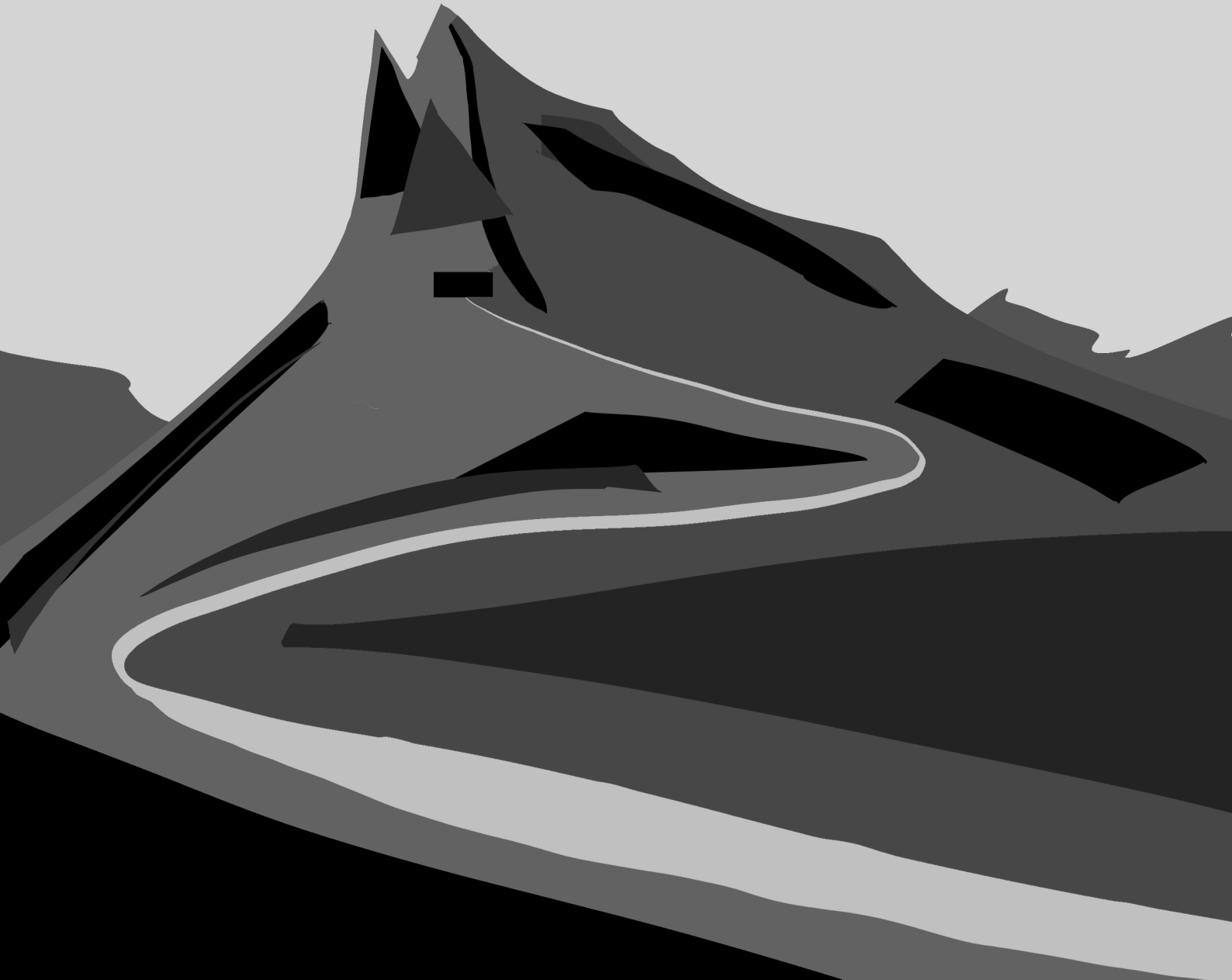
ZÂR

A scenario by Henrik Dithmer
Revised edition



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Preface to revised edition:

Zâr was written for Fastaval 2022, and was nominated for the awards for Best Roles, Best Mechanics, and Best Scenario. While this was quite overwhelming, it was fundamentally not a very well presented text, and most had problems deciphering how it was supposed to be facilitated before I demonstrated it in-person. This is why I've made this revised edition, which will hopefully make it more available to readers who are (understandably) confused by the original text. Many thanks to Niels Jensen for sparring, and to Nicolai Just Olesen For editing.

Another thing I didn't get around to acknowledging some sources of inspirations that have been instrumental to the development of the scenario. The three scenarios I want to mention are Ten Thousand Light Years From Home by Morten Havmøller Laursen, whose poetic style and thematic game mechanics have left a clear mark, Forgotten by Mads Egedal Kirchoff where the characters are forever changed by their hopeless mission, and "Adams Venner" by Michael Erik Næsby, which I am sad to say has never been translated to English.

(Note: These scenarios, and many, many more, can be found at www.Alexandria.dk)

Media touchstones:

Jass & Music from Southern Iran by Zâr

Siavash Aminis discography of ambient electronica

Runaljod - Ragnarok by Wardrune.

Neon Genesis Evangelion

The music videos of Lady Gaga

The Matrix

Finally, this is not a scenario about Iranian or Northeast African culture. It started with a fascination with a particular South-Iranian ritual, and has muddled with the my brain for an extended amount of time, and the ensuing ritual the characters undergo has little resemblance to an actual Zâr. If I am perfectly honest, upon re-editing it the scenario feels like an orientalist fever dream. Someone reading this might read the Shah as the decadent, feminine ruler stereotype from Orientalist fiction, but this is not the intention. You may decide for yourself if I succeeded in communicating that.

