

# MASKS

## A NEW GENERATION



**BRENDAN  
CONWAY**



*A giant robot is smashing down Main Street. Your best friend tried to kiss you. Your mom thinks your grades need work. Your mentor thinks your team is bringing you down. Oh, and your costume is ripped.*

*Just another day in Halcyon City...*

**Masks: A New Generation** is a superhero roleplaying game in which a team of young heroes fights villains, saves lives, and tries to figure out who they are—noble paragons? Dark avengers? Or regular kids? All against the backdrop of Halcyon City, the greatest city in the world.

In this book, you get:

- Ten playbooks for young superheroes, so you can create your own awesome characters
- Rules for superheroic action, interpersonal drama, and changing identity
- Detailed instructions for running the game, building villains, and playing to find out what happens
- Tools for creating your own custom material for **Masks**

**Masks** makes use of the same rules-light engine as *Apocalypse World*, *Monsterhearts*, *Dungeon World*, *Urban Shadows*, and *Epyllion* to create stories about young superheroes in the vein of *Young Justice*, *Young Avengers*, and *Teen Titans*.

So what're you waiting for, hero?  
Time to get to work.



 **MAGPIE GAMES**





# **MASKS**

## **A NEW GENERATION**

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The Apocalypse Engine is used courtesy of Vincent Baker and Lumpley Games (lumpley.com). Much of the text of this book was inspired by **Apocalypse World** (as well as **Monsterhearts** by Avery Alder). Much of the basics on how to play or run the game are lifted directly from **Urban Shadows**, by Mark Diaz Truman and Andrew Madeiros.

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*Masks* was initially funded thanks to the support of 2,371 backers. You can find a full list of their names at <http://www.magpiegames.com/masks/backerlist>. They shall live on forever in the honored halls of Halcyon City.





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# CHAPTER 0: THE PREFACE

## WHAT IS MASKS?

Ever imagine what it'd be like to punch down walls? Throw lightning from your fingertips? Run faster than the human eye can see? Fly?

Ever been told “No” by a parent, teacher, boss, someone above you, maybe even someone you looked up to? Ever wanted to tell them, “*I don’t care what you say,*” as you go do something completely awesome?

Ever read stories about interesting, cool, complicated heroes, people uncertain of who they are, uncertain of what they should do, but ultimately striving to do the right thing in the face of impossible odds? And *triumphing*?

**MASKS** is where all those experiences connect. A game where you get to tell your own awesome superhero comic book stories about young people standing up to the world around them and paving their own way—with plenty of explosions and madness along the way. A game where you get to both guide the story and be surprised to find out where it’s going.

When you play **MASKS**, you and your friends tell a story, almost as if you’re writing a comic together, each of you taking on the roles of the main characters in the story. Actual play is like a conversation, with you and your friends talking about those characters, what they do, and what happens. You’re each co-authors and readers; you get to guide where the story goes, and you get to be excited when it goes somewhere you never expected.

Unlike a regular comic book, **MASKS** has rules that take you places you didn’t expect, keep things exciting and surprising, and guide you through what to say and when. So when you fling a car at the T-rex, instead of just saying what happens, the rules jump in and help fill in the next step. You have to contribute some, too—these rules offer guidelines that you and your group use to tell a story—but they’ll point you down certain paths, ones you might not’ve chosen. But that’s the entire point!

If you want to tell a story where you know exactly what will happen, you can write it on your own. **MASKS** lets you play to find out what happens. When you throw that car, you won’t know in advance whether the T-rex will snatch it out of the air with terrifying jaws, or shoot it with secret cyber-dinosaur missile launchers, or just get decked across the face. You roll them dice and see what ensues, and get the enjoyment of being surprised.

## TALES TO ASTONISH!

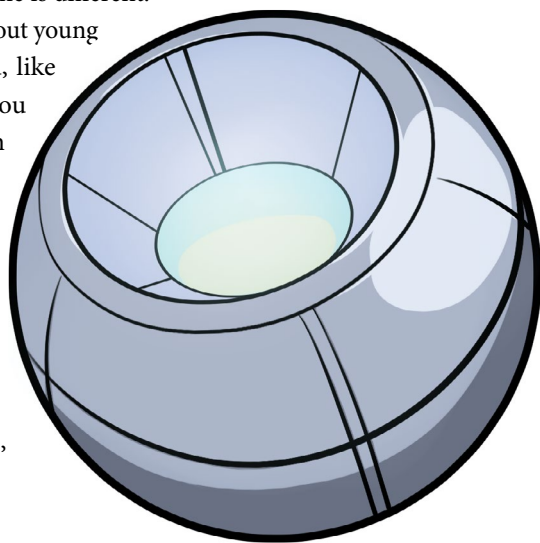
In addition to the story itself, the plot, the things that happen, **MASKS** is about awesome, over-the-top superheroic shenanigans. And that kind of superhero stuff is just damn fun. Ridiculous? Sure. A bit stupid from time to time? Yeah, totally. But damn fun? Without a doubt. What other stories give you time travelers, sorcerers, mutants, aliens, and some guy with a bow all on the same team? What other stories give you world-ending stakes coupled with all-too-personal drama, because it turns out the apocalyptic mutant demon from another world didn't just possess some random guy, it possessed your *brother*? Sure, superhero stuff can get a little silly, but it's damn fun if you go with it. Yeah, teen drama can get a little overwrought, but it'll get you right in your feels if you let it. Embrace it!

**MASKS** is first and foremost about a team of young superheroes. They're friends, rivals, love interests, allies...and *always* teammates, joint stars of their comic, and superheroes. They're young; they've got abilities that make them special; they wear costumes; they use codenames; they save people; and they do it together. They're growing up in Halcyon City, a place with plenty of older supers who provide an endless clamor of voices telling them who to be, and these young heroes are all trying to figure out their own way.

All of those pieces are key. You might have awesome story ideas about the premiere team of superheroes, or a crazy group of misfits on a spaceship, or genetic superhumans fighting to protect a world that hates or fears them—but **MASKS**, as it's presented in this book, isn't written for those stories. You'll find pieces of those tales, but the core of this game is different.

If you're here because you love stories about young adults, where everything feels heightened, like it matters more...If you're here because you love stories about growing up, the transition from something smaller and self-focused to something new and interesting and capable of changing the world...If you're here because you're excited about a game exploring identity and self-image in the face of others' influence...Or if you're here because you love superhero stories, punching aliens, making dramatic speeches, and saving the world...

Then, good. You're in the right place.





## HALCYON CITY

There's no place like it, anywhere else on earth. And to those who call it home, there's no place better.

Halcyon City is a massive, bustling megalopolis. Gleaming silver skyscrapers adorn its business districts, and assorted streets, bridges, and rails crisscross its body. Countless people from countless cultures and walks of life populate this great city. It's a contradictory and wonderful combination of darkness, crime, corruption, and flaws, built on the errors of the past alongside light, hope, and the promise of change and growth. It's always been the city of tomorrow and yesterday, and that's never been more true than today.

Halcyon is the focal point of the super-powered, extra-normal world. Caped figures soar through its skies and break into fights against terrible monsters and gigantic robots. Villains scheme in nefarious lairs hidden in the clouds over the city, while heroes meet and contemplate their next course of action in their golden halls of justice. Paranormal adventurers walk Halcyon City's streets, looking for distortions and portals to other realms, while time travelers and aliens make this city their home, for better or worse.

The city's always had more than its share of strange heroes and goings-on, but since the late 1930s, it's played home to more superhumans and their kin than any other place on Earth, and the city has evolved to fit its population. Construction crews work at ridiculous speeds to repair the damage done in superhuman brawls. Law enforcement has adapted to the superhuman activity with a unique set of responses and equipment. Halcyon hosts the headquarters of A.E.G.I.S., the Advanced Expert Group for Intervention and Security, an elite government agency that arose specifically to deal with superhumans, among other weird, secret, and superhuman oriented organizations.

Over the course of 80 or so years of superheroes, Halcyon City has seen three relatively distinct generations of superheroes rise and fall. These three generations are known colloquially as the Gold Generation, the Silver Generation, and the Bronze Generation. And now...there's a new generation rising. The children of other superheroes, or trainees of prior generations, or brand new superpowered individuals, all trying to figure out who they are in the midst of Halcyon City's own special brand of wonder and insanity.

That's you. You're the new generation, and soon enough, this city with its amazing miracles and impossible wonders will be yours. Who will you be when it's time to inherit Halcyon's reins? What will you make of the place? Whose butts will you kick on the way?

## FINDING YOURSELF

So there you are. You've got your cape. You've got your superpowers. You've got a cool name you spent a while thinking about. You've even got a team of friends. And you're in the greatest city on earth.

What now? Where do you go? Who will you become?

In **MASKS**, you play characters who are approximately 16 to 20 years old (with allowances made for stuff like the alien who's actually 1,000 years old and is still a teenager in mind and body). They're trying to figure out who they are, but they're not so young as to have no idea at all. The trouble is all these adults around them, telling them what to do and who to be. Everybody has a vested interest in making these young heroes one thing or another—from their parents, who might just want them to be *normal* and *safe* and *human*, to their mentors who want them to be *noble* and *heroic* and *upright*, to their enemies who want them to be *dangerous* or *free* or *arrogant*.

It's the story we all face as we grow up. We don't just become exactly what our parents, teachers, or mentors want us to be...and we don't completely abandon or ignore what they say, either, whether we want to or not.

**MASKS** is all about that story. It's about seeing these young superheroes go through the wringer, get thrown into crazy superhero fights, get pushed and changed by the words and ideas of those around them, and then at the end, seeing who they've become. Sometimes, they'll be heroes. Sometimes, they'll be monsters. Either way? It'll be an awesome ride.

## PLAYING TO FIND OUT

There may be times while playing **MASKS** when you say, "Oh! I know exactly what happens next!" You feel like you have the best possible idea for a stream of events to take your character to some interesting place, and you just want to say what those are.

Don't.

The characters in **MASKS** don't really know where they belong, where they'll end up, who they'll become, and you don't either. This is a story of uncertainty and discovery. Don't cheat yourself out of that excitement by planning the next dramatic arc in detail. Don't force a rivalry or romance or convince yourself that your character needs to die in the next fight. Just let it happen.

The mechanics in **MASKS** will push you in new and different directions, taking you places you wouldn't have expected. It'll take some discipline to really adhere to those mechanics and go where they're taking you, but it's worth it. So much of the fun of **MASKS** lies in the surprise of finding out what happens, who the characters are becoming, without knowing in advance. Commit yourself to that uncertainty—you'll be glad you did.





## OTHER WORLDS

If you're interested in exploring other games based on the **APOCALYPSE WORLD SYSTEM**, check out Magpie Games's own **URBAN SHADOWS**—a game about political urban fantasy—and **EPYLLION**—a game about baby dragons going on adventures across Dragonia!

## WHERE THIS CAME FROM

**MASKS** borrows its rules framework, and many ideas about stories and storytelling, from the game **APOCALYPSE WORLD** by D. Vincent Baker. **APOCALYPSE WORLD** is a mature game (think R rating) about the post-apocalyptic wasteland. **MASKS** is pretty different in terms of subject matter and style, but the basic spine of both games is the same: both are about playing to discover, about dynamic characters changing in reaction to each other and the world around them, about stories that go to places you'd never expect.

You don't need **APOCALYPSE WORLD** to play **MASKS**; everything you need to play this game is included in this book. But if you want to take a look at **APOCALYPSE WORLD** (and you're comfortable with its mature content level), then it's well worth your time.

**MASKS** also comes from a long tradition of young superhero stories. Here're a few worth checking out to get an idea of the style and themes of **MASKS**:

- **YOUNG JUSTICE** (cartoon TV show created by Brandon Vietti and Greg Weisman)
- **YOUNG AVENGERS** (Volume 1, by Allan Heinberg and Jim Cheung, and Volume 2, by Kieron Gillen and James McKelvie)
- **AVENGERS ACADEMY** (by Christos Gage and Mike McKone)
- **RUNAWAYS** (by Brian K. Vaughn and Adrian Alphona)
- **TEEN TITANS** (the original Cartoon Network show, as well as the original Marv Wolfman comics, and the Geoff Johns issues)
- **MS. MARVEL** (by G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona)
- **WOLVERINE AND THE X-MEN** (by Jason Aaron and Chris Bachalo)

## WHAT YOU'LL NEED

To play **MASKS**, you need a few friends willing to commit to playing at least one 2 to 4 hour session. A single session of **MASKS** is fun, but the game really sings when you play multiple linked sessions.

**MASKS** needs one player to be the Gamemaster or GM—that's a special role with responsibilities slightly different from the other players, see THE GM page 125 for more—and 3 to 5 players to play the main characters of the game, the Player Characters or PCs.

You also need some additional supplies. Usually the GM brings a lot of these resources, but just make sure *someone* is bringing them. Having this book at the table in some form is pretty useful, too.

### DICE

You need at least two six-sided dice, like the kind you find in *Monopoly* or *Risk*. One pair is enough to play, but it's a lot better to have one pair of dice for each player.

### PLAYBOOKS

You need a printed copy of each of the ten core playbooks. Each one can be printed, landscape, on regular letter paper. You can add in a few limited edition playbooks or take out a few core playbooks to adjust the mix, but make sure you've got a wide variety printed and ready.

### PENCILS AND PAPER

You'll want plenty of pencils, at least one for each player—throughout the game, the players mark up and make changes to their character sheets, so they need pencils for sure. You'll also want plenty of scrap paper, either notebooks or index cards or post-its, so you can write down names and notes throughout the game.

### ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

Some other materials you'll need or want:

- Tokens for Influence, at least one set of about 5 distinct tokens for each player (the Hero Deck has cards that act as tokens, if you have it)
- Some inspirational art and pictures, to generate ideas (the Deck of Villainy has a pantheon of villains, for example)
- Printed copies of the basic moves, one for each player
- A printed copy of the GM materials

You can find the sheets for running a game of **MASKS** as downloads, and more information on the Hero Deck and the Deck of Villainy, at [www.magpiegames.com/masks](http://www.magpiegames.com/masks).

## WHY MASKS?

The name of the game is **MASKS**. There's a rules piece in the game called **pierce the mask**. The chapter including the playbooks is called THE MASKS. Why such an emphasis on masks?

On one level, the game is about superheroes—and the association of masks with those costumed superpeople is pretty well ingrained, thanks to nearly a century of such stories.

But on another level, the game is about appearances, image, and perception. It's about the conflict between what you seem to be, and what you actually are.

Everybody wears masks. Everyone's fitting into some kind of image or mold, playing some kind of role. Everyone has a “mask” to pierce, even if they're not wearing anything on their face. The playbooks you choose, the appearances of your characters, their secret identities and their superhero names—all masks, of one form or another.

Embrace masks. Revel in putting them on, taking them off, trying on new ones, abandoning old ones.







# CHAPTER 1: THE CITY

## **HALCYON HISTORY**

Halcyon City! Shining beacon of heroism and progress! The city of tomorrow!

That's the tagline, anyway. The truth is always a little more complex.

Halcyon City has been around for several centuries, but its real history begins in the 1930s, with the appearance of Maggie MacIntyre, better known as Flying Freedom. Historians know now that there were superhumans before, scattered all throughout history. But Flying Freedom was the first public figure to whom the term “superhero” could reasonably be ascribed. She was cloaked in a pilot's jacket, cap, and goggles, with the American flag emblazoned on her back, and she could fly. Newsreel footage of the era marveled at how she soared over Halcyon's tallest towers.

Maggie MacIntyre fought criminals and madmen with flair and heroism. But she wasn't immortal, and she wasn't invulnerable. She died saving Halcyon City from her mortal enemy, Captain Coldheart, and his aerial doomcraft, but she'd already inspired new heroes. Champion and the Haunt had taken up her struggle for heroism, and Halcyon City would never be the same.

Superhumans gravitated toward the city, joining its ever-growing community of metahumans. Some immediately sought out criminal activity; others dove headfirst into heroics; still others just lived their lives. But with all of them together in one place, Halcyon became a hotbed of technological progress. Industries moved headquarters into Halcyon to be closer to the biggest developments in their fields. And with ever greater wealth and success came ever more superpowered insanity.

Halcyon has seen countless superheroes rise and fall. It's seen super criminals and aliens, warlords and mythical monsters. It's seen parallel dimensions overlaid on its own streets, and it's seen time travelers from an endless panoply of possible futures. It's been invaded, conquered, defended, and freed. And through it all the city perseveres, changing and adjusting and adapting to face whatever threats or challenges come before it.

## **HALCYON TODAY**

The city is huge; over 10 million people live in its many neighborhoods and districts. It's a city of tremendous variety, from the large island of silver and glass skyscrapers to the waterfront neighborhoods of dark alleys to the strange architecture transposed onto our Halcyon from other worlds. People from an endless panoply of cultures fill its streets, bringing their own beliefs, traditions,

## FACT OR FICTION?

This history of Halcyon City is largely painted with broad strokes, because these broad strokes are what's most important for your game at your table—the specifics can all be in flux. Maybe the first recorded superhero wasn't Maggie MacIntyre at your table...but that doesn't change that the Gold Generation was the first generation of superheroes.

I won't be at your table to ensure you conform to this history, nor do I have any interest in doing so! Make Halcyon City your own, but carefully consider what the core of Halcyon City is—a massively cosmopolitan city full of different people and a history of superheroics going on into today.

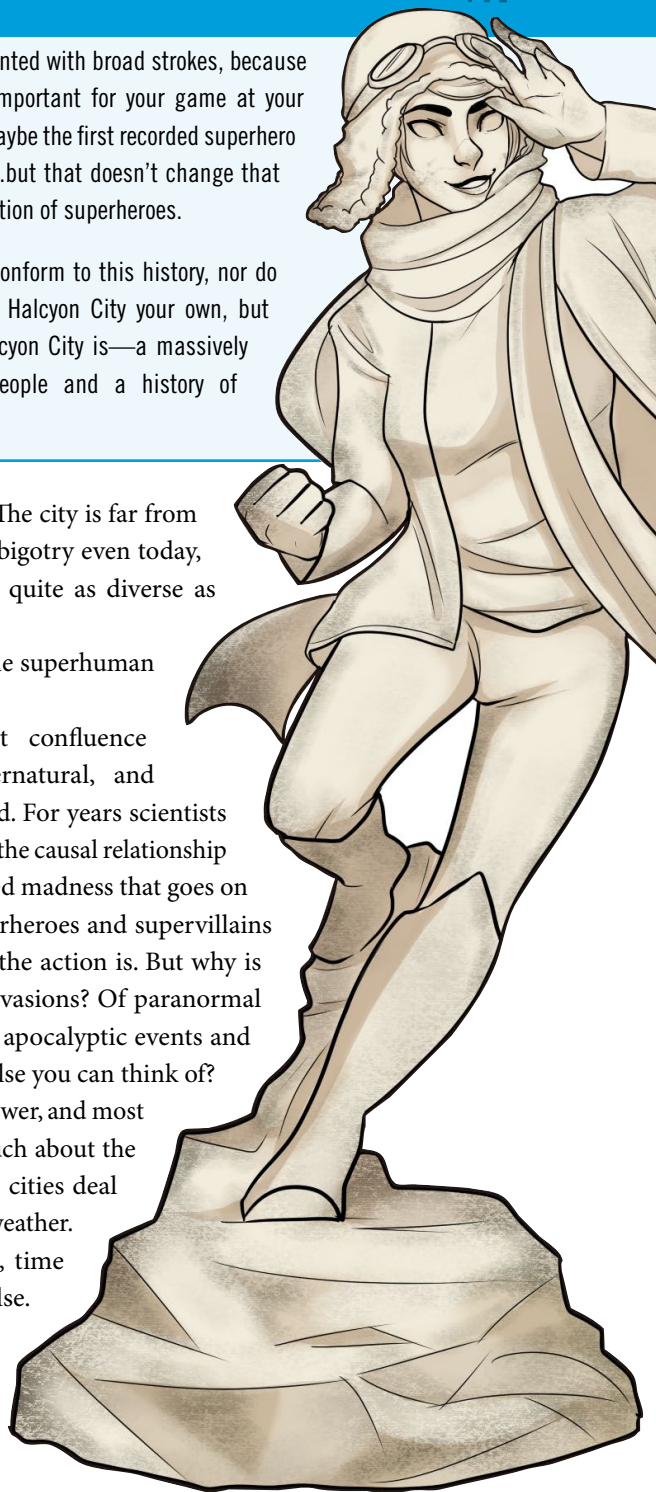
and practices into the city's crucible. The city is far from perfect, with plenty of prejudice and bigotry even today, but there's no other place on Earth quite as diverse as Halcyon.

And that's not even getting into the superhuman stuff.

Halcyon is the single greatest confluence of superheroic, metahuman, supernatural, and impossible activity in the entire world. For years scientists and historians have tried to determine the causal relationship between the city and the superpowered madness that goes on there. There's the obvious—new superheroes and supervillains come to Halcyon because it's where the action is. But why is Halcyon always the target of alien invasions? Of paranormal transdimensional transpositions? Of apocalyptic events and eldritch monstrosities and whatever else you can think of?

No one's ever found a definitive answer, and most people in the city don't worry too much about the *why*. The city just is what it is. Some cities deal with constant cloud cover or terrible weather. Halcyon has superpeople, monsters, time travel, sorcerers, and whatever else.

\*Shrug\* The city's never ended so far, and the superheroes generally have a pretty good handle on things. Life goes on.







## THE GENERATIONS

Carving the superheroic history of Halcyon City into discrete generations is sort of an arbitrary process. The dividing lines aren't explicit, each generation bleeding into the next. But looking back, it's clear that each generation developed its own clear and distinct voice that lets us talk about them meaningfully.

So far, three clear, defined generations have risen to prominence...and the fourth generation is in the midst of its ascendance.

### **THE GOLD GENERATION (HEROES BORN FROM '20s TO '40s)**

The first real, codified superheroic generation. There were definitely superhumans and supernatural events going on for eons before Halcyon City ever arose, but the Gold Generation was the first with publicly recorded superhumans acting in their own personas. Flying Freedom started it all, but she was far from the last of her generation. Champion, the Haunt, Golden Girl, Bryce Brilliant, the Cast-Iron Man...they all came out of the woodwork in this era. None of them were spectacularly powerful, but each of them was great, strong-willed, and more than capable of fighting the good fight.

This generation pulled America out of the Depression, and in particular reinvigorated Halcyon City with new inventions and a new drive for progress. This generation sent supers into World War II, where they battled their counterparts on the other side of the lines. This generation created for itself the notion of the modern superhero, complete with colorful costume and colorful code name.

Sometimes they fought aliens or robots, but the villainous opponents of the Golden Generation were often just powerful criminals, unscrupulous corporate fatcats, or corrupt politicians. These heroes had a direct and real effect on the city's mundane existence. The remaining heroes of the Golden Generation often lament that theirs was the last generation of heroes to really fight both the superhuman and the all-too-human threats.

The stakes were different for heroes in those days. Periodically there'd be a monster like the Gorgomoth, a gigantic minotaur creature that stomped down Halcyon's streets, or an evil genius gone mad like Captain Coldheart. These threats posed real danger to the city, but they were rare. There were countless costumed criminals, stealing priceless artifacts and jewels or playing pranks on public officials, but they weren't interested in hurting anyone. The city as a whole wasn't under as much threat, let alone the rest of the world.

The culture of Halcyon City often presents the Golden Generation as a simpler era of superheroics—a time of obvious and easy conflicts—but there’s a stronger and stronger impulse to deconstruct that narrative. The Golden Generation had real battles to fight, real struggles. Women and minority heroes were often laughed at, degraded, insulted, and ignored—they had to fight for every single ounce of respect they could get. The entire city was filled with the prejudice and bigoted ideas of that era. While the conflict between Champion and the pugilistic Deadly Devil might have been simpler than those faced by later generations, Champion’s struggle as a homosexual man and public figure in the 1940s was far from simple.

For all the flaws of the generation and the people within it, the heroes of the Golden Generation are credited with starting everything, and you can find monuments to their victories and their sacrifices all over Halcyon City. Today, most of them are either gone, having passed away or given everything in their struggles, or they’re retired.

Most from this generation who are still active are either trying to reclaim their lost glory or success—the Scarlet Songbird wants nothing more than to be a relevant supercriminal again—or they’re the most powerful, most impressive, and most enduring members of this whole generation. Aquaria, Brass Brilliant, and the Lady Faust might be from an older era, but they survived into today for a reason, and they’re not to be trifled with.

## **THE SILVER GENERATION (HEROES BORN FROM ‘50s TO ‘60s)**

There was a sea change in the superheroic scene of Halcyon City during the ‘50’s. For reasons unknown, superpowers became *more powerful*, and with their increased powers came ever greater threats.

Many suprologists consider the first hero of the Silver Generation to be the Silver Savior—a hero covered in silvery metal, capable of flight faster than ever seen before, nigh-invulnerable, as strong as Champion if not stronger, wielder of the Silver Spark and all its powers. Sam Tolman was a mathematician and physicist, working for United States’ aeronautical research division, before he inadvertently summoned the Silver Spark to him with an experimental new engine. With its powers, he became the first widely acknowledged representative of a new kind of superhuman. Silver Savior was bright, shining, and *powerful*.

Silver Savior didn’t contend with costumed thieves. Instead, he fought Doctor Infinity, the all-powerful time-altering android. He clashed against the Jabberwock, a monster risen from fiction itself to convert all of our reality

into words on a page. The battles he fought, while still mostly centered around Halcyon City, were often struggles over the fate of the entire world.

These powerful, impressive, explosive abilities and these incredible fights against enormous foes characterized this generation. Nucleon fought against the Demonicator. Starbolt clashed against Sablestar. The battles at their worst leveled whole city blocks, or changed the color of the sky for days, or left a scent of ozone and smoke pervading the entire city—but Halcyon became more adept than ever at repairing the damage and restoring itself to “normalcy” with incredible speed.

Teams were more important to the Silver Generation than they’d ever been to the Gold Generation. Such incredible threats meant these new heroes sought aid from each other. The Exemplars, the Silver Saviors, the Amazing Eight—all saw their origins in this generation. And as the heroes banded together into new super teams, so too did the villains form their own alliances against the heroes. The Silver Generation was a constant cycle of escalation, with all sides growing in power and support for ever more epic clashes.

Toward the beginning of their rise to prominence, the Silver Generation made great strides on mundane struggles. There was a major public push by the Silver Generation for equal rights among all the people of Halcyon and indeed America. Some even took on overtly political roles.

But over the course of their time in power, the Silver Generation largely abandoned struggles against social issues, and even against criminals or corrupt politicians. There were always exceptions, but by and large as their power grew, their focus shifted ever upward, to greater and greater threats, planet enders and dimension destroyers and the like. While the fight against such enormous threats was clearly important, those who criticize the Silver Generation often focus on the fights that they let lie fallow...the changes they didn’t push for.

The Silver Generation is still largely around and in power today. They’re reaching the end of their time, however, and many are looking into retirement of some kind. They’ve fought for many, many years to keep the city and the world safe, and they’re well due their rest, but...it’s hard to see figures who’ve been so prominent and dominant for so many years easily abandoning their control. Many of the Silver Generation would love nothing more than to find successors they can shape directly into new versions of themselves, to ensure that things continue exactly as they have so far.



## **THE BRONZE GENERATION (HEROES BORN FROM '70s TO '80s)**

Most suprologists, historians, and sociologists agree on a single defining moment as the transition point from the Silver Generation and their ethos to something new, something more complicated and ambiguous: the Bronze Generation.

Quintessence, a younger hero acting within the style of the Silver Generation, was under threat by his greatest foe, a telepath known as Psilence. Psilence targeted Quintessence in his real life as Niall Collins, publicly abducting and threatening Niall's best friend, a young man named Sam Reed. Quintessence attacked Psilence directly and angrily, and Psilence responded with cold glee at having truly hurt her old foe. And when Psilence knocked Sam from the top of the Colossus Building in downtown Halcyon, Quintessence responded with fear and desperation, rocketing down the side of the building after his friend in a last ditch effort to save Sam.

The medical examiners couldn't say with confidence what caused Sam's death. It's possible he was dead before Psilence cast him off the building or perhaps he struck the building on his way down, but it's equally possible (and a much darker interpretation of events) that he died from the force of Quintessence striking him in mid-air in an attempt to arrest his descent. Regardless, the fact remained: Sam Reed died for being friends with Niall Collins. Quintessence failed to save him. Psilence had changed the game.

The ripples touched the new generation of heroes growing up in Halcyon City. Most of them had started out clearly under the Silver Generation, acting in their style and idiom. But the death of Sam Reed started a wave of introspection among the younger generation, forcing them to take a harder look at the failures of their parents and mentors. They saw that the Silver Generation's methods never seemed to solve the problems in their entirety. The Silver Generation often seemed more focused on grand gestures than real change. What's more, the Silver Generation still clung to power, held their positions of dominance over the city and the world, and this new generation had little to no room to call their own.

Young heroes changed their identities and their ideas. They shifted away from their ties to the Silver Generation, doing everything in their power to differentiate themselves and find whatever places were left to them. New heroes rose up, touting new ideas and methods. Some, such as the sword-wielding and murderous vigilante Guillotine, pursued unrelenting violence against criminals. Some, such as the patriotic Blue Eagle, became political figures, trying to change the system from within. Some, like super-scientist Dr. Sheila Supreme, left Halcyon City and even this world entirely to explore



## LAW? WHAT LAW?

Halcyon City's laws regarding superheroes and metahumans form a nebulous webwork of maddening irregularity and ambiguity. Are superheroes legal? Are they illegal vigilantes? Does the city register superhumans?

Many plotlines of superhero comics, especially in recent years, have looked at the intersection of superheroics and the law. While **MASKS** can focus on those stories, it doesn't have to center on legal conflicts. So what are the laws of Halcyon City regarding superheroes? Whatever is interesting for your particular table.

Feel free to ignore these questions if they're irrelevant to your table's issues and stories. For some characters, it's not interesting to dwell on legality. But for others, it's crucial. Suffice it to say that Halcyon City *de facto* accepts and legalizes superheroes wherever needed...which leaves it open for important members of the city to crack down on superhumans, should the need arise.

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brand new realms of possibility. Some, like Agent Caldwell Wing, aka Soar, became government operatives, working from the shadows to do what was necessary for good or ill.

The Bronze Generation defined itself in the cracks left for them by the Silver Generation. And they were the first generation to truly doubt the entire idea of superheroism as it had existed so far. They opened doors to exploring different ways of being heroes, even if many of those doors led to dark places. They took on social issues their parents and mentors had left alone. And they carved out their own place as a darker, more exploratory, more cynical generation than the ones that had come before.

The Bronze Generation is very much present and active today. Though members of the Silver Generation still sit in positions of power over most of the city and throughout the superheroic society, the Bronze Generation have found their own places and their own sources of power. They may not be as openly in charge as the Silver Generation, but the members of the Bronze Generation are still positioned as people of import, and they're ready to seize the reins as more of the Silver Generation moves into obsolescence and retirement.

## THE MODERN GENERATION (HEROES BORN FROM '90s TO TODAY)

The newest generation of superheroes, most of them still quite young, comes from a unique place. They live in a world well-used to the idea of superhuman individuals. Dinosaurs stomping down Main Street is just a thing that happens sometimes; invading aliens and escaped products of mad science are treated as somewhere between average problems of the city and tourist attractions. As the latest superheroes to arrive on the scene, they have a stronger, more innate grasp of superhuman issues than any other generation—though that's not always a good thing.

They don't have a name yet, really—the name “Modern Generation” is a tentative placeholder, used right alongside “The New Generation,” “The Young Generation,” and other names. They haven't yet made their mark on the world, nor have they developed as strong an identity as those who have come before. Halcyon City doesn't know what it will become as they grow up and rise to greater and greater power.

Some members of the Modern Generation have made splashes, especially in the realm of celebrity and the internet, like teen pop-star turned villain Cygnus. Some have apprenticed themselves to older heroes, earning their names in the city at large as scions of the powers that be, like the Silver Ace, wielder of a portion of the Silver Spark. Most are aware of fame and popularity, of the voices of everyone around them, more than those of other generations. And they all feel the eyes of the older generations on them.

So far, they've proved themselves a generation of greater hope and greater skepticism, somehow, than any other generation. They're aware of both the triumphs and the failings of those who came before them, in a way no other generation has been. They see the Gold Generation's nobility, and all-too-easy oversight; the Silver Generation's power and success, and domineering attitudes; the Bronze Generation's frustration and search for new alternatives, and ultimate failure to change anything significantly.

All of that history weighs on them, as they try to determine who they want to be, and what they can do. Maybe they want to change the world; maybe they give up the fight and go for fame instead. Maybe they think the whole system needs fixing; maybe they try to work within the rules. In all cases, they're still finding their way, deciding exactly what they're going to be, and what world they're going to make.

The world awaits with trepidation and excitement to see what they will finally become.



## HEROING TODAY

Being a superhero means many different things in many different ways throughout Halcyon City. Some heroes put on the mask, the costume, and soar through the skies in the middle of the day. Some heroes go out at night, wearing dark, practical clothes to beat criminals with their fists. Some heroes work directly for the city or for law enforcement or for corporations.

That said, Halcyon City has a few important traditions that any new superhero must learn before heading out to face villains for the first time.

### THE TEAMS

Superhero teams have been an important part of the city's metahuman social scene since the Silver Generation, and even before. They're viewed with the same combination of celebrity awe and interest as a combination of Hollywood celebrities and up-and-coming tech companies. Some long-standing teams like the Exemplars have become part of the fabric of the city, while new ones are viewed as spunky newcomers trying to find their own niche.

A team is far better equipped to actually deal with threats than individuals are, and forming a team is a great way for up and coming superheroes to get attention and a level of authority that individual members might not have on their own. But there's no tried and true method here. Some teams are corporate sponsored, some are brought together by random happenstance, some are successors to existing teams. Halcyon City now has a large enough superhuman population that the turnover of teams is pretty high, and for every team you've heard of, there are probably five or more that you haven't.

