

# Harbingers of Skulls

OWBN Genre

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It is the feeling of the Giovanni coordinator that anything that can be portrayed in OWbN should have a genre packet. It is our hope that the following information will allow the proper portrayal of NPCs and PCs of this group.

A recent addition to the Sabbat, the bloodline calling itself the Harbingers of Skulls claims a history of treachery, for which it seeks to exact a hellish vengeance. Members of the bloodline are quite powerful without exception, and they claim to have returned from their banishment to the realms of the dead. Long ago, they whisper, a rogue society of sorcerers hunted them for their blood, stealing immortality to further their own arcane lusts for power. Few Sabbat believe this fairy tale of ancient injustice in these modern nights, but the Harbingers are afforded a wide berth none the less, given the immense potency of their magic and their discomfiting eccentricity. The Harbingers of Skulls are necromancers on par with (and some say exceeding) the dreaded Giovanni, surrounding themselves with miasmas of death, murder and mortification. They do so in attempts to right their legendary wrong. It would seem, however, that for all their polemics, something rots below the surface they present. Like the corpses they resemble, something eats away at them from within.

The Harbingers of Skulls have been members of the Sabbat for only a few years. Scarcely any of the youngest members of the sect have ever heard of them, let alone seen one. Apparently, one of their numbers came forth with a proposition to the Cardinals, Prisci and Regent, who conferred and welcomed the Harbingers to the Sword of Caine. Since then, the Harbingers of Skulls have amassed unheard-of power in the sect (given their small number, which is estimated in the low hundreds). The Black Hand, the Inquisition and even the ranks of the Prisci now claim members of the Harbingers among them. Scions of the Sabbat appear to reap great benefits from the Harbingers' death magic, maintaining contact with fallen allies or tormenting enemies from beyond the wall of Final Death. Indeed, the Harbingers seem more than willing to offer aid to their Sabbat compatriots in exchange for open-ended favors.

Cursed by Zemyaza's blood with the countenances of corpses, the Harbingers often flay the tattered, grave-tainted flesh from their heads, leaving them with the grinning rictus of their namesake. Masks and ceremony play an important part in the bloodline's culture, and elders among these Cainites maintain vast collections of ritual masks and implements that they wear and use in their necromantic rites. It has been rumored that the vitae in their veins is ancient and quite potent. Perhaps their claims of grandiose history are not far from the mark. Whatever the case, the Harbingers of Skulls simply ignore inconvenient lines of questioning, preferring instead to spend their hours amid the tombstones of cemeteries or in deep contemplation of the powers of the dead.

**Nickname:** Lazarenes (after Lazarus, who observed Christ's return from the dead)

**Appearance:** The Harbingers of Skulls have an emaciated, corpselike appearance, accentuated by flesh that shrinks to fit the vampires' skulls. They are seldom seen outside their havens or the secret halls where powerful Sabbat convene to plot their intrigues. Harbingers prefer loose-fitting, flowing cloaks and burial shrouds, the better to represent their death magic and make dramatic impressions. Vicissitude should never be used to get around any of the above. Harbingers of Skulls are, in some ways, very proud of their appearance. The notion of using disciplines and other means to attempt to get around who and what they really are should be frowned upon.

**Necromancy:** Harbingers of Skulls do NOT have access to the Cenotaph Path of Necromancy. Harbingers of Skulls do NOT have access to Pisanob Rituals, nor Giovanni only Rituals. The Harbingers of Skulls should not be used to teach Necromancy. They are not here to dole out Necromancy like candy treats to either PCs or NPCs. They have already earned their place in the sect to which they now belong. They view Necromancy as their blood right and do not support the proliferation of rogue necromancers, nor do they hinder their efforts at this time. All other matters of Necromancy can be found in the Necromancy section of the blood magic packet, section seven.