Wordlist (for the scenario, not necessarily reality):

Angra - Lord of Demons

Aurvanto - Pure Soul

Apocalypse - A vision of the future

Ashkar - The mountain where the consciousness of the Shah is entombed

Daiva - High Priest

Shah - Lord of the Realm, which has areas of flat plains, high-tech cities, and vast mountan ranges

Sufi - Mystic and exorcist

Zâr - Ritualistic exorcism of evil spirits

Introduction

It is said the sun always shines on the peaks of Mount Ashkar. Centuries ago the Shah was eternalized in the sacred waters of the mountain cave, and has since upheld the sacred balance of the realm, keeping the evil spirits of Angra in check.

The ascent has been brutal. The wind and the rain has sharpened the mountains' rocks into keen blades, the acid in the rain has infected you with endless nightmares, and an ink-black cloud has enveloped the very top of the mountain. As you enter the cave temple the ink has soiled your clothes, your skin, and your minds.

The drone from the massive apparatus form an unreal background music, while the wires leading into the waters crackle with electricity. What you feared turned out to be true - the previously clear waters are now darkened, emanating the vapours of falsehood.

The evil spirit in the temple of the Shah must be driven out. It is time, for a Zâr.

Zâr is a one-shot scenario for 4 players, where one facilitates. If you're reading this, odds are that's going to be you, but you participate as a player like everyone else. The scenario is about four theurges that have travelled to Mount Ashkar to exorcise the evil spirit that has infected the Shah's dreams, and thereby avoiding the fall of the Realm.

It is fundamentally a narration-based scenario, with a bit of character-play, and a card-driven system to keep the dreams interesting.

The role of the facilitator.

The facilitator explains rules, and sets the tone and mood of the scenario. The first part requires you to invest some time in reading through this text, and keeping track of the scenario's fundamental structure. The second part demands that you take the lead in the beginning if noone jumps at the chance to start describing and narrating, and generally treating the scenario like the somber event that it is. Try to keep yourself engaged, and give encouraging nods when the other players describe and narrate.

A final minor role is that you are in charge of the transitions between one type of scene to another, and fundamentally patch together the narration so that the transitions feel whole. This means you are the one describing how you dive into the dreams, and you describe how you wake up from them again. You can play with this as much as you like, but my baseline idea is that you dive into the Shah's dreams by literal literal submersion into the sacred waters of the mountain cave.

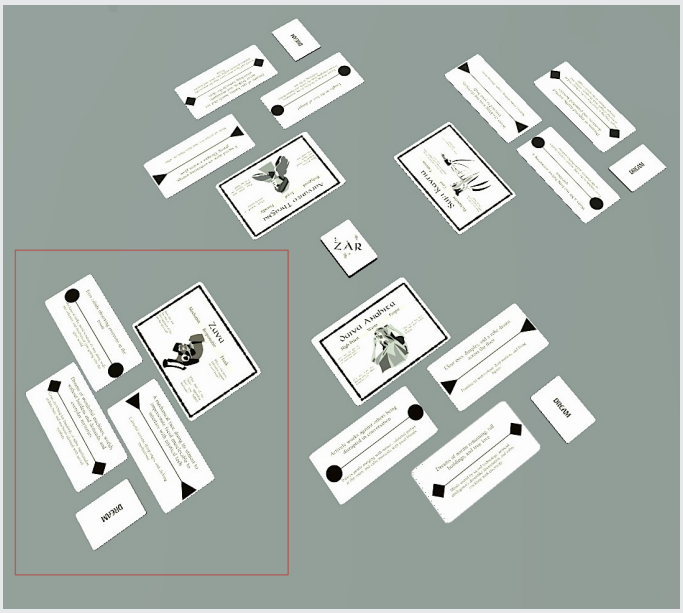
To play Zâr you'll need to print the double-sided Theurges, their accompanying Dream Cards, and the central set of Zâr-cards. I recommend printing on cardboard, so you can't easily tell what is on the other side of the cards. A typical setup can be seen on the next page

You will also need a way to track the time. A smartphone will do: I recommend the app Caffeine, so you can have the timer as a ticking bomb in the middle of the table, for all to see.

Content and structure

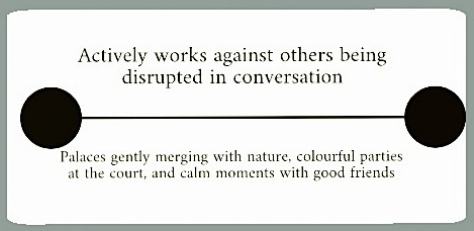
The narrative centers on four theurges attempting to exorcise an evil spirit from the Shah's temple. Many generations ago the Shah was transferred into the ritual-mechanical apparatus at the top of the sacred mountain, from where they keep the realm safe from Angra's spirits.

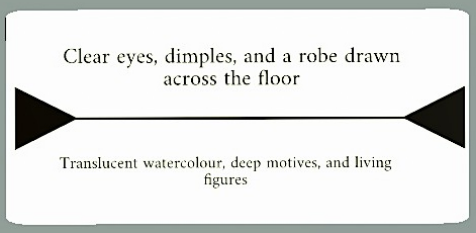
The scneario proper begins as Theurges each move into the mountain cave, describing how they do so. During the scenario they will move through three of the Shah's dreams. The scenario stops after all three dreams have been completed, or when the timer reaches zero - marking 60 minutes of in-dream time. The timer runs whenever the Theurges are inside the dream. The exorcisms will press the Theurges to the utmost, and in the worst-case scenario they will be possessed themselves. If they do not finish all three dreams before time runs out, the Shah's machinery will break down, and the Realm will fall.