### A.E.G.I.S.

The Advanced Expert Group for Intervention and Security is the primary governmental agency for the metahuman world. Its roots go way back to the Gold Generation, but it's changed a great deal over the years. At this point, it has agents and strike teams, metahuman holding facilities, a tremendous intelligence network, and more. When metahuman law enforcement is necessary, it comes from A.E.G.I.S. That makes A.E.G.I.S. somewhere between a constant thorn in the side of the superheroes of Halcyon City, and one of their strongest allies.



Only the highest level agents of A.E.G.I.S. know who's on the current Board of Directors. They're all either agents or important people in the superhuman community or the world at large. And the decisions they make are ostensibly for the good of the whole world...but superheroes have come into conflict with A.E.G.I.S. and its Board plenty of times, either publicly or secretly.

A.E.G.I.S. is always on the lookout for new talent, for those who can do what needs doing to keep the world safe from genuine superhuman threats. It's found agents even among the young. A.E.G.I.S. keeps files on everyone, and fosters and recruits new talent wherever possible. But A.E.G.I.S. isn't a place to be a superhero—it's a place to be an agent, a servant of a greater purpose that pushes you to make hard decisions. Joining A.E.G.I.S. can change you, and not always for the better.





## MORE ON A.E.G.I.S.

Keep your eyes peeled for **SECRETS OF A.E.G.I.S.**, an upcoming **MASKS** supplement book with playsets, playbooks, and files all about A.E.G.I.S. and its role in Halcyon City!

## VILLAINS AND CRIME

The metahuman population is still ultimately a fraction of the regular population of Halcyon City. But just as there are more heroes than ever before, there have never been more villains and super criminals than there are today. They go hand in hand with the heroes, falling into the same generations and styles as their counterparts. Gold Generation villains were a bit cheesy and generally kinda tame; Silver Generation villains were over the top and cosmically powered; Bronze Generation villains were intense and frightening; Modern Generation villains are still finding their own places in the world.

Although many metahumans can make more money legitimately than they can through crime, that's not true for all of them. And many aren't just interested in the money in and of itself—they want the thrill of crime, or they can't stand the mundanity of regular work. A young super-powered woman from a poor neighborhood might be able to make herself a celebrity...but it's just as likely that monolithic and dangerous corporations will kidnap her for further study, or lock her into controlling contracts. She might be better able to earn money if she simply steals it.

Many supercriminals are mercenaries, taking up dangerous work in exchange for tremendous pay, with no concern for the morality of their jobs. These criminals abound throughout the city, although they're not considered the greatest threats from the metahuman side of life.

"Supervillain" or "villain" are terms used with a bit of chagrin—as they feel outdated and useless—and used all the time, as no one's come up with a more catchy term for the superpowered entities that threaten Halcyon City. These aren't the people out to make money or rob banks; these are the people out to end the city or take control over time itself. The term is applied unilaterally to extend from dangerous super scientists to time-traveling demigods, all of which Halcyon City has seen over the course the past century.

The heroes of Halcyon City have defended it well, and it has weathered many a crisis from these threats. So the city begrudgingly accepts the endless cycle of new heroes arising to combat new villains, and new villains arising as a result of the actions of the heroes. Though the city's media or politicians may criticize any individual hero, the populace largely accepts this cycle as "just the way things are," for better or worse. It's the new normal.





# CHAPTER 2: THE BASICS

## THE CONVERSATION

Playing **MASKS** is having a conversation. That means it's *easy*! You sit at the table with dice and pencils and sheets of paper, and you talk with each other. For the most part, the conversation revolves around your characters. You say what they do and how they react. Since the other players don't live in your head, you convey your character's thoughts, emotions, and feelings to the other players and the GM.

There are times in the conversation when you slip directly into your character's shoes, no longer narrating but actually taking on your character's persona. You make the gestures your character makes; you say things your character says. Most people do this without thinking much about it. It's pretty natural to *become* your character while you're playing, to want what they want, to fear the outcome of the dice at crucial moments.

The conversation in a roleplaying game evolves naturally over the course of the session. But it's your job as a group to keep the conversation interesting. The rules, the techniques, and everything you bring to the table is about driving that conversation toward interesting places. Explosive fights! Emotional confessions! Heroic sacrifices! Wherever the fiction takes you.

## FRAMING SCENES

The best way to keep the conversation moving toward interesting places is to **frame scenes**. Instead of sitting around the table talking vaguely about cool characters, who they are, and what they can do, put those characters into concrete locations with concrete objectives. You don't just say, "Oh yeah, Nano's got nanite powers, so he can make weapons out of the nanites in his body!" You put Nano into the Exemplars' Headquarters and describe him sending his nanites into the nearby machines and taking over the security system.

Think about your story like a comic book or superhero movie. Cut straight to dramatic struggles against dangerous villains or complicated discussions about what's right or wrong in a difficult situation. *Skip the boring stuff and get right to the meat of what's happening or what's about to happen.* It sounds complicated, but it's no harder than starting any conversation; once you get up and running, the rules of the game will take you the rest of the way. The GM has final call on what happens when, but it's the responsibility of everyone in the group to ensure that every scene in your story starts out interesting and goes somewhere meaningful.

## HARD FRAMING

Sometimes the GM wants to move things along faster or jump right into a tense or difficult situation. Maybe the consequences of an earlier decision come to bear, hard and fast—it's time for the dragon creature you accidentally unleashed from an extradimensional portal to make its appearance again, or your teammate's Mom has had enough of your teenage hijinks. The GM tells you what's happening and it's your job to react!

This technique is **hard scene framing**, so-called because there's less room for negotiation; the scene starts and the PCs must react as best they can. Despite the tropes, villains often don't give heroes a chance to plan before they begin their dastardly plans.

Joe's character, Hornet the Protégé, is trained by Mantis, a skilled and capable hero from the Silver Generation. Hornet was relatively unscathed by the dressing down with the Gentleman, so I decide that Hornet's story needs a strong push. They aren't **MASKS** characters if they aren't getting pushed around.

"So Hornet, where're you headed after the meeting at the team base? Check in with Mantis? You haven't talked to her since the fight," I ask.

"Yeah, I'd go talk to her. I need to know what she thinks about finding those kids we fought," Joe replies.

"Awesome. So you're arriving at the secret teleportal she set up for you, the one hidden in the alleyway, right? And it's not camouflaged like it should be. The portal looks damaged. Through the faint image you see in the archway, you see sparking control consoles. Looks like somebody wrenched the portal open and forced their way through. What do you do?"

## "WHAT DO YOU DO?"

"What do you do?" is a constant refrain of **MASKS**. Halcyon City moves quickly, and there isn't time for you to construct detailed plans when space insects start pouring out of another portal over on 5th and Main. Scene framing is about getting characters to the question "What do you do?" as quickly as possible. Hard scene framing makes the question immediate and demanding, so the characters have to answer it right away.

Generally, **MASKS** is about dramatic *doing*. Scenes where the characters jaw about past boyfriends or girlfriends, or make complex plans to deal with the dangerous superhuman threats might interest you, but the game is ultimately about making decisions quickly and acting on impulse. It's about action, even if that action is dramatic and intense conversation. That doesn't mean you never have those contemplative moments, but understand they're few and far between amid all the action and drama. Halcyon City moves fast!

## FOLLOWING THE FICTION

Superhero comics in particular have a long history of “the retcon” (short for retroactive continuity), a technique by which some prior truth in the fiction is undone or changed. *That character didn't really die in that explosion—that was an alien clone! The real character was in a stasis pod aboard the mothership,* says the retcon.

A good retcon respects what was established as true, and makes sense within that set of facts. A bad retcon ignores what was previously true in the fiction, and twists the circumstances to ensure a particular outcome.

**MASKS** (like many superhero stories) falls apart if you retcon without regard to the fiction that's come before. When you say something in the conversation of **MASKS**, it becomes true, and what comes later needs to build on that. Hold yourself to what you establish, and the game will reward your discipline.

“Ah, crud,” says Joe. “I dash through the portal, but stay low behind control consoles. If someone's there, I don't want them to see me.”

“Awesome!” I reply. This is a golden opportunity because Hornet's headed into danger alone. “You go through the portal, and on the other side you immediately hear a weird buzzing sound, and then a voice from somewhere in the control room: ‘I've been waiting for you, girl.’ It's weirdly electronic, and familiar—you're pretty sure it's Technatrix, one of Mantis's old foes.”

“Oh, man, I remember her. No way I'm gonna win against her, I probably shouldn't go in.”

“Too late. You're through the portal already, and you hear a snap-hiss sound as it shuts down behind you.”

“What?! How'd she do that?!”

Like I said, golden opportunity. I'm following the previously established fiction to reveal a horrible truth to Hornet. “You can almost hear her grin in her bizarre voice. ‘Remember when someone stole data from Mantis's cores? You were so worried that something was taken out or deleted, you didn't look for anything left inside the system.’”

“Ah, crud!”

In the example, we adhere to the fiction on two sides. I hold myself to the fiction, establishing how Technatrix got in here, and I keep Joe to the fiction, ensuring that Hornet's held to her actions in a reasonable way.

I'm trying to keep true to the fiction—no one had established that Technatrix left a code bomb in Mantis's data cores, but we never established who accessed them in a previous session. If we had—for example, if Hornet had learned that Source Code had accessed Mantis's data cores—then I'd disregard that fiction if I said it was actually Technatrix all along.

On the other side, Hornet took action that ended poorly for her that she couldn't take back—but that's perfect! When you play *Masks*, you dive into ambushes you didn't know were there, or you say things you didn't realize would be hurtful, or you use your powers in ways that have unexpected side effects. You take actions that have consequences, and that's exactly what you want. You can't take back those actions, much as you might want to, and the group must keep everybody honest about sticking to what's actually happened.

Wanting to clarify, detail, or hone an action is just fine. If Joe had said, "I dash through the portal," I might have asked, "You just charge in stun batons blazing?" And Joe could've replied, "No, I want to stay low and hidden." That kind of clarification and definition is perfectly appropriate, but none of it undoes something that happened. Stick to the truths you've established.

## MOVES AND DICE

Framing scenes starts the conversation in an interesting place, like nocking an arrow on the bow and aiming it at a target. But the **moves** carry the arrow to the target. They connect your characters to the fiction in exciting ways, and they drive the story in directions you might not expect. Each move is a small set of rules that help resolve conflicts, answer questions in the fiction, and push the story forward. Moves are like the programming language of the game—"When you do x, then y"—shaping and defining the fiction when your characters take action.

The **basic moves** are the core of the game, and any PC can trigger them from the start of play. Each character also gets their own **playbook moves**, more specific pieces of programming language that point the characters in their own cool and interesting directions. The PCs might add more moves over the course of play, too. In general, the basic moves cover situations that come up all the time in **MASKS** stories, while the special moves cover situations that are character specific or much more rare.

Every move has a specific trigger, the "When you do x" part of the program. They aren't triggered whenever, or when you feel like they should be, but only when your characters are in situations that trigger the move. If you want to trigger a move, you have to do the thing that triggers it. (You can also *avoid* a move by avoiding its trigger.) Triggers are almost always tied to the fiction, which means all moves are governed by the same principle: *if you do it, you do it*. If you want to trigger the basic move **directly engage a threat**, then you have to **directly engage a threat**, perhaps charging at a supervillain while screaming and swinging your fists. And if you pick up a car in each hand and go swinging at the giant robot, you're directly engaging the threat, and the move triggers, whether you like it or not.



Marissa's character, Toro the Bull, is in a super-science lab—like the kind that experimented on her—and she's not happy about it.

"You recognize the gene vats, the nano-machines, all the equipment, Toro," I say. "It's weirdly like coming home. And there are people, teenagers like you, floating in those gene vats on the far side of the room. The scientists in the room look at you, aghast."

"Oh hell no," Marissa says. "I start flinging tables over, chucking them around like crazy. I want this place messed up."

I nod. Toro isn't triggering a move yet; she's super strong, so flipping these tables isn't exactly difficult for her, and she's unthreatened. "Yeah, you make a mess. Tables up-ended, chemicals spilled, scientists running from you. This room is trashed. That's when a whole squad of black-armored thugs with assault rifles comes into the room. They don't even look like they're going to ask you to surrender, they're just going to shoot."

Marissa grins at me. "Awesome. I wade into their midst and start tossing them around."

I nod. "Perfect. You're **directly engaging a threat**, definitely."

Marissa makes a face. "Oof, hold up, I didn't think these guys were an actual danger. I'm bulletproof, right?"

"Yeah, but they're well-trained and pouring concentrated fire your way. They're pretty dangerous, even to you. Still want to wade in and toss 'em around?"

Marissa has time to reconsider and not take the action—she hasn't crossed the Rubicon yet, hasn't seen the consequences of the action.

"Yeah," she says. "Let's go for it."

Marissa looks to the basic move—**directly engage a threat**—to find out what happens next.

Often when you trigger a move, you roll dice to see what happens next. These are the only times you roll dice in the whole game. You might want to roll dice to resolve a situation at other times—don't, until you've actually done something in the game that triggers a move. Sometimes you might want to trigger a move and go straight to rolling without describing any action in the fiction—don't, until you've done something in the game that triggers it. Fiction first.

Some moves are just input-output without any random element. No dice needed. See New Exemplar on page 199 for an example of a move that doesn't need dice.

## HITS AND MISSES

When a move asks you to roll dice, pick up two six-sided dice (hereafter referred to as 2d6) and roll them. You'll probably be asked to roll with something or "+" something, like Freak, Danger, Savior, or Conditions Marked. That means add that number to whatever comes up on the 2d6. So if you have Danger +3, you add 3 to the results on the dice. If you have Savior -2, you subtract 2 from the results on the dice.

**You can never roll with more than +4, and less than -3, no matter what penalties or bonuses you'd have.**

Every move splits up outcomes the same way. A 7 or higher is a "hit," while a 6 or less is a "miss." A 10 or higher is a "strong hit," while a 7, 8, or 9 is a "weak hit." Most moves give some results and changes to the fiction between strong hits and weak hits, and some may say what happens on a miss. Follow what the move says when you roll it.

In general, a hit means you largely keep control of the situation and probably get some version of what you want. It's not always exactly or all that you wanted, but it's the bare minimum. On a weak hit (7-9), you might get a distorted version of what you wanted, or you might get some major costs attached. On a strong hit (10 or higher), you might get an even better version of what you wanted. You almost always want 10+ when you roll (except for the one inverted move in the game, **take a powerful blow**—pay close attention to that one!).

A miss, 6 or less, isn't the same as a failure. It just means the GM gets full say over what happens next, and chances are you won't like it. The GM will probably make things worse for you in some way, tighten the screws more, but it doesn't have to be the worst possible thing that could happen, and it doesn't even have to mean that you actually failed. Some of the most interesting misses give you exactly what you wanted, in the worst possible way.

Marissa rolls to toss those black-clad goons around, and sadly rolls 2, with Danger +2, for a total of 4. A miss.

"Yeah, you're thrown into the mix with them, and they're pumping bullets your way, but you largely shrug them off as you chuck these soldier types around, sending them flying into tables and walls with abandon. When you hurl the last one all the way up against the ceiling and watch them fall back down, you notice their features underneath the cracked helmet. This guy's a teenager. You peel off the helmet and find a guy no older than you, but with implants in his skin, probably something ensuring his compliance. Each one you check is the same, another teen, showing signs of experimentation. You just beat up your lab-siblings, the same people you were hoping to save."

Marissa groans. "Oof. Now I feel terrible."

The GM doesn't roll dice in **MASKS**, ever. The GM just says what happens, making moves when a player rolls a miss, when the conversation gets boring, or when a move tells them to contribute. These limits ensure the GM sets up situations in which the PCs are forced to react. For more about GM moves, check out page 135.

## TRIGGERS AND UNCERTAINTY

There are only seven basic moves in **MASKS**, and a limited number of other moves. Does that mean you can only do those things in the game? Why would we limit it like that?

The answer is simple: **the moves point to places where no one knows what happens next.**

If your superpower is flight, and you want to fly over the city, no urgency, no rush...then there's no uncertainty. The players and the GM all know exactly what happens next. You just do it.

If you, someone with super strength and super speed, want to knock out a completely mundane citizen (for some reason)...there's no uncertainty. They can't hurt you, stop you, or affect you. You just do it.

If you want to throw a quick snarky insult at someone, nothing too biting or incisive, nothing that demands a response, there's no uncertainty. You just do it.

But when you're trying to fly faster than Lightning Streak to make sure you get to the Interdimensional Quantum Stabilizer first, then no one, not the player or the GM, knows what happens. *That's* when a move triggers (in this case, **unleash your powers**).

When you're trying to knock down the Stone Titan with your fists, to stop the towering fifteen foot behemoth of stone, then no one knows what happens next. *That's* when a move triggers (in this case, **directly engage a threat**).

When you're trying to throw a biting insult that makes Vanquish turn away from the Cosmic Battery to fight you, abandoning sense and reason to smash you into the ground for your insolence, then no one knows what happens next. *That's* when a move triggers (in this case, **provoke someone**).

Your character can do anything that it makes sense they can do, within the story. Moves resolve situations in which both player and GM aren't sure what happens next, to *tell you* what happens next. They highlight the natural tension points in a **MASKS** story.

When a move is triggered, everyone around the table *doesn't know what will happen*, including the GM. When a PC tries to suck all the power out of an enormous robot and channel it directly into the city's power grid, no one around the table is sure what will happen until that move is resolved. And when it's resolved, everyone knows where the story goes next.

Sometimes, the GM and the players have to talk a bit to get on the same page about the uncertainty. A PC wants to fly into space, and the GM feels that it's uncertain if they can because they've never done it before. But the player's always had it in their head that they can fly into space, should the need arise. The player and the GM have to quickly figure out if this is truly uncertain. The point of moves is to make us excited, interested, and surprised about what happens next, and if someone doesn't feel excitement around the uncertainty, then it's a good sign that either a move isn't being triggered, or someone doesn't fully understand the situation. Talk it out and find a place where you agree on the uncertainty, then make the move that makes sense. Or no move at all.

For more on the basic moves and when or why they're triggered, check out page 55.

## STARTING THE GAME

Before you play **MASKS**, there are a few things you need to prepare, and a few things you need to think about.

### PREPARING TO PLAY

You need a space to play. If you're playing face-to-face, you want a table big enough for everybody to sit around it, spread out a bit, put their character sheets down, and roll dice. Make sure you've got printed copies of the basic moves and the playbooks ready to go, along with a pair of dice for each player, some tokens for tracking Influence, a batch of index cards or post-its, and a bunch of pencils.

During play, establish some boundaries so you aren't disturbed by people around you. Don't hesitate to take breaks when needed—while it's better if nobody stops for a meal in the middle of play, bathroom breaks, snack breaks, stand-up-and-stretch breaks are just fine. No need to rush.

### HALCYON CITY

If you're playing **MASKS**, you're playing in Halcyon City. **THE CITY** on page 15 has information about Halcyon City, and there're a few other books in the **MASKS** line that offer even more information (**HALCYON CITY HERALD COLLECTION**, **SECRETS OF A.E.G.I.S.**). But here's the thing: ultimately, Halcyon City is yours to play with, change, modify, and adapt as you choose.

A few key things should be true about Halcyon City, no matter what:

- There have been three full generations of superheroes, supervillains, and super-powered calamities before now, stretching back into the earlier parts of the 20th century. The PCs are members of a fourth generation. Members of the prior generations are still active and interested in the future of Halcyon City.



- The city's pretty used to all kinds of insanity, from dinosaurs rampaging down the streets, to dark wizards transforming sections of the city into castles, to parallel dimensions appearing in the sky, to aliens invading. That doesn't mean these things aren't still amazing and surprising, but they happen, and they're a fact of life in the city—Halcyon rolls on, even after something that seems like it should change everything.
- The city is the greatest city in the world, huge and full of nearly anything you could expect to find in any city anywhere. Monuments, museums, massive corporations, slums, dark alleys, subways, whatever. Huge districts encompass many different populations and neighborhoods throughout the city, and the people living here represent diverse populations.

Other than that, if you need or want to change the details, go for it. If you don't think your version of Halcyon City has A.E.G.I.S. (the secretive governmental law enforcement organization targeted towards metahumans), but instead has a metahuman SWAT team force, that's great. If you think your version of Halcyon City has a mayor who's a former superhero, that's awesome. So is having a mayor who hates superheroes.

Adapt the city to your own choices. Ask questions and fill it in as you go. Ultimately, Halcyon is your sandbox.

## SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Superhero stories span a huge medley of styles and genres, from goofy to just plain fun to dark and gritty. It's important that everybody's on the same page about what to expect from the tone and style of your **MASKS** game. There's room for you to nudge the tone according to your table's choices, and the playbooks you select inherently change the game's style. But here are some basic elements you always need to think about.

## GROWING UP IN A SUPERHEROIC WORLD

In **MASKS**, all the characters are residents of Halcyon City. They may not have lived there for their whole lives, but they've been there long enough to get a gist of the place. That means they know about the long tradition of superheroes and villains, they know about the craziness that happens on the city streets, and they know they're part of that world. Everyone can name at least a few heroes and villains. Everyone can remember at least one incident of seeing a superhero or supernatural event. This isn't happening for the first time; super stuff isn't brand new—it's a fact of life.

What's more, because the characters are part of that world, they're all of interest to someone. The older generations are guaranteed to be invested in you and who you become, whether it's because they want to stop you from

becoming a great hero, or because they want to foster you, or whatever. There's no way you'll slip by unnoticed, or receive support from those older heroes without any conflict at all; be prepared.

## YOUR TEAM

In **MASKS**, you always play a team of young superheroes. The specifics of your team are filled in by many of the choices you make during character creation, from the playbooks you choose to the questions you answer from the GM. But a few pieces of your team are always true:

**You all choose to be here.** You might be pressured to be on the team, you might feel guilt and be part of the team to absolve it, you might audibly wish you weren't on the team at all while secretly loving it. But ultimately, it's always your choice to be part of the team. That's why the team won't fracture in a heartbeat—one way or another, you want to be here, for whatever reason fits your character.

**You aren't killers.** You're a fairly young team, and you may have made some mistakes and blown some stuff up. Your actions might have led to deaths. But you aren't killers; you don't solve problems by killing those on the other side as if it were of no consequence. If your team is interested in pursuing more drastic measures, you might grapple with the complexities of killing as a solution to difficult problems. But so far, your team hasn't gone down that dark path.

**You aren't illegal or openly hunted yet.** Your team might technically be illegal, depending on the specifics of how superhuman teams are treated in your version of Halcyon City. But even if you are, you aren't yet hunted by the authorities. Adults are more than likely making overtures to your team, offering to sanction you or guide you and thereby provide you with whatever legal support you need. The actions you take over the course of play may lead you to a place where you're actively pursued or captured, but that's not the case at the start of play.

**You aren't beloved.** Just as you aren't yet hunted by other superheroes or by law enforcement, you also aren't beloved by the city yet. You might be more or less well-liked, more or less doubted, but either way your team hasn't been around long enough for the public to truly develop any kind of abiding interest in and fondness for your team yet. If you're loved, it's the love of celebrity, temporary and easily turned to hate.

## WHY PLAY?

But why do this? Why go to all this work to tell a story, when TV, movie theaters, and even book stores are full of superhero stories you can consume without having to do any of the work to write them yourself?

Because it's frickin' *awesome*!

Because when you play **MASKS**, you create your own cool superheroes, interesting and competent and powerful and capable of heading up their own comic books. You then watch those characters bounce off each other in dramatic, tense, and most of all *fun* ways. You create your own team of superheroes and watch them argue, draw together, and kick all the butts!

Because superhero stories let you play with whatever crazy elements you like, and weave them all together into one awesome tapestry. Vampires? Sure! Robots? Definitely! Aliens? Of course! Alien robot vampires? Why the heck not! Superhero comics are unselfconscious about their zaniness, and they let you tap into the same wellspring of unrestrained creativity, and just have *fun* making stuff up!

Because we can all relate to these characters and their stories. We all have to grow up eventually, so you've either done it already, are doing it right now, or are going to do it someday. We've all felt it when someone else's words have changed how we saw ourselves, and we've all had to decide whether to take that, or to reject it and find something else. And that means what these characters are going through, even with all the spider-demons and the super-police and the costumed burglars, is relatable and even *real* to us.

Because these stories of young heroes and their superpowers and their battles are about regular human drama, writ big and large and loud. They're melodramatic and they're engaging, and they're over the top, and if you invest even a bit of yourself you'll get sucked in.

Because everyone wants to tell you who to be. And you've got to find your own path, kid.







# CHAPTER 3: THE HEROES

## CHOOSING A PLAYBOOK

The characters you create for **MASKS** are the protagonists of the story, the stars of your comic book. To ensure an interesting cast of characters, **MASKS** uses **playbooks**, each one a basic skeleton for a kind of character from young superhero stories. There are ten core playbooks in this book: The Beacon, The Bull, The Delinquent, The Doomed, The Janus, The Legacy, The Nova, The Outsider, The Protégé, and The Transformed. You can also find limited edition and fan-created playbooks elsewhere.

Each player (except the GM) chooses a single playbook at the start of play and uses it to create their character. No two players can pick the same playbook; because **MASKS** focuses on the team dynamics of these young heroes, the members of the team need to be disparate and distinct. If two players want the same playbook, the GM can suggest similar alternatives, or resolve the issue with a coin flip or dice roll.

The playbooks don't tell you exactly who you're playing; they give you an interesting starting point for designing differentiated characters who play to the themes and issues of **MASKS**. Each playbook has a series of issues, complications, and themes wrapped up in its particulars, and it's important that you're happy with whatever you choose. For more on the individual playbooks and their particular stories, see page 93.

## HOW DO I PLAY MY FAVORITE CHARACTER?

If you approach the playbooks saying, “I want to play my favorite character from comics. How do I do that?” they might seem too restrictive. But each playbook is more open than it might look at a glance. They give you boundaries for your sandbox, or a skeleton to build your character on top of. The specifics are largely left up to your own interpretation and choices in the fiction.

The playbooks are flexible: the Nova playbook is about power and how you manage it—but that doesn't mean the Nova must be a particular kind of character with a particular kind of powers. They might be a mutant with extraordinary psychic powers; a cosmic entity embodied in human form with powers over the fundamental forces of the universe; or a young witch on track to become the most powerful sorceress in the entire multiverse.

The playbooks are primarily about the kind of story the character is involved with, the dramatic issues they're likely to face. If you have an idea for a particular kind of character, talk with your GM and your group to see if it makes sense for the playbook—chances are, there's a way to make it work.

## THE MEDLEY OF HALCYON CITY

The openness of the playbooks means you have to fill in some blanks as you make characters. If your Nova is a sorceress, then you need to speak to the role of sorcery in Halcyon City; if they're a mutant, then you have to answer some questions about how mutants fit in.

That's all good! The rules ensure that your characters work, that you can tell dramatic stories about them. And the basics on Halcyon City (page 9) should give you enough of a framework to start answering these questions. But after that, it's down to you. You make your own particular version of Halcyon City by filling in the specifics and details as you go. And because **MASKS** and Halcyon City are about the kind of kaleidoscopic comic book craziness that includes nearly anything you can think of, there's pretty much no way you can go wrong, provided everyone in the group thinks the direction you're taking the city is fun.

Rich is creating his character, so first he needs to pick his playbook. He's sort of interested in playing a classic character, someone with powers, but nothing too bizarre. He's thinking about a super strong, super tough guy. He narrows it down to the Bull, the Legacy, or the Transformed. The Transformed is more bizarre than what he's looking for, and the Bull sounds a little too gruff or ignoble, so he settles on the Legacy. He especially likes the idea of being the latest in a line of classic characters, which is the Legacy's core issue.



## NAMES AND LOOK

You've got your playbook! Next you pick your name and your look. These give you a starting point for thinking about your character.

You need to pick your hero name, and you might have to or want to pick your real name, if it's different from your hero name. For some characters, the two might be the same—if you're a modern incarnation of the Greek god Athena, and you're never really an ordinary person, there's no need to choose a different “real name.” Other characters, though, have a clear dividing line between their costumed heroic identity and their real identity—you might play a regular kid named Maria Moreno, who puts on a costume to become Darkwolf.

There are examples of real names and possible superhero-style names on the GM sheets, but ultimately it's your choice—in superhero stories, the best names are the ones you find the most compelling.

Think about your look, how you physically appear to others—how you present yourself, what you regularly wear, and so on. Choose as many from each list as apply. You might also choose some options differentiating how you look in your heroic persona and how you look the rest of the time.

Rich next picks the name and look for his Legacy. He decides his character is a man, Middle Eastern—Iranian, in particular. He pictures a handsome young man, born in America but of Iranian descent. He picks “trendy clothing” next; he thinks his character dresses pretty well when wearing civilian outfits. Then, “predecessor's costume”—his character wears the same basic costume as his predecessor, so something iconic and relatively classic, with bold colors and lines. Probably spandex-ish. Off the top of his head, he's thinking red and white.

Finally, he picks his character's names. After a bit of research, he picks Rustam Attar for his character's real name. Then, for his character's superhero name, he picks Huma, the name of a mythical Iranian bird.

## ABILITIES

Now pick your abilities. **Abilities** is a broad term, meant to indicate the special things your character can do that puts them into the superheroic world. Some abilities are the height of standard human capabilities—Olympic-level athletics, for instance. Others are straight up incredible superhuman abilities, like controlling fire or reading minds. Choose as many abilities as your playbooks says from the available list. Some playbooks have special instructions for abilities, such as the Bull or the Protégé. Simply follow those instructions.

Your abilities leave some information up to interpretation. A Nova might have sorcery, but that doesn't tell you exactly what sorcery looks like, how it works, or what you can do with it. An Outsider might have radical shapeshifting,

but that doesn't say exactly how they change shape, or what they can change shape into—just that it's radical, probably changing their whole body into totally different shapes, not just changing their face. In two different games, a player could create a Legacy with the same exact abilities as in the other game—super strength, invincibility, and flight—but they can look completely different, with one of them being simply an invulnerable and god-like humanoid, and the other wearing a powerful suit of protective mechanized armor.

Abilities don't clearly state exactly what you can or can't do: after all, if your ability is super speed, that doesn't tell you at all whether you can travel at 600 miles per hour, or break the sound barrier, or vibrate your molecules through a wall. Abilities give you a clearer picture of your character at the start of play and a jumping off point for figuring out what makes sense for your character's specific capabilities. For example, someone whose abilities are martial arts and swords probably can't run at 600 miles per hour, break the sound barrier, or vibrate their molecules through a wall. Yet.

You'll discover the specifics of your abilities through play at your table, through discussions with the GM, and through your own decisions. After all, you're playing to find out!

Huma is a Legacy, so he chooses his abilities a little differently than other playbooks. To fill in Huma's abilities, Rich first picks one line on the playbook, then picks two abilities from that line that he doesn't have yet. He settles on a line that fits those pretty classic powers he wanted—super strength, invincibility, eye beams, flight, and super senses. He picks eye beams and super senses as the powers he doesn't have. That means Huma does have super strength, invincibility, and flight.

Rich considers that these might take a surprising form—maybe he grows actual wings to fly or glows with fire when he's using his super strength—but ultimately, he settles on pretty classic manifestations. He's ridiculously strong, his body's pretty much impervious to harm, and he can fly, leaving a trail of gold behind him. Classic.

## **BUT WHAT ABOUT THAT ONE POWER?**

You may notice that not every possible power is represented, especially not for every playbook. You may wish that a particular power was listed, or that it was left open-ended so you could fill in whatever power you want.

Here's the thing. I guarantee that the abilities listed for each playbook will work well in play. They'll give you exactly the kind of springboard you need to make interesting characters, while still giving you an idea of what your character can do, and ultimately playing into the particular issues and themes of each playbook.

Within those abilities, there's still plenty of wiggle room to define them how you want. The Bull, for example, is superhumanly tough, incredibly strong, and

uniquely skilled at fighting. That could mean that the Bull can turn to metal at will, or it could mean that the Bull has a ridiculous healing factor, or it could mean that the Bull can grow to enormous size—any of those descriptions fits the general categories of “tough, strong, and skilled at fighting.” Take advantage of that wiggle room to make your abilities what you want them to be.

After that, if you still don’t want to pick one of the listed abilities, or you’d rather pick something else you’ve come up with—you can do that! I won’t be at your table ready to swat you with a ruler if you don’t play exactly according to the playbook as written. But...I can’t guarantee other abilities will work as well—some abilities might even outright contradict the point of some of the playbooks. For example, playing a Bull with an open-ended and incredibly useful power like telekinesis could change what the Bull is about, making them more like a Nova than a Bull. Playing a Beacon with real, useful, genuine superpowers totally undermines the point of that playbook, and playing an Outsider without strange or particularly alien powers takes away some of the dramatic oomph of that playbook.

So if you want to use other abilities than those listed, go ahead—it’s ultimately your game and your table. It still might work just fine, and you still might have a great time. But using the abilities listed in the playbooks is your best bet to make **MASKS** work for you.

## THE LABELS

In **MASKS**, you have five main stats called **Labels**. Each Label tells you *how your character understands their self-image*. These Labels shift and change over the course of play as your character’s own self-image changes, and those changes are often in direct reaction to how others see you. When you’re a young hero, how you see yourself is determined just as much by others as it is by your own choices, for better or worse.

The five Labels are:

**Danger:** seeing yourself as threatening, strong, bloody-knuckled, and risky. Other people see you as a danger when they think they should steer clear of you because you might bring them harm. You see yourself as a danger when you believe you can take down other dangerous threats, and when you think you yourself are a threat to other people.

**Freak:** seeing yourself as strange, unusual, unique, and powerful. Other people see you as a freak when they think you’re odd, unlike them, something unnatural or outside of their understanding. You see yourself as a freak when you accept and own the things you can do that no one else can, and when you think you don’t belong with the people and the world around you.



**Savior:** seeing yourself as defending, guarding, protecting, and stalwart. Other people see you as a savior when they think of you as noble or self-sacrificing, or a bit overbearing and moralizing. You see yourself as a savior when you think of yourself as a martyr, someone who gladly sacrifices to protect and defend others.

**Superior:** seeing yourself as smart, capable, crafty, and quick. Other people see you as superior when they think you're the smartest person in the room, an arrogant and egotistical jerk. You see yourself as superior when you think you're cleverer than everyone else, and when you know exactly what to say to make the people around you do what you want.