**Haven:** Harbingers of Skulls never belong to packs. Therefore, they never become members of a communal pack haven. The only exception to this is if such havening is temporary. The Sabbat rumor-mill is rife with tales of a Harbinger, calling himself the Capuchin, accepting brief hospitality from certain packs, Priests, or Ducti. Lazarenes prefer their own, private havens, which often have laboratory annexes where they may conduct their grisly studies. Such havens tend to be far from prying or mortal eyes, beneath places like cemeteries, mausoleums, morgues and slaughterhouses.

**Background:** The backgrounds of those who became Harbingers of Skulls are unknown. It is believed that the bloodline has not embraced since its introduction to the Sabbat. If this is true, murmur the young members of the sect, the Harbingers must be ancient, accomplished and critical, as they seem not to deem children of the modern nights worthy of their brand of Caine's curse.

**Character Creation:** Harbingers of Skulls have morbid concepts, many of which are archaic or foreign to the modern nights. The bloodline favors Mental Attributes, the more intellectual or academic Abilities, and its members cultivate numerous Backgrounds. Few Harbingers deign to follow the tenets of Humanity; they are more frequently attuned to the Path of Death and the Soul or some bizarre variant of the Giovanni's Path of the Bones.

**Weaknesses:** All Harbinger of Skulls should have the Recently Arisen flaw. Regardless of the quantity of blood a Harbinger of Skulls consumes, their skin maintains a deathly pallor. Additionally, the Harbingers' skin shrinks to make these Cainites appear skeletal, with bony limbs and faces frozen into an immortal death's grin. Because of this decidedly unwholesome and morbid visage, Harbingers of Skulls should not have any Appearance related Social Traits. Thus, all Social challenges involving Appearance Traits automatically fail for Harbingers of Skulls. Harbingers do not breed. Those that are walking the earth now are the same ones that faced the horrors of being trapped in the cave for so long. They keep their blood potent and their numbers small.

**Organization:** The Harbingers of Skulls have little organization. Most eschew social company, preferring to be left alone to study or hatch their plots. They do gather infrequently, but to what purpose has never been confirmed. Vampires outside the Harbingers' circles suspect everything from schemes to bring down the Sabbat from the inside to symposiums on the most recent research involving the lands of the dead. The Harbingers of Skulls do maintain some form of visible hierarchy, however, as evidenced by their masks and rituals. The more esteemed or accomplished members of the bloodline wear much more elaborate masks, and they are ritually acknowledged by lesser Harbingers. However, the precise system has eluded onlookers to date.

**Quote:** Nothing—nothing—burns as hot as the wound left by the knife of treachery, especially when it has been left to fester for eons.

**Storyteller Notes:** Harbingers of Skulls only have access to Giovanni Clan Lore up to Level 4. They know all too well from where the clan originated. However, having not being a part of the world for so long, they do not know everything Giovanni have been up to as of late.

All Harbingers of Skulls are at least eighth generation, and hundreds (if not thousands) of years old. Most have more Disciplines than many starting packs, and could easily prove a match for the wiliest Tzimisce or most duplicitous Lasombra elder. In fact, almost every Harbinger predates the Sabbat altogether! After all, millennia-old vampires are not likely to pick people off the street and turn them into vampires. This bloodline is better off being used for Storytellers to weave plotlines than as a powerhouse PC. Also, don't let your players' knowledge color their characters' knowledge in this matter. In the World of Darkness, there are no master Vampire books for characters to consult on these matters of mystery. Let them unearth the secrets of the malignant world for themselves.

## Views on the New World

**Assamites:** How far Saracen blood has fallen, yet even in these chaotic nights their skill has not diminished. Respect their ways....but always remember....a scorpion can be nothing but a scorpion no matter what its secret heart might wish.

**Brujah:** \*Sound of piteous hollow laughter.\*

**Baali:** It takes a weak mind and a hollow soul to surrender one's free will to a demon in exchange for simple temporal power. If the Baali wish to wallow in their own corruption, what business is it of ours? No wonder they survive in the modern era; cockroaches are so hard to eliminate entirely.

