play at every theater, every game the children play in the streets, changes the city and steers the direction of its future growth. Each Carag psyche is a city unto itself.

We've already touched on Graesh Etran's metaphor for the complete being: it's the River. The River is the water within it, and many of the lives that swim through, yet there are many large things that push through the River's space without becoming part of it: fish and great plated predators, and the boats of strangers drifting or propelling themselves across its surface. The River is water, yet it's more than

water: it's sediment and decay and yes, sometimes waste. The River allows many beings to drink of it, yet they do not become the River, and it allows many beings to swim to its depths and glimpse a little of what lies on the bottom, yet even they do not become the River.

The River flows, and others flow into it, yet somehow all remain their own.

And Graesh Saelvur? Our metaphor for the complete being is the familial estate: a quaint mansion where so much of what we discover is inherited, and yet in the act of discovering it, we create it as our own. The manor has many rooms where only some are used. Most guests will glimpse only a fraction of its chambers, and every wall might yield a secret passage forgotten until just now. The grounds outside the mansion walls may be overgrown or cultured, but either way, they reflect something about the nature of the estate and the one that shapes it.

All the estate belongs to the mind that owns it, yet in the beginning that mind is aware of so little about what lies within. It's easy to spend years discovering, thinking the secrets will never end, only for the owner to wake one morning and discover that they've found the final chamber. At first this can bring despair, stifling: are their journeys done? Are their joys over?

Yet in time they realize that in exploring, seeking, seeing the patterns of the estate and the layout of its rooms, they've learned enough to begin building. They see how each chamber added or removed changes the flow of life within the walls, and without.

For many, the first step in spiritual growth begins with a step nearly all Earth humans are already familiar with: taking a name! Names are optional among the Carag. We have many other ways to show respect, affection, and recognition, and have nothing but hatred for the use of names as a means to claim, possess, or otherwise show ownership of another sapient being. Names tend to become very personal very quickly, encapsulating a being's essence and growth, and we believe every being should have the right to name themselves.

Letting someone incredibly fuckable choose a name for you because it turns you on is another matter, of course.~

Saelvurs have our own custom surrounding names: the Glory Name. From warships to weapons and the soldiers themselves, we developed this custom as a means to take ownership over the misery Seurchraig forced us into. Now that she's gone and peace is before us, I believe it's perfect for expanding to much larger purposes—to commemorate any great achievement we like. For example, Zlaetasrul, my familial name, is the Glory Name I took to celebrate my joy, love for life, and most of all my lust after I finally began to heal from the backlash of ending Seurchraig.

Hence its meaning: literally, "lust forever new."

Carag believe that mythology is itself a kind of purely-psyche essence construct, a machine of ideas designed to reflect the soul or essence of the people that created it as that people see it. The thing is, a people's essence changes and evolves over time. So sooner or later, just like the material essence constructs I mentioned in the science and tech section, mythology loses its links with the present day descendants of the people that created it. It must be maintained by updating it to reflect their present when possible, and if not, a culture must create new mythologies for each new era it enters.

In light of the need for mutation, Carag base the images, symbols, and modes of our mythology on the

things that exist in our own time, and the things we exist among. For me as a Carag succubus, the metaphor of a veiled and lurking being that preys on some, yet shepherds those close to her heart through dark and dangerous reaches, is not a cloaked figure with a dagger, but an attack submarine.

It continues: to me, the symbol of deep thought is not a forum or even a classroom (anyone that's ever been in a human-helmed classroom knows how much actual thinking most students do), but a shower. If this seems funny, well, it is, and yet that's the truest symbol. Carag hold that the burden lies on the interpreter to understand how the symbol serves its purpose, not on the symbol to be easy to understand and take seriously. Otherwise, how can we have symbols for the many, many, many wondrous experiences which are both superficially ridiculous and complex, deep, invigorating?

The exact details of Carag mysticism are already far too rich to delve into deeply, here. I'll explore my own tradition, the Lambent Way of the Quasar Dream, at my own pace in future writings. So for now, I'll close with my notion about Nova Priests, who I think would be well-suited to providing Graesh Saelvur's closest equivalent to a conventional priesthood. The obvious question: if the Carag are so distrusting of gods, on whose behalf do the Nova Priesthood preach?