**Mundane:** seeing yourself as normal, human, empathetic, and understanding. Other people see you as mundane when they think of you as all too normal and uninteresting, but also comprehending and sympathetic. You see yourself as mundane when you think you're regular, just a person, not special, and focused on normal human things like feelings and emotions.

## RULES FOR LABELS

Every playbook comes with a predetermined set of values for your Labels. You can add +1 to any one Label of your choice, making sure it doesn't go over +3. You might want to look at the basic moves and your playbook moves to determine what Label you want to add +1 to, but you can also do it just based on your character's self-image.

On your playbook, record your starting Labels by circling the appropriate numbers on each line. Do this in pencil; your Labels will change a lot!

A couple important rules for your Labels:

- The vast majority of the time, when one Label shifts up, another shifts down, and vice versa. There might be a few cases when this isn't true, but if rules reference shifting Labels without further explanation, this is what they mean: one goes up, and another goes down.
- If a Label would shift up past +3, or down past -2, then no shift at all occurs—neither of the two Labels that would change goes up or down. Instead, you mark a **condition**—a negative emotional state that starts affecting your actions. If you see yourself as too much of an extreme, then it starts messing you up.

According to the Legacy playbook, Huma's starting Labels are Freak +0, Danger -1, Savior +2, Superior +0, and Mundane +1. So at the start of play, Huma sees himself mostly as someone who saves other people, partly as someone normal and human, and actively not as a threat to anyone. Rich decides to add his free +1 to Superior; he thinks Huma is pretty smart, but also maybe a bit arrogant and haughty.

## CONDITIONS

You don't have any decisions to make here, but understanding conditions might affect your choices on some of your moves. All PCs have the same five **conditions** to mark: Afraid, Angry, Guilty, Hopeless, and Insecure. Sometimes you have to mark conditions during the game as a result of moves and misses. While you have a condition marked, you take -2 ongoing to particular basic moves, depending on which condition it is. If you have multiple conditions marked, all are applicable. There are a few ways to clear conditions, and you can find out more about them on page 88.

## BACKSTORY QUESTIONS

Each set of **backstory questions** is a series of prompts to get you thinking about your character's identity, how they relate to Halcyon City and its superhuman side, and how they relate to other people. Try to jot down a few answers to these questions so you can bring them up during character introductions. When other characters are brought up in these questions, focus on NPCs and avoid using other PCs to answer the questions.

For the moment, skip the "When Our Team First Came Together," "Relationships" and "Influence" sections.

Rich jots down a few answers to Huma's backstory questions.

- When did you officially become a part of your legacy?

*On my 16th birthday, Dad actually awoke the powers within me and gave me the title.*

- What's the best story you always heard about your legacy?

*The time that Huma single-handedly defeated Vortex after he'd grown the black hole in his chest with neutron star matter.*

- How does the public perceive your legacy?

*Pretty positively. Huma's a classic and noble hero, adopted by Halcyon City when the family moved here.*

- How does your legacy tie into your reasons for being a hero?

*It's pretty much the whole reason. I was never going to be anything else, I never really thought about it.*

- Why do you care about the team?

*Because Huma is all about being an icon to others, and I can be a good role model for them.*

## PICKING MOVES

At the start of play, any character can trigger the basic moves, including **directly engage a threat**, **unleash your powers**, **defend someone**, **assess the situation**, **provoke someone**, **comfort or support someone**, and **pierce someone's mask**. Each of these moves triggers when the characters take action in the fiction that match the move.

In addition to the basic moves, every character gets some **playbook moves** that may grant them wholly new abilities or may build on the basic moves. Some of them require their own rolls, while others change the way the basic moves work or add new abilities that work without a roll.

Each playbook has its own rules for how many and which playbook moves you can take at the start of play. Follow those rules. If you want to change where you put the +1 in your Labels to match up with playbook moves you like, go right ahead—you haven't started playing yet. But keep in mind your Labels will change, so any such connection is liable to be temporary.

Many of the playbooks also have **extras**. These aren't moves; while they may follow the move structure, they're special additional pieces that define the different playbooks and make them more distinct and interesting. For example, the Doomed playbook has their doom track and doomsigns, and the Janus playbook has their mundane life. Make any necessary decisions about your extras as you go through your playbook.

Over the course of play, you may be able to take moves from other playbooks. There's space for you to write those in. Keep in mind that taking another playbook move doesn't mean you can take another playbook's extra. You have to switch playbooks to get access to a Legacy's lineage or the Nova's flares (with a few exceptions built into the advancement lists).

Rich looks at his Moves section and sees that he gets two of the listed options. He chooses **Words of the past** and **Fight the good fight**. He needs to fill in at least two names in his legacy section for the members of his legacy. He chooses his dad, Shahin Attar, as retired and judgmental, and Demonsoul as the greatest opposition his legacy has ever faced. As the GM, I start thinking about ways to bring those NPCs into play right away!

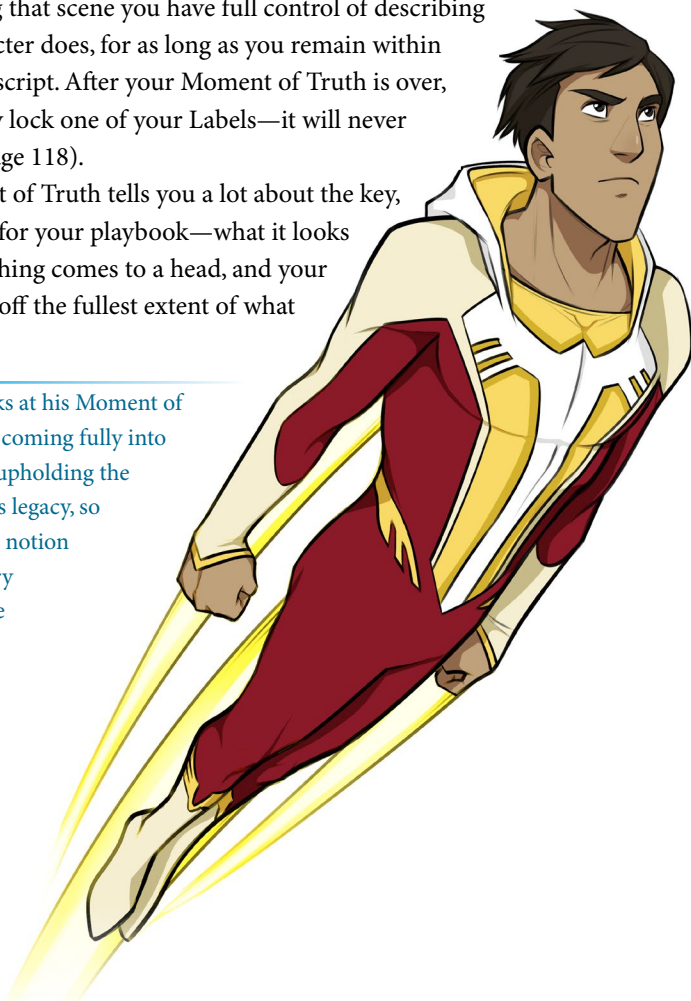
## MOMENT OF TRUTH

You don't have any decisions to make about your playbook's Moment of Truth, but it's good to familiarize yourself with it early. Your **Moment of Truth** is a script for a special instant when you get to seize control of the game's conversation. Each playbook's is a bit different, and gives you an idea for the kinds of thing you're allowed to say when you trigger your Moment of Truth. You're not mind-controlling anybody, so you probably can't say what the other PCs or NPCs choose to do—but you can say largely everything else, including how you defeat them or how you change the world around you. It's a moment when the spotlight's on your character, and we're all interested in seeing them be awesome—which means you get to say what happens in a much more direct fashion than at any other time in the game.

You can't trigger your Moment of Truth until you've unlocked it through advancement (page 115). Then, you can trigger it whenever you want, and during that scene you have full control of describing what your character does, for as long as you remain within your playbook's script. After your Moment of Truth is over, you permanently lock one of your Labels—it will never change again (page 118).

Your Moment of Truth tells you a lot about the key, critical moment for your playbook—what it looks like when everything comes to a head, and your character shows off the fullest extent of what they can do.

Rich briefly looks at his Moment of Truth. It's about coming fully into his powers and upholding the full weight of his legacy, so Rich gets a clear notion that Huma's story will be about the pressure and burden of that name.



## TEAM MOVES

Every character gets two **team moves**, one that triggers when they share a triumphant celebration with someone, and one that triggers when they share a vulnerability or weakness with someone. You don't have any decisions to make here, but read through the team moves for your playbook to get an idea of your playbook's issues and how they relate to other characters at critical, dramatic moments.

Rich looks over his two team moves. The triumphant celebration move deals with how superior the Legacy views himself, and the vulnerability move concerns the secrets of his legacy. He's getting an idea that Huma's dramatic arc will deal with where he fits in with the team—and that his legacy must have secrets to fit his vulnerability move.

## INTRODUCTIONS

Once everyone finishes filling out most of their playbooks (everything except for their “When Our Team First Came Together” section, their Relationships, and their Influence section), then it's time for character introductions.

One at a time, each player takes a few minutes to share their name, their look, their abilities, the answer to their backstory questions, and anything else important that the other characters might know about them. During this time, the other players and the GM especially can and should ask them questions to get a better grasp on who the character is.

Rich introduces Huma, explaining his look, his abilities, and a few facts, such as Huma is the latest in a line of Humas, his dad is retired, and his mundane identity isn't public. I, the GM, ask a few questions to fill in more information, like how long Huma's been in Halcyon City.

## “WHEN OUR TEAM FIRST CAME TOGETHER...”

After introductions, determine the inciting incident that made this team of young superheroes come together in the first place. It was something big, something that none of them could tackle on their own, something that required them to work together against far greater odds, something that forged them into a group greater than the sum of its parts. When you actually start playing, you'll tell a story set some time after this inciting incident—the team's been together for a while at this point. This process just makes sure everybody's on the same page for how it all started.

Each playbook has its own statement and question. One by one, each player reads their “When our team first came together...” question out loud,



so everyone knows what questions are on the table. Then, the GM leads the group in a discussion about those questions and their answers, filling in the details of what happened when the team first came together.

Each player has total control over the answers to their playbook's question. They can ask for input and ideas from the other playbooks, but they have final say. Each succeeding question should build on and take into account what came before.

The questions should be answered in a particular order to ensure that the answers build on each other and you aren't trying to figure out the details before you've covered the fundamentals. The discussion can cover whatever ground comes up, but it's the GM's job to pointedly ask the players to answer their questions in the order provided on the GM sheet.

If a particular playbook isn't in play, then its question doesn't need to be answered. The GM can still choose to ask the question of the group, in which case the answer comes from group consensus or from whatever player the GM chooses to ask.

The group as a whole and the GM in particular should ask additional questions as necessary to fill in the details on this incident, until everybody has a pretty clear picture of what happened and who was involved. At the end of this process, you should have a good idea of the incident that drew the group together, their very first adventure, and the roles that the PCs played in it.

When it's time to fill in Huma's question, the group has already filled in a lot of information. They know that they fought a ridiculous, **over the top** enemy named Technosaurus Rex, right in the center of town, where they inadvertently blew up a monument to Flying Freedom. They know that they saved the life of Mayor Eveline Clearwater, and to win the fight they had to tear open a hole in time and space and push Technosaurus Rex through—totally against the rules of the older heroes and of A.E.G.I.S.

Now, it's time for the Legacy's question. Rich reads it aloud: "All things considered, we did well and impressed an established hero. Who was it?"

Marissa suggests that it could be the leader of the New Exemplars, the leading superhero team in the city, but Jack points out that would undercut how much they've angered the older heroes with their time-hole strategy. Rich agrees. Instead, he suggests they impressed someone else, a quieter hero, someone who works more behind the scenes—the Everyman, a shapechanger who can appear as any person and never appears in the same form twice. The rest of the players like it, so Rich goes with that.

I ask, "So why was he impressed?"

Rich replies, "We did what was necessary, and we didn't hesitate, even though we were breaking the rules. That's something Everyman endorses."

I nod, and we move on to the next question.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Once you know the details of the incident that brought the team together, fill out each character's **relationships** with the others. Each playbook has two relationships on it, sentences with blanks in them. One at a time, each player reads one sentence from their playbook, and fills in the name of a fellow teammate. This sets an initial relationship between those two characters.

When it's his turn, Rich chooses his first relationship to fill in.

"I think I once got caught breaking my legacy's rules with Toro," he says.

"Oh, neat!" I say. "So, what were you doing?"

"I think my legacy has pretty clear rules when it comes to putting up a positive image, y'know? Nothing formal, but Dad always said I had to be on my best behavior whenever anybody might be watching. But I wanted to impress her, so I tried to use my superhero name to get us into a club, and...it didn't go so hot. Plus, Dad heard about it, and chewed me out."

"Perfect! Toro, were you actually impressed?"

"Not really? I mean, he didn't get us in. But it was cute that he tried," says Marissa. The group does a few more relationships, then it's Huma's turn again.

"For my second relationship, I think that I trust Hornet, and told her an important secret of my legacy. I feel like Hornet's the one I can trust to take me down if I ever get out of control," Rich says.

"Awesome! What was the secret?" I ask.

"How to take away my powers. There are these feathers, supposedly taken from an actual huma, and as long as you've got one on you, my powers can't affect you. If you put it on me, my powers go away entirely," Rich says. Before this moment, none of that was true...but now it is.

"Excellent! And did you give Hornet one of these feathers?"

"No, I just told her about them," Rich says.

"Hornet, did you do any more digging about the feathers afterward?"

"Definitely," says Joe. "I think I know where one is, at the museum, if it turns out I need one."

Feel free to discuss these relationships as you go. Ultimately, each player has final say over whose name they put into each blank, but they should feel free to ask for suggestions or ideas.

## INFLUENCE

Finally, each character gives out some **Influence** to their teammates. Influence in **MASKS** is a binary resource—someone either has it over you, or they don't. If someone has Influence over you, it means you care about what they think, say, or do about you. It means their words carry weight with you, and can change how you see yourself. By default, in **MASKS**, all adults hold Influence over the PCs. This section of character creation is about sharing Influence among teammates.

Each playbook has a section that describes how much Influence they give out to their teammates. Sometimes you have to make a choice about your initial demeanor, how you come off to the others first thing—other times it just tells you how many characters you give Influence to. Choose which teammates you give Influence to, and hand them one of your Influence tokens to mark it.

You can always choose to give out more Influence—if you think your character cares about somebody's words, then you should give them Influence over you if they don't already have it. But you have to at least give out as much as your playbook tells you to.

When handing out Influence, think about whose words your character most cares about at the moment, who's most likely to be able to change how they see their self. Influence comes and goes over the course of play, so don't worry too much about this initial set-up.

When it's time for Huma to hand out Influence, Rich follows what it says in the Legacy playbook:

"You're a part of this team, for better or worse, and you care what they think. Give Influence to all of your teammates," Rich reads aloud. He then hands one of his Influence tokens to every other PC. Huma cares about what they all think.

Once all the PCs have handed each other Influence according to their playbooks, then you're ready to play!



# CHAPTER 4: THE MOVES

## USING MOVES IN PLAY

The most important thing to keep in mind about moves is this: *to do it, you do it.*

Every move has both a mechanical element—rolling the dice and charting the results as a full hit, partial hit, or miss, and then determining what happens based on the move—and a fictional element—you charge forward and punch someone, or you say something mean and provocative, or what have you. You can't get one without the other! To do it, you do it.

No move ever triggers without the associated fictional action. Want to **unleash your powers**? You have to try something crazy with your abilities! Want to **directly engage a threat**? You have to throw yourself into thick of it and start tussling with the enemy! Want to pierce someone's mask? You've got to be watching them for signs of what's hidden beneath! Want to **comfort or support** someone? You've got to actually say something comforting or supporting to them!

Sometimes you'll look at a move and say, "I want to do that thing." You realize that what you really want to happen, right now, are the mechanical results of **directly engage a threat**, so you want to trigger that move. That's awesome! But you don't get to roll because you want to roll. You have to take some action in the fiction that triggers the move.

The GM, at the same time, is watching for moments when a move triggers. Sometimes you describe yourself doing something, and the GM tells you that it sounds like you're triggering a move—and that's awesome, too! If you like, you can focus on just saying what your character says or does, and rely on the GM to help call it out when you trigger a move.

The final thing to keep in mind is that just because there's no move for it doesn't mean you can't do it! Using moves is triggering these specific combinations of fiction and rules, but you can still do things in the fiction without a move behind it.





## FIGHTS, CONDITIONS, AND BLEEDING

At this point, you might be asking, “Hold up. When I punch a monster in the face, the primary way that’s represented in the **MASKS** system is with an emotional condition inflicted on the creature? That doesn’t make sense. It should bleed! Why isn’t it bleeding?”

It is! When you **directly engage a threat**, you’re probably hitting an enemy and hurting them. Follow the fiction—if you punch the Spider in the face, then yeah, he’s probably bleeding from a split lip. If it fits the fiction, then yeah, you might nerve strike an enemy’s arm into uselessness, and they’ll have to find other ways to come after you.

**MASKS** doesn’t pay close attention to physical harm, though. How much physical harm can an invulnerable space alien take before they go out? How much punishment can the utterly human bowman take? **MASKS** isn’t about that—in **MASKS**, their responses to getting punched are far more important. The alien gets Angry. The bowman gets Afraid.

Villains always make a move after marking a condition (page 158), so the condition they mark says a lot about what they’ll do next. And the most common way for PCs to get rid of a condition is to take a particular kind of action. Marking conditions leads to more fiction, more things happening—and that’s exactly what you want.

## HOLD, +1 FORWARD, AND +1 ONGOING

Some moves describe your character getting **hold** as a result of the move, such as “hold 1” or “hold 3.” These are temporary points you can spend according to the move, often with the phrase “spend hold one-for-one,” meaning “spend one point of hold for one effect as the move describes.” Usually hold has to be spent during a given conversation or scene, but moves tell you how long you have before the hold expires. If there’s ambiguity, ask the GM for clarification.

Other moves describe your character “taking +1 forward” or “taking +1 ongoing.” +1 forward means your character gets +1 to the next applicable roll; +1 ongoing means your character gets +1 to all applicable rolls moving forward, as the move describes. The move always indicates how long these bonuses last.

## BASIC MOVES

Every player character uses these basic moves throughout a game of **MASKS**. These basic moves drive the narrative forward.

The seven basic moves are **directly engage a threat**, **unleash your powers**, **defend someone**, **assess the situation**, **provoke someone**, **comfort or support someone**, and **pierce someone's mask**. Here's more info about the individual moves and their pieces, as well as helpful examples of how they work.

### DIRECTLY ENGAGE A THREAT

When you **directly engage a threat**, roll + Danger. On a hit, trade blows. On a 10+, pick two. On a 7-9, pick one:

- resist or avoid their blows
- take something from them
- create an opportunity for your allies
- impress, surprise, or frighten the opposition

**Directly engaging a threat** is the move for straightforwardly duking it out with something—a monster, a villain, whatever. If you're playing a bit of the rope-a-dope, hoping to tire an enemy out, you're not *directly engaging*, so the move isn't triggered. If you're up against someone or something that isn't actually all that dangerous to you, then they're not a *threat*, and the move isn't triggered.

*Trading blows* means both you and the threat get in some good hits on each other. That can lead to changes in the fiction—getting punched by a giant monster probably leaves you nice and bruised, unless you're utterly invulnerable. Beyond the fiction, though, this most often means inflicting conditions, or triggering the move **take a powerful blow**.

When you trade blows with an NPC threat, the GM marks one of the NPC's conditions, and tells you whether to straight up mark a condition on your PC or to roll to **take a powerful blow**, depending on the fiction. The GM gets to choose what condition the NPC marks. If the GM tells you to **take a powerful blow**, then you follow that move's rules to determine what happens next; if the GM tells you to mark a condition, then they tell you which condition to mark. When you trade blows with a PC threat, you both roll to **take a powerful blow**.

### OPTIONS FOR DIRECTLY ENGAGING A THREAT


*Resisting or avoiding their blows* means you aren't affected by the trading of blows—you either get out of the way of the threat's strikes or you can just shrug them off, depending on what makes sense for your character and the threat. This ensures that you come through unscathed, but it doesn't get you anything else—it means all you've done is struck the threat and most likely inflicted a condition on them.

*Taking something from them* means you can take something physical or conceptual from the threat. You could, for instance, take the Doomray they're holding in their hands, knocking it out of their grip with one of your punches; or, you could take their footing, knocking them to the ground and giving you a chance to run; or, you could take their position in front of the controls for the Tachyon Cannon. This is your chance to use your attack to change your position and theirs.

*Creating an opportunity for your allies* means you're giving your teammates (or other allies) an opening to act or to gain some kind of advantage. Maybe you hold the villain off to the side, so your teammate has a shot at reaching the Neutrino Bomb. Maybe you smash the villain straight through the air towards your teammate, giving them a chance to land a follow-up strike. Either way, this option sets up team maneuvers.

Sometimes, you choose this to change the actual situation so your teammate has a chance to do something they couldn't otherwise do. Other times, you're just giving your teammate a boost. If it's the former, then choosing this option gives your teammate that chance. If it's the latter, though, then you should add a Team to the pool. (For more on Team and the Team Pool, see page 48.) The GM tells you which it is.





*Impress, surprise, or frighten the opposition* means you're affecting how the threat perceives you after you've traded blows. Maybe you've put on such a show of force, suddenly they view you with greater respect; or maybe you've proved that you're a danger in a way they didn't see before, and now they try to get away from you. The GM picks which option (impress, surprise, or frighten) makes the most sense when you choose this option against an NPC threat. For NPCs or PCs, the GM might inflict a condition to represent the character's new perspective, if it fits the fiction.

## EXAMPLES FOR DIRECTLY ENGAGING A THREAT

Toro the Bull, played by Marissa, is trying to escape from the secret laboratory she was taken to after she was knocked out in the last fight. On her way out, she runs into an experimental metahuman like herself—her altered clone, in fact—named Ursa. Ursa gives her a sadistic grin and extends metallic claws from the tips of each of her fingers, an upgrade they never gave to Toro. Marissa says that Toro responds by spitting to the side, putting up her fists, and charging in to beat the crud out of Ursa.

Toro's definitely **directly engaging a threat**, so I ask Marissa to roll to **directly engage**. She rolls + Danger, and gets a total of 8: she trades blows with Ursa, but only gets to choose one option. Marissa chooses to take something from Ursa—in this case, Ursa's claws. I ask Marissa what that looks like, and she describes Toro grabbing Ursa's hands and slamming them into the wall, snapping off her claws. That's awesome, but it doesn't happen before Ursa gets in some pretty nasty slashes on Toro with those claws, and even Toro's super-hard skin isn't invulnerable to them—I tell Marissa to roll for Toro to **take a powerful blow**, and I mark a condition on Ursa (I think Angry is the right one).

Matt is playing Rex the Transformed, who's just busted his way into the control deck of Vanquish's attack-mech, a skyscraper-sized robot stomping down Halcyon's streets. Rex surveys the control deck, full of Vanquish's underlings—a horde of alien chumps nowhere near as powerful as the alien overlord himself.

"I waded in and start chucking them around the room. Am I **directly engaging**?" Matt asks.

"Nah," I say. "They're no match for you, no real threat. You're tossing them around without trouble, and it's completely disrupting control of the attack-mech. That is, until you hear Vanquish's voice call to you from the entrance to the control chamber..."

## UNLEASH YOUR POWERS

When you **unleash your powers** to overcome an obstacle, reshape your environment, or extend your senses, roll + Freak. On a hit, you do it. On a 7-9, mark a condition or the GM will tell you how the effect is unstable or temporary.

**Unleashing your powers** is the move for doing something complicated, dangerous, and difficult with your powers. It is *definitely* not the “use your powers” move—you’re probably using your abilities on nearly all of the basic moves. This move is for those situations when you do something intense with your powers, and we’re not sure how it’ll go, or if you can even pull it off.

This distinction is crucial—just using your abilities isn’t unleashing them. Unleashing them means pushing them or using them in dangerous or difficult situations. Over the course of the game you’ll establish a baseline for each character that tells you when it feels like they’re unleashing and when they aren’t. And keep in mind, these characters are all young superheroes, getting the hang of their powers and what they can do—chances are, they unleash their powers and push the boundaries of what they can do more often than not.

If you aren’t trying to overcome an obstacle, reshape your environment, or extend your senses, then you’re probably not unleashing your powers. That said, these categories are pretty open-ended. Overcoming an obstacle covers both flying faster than the villainous Speed Demon to get to the artifact first and smashing through the sorcerous energy field Gehenna cast to keep you away from her sanctum. Reshaping your environment covers both bringing down one wall of the building so you can escape and using your magnetic powers to trap the villain inside a cage of steel. Extending your senses covers both extending your telepathy into someone’s mind and using your supervision to see halfway across the city.

**Unleash your powers** is a bit of an overarching move. When you’re trying to punch out a titanic rock monster, it feels like you’re unleashing your powers, namely your tremendous strength...except, that’s a move to **directly engage a threat**. When you’re trying to create a massive ice wall to save your friends from an explosion, it feels like you’re unleashing your powers...except, that’s a move to defend someone from an immediate threat. Always see if another move fits *better* and *more specifically* than **unleash your powers** before using this move—it’s really here for situations where the other moves don’t fit.

If the characters are just using their regular abilities to solve a problem—running from a threat with no special powers, for example, or trying to drive a car into an enemy—then it’s not **unleashing your powers**. The GM just says what happens based on the fiction. If you want to try to take control over what happens, use your powers to solve problems!





## OPTIONS FOR UNLEASH YOUR POWERS

*On a hit, you do it* means that as long as you roll 7 or higher, you do the thing you set out to do, no matter what. But on a 7-9, you have to choose to either mark a condition (of your choice, not the GM's), or let the GM tell you how your effect is unstable or temporary.

*Temporary* is pretty self-explanatory—it puts a time pressure on the effect, and it could be anything from, “You’ve wrapped the villain in a metal cage, but he’s gonna break out soon, you’ve only bought yourself a bit of time,” to “You’ve managed to lift up the debris of the collapsed building with your gravity powers, but you can only hold it up for a bit longer.”

*Unstable* is about unintended additional consequences, often dangerous to you or others. Unstable effects never take away from the core success of the roll—you still did whatever you intended to do. But they add an additional element that complicates the situation: collateral damage, unintended consequence, or worse. The GM might even make you roll to **take a powerful blow** as a result of an unstable effect.

## EXAMPLES FOR UNLEASHING YOUR POWERS

Sarah is playing Fission the Nova, who’s currently stuck in a nuclear reactor that was damaged in an attack by Helldrake; it’s about to overload and detonate half the city. Sarah says, “I suck in all the radiation and nuclear force, then I want to fire it up into the sky in a single beam of light!” I grin, both because that’s awesome, and because I’m excited to find out if this works. This is absolutely Fission pushing his powers to the limit and reshaping the environment by pulling away all that radiation, so I ask Sarah to roll to **unleash Fission’s powers**. Sarah gets a big ol’ 13. Fission successfully siphons it all off and shoots it into the sky!

Mark is playing Sureshot the Beacon, whose abilities are acrobatics and his bow and trick arrows. Sureshot is trying to get into the thick of the action below from his perch atop a nearby building—he wants duke it out with the VENOM goons on the ground. Mark says, “Sureshot fires an arrow with a long tether attached to the end of it, then uses that to zipline his way to the ground. So that’s probably **unleashing his powers**, right?”

“Nah,” I say. “You’re not looking for pinpoint accuracy here, and no one’s focusing on you right this second. It’s not too difficult for you to do, and you get down to the ground without any issue. But as soon as you do, some VENOM goons notice you and swarm over. What do you do?”

## DEFEND SOMEONE

When you defend someone or something from an immediate threat, roll + Savior. For NPC threats: on a hit, you keep them safe and choose one. On a 7-9, it costs you: expose yourself to danger or escalate the situation.

- add a Team to the pool
- take Influence over someone you protect
- clear a condition

For PC threats: on a hit, give them -2 to their roll. On a 7-9, you expose yourself to cost, retribution, or judgment.

**Defending someone** is the move you use to stop something bad from happening. It's not about preemptively preparing a defense, or setting up a shield—it's about preventing the worst in the moment. The threat must be immediate for this move to trigger.

NPC threats include threats from the environment—anything the GM describes or controls. Defending someone from a PC threat is for when a fellow PC tries to do something bad and you try to stop them. The key isn't that you're defending another PC—it's that you're defending *against* another PC.

When you trigger this move, be sure that both you and the GM are clear on what the immediate threat is. You can defend someone from physical dangers and threats, but you can also defend someone from cruel words or insults—if an older hero berates your teammate, you can defend them just as much as if a fireball was hurtling towards their face. In this case, the immediate threat is the harm and effects of the words.

You don't trigger **defend someone** when you're trying to keep yourself safe from an NPC or environmental threat—that's much more likely to be another move, like unleashing your powers, or rejecting their Influence. You can defend yourself from a PC threat when another PC tries to hurt you.

*Keeping them safe* means that you prevent the danger you acted against. If you're putting up an energy shield to stop someone from getting roasted, then on a hit, you do that—they're protected from the flame blast.

On a 7-9, you must expose yourself to danger or escalate the situation—your choice. Exposing yourself to danger leaves the danger up to the GM. It could mean anything from you taking the hit instead of whomever you're defending, to your actions leaving you in a more vulnerable position. Escalating the situation means you make things more tense, more dangerous, more complicated in general. This is you breaking out your powers to defend someone when a moment before it was just a verbal fight.

When you defend against a PC threat, it should always be when the PC is making a move and they're really being an overt threat towards you. On a hit,

you give them -2 to their roll, which might shift them down to a 7-9 result or even a miss. If their move becomes a miss, they still mark potential and the GM makes a hard move, as usual. They can also still get boosts by other teammates spending Team out of the pool (page 48).

Getting a 10+ when defending against a PC threat means you just give them -2 to their roll at no cost. Getting a 7-9 means you expose yourself to cost, retribution, or judgment—GM's choice, based on the situation. Cost means you pay a price, usually marking a condition yourself, to defend against the other PC. Retribution means the other PC gets a chance to act against you without your interference. Judgment means other people watching might judge you for your actions, leading them to shift your Labels (page 44) or otherwise act against you.

## OPTIONS FOR DEFEND SOMEONE

On a hit when **defending** against an NPC threat, you always get to choose one option from the list. Adding a Team to the pool means your actions now are building up a sense of team cohesion and focus that you can call on later.

*Taking Influence* over someone you protect means they care about how you've helped them, and they're more inclined to listen to you moving forward. If you already had Influence over an NPC, there's little reason to take Influence over them again—you'll get +1 forward on your next move aimed at them, but that's it.

However, taking Influence over a PC you already hold it over allows you to immediately shift their Labels. When you protect a whole bunch of people, you can either: name the specific person in the crowd that you want



Influence over; let the GM tell you someone important in the crowd over whom you now have Influence; or take Influence over a whole group.

*Clearing a condition* means you can immediately clear a condition you have marked, before you suffer any consequences for **defending someone**.

## EXAMPLES FOR DEFENDING SOMEONE

In the midst of an intense superhero brawl, Grasshopper the Janus, played by Jenn, and Sureshot the Beacon, played by Mark, are facing down the obnoxious Troll. Sureshot's been hurt, so he's trying to pick himself up while Grasshopper rushes in to help. At the same moment, Troll flips a car straight at Sureshot.

"Aaa! I flip in quickly and grab Sureshot so I can pull him out of the way!" Jenn says.

I tell Jenn to roll to **defend Sureshot**. She gets 9, then picks one from the list. "Definitely adding one Team to the pool. I just saved Sureshot's butt!"

I nod. "Yeah you did! But now you have to either escalate the situation or expose yourself to danger, your choice."

Jenn thinks. "Well, I'm not really escalating right now. If I was super strong, I could escalate by kicking the car back at Troll...but I'm not, so I can't. Yeah, I guess I just expose myself to danger."

"Yep, that sounds right to me, too," I say. "I think you get Sureshot out of the way, but you get clipped by the car. Roll to **take a powerful blow**."

Dominus, a terrifyingly powerful metahuman, floats over Halcyon City Square, reshaping the buildings into statues to his glory. Dusk the Doomed uses her dark portal to teleport into the area, just in time to see people getting flung from the buildings as Dominus reshapes them.

"Aw, crud. All right, I'll create a big scoop with my shadow powers: I want to catch those people," Grace, who's playing Dusk, says.

"Excellent! Roll to **defend**. The threat is that the people aren't caught in time."

Grace rolls a 10! She gets to choose one option from the list. She doesn't have any conditions, and she feels weird about adding a Team to the pool when no one else is around, so she chooses to take Influence on someone she saves. "But I don't know who's in this clump of people," she says.

"That's okay, I've got a great idea! You create your shadow scoop and catch them as they fall. You safely deposit the people on the ground again, and you think you spy—is that Grasshopper's mom? What's she doing here? Well, regardless, she sees you and the look of gratitude on her face speaks volumes—take Influence over her. But Dominus has noticed you—he's floating over in your direction. What do you do?"



## ASSESS THE SITUATION

When you **assess the situation**, roll + Superior. On a 10+, ask two. On a 7-9, ask one. Take +1 while acting on the answers.

- what here can I use to \_\_\_\_\_?
- what here is the biggest threat?
- what here is in the greatest danger?
- who here is most vulnerable to me?
- how could we best end this quickly?

**Assess the situation** is the move for when you want to get specific and useful information about your situation and surroundings. In the fiction, this is you taking a moment to survey what's going on around you, looking for important details. You can always ask the GM clarifying questions about your environment and what your character would know—assessing the situation is for highly specific and pointed information.

As long as you're using the information you learned from your assessment to guide your actions, take +1 to your moves and rolls. But if the situation changes too much, you might not get that bonus anymore. If you can take a course of action that uses multiple answers, the bonuses stack, but remember you can never roll with more than +4 total, including your Label.

## OPTIONS FOR ASSESS THE SITUATION

"What here can I use to \_\_\_\_\_?" lets you fill in the blank when you ask the question. This is a great question for finding useful tools and pieces of your surroundings that will help you accomplish some purpose. Want to trap Vanquish? Ask "What here can I use to trap Vanquish?" and the GM will tell you. The answer might be "nothing."