**Gangrel:** The more things change....

**Lasombra:** Our erstwhile allies in arms. How very quaint. They serve their purpose. We shore up the holes in their magically deprived sect and they give us authority over troops. It is a most equitable arrangement. Allow them to think they have it all in their control and the rest takes care of itself.

**Malkavian:** Oftentimes in madness, wisdom might be found. Occasionally an elixir might be drawn from their pulped brains that can yield interesting visions. Until the time comes to harvest, I am content to let their own legs carry them.

**Nosferatu:** Faith and self-debasement trickling slowly away until all that is left is the essence. The Nosferatu are the eyes and ears of the Children of Caine. A wise Cainite treats them well as an investment for rainy days.

**Ravnos:** They are the very essence of their craft....full of flash and no substance. The time of the romantic rogue is over... as a matter of fact, it never really was.

**Followers of Set:** Really. Identifying with the serpent in the garden... how very quaint. What a juvenile obsession. And a founder who is a deity no less? If the ego of the Setites were any greater, I fear their legs would not support their skulls. I find it hard to take anyone seriously that flinches at the sight of anything brighter than a candle.

**Toreador:** Someone hasn't stepped on these velvet garbed cockroaches yet? Getting lost in temporal matters is a despicable flaw. All things of this world are transitory. Perhaps we will get lucky and the jihad will phase these preening peacocks out.

**Tremere:** And so the plague that took Saulot's shining ones reaches its final expression: a dead cult that busies itself with books, scrolls and the making of monsters. This is the end result of all they have worked to accomplish...serving as magical boogiemens by which the Ventrue hold power. I would say put them all down, but since they have enough enemies to populate a city, I believe I shall just sit back and see who obliterates them first.

**Tzimisce:** An interesting group. The Tzimisce are regal, powerful, magically inclined...and completely unhinged. While I find their fleshly arts a curiosity, in the end they are the same as the Lasombra: a resource to be expended in careful measure.

**Ventrue:** Ahh, the little emperors sitting on their thrones of clouds glowing with the obedience of the masses. The Blue-Bloods love to tout their nobility and right to rule. But I remember a time when they made pledges to us that they gladly tossed aside when it was no longer convenient. Take special pleasure in tearing apart the souls of these turncoats.

**Giovanni:** To the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee.

**Samedi:** On the matter of these strange Cainites, there are two schools of thought. On the one hand they owe their existence to a profound act of cowardice...on the other...would we not have done the same had we known what awaited us? In the end, it is better to have allies than to start a pointless feud. Enlist their aide when you are able, ignore them

otherwise. They can be valued allies or entirely irrelevant. Some among our ranks are very upset with their resent actions, so take heed.

**Gargoyles:** It is said that revenge is a dish best served cold. I suspect stone is very cold indeed.

**Salubri:** Lamentable is the fate of Saulot's gentle children. The healers of our age are almost gone from the world. Assist them where you can. They know what it is like to be hunted and it never hurts to have a healer in your debt. As for the Antitribu now breeding among the Sabbat....they are shadows of a former glory. One man's attempt to spit on the hand fate dealt him. Give them your support and be wary of their wrath.

**True Brujah:** To be betrayed from within, to have your place in the world supplanted by a group of ambitious savages, we know the heart of the children of Brujah better than perhaps any other. They do not appear to us often but assist them when you are able. If revenge is a dish best served cold then the True Brujah are well prepared for the feast.

**Kiasyd:** To our knowledge, the Wierdlings are one of the most erudite groups still walking the night. Their knowledge and insight is second to none and they have a store of lore that would stagger the mind. Make good use of their talents: knowledge is the only true power.

**Blood Brothers:** One would think that after the Gargoyle debacle the Tremere would stop trying to build a better foot soldier. Luckily the Antitribu were wiped out before they reaped their harvest on this matter. As to the remnants....perhaps their plight is an opportunity for us, with the Lamia gone.