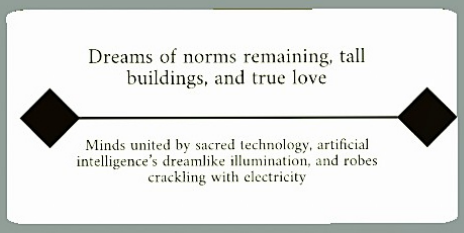
The roles laid out on the table, with the Zâr-cards in the middle. Everything within the red border belongs to one character, in this case Zaya.

The core part of the character, double sided.
Starts with the "light" side facing (also recognizable by it not having "Angra" in the name),





The characters' three traits, double sided. The solid symbols are face up.



The Dream cards, shuffled and drawn at the start of each dream. Has the character's name on the back in the physical version.

Between the dreams there will be short interludes where the theurges wake up from the dreams, and they interact and discuss what happened in the dream. Outside of the dreams the timer is paused, so these scenes are a lot less hectic than the dream scenes.

At the end of the scenario there will be a revalation of the future, which depends on how many dreams have been succesfully cleansed by the Theurges, and a final scene where the Theurges leave the cave one by one.

Tone and flow

The scenario rests on your narrations, based on the prompts the system gives you. The words on the cards are more to be seen as suggestions, than limitations on what you allowed to narrate.

The setting is a world where technology and mysticism is intricately connected. Humankind uses machines dedicated to the higher powers, engraved with sacred symbols and activated through mystical rites, to keep evil spirits at bay, and maintain order in the world. Angra constantly lurks in the periphery, whispering in the ears of the discontented, encouraging ambition, the pursuit of power, and speaks of a world standing at the precipice of oblivion.

The tone is sombre and serious. If the theurges were to fail, it would destroy the sacred balance and evil spirits would have free reign in the realm. Even if the Zâr is succesful, the theurges would be forever change. That being said, evil in this game is a relatively limited thing. Political violence, anger, and oppression is fair game, but things such as sexual violence and abuse is outside the scope of the scenario.

"Breaking" traits:
Breaking a trait simply means flipping it, revealing something the Theurge would probably prefer to keep hidden.

The flow of the scenario aims for intensity, and the ideal is to have as little off-game talk as possible. Be that as it may, it was also designed for a two-hour time slot, so if you have plenty of time and you want to take a break, be my guest. The first dream is bound to have some rules-questions from the players, but it is my experience that they usually get it by the time the second dream starts.

The roles:

There are three components to each Theurge:

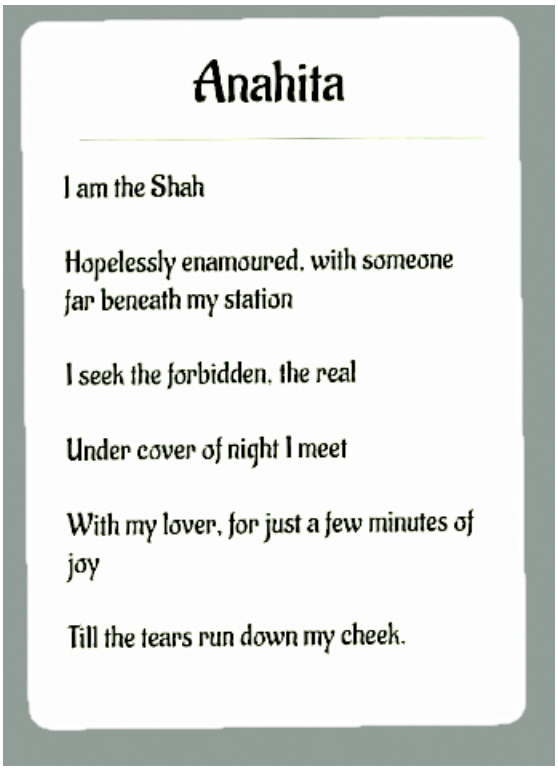
- A double-sided sheet with portrait, title, name, and a couple of questions for the introduction. The backs (the one that reads darker) is their fully broken form. You decide what pronouns your theurge uses.
- Three double-sided traits that each tell something about the Theurge on top, and has some inspiration for the dream descriptions below. Note that they also have a symbol, which are relevant for some of the Zâr-cards, drawn during the dream. The traits are always broken before the Theurges' main sheet.
- Five dream cards, used to start the dreams.

Playing the Dream

The dreams have a system to help you make up cool, weird and dark dream narratives, and give some tension as to whether the dream is succesful or not. It is more important to maintain the mood and flow, than to be absolutely sure you've done it "correctly". So, if you find out a card is in the wrong place, or you did something against the rules two minutes ago, let it slide. The game won't break.