"What here is the biggest threat?" helps you to prioritize dangers and threats in the area. You can clarify to the GM how you prioritize things yourself—so the GM knows whether you'd think that the biggest threat is an enemy or something that endangers civilians, for instance. It's also useful even when you're not in an immediately dangerous situation to find out who's the most menacing in the room.

"What here is in the greatest danger?" is the inverse of the prior question. This tells you what needs protection the most, and potentially alerts you to the target or focus of a villain's attention—if they're after someone or something, chances are it'll be in the greatest danger.

"Who here is most vulnerable to me?" is about your own abilities and whom they can best affect. The obvious answers focus on who's most vulnerable to your particular skills and abilities, but it can also take into account who's most vulnerable to your words, if someone's susceptible to the things you could say.

“How could we best end this quickly?” outlines a course of action to stop a dangerous or bad situation as quickly as possible. This could be how best to take down an enemy quickly, but it might tell you that the best way to end things quickly is to flee. It might also tell you that all you have to do is apologize to bring a bad situation to a close.

## EXAMPLES FOR ASSESSING THE SITUATION

Hornet’s been captured by dark cultists working for Lady Faust. She’s being held in some hidden basement. One of the first things she does upon waking is **assess the situation** to look for an escape. Joe gets a 7, meaning he gets to ask one question.

“What here can I use to escape?” Joe asks.

“Looking more closely at the room, you realize you’re locked into some kind of old cell. The bars are wrought iron, but one looks a bit loose. If you can kick that bar out, you can use it as a pry bar to bend out the others. But doing that’s gonna be hard, especially if you want to avoid making noise. What do you do?”

“I’m gonna go for it. Kick out the bar and use it to pry open the others,” Joe says.

“Cool! **unleash your powers** for your strength and stealth, and take your +1 for acting on the question!”

After hearing about it on the news, Skysong flew to Halcyon’s Pristine Park and hid herself among some trees where she could watch an alien spaceship that landed in the park, with alien cyborgs marching down its landing ramp. She **assesses the situation** from the safety of her tree and gets a 10. She can ask two questions.

“Hm. I think I know what the biggest threat is...how about, what here is in the greatest danger?” Andrea, Skysong’s player, asks.

“You watch them pull big weapons on anti-gravity platforms out of their ship. You’re an alien, so you recognize these cannons—they’re called Archon Rays, and they’re most famous for neutralizing mutational or extranormal powers. So it’s other supers of Earth who are in the greatest danger,” I reply.

She asks, “Okay, how can I best end this quickly?”

“Observing them more closely, you recognize the technology and the aliens themselves. You’ve heard of them, if you haven’t seen them up close—Menagerists, they’re called. They’re probably here looking for metahumans for their zoo. If you can convince them that the metahumans here are too tough to be worth the trouble of capturing, or if you can convince them that there really aren’t any valuable specimens here, they’ll take off. But as you’re putting all this together, they start moving towards the treeline and into the city. What do you do?”



## PROVOKE SOMEONE

When you **provoke someone** susceptible to your words, say what you're trying to get them to do and roll + Superior. For NPCs: on a 10+, they rise to the bait and do what you want. On a 7-9, they can instead choose one:

- they stumble: you take +1 forward against them
- they err: you gain a critical opportunity
- they overreact: you gain influence over them

For PCs: on a 10+, both. On a 7-9, choose one.

- if they do it, add a Team to the pool
- if they don't do it, they mark a condition

**Provoking someone** is one of the main ways to make other characters do what you want. This isn't just straight up manipulation, though—provoking someone isn't about trying to convince them to do it, or offering them something they want. It's about pushing the right buttons to get them to do what you want. Your words don't have to match your intent, so long as you're pressing the right buttons.

You can only **provoke someone** susceptible to your words. If you have Influence over someone, they are, by default, susceptible to your words, but otherwise it's down to what makes sense. Sometimes you're able to say the right thing to get to someone, especially if you've already **pierced their mask** (page 73). But other times, they can shrug off your words—for example, Rampage, a dangerous and powerful monster, might not be susceptible to your threats of violence. But if you prod and taunt her about her transformed, inhuman form, she might be susceptible to those words.

When you **provoke someone**, tell the GM what you're trying to get them to do. This is crucial! What you say in character to provoke them is about pushing their buttons—but what you actually want them to do might be totally different from what you say out loud. You might provoke an adult hero, pushing them, getting in their face, as if you were provoking them to a violent confrontation. Except you really want them to back down and leave, and you're counting on them being an adult and a hero to get them to do what you actually want. Every time you **provoke someone**, you must say exactly what you want them to do out of character, no matter what you're saying in character.

When an NPC “rises to the bait and does what you want,” it means they do whatever you said you wanted them to do out of character. If you wanted them to back down, they do. If you wanted them to come after you and ignore your teammates, they do. On a 7-9 result for NPCs, they can still choose to rise to the bait and do what you want, or they can instead choose one of the options from the list.

## OPTIONS FOR PROVOKE SOMEONE

*If the NPC stumbles*, it means they were tripped up, caught on something, knocked off balance by your words. They're ill-prepared to deal with your next move; hence, you get +1 forward against them. Stumbling is essentially non-action, allowing you to follow-up with a more straightforward move against them, at an advantage.

*If the NPC errs*, it means they take action without planning or thinking and it leaves them vulnerable or creates an opportunity that you wouldn't have otherwise had. They might take a swing at you, leaving them open for you to simply knock them out with one punch. They might accidentally let information slip in an attempt to tell you off.

*If the NPC overreacts*, it means you take Influence over them, and they take an exaggerated or extreme reaction in response to what you say, something that shows you've really gotten to them. This isn't the same as erring—their overreaction might not give you any kind of opportunity or even a chance to react. Instead, it shows how much your words actually affected them. They might start firing their eyebeams at you in response to your taunting. They might lose their composure and start insulting you directly.

If you're trying to **provoke** a PC, on a 7-9, you pick that either they must mark a condition if they don't do what you said you wanted them to do out of character, or you can add a Team to the pool if they do what you want. On a 10+, both are true. If they must mark a condition, they get to choose which condition they mark.

## EXAMPLES FOR PROVOKE SOMEONE

The Dread Queen is flying in her quantum skyship, chasing Skysong over the skies of Halcyon City. Huma sees the fight and flies up into the skies to join them.

"I want to fly after the Dread Queen. I fire a few force blasts at her ship, not really to hit her, just to get her attention. I want her to focus on me," says Rich.

"It's not quite enough. Her ship's one tough cookie, and she knows she has Skysong on the ropes. She's not changing course." I'm signaling to Rich that this isn't a **provoke** yet—the Dread Queen isn't susceptible to Huma's provocation attempts right now.

"Hmm. Okay, I'll fly directly in front of her cockpit, sit on the glass, and smile down at her. As smugly as I can."

I smile at Rich. "Yeah, okay, sounds like that'll get her goat. You want her to chase you and try to kill you, right? Ignore Skysong?" Rich nods. "Great! Then roll for it."

Rich rolls to **provoke the Dread Queen**, and gets a 7. In this case, I choose to have her overreact.

"Okay! She rapidly brakes her ship, so you go flying off thanks to inertia, and then with a snarl you can see through her cockpit, she opens fire with a steady stream



of bolts. She was holding her fire before so as not to damage Halcyon City—the weirdness of her legal status as a foreign official would’ve protected her if she didn’t actually hurt the city, so long as she only went after non-citizens, like Skysong. But now she’s firing at you full bore, and she doesn’t care what she hits. Take Influence over her, and tell me what you do now!”

The Silver Savior is lecturing Vertex about how the young hero needs to live up to being a real hero. Vertex blows him off and opens up with a bit of a tirade.

“Hey, you know what? I’m not sure why I should listen to you at all. You’re all covered in metallic goo, sure, but do you even have the Silver Spark anymore? Is that just metallic paint on your skin? Best I can tell, you haven’t done anything real important for a while.” Jack smiles slyly.

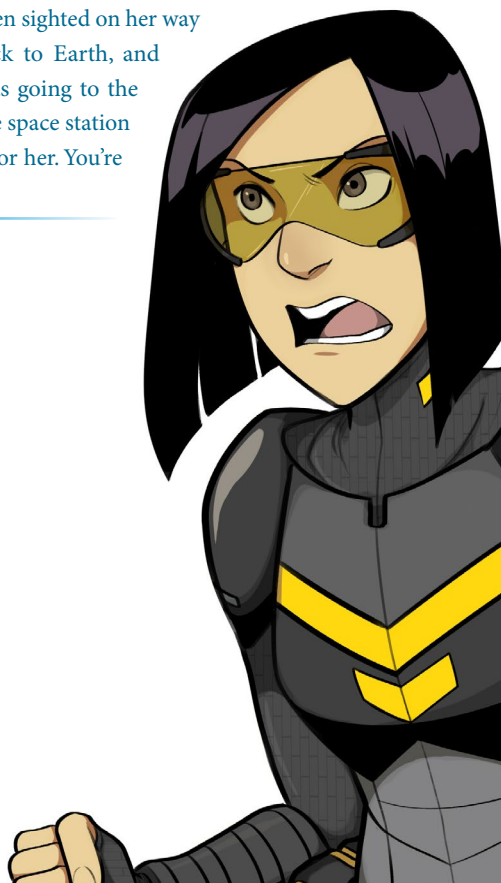
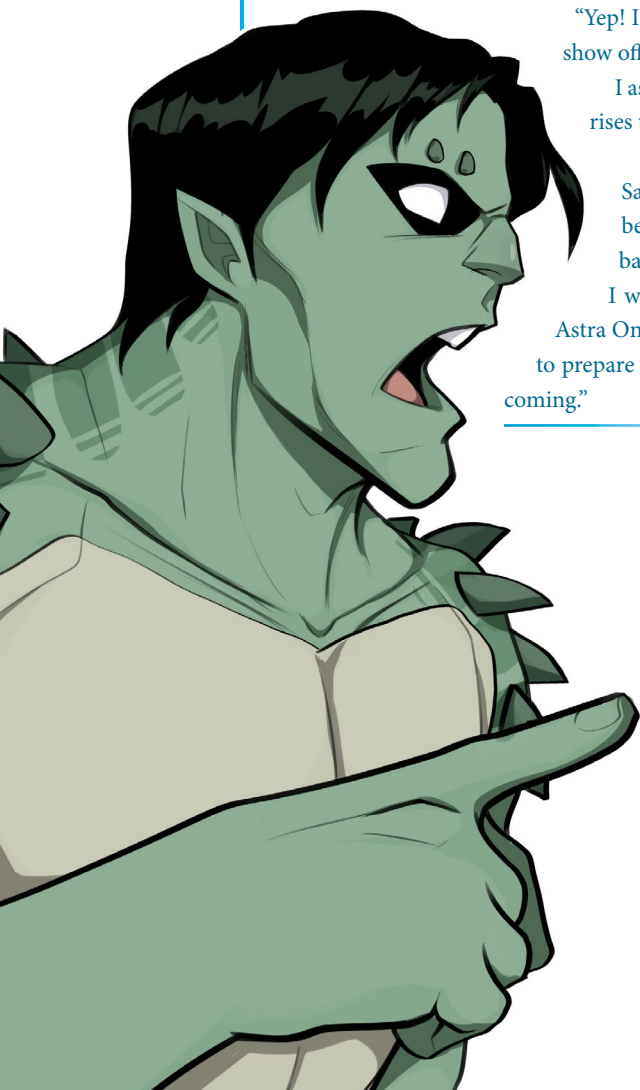
“Yeah, that does it. You’re **provoking** him, right?”

“Yep! I want him to take me on a real mission and show off.”

I ask Jack to roll, and he gets a 12—Silver Savior rises to the bait.

“Very well,” I say, speaking for the Silver Savior. “The Sable Saboteur has been sighted on her way back to Earth, and

I was going to the Astra One space station to prepare for her. You’re coming.”



## COMFORT OR SUPPORT SOMEONE

When you **comfort or support someone**, roll + Mundane. On a hit, they hear you: they mark potential, clear a condition, or shift Labels if they open up to you. On a 10+, you can also add a Team to the pool or clear a condition yourself.

**Comforting or supporting someone** is the move for helping others get over their conditions and take control of their own destinies. It might appear to be a nonessential move at first glance—which is more important, comforting or supporting someone, or being able to punch superhuman monsters in the face? But **comforting or supporting** is just as crucial as any other move in the game.

Comforting or supporting needs to break a certain threshold for the move to be triggered. This isn't for pats on the back or simple "Good job!" compliments. This is for genuine, open-hearted, even extended emotional support of another person. This is for heart-to-hearts, for meaningful gestures and actions.

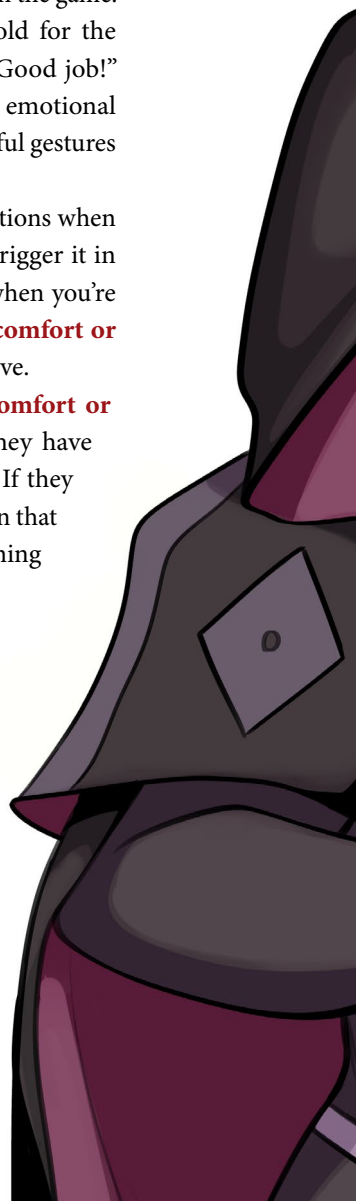
That said, you shouldn't feel that there are more limits on situations when you can trigger **comforting or supporting**. You absolutely can trigger it in the middle of a terrible fight, just as much as you can trigger it when you're hanging out at your base. As long as you're genuinely trying to **comfort or support** someone in a meaningful fashion, you can trigger the move.

You can also **comfort or support** PCs and NPCs. If you **comfort or support** an NPC, their reactions largely depend on whether they have conditions marked. If they do, they act to clear those conditions. If they don't, then it's up to the GM whether the NPC chooses to open up in that moment. PCs always get to make their own decisions about opening up to you.

## OPTIONS FOR COMFORT OR SUPPORT SOMEONE

On a hit, the person you are comforting or supporting has to decide if they want to open up to you. What that means varies heavily depending on the specific situation—it could cover anything from confessing a secret to returning a kiss. The key is that it supports a meaningful emotional, dramatic exchange. If you don't feel like you've received any kind of open-hearted response, then it's not enough—the character you supported or comforted hasn't opened up.

If they do open up, they get to choose to either mark potential, clear a condition immediately, or shift one of their Labels up and one of their Labels down (both their choice). Making the emotional connection helps them strengthen their self.



On a 10+, you also get to choose to either add a Team to the pool or clear a condition immediately yourself. You only get to do this if they open up to you—if they don't open up, then no one gets anything.

Sometimes, opening up in response to **comfort or support** triggers another move, a Team move—sharing a vulnerability or weakness. If that's the case, it's fine! Finish resolving the **comfort or support**, then resolve the vulnerability or weakness.



## EXAMPLES FOR COMFORT OR SUPPORT SOMEONE

La Espada is coming for Sureshot, ready for a fight—but Sureshot has different ideas.

“I put away my bow, clipping it to my back,” says Mark, Sureshot’s player. “I look at her straight on. ‘You don’t have to do this. You could be so much better than this. You’re so good with that sword! You don’t have to be a criminal!’”

I’m not sure this is quite enough for her to be comforted or supported, especially since Sureshot doesn’t have Influence over La Espada, so I don’t say anything about that. “She comes closer, and now she’s within range. She pulls back the sword to strike at you.”

“I don’t move,” says Mark. “I’m not going to fight you. You can hit me again, or you can prove that you’re what I think you are. That you’re better than this. I really hope you prove me right.”

“That’ll do it,” I say. “You’re **comforting or supporting her**—in this case, supporting. Roll it.”

Mark gets an 8. That means that if she opens up to him, she can clear a condition, mark potential, or shift Labels—but since she’s an NPC, only clearing a condition matters. If she had no conditions marked, it would be up to me what she does, based on her moves and her drive. In this case, she has Angry marked, so she’s definitely going to try to clear it—NPCs always do.

“She pauses for a second, with a look of anger on her face, and there’s a moment where she tightens her grip...and then she puts down the sword. ‘Get out of here,’ she says. ‘I’ll do the same. I don’t think I’m as good as you say...but you’re right. I’m better than this.’” I clear her Angry condition.

Dusk and Grasshopper go to a party after a hard day’s fight. Dusk doesn’t normally do this, though, and she’s pretty reluctant to be here. Grasshopper is trying to talk her out of her solitude.

“Don’t separate yourself from us, Dusk. You’re one of us. We like you. Stay here, hang out with me, relax. Please,” says Jenn as Grasshopper.

“Are you trying to **comfort or support** Dusk?” I ask Jenn.

“Definitely,” replies Jenn.

I ask Grace, “Is that enough? Do you think what she said would mean anything to Dusk?”

“Oh yeah,” says Grace. “Grasshopper has Influence over Dusk, so definitely.”

“Cool,” I say, and I ask Jenn to roll to **comfort or support**. She gets a 10! That means if Dusk opens up, Grace can choose to mark potential, clear a condition, or shift her Labels, and Jenn can either clear a condition or add a Team to the pool.

“So, are you going to open up? What’s that look like?” I ask Grace.

“Yep, I think I do. I smile back at Grasshopper, and say, ‘Thank you.’”

To Jenn, I say: “Is that enough for you? Do you feel she’s really opened up?”

“No, not quite yet,” says Jenn.

“Okay. ‘I...I haven’t really had any close friends before. And I don’t know how to act around them. But it means a lot for you to say that to me,’” says Grace.

“Perfect!” says Jenn, and both Grace and Jenn choose their options.

## PIERCE THE MASK

When you **pierce someone's mask** to see the person beneath, roll + Mundane. On a 10+, ask three. On a 7-9, ask one.

- what do you intend to do?
- how could I get your character to \_\_\_\_?
- how could I gain Influence over you?
- what are you really planning?
- what do you want me to do?

**Pierce the mask** is for seeing who someone really is, beneath whatever facade they present. It's not just about literally seeing beneath someone's mask; it's about understanding another person. It requires you to watch someone, observe them, pick up on their body language and their emotions, to get a read on who they really are. You don't have to be talking with them to trigger this move, but it's easy to say you're trying to pierce someone's mask when you're talking to them.

When you pierce someone's mask, you get to ask questions of them, and their player must answer honestly. For NPCs, that means the GM answers honestly. You should ask all your questions at once, but if you must, you can hold questions for as long as you're watching them.

### OPTIONS FOR PIERCE THE MASK

"What are you really planning?" is about long term plans. It's about overarching goals and intent, not immediate intent. The answer could be "Nothing," but most characters have some kind of overarching goal and plan that they can use to answer the question.

"What do you want me to do?" puts a focus on the other person's vision and ideas for you and how they want you to act. You can usually offer to act how they want in exchange for getting something from them.

"What do you intend to do?" is about immediate plans, right here in the moment. It's a very action-focused question, giving you information on what you can expect to happen very soon.

"How could I get your character to \_\_\_\_?" is one of your best ways to get other characters to do what you want in the game. You fill in the blank with whatever action you want them to take. They have to answer honestly, so whatever action or events they describe will genuinely get them to take the actions they've promised. The answer might be "You can't," because the question and what it's asking of them is so not in character, they just wouldn't do what you want them to.

"How could I gain Influence over you?" is one of the most straightforward ways of getting Influence on someone. If you already have Influence over them, the question won't tell you anything; if you don't, this tells you what you need to do to ensure that your words and opinions matter to them. If you do whatever they tell you to do, they should grant you Influence immediately after.



## EXAMPLES OF PIERCE THE MASK

Skysong is talking to Agent Coriolis of A.E.G.I.S. Coriolis wants Skysong to hand over her crystalline ship, but Skysong doesn't trust the agent.

"I want to **pierce her mask**," says Andrea.

"Sure! So you're watching her carefully, trying to read her through her carefully calm mask?" Andrea nods. "Roll for it," I say.

Andrea rolls an 8. She chooses to ask, "What are you really planning?"

"You're right to be suspicious. She's A.E.G.I.S., and they aren't altruistic. You can see it in her eyes, the veiled excitement and greed—she wants to get her hands on your ship so she can take it apart and learn its technologies," I say. "What do you do?"

The Scarlet Songbird is trying to waltz out of a bank with a few bags of cash, and Rex thuds to the ground in front of him, folding his arms. Songbird doesn't even try to run, though—he just keeps walking.

"This is weird, even for this joker," says Matt. "I want to **pierce his mask**, figure out what's going on, before I decide to punch him."

Matt rolls an 11. His first question: "What do you intend to do?"

"He's way cockier than he should be. He intends to get out of here with the cash, sure, but more importantly he intends to show off by taking you down. He must think he has some way to do that, nice and easy."

"Yeah, that's not going to happen. How could I gain Influence over him? It'd be useful for stopping him," asks Matt.

"Compliment him! Play into his arrogance and ego, and he'll start listening. Praise this clever plan of his," I say.

"Ugh. I really, really don't want to do that."

"Well, he's walking past you now, so what do you do?"

## TAKE A POWERFUL BLOW

When you **take a powerful blow**, roll + conditions marked. On a 10+, choose one:

- you must remove yourself from the situation: flee, pass out, etc.
- you lose control of yourself or your powers in a terrible way
- two options from the 7-9 list

On a 7-9, choose one:

- you lash out verbally: provoke a teammate to foolhardy action or take advantage of your Influence to inflict a condition
- you give ground; your opposition gets an opportunity
- you struggle past the pain; mark two conditions

On a miss, you stand strong. Mark potential as normal, and say how you weather the blow.

**Taking a powerful blow** is a move for when you get hit—hard. You’ll never trigger this one intentionally. The GM always tells you when you need to roll it. Most likely, you’ll get smacked during a fight—often as a result of a **directly engage**—and the GM will tell you to **take a powerful blow** to see what happens. You can **take a powerful blow** on an emotional level, too—getting punched with a deep and terrible truth, maybe, or hearing someone you care about utterly rip your heart to shreds.

Rolling + conditions marked means that you count up however many conditions you have marked, and add that number to your roll. Remember, you can’t roll with higher than +4. If you have zero conditions marked, then you roll +0.

## OPTIONS FOR TAKE A POWERFUL BLOW

*You must remove yourself from the situation* means you’re out. You’re knocked from the scene somehow. You get ultimate say in how exactly you’re removed, but you should follow the fiction. If you just got punched in the face, you probably got knocked out. You’ll come back next scene, but all your conditions will still be marked.

*You lose control of yourself or your powers in a terrible way* means the GM gets to tell you how your powers go haywire, cause collateral damage, make the world around you unstable, and all kinds of other bad stuff. Losing control of yourself means that you might say or do something awful. The GM chooses which you do, and what exactly that looks like.

*Lashing out verbally* means you’re thrown off your game, and you release the tension by snapping at someone you care about, usually another teammate. You have to immediately provoke them to take a foolhardy action, or you have to take advantage of your Influence over them to inflict a condition—any condition. Those are the only actions that satisfy “lashing out verbally.”

*Giving ground* means you retreat, or hold back, or otherwise leave an opening for your opposition. The GM decides what it is, but usually it means your opposition can make some move they otherwise would've been blocked from, without you being able to stop them.

*Struggling past the pain* means you mark two conditions of your choice. You hurt, but you keep going.

When you stand strong, you mark potential (just like on any miss), and you get to say exactly how you manage to weather or avoid the blow.

## EXAMPLES FOR TAKE A POWERFUL BLOW

Toro's tussling with the robotic-bodied Shell, the two powerhouses punching it out head-on. Marissa rolls to **directly engage a threat** and gets an 8, ultimately choosing to take something from Shell—in this case, her weapons. But that means they trade blows, so Shell gets a hit in on Toro before Toro rips off Shell's gun arms.

"Toro, you're in close with Shell, so she's having a hard time bringing her cannon-arms to bear, which is good for you—you may be tough, but those things hurt. You see an opening, but it leaves you open too. You manage to sweep past one of her punches to get in close and latch your hands onto her elbows, but she gets a good shot at your sides with her guns, before you rip off either end of her arms, wires and sparks spewing out of the broken limbs. **Take a powerful blow** for her shots," I say to Marissa.

"I've got Angry marked, so I'm rolling +1," says Marissa. She rolls, and gets a miss—a good thing on this move! She gets to mark potential and say how she weathers the blow.

"Oh, it hurts, a ton," says Marissa. "But I just stand there and take it, relying on my invulnerability and focusing on my goals. She's not going to stop me."

Dusk and Vertex are facing Lady Faust, Dusk's nemesis and ancestor, in a standoff, circling each other.

"I want to **provoke her** into revealing a secret—telling me why she's here," says Grace. "If you're so powerful, why all the subtlety? Are you worried I'll stop you?"

"Cool!" I say. "Go ahead and roll." Grace gets snake eyes!

"Oh yeah, she looks at you with a feral grin. 'Oh, you poor child,' she says. 'I wouldn't want to burden you further. After all that you've been through, all that you've done to those around you...all the suffering you caused to your parents.' Her grin grows wider. 'You did know, didn't you? That your status as the portal to another realm caused your mother to go mad?'"

"Oh, man," says Grace. "I did not know that. Oh, man."

"Yep," I say. "I think that means you **take a powerful blow**. The revelation hits you hard." Grace rolls to **take a powerful blow**. Fortunately, she didn't have any conditions marked, so she rolls +0 and gets an 8.

"I choose to lash out at a teammate. Vertex maybe makes a movement, to come closer to me, and I turn and snap at him—'Get away from me! Get back! Get out of here!' I'm provoking him to leave me alone with Lady Faust."

## INFLUENCE

**Influence** is a way of measuring whose words, actions, opinions, and example have meaning to you. If someone has Influence over you, then you care about what they think and say. **By default, adults have Influence over PCs—the young heroes care what the adults tell them.** Over time, they'll be able to take Influence away from the people they don't want to listen to.

Influence is binary, like an on/off switch. You either have Influence over someone or you don't. If you would gain Influence over a PC you already have Influence over, instead of marking any changes to Influence you immediately tell them to shift one of their Labels up and one of their Labels down. If you would gain Influence over an NPC you already have Influence over, instead of marking any changes to Influence you take +1 forward on the next move you make towards them.

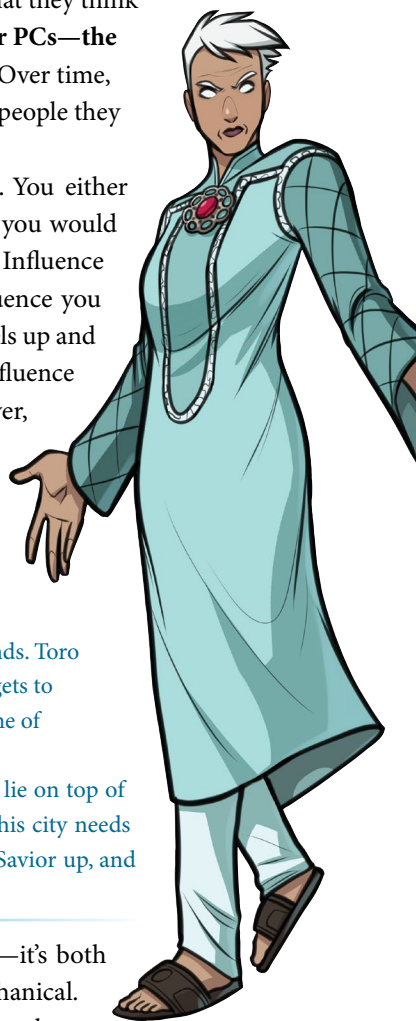
Toro **defends Huma** from a rampaging Cyber-Rex, throwing Huma out of the way. Marissa chooses to take Influence over someone she defends. Toro already has Influence over Huma, so instead she gets to immediately shift one of Huma's Labels up and one of them down.

"Get up, hero," Toro grunts to Huma as they lie on top of each other. "We're not done saving people, and this city needs you." Marissa continues: "I'm going to shift his Savior up, and his Superior down."

Influence works like most things in **MASKS**—it's both descriptive and prescriptive, fictional and mechanical. If a move gives someone else Influence over you, then it means that you care about what they think now. You might hate their guts! But their words still hit home.

If you think that your character cares about what someone else thinks, then any time you want you can give them Influence over you if they didn't already have it. Don't be shy! It's fun to admit that other characters matter to your hero.

You can't just take Influence away from someone, though—it's not that easy to decide that you don't care about what someone thinks. There are only a few ways to take Influence away from someone, and until you get such an opportunity, you're stuck caring about what they think.



## USING INFLUENCE

The most crucial function of Influence is determining whose words affect you and have a chance of shifting your Labels.

**When someone with Influence over you tells you who you are or how the world works**, accept what they say or reject their influence. If you accept what they say, the GM adjusts your Labels accordingly; if you want to keep your Labels as they are, you must reject their Influence.

*Accepting what they say* means you let it hit home. When the GM shifts Labels, they follow the fiction and what was actually said, so the shift flows from what happened—no telling someone “You’re a real threat!” and then choosing to shift Savior up and Danger down. The GM tells you what they’ll shift up and down before you choose to either accept or reject what the other person says. Rejecting Influence is a whole other matter (page 80).

Like **comfort or support**, this move has to reach a certain threshold of intensity and drama to be triggered. It doesn’t go off when someone says, “You’re a jerk!” They either have to want to change how you see yourself or the world, or they’re expressing their views so strongly it can’t help but affect you.

Mantis, Hornet’s mentor, definitely still has Influence over Hornet. Mantis is criticizing Hornet’s most recent performance.

“You could’ve done so much better,” I say as Mantis. “You must do better, if you want to keep doing this. In our line of work, smarts, care, and precision matter more than guts.” I definitely think Mantis is telling Hornet who she is—she’s saying Hornet is too impulsive, but is also smart enough to get the job done.

“Hornet, Mantis is shifting your Labels. If you accept what she’s saying, then you’ll shift up your Superior, and shift down your Danger.”

Most often, this move triggers when NPCs tell you who you are, who to be, or how the world works, but it can work when PCs do it, too. That said, any other move that a PC triggers would supersede this one. If it seems the PC triggers **comfort or support** or provoke, then use those moves instead.

Skysong and Dusk are trying to relax with one of Skysong’s favorite pastimes—partaking of myriad food trucks—and talking.

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” says Andrea as Skysong. “You aren’t like the others on the team, and I was worried that I would never understand you.”

Skysong isn’t provoking or comforting or supporting Dusk here. If Skysong had Influence over Dusk, she’d be telling Dusk who she is—shifting up Freak—but Skysong doesn’t have Influence over Dusk, so nothing happens.

“Oh, really,” says Grace as Dusk. “Dusk is bristling a bit at what Skysong said. ‘I am the one *you’d* never understand. *You’re* the blue alien who barely understood English a few weeks ago.’”

Dusk does have Influence over Skysong. Again, Dusk isn't trying to **provoke** or **comfort or support** Skysong, but her words are definitely telling Skysong who she is.

"Skysong, Dusk is shifting your Labels. Freak up, Mundane down. Do you accept what she says?" I ask Andrea.

"Yeah, I guess so," says Andrea, and she shifts her Labels accordingly.

There are a few other ways to use Influence.

**If you have Influence over someone, you take +1 to all moves towards them.** That means you'd take +1 to **directly engage** them, **unleash your powers** towards them, **defend** them or **defend** against them, **provoke** them, **comfort or support** them, and **pierce their mask**. You also take +1 on any of your playbook moves that target them. You might even take +1 to **assess the situation** if they're the focus of your attention.

Hornet has Influence over Sureshot, so when Hornet tries to provoke Sureshot into coming with her on a mission instead of moping in his room, she takes +1 to do it.

You can also choose to take advantage of your Influence, using it against someone else to produce immediate effect.

When you **take advantage of your Influence** over someone, surrender the Influence you hold over them to choose one:

- give them -2 on a move they just made (after the roll)
- inflict a condition on them
- take an additional +1 on a move targeting them (after the roll)

Surrendering the Influence means you give it up, choosing to take advantage of how they view you—to the point where they change their view of you—in order to immediately get some effect or advantage. You could say something that plays on their fears (inflict a condition on them) or you could sucker them in, pretending you're weak, so when they come at you they're off balance (give them -2 on a move they just made). The key is that you're actively and consciously taking advantage of how they care about you and what you say or think. One way or another, though, once you're done, something between the two of you is severed. At least for now.

Grasshopper has Influence over Rex, and she wants to stop him from charging into battle against the invading beetle aliens.

"Don't do it, Rex! You're not strong enough—they'll kill you! You have to run!" she yells to him, and Jenn, her player, says, "I'm taking advantage of my Influence over Rex. I want to inflict a condition on him—Afraid."

I nod. "So you give up your Influence—you don't have any over Rex anymore—and Rex, mark Afraid."



If you choose to inflict a condition, you get to pick which condition they mark. If you choose to take an additional +1 on a move towards them, it stacks with the original +1 for just having Influence over them.

Hornet is provoking Sureshot, and takes the +1 for her normal Influence, but she still only gets 6. After the roll, Joe decides to take advantage of Hornet's Influence over Sureshot and really pushes it: "Come on. If you ever *expect me* to respect you, then you'll pick up your bow and come with me to stop Carlo." Hornet gives up her Influence over Sureshot, and takes another +1 to the provoke, pushing it up to a hit.

## REJECTING INFLUENCE

When you **reject someone's Influence**, roll. On a hit, you successfully hold to yourself and tune them out. On a 10+, choose two. On a 7-9, choose one.