Why, to the worshipers themselves, of course! A Nova Priest, or Priestess, or Cleric (whichever sounds best in English based on gender and preferences, the words in Vulshiir will be the same anyway) is a priest of self-love. They nurture love for themselves, virtues, flaws, gray areas and all, and shine forth that example into those that seek their counsel.

A Nova Priestess accommodates without apologizing, invites without pressure, and entices without manipulating. She reveals the intimate flows of her soul's font and invites those that meet her to see, in the joy she gives herself by existing, the joy their own existences might give them.

We are also sacred prostitutes. Look, it's a major fetish for me, I couldn't help it? But then... you're probably not complaining, are you, seeker?~

For now, I'm the only one I know of that uses the term Nova Priest. That said, instinct tells me that this way of conduct already exists among Carag other than myself. As always, I hope my words find favor, and bring benefit to my people as well as to those that might wish to join us.

### **Silver Lines on a Spring of Rosy Flame: The Carag at Play**

"The Carag at Play." What strange words to type. What an odd thing to look at tomorrow as a chance to share joy rather than struggles. We've never had the chance to invent our own games before. So, I'd like to put forward some ideas I've had for the consideration of the wider Carag species! A note: some of these ideas will be fraught, I understand. It took me a long period of rehabilitation to reach the point where I could even contemplate games and play as worthwhile subjects to write about, let alone as things adult Carag ought to participate in.

So please, kindred. Give yourselves time.

First, my time on Earth has introduced me to all sorts of lovely human games which I believe would be perfect for Carag as well. Video games! Now that they're aware of Earth, my kindred will be able to access humankind's internet from our side (humanity's home universe only censors and suppresses incoming contact with the paranormal, not outgoing), so mentioning the term is enough.

Already a very Carag-brained medium, as I'm sure my kindred will agree, but we can take it further! I wish to propose that we create stable fields of pure essence which respond to inputs from associated computers—possibly attached? Imagine the delicious phantasmagoria of big, shiny cables trailing off the back of a desktop tower or game console into a vaporous mass of gas and light, slowly unwinding and becoming transparent until they meld with the cloud like anchor-chains vanishing in the depths.

We'll prime the essence-cloud to solidify based on instructions from whatever application the computer/console/input device offers: impermanent 3d printing as a means to turn gaming well and truly 3d! We can fill entire pocket dimensions with the stuff, enough to simulate whole worlds, and run whatever kind of ludicrous games we think of when we create an environment where players can use their physical forms to interact directly with the game!

Humans have all sorts of what I'd call "finding games," for example, scavenger hunts. Carag love to seek things out, scabble into odd nooks and crannies. I say these are a marvelous candidate for a Carag pastime! Think about it: we scatter items across locations in multiple planes of existence, using some of the earlier items as clues for where to go to continue the search. We don't excrete, we can collapse out of reality to rest safely anytime we need, we can open portals or stretch our psyches across existence to snatch food if we want to take a break and eat, hell, we can leave the playing field to go home and return at any time... we could setup scavenger hunts that play out of the course of *multiple. Years.*

And if we get bored and never finish the game, that's great too! There'll be that many more odd little Carag relics, scattered in strange corners of the multiverse, waiting for someone to stumble across them in a century, or a millennium, or an eon...

Now, never let it be said I haven't had ideas for original Carag games. First, it seems to me that we have a special affinity for shapeshifting even by demonic standards, so I'd like to propose a shapeshifting called Squelchers. Squelchers has only three set rules: look for excuses to shapeshift, make those excuses clear to the other players, then shift away! There doesn't need to be a win condition—it should be more than enough fun coming up with ridiculous reasons to shapeshift and seeing what kind of response we can get by the ludicrous forms we take—but if the players want one, I recommend starting simple: the player that gets a stronger response from the other, wins.