Each dream has three distinct phases: The Submersion, the Exploration, and the Cleansing

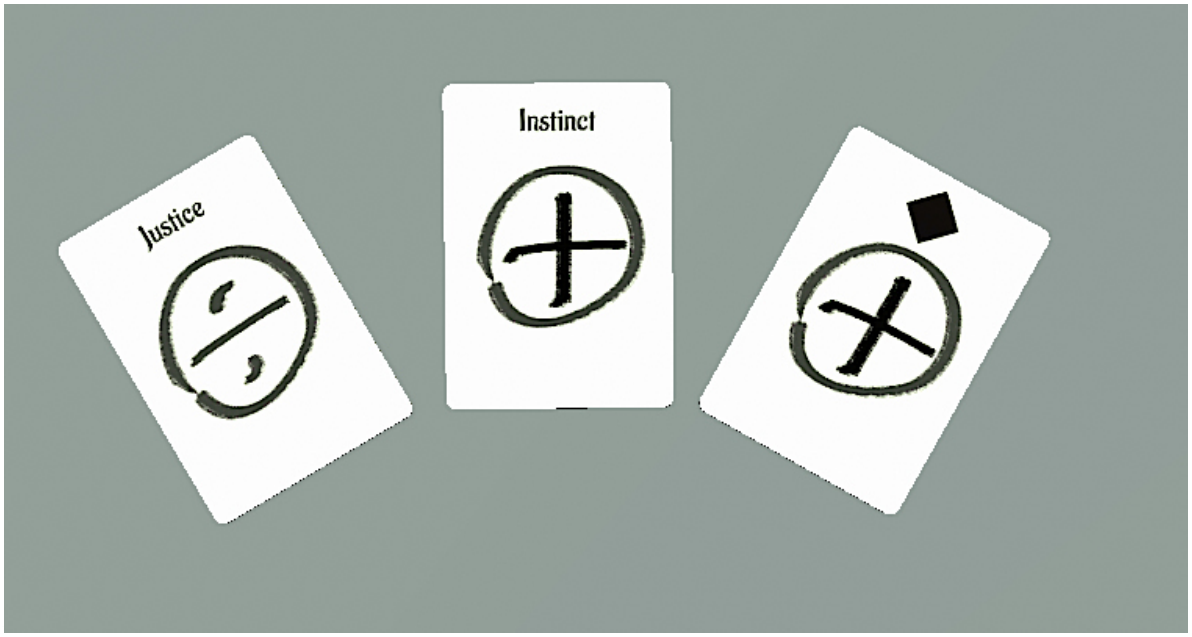
Submersion.



Each player takes one of their theurge's dream cards, and then everyone reads their card aloud, going around the table. This is the basis for this dream, which the Theurges at this point are present in. They will by their very nature not be completely coherent, and this reflects the weird dream logic of the Shah's dreams. When everyone has read theirs aloud, we move on to:

The Exploration

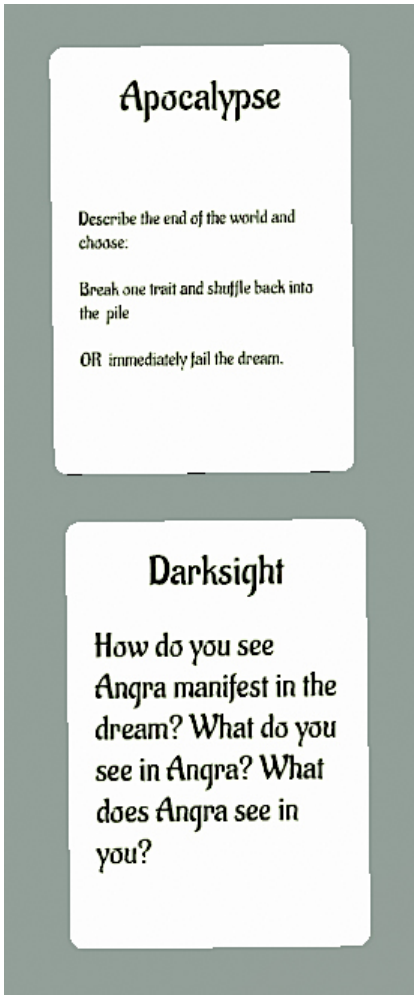
The last to read aloud their Dream Card, draws a Zâr-card without showing it to the others, and narrate what happens in the dream. If it is



a plus or a minus, you can give it a positive or negative spin, and use the card as a prompt.

If the first Zâr-card drawn is an apocalypse-card, reveal it to everyone, draw cards until you draw a non-apocalypse, and afterwards shuffle the apocalypse cards back into the pile.

The cards drawn are placed on the table face-down: This is the Theurgists' shared hand, the contents of which is hidden information. After a given card is drawn and narrated, send the hand to another Theurgist, who can choose to either keep Exploring the dream, or begin the Cleansing, but at first it makes the most sense to keep Exploring. The player now Exploring draws a card, narrates what happens, and sends along the hand, just like before.



If you draw an apocalypse-card, reveal it and narrate how, in the dream, the world ends. Afterwards you choose to either:

- Break one of your own traits, shuffle the apocalypse back into the draw pile and continue the dream, or;
- End the dream immediately in failure.

There are a couple of cards that are a bit special. First of all, some of the plusses or minusses have symbols on them. This means that instead of basing your narration on a word-prompt, you base it on the corresponding keywords on your character traits. Second, there are a couple of neutral cards, that simply have some special instruction for narration on them.

If you are completely broken, you can still participate in the cleansing, But your narration must come from the depths of the mind, where the dark demons have now completely lodged themselves, whispering forbidden thoughts into your ears. When an effect would result in one of your traits being broken, break one of the other theurgists' traits instead

At some point you will receive a hand, which you suspect is strong enough to exorcise the spirit - meaning it will contain at least 5 plus-cards. Then you might coinsider beginning...

The cleansing.

When you decide to begin Cleansing, the theurgists start taking an active role in the dream, attempting to exorcise the evil spirit. In order to succeed, the Theurgists will have to reveal at least five plus-cards from the hand.

Shuffle all the cards in the hand, and reveal the top card fior all to see. If it is a plus, put it in the middle and narrate how you help in the

Cleansing. If it is a minus, put it in front of your character sheet, and narrate how you are partially corrupted by the spirit. Afterwards another theurgist can draw a card, and continue the process.