- clear a condition or mark potential by immediately acting to prove them wrong
- shift one Label up and one Label down, your choice
- cancel their Influence and take +1 forward against them

On a miss, their words hit you hard. Mark a condition, and the GM adjusts your Labels.

Rejecting someone's Influence is the moment that you realize what someone just said to you, and you question whether you should really be listening to them. It's about pulling yourself free of someone else's opinions, for better or worse. You might reject someone else's Influence on your own, unprompted, or you might do it in response to a move of theirs. Either way, they need Influence over you for you to reject it in the first place.

Rejecting someone's Influence requires a flat roll, unmodified by any Labels. But if you have Influence over them, you add that +1 bonus to the move.

On a hit, you don't adjust Labels according to what they said. If you wish, you can choose to shift Labels as you prefer.

If you clear a condition or mark potential, you have to immediately act to prove them wrong—that means taking action that directly opposes what they've said. It's not enough just to tell them they're wrong—you have to act.

If you cancel their Influence, it means they lose their Influence over you. This is one of the few ways you can take Influence away from someone.

Brass Brilliant, former hero and current puppetmaster behind the scenes, is trying to convince Fission that his manipulative schemes are for the good of all of Halcyon City. “Son, I think you’re a hero,” he says to Fission. “I think you’re going to make the right choice here, because I think you know what’s best for us all. Am I right?” Fission, he’s definitely trying to shift up your Savior and shift down your Danger. Do you accept it?” I ask.

“Heck no!” says Sarah. “I reject his Influence!” She rolls a 12.

“I think I’m a hero, too. And I think being a hero right now means kicking your butt,” says Sarah as Fission. “I shift up my Danger, shift down my Savior, then I fling myself at his machinery, start tearing them to pieces. Does that work to immediately prove him wrong?”

“Considering he wanted you to join him in his weird crusade? Yeah, breaking his stuff counts. Mark potential.”

On a miss, your Labels most likely shift in exactly the way you tried to resist, and you have to mark a condition of your choice. Despite your best efforts to reject their words, they hit home and messed with your self-image.

Huma is in an argument with his dad. I say, as the older Huma, “You shouldn’t be on that team. They make you reckless.” He’s telling you you’re dangerous, Huma. Raise Danger, lower Savior. Do you accept it?” I ask.

“Nope,” says Rich. “I’m going to reject. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about, Dad. Things have changed, and your ways are out of date.’”

Rich rolls to reject the older Huma’s Influence, and gets a miss.

“Yeah, your dad just looks at you with those sad, ‘Oh, son, you just don’t get it,’ eyes. ‘The fact that you think so just means you’re not ready to be Huma,’ he says. Shift up your Danger and lower your Savior and mark a condition.”

You can reject someone’s Influence instead of accepting their words when they try to tell you who you are or how the world works. You can also reject their Influence any time they try to affect you and you resist. When they **comfort or support** you and you don’t open up to them, when they provoke you but you hold back... You need to take some action in the fiction to show your rejection—throwing water in their face, arguing with them, staying quiet and unresponsive.

## TEAM MOVES

**Team** is a resource that the team of young superheroes can use to help each other out. It represents their unity, their connection, and their coordination, but it's pretty intangible—a squad of superheroes with a lot of Team doesn't look different, but they're much more prepared to work together!

### USING TEAM

Anyone on the team can spend a Team out of the pool to give a teammate +1 on a move, after the roll. To do this, the spender has to be able to actually help—if you're in a completely different place from your teammate, then you can't spend Team to help, unless it makes sense in the fiction (a telepathic connection, maybe).

Multiple teammates can spend Team from the pool to help on the same roll—even low rolls can be turned into hits when the whole group pitches in and there's enough Team in the pool. But each teammate can only spend one Team out of the pool for any single roll, and they still have to be able to actually help in the fiction.

Toro charges at Blood Opal, and the two start fighting hand to hand, Blood Opal striking with her sword and Toro punching with her fists. Marissa rolls for Toro to **directly engage a threat**, and gets 5 total—a miss.

"I want to help," says Grace. "I summon up a brief shadow construct, just something to grab her ankle and throw her off balance."

"I'm not sure you can help," I say. "You're stuck on the other end of the street fighting against Aquaria, aren't you? You've got your hands full."

"What about me?" says Mark. "Sureshot can fire an arrow into the conflict so Blood Opal has to deflect it at just the right moment."

"Yeah, that's great! You were just firing arrows from on top of the nearby building, you can definitely help like that. Spend a Team out of the pool."

That raises Marissa's roll to a 6. But it's still a miss.

"Am I there yet? Have I arrived?" asks Sarah. "I've been flying there as fast as I can."

"Oh yeah, you're there now."

"Awesome! I fly straight at Blood Opal from the opposite direction of Sureshot's arrow. This'll help keep her off balance so Toro can get that perfect hit."

"Excellent! Spend another Team out of the pool, Sarah." Now Marissa's roll is 7—a hit!

NPCs who are part of the team, whether temporarily or permanently, can also help. Players can spend Team from the pool on behalf of those NPCs. The players still have to spend one Team per NPC who helps, and the NPCs still have to be fictionally capable of helping. If the GM thinks the NPC wouldn't help, then they won't.

## SPENDING TEAM SELFISHLY

PC team members can also spend Team to act selfishly.

When you **act selfishly**, say how your actions ignore or insult your teammates, remove one Team from the pool, and shift one Label up and one Label down, your choice. You can use this option after rolling to alter the Label you're rolling with.

Because you can act selfishly after you roll, this can boost a miss up to a hit, or a partial hit up to a full hit, by changing the Label you rolled with. All you have to do is spend the Team from the pool and describe your character doing something that ignores or insults your teammates.

Generally, your teammates can determine whether they feel ignored or insulted by the selfish action, but the GM can push on it if it seems appropriate. Acting selfishly may save you when you can't be helped by anybody else, but it has a cost you can't avoid.

Vertex is **unleashing his powers** to create illusions, to try to distract Arcknife from attacking him. He's on his own, too; no teammates around to help. He rolls, and he gets a 6...not enough for a hit.

"Crud! And no one can help?" Jack asks.

"Nope. What do you do?"

"Y'know what? I'm going to make the illusions look exactly like my teammates. I'm going to have them taunt him, so he'll chase after them, and then once he sees the real ones, he'll leave me alone," says Jack. "I'm acting selfishly, spending a Team out of the pool to shift my Freak up and my Savior down, so I get that extra +1 I need for a hit."

"What do you think? Is that selfish enough? Do you feel insulted or ignored?" I ask the other teammates.

"Definitely," says Marissa. "You jerk."

I have Jack spend the Team and shift his Labels.

## ADDING TEAM TO THE POOL

The primary way to generate Team in the pool is by entering battle against a dangerous foe as a team.

When you **enter battle against a dangerous foe as a team**, add two to the Team pool.

- If the leader has Influence over every teammate, add another Team.
- If everyone has the same purpose in the fight, add another Team.
- If any team member mistrusts the leader or the team, remove a Team.
- If your team is ill-prepared or off-balance, remove a Team.

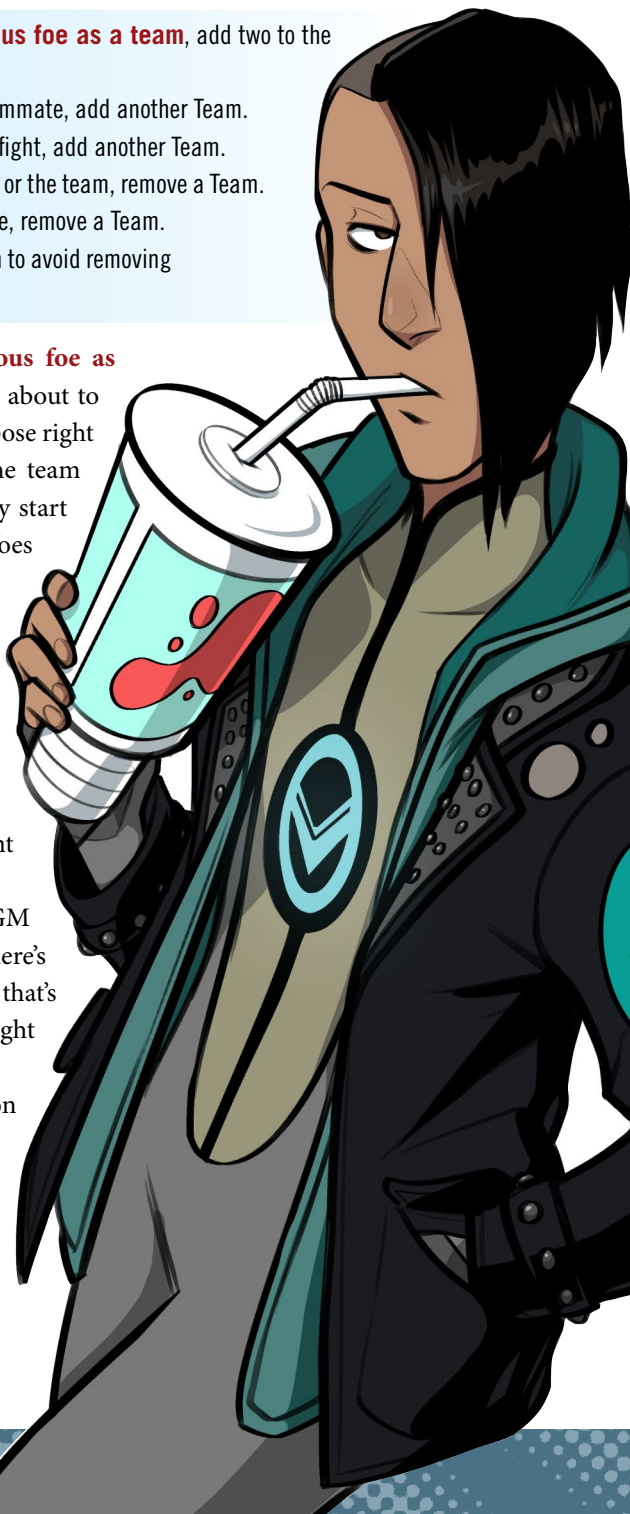
The leader of the team can mark a condition to avoid removing a Team from the pool.

**Entering battle against a dangerous foe as a team** is the moment when the team's about to start fighting. You can think of it as the pose right before the fight; the moment when the team comes up with a plan, right before they start the punching; or the very split second foes burst in, and the team starts to react.

If someone's alone, they can't trigger this move—they're not entering battle as a team. If the team isn't actually going up against a dangerous foe, they can't trigger this move. "Dangerous foe" should be interpreted liberally; going up against a horrible monster or a giant meteor can both trigger this move.

When you trigger this move, the GM asks the team who the leader is. If there's dissent, the GM makes the final call, but that's a good sign that team members might mistrust the leader or the team.

Then run through each criterion on the move. "Teammates" are anyone on the team who might be able to spend Team out of the pool to help—so if the leader doesn't have Influence over all those characters, then they don't get the extra Team in the pool for that criterion.



To determine if everyone has the same purpose in the fight, the GM asks the leader what their purpose in the fight is, and then every other teammate gets to say if they share the same purpose. Mild variation is fine—the difference between “Beat the bad guys” and “Beat Vortex” is negligible. But the difference between “Beat Vortex” and “Save my mom” is significant and means that the team doesn’t get the extra Team in the pool for that criterion.

Every team member gets to say whether they mistrust the leader or the team—that’s their decision, but the GM can ask clarifying questions.

The GM is the final arbiter of whether the team is ill-prepared or off-balance, and it’s based entirely on the fiction. If the team is at all expecting this fight, there’s a good chance they aren’t ill-prepared or off-balance; then again, if the team is in the midst of plenty of internal conflicts, or they’re missing a clear understanding of their foes’ intent or abilities, then they might be ill-prepared or off-balance, even if they know the fight is coming.

The team of Grasshopper, Hornet, Huma, and Skysong is flying on Skysong’s crystalline ship—they’re going to try to free Sureshot from Brass Brilliant’s clutches. But Brass is holding Sureshot in an underground base with plenty of goons there. When they leave the ship, they have a moment where they share a look, and consult one last time on what the plan is. Huma tells everyone the plan is to go in quietly.

“Okay, great! It sounds to me like you’re entering battle against a dangerous foe as a team. So. Who’s your leader?” I ask.

“Well, Hornet, normally,” says Joe. “But I think it’s Huma in this case.”

“Agreed. Okay, so first you add two Team to the pool. Then, if the leader has Influence over everyone on the Team, you add another.”

“I don’t. This is why I shouldn’t be the leader!” says Rich.

“Heh. Next criterion—does everybody have the same purpose? Huma, what’s your purpose in the fight?”

“I’m here to free Sureshot, first and foremost,” says Rich.

“Is that everybody’s purpose?” I ask.

Joe shakes his head. “Nope, my purpose is to take down Brass Brilliant.”

“Okay then, no extra Team for that criterion. Does anybody mistrust the leader or the team? Skysong? Hornet?”

“Nah,” says Andrea. “I don’t mistrust Huma, I just don’t particularly listen to him.”

“Cool. And finally, I don’t think you’re off-balance or ill-prepared—you know what you’re getting into. So that’s it! You stand outside the doors to the underground base. What do you do?”





The Team pool can reset when you shift the fiction forward some significant period of time.

Whenever time passes, the GM empties the Team pool and restores it to one Team.

“Time passing” isn’t about some specific amount of time going by. It’s about a fictional reset, like when there’s a time jump to leap ahead in the story, creating a clear divide in the story. It’s when a TV show episode ends and the next one picks up weeks later, or when a comic book has the little narrative bubble saying “One month later...” Time passing naturally over the course of play won’t trigger this move—the GM doesn’t simply empty the Team pool because things move forward.

Essentially, if you ever come to the close of events and shift them forward (most likely by a week or more) to get to the next exciting thing, then the GM resets the Team pool to one.

## PLAYBOOK TEAM MOVES

Each playbook has two moves listed under the section “Team Moves.” These are always based on the same two triggers: *When you share a triumphant celebration with someone* and *When you share a weakness or vulnerability with someone*. The specifics of what happens after the trigger vary with each playbook.

These moves demonstrate how your playbook leads you to connect to and engage with other people in moments of high drama. You’ll probably use them most often with teammates, although they trigger regardless of whom you share the moment with. When you trigger either one, even though multiple people might technically be in the room, you have to choose who in particular you’re most sharing with.

Sharing a triumphant celebration should be more than just high-fives after the fight. The idea is that you’re excited, you’re happy, and you’re inviting someone to share in your happiness and joy in the moment. It could be a meaningful hug or kiss, a congratulatory set of compliments, or a shared party or drink.

Sharing a weakness or vulnerability is letting someone else see the most secret and vulnerable parts of yourself. You’re telling someone your worst fears or memories, your deepest desires, your greatest insecurities. You could show it to them, or you could tell them—either way, so long as you’re sharing it, the move triggers.

## CONDITIONS

**Conditions** are negative emotional states that beset the characters in your story. Having a condition marked means that your character is experiencing that emotion—anger, or fear, or insecurity, or whatever. You're always in charge of how your character is played; you can choose to play your character as calm and dispassionate, even with Angry marked. But that means you're holding your anger inside, and it still impacts your actions as the story progresses.

## EFFECTS AND MARKING CONDITIONS

Conditions impact and interfere with your ability to take action. Each condition gives you an ongoing -2 to certain moves. Remember that the lowest modifier you can roll a move with is -3.

When a move tells you to mark a condition, unless it says otherwise, mark any condition you choose. Sometimes the GM tells you a specific condition to mark, especially after a hard move. If you need to mark a condition and all conditions are already marked, you're taken out. You lose consciousness or flee the scene—one way or another, you cannot continue there.

The conditions and their associated penalties are:

- If you're Angry, take -2 to **comfort or support someone** or **pierce the mask**.
- If you're Afraid, take -2 to **directly engage**.
- If you're Guilty, take -2 to **provoke someone** or **assess the situation**.
- If you're Hopeless, take -2 to **unleash your powers**.
- If you're Insecure, take -2 to **defend** or **reject others' Influence**.

## CLEARING CONDITIONS

Some of the basic moves help you clear conditions—**comfort or support** and defend, in particular. But the most straightforward way to clear conditions is to take a particular action to relieve that emotional state. The action varies depending on the specific condition.

At the end of any scene in which you take the corresponding action, clear that condition.

- To clear Angry, hurt someone or break something important.
- To clear Afraid, run from something difficult.
- To clear Guilty, make a sacrifice to absolve your guilt.
- To clear Hopeless, fling yourself into easy relief.
- To clear Insecure, take foolhardy action without talking to your team.

Clearing Angry requires you to vent your anger, either on someone or on something. It's not enough to just punch a bag—you have to take your anger out on someone, or something *important*. What's important is different for every character, but the GM should ask if and why an object is important when the Angry character breaks it. Hurting someone doesn't necessarily mean hurting them physically—yelling at them and hurting their feelings would do the trick, too.

Clearing Afraid requires you to avoid or flee from a complicated, dangerous, or problematic situation. That could mean anything from running away from a villain to fleeing the room when someone wants to have a conversation about your recent actions. The key is avoidance—instead of confronting something, you're running from it.

Clearing Guilty requires you to pay some cost on behalf of others, those you feel you've wronged or let down. It doesn't require them to actually absolve you of your guilt—just so long as you pay a price in an attempt to redeem yourself. This might be anything from standing alone against a dangerous villain so your teammates can escape to agreeing to follow the older heroes' rules even when it's easier not to.

Clearing Hopeless requires you to seek the easiest and quickest way to relieve your feelings. Most likely, that means making stupid decisions in pursuit of stupid fun. It could be anything from finding some cheap booze and getting drunk to making out with the wrong person.

Clearing Insecure means following your worst, most impulsive instincts without consulting anybody first. You feel doubtful of your own abilities, so you're proving yourself by following your own plan without talking to anyone first. That could be anything from deciding to attack the bad guy while the rest of your team waits in stealth to agreeing to give up the crucial component

for the death ray in exchange for escaping right now, all without anyone else's input.

Remember that even if you take the action, you only clear the condition at the end of the scene. You can clear multiple conditions in one scene, but you continue to be affected by the penalty for the entirety of the scene.

## **LABEL SHIFTING AND CONDITIONS**

**Shifting a Label** means that your view of yourself is changing. You see yourself more as the Label you shift up, less as the Label you shift down.

If you ever need to shift a Label and can't (because the Label is at +3 and would shift up, or is at -2 and would shift down), you must mark a condition, GM's choice. The entire Label shift doesn't occur—you shift no Label either up or down.

Huma's dad is actually praising him, telling him that he's a great hero, the savior the city needs—but Huma's Savior is already at +3. If Huma accepts his dad's words, then his Savior would shift up, but it can't. Instead, Huma marks a condition—I tell Rich to mark Insecure, because of all the pressure his dad is putting on him.



## POTENTIAL

Every time you roll a miss on any move, you mark **potential**—your character is growing fully into their self and what they can do. Once you've marked five potential, you can take one of your advances, checking that option off the list.

The advancement list is divided into two sections. You can only take advances from the lower section once you've taken five from the top section. For more on advancement, see *THE FUTURE* page 113.

## SESSION MOVES

There are two session moves that happen for every session you play. One happens when you start playing, and one happens when you're finishing up.

At the start of every session, the GM adds one Team to the pool.

At the end of every session, choose one:

- Grow closer to the team. Explain who made you feel welcome; give Influence to that character and clear a condition or mark potential.
- Grow into your own image of yourself. Explain how you see yourself and why; shift one Label up and another down.
- Grow away from the team. Explain why you feel detached. Take Influence over you away from another character.

The start of session move happens only once, and is there just to get some Team in the pool for the players to spend.

Every player performs the end of session move, one at a time. It's entirely their own choice which end of session move they make. You should look at what happened over the session to determine exactly which choice is right, but it's likely a few different options will make sense. Ultimately, it's your call which option you choose.

Growing closer to the team means you care more about your fellow teammates and you're more connected to them than you were before. If you feel like the bond between you and the other PCs grew, then you probably grew closer to the team. You ultimately need to pick one teammate in particular you feel you grew closer to, even if you feel like you grew closer to the whole group—choose the person you feel you had the greatest bond with over the course of the session. They get Influence over you, and all the rules apply—if they already have Influence over you, they immediately shift one of your Labels up and one down, without you being able to reject their Influence. In turn, you get to clear any marked condition of your choice, or mark potential. If they shift your Labels, they shouldn't shift any Labels that will cause you to mark

a condition—it's the end of the session, and characters shouldn't be marking conditions right before you stop playing.

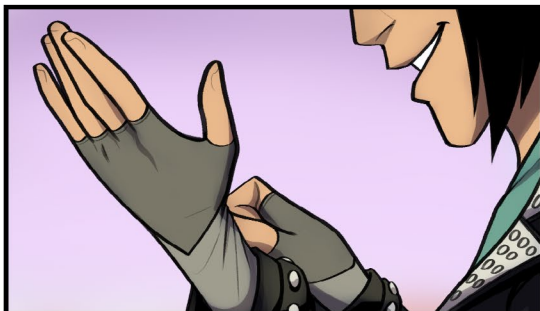
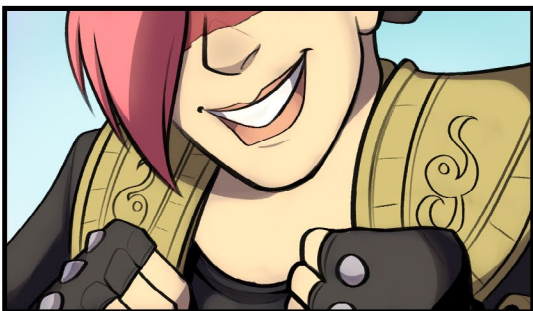
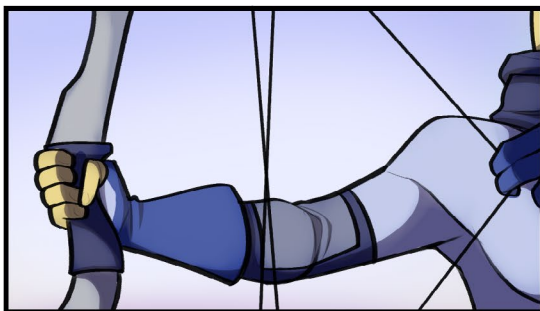
Growing into your own image of yourself means you're becoming more of how you see your adult self. It means you're becoming closer to what you want to be, or at the very least what you think you will be. It's less about your interactions with any other character, and more about you becoming an independent and completed person on your own. Explain to the group exactly what you see yourself becoming and how that was borne out over the course of the session, and then you get to choose one of your own Labels to shift up and one to shift down.

Growing away from the team means you drifted away from your teammates and friends. Maybe you had a fight with them, or actively disagreed with them...but maybe you just diverged and went different ways. You indicate that you no longer care about the words or opinions of a teammate in the same way, and take away their Influence over you. This is one of the few ways you can take Influence over you away from another character.

## **CUSTOM MOVES**

In addition to the moves listed here—and the moves specifically attached to each playbook—you might also use **custom moves** in your sessions. Each custom move is crafted by your GM to handle a unique situation. Like all moves, custom moves have triggers and they're only triggered by actions in the fiction. See CUSTOM MOVES page 197 for more on creating and expanding on moves with your own custom work.





# CHAPTER 5: THE MASKS

## THE BEACON

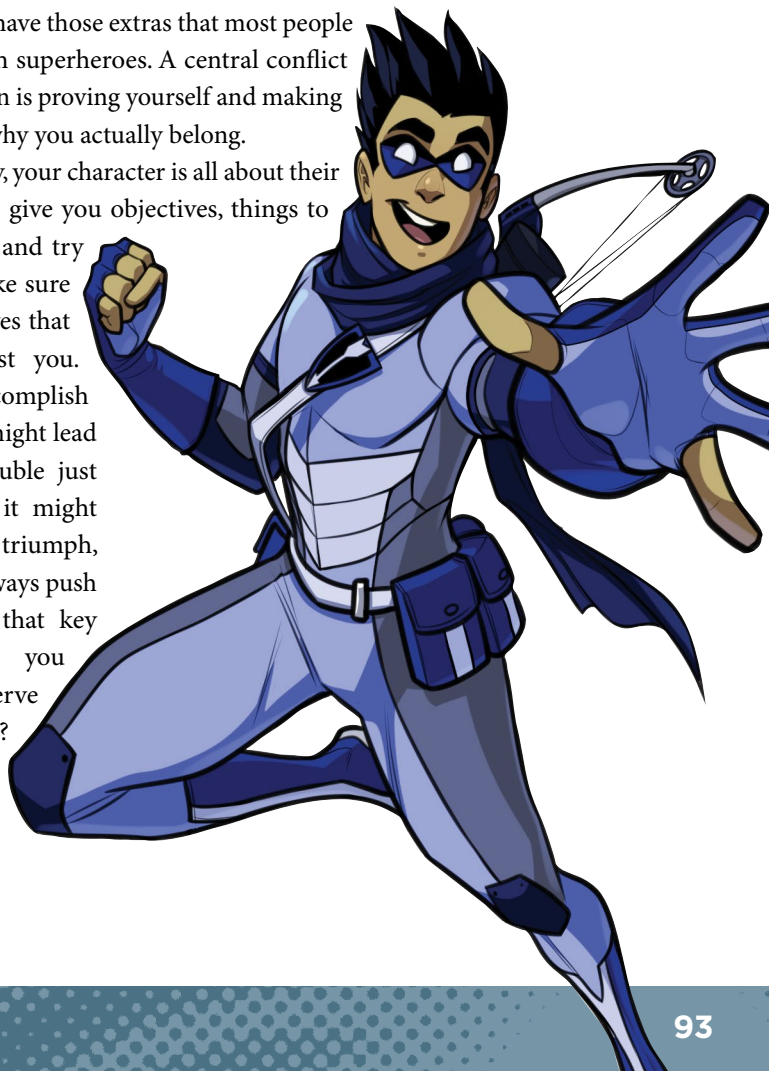
You don't have to do this. You could probably have a safe, decent, simple life. It'd be nice, but...come on. Superpowers! Aliens! Wizards! Time travel! You're out of your depth, but who cares? This is awesome. Everybody should try it.

### PLAYING THE BEACON

Hopeful, excited, understanding, human. The Beacon is the most directly mortal and least strange of all the playbooks. They haven't been shaped by anything else—they could choose to leave this life behind, if they wanted. Which is exactly the point. They're here because they *want* to be here. They *want* to do this. And that gives them a purity compared to the other characters.

You can expect NPCs to tell you that you don't really belong here. After all, you *don't* have those extras that most people associate with superheroes. A central conflict for the Beacon is proving yourself and making the case for why you actually belong.

Ultimately, your character is all about their drives. Those give you objectives, things to aim towards and try to do, so make sure you pick drives that really interest you. Trying to accomplish your drives might lead you into trouble just as much as it might lead you to triumph, but they'll always push you toward that key conflict—do you actually deserve to be here? And that's exactly what you want.



## NOTES ON YOUR MOVES AND EXTRAS

**No powers and not nearly enough training** requires you to pay attention to gear. Most other characters only care about stuff like ray guns and special devices when they're immediately dangerous, but you should be listening for cool stuff you can pick up whenever possible. Assessing the situation and **Straight. Up. Creepin'** are great ways to flag cool stuff you can use.

**Pretty much a superhero** is your chance to control NPCs' first impressions of you. It only triggers when you think the other character is actually important, and it lets you frame how they see you—though the GM can complicate it on 7-9. Whatever Label you pick is the one they reflect back at you through their Influence.

**Suck it, Domitian** requires you to be dramatically under fire—that means the odds are against you, or you're up against some terrifying threat. If the situation's well in hand, chances are you're not dramatically under fire. Of course, you're often underpowered compared to your opposition, so it shouldn't be too hard to get there.

Your **drives** work almost like an alternate advancement track—even if you aren't there yet on your normal advances, when they're all gone you have to change playbooks, retire, or become a paragon. If you retire or become a paragon, your character becomes an NPC. If you change playbooks, mark that advance like normal, and switch your character to the new playbook.

## INSPIRATION FOR THE BEACON

Kate Bishop, **YOUNG AVENGERS** and **HAWKEYE**

Artemis and Arrowette, **YOUNG JUSTICE** cartoon and comic (respectively)

Doug Ramsey, **THE NEW MUTANTS**

Kamala Khan, **MS. MARVEL**

Gertrude Yorkes, **RUNAWAYS**

Felicity Smoak, **ARROW** (TV show)

Stephanie Brown (Spoiler), **DETECTIVE COMICS**

## THE BULL

You're big, strong, and tough. You know what fighting really is, and you're good at it. Sure...you've got a soft side, too. But you only show that to the people you care about most. Everybody else? They can eat your fist.

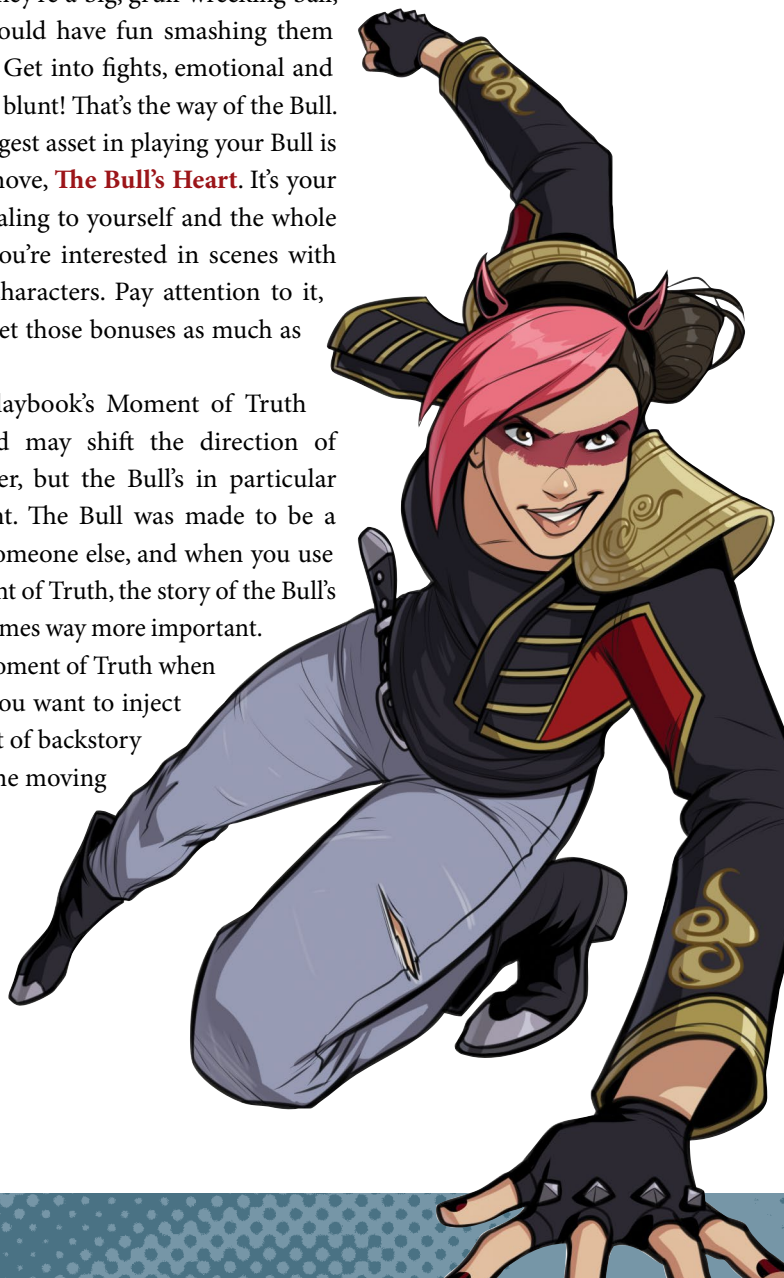
### PLAYING THE BULL

Gruff, tough, passionate, big-hearted. The Bull's a heavy hitter with big feelings. They get into a lot of fights, both interpersonal and superheroic, especially thanks to their signature move, **The Bull's Heart**. A lot of the time, they'll be Angry. They're a big, gruff wrecking ball, and you should have fun smashing them into things. Get into fights, emotional and physical! Be blunt! That's the way of the Bull.

Your biggest asset in playing your Bull is your core move, **The Bull's Heart**. It's your way of signaling to yourself and the whole table that you're interested in scenes with particular characters. Pay attention to it, and try to get those bonuses as much as possible.

Every playbook's Moment of Truth matters and may shift the direction of the character, but the Bull's in particular is significant. The Bull was made to be a fighter by someone else, and when you use your Moment of Truth, the story of the Bull's origins becomes way more important.

Use your Moment of Truth when you know you want to inject that element of backstory into the game moving forward.



## NOTES ON YOUR MOVES AND EXTRAS

You can change the subjects of **The Bull's Heart** pretty easily, which lets you make sure it's always pointed at characters you're interested in engaging. Other PCs are usually more interesting sources of drama and conflict than NPCs, but focus on the character relationships you find most interesting. If you aren't spending time pursuing either your rivalry or your love, then you're missing out.

Also, keep in mind that your love doesn't have to be a romantic love, and your rival doesn't have to be hated. They absolutely can be if that's what you want! But they don't have to be so extreme. Your rival could be your closest friend whom you're determined to surpass. Your love might be someone who's like your younger sibling, and you keep them safe at all costs. Interpret those terms liberally—that's why **The Bull's Heart** roles, like Friend, still make sense. You would **comfort or support** your rival if they're not just an enemy.

For **Punch everyone**, charging into a fight without hedging your bets means dashing into danger without any thought to your own safety or the safety of others. It needs to be meaningful that you aren't hedging your bets or thinking about what you're doing. Often, that means you aren't participating in the move to generate Team for the fight.

**There when it matters** allows you to appear in a scene you weren't previously in—just work with the GM to explain how you got there so quickly. It could be anything from you just happening to be in the area to you actively tailing the person you protect.

## INSPIRATION FOR THE BULL

Ms. America Chavez, **YOUNG AVENGERS**

Superboy, **YOUNG JUSTICE**

X-23, **X-MEN**

Molly Hayes, **RUNAWAYS**

Hazmat, **AVENGERS ACADEMY**



## THE DELINQUENT

You've got these cool powers. But everyone keeps telling you how to use 'em. You know what they need? Someone to give them trouble, to make sure they don't always get their way.