## The Others

**Mages:** The days of wonder when the viziers and wise men worked with the fabric of creation are long gone. The sorcerers of today are shadows of what they once were. Pity their fall but never underestimate them.

**Lupines:** Jackals at the gates of the empire. They are wild dogs who rage against the masters of their world. The rare scholars among them may be dealt with. As for the rest, a quick death is best.

**The Fey:** The Fairy folk are a dying people. Long gone are the days when we traded secrets with the whispering ones. Useless and lost.

**The Restless Dead:** When we were betrayed, it was only through the grace of the deathless that we endured to seek our revenge. Remember the debts we owe, for their wrath and spite rivals our own.

**Hunters:** How very quaint, sheep playing at being wolves. Don't bother with them, should they meddle in your affairs point some, throw a Brujah Antitribu at them. There are rumors of hunters displaying strange powers in these Final Nights. If all else fails, leave town for a few decades. They die of old age, we don't.

**Cathayans:** I hear that the strange vampires of the orient have invaded the west coast of the United States and are causing significant damage to the Anarchs and the Camarilla. Good for them.

## The Sects

**The Camarilla:** The ivory tower built by the Blue-Bloods to shield them from the rest of the world. Using the Inquisition as an excuse, they have set up an array of bodies between themselves and the consequences of their actions. The problem with building an empire on the backs of predators is that they are always looking for weakness. The Ventrue have made their own cage, let them rot in it while we gather our forces. In the end no empire will stand before the coming storm.

**The Sabbat:** Ahh the raging descendents of the Anarchs. In the years since its formation, the Sword of Caine has become an extraordinary engine of violence and brutality. The perfect tools to help us exact our vengeance. The loss of the Tremere Antitribu left a void that the Koldun cannot entirely fill and we are happy to lend our assistance in return for the sizeable concessions we have been given. The aptly self-titled Sword of Caine will be our weapons against those that betrayed us, regardless of how many of them need to be expended in the process.

**The Inconnu:** Irrelevant to our designs. There is time enough to seek the peace of Golconda once the fires of our wrath have cooled.

## Days of Celebration

**Exodus:** Each year on the day of their departure from their underworld prison, the Harbingers gather as a bloodline to commemorate the day they escaped their bondage. In secret ceremonies they enact the ancient death rites of the Cappadocians as a cry of defiance to the forces that betrayed them and sought to snuff them out utterly. At the culmination of three days of rites, a great bonfire is built around a great wooden pillar to which are tied a captured member of Clans Ventrue and Giovanni. As the kindred are burned, the celebrations come to a close and the bloodline scatters back to its havens.

**The Feast of Ashes:** On the night of October 31<sup>st</sup>, when the Shroud is at its weakest, the bloodline gathers at the ruin of the great city of Kaymakli. Amid the shattered remnants of their prison the Harbingers have constructed a great well far below the buried streets. In this carved wonder of basalt and granite is poured clear water to which is added a stone prepared all year by the eldest of the line. This artifact taints the water with the essence of the Tempest that permeates the underworld. Over this well, the Harbingers meditate and see the faces and, in a few cases, the wraiths of the comrades they lost during their time beneath the city. By this rite the Harbingers fuel their wrath and vengeance, rejuvenating themselves for the coming year.

## Hierarchy

One of the reasons the Harbingers integrated into the Sword of Caine so well is that their structure mirrors that of the sect in a few key ways. There is no single nominal head of the bloodline; the decisions are made on the basis of relative age and power among the survivors. At the top of their line are a small handful of elders who had managed to survive the feeding frenzy beneath Kaymakli. This Oligarchy consists of four Harbingers, dark beings of potent sorcery and wickedly devious intelligence. These beings, known collectively as the Shades, serve as an advisory body to the bloodline should matters arise that require administration. The Harbingers determine rank by a mixture of knowledge, age and necromantic ability. Each member of the line owns a mask which they wear at a frequency dependent on the owner. These stylized designs have patterns and secret indicators, known to the Harbingers, which spell out the wearer's claims at competency in several arenas. When two Harbingers meet, these patterns tell the observer exactly how he or she compares to the other and who is due deference.