Alternatively, the players might agree that they'll limit their power to a certain level so neither has an advantage, then try to shapeshift in ways that force the other player to shapeshift in order to deal with them. For example, one player might become a diaphanous mass of fabric, then the other transforms into a jagged mess of crystal shards that tear the fabric, so the fabric player must become water, the other player becomes something absorbent or alternatively a heat-source that'll evaporate the first player, and so on.

Considering that... maybe for adult players, the winner would be the one that gives the other the most new kinks!~

My other idea will be fraught for many of us. It's a little fraught for me, too. But I believe it's the sort of game we'd quickly have learned to play if not for Seurchraig, and because of this, I believe pursuing this game will serve as a good barometer for our collective healing.

Mirage Fractal, or a Mirage Fractal, is a shapeshifting game of veiled and stolen identity. I know some of the kindred just felt their fight-or-flight responses spike. The idea still gets to me, too, but my instincts tell me that games like this should be a sense of profound joy for us, so... I at least want to put

the idea forward. Stop reading if you need to, kindred, but please give me room to make my case.

A game of Mirage Fractal takes place in a specific, defined area. This could be pretty much anywhere, provided that we've confirmed it to be empty of intentional external threats in advance of the game. This is essential because Mirage Fractal requires a lot of trust on everyone's part. With that condition met, the game could take place in the corridors of an abandoned starships drifting through the vacuum, in the canyons of a volcanic world, on the mountains of an ice-moon orbiting a gas giant: the location just needs to feel compelling, and lend itself well to set-dressing.

See, a Mirage Fractal consists of a premise, which might involve an actual story or might begin and end with inspiration for the personas the players adopt, explaining why a certain group of beings have come to this place and giving them a reason to stick around. At the start each player either creates a persona or receives one from the game master—if there is a game master—and they inhabit this identity for the duration of the game.

The real meat relies on the fact that *everyone* is a shapeshifter. Every player has the ability to impersonate every other player. Here's the one adamant rule: every game of Mirage Fractal is self-contained. Players do not use any real-life information they may have about themselves or other players as fodder within the game, and when the game ends, all its events and drama end with it.

This is to stop us from driving each other insane with paranoia.

As a starting point, the goal in a game of Mirage Fractal is to be the last player whose identity is correctly guessed by the other players. The game starts with a grace period where no players throw guesses at each other, and each player walks around in the form they assumed at the start of the game.

To improve their odds, players use this time observe each other, understanding one another's personas: a femme-fatale takes stock of an archaeologist who's busily chipping away at a wall, unaware that her sly smile and seductive saunter are in turn observed by a player in the role of a vagabond who's posted upon the clifftops above. Players may talk about their persona's personal history and desires if they wish, and the game both incentivizes this and makes it a second layer of risk. If nobody knows any details about the player's character, there'll be easier to impersonate, but clear details may also be used to guess the player's identity in the endgame.

A key twist: if players cannot backup their guesses with evidence, the other players are free to ignore the player's guess—even if that guess is actually correct. In particular games, a player whose guess goes unanswered might be expected to give away a new detail about their true identity, or forbidden from shapeshifting for a certain period of time.

After the grace period expires, players are free to shapeshift at their discretion. Ideally, they want to leave their original form behind as quickly as possible, first assuming the guise of another player while they're unobserved, and then shapeshifting for advantage whenever they feel like it. Once they have a degree or two of separation between themselves and their first form, returning to it can be a key strategy: no other player can be certain that they're not a *different* player impersonating themselves. There are many times when being seen to assume a particular form is just as useful as going unseen.

To keep the Mirage Fractal fast-paced and the players' minds busy, they're encouraged to invent and spread rumors about other players. More elaborate games might give the players secondary objectives to complete, or eschew the identification layer entirely in favor of those goals, allowing players to

sabotage each other. I considered writing this into the base game, but given the baggage we've all got from the war, sabotage felt a little too fraught to treat as a default.