And hey! You're the perfect hero to do it.

### PLAYING THE DELINQUENT

Rebellious, joking, attention-seeking, manipulative. The Delinquent is the class clown, or the punk with the stash of weed, or the rebel without a cause. They're the spoiler, most often just because they can be more than out of any particular desire. They trick other people, they mess with people, they cause problems. That said, the Delinquent isn't an excuse to just be an annoying jerk. They cause trouble because it's how they get attention, and it's how they deal with problems—but that doesn't mean they're without deeper feelings or goals that make them more human.

The Delinquent veers between being selfish and being a proud member of the team, and their moves point them in that direction.

**Mary Contrary** and **I don't care**

**what you think!** are both about messing with and ignoring the words of others, especially your teammates, while **Troublemaker** is about helping your team (albeit in destructive ways), and **Team?**

**What team?** is about both!

The Delinquent bounces back and forth over that line, over and over, so play in that space and have fun with it. Remember always that, ultimately, you're part of this team for a reason—you wanted to be here—so simply ditching them all is never an option. (Not least because it means your character would probably retire!)





The Delinquent works best by sticking close to teammates, one way or another, as much as possible. Whether you're giving them grief, getting to know them better, or even revealing your true self, your story is ultimately about how you relate to your closest compatriots. You're the companion, the helper, the provocateur, and you make other characters' lives interesting with your presence. Own it!

## NOTES ON YOUR MOVES AND EXTRAS

For **Criminal mind**, you still get +1 ongoing to act on the answers to those questions, just like for a normal **assess the situation** move.

For **Are you watching closely?**, you're assumed not to get any of the options that you don't choose. That means if you don't choose "You confuse them for some time," then your trick may not last very long. If you don't choose "You avoid further entanglement," then you can assume someone's going to check up on you later about that deception. Getting an opportunity means you get a chance you might not have had otherwise to take action, and exposing a weakness or flaw means you learn something you might be able to exploit.

## INSPIRATION FOR THE DELINQUENT

Quentin Quire, **WOLVERINE AND THE X-MEN**

Kid Loki, **YOUNG AVENGERS**

Chase Stein, **RUNAWAYS**

Arsenal, **YOUNG JUSTICE**

Striker, **AVENGERS ACADEMY**

## THE DOOMED

Something about your powers dooms you. It's just a matter of time before your doom comes for you. Until then, though...you've got a nemesis who needs fighting and a world that needs saving. After all, it's better to burn out than fade away...

## PLAYING THE DOOMED

Tragic, melodramatic, powerful, driven. The Doomed is a character best served by long-term play, even though their story is about time pressure and not knowing how long they have left. They're the only character who starts with a clear-cut enemy—their nemesis—and a dangerous timer on their character's lifespan. They're also the only character that explicitly faces death by the end of their story. As a result, adding a Doomed to your campaign inherently adds a level of drama, gloom, and danger to your game—death, while not a constant element, is now on the table.

If you're playing the Doomed, you may feel a desire to avoid using your doomsigns or to stay away from the triggers that advance your doom track. Don't! Embrace those pieces of your character. Filling your doom track gives you doomsigns; doomsigns give you more power; and that power demands a purpose. By default, you can rely on your nemesis to provide you with a purpose, something to strive against, but you can aim for other things, too. Be ready to pay a lot of costs along the way to accomplishing your goals, whether through your sanctuary or other means.



## NOTES ON YOUR MOVES AND EXTRAS

When you pick the two triggers that bring your doom closer, pick actions you're interested in undertaking, not things you're interested in avoiding. The GM will help stay alert for when you bring your doom closer, but you're primarily in charge of watching for the triggers—so make sure you're invested in them.

For **Infinite Powers**, you can use an ability from any playbook—meaning, one of the abilities listed at the front of each playbook, like acrobatics or telekinesis. This doomsign gives you temporary access to new powers, so you can **unleash your powers** or **directly engage** in new ways.

For **Portal**, you can appear in a scene with any one other character you name—whoever else is there is down to the fiction and the GM's choice.

The last doomsign, “Your doom arrives; confront it and perish,” triggers the end of your Doomed's story. It means that whatever their doom is at that point finally arrives, and they can't overcome it. They're lost to it. The full end may not happen instantaneously, but it should happen by the end of the session (or the next) in which the Doomed marks this final doomsign. Once it's marked, nothing can stop the Doomed from perishing.

When you **call on the resources of your sanctuary to solve a problem**, those resources should dictate the conditions the GM imposes on you. Often, you'll have to add some additional resource to your sanctuary to get the job done. If your sanctuary is *intricately tied with your doom*, then almost always using it to solve a problem should require you to mark your doom track.

When you take the advance “Clear a doomsign,” you erase one marked doomsign. That means you have to fill your doom track again to retake it. You lose access to one of your powers, but you delay the arrival of your final doom.

When you take the advance “Confront your doom on your terms; if you survive, change playbooks,” it means you're forcing a confrontation with your doom...but you get to define the terms. You might confront your doom and overcome it purely over the course of play—in which case, the GM might say it's appropriate that you simply mark off this advance and change playbooks. But if you select this advance, you choose to force the issue. You aren't guaranteed to survive that final confrontation—only to have a chance at victory.

## INSPIRATIONS FOR THE DOOMED

Veil, **AVENGERS ACADEMY**

Raven, **TEEN TITANS**

Rachel Summers, **X-MEN**

Monster Girl, **INVINCIBLE**

Velocidad, **GENERATION HOPE**

## THE JANUS

Wake up. Breakfast. School. Work. Homework. Sleep. Repeat. It burns you up, being stuck in this life, unable to make a real difference. That is...until you put on the mask. And then, you can be someone else: a hero.

### PLAYING THE JANUS

Stressed, responsible, dual, heroic. The Janus is two people in one, and their struggle is about balancing that paradox.

You have your regular life and all its responsibilities on one side, and your superheroic life and all its madness on the other. And ultimately, you don't want to give up either one—but they both pull and pull at you, building up the tension until you feel like you're going to snap. That's okay, though. Your story's all about that tension, and overcoming it, especially thanks to the people around you. Cultivate relationships with NPCs and PCs—they're all important to your overarching story.

Pay close attention to your mask.

When do you wear it and when do you take it off? Who knows about your secret identity and who doesn't? For you, more than any other playbook, it matters which overt guise you're in, which mask you're wearing, and which face you're presenting to the outside world.

### NOTES ON YOUR MOVES AND EXTRAS

For **The Mask**, affirming your secret or masked identity means doing something that firmly plants you in that role. Leaving your



teammates to go save your sister might affirm you as your secret identity, even while you're still wearing your mask. Doing the opposite, going off to fight the Blue Hydra instead of rescuing your sister from the Centipede, might affirm you in your masked role. Affirming your identity should always be a meaningful choice or action in the fiction, something with ramifications—good or bad—moving forward.

For **Game face**, whether or not you made progress towards your goal is ultimately down to the GM's discretion.

For **I am what you see**, you can still reject the Label they try to impose on you—and you'll probably have to if you don't accept it.

For **Mild-mannered**, if they buy your facade you're in no immediate danger of being found out. If you're still under observation, it means that if you do anything too problematic, you're likely to get into trouble—they're watching you. If you leave something incriminating, it means that later you can expect someone to put two and two together and come to find you. If you have to make a fool of yourself, you can expect NPCs to use their Influence to affect how you see yourself—and probably inflict a condition.

**I'll save you** is ultimately a move for making sure the people from your civilian life are safe at critical moments—though it may come at some cost to you.

For **Dangerous web**, you don't actually have to have put the trap in earlier—when you trigger the move, it can be the first time that you've mentioned setting the trap. It has to fit the fiction—if there's no way you possibly could have left a trap, then you can't trigger the move.

For your **Secret Identity**, the GM tells you what opportunity or advantage you receive on a hit. When you lapse on an obligation, that means you can expect to get trouble from it in the near future. When your obligations come back to bite you in the butt, they'll make your life more complicated almost immediately.

## INSPIRATIONS FOR THE JANUS

Miles Morales, **ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN**

Blue Beetle (Jaime Reyes), **YOUNG JUSTICE**

Kamala Khan, **MS. MARVEL**

Thor (Jane Foster), **THOR**

Batgirl (Barbara Gordon), **BATGIRL**

## THE LEGACY

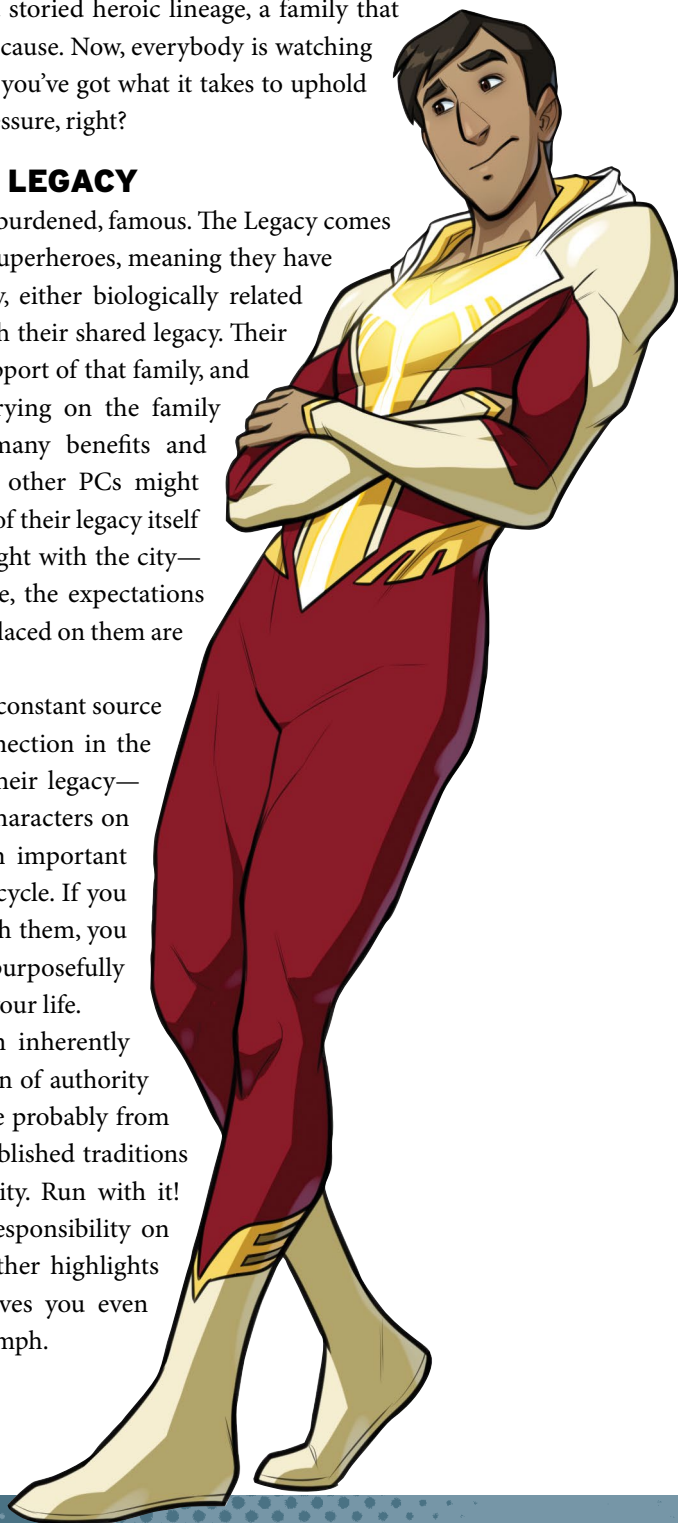
You're the latest in a storied heroic lineage, a family that shares a name and a cause. Now, everybody is watching and waiting to see if you've got what it takes to uphold that tradition. No pressure, right?

### PLAYING THE LEGACY

Capable, impressive, burdened, famous. The Legacy comes from a long line of superheroes, meaning they have a superheroic family, either biologically related or connected through their shared legacy. Their story is about the support of that family, and the pressure of carrying on the family name. They have many benefits and advantages that the other PCs might not have—the name of their legacy itself probably carries weight with the city—but at the same time, the expectations and responsibilities placed on them are even higher.

The Legacy has a constant source of support and connection in the other members of their legacy—returning to those characters on a regular basis is an important part of the Legacy's cycle. If you don't spend time with them, you can expect them to purposefully force their way into your life.

The Legacy often inherently pushes into a position of authority on the team—they're probably from one of the most established traditions of heroism in the city. Run with it! Putting still more responsibility on the Legacy only further highlights your issues—and gives you even more chances to triumph.





## NOTES ON YOUR MOVES AND EXTRAS

**Words of the past** lets you ask members of your legacy for input on a problem.

**The legacy matters** is about taking and giving Influence to members of your legacy, and allowing yourself to be shaped by their words and opinions. Both are great moves to push you toward interacting with your legacy on a regular basis.

**Never give up, never surrender** only triggers when you get hit by someone far stronger than you. Choosing “You get an opportunity or opening against your attacker” means the GM tells you what opportunity or opening you receive, suited to the situation. Choosing to keep your attacker’s attention ensures they won’t stop trying to attack you after they notice how hardy you are—you can continue defending others by sacrificing yourself.

**Symbol of authority** should be aimed pretty specifically when you trigger it. You should be clear about the specific person or group of people you’re using it on—and the GM has final say over whether it makes sense that you’re using the move on a larger group. Generally speaking, you can only use **Symbol of authority** on a group that’s unified and not differentiated from each other.

The move only triggers when the person you command actually recognizes and understands your authority. If you tell a group of unintelligent robots—or aliens who’ve never heard of your legacy—that they must stop what they’re doing, the move won’t trigger. It still triggers on enemies who know of you, but hate your legacy—they recognize your authority, even if they loathe it and choose to ignore it as much as possible.

You also might give them an order that lines up with one of the options on the list—for instance, ordering them to get out of your way. That’s fine, and it still comes down to the GM’s choice to say exactly which option they choose.

Your legacy move triggers “when time passes.” When there’s a jump cut to a later time, when things have quieted down a bit and given characters the opportunity to react to recent events, this move triggers. Members of your legacy might react to your recent actions without triggering this move—especially if you take particularly heroic or non-heroic actions.

## INSPIRATIONS FOR THE LEGACY

Kid Flash, **YOUNG JUSTICE**

Robin (Tim Drake), **YOUNG JUSTICE**

Lightspeed, **AVENGERS ACADEMY**

Beast Boy, **TEEN TITANS**

Green Lantern (any), **JUSTICE LEAGUE**

## THE NOVA

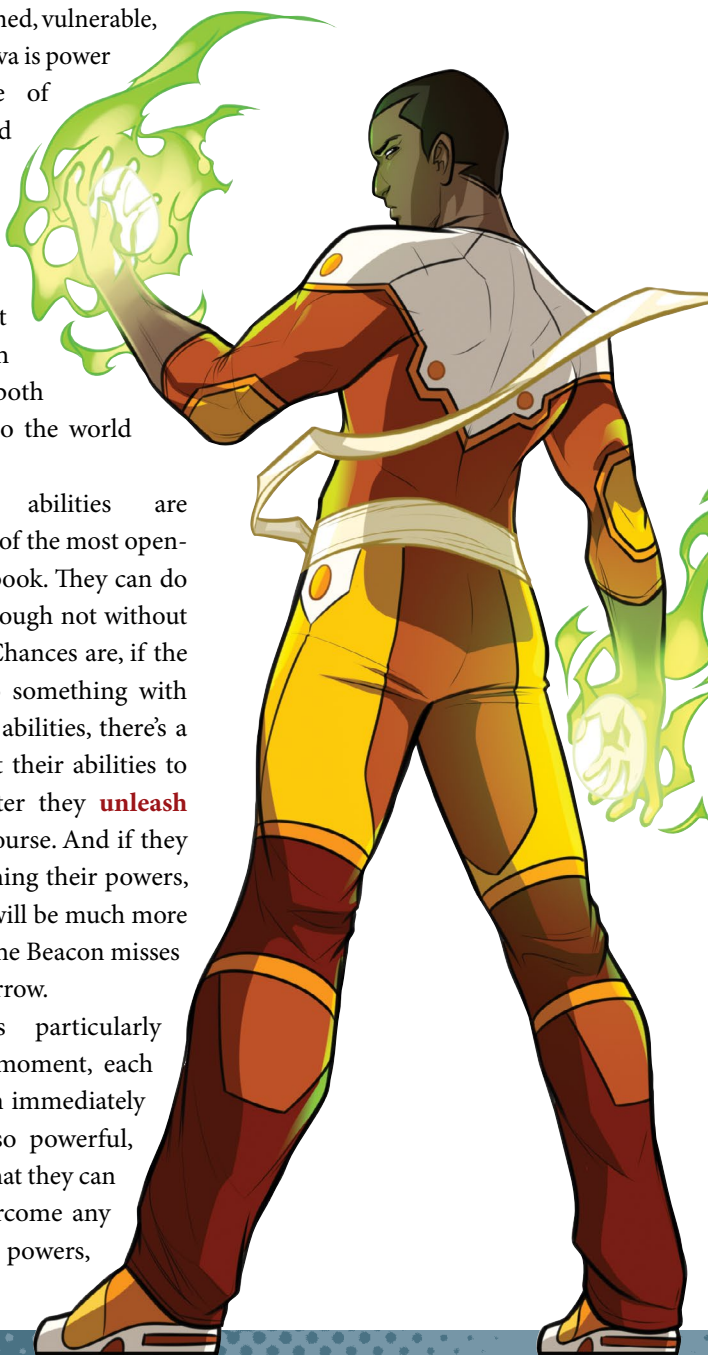
You're a font of power. Channel it, and you can remake the world into exactly what you want. Unleash it, and you can do miracles. It's wonderful...and terrifying. Lose control for even a second, and other people get hurt.

### PLAYING THE NOVA

Powerful, unrestrained, vulnerable, destructive. The Nova is power incarnate, capable of affecting the world and changing reality on a level their teammates can't possibly match—but that power comes with enormous risk, both to the Nova and to the world around them.

The Nova's abilities are intentionally some of the most open-ended of any playbook. They can do nearly anything, though not without difficulty or cost. Chances are, if the Nova wants to do something with their superhuman abilities, there's a way they can twist their abilities to do that thing—after they **unleash their powers**, of course. And if they miss when unleashing their powers, the consequences will be much more severe than when the Beacon misses while firing a net arrow.

The Nova is particularly focused on each moment, each individual problem immediately at hand. They're so powerful, chances are good that they can at least try to overcome any obstacle with their powers,



right then and there. As a result, this isn't a playbook for long-term planning or preparation. You're explosive, a battering ram of power. Don't be too afraid of conditions, because they feed right into your flares, giving you still more power to just *make things happen*, instantly. But that's your story—balancing the impossible, trying to keep a rein on your power and guide it in the right direction.

## NOTES ON YOUR MOVES AND EXTRAS

When you charge up your powers, the burn you generate lasts until the end of the scene. To charge up your powers, tell the GM what you're actually doing, what that looks like for you. If, through charging up your powers, you wind up marking one condition too many, that still takes you out of the scene, just like normal. When you roll + conditions marked, add the total number of conditions you currently have marked to your roll—but keep in mind your bonus can't go higher than +4.

For **Reality storm**, if you cause unwanted collateral damage, the GM tells you what it is—and you can expect not to like it.

For **Constructs**, when you animate a construct independent of yourself, you can give it orders and have it take actions. It will obey you. For the most part, the GM tells you the results of anything it does, but the GM might have you make a move through your construct, if appropriate.

**Shielding** allows you to protect someone in the moment, rolling + Freak to defend. It's transient and immediate.

**Moat** allows you to set up a lasting defense in advance, but it won't necessarily help you right in the moment when your friend is in danger. **Moat** lasts as long as you focus on it and spend more burn when it gets hit especially hard.

**Worship** allows you to awe an audience in addition to whatever else you do when you unleash. You can **unleash your powers** specifically to put on the display if you so choose.

**Move** can refer to teleportation, barreling hard in one direction, or anything else that fits your powers.

**Elemental awareness** lets you ask the GM any question you want, but it has to be about the place you're currently in, or elements in the area around you.

## INSPIRATIONS FOR THE NOVA

Wiccan, **YOUNG AVENGERS**

Miss Martian, **YOUNG JUSTICE: INVASION**

Jean Grey, **X-MEN**

Nico Minoru, **RUNAWAYS**

Zero, **GENERATION HOPE**

## THE OUTSIDER

You're not from here. Your home is an amazing place, full of beauty and wonder. But there's something to them, something special that you're missing back home. Something...human. So yeah, you'll be hanging around. At least for now.

### PLAYING THE OUTSIDER

Strange, curious, naïve, arrogant. The Outsider isn't from here, but that won't stop them from creating a life for themselves right here on this planet. At least, for now. But can they find a place here? Will they even want to, once they get to know this world more? Or will they answer that siren call, and go home?

When you make an Outsider, feel free to go nuts with your homeland. You might be an alien, absolutely, but you might also be from a parallel world, or from the future, or from a digital realm—whatever. The key is, wherever you're from, it has to be substantially different from Earth and Halcyon City, to the point that you don't fit in even when you try.

A crucial thing to remember while playing the Outsider is that you aren't incompetent—you understand more than enough to get by in your new home. What you don't understand are the more complicated elements of the world around you.

Pick a few key areas of different philosophy and psychology as you play your Outsider. You can add all the weird pieces you want—"My people never let their feet touch the ground, and we can't see



the color green, and we hear emotions!”—but focus on important and difficult questions, like your people actively dismissing the idea of incarcerating criminals instead of reforming them or believing that those with great power are required to follow the will of the people.

## NOTES ON YOUR MOVES AND EXTRAS

**Belong in two worlds** inherently implies that you have some status and power with your people. You also must have some method of contacting your people, whatever that might be for you.

The hold you spend on pieces of tech or answers can represent benefits you’ve gained over the course of your communication with your people, allowing you to say after the fact that they gave you technology or information during the conversation. Spending a hold to clear a condition through contact with home, however, is only appropriate when you’re actually in contact with home.

When you create a device with **Alien tech**, you still need human technology to build on. While whatever you build can do something impossible, it often does a limited version of it—choosing on a 10+ that the device works exceptionally well ensures that you get everything you wanted, and maybe more.

If you take a **Kirby-craft**, its particulars are largely down to your fictional set up. How big is it? As big as you think makes sense. What does it look like? Whatever makes sense for your people’s technology. Its strengths and weaknesses just tell you and the GM the important pieces about what the ship can do and how it can be damaged. If it gets damaged, you have to repair it to use it again.

For **Alien ways**, what counts as an important Earth custom is ultimately up to you and the GM. As a guideline, a custom is important when undermining it has consequences and/or creates friction with those around you. If nobody cares if you undermine that custom, it’s probably not all that important.

For **Not so different after all**, remember that you have to actually do whatever options you choose. Make sure you let the other players know how you confess a flaw of your home, mislead them about your home, or describe the glories of your home during the conversation.

## INSPIRATIONS FOR THE OUTSIDER

Miss Martian, **YOUNG JUSTICE**

Marvel Boy, **YOUNG AVENGERS**

Xavin, **RUNAWAYS**

Starfire, **TEEN TITANS**

Warlock, **THE NEW MUTANTS**

## THE PROTÉGÉ

You proved yourself to an experienced hero. They think you've got what it takes. They've been training you for a while, and now you have to decide...do you want to be them? Or will you find your own path?

### PLAYING THE PROTÉGÉ

Focused, well-trained, driven, unsure. The Protégé is defined by two things: their training and their mentor. A Protégé has a level of skill and preparation beyond nearly any of the other PCs—even the Legacy wasn't necessarily as well-trained as the Protégé. The Protégé might have innate powers, sure, but they were also guided in how to use those abilities and more by their mentor. That also means they're devoted to being a superhero in a way that none of the other PCs may be—a Protégé made at the start of play has been training for quite some time to get into this life.

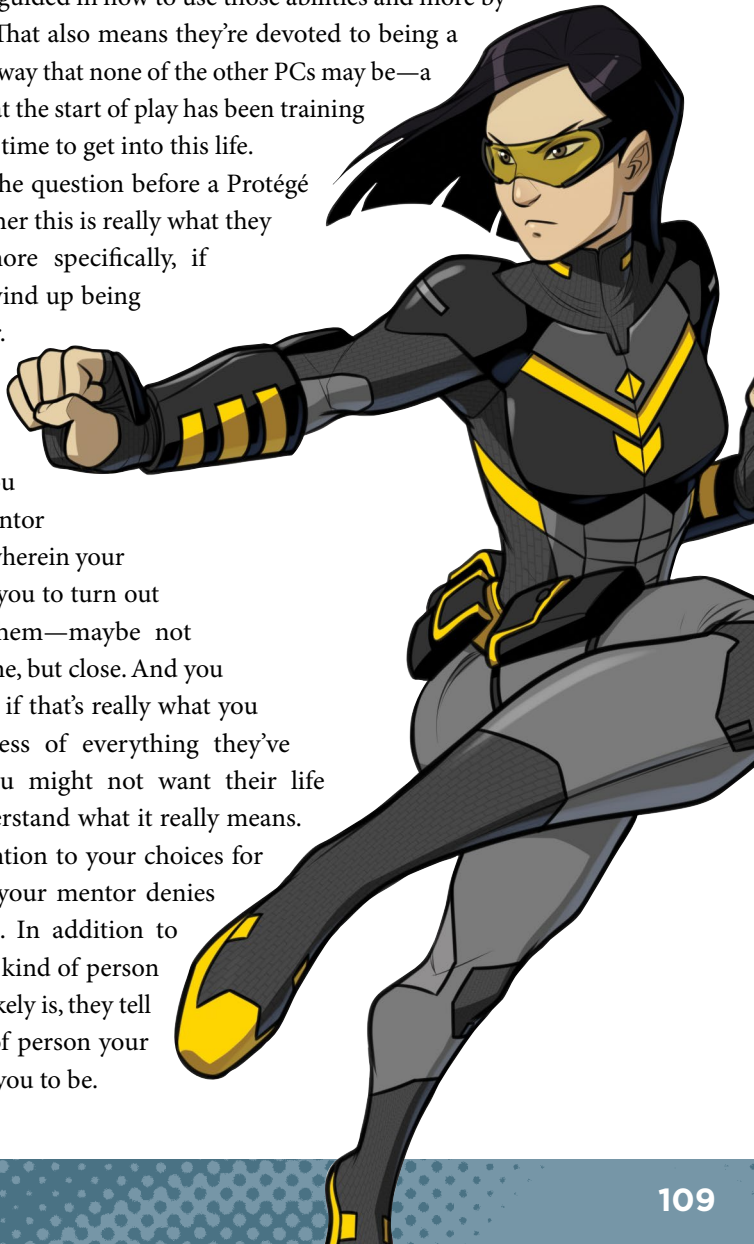
That said, the question before a Protégé is always whether this is really what they want—and, more specifically, if they want to wind up being their mentor.

For better or worse, the relationship between you

and your mentor

is always one wherein your mentor wants you to turn out similarly to them—maybe not exactly the same, but close. And you have to decide if that's really what you want. Regardless of everything they've given you, you might not want their life once you understand what it really means.

Pay close attention to your choices for which Labels your mentor denies and embodies. In addition to telling you the kind of person your mentor likely is, they tell you the kind of person your mentor wants you to be.





Make sure you spend time with your mentor. Return to them. Ask them for help and input. You might butt heads with them, you might resist what they choose for you, but they matter to you, as well. They gave you what you needed to become the person you are today, and your relationship with them is the source of your dramatic arc. They might seek you out, but you should do the same.

## NOTES ON YOUR MOVES AND EXTRAS

For **Been reading the files**, you're assumed to be reading or otherwise learning about the superhuman world from your mentor—in whatever way fits their MO. You only trigger the move, though, the first time you encounter any given important superhuman phenomenon. You can't say you read a file about them during a later encounter. When you tell the team the most important detail you remember, you have a responsibility to stick to whatever fiction is already established about the world and this character—but otherwise, you can add whatever detail you want. The GM tells you if anything is different, meaning that they'll alert you if things have changed surrounding the detail you provided.

The resources that your mentor gives you and the team are things that your mentor has access to and is willing to grant you. Ultimately, you're the arbiter of whether they go to the team, or if you keep them for yourself.

## INSPIRATION FOR THE PROTÉGÉ

Robin, **YOUNG JUSTICE**

Cyclops, **X-MEN**

Batman (Terry McGinnis), **BATMAN: BEYOND**

Aqualad, **YOUNG JUSTICE**

Wonder Girl, **YOUNG JUSTICE**

## THE TRANSFORMED

You can recall a time not too long ago when you looked...normal. When you didn't feel their stares. When you didn't hear their gasps. When no one thought of you as a monster. Those were the days, huh.

## PLAYING THE TRANSFORMED

Troubled, titanic, grotesque, lamentable. The Transformed used to be human, without any powers or superhuman elements, until something happened and they were changed, obviously and permanently. They might be a cyborg, or a strange monster, or made of electricity—just so long as they're strange and inhuman, with no way of hiding it. The Transformed's story is about what

you do with your new life and form, and how you react to the way other people treat you now.

As the Transformed, lots of people will attempt to shift your Labels, just by how they react to your appearance. You're the quintessential book, and your cover is pretty striking—other people will judge you by it all the time, whether you like it or not. Your story is about how your actions either change or confirm those opinions. You can prove those people wrong—or you can prove them right. It's your choice.

It's theoretically possible for you to change yourself back over the course of play—after all, everything and anything is possible within Halcyon City. But keep in mind that doing so will be very difficult—you have no tools to point out such a path for yourself—and it requires you to change playbooks, or retire your character at the very least. Your character's arc and struggles aren't really about trying to return to what you were—they're about trying to deal with what you are now.

## NOTES ON YOUR MOVES AND EXTRAS

For **Not human enough**, what counts as a “terrifying way” is up to you and the GM, but the GM might push you on it to make sure you're doing something actually terrifying.

For **Coming for you**, if it's not immediately obvious who's to blame for a given condition you mark, don't worry about it and don't bother to keep track—you'll mark plenty of conditions, so just worry about the times when it's a pretty clear choice.

For **Be the monster**, there might be times when it doesn't make sense that you could frighten or intimidate another individual—the GM lets you know if that happens. Otherwise, though, the move should trigger whenever you do something outright meant to provoke fear.

## INSPIRATIONS FOR THE TRANSFORMED

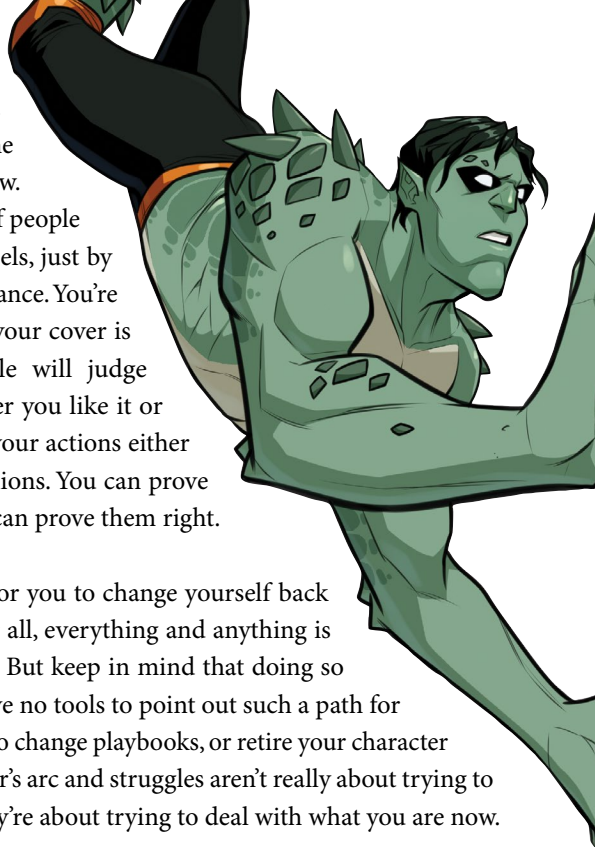
Cyborg, **TEEN TITANS**

Mettle, **AVENGERS ACADEMY**

Beast, **X-MEN**

The Hulk, **THE INCREDIBLE HULK**

Rockslide, **WOLVERINE AND THE X-MEN**





# CHAPTER 6: THE FUTURE

## ADVANCEMENT

The main characters in a game of **MASKS** change drastically over the course of the game. Their Labels shift, they gain and lose Influence, and they reach their potential. All of these changes are reflected both in elements on the character sheets and in the fiction of your game. Like the moves, change in **MASKS** is both fictional and mechanical.

Sometimes you gain something in the fiction, and it causes you to mark a change on your character playbook.

Hornet sends the last punch into Vanquish's jaw, knocking out the alien dictator, while Mantis looks on. There's no doubt in my mind—she just gained Influence over Mantis with that impressive display, and I tell Joe to mark it down.

For his service to the strange alien Crafters, Sureshot gets a new energy bow, something that never runs out of ammunition and can fire energy bolts of myriad forms. I tell Mark he should probably record the new bow as a different ability with something like energy control.

Sometimes, you lose something in the fiction, and it makes you mark something out of your character playbook.

Skysong flies her crystalline ship directly into the skyscraper-sized Dominus to take him out once and for all. The maneuver works, the energy discharge from the ship sending him to a different dimension...but I tell Skysong to mark the ship off her sheet. She doesn't have it anymore—it shattered when it struck him.

Dusk learned she could take away Lady Faust's powers while meditating in her Penumbra sanctum, but she'd consume the power of the sanctum entirely. In the final fight with Lady Faust, Grace decides to go through with the plan, channeling all the power of Penumbra into Lady Faust to blast away her demonic might. I tell Grace to cross the sanctum off her playbook.

Reaching your potential and taking advances works in the other direction. You take the advance mechanically, then you have to work out how it fits into the fiction. Chances are, you and the GM will have to work together to make sense of the change. The key, though, is that you don't need permission to take an advance—you can take it whenever you want, and while you might need to work out a compromise about the fiction to make the advance make sense, ultimately you always get whatever you take.