## Status

Among the Harbingers, status is a tricky issue. For the most part they have no use for it. In a way their bloodline functions like a theological institution, albeit one with vast homicidal urges. Accomplishments in the area of Necromancy are respected as is significant inroads made against the Giovanni or the Ventrue. Members of the bloodline who have personally slain one of these Cainites are afforded particular esteem. High status members of the bloodline get priority where research materials and ritual components are concerned.

**Nature and Demeanor:** Harbingers tend to have very direct and forceful natures such as Director or Judge. Demeanors tend to be the mask by which they hide their disdain for others, and thinly at best, such as Traditionalist or Conformist.

**Preferred Abilities:** Mental Attributes tend to be primary with Physical traits coming in second. Common Abilities include Awareness, Occult, Lore, Subterfuge and Dodge.

**Backgrounds:** Mentor, Age, Arcane, Occult Influence, Occult Library and Retainers.

**Merits & Flaws:** Flesh of the Corpse, Monstrous, Eerie Presence, Concentration, Danger Sense, Touch of Frost, Wraith Companion, Hatred, Vengeance, Iron Will.

**Names:** Azimye, Bedia, Cavidan, Devrim, Erman, Firat, Harika,

**Role-playing Notations:** The key to dealing with the Harbingers in any situation is to always remember that the force that animates this bloodline is a vengeful obsession. Imagine the relationship that fell apart in which you invested your heart. Remember the feeling inside you when you were betrayed, that bottomless despair. Now imagine if you can that after breaking your heart, the one you trusted locked you in a closet with all the others who had suffered the same fate and left you all to rot. This is what the Harbingers

of Skulls had to endure multiplied a thousand fold. They were a proud people once, respected and wise; suddenly it was all snatched away by the ones they trusted the most and they were sentenced to an eternity in hell. Now they have escaped their imprisonment and what do they find? The ones that they had survived their banishment to destroy were gone, eaten from within by upstarts. Like Ahab's obsession with the great white whale, the Harbingers are defined by their vengeance and they will never let it go. To do so would mean their undoing. Without it they are empty, thrust into a world they barely comprehend. Theirs is a pure hate and to them everyone else is simply a tool by which they forward their designs. They will never stop. They will never forgive. They are an engine fueled by the fires of the underworld. Their time has come at last. When playing one of these entities never let that intensity slip. Make everyone you speak to feel as if you are looking through them to the end result of your use of them. Your existence has a singular purpose. A second point to remember is that Harbingers are not front line fighters in any sense of the word. They should not be appearing like Darth Vader in black robes and mask to crush the enemy by hand. They might be personally powerful but their numbers are too few to behave in such a manner. Harbingers are the hidden enemy, the directing hand, the will that guides the sword. A Harbinger will not often show his countenance in a plan until the enemy has already lost. They have survived by being cunning and vicious. Above all that there is a hellish patience that has served them well. For the longest time their very existence was mere rumor which they guarded until their position was stable. Harbingers work best as behind the scenes foes and an adversary would have to work very hard to even uncover that a Harbinger is involved in a given situation, much less find one.

**They are not just the boogieman for the Giovanni.** Although the Giovanni did the deed, it was their long time allies within the Venture, Toreador, and Brujah that let it happen. This fact, over all others, is why they joined the Sabbat. Their plots and plans include not only giving the Giovanni clan a hard time but also those clans and the sect to which they belong.

For more information on how this bloodline might interact with your game and its PCs and NPCs, please contact the Giovanni Coordinator.

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