Moving on from game ideas to the general idea of Carag at play, I haven't had too many ideas to do this yet, either, but there are some trends. First: Carag are gremlins. We are ridiculous, impulsive, weird little outer demons that take great joy in doing goofy nonsense. I think it's pretty fair to call us the goblins of the cosmic horror ecosystem. We like to burrow, we like to slip off chasing a whim and leave our non-Carag friends to look around ten minutes later and say "wait, where'd Kai go?", and we sure do like to chew on things that we should not, perhaps, chew on.

Examples include power cables (tasty electricity!), metal rods (huh, this one's almost as hard as my ex-girlfriend), sources of heat and energy in general, and *especially* radioactive materials.

We rush, we chase each other, we use our claws to slice things apart because it's fun and the tactile sensations can be very pleasant—or even arousing—and we like to get physical. Like many demons, Carag enjoy fighting for fun. It'll take us a while to fully reclaim our joy in it, but it helps that when it comes to the spiritual, killing intent determines whether the mechanics of combat create genuine wounds. It's being forcibly split apart and mauled against our will that makes violence violence. If we're letting our kindred chop us up because we're having fun, then all the dismemberment won't do much worse than tire us out.

### **Stoke in me the Ardor: Carag Lust and Sexuality**

Here we are at last, the section you've all been waiting for! Well, at any rate, it's the section I've been waiting for. It may be more enlightening than horny, but it's deeply important to me. Let's push in.~

I want to start with a definition of lust as I, a lust-demon, understand it. If my definition doesn't resonate with you, that's fine. I'm using "lust" to translate the Vulshiir "zlaeta," so if some of my definition seems overly granular, it's because I'm carrying over as many meanings of the Vulshiir word, the Carag conception of lust, as I can.

Lust is sexual abandon, an emotional state that pushes one towards sexual intimacy and the continuous stoking of arousal with the goal of experiencing maximum possible pleasure. That often means climax—heh, it often means *multiple* climaxes—but it doesn't always. On some of my most lustful days, I've never cum at all, just edging myself over the course of hours while I melt into one delirious fantasy after another. Lust is about arousal and sexual fulfillment, not just nor only the physical act of sex.

I drive this home partly because I'm aware this text will be read by humans who may have misconceptions about demonic lust, and partly because, well... so did the Carag, at the start. Exploring our sexuality in the middle of an endless war led many of us to take bad ideas at face value because we just didn't feel we had time to explore any more deeply. I was one of that number.

As a succubus—a word I use to translate the Vulshiir word "taershan," which refers to the kind of succubus you most likely imagine when you encounter the word "succubus"—I had a hazy idea that it was important for me to have sex, but because so much of our thought was dominated by wartime necessity, that's all I thought it was. During the rare lulls in the fighting, I gave myself to my kindred as a source of sexual comfort. They often enjoyed themselves, and I thought that the satisfaction I felt in helping them was what it meant to be a sex demon. I believed sex was for pleasuring others and masturbation was for pleasuring myself.

It took me until the writing of the Necromancer's Vengeance duology to realize I wanted to enjoy and get off on sex, that this was normal, right, and healthy for me. My experiences, while more extreme, were thematically similar to those of many other Carag. Lust-demons forced into war, we were already used to losing track of our deeper desires in dissociative defensive behaviors.

So, to put it clearly: Carag culture holds that, as a baseline, the purpose of sex is for all partners to fulfill the needs of their lust. One may choose to waive that standard to focus on their partners' joy, and that can be its own wonderful and intimate approach. It's important to remember, though, that they do this as a personal choice. Sex is not normally about one partner serving the other. Sex is not about reproduction, ideals, altruism, or power dynamics. Carag hold that sex is, first and foremost, about sex.

The same perspectives and principles, as a baseline, apply to kink. Sex and kink are rich, hedonistic experiences, some of the best we know of in any universe. They are their own justification. They do not have to be coping mechanisms, political statements, or rites of passage to be worth doing. Sex and kink are worth it because they're just plain fun. It follows that while we absolutely encourage our kindred to use kink to cope with and process trauma if that's what they want, the Carag don't support the idea that kink is innately traumagenic, nor that it should be.

Kink. Is. Fun. So if we tell future generations of Carag that they need to 'earn' kink by going through trauma, that every kink should come from some deep-seated wound, we're going to wind up with descendants traumatizing themselves to justify developing a particular fetish.