There are three cases in which the cleansing ends:

- If you have drawn a total of 5 plus-cards, the player drawing the fifth plus-card narrates how evil is cleansed from the dream. This dream now counts as succesful, and you do not need to draw the rest of the cards in the hand.
- If you run out of cards without having enough plusses, the player who drew the last card in the hand narrates how the cleansing fails. The dream now counts as a failure.
- When you draw a minus-card, and it isn't the last card in the hand, you can choose to give up. In that case you fully ignore the card just drawn, and narrate how the cleansing fails. The dream now counts as a failure.

When a cleansing stops, whether it fails or not, you look at how many minus-cards lie in front of each player. Each minus breaks one of that Theurge's traits, flipping them.

When the cleansing is done, take all the Zâr-cards and shuffle them back into the pile, after which we have either an interlude or Apocalypse (the end-game).

Interlude

After the first and second dream we have an interlude, where the timer is paused and the Theurges can interact and show how the dream has changed them. There is a single rule for this scene: Each theurge who had at least one trait broken, must put a hand on their heart, and only remove them once each broken trait has been expressed, either in dialogue, through description, or in performance. The theurges can only start the next dream after all hands have been removed.

Endgame

The game enters Apocalypse if you run out of time, or if you complete three dreams before time runs out.

If Angra is unleashed due to time running out, or if all dreams fail, read the following aloud:

Once there was a Grand Shah, who ruled with Justice and Harmony in a great empire. He was made a lamb to the slaughter, as the people demanded that this order lasted forever, so they fastened him to the altar with long spiuts. In payment for his eternal presence, they gave him torment forever.

This ended today, as four bitter theurges chose not to make the same sacrifice, and the darkness in the Shahs heart became so entrenched, that it drew the entire realm into the darkness of falsehood. Angra thanks you.

If even one dream succeeds, the future is revealed to all present, and in the order of least to most broken theurge, you each answer a question from the list. If you are entirely broken, instead answer the question from your theurge.

3 good dreams:

How does order return to the realm?

How can you feel that the Shah keeps watch on you?

How are the minds of the wicked destroyed?

Why are certain groups interred in camps?

2 good dreams:

What new from of rule will they end up implementing in the empirre?

What war machines will the mechanics of the empire build to wage war on the brood of Angra?

What states secede from the Empire?

Why are you forgotten?

1 good dream:

What cult arises around your stories?

How do the people learn to live with famine and brushfires?

How does Mount Ashkar become the new seat of Angra?

Why do the rest of the world look at the empire with worry?

Bringing it to the table

Zâr is a challenging game. It has lots of moving parts, and I've been told that it scares people. However, I am sure you can do it. Here's a checklist for things to make sure you cover before you start the game:

- □ Print materials, make sure you have a timer
- □ Introduce yourselves to each other
- □ Explain the general concept (Dreamwalking, high-narration)
- □ Introduce the setting (Persian, Techno-Mystical, Shah)
- □ Go through structure (Intro→ 3 Dreams + 2 Interludes → Apocalypse and final scene)
- □ Explain the rules of the dreams (Submersion → Exploration → Cleansing), including breaking traits
- □ Explain the Interludes (Hand from heart when broken traits have been expressed, no timer)
- □ Explain the Apocalypse (More succeeded dreams = Better for the realm) and what happens if you run out of time.
- □ You can go through what happens in the final scene, but you can also wait until you get there

Sufi Kayria

Techsorcist Cool Curious

What does it take to expel evil spirits from the machine?

How can you tell that the sacred apparatuses have been integrated with your soul?

Why are you both loved and hated?

Waits a bit too long before answering a question

Trees bending in the wind, mental creatures hidden in the shadows, and forbidden archives

Wires crackling with red electricity, fastened to your body

Abstract forms, shifting images, droning music

Dreams of exposed truths, averted disasters, and punished heretics

People refusing to bend their necks, cyborgs locked in eternal struggle with the spirits within, and thought streams at the speed of light

Dreams of worlds being toppled, crowned prophets, og exalted madmen

Lost beings rediscovering the will, spirits living in harmony with their masters, and thought streams burning beautifully

Wires tearing the skin, sending translucent blood flowing down your body, slowly drenching your dress

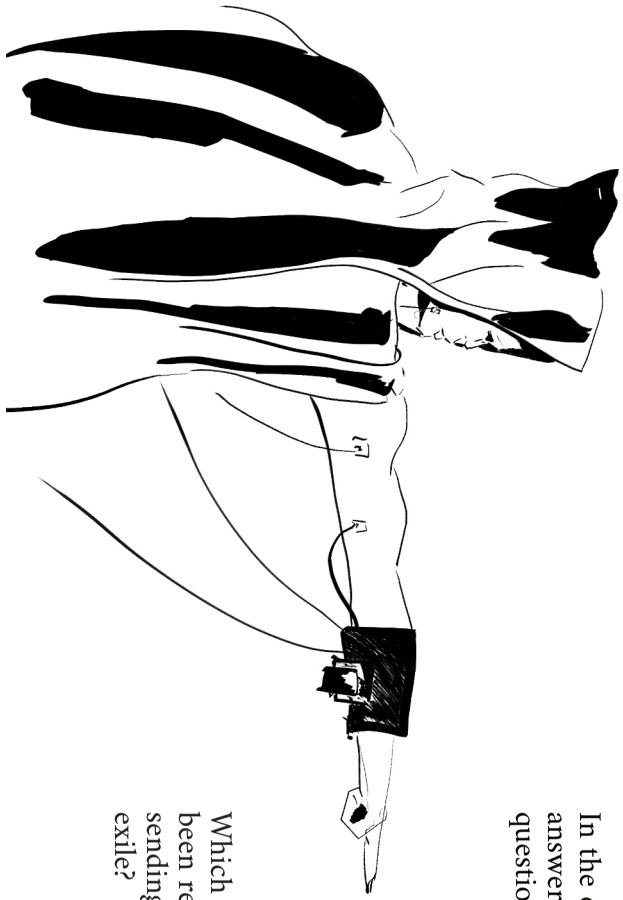
Exaggerated reality, overt symbolism, and forms collapsing

Does not answer questions directly

Natural phenomena reduced to basic lines, archetypal figures and floors littered with scrolls

Angra Kaurya

Awake | Fanatic | Possessed



In the epilogue, answer this question instead:

Which secret has been revealed, sending you into exile?