Rex and the team just fought off a bunch of time-displaced dinosaurs, and Rex got an advance thanks to a few misses during the fight. Matt really likes the idea of getting a pet raptor, so he takes the advance **Get a move from another playbook** and chooses **C'mon, Lucky** from the Beacon playbook. That means he gets some kind of smaller companion that helps him out on some moves.

I think that's awesome. I tell him that Rex finds an egg from the raptors. I suggest that in the fiction, it probably makes sense that the egg won't hatch a fully grown raptor; but especially since it's a time-displaced raptor, it probably ages rapidly as he raises it in the team's base, and it'll show up at least by next session. Matt's cool with all that, and writes down the move and his raptor's name.

Huma rolls a miss trying to pierce his dad's mask, and it's the last potential Huma needs to advance. Rich immediately decides on **Take a sanctuary** from the Doomed playbook, and suggests there's a special place, tied to the power of Huma, that his family never learned to call on. I think that's awesome, so as soon as the scene is resolved and Huma storms away from his dad, I say that his power calls him to his new sanctuary.

## MARKING POTENTIAL

You have to mark potential five times to advance. As soon as you mark the fifth, you clear your track and take an advance. Pick one option from the advancement list and mark it off—once you've taken that particular advance, you can't take it again. Once you've taken five from the top list, above the line, you can start taking options from below the line.

There are a few ways to mark potential throughout the game, ranging from team moves to some of the results of basic moves, but the most important way is by **rolling a miss on any move**. Every time you roll a miss, on any move, you mark potential.

## ADVANCES

Most of the advances are pretty straightforward, but here are a few notes on what they mean.

- \_\_\_ Take another move from your playbook
- \_\_\_ Take a move from another playbook

You get another move, either from your own playbook or from a different one, depending on which advance you choose. This is for getting another move, not an extra—you can't take the doom track from the Doomed, for instance, by taking a move from another playbook.

- \_\_\_ Someone permanently loses Influence over you; add +1 to a Label

Pick one character; they lose Influence over you if they have it, and they can never gain Influence over you again, by any means. If they would ever gain Influence over you, ignore that part of the move or effect.

After you choose that character, add +1 to any one of your Labels. Note that this isn't a shift, meaning that another Label doesn't have to move down. You simply move that Label up one. It might shift down later, like normal, but the overall total of your Labels is permanently increased by one.

\_\_ Rearrange your Labels as you choose, and add +1 to a Label

As soon as you pick this advance, you can reassign the points in your Labels however you choose, shifting any of them up and down as much as you want, so long as the overall total of all your Labels doesn't change. After you're finished shifting however you want, add +1 to a single Label. Just like the advance above, this isn't a shift. That Label goes up by 1, and no other Label has to come down.

\_\_ Unlock your Moment of Truth

\_\_ Unlock your Moment of Truth after it's been used once

When you take this advance, you unlock your Moment of Truth. When you trigger it, you follow the script listed in your playbook and take control of what happens in the narrative (page 47). After you've triggered it once, it becomes "locked" again, and you have to take the second advance to unlock it again.

The second advance is listed below the line, so you can only take it after you've already taken five advances. Even if you change playbooks, you can only take this advance once, after you've already unlocked and triggered your playbook's Moment of Truth.

\_\_ Choose another 2 roles for **The Bull's Heart**

\_\_ Unlock 3 new flares

\_\_ Choose up to 4 more resources from your mentor

These advances get you more options for the base elements of your playbook. When you take them, you get those additional options immediately, selected from those already present.

\_\_ Add +1 to any two Labels

\_\_ Add +2 to the Label your mentor embodies or denies

\_\_ Change your Mask Label; add +1 to your new Mask Label

These advances increase your overall Label totals. Adding +1 to any two Labels means that you increase any two Labels by one step, without shifting



anything down. Adding +2 to the Label your mentor embodies or denies is a Protégé advance, and it requires you to add the +2 specifically to either the Label that your mentor embodies or denies, and no others. Changing your Mask Label and adding +1 to the new Mask Label is a Janus advance, and represents you changing your mind about who you are, how you see yourself and your mask.

Remember that each individual Label can never be higher than +3.

- Take drives from the Beacon playbook
- Take **The Bull's Heart** from the Bull playbook
- Take a sanctuary from the Doomed playbook
- You adopt a human life; take secret identity and The Mask from the Janus
- Take a doom, doom track, and doomsigns from the Doomed playbook

These advances allow you to take a specific extra from a different playbook. Make your choices and fill in your options as if you were building a character of that playbook anew, unless the advance tells you to do something different.

For all these options, make sure you talk with the GM. Taking drives from the Beacon might not mean much—maybe you're just getting more interested and excited about living a superheroic life. But if you take a sanctuary, that's got to come from somewhere. If you take a secret identity, you have to explain how you can fit in with the mortal population. Work with the GM to answer these questions after you take the advance.

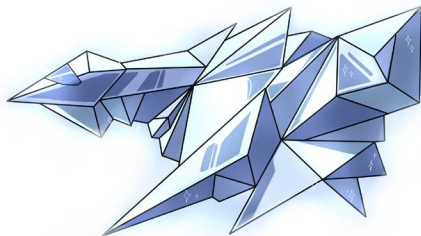
- Unlock the remaining two powers of your suite
- Choose two new abilities from any playbook as you come into your own
- Mutate further and reveal another two new abilities (chosen from any playbook)

These advances give you more abilities. Remember abilities include superpowers and skills, all the cool things that make your character deserving of inclusion in your superhero comic book. These advances tell you what abilities to choose from—if they tell you to choose from any playbook, then select any abilities listed in the other playbooks.

The same general advice and rules from character creation apply here. The advance is about you developing new powers and skills, and the abilities described in the playbooks generally feed into that idea more consistently and successfully than just picking any ability at all—for example, time travel isn't an ability in any of the base playbooks, and will almost always cause more trouble than it's worth. That said, use our own judgment, and talk to your GM and the other players. If you have a great idea for an ability that's not in the playbooks, then maybe it can still work out.

## LATER ADVANCES

Some advances are listed in the playbook below a line. You can only choose these advances when you've already taken five advances above the line. These are generally uniform across the different playbooks, but a few playbooks have some small changes to these advances.



### — Change playbooks

Pick a new playbook that no other player is currently using, and switch your character over to it. This is a huge change for your PC—they're now confronted with totally different issues, and their situation and life will change to match. This is the alien Outsider settling into life on Earth and becoming a Janus, concerned more about leading a double life than their alien home. Or the noble Legacy being doused in strange chemicals and changing into a weird monster, the Transformed, now contending with their grotesque body.

You get whatever moves the playbook tells you to take, as if you were building a new character with that playbook. You also get whatever extras the playbook describes. Don't worry about the "When our team came together for the first time..." section, or the Influence or Relationships—those things are already set for your character. Keep your Labels exactly the same as they were before you switched playbooks, keep any conditions you had marked, keep any potential you have currently marked, and keep any Influence you hold over other characters.

Use the advancement track on your new playbook, but transfer any marks you've made below the line—those advances don't "refresh" when you change playbooks.

Whether you keep the abilities, moves, and extras of your first playbook depends on the exact circumstances of your switch. Generally speaking, you keep anything internal to your character—like your emotions or knowledge—and you lose anything external that doesn't fit with the new playbook or would've been lost in the change.

If you're the Doomed and you change to a new playbook, you almost certainly give up your doom track and doomsigns—you're not the Doomed anymore, and it's likely those pieces don't make sense to carry over to your new playbook. If you're the Protégé and you change to a new playbook, you probably give up your mentor—your story's not about your close relationship with them anymore. If you're the Janus, though, you might not actually give up your secret identity or your social obligations to become the Beacon.

It's easy to imagine exceptions—a Protégé keeping their mentor, but becoming part of a larger tradition as they become a Legacy, for example. A Janus who abandons their prior life—and their prior powers—as they're forever altered and become the Transformed.

Talk these pieces over with your GM to decide which you keep and which you lose, if any. The key is to be true to the fiction—what would the character actually keep, and what would they lose?

#### \_\_ Take an adult move

When you take this advance, you immediately gain access to one of the adult moves (page 119). Keep in mind that you can only take this advance twice—you can only ever gain access to two of the five adult moves.

#### \_\_ Lock a Label, and add +1 to a Label of your choice

Pick one Label and lock it—it can't move up nor down. If that Label would shift, ignore that effect in its entirety.

You also get to add +1 to any Label you choose, remembering that this isn't a shift, but an addition. You can do these effects in any order, meaning you can add +1 before you lock the Label—raising it to +3, for example, then locking it.

#### \_\_ Retire from the life or become a paragon of the city

When you take this advance, your character is no longer a PC. Regardless of whether you choose to have them retire or become a paragon, their story, as far as **MASKS** is concerned, is over.

If your PC retires, they stop being a superhero, at least in the traditional sense. Maybe they go off to college, maybe they form a company around their super science ideas, maybe they venture off into the galaxy to explore the cosmos—regardless, they stop being a costumed superhero in Halcyon City. What's more, they're guaranteed safety—the GM can't later mess with them specifically in any way.

If your PC becomes a paragon, they become one of the leading heroes of Halcyon City—essentially, they become one of the adults. Even if they're not public, they're still embedded deeply in the fabric of the city. Work with the GM to figure out exactly what that looks like for the character. They transition into an NPC, and the GM has a responsibility to avoid targeting them. They're presumed to be having their own adventures, conflicts, and battles, but they're not the focus of the story anymore.

After you choose this advance, if you're still playing your **MASKS** campaign, pick up a new playbook and make a new character.

## MAKING A NEW CHARACTER

When you make a new character during an ongoing campaign—most important when your old character retires or becomes a paragon—the process is mostly the same, aside from a few key differences.

Ignore your “When the team first came together...” section. The team is already together, so that question won’t matter. Instead, work out why you’re joining the team, why the team already trusts you, and why they want you to join their group.

Ignore your Influence section. Pick at least two PCs whose words matter to you. Give them Influence over you.

For Relationships, fill them in with other PCs as normal.

After you’ve introduced your character, go around the table and ask each PC if they care what you think. If they do, they give you Influence over them. If they don’t, ask them to tell you one time they shot you down.



## ADULT MOVES

The adult superheroes of Halcyon City can do things the younger heroes can’t quite pull off. As the younger heroes grow in confidence, power, and ability, their capabilities mature.

Adult moves are essentially more powerful versions of the basic moves. But they don’t actually replace the basic moves—just because you can now **overwhelm a vulnerable foe**, that doesn’t mean you can’t **directly engage a threat**.

## WIELD YOUR POWERS

When you **wield your powers** with precision or grace, roll + Freak. On a hit, choose one. On a 10+, choose two.

- take hold of something vulnerable to you
- create something useful from your environment
- neutralize an opponent or threat, at least for now

**Unleashing your powers** is trying something you’re not sure you can really pull off, whereas **wielding your powers** is doing something with mastery and control, so you get exactly the effect you want. Just like unleashing your powers, wielding them doesn’t trigger every time you use your abilities; you still have to wield them to a particular effect, and you have to do it with a focus or grace beyond the most ordinary uses of your abilities.

## OPTIONS FOR WIELDING YOUR POWERS

To *take hold of something vulnerable to you*, you seize something, physically or metaphorically. You could literally snatch something out of an enemy's hands with your telekinesis, or you could take control of the genius loci in the Halcyon Park, or you could take hold of your enemies' fear by putting on a terrifying show of power. You name what you want to take hold of before you make the move, and the GM tells you if it's vulnerable to you.

To *create something useful from your environment*, just name something within your abilities to make, and you do it. This could be anything from “a hole in the wall” to “a living statue” depending on your abilities and the environment around you. It's always explicitly useful to you,—if you create a living statue, it'll fight for you or defend you, not cause you trouble.

To *neutralize an opponent or threat, at least for now*, name what you hope to neutralize, and so long as it's within your abilities to do so, that opponent or threat is locked down, incapacitated, or otherwise indisposed. This could be anything from encasing an enemy in ice to shooting a flashbang arrow in their face. It's always temporary—they'll recover, given time—but it may give you the opportunity you need to take them down, or to run.

### OVERWHELM A VULNERABLE FOE

When you **overwhelm a vulnerable foe**, roll + Danger. On a hit, the fight's over. They're done. On a 10+, choose one. On a 7-9, choose two.

- you **take a powerful blow** in turn
- you hurt your foe more than you intended
- you cause serious collateral damage

This is a powerful move—it's a way for a PC to instantly end a fight against a foe, regardless of how many conditions they have marked. You open fire, pouring attack after attack on an enemy and just battering them into submission.

The key to this move is “vulnerable foe.” Dangerous opponents almost certainly won't be vulnerable, at least until they've been pushed a bit—maybe the PC tricks them into making a stupid move, or maybe they've gotten banged up first. But until the PC has a real chance against them to end things quickly, they can't trigger the move.

“The fight's over” means exactly that. Against this enemy, at least, the fight is over. They're knocked down, knocked out, defeated, incapable of continuing.

## OPTIONS FOR OVERWHELM A VULNERABLE FOE

Choosing to *take a powerful blow in turn* is exactly what it says—you have to roll to **take a powerful blow**. Your enemy, though they're vulnerable to you, gets a shot at you before they go down.

Choosing *you hurt your foe more than you intended* means your dangerous nature overcomes your restraint. To overwhelm a vulnerable foe, you've really got to lay it on them, hard, and it can get out of your control. This is when it turns out you accidentally left your psychic opponent a vegetable (at least for now), or the massive energy blast you unleashed cost your enemy an arm. Depending on your tone and the fiction, it might even mean your enemy dies. You can bet that'll have repercussions, especially when your teammates and the adult heroes hear about it.

Choosing *you cause serious collateral damage* means your environment, and those around you, are hurt or at least endangered. Maybe that torrent of blows you unleash damages a support strut, and now the building is collapsing. Maybe when you blew up half the street with a radioactive blast, you caught your friends in the explosion. It's up to the GM exactly who or what gets hurt.

## PERSUADE WITH BEST INTERESTS

When you **persuade someone with their best interests**, roll + Superior. If they're an NPC, on a 10+ they buy it and act accordingly. On a 7-9, they need concrete assurance right now.

If they're a PC, on a hit, they can mark potential or shift their own Labels if they do what you want. On a 10+, take Influence over them as well.

**Provoking someone** is about pushing their buttons; **persuading them with their best interests** is about dangling a carrot in front of them and leading them where you want. You're not trying to trick or anger them—you're offering them exactly what they want or need in exchange for them doing what you tell them to do.

**Persuading someone with their best interests** doesn't have to be so obviously transactional, either. You don't have to physically have the thing they want—it's more about you identifying what they want or need and telling them what to do to get it. Telling a would-be hero that they really need to stand up to the corrupt police department if they want to appear to be a true hero is persuading them with their best interests—you're offering them a path to their goals.

Like provoke, when you trigger this move make sure you say, out of character, what you want them to do.



## OPTIONS FOR PERSUADE WITH BEST INTERESTS

When an NPC needs concrete assurance, they need clearer proof that the path you're offering to them really is in their best interests. You need to provide some evidence or support, or make some kind of meaningful promise to back up your words, for them to believe what you're telling them.

For PCs, if you get a hit, they get to choose whether they mark potential or shift Labels (and which Labels they shift) if they do what you want. Taking Influence over them on a 10+ is in addition to them getting to mark potential or shift their Labels.

### EMPATHIZE

When you openly **empathize with someone**, roll + Mundane. On a hit, they must reveal a vulnerability or mark a condition. On a 10+, take Influence over them as well.

Openly empathizing with someone is about creating a deeper connection with another person, something more than just comforting them. You can comfort someone by saying what they want to hear, without ever truly understanding them or reaching them. Empathizing with them requires you to address their real feelings and situation, meaningfully and directly—not to make them feel better, but to connect with them, to reach them.

To trigger this move you must empathize openly, speaking about it out loud to let them know. It's not enough to empathize internally, to think about how you understand where the other person is coming from—you have to speak to them about it.

### OPTIONS FOR EMPATHIZE

When you get a hit on **empathizing** with someone, they choose whether they reveal a vulnerability or mark a condition. If they choose to mark a condition, they're keeping themselves closed down, refusing to connect, and doing so hurts them emotionally. They choose which condition they mark.

If they choose to reveal a vulnerability and they're a PC, it almost certainly triggers the appropriate team move on their playbook.

## STAND UP FOR SOMETHING

When you **stand up for something**, roll + Savior. On a 10+, choose two. On a 7-9, choose one.

- listeners can't keep doing what they're doing
- listeners can't flee without addressing you
- listeners can't attack you without losing status or position

Standing up for something is making heroic speeches in the face of terrible opposition, and boldly stating your true beliefs. Standing up for something is about defending an ideal in the face of someone who'd tear it down. It lets you affect those who listen to you in a broad way, generally preventing them from continuing to take action that threatens your ideal.

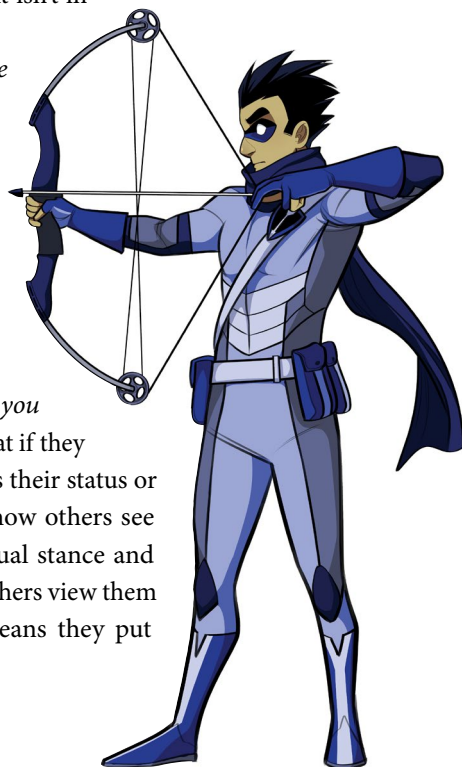
**Standing up for something** is most often about your words, what you say, and who hears you. That means you don't necessarily have to do anything physical to trigger it—you could stand up for something while tied to a chair.

### OPTIONS FOR STAND UP FOR SOMETHING

Choosing that *listeners can't keep doing what they're doing* means you can ensure someone who hears you has to stop what they're doing to listen to your words. If a villain is programming the city-destroying bomb, and you choose *can't keep doing what they're doing*, you ensure that they turn their attention away from the bomb. What they do next isn't in your control, however.

Choosing that *listeners can't flee without addressing you* means that you guarantee they face you directly instead of running away. They have to directly respond to what you've said before they can leave, and that means you get another chance to come at them with another move, or to keep their attention away from anything else.

Choosing that *listeners can't attack you without losing status or position* means that if they choose to come after you, doing so hurts their status or position in some way. Status is about how others see them, while position is about their actual stance and placement. Hurting their status means others view them worse, while hurting their position means they put themselves at a disadvantage.





# CHAPTER 7: THE GM

## THE GM

If you're reading this, you're probably the person who's running the game for your group. You're the **Gamemaster**—the GM, for short.

The rest of the players are focused on their one character. Their job is to make that character interesting, compelling, cool, complicated, and so on. To play that character to the hilt, and to own their decisions.

You? You're responsible for most everything else. It's sorta like you're the cosmic being behind the scenes, controlling the entire universe with your phlogiston-powered puppet strings, laughing maniacally every now and then.

It's a pretty cool gig.

You're here to toss out diabolical villains and dangerous villains, and watch the heroes knock 'em down. You're here to punch these PCs where it hurts, and revel in the drama. You're here to push them to the brink, and see who they become under that titanic pressure. You're here to surprise the players, to shift things in directions they might never have seen coming, and to be entertained by the surprising things they choose to do.

## HOW DO I DO THAT?

Well, that's what this chapter's for. It tells you what you should be doing as a GM for **MASKS**. This is the way to make the game sing—go with it.

You should've read the other chapters before you get here, so you know all the main pieces of the game. You don't have to have memorized them or anything, but that information should be floating around in your noggin.

This chapter gives you the rules for your side of the conversation. **Agendas** are your overall goals in running the game, and they aim you at the best kind of play for **MASKS**. **Principles** give you the best practices for running the game. **Moves** are specific things you can say in response to the players' choices. Together, these make up the structure for how to GM **MASKS** in a fun, dramatic, and interesting way that fits the themes and style of the game.

This chapter also includes myriad other tidbits of import, including:

- How to create villains (page 155)
- How to run specific playbooks (page 160)
- How to foster a superheroic style, including fight scenes (page 146)

Again, you don't have to memorize this whole chapter before you play, so don't try. Plan on coming back to this chapter a few times, to refresh and inform yourself of what you should be doing.

## AGENDAS

Agendas are your overarching, big goals for running the game. You have to balance your focus and attention between them.

- Make Halcyon City feel like a comic book
- Make the player characters' lives superheroic
- Play to find out what changes

### MAKE HALCYON CITY FEEL LIKE A COMIC BOOK

Halcyon City is a crazy, amazing, incredible place, full of monsters and mutants and aliens and wizards and more. Own it! Revel in it! Love it! **MASKS** and Halcyon City are based on stories that originate in the sequential art of comics; using the tropes and techniques of those stories only makes **MASKS** stronger. It's your job to make your game of **MASKS** feel like it could be your new favorite comic book, and the rest of this chapter gives you the tools you need to make that happen.

### MAKE THE PLAYER CHARACTERS' LIVES SUPERHEROIC

Even though a lot of the PCs actually desire stability and normalcy, it's your job as GM to make their lives appropriately incredible and superheroic. **MASKS** isn't about characters going to the mall and shopping for clothes—it's about characters going to the mall and a supervillain picking that moment to attack. Keep their lives interesting and epic!

### PLAY TO FIND OUT WHAT CHANGES

You don't know exactly what will happen over the course of the game. You don't know who the PCs will become. You don't know how they'll change the city. That's why you're playing in the first place—because you're excited to find out! **MASKS** is a game about change, about young people growing up, about the city reacting and reshaping itself in response to the people within it. Don't plan on any single course of events coming true—plan only on pushing and prodding the characters and the setting to see what it might become.

## ALWAYS SAY...

Sometimes, you'll get caught between different agendas, and you won't know exactly how to move forward. If you get into that kind of bind, then always say:

- What the principles demand
- What the rules demand
- What honesty demands
- What your prep demands

The principles are the paths you tread to reach your agendas, and the rules are the hard skeleton of the game that you build everything else around. Depend on them and don't break them. If a character should **take a powerful blow**, make them roll. If a player rolls a miss, even after their PC just spilled their heart out in a heart-wrenching scene with the love of their life, you gotta make a move. No fudging the dice. Commit to the rules, and they'll guide you to a great story.

The rules also put everybody on an even footing—they're open and honest. It's your job to keep that honesty throughout everything you do. You are *not* supposed to hide critical information from the PCs or the players. They only know what you tell them about the scene and the world around them, after all! If something is obvious, don't hope they figure it out—tell them! If a player asks you a question about something their PC should know, don't be coy or hold the information back—answer it or turn it back on them and let them answer it!

That directness is important especially around information that only you have—your prep. If you prepare something in advance of play, like an arc or a villain, don't deviate from it without cause. Stick to your fiction! When you've set up a villain with a move to "Neutralize superpowers in their vicinity," then follow that through. Your prep helps keep you honest about the world and keeps your Halcyon City internally consistent.



## THE PRINCIPLES

The agendas are your goals, and the principles are how you get there. These are rules—don't break them!—but it's up to you to figure out how they apply in any specific situation. They're general paths for you to produce the best possible **MASKS** stories. Use them, and the game will work! Ignore them, and it's gonna explode on you.

- Describe like a comic book
- Address yourself to the heroes, not the players
- Make your move, but misdirect
- Make threats real
- Give up to fight another day
- Treat human life as meaningful
- Make supers seem outlandish, creative, and cool
- Give villains drives to feature their humanity
- Make adults seem childish and short-sighted
- Support people, but only conditionally
- Ask provocative questions and build on the answers
- Be a fan of the PCs
- Treat your NPCs like hammers: square peg, round hole
- Remind them of the generations that came before
- Think in the gutters between panels
- Sometimes, disclaim decision-making

### DESCRIBE LIKE A COMIC BOOK

Don't just set a scene and say what's there—describe the first panel of the page, what the picture shows. Tell us how the panel shifts, what people say or do. Periodically throughout play, cut in with descriptions not just of the action, but of how it looks as a comic book. One panel might show the punch, the next shows your enemy flying through the air, the next shows the impact—call out each one.

**MASKS** is based on many, many sources, but superhero comics are at its heart. Use their art and style to help you make vibrant, interesting, and detailed descriptions of the fiction. Think about what would look good on the page, what you'd like to see in the comic version of your story. Exciting visuals! Cool angles! Interesting framing! Not static images, not simply talking heads.

## **ADDRESS YOURSELF TO THE HEROES, NOT THE PLAYERS**

The story's about the heroes, right? They're the ones dealing with teachers who'd love to hold them in detention, even though they *absolutely have to go deal with that black hole in the sky*, right? So don't talk to the players—talk to the people really dealing with those problems. Instead of “Hey, Joe, what does Hornet do?”, say “Hornet, what do you do?” It keeps everybody focused on the fiction, on these characters, on their triumphs and travails.

You're acting as those characters' lens into the world. Tell them what they see, what they hear, what they know, fully and truly. “Source Code is way closer to the computer terminal than you are; it's obvious she'll get there before you do, unless you do something. What do you do, Hornet?” Don't ever let them flounder for lack of information.

## **MAKE YOUR MOVE BUT MISDIRECT**

When you make a move—a specific thing you say happens—don't say its name. Say what happens, say how it feels, say what the characters see or hear or experience—but don't say exactly what move you just made. Say, “Oh man, you chuck that car at Rampage, but she just knocks it away. The car hits the fire truck dealing with the conflagration in the back and knocks it over. Without any more water on it, it's like the fire comes alive—and you know there are still people inside!” Don't say, “I just put innocents in danger!”

Sometimes you still need to bring up the mechanical effect of a move you made, like pointing out that you just took or gave Influence or inflicted a condition—but couch those changes in the fiction. Say, “Nano taunts you, running through an almost itemized list of all your failures, and you can feel your blood boil—mark Angry.” Don't say, “Nano inflicts a condition on you.”

## **MAKE THREATS REAL**

Superhero stories are often about stopping terrible things from happening. But that all becomes rote if the threats aren't truly threatening. Make the scope and focus of threats real and meaningful—and the best way to do that is often to make them small and personal. If a villain threatens to turn your best friend into their apprentice? That's a real threat.

The second part of making threats real is to sometimes deliver on them, hard. If the PCs take action to stop a threat, and the rolls go their way, then fine—you're playing to find out, and they overcame the threat. But if they get a miss, or if they give you a golden opportunity through their actions—then deliver on the threat. Follow through. Make it real.

## **GIVE UP TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY**

In **MASKS**, a lot of the characters and elements you portray are straight-up opposition to the PCs. They're villains with dastardly plans; they're monsters on a rampage. You may feel a compulsion to have those forces drive, endlessly, toward their goals until they're either victorious or destroyed.

Resist that urge. Those villains don't always drive towards their goals to the point of near-suicidal determination—they give up. They run away. If it's obvious they're going to lose, they flee and look for new opportunities. Not every fight has to go to the bitter end—any fight that ends earlier leaves elements open to resolve down the line.

This goes for social scenes, too. A domineering hero who's trying to get a PC to see the world their way shouldn't necessarily press the issue to extremes every single time—they give up to fight another day. To bring up the problem down the line.

## **TREAT HUMAN LIFE AS MEANINGFUL**

People *matter*. Their lives have value. That means your stories shouldn't involve wanton mass murder or death. Never kill a bunch of people just to show the situation is dangerous. It should be momentous when an anti-hero finds it expedient to take human lives—it shouldn't be the norm. It also means every time a building or a piece of the city is threatened, you should immediately flag the people endangered, so a hero can save them.

Regular, mundane lives are important, too. You don't have to be a demi-god to get consideration in the story. Parents, teachers, siblings, police, librarians, lawyers—they're all *people*, not just caricatures. You should portray them as people, with their own lives and goals and drives and desires. They can lend a hand to the PCs, and they can stand in the PCs' way. And that way, when a situation puts them in danger, it's a *person* who is endangered.

## **MAKE SUPERS SEEM OUTLANDISH, CREATIVE, AND COOL**

Superhuman pieces of the world should be just that—superhuman. Beyond the mundane, beyond normal. Strange, exciting, bizarre, magical. The superhuman side of Halcyon City is meant to be extraordinary. Who cares about what feels *realistic* in terms of superpowers or plots? Go nuts! A lady who can send her mind into pieces of the city and possess them, bringing them to life—absolutely! A guy made of pure imagination, capable of reshaping his body to his whim, but barely existing and ethereal—sure! An alien robot, powered by a miniature sun, and looking for love—yes!

Make your superhumans truly *super*. There's nothing more boring than “just another guy who's invulnerable and super strong” in a superhero story.

## **GIVE VILLAINS DRIVES TO FEATURE THEIR HUMANITY**

All villains are in some way *people*. If they aren't people, they aren't really villains—a robo T-Rex is an awesome threat to fight once, but not as a recurring villain, unless it's intelligent, with desires, insecurities, fears, and more. Villains may be extreme, over the top, terrible, awful, and criminal, but they're still *human*—even the ones that are robots or aliens or whatever.

Give every single villain, then, a drive that features their core humanity. Drives are statements of intent: “To \_\_\_\_.” “To save the life of my sister by any means necessary.” “To discredit the fake and unworthy heroes.” “To make the people who once tortured me pay.” No villain should ever want to take over the world *just 'cause*. They want to take over the world for a *reason*.

## **MAKE ADULTS SEEM CHILDISH AND SHORT-SIGHTED**

It's easy to play adults as superior, wiser, and better than the younger PCs. But that gets frustrating really quickly for the PCs, if the adults are consistently smarter than their younger counterparts. Instead, draw out the adults' own childish and short-sighted behavior—make clear that even though they're older, that doesn't mean they have all their ducks in a row. They think they're right—and often, they petulantly stick to their guns even when proved wrong.

The core of this principle is making adults flawed in the same ways that the PCs themselves are flawed. The adults may have a better idea of who they are than the PCs do, but that doesn't mean they necessarily make smart decisions. Even the PCs' own mentors, or the greatest heroes in the city, are fallible. The only way the PCs can mature is if they see that the adults are just as flawed as they are.

## **SUPPORT PEOPLE, BUT ONLY CONDITIONALLY**

Some of the adults in **MASKS** may be kind, fostering, and supportive—but they probably always think they know who the PCs should turn out to be, and they'll act to make their opinions clear. They might support the PCs, providing encouragement and positive words, but always in an attempt to get the PCs to trend in the direction they want—always conditionally. And if the PCs refuse to fulfill those conditions, the NPCs will make their discontent known, in anything from angry speeches to barely veiled disapproving looks.

By default, the kind of support many of the PCs will inevitably seek should be conditional, depending on the behavior of the PCs. Over time, it might be possible to earn someone's open approval unconditionally—but that's a long way away. Make the PCs either choose to go it on their own, or play by someone else's rules to receive approval.

## ASK PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS AND BUILD ON THE ANSWERS

Always ask questions of the PCs. When you're curious about something and one of them should know the answer, ask. Make the question pointed, provocative, and leading. Not, "Is there anyone in your class you like?" But, "Someone here is your best friend. Who is it?" Not, "Have you ever been defeated by a villain?" But, "How did Vortex defeat you so badly last time you clashed?"

Only ask provocative questions that the PCs would know the answers to. You shouldn't ask them, "What's that villain's dastardly plan?" unless it's somehow believable that they would know.

Remember those answers, keep in mind they add to the fiction, and target them for further development. Those answers are now *true*, and what's more, the PC who gave you that answer is inherently interested in it—it was their answer! Don't let it lie. Build on it.

## BE A FAN OF THE PCs

The main characters of a game of **MASKS** are always the PCs. No NPC is ever as important as the PCs. And you, as an audience member of this story, are always more interested in the PCs' stories than anybody else's stories.

When you're saying what happens next, think about it from the perspective of a fan. What would you want to see next? Would you really want to see the Protégé, an incredibly adept fighter, look like a clumsy fool? Would you really like to see the Transformed just be accepted instantly and loved, without any trials or tribulations?

Being a fan means both that you want the PCs to be awesome, and that you want to see them pressed. They go together! Putting pressure on the PCs means they have the chance to be awesome. But it means you won't want to see them made chumps, or look incompetent, or anything similar. Ruining the core conceits of a character, or taking away what makes them cool—that's the epitome of *not* being a fan.



## **TREAT YOUR NPCs LIKE HAMMERS: SQUARE PEG, ROUND HOLE**

NPCs all have ideas for who the PCs should be. They don't just withhold approval until the PCs act the way they want—they take active steps to change and reshape the PCs. It doesn't matter if the PCs want to go into those shapes. They're going to hammer away at the PCs anyway.

Villains are great for this. They often want the PCs to either think less of themselves or adopt ideologies that match the villain's own. The PCs won't necessarily seek approval from those villains...but that doesn't mean the villains won't try to impose their own views on the PCs, to hammer them into shape.

Mechanically, this looks like telling the PCs who they are or how the world works, and thereby shifting their Labels, among other things. But so long as the NPCs are trying to reshape the PCs, for good or for ill, they're doing their job.

## **REMIND THEM OF THE GENERATIONS THAT CAME BEFORE**

Halcyon City has had several generations of heroes. The city is built on the shoulders of those who came before—their triumphs, their mistakes, their successes, their failures. Many of those characters are still around in Halcyon City to this day. Current problems have their origins in the past, too, in the prior generations and their flaws.

Never let the PCs forget that there were several other generations before them, that those characters shaped the world the PCs live in today, and that in many ways, those older generations are still in power. The PCs aren't pioneers—they're denizens of realms already explored and colonized.

## **THINK IN THE GUTTERS BETWEEN PANELS**

In comics terminology, a “gutter” is that space between any two panels. Thinking in the gutters between panels means thinking about what happens between the things you talk about during the game's conversation. Halcyon City lives and breathes; the villains make plans, the heroes keep thwarting the villains, and life continues. The key to making your Halcyon City feel alive is to make sure things keep happening, whether or not you see them firsthand in your game.