As a rule, Carag allow consenting adults the room to do whatever they want in private. Radical consent, right? They have the right to do this without anyone else prying into their sex lives, and if anyone else does delve that way, we meet them with disapproval should they try to disclose things which aren't their right to disclose. Each being has the right to hold their own counsel, to think and experience whatever they wish within their own minds. As long as those they share these things with can and do give informed consent to the experience, none of us has any right to judge.

Public sex is normalized and commonplace in most Carag communities, with the first partners usually being the ones to decide whether they're willing to let random passersby join in. Here we do require some discretion: while adults in private can do absolutely whatever they like with each other, play out any scenario no matter how depraved, especially fraught kinks like ageplay are not appropriate for spontaneous display in a public setting. Some communities allow partners to negotiate exceptions, either on demand or for special events such as sex festivals, while others keep this as an absolute no.

If the sexual conduct of certain community members becomes an issue, the other denizens will first try conversation, then light social penalties such as refusing to do favors or allow leeway, with exile as the fallback option for extreme misconduct.

If I seem like I'm being a little vague about what Carag sex actually *looks* like, well... I've written some erotica already, and I'll write plenty more, don't you worry! Thus, here, I'm focusing more on the cultural and historical context surrounding it. For the same reason, I'm not writing in too much depth about the lust of succubi like me, the taershanat, since our often-comical levels of horniness receive ample attention in my own work.

Suffice to say that Carag communities abound with sex clubs, artisans offering sexual goods of all kinds, and that sex workers are among the most cherished members of our society.

## Looking to the Future

As vast as it may be in comparison with the cultural documents I've written in the past, this piece is not the complete work, but the first foundation. In the past, I wrote about fictional cultures. The Carag, though many who read this text may spend all their lives in this one universe and never meet my people, are a real species, still frighteningly new despite all we've endured. My own explorations, first in writing on this side of existence, and in later lives in person by dwelling with and adventuring among my own people at last, will be but the smallest part in the vast frolic of our being.

You'll not, for example, that I didn't touch on the idea of Carag culinary arts at any point—that's because we've only just begun to explore what our own styles of food might look like! There's so much more to uncover as well as to create.

At the time of writing, the Carag stand at a perilous crossroads. Seurchraig is, at long last, truly gone. Her Rapturous died with her. The children of abyssal stars stand as sole sapient inheritors of a vast universe, one we have scarcely even begun to explore—and that scarcity, we've mostly seen through the portal of a gun-sight. War took everything from us. War mangled us, burned away our kindred and the innocent dreams we once thought we'd call tomorrow. War has left a psychic scar on the entire first generation of our people.

War is what we know. War, by now, is simple habit. That familiarity, and our shared experience of it, has now transformed from our saving grace to a dangerous pitfall. It will take time and self-nurturing labor for each of us to visit a bar or a crowded restaurant of other peoples without tensing up, waiting for the telltale sharpening of glints that sometimes heralded a Rapturous attack, shaking with a perverse need for tension to bloom into open violence so survival instinct will spare us from our own galloping thoughts.

As we stare down upon the bountiful valley of the promise of peace, I know that many of my people feel the same uncanny instinct that I do: to seek another war to fight. A righteous war, where the enemy is so ruinous that we know anything we do against her will surely be better. Peace frightens us. Peace frightens *me*. I'm afraid of being hurt. I'm afraid of hurting others. In this, I will trust to the same spirit of unyielding demonic rebellion that brought us together, as one, against the old Empress.

If we allow her war's lingering marks to frighten us away from the fruits of peace, have we not allowed her to shape our nature as surely as though we knelt before Seurchraig in servitude? Yet I fear this only a little, for I know my people, and I know we will not be so easily entangled as that.

Indulgence lies within our grasp at long last. Passion and tenderness and lust under shining spires, under forests of hexagons and rods, and on the shores of strange seas under the light of abyssal stars. I trust in the yearning of Carag hearts for an odd, lambent promise named "joy."

~Kairliina Saelvur Zlaetasrul~