Daiva Anahita

High Priest Warm Proper

How does the gem in your forehead make you see more than most?

What sacred law have you had most trouble keeping?

How was your first meeting with the Shah's mountain cave?

Actively works against others being disrupted in conversation

Palaces gently merging with nature, colourful parties at the court, and calm moments with good friends

Clear eyes, dimples, and a robe drawn across the floor

Translucent watercolour, deep motives, and living figures

Dreams of norms remaining, tall buildings, and true love

Minds united by sacred technology, artificial intelligence's dreamlike illumination, and robes crackling with electricity

Angra Anahita

Domineering Sensitive Anxious

In the epilogue, answer this question instead:

How do you turn into a genuine hypocrite

Dreams of just kings, dark dungeons, and forbidden friendships

Minds depraved in the occult rituals, artificial malevolence lurking in the depths of programming, and clothes strangling their owners

Eyes darkened with ink, charcoal stripes appearing in your hair

Muddy colours, stiff figures, and light conspicuously absent

Insists on being heard

Palaces with secret halls, cliques subconsciously excluding, and blank eyes

Aurvanto Thragna

Bodyguard Loyal Friendly

How did you acquire the sacred aura which surrounds you

Which wound is your favourite?

What about your spear's history ties it to the Shah?

Laughs in the face of danger

Nature flowing in rhythmic forms, mountains bravely emerging from the earth, and human bodies frolicking in the sun

A sacred aura, an embracing energy, giving Thragna a warm glow

Birds eye perspective, neat lines, black on white

Dreams of epic battles, bonds that are never broken, and mountains stretching towards the skies

Sword and Spear more trusty than the newest rifle, implants perfectly sliding into place, and muscles flexing

Angra Thragna

Prison Guard Subservient Death Driven

In the epilogue, answer this question instead:

Why do you forever forsake the Spear, the Sword, and the Bow?

Dreams of dark caves, death of old age, and fetters that cannot be broken

Death under artillery bombardment, implants taking over the soul, and muscles torn apart

The Aura turns into ink-black bonds, enveloping Thragnas body

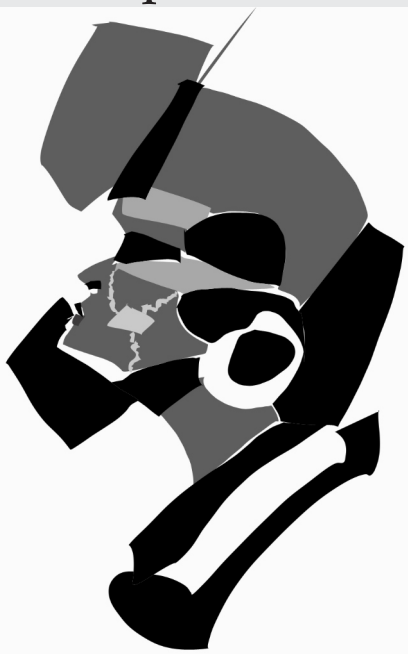
Frogs eye perspective, bleeding ink, and mouldy cloth

Laughs at fear (even their own)

Predators circling a wounded deer, labyrinthine wilderness, and humans seeking eternal shelter

Zaya

Mechanist Responsible Frank



How did you become a Recognizant of the mecha-mystical?

What is the most extensive implant in your body?

What part of the Shah's apparatus have you helped maintain?

Eyes calmly observing everyone in the room

Mechanical limbs, metal winding its way along walls and columns, and mechanical eyes gazing into the spirit world

A mechanical face, doing its utmost to impersonate facial muscles,able to interface with mystical tech

Colourful screens, sharp edges, and clicking mechanisms

Dreams of wonderful machines, worlds without burdens and demands, and everyday mysteries

Cities stretching for hundreds of miles, functionalist architecture, and machines adorned with sacred symbols

Angra Zaya

Fatalistic **Judgemental** **Indecisive**

Answer this question in the epilogue instead:

How do you set the Empire's fall into motion?

Dreams of the end of the world, a world without meaning, and death in routine

Endless industrial complexes, decrepit buildings, and computers glowing with red occultism

Skin peeling of, and only the mechanical parts of Zaya remaining

Blinking screens, edges breaking with symmetry and mechanisms fusing with the flesh

Eyes staring determinedly, yet never on the one Zaya speaks to

Suicidal software, steel melting in the furnaces of hell, and mankind unconscious of their own machinery

Thragna

We are the technological wonders

presented in flash and glamour

before the eyes of the Shah

We can give wealth to the poor

Life to the dying

and death to the evil powers of the world.

Anahita

We are the courtiers

The mightiest officers of the empire

and the Shah's most loyal subjects

One by one we whisper, in the eyes of the Shah

and turn every decision

into a battlefield

Kairya

We are the victims

of the Shahs numerous decisions

Whether in good faith, or outright attack

The decisions will claim lives

We cannot speak, whisper, or scream

but we always intrude

on the Shah's mind.

Zaya

I am the Shah

With a straightened back, on the throne

Raised on high, beyond the prophane

My gazes pierces

Far and wide, across the multitude

And see the bright future arriving

As my mind remains muddled with doubts

Anahita	Thragna
Zaya	Kaiyria

Thragna

I am the Shah

My will is made of steel

My fist is carved from granite

Clad in armour from top to toe

I go to war.

The world will feel my wrath

Anahita

We are the warriors

Our voices raised to the skies

overwhelming the thundering hooves of our foes

The Shah's name on all our lips,

Yet each heart bears a doubt

Will we see death in the eyes

for the Shah?

Kairya

We are the battlefield

A wasteland, watered by countless wars

with the blood of soldiery

and oil of machines

We send ocher dustclouds

In the air, so all are blinded

And the light of the sun is suddenly eclipsed.

Zaya

We are the enemy

with the blasphemous machinery of the void

We meet the Shah in battle

We will crush their weapons

We will bend their wills

We will turn the soldiers against them

Anahita	Thragna
Zaya	Kaiyria

Thragna

We are the persecution

The Inquisition, enforcing

Ethics, morality, glory

On all the peoples of the Empire

We have caught a scent

Of corruption at the courts

To be purified

Anahita

I am the Shah

Hopelessly enamoured, with someone far beneath my station

I seek the forbidden, the real

Under cover of night I meet

With my lover, for just a few minutes of joy

Till the tears run down my cheek.

Kairya

I am the lover

The loveliest beauty of the land

In mind, to the eye, and in spirit

yet born in the lowest caste

My ambition is linked to the much

My wrath will break these chains

and my love to the Shah

Will remain

Zaya

We are the darkest recesses of the palace

Silk, velvet, marble, ceder

Secret rooms, and hidden passages

Where the people of the courts can hide

Intentions

We will hide all that is imperfect

From view

Anahita	Thragna
Zaya	Kaiyria

Thragna

We are the demons lurking in the dark

at the threshold of this world

Where innumerable Shahs have performed

A rital keeping us at bay

They fear us, even as we whisper

truths into their ears

asking them to let us in

Anahita

We are the lamb

Born too early into this world

and now too early sent away

Crying out on the altar

We writhe under the Shah's knife

And our animal eyes beg

for

mercy

Kairya

I am the Shah

My silver knife raised, prepared

to soil it

with the blood of the lamb

I tremble as I imagine

the pain I inflict

yet nothing else can keep

The demons at the threshold at bay

Zaya

We are the ritual

Lights, altar, symbols, drums

Sacred engine grease

An eternal procedure, the goal of which

Is the world's eternal balance

With our rules

The Shah binds themselves

to All

Anahita	Thragna
Zaya	Kaiyria

Thragna

I am the Shah, the day before the submersion

Into the grandeour of eternity, at the peak of the mountain

I must take control of the fate of the world

I stare into the translucent waters

And shiver in fear, for what awaits

What do I see?

Anahita

I am the Shah, the day before submersion

Into the purity of truth, at the peak of the mountain

I must be purified of all that is of the earth.

But the whispers of the soil, following me through life

Mock me, degrade me, humiliate me.

What plagues me?

Kairya

I am the Shah, the day before submersion

Into the depths of the lake, at the mountain's peak

I must realize the deepest secrets of the world

In prophetic animation, I rant about the future.

But in solitude the tears emerge.

What will I achieve?

Zaya

I am the Shah, the day before submersion

In sacred machines, at the mountain's peak

I must be forged like a blade, my thoughts eternalized

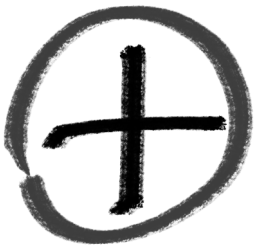
I feel estranged, lyke the cogs of my mind

Run away, without my consent.

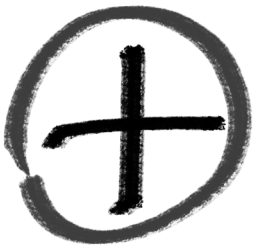
What do I fear?

Anahita	Thragna
Zaya	Kaiyria

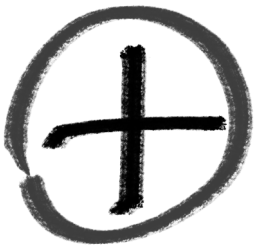
Instinct



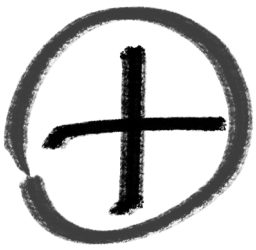
Resistance



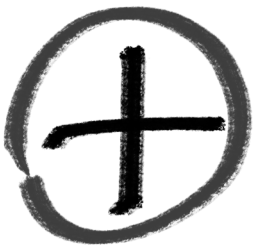
Virtue



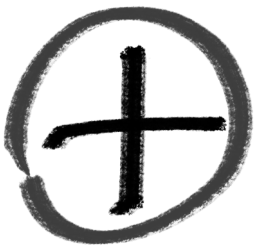
Sight



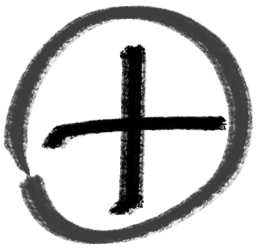
Hero



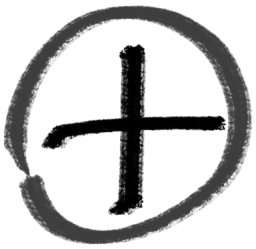
Sword



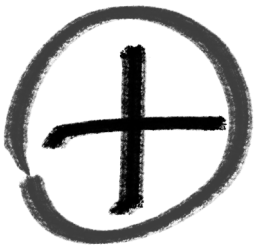
Artificial



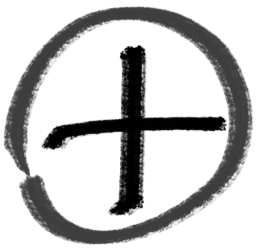
Justice



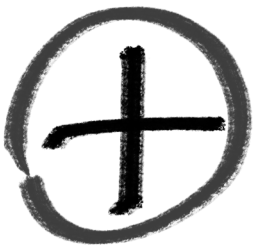
Exploitation



Patience



Paradox



Apocalypse

Describe the end of the world and choose:

Break a trait and shuffle it back into the draw pile, or fail the dream

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ZAÏR

Soldier

Justice

Apathy

Nonsense

Shame

Artificial

Pity

Foreign

Superficial

Slimy

Conception

Apocalypse

Describe the end of the world and choose:

Break a trait and shuffle it back into the draw pile, or fail the dream

ZAÏR

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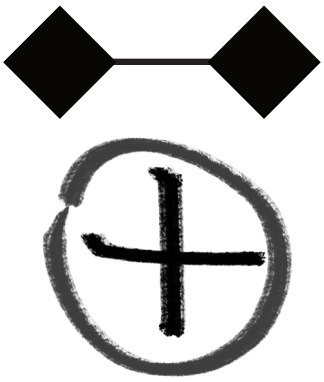
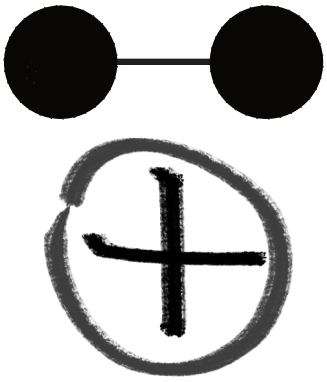
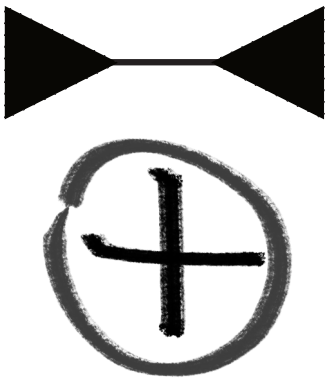
ZAÏR

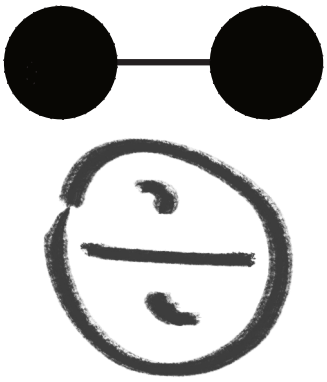


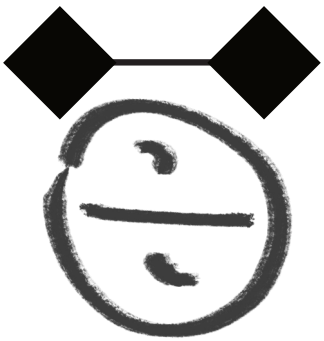
Wrath

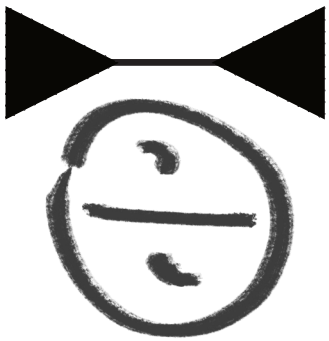




Sky







Wrath

Deep

Darksight

How do you see Angra manifest in the dream? What do you see in Angra? What does Angra see in you?

Darksight

How do you see Angra manifest in the dream? What do you see in Angra? What does Angra see in you?

ZAÌR

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ZAÌR

Dream Scene: Flow

First Phase: Submersion - in which the dream is introduced

Everyone shuffles and draws one of their dream cards.

One at a time, read aloud what it says on the card. This is the foundation of the scene.

Second Phase: Exploration - in which the dream is observed

The player who read aloud last, draws a Zâr card from the pile in the middle. If it is an Apocalypse card, draw until you draw a card that isn't an Apocalypse card, and shuffle the Apocalypse cards back in the draw pile.

Then narrate what happens in the dream, based on the prompt on the card, without showing the card to the other players.

The drawn card now forms the hand, which is secret. The player passes the hand to another player, who then has a choice to either:

A: Keep exploring, drawing another Zâr-card from the pile (note that Apocalypse Cards are now in effect, and are no longer shuffled back into the draw pile), and narrating what happens

or

B: Begin the Cleansing, moving on to the next phase. This is usually done when you believe there to be at least 5 positive Zâr cards in the Hand.

Third phase: Cleansing - In which the Theurges now take action.

When the Theurges start cleansing, they start taking an active part of the dream. The Draw pile is no longer used. Instead, shuffle the hand (no looking!) and draw a card for all to see. Narrate what happens based on the card. If it is a positive card, put it in the middle, if it is negative, put it near your character. Each negative card breaks a trait (flipping it) after the dream is over.

The moment you reach five positive cards, the dream succeeds.

As long as you haven't drawn the final card in the hand, you may elect to fail the dream, and ignore the card you just drew.

If you draw the final card, and haven't acquired five positive cards, the dream fails.