Don't just make moves and say what happens based only on what's narrated directly in the course of play. Make moves and say what happens based on what would've happened between the panels. If it makes sense that the Protégé's mentor would've made their own attempt to take down the Magus, then make your moves and say what happens. If it makes sense that the Dread Queen would've worked on a way to neutralize the Legacy's dangerous powers, then make moves and say what happens then too.



## SOMETIMES, DISCLAIM DECISION-MAKING

Sometimes, you need to make a decision about what to say or what happens next, and you don't want to make the decision yourself. *Would the August agree to Hornet's plan to take down Satin? Would Cuckoo possess Grasshopper's sister before Grasshopper gets home?* In those cases, it can help to disclaim decision-making, and pass the choice off to some other source of authority. Your choices are: the moves, the players, the characters, and the arcs.

To disclaim authority to the moves, interpret the action either in terms of the basic moves or your GM moves. If you can find a move that fits, it should help resolve the uncertainty for you—just do what that move says. *“Would the August agree to Hornet's plan to take down Satin?” “Yes, so long as Hornet agrees to stop training with Mantis and come train with him instead. **He's supporting Hornet conditionally.**”*

To disclaim authority to the players, make it a question about what they do, specifically. Push them until they do something that resolves the uncertainty for you. *“Would the August agree to Hornet's plan to take down Satin?” “Somebody should provoke him or pierce his mask to find out!”*

To disclaim authority to the NPCs, look at the drives and moves of the NPCs involved, and follow them through to their conclusion. If the drives and moves support one course over all the others, go with that. *“Would the August agree to Hornet's plan to take down Satin?” “The August has the drive ‘To serve and protect the whole of Halcyon City at any cost.’ So, yes—he'd go with the plan to save Halcyon from Satin.”*

To disclaim authority to the arcs, look at your arcs and hooks (page 181), and see if you can use them to answer the question for you. *“Would the August agree to Hornet's plan to take down Satin?” “The August is a hook for Hornet, pulling her to be a Savior. He'll agree if Hornet puts the emphasis of the plan on saving people, and not on beating Satin.”*

## YOUR MOVES

Your agendas are your goals, and your principles are the paths you take to achieve your goals. Your moves, then, are the things you actually say during the game to fill in what happens next. They're individual steps you take towards your goal.

Often, it's enough to let the players tell you what they do and focus on any moves they trigger along the way. If they roll a hit, the moves usually tell you what happens next. But sometimes that's not enough: when they roll a miss, and you have to make a hard move; when no one's triggering any moves, and they're all looking at you expectantly; or when you just think that you should make a move as a follow-up to something that happens.

### SOFTER MOVES VS. HARDER MOVES

Throughout the book, I've made reference to **hard moves**, which implies that there are **soft moves**. Whether a move is harder or softer is about how much, and how directly, it changes the fiction. Softer moves set the stage for harder moves in the future, and can be dealt with, stopped, and undermined before they lead to a harder move. Harder moves change the fiction immediately and importantly, and can't be stopped.

As GM, you decide how hard or soft to make any given move. Keep in mind your agendas and principles, though. If you're hitting with hard moves all the time, chances are you're not being a fan of the PCs. If you're using soft moves all the time, then you're not making your threats real.

### SOFTER MOVE EXAMPLES

You show up back at your base, but something's off. The door isn't locked, and the lights inside are flickering. You look around, but you don't see anyone. What do you do?

When you arrive at home, your mom is sitting in her armchair, waiting for you. The TV's on, showing your recent exploits. She's not watching though—her eyes are locked on you. She says, "Well? Any words to explain your behavior?"

### HARDER MOVE EXAMPLES

You show up back at your base, but something's off. The door isn't locked, and the lights inside are flickering. Suddenly, in a blur of motion, Shell comes hurtling out of the base punches you in the chest. **Take a powerful blow**, and then...what do you do?

When you arrive at home, your mom is sitting in her armchair, waiting for you. The TV's on, showing your recent exploits. She's not watching though—her eyes are locked on you. She says, "I'm ashamed of your behavior tonight. You didn't act like a hero—you acted like a thug." She's shifting your Savior down and your Danger up. What do you do?

## MAKE A MOVE WHEN...

You make a move—as hard or as soft as you like—when:

...there's a lull in the conversation.

...a player misses a roll.

...a player hands you a golden opportunity.

**You're the Editor in Chief, in charge of keeping the story interesting.**

When everybody's looking around, unsure of what happens next...when the conversation stalls...that's your cue. Step in. Make something happen. You can usually get away with softer moves in this case.

**You're the Voice of Fate, in charge of interpreting misses.** When someone rolls a miss on a move, you're the ultimate authority on what happens next. Whatever move you make needs to flow from the fiction, based on what's come before and the circumstances of the missed roll. If the PC's move describes a miss condition, follow those guidelines. Otherwise, you make whatever move fits, hard or soft as you choose.

**You're the Keeper of Continuity, in charge of following the fiction and seizing opportunities.** When someone does something that's just begging for a move, then make one! A PC can't go charging at Dominus, the time-traveling god-being, and not expect to get smacked. You're in charge of making sure that when the fiction demands a move, you make one.

## BASIC MOVES FOR THE GM

Here're your basic moves, with some details on each:

- Inflict a condition
- Take Influence over someone
- Bring them together
- Capture someone
- Put innocents in danger
- Show the costs of collateral damage
- Reveal the future, subtly or directly
- Announce between-panel threats
- Make them pay a price for victory
- Turn their move back on them
- Tell them the possible consequences and ask
- Tell them who they are or who they should be
- Bring an NPC to rash decisions and hard conclusions
- Activate the downsides of their abilities and relationships
- Make a playbook move
- Make a villain move
- After every move: "What do you do?"



## ADULT NPCs AND INFLUENCE

Adult NPCs have Influence over PCs by default, but they can lose it if the PCs reject their Influence. Young NPCs can gain Influence over the PCs too. When an NPC gets Influence on a PC they already have Influence on, the NPC instantly shifts up one of the PC's Labels and shifts down another, without the PC getting to interrupt.

### INFLECT A CONDITION

Young heroes lead stressful lives! **Inflect a condition** to clarify how intense the pressure's getting, how they're negatively affected by all that's coming at them. Inflicting a condition always leads to more fiction, which is exactly what you want. When you **inflect a condition**, you should only tell the PC which condition if you have a very clear idea for it.

Toro, you unleash a barrage of punches at Vanquish, but he's not affected by any of them. When you're done, you're panting, and your fists hurt, and he just laughs at you. Mark Afraid. What do you do?

Huma, your words of comfort fall flat—Iconoclast looks at you with utter contempt. “You don't know what you're talking about. You're just a kid,” she says. Mark a condition, your choice. What do you do?

### TAKE INFLUENCE OVER SOMEONE

Young heroes often leave themselves vulnerable. They open themselves up and find themselves affected by the words of people they thought they could ignore. That's you **taking Influence over someone**. You're flagging that the PCs don't have as much control over their own emotions as they might want...that they don't always get to pick and choose whose words matter to them.

Sureshot, you try to pierce Champion's mask, but you're kinda distracted—*this is Champion!* ! “It's okay to be a little starstruck,” he says, noticing the look on your face. “I always like meeting a fan.” He thinks you're just a fan! *He* takes **Influence over you**, but he already had it—shift your Mundane up, and your Savior down. What do you do?

Vertex, you try to turn away from White Cobra, to pretend she doesn't know what she's saying, but it doesn't work. Her words got to you. “I can help you, kid,” she says. “I can make you better than you ever thought you could be.” She takes **Influence over you**. She'd lost it previously, but now it's back, and you're frozen in her presence. What do you do?

## BRING THEM TOGETHER

The young heroes will do a bang-up job of separating themselves. They've all got their own stuff to worry about, their own interests and ideas to pursue. It's your job to bring 'em back together and connect the disparate elements of their lives so they wind up encountering each other again in surprising places and ways. You don't have to make them love each other—but you do need to point them at each other.

Grasshopper, your sister runs right up to Huma and holds out her little pocket notebook. "Could you...could you sign it?" she says, her eyes glistening with hope and wonder and worship. "You're my favorite hero!" What do you do?

Toro, you read the file that Ursa sent you, and realize it lays the blame for your creation at the feet of Crystal Corp., the same company that Mantis, Hornet's mentor, once owned and ran. Did Mantis know about this? Did Hornet? What do you do?

## CAPTURE SOMEONE

Lock people down. Put them into dangerous situations, with no clear way out. Do it to the PCs, or to people the PCs care about. Sometimes you can even just straight up capture characters, having the villain take them to a secret lair or something similar. When you **capture someone**, you amp up the stakes, giving the heroes a chance to be heroes and save their friend.

Sureshot, the doorway's blocked by fire, and you're on the eighth floor—any jump will be pretty nasty for you. Meanwhile, Satin is still advancing toward you, seemingly impervious to the flames. What do you do?

Fission, you wake up after your powers knocked you out, and you're bound, held inside some kind of laboratory. Weird cords are plugged into your arms, pulling energy through your skin—you feel weak, certainly not strong enough to do anything about the restraints. Above you, Rosa Rook looks down through thick glass. What do you do?

## PUT INNOCENTS IN DANGER

Halcyon City is full of people, and they may be used to the superhuman conflict that riddles the city, but they aren't immune to it or safe from it. That's why heroes are needed in the first place—to keep people safe. When Rampage throws a car, it has to go somewhere, and that means people are often put in danger. **Putting innocents in danger** ups the ante, and gives the heroes a chance to be heroes.

Hornet, you hear Fanboy giggling through the speaker on his robot, as the machine's chest opens to reveal a timer counting down. The thing has a bomb inside of it, and this building is still full of people! What do you do?

Rex, you see Troll start picking up people off the street and tossing them over his shoulder. He's probably hoping to just slow you down, although he clearly doesn't care if anyone gets hurt. What do you do?

## SHOW THE COSTS OF COLLATERAL DAMAGE

It's easy to just pass over and ignore the damage when buildings get destroyed, cars trashed, streets torn up. Halcyon City's gotten pretty darn good at cleaning up that kind of destruction, after all. But that doesn't mean someone doesn't come calling, demanding that the PCs take responsibility for the damage they've caused. Especially when it's important structures, or people, who've been hurt. Show them the costs and the penalties for letting that damage ensue.

Skysong, when you come back to your crystalline ship, you see A.E.G.I.S. agents surrounding it, looping weird straps over it. The lead agent explains that after your last ride through the city, where you clipped all those skyscrapers, they're impounding your ship. What do you do?

Dusk, you brought down the Magus, but the crowd looks at you in shock and horror. They're quiet, and you can hear some of the whispers—they remember when you destroyed Freedom Plaza, and they're terrified of you. The looks in their eyes...you can't help but feel like a Danger. What do you do? Do you accept their view of you?



## REVEAL THE FUTURE, SUBTLY OR DIRECTLY

The characters in **MASKS** are the future of this city. They'll determine what Halcyon City becomes. So keep showing them the future and the possible paths they're on. Sometimes you can do this in a straightforwardly comic book fashion—literally, showing them the future through time portals or future versions of themselves or whatever. But other times, do it indirectly, through current figures that might represent what they're becoming.

Hornet, after you yell at Mantis, you storm out to change into your civilian clothes. Just before you leave the base entirely, you look back to see your mentor sitting at her computer. She looks...more tired than you've ever seen her. Worn out. Sad. Then she sees you looking at her, and her focus snaps back on, her face hardening. What do you do?

Fission, the time portal flares up and you see someone come through. It's...you. This version is bald, and scarred, and filled with deep power—you can feel it. The energy flows through his entire body. He looks at you and smiles, with a terrifying look. "Hello, kid," he says. "I'm here to save you." What do you do?

## ANNOUNCE BETWEEN-PANEL THREATS

Halcyon City marches on, even while the heroes deal with other problems and issues. Between scenes, outside of the conversation, villains may take action that threatens the heroes and their interests. When you need to make a move, you can **announce those threats**. Draw attention to them. Show a villain cackling ominously, or have them make veiled allusions to what they've done—or just straight up announce it, publicly. Villains can be a pompous bunch, after all.

Huma, you've vanquished Vanquish, and you're standing there having your heroic moment, your foot on his chest as he lies against the ground...when you feel a buzzing in the pocket where you keep your cell phone. When you surreptitiously answer it, you hear your dad's voice: "Rustam. It's your grandfather. We're at the hospital. Come quickly." What do you do?

Grasshopper, just as you're leaving for a normal day, you see the Blue Hydra, massive swarm of reptilian blue heads erupting from her back, picking up a car like it weighs nothing. She calls out to the whole of your neighborhood, "Where are you, little cricket? I know you're here—I've been tracking you. Show yourself!" She looks ready to throw the car at your house. What do you do?

## MAKE THEM PAY A PRICE FOR VICTORY

You can open paths for the heroes to come through victoriously, having another hero or even a villain arrive with a way to succeed—but always at a price. The villain will only help if you give them something you shouldn't; the hero offers help, but only in exchange for your team agreeing to follow her lead in the future.

Dusk, the Lady Faust holds out her hand. “I can help you,” she says. “I can give you the power you need to close the rifts and push this monster back out of your world. But you have to give me something in exchange—I want you to let me into the Penumbra Realm behind your portal.” What do you do?

Vertex, the Silver Savior hears your plea for help—reluctant as it is—and looks skeptical. “I don’t know if I believe you, and honestly, I’m tempted to leave you on your own,” he says. “But I’ll come with you if you promise me something: that you come here to train with me, from now on, every day.” Probably means Silver Savior would also take Influence over you. What do you do?

## TURN THEIR MOVE BACK ON THEM

Sometimes, all you have to do to make a move is flip around the move a PC just made. They tried to **pierce someone’s mask**? Great! Pierce theirs, and ask them some questions. They tried to **provoke someone**? Great! Provoke them, telling them to do something nasty. When you turn their move back on them, always do it as if it was a 10+ result.

Vertex, your efforts to **provoke** Grasshopper to come out partying with you wind up making you look more insecure—and open you up. Grasshopper, you can **provoke** Vertex to do whatever you want, as if you’d rolled a 10+. What do you do?

Skysong, you’re **piercing Kalka the Bloodhewn’s mask**, but she’s just stone-faced and angry. You wind up showing much more on your face than she does on hers, so she gets to ask you some questions from the **pierce the mask** move. How could she get you to help her defeat Sablestar?

## TELL THEM THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES AND ASK

Sometimes, the path to victory is clear—but it won't come without taking a few hits along the way. You can always tell a PC exactly what will happen if they follow a particular course of action, giving them a difficult choice to make or a messy option they hadn't considered. It raises the tension around their choice and decisions, while still keeping things moving forward.

Toro, Arcknife is getting away, dashing down the street. You could throw something at him, but he moves so quickly, you've got no chance of hitting him. Your only shot is to smash the ground—send a tremor running through the street—and knock him off his feet. Of course, that's going to break everything around you. What do you do?

Sureshot, from your perch atop the nearby building, you've got a shot at the Vorpall Integrator—you can probably take it out. But it's nearing full power, and you can clearly see Dusk getting crushed by Tectonic Prime. You can send your arrow to either situation—but you only have time for one or the other. What do you do?

## TELL THEM WHO THEY ARE OR WHO THEY SHOULD BE

Adults and other NPCs who hold Influence over the PCs are always telling the PCs exactly who to be. How to act. What to think. Do it, and do it often. **Telling the PCs who to be** almost always means they have to shift their Labels or reject the NPC's Influence, and that's exactly what you want, to keep the PCs' senses of identity fluid and changing.

Rex, Cygnus looks at you with disgust. "Ew, you're the one who's going to take me down? Why couldn't it be someone more photogenic, you ugly freak?" She's shifting your Freak up, your Mundane down. Do you accept it?

Skysong, your uncle Warpstar says to you in your native tongue, "I don't know why you're staying here with these people. They're simple, stupid, and violent. You're so much better than they are." He's shifting your Superior up, and your Mundane down. Do you accept it?



## BRING AN NPC TO RASH DECISIONS AND HARD CONCLUSIONS

NPCs don't always know what's best. They judge situations quickly and harshly and, especially when they have power of their own, they act just as quickly. Those decisions can set in motion all kinds of mayhem and future moves. Don't hesitate to take advantage of an opportunity in which an NPC would jump to a wrong conclusion.

Toro, you're moving down the hallway alongside Arcknife, your uneasy alliance settling into a kind of mutual silence, when Wayfinder, the youngest hero on the Exemplars, appears. He takes one look at the two of you together and shakes his head. "Yeah. I've read your file, Toro. Of course the two of you would team up. Just a matter of time before you became a villain." Now he's charging down the hallway towards you at super speed. What do you do?

Grasshopper, you take off your costume and rejoin the evacuated students now that Power Sink has been captured. You find your sister, but she looks at you with sadness and disgust. "You ran," she says. "You ran and left me there. If it wasn't for that green hero lady, I'd be dead, because you ran. I hate you!" What do you do?

## ACTIVATE THE DOWNSIDES OF THEIR ABILITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Every ability has a downside; every relationship comes with responsibility. Bring those into play to increase the pressure on the PCs. If your powers require you to have equipment, then having that equipment break can mess with your ability to act. If your dad is the leader of the biggest superhero team in the city, people will judge you by his standards. Make the problems and difficulties of each PC's abilities and relationships come up to counterbalance the benefits.

Hornet, when you and the team enter the Exemplars' base, you're met almost immediately by one of their security people. "You're on file as working with Mantis," she says. "She's considered a possible threat in our systems. You'll have to wait outside." What do you do?

Sureshot, you manage to land a few good shots against Carlo the Assassin while you're punching each other, but he goes straight for a kick at your bow, breaking it in half. You pull away from each other, but your bow dangles uselessly from your hand. He grins as he pulls out his own bow and nocks an arrow. What do you do?

## MAKE A PLAYBOOK MOVE

Every playbook has its own unique issues and themes to deal with. In **BEHIND THE MASKS** on page 160, you'll find individual moves you can make for each playbook, to really push on and bring attention to that playbook's issues. You can make these moves any time you could make any other GM move.

**Example:** Nova—Introduce threats only they can take on

Fission, as Doctor Chaotix's device fires, a portal opens up in the sky. An enormous figure descends, radiating power, with strange translucent wings emerging from his back. He waves his hands, and the very matter from the tops of nearby skyscrapers begins to rearrange into statues. What do you do?

**Example:** Outside—Make a request from home

Skysong, your uncle Warpstar runs into the room and grabs your shoulders. He speaks to you in the melodic, unending tones of your home language. "Child, you must come with me, right now—one of the Keynotes has been unearthed on this planet, and we need to secure it for our homeworld before the Farlander does." What do you do?

## MAKE A VILLAIN MOVE

Like the playbook moves, every villain you make has a few moves of their own. You'll find out how to do that later in this chapter (page 156). You can make these moves when you would make any other move, so long as the villain's involved in the situation. They always amp up the situation, and highlight that villain's own particular idiom.

**Example:** Blood Opal—Instantly heal a deadly wound

Rex, you smash through the final pillar and the building collapses behind you, smashing all around Blood Opal. But you're astonished as you see her push her way free of the rubble, the wounds and cuts on her body healing almost immediately. "Is that the best you can do?" she says. What do you do?

**Example:** Ilijah Intrepid—Offer a valuable piece of information or gadget for help

Dusk, Ilijah Intrepid holds up his hands. "Wait, I came here to talk," he says. He pulls out a strange device, diamond shaped, faintly glowing purple. "You can use this to draw off the excess energies from the Penumbral door in your soul. It will delay your end. All you have to do to get it is help me to steal the Quantum Gateway." What do you do?

## CHAIN REACTIONS

The moves in **MASKS** are designed to link together. One move ends and immediately sets up a new move. Partial hits (7-9 results) in particular push the situation towards unresolved tension—you don't flat out take down Tentacular Doom, you hurt the monster instead, then it hurts you, and you push the creature to a place where you might have a chance to knock it out of the city, and so on. Even misses often require reaction, and that reaction pushes towards new moves. That's how you get tense, effective, interesting scenes across the board—but it's also how you get awesome fight scenes. Each punch leads to another change in the scene, which leads to another punch.

As the GM, you control how much the moves snowball. Some things you can say will lead to a chain reaction of moves more than others—if you capture a PC for instance, that ends the chain reaction, whereas opening a portal that releases alien warriors onto the streets will only push the PCs to further action.

This section details a few other things you need to know about how some of the moves of the game connect, interrelate, and flow.

## SESSION MOVES

In **MASKS**, there are two session moves that occur once each every session.

At the start of every session, the GM adds one Team to the pool.

At the end of every session, choose one:

- Grow closer to the team. Explain who made you feel welcome; give Influence to that character and clear a condition or mark potential.
- Grow into your own image of yourself. Explain how you see yourself and why; shift one Label up and another down.
- Grow away from the team. Explain why you feel detached. Take Influence over you away from another character.

The start of session move primes the pump, ensuring the PCs have some Team to work with to make things more interesting over the course of play. The Team pool only empties back to one after time passes, so when you add one there might already be some Team in the pool, left over from the last session.

The end of session move is a satisfying cap to your session of play, almost a recap for everything you just did. The end of session move is performed by every PC, but it's prompted by you, the GM. Make sure each player enunciates their reasons for their choice in the fiction—they might choose for mechanical reasons, but it should always have fictional meaning.

The end of session options should primarily be aimed at other teammates. Remember a player can still give Influence to someone who has it over them already—the other PC just instantly gets to shift their Labels.



## FIGHT SCENES

Fights come up often in **MASKS**, so you need to be prepared for them. An awesome fight can be one of the most fun pieces of a game, but it can also test your GMing skills. You have to manage the spotlight and the flow of the action, the tension, the reactions of the villains...all the moving parts that make a fight scene fun.

### MANAGING THE SPOTLIGHT

If you have a fight scene involving every member of the team and at least one villain, that's a lot of characters for you to bounce between. You're in charge of the **spotlight**, i.e., which character is featured in any given panel of your comic. In game terms, that means you're in charge of who's acting, who has the chance to make a move.

When you've got a big fight like that, you should first see if the players have triggered the core team move: **when you enter battle against a dangerous foe as a team**. The move accounts for them being out of sync with each other and thrown off balance, so you should only avoid the move when it's very, very clear they never came together as a team. This move is crucial to setting the scene, signaling that "This is a dangerous fight!" and getting some Team in the pool for the players.

When the punching starts, remember to be a fan of the PCs. You want to see every one of them be awesome and amazing in your fights, and you don't want to see any of them neglected.

That said, stay where the action is interesting. You don't have to give every single character the exact same amount of time—in fact, you probably shouldn't. If you're controlling what the panels of the comic book show, you wouldn't want the comic to flit around all the time, showing a different character with each successive panel. You'd want to see the comic stick with a character for a few beats before moving to the next part of the fight.

### CRAFTING TENSION

How do you make fights matter? How do you make them feel tense? Dangerous? Potentially disastrous?

First, make moves that inflict conditions or force PCs to take powerful blows. Don't do this out of nowhere, but if you're following the fiction, there'll be ample justification for both conditions and blows. Conditions lead the PCs to either taking interesting actions or rolling more misses, both of which allow you to ramp up the tension. **Taking a powerful blow** leads to its own interesting, stakes-raising outcomes. Rely heavily on those tools throughout the fight.

But also make fights about more than knock-outs. Sometimes the situation calls for a good, solid, climactic brawl, with the heroes and the villains going at it to see who's standing when the dust settles. And that's awesome! But the rest of the time, complicate the situation.

Most fights shouldn't just be about who takes out who first, but whether the villain can set off the Quantum Reverberator before the heroes can stop them, or whether the heroes can get the Mayor to safety, or whether the heroes can successfully capture the rampaging villain before they destroy too much of the city. Make GM moves that point the fight in directions other than straight out brawling.

## PORTRAYING VILLAINS

You should still portray your villains as people, with their own character traits and contradictions. But during fights, you need to take some steps to make them fit the role of primary opposition.

**First, every time a villain marks a condition during a fight, they immediately make a condition move.** They can make condition moves at other times throughout the fight, whenever you'd make a move—but they always make one immediately after they take the condition. These should almost always be softer moves, setting up future action and results. Not, “You punch Vanquish, he gets Angry, and he levels you with a punch, mark a condition,” but “You punch Vanquish, he gets Angry, and now he's hurtling at you full speed with all his alien power. Stay where you're standing and you're gonna get leveled. What do you do?”

**Second, push villains toward their drives.** Drives tell you what the villains are really after, and more often than not, they point you in directions slightly askew from straightforward conflict. Use those drives to help keep the conflicts interesting, and as a prompt for when villains would start to negotiate or flee.

**Third, follow the fiction.** If the PCs nail the villain with a snide insult and make them start feeling a particular condition, mark off that condition and have the villain make a condition move. If the villain would be largely immune to some kind of threat or attack from the PCs, let them know—the villain just shrugs it off.

Here's an example to show how these principles come together in a fight scene:

Hornet, Rex, Fission, and Skysong were hunting for a piece of extradimensional matter, but they were caught in a high-school-shaped labyrinth of traps by an otherworldly threat known as the Teacher. The Teacher's trying to “reeducate” the young heroes by keeping them separated in her warped network of classrooms, but

they managed to come together after snagging a piece of “chalk”—the matter they were seeking—for a final confrontation against her.

“The four of you stand there, as the Teacher gives you that eerie smile. ‘Oh, you children, trying to play hooky! I think it’s time for detention.’ She swipes her hand across the lockers behind you, and a rent in the fabric of space opens up. Behind it, you see...bad, bad things. There’s a panel of the four of you exchanging a look. It sounds to me like you’re entering **battle against a dangerous foe as a team?**” Everyone nods, and I’m glad I called it out. It’s likely that everyone would have jumped directly to their moves!

We run quickly through the move—two in the Team pool by default; Hornet’s the leader, she has Influence over everyone (+1 Team); her plan is to escape, and everyone agrees (+1 Team); no one mistrusts the team or the leader; but they are kind of ill-prepared for this (-1 Team). The PCs add three to the Team pool.

I turn the spotlight to Hornet first. “Hornet, the Teacher starts moving down the hallway, just walking normally, but with a strange look in her eyes; you see weird clawed hands clamoring at the rent in space behind her. What do you do?”

“Oh, man,” says Joe. “I really want to get us out of here. I’m looking around for any exits, or any ways out—I want to **assess the situation.**”

“Perfect!” I say. “Roll!”

Joe gets a 10, so he asks two questions. “All right. First up, how could we best end this quickly?”

“Looking around, this whole place is a strange, ethereal labyrinth of madness. You’re not even sure this place is real. Get out of here, and you’re confident you’ll get free of her power and end this threat—and you think you might be able to break this place apart by smashing it.” Before I gave this answer, I wasn’t sure if they were in a real place or an extradimensional space or what, but I took this opportunity to make the fight about more than just beating the Teacher. The best way to end this quickly isn’t a head-on confrontation—it’s to flee, by other means.

“Great. I think I know a few of these other answers, so...what here can I use to escape?”

“Oh, interesting. Yeah, your stun batons can act as lightning rods if Fission pours a tremendous amount of energy into them. They might disrupt the cohesion of this whole place better than punching or smashing.” Joe looks at the team, and everyone nods. I can see they’re already formulating a plan.

“But as you’re putting this together, the Teacher’s been closing the distance. She extends one hand toward you. You feel the floor growing sludgy as your feet sink into it...somehow.” I’m using one of the Teacher’s villain moves, **hold a student in place with reality distortions**, but it’s just a soft move, setting up a harder move later and still giving Hornet a chance to react. “Hornet, what do you do?” I’m keeping the spotlight on Hornet because I’m interested about what she’ll do next.

“I start barking orders! ‘Skysong, Rex, hold her off! Fission, you’re with me—we need to break this place open!’” Joe says. “Then I’ll pull my feet free and try to ram

one of my stun batons into the wall. Is that **unleashing my powers** since I'm relying on my weapons?"

I nod, and Joe rolls. He gets a 9 and chooses to mark a condition instead of letting it be unstable or temporary. He settles on Hopeless: "Yeah, Horner's not sure we can really make it out of this. The Teacher can warp reality, and she's clearly pretty far removed from humanity."

"Yeah, it's right to worry. You slam the stun baton into the wall, but the Teacher makes another gesture, and those shadowy hands clawing at the rift in the air start stabbing forward at the four of you," I say. I'm making the same move and emphasizing the Teacher's drive—to control the next generation of heroes and villains. She won't let them go if she can avoid it.

"Nuh-uh," says Andrea. "I want to fire a burst of light to cut through the arms, so no one gets caught in them. Is that an **unleash**?"

"Sounds more like **defending**! Roll with Savior." I'm cool with Andrea essentially seizing the spotlight as Skysong—what she's doing is cool and a perfect response to the move the Teacher made.

"Ah, poop, I have a low Savior," she says. She rolls anyway and gets a 3!

"Oh yeah, you blast out all that powerful light and it scythes through the shadowy arms—but the Teacher just looks at you with an utterly inhuman expression and surges forward. Her body distends and twists weirdly as she comes at you and slaps you with one long limb. It's a pretty terrifying display—mark Afraid, then roll to **take a powerful blow**."

I'm following the fiction—Skysong definitely has to **take a powerful blow** from that hit—and I'm **inflicting a condition**—a simple hard move that works well along with taking a **powerful blow**. I'm doing it through one of the Teacher's moves—**reveal her true form from an innocuous and trusted shape**. It's not quite the full move—they certainly didn't trust this shape—but close enough.

"Can I jump in to **defend** her from that hit?" Matt asks. "I think Rex would totally help Skysong out here."

"No, we're still resolving Skysong's **defend** move," I reply. "The Teacher moves so unexpectedly, you just can't get there in time."

Andrea rolls to **take a powerful blow** and gets a 7. "I don't like any of these options! I guess I'll give ground. The opponent gets an opportunity."

I look to the Teacher's drive again, and decide she'd try to capture Skysong, once and for all. "Yeah, you're pretty dazed by this, right? Before you put yourself back together, she wraps her weird arms around you and pulls open one door in the hall. Behind it there's that endless swirling dark vortex. She's gonna throw you inside!"

Now that the Teacher has seized her opportunity, it's time to turn the spotlight back to the other PCs. "Rex, you're moving by this point—what do you do?"

"Oh, I'm gonna just leap on her and punch her tons. Over and over and over," Matt says. Matt rolls to **directly engage**, and gets an 11! "Perfect! Okay...I choose to impress, surprise, or frighten my foe, and take something from her. Clearly Skysong, right?"

“Oh definitely,” I reply. “Yeah, you two are embroiled in a nasty little fight, her body twisting into weird tendrils and stabbing at you, you just tearing her up with your claws, snarling with that animalistic expression on your face. Her body slackens and she releases Skysong before she pulls away from you. But she got her licks in too—**take a powerful blow**.” Matt gets a 3—he’s getting all the good rolls!

“I get to mark potential and say how I weather the blows, right? It’s not even conscious. My body repairs the damage, and grows hardened scales over those spots almost instantly. She can’t hurt me!” Matt says.

“That’s awesome!”

Since Rex has traded blows with her, I mark a condition on the Teacher. Normally I’d mark Angry for her but because Rex impressed, surprised, or frightened her, I look and choose to mark Insecure. “I see *double down on broken plans* or ideas in the condition moves for Insecure, and go with that.

“Yeah, she reels and looks super uncertain as her face collapses into a goopy mishmash...but then her features snap back together and you hear her say, ‘No! You’re just...just children! *I must save you! I will save you!*’ And though you’ve clearly got Skysong safe behind you, she surges forward, straight towards you. She’s trying to get around you, Rex—trying to get to Skysong.”

“Can I **defend** Skysong?” Matt asks.

“In a second—I think that’s where the panels shift to show what’s happening with Fission and Hornet while all that fighting is going on,” I say. Fission hasn’t had spotlight yet, so I want to shine it on him. “Hornet just slammed that stun baton into the wall. You telling Fission anything, Hornet?”

“Charge it up! If you pour your power into it, you can break this place apart!” Joe says as Hornet.

“Okay, I don’t hesitate—I’ll follow Hornet’s lead,” says Sarah. “I wrap my hands around the baton, and then I pour power into it until the walls shatter.”

“Perfect! **Unleash your powers**,” I say.

“Can Fission get the +1 bonus for acting on the answer for **assess the situation**?” Joe asks.



“Normally that bonus is for the person who did the assessment, but sure, in this case, since you’re team leader and Fission is following your plan.”

Sarah gets a 6. It’s going to be a miss!

“Wait, I want to help,” says Joe. “As soon as the wall starts to shatter under Fission’s power, I start striking at the cracks. It probably hurts my hands, makes my fingers bleed, but I’m well trained, and I break bricks with my hands all the time. Does that work?”

“Yeah, totally! That makes the roll a 7!” I take one Team from the pool.

Fission overcomes the obstacle, but at a cost. “I’m pretty high on conditions right now, so...I’m gonna make it unstable or temporary,” says Sarah.

“Oh, perfect,” I say. “Yeah, you feel your power disrupting this pocket reality. Weird glowing green cracks spread from the stun baton and Hornet starts striking those cracks, forcing them to spread further, creating holes in the walls and showing that blackness beyond. At one end of the hall, you see a hole of light—blue sky! That must be the way back! But between here and there is a mess of broken high school hallway and gaping voids of hungry darkness.” I’m raising the tension here—they have a way out, but it’s dangerous to get there, and the Teacher’s still on their heels.

“So, Hornet—what do you do?”

## PC VS PC

In **MASKS**, there may be some conflict between PCs, situations where two young heroes try to provoke each other or punch each other. Most of the time, PCs try to **comfort or support** each other, and they have relatively little reason to resist—even on a hit, the comforted or supported PC can choose to not open up. But even though **MASKS** is mostly concerned with conflict against antagonists and villains, sometimes the PCs will want to hit each other. That’s okay! You and **MASKS** can handle it.

## SHARING SPOTLIGHT

These situations ultimately follow many of the guidelines for fights. Share the spotlight between the characters and be a fan of everyone involved. You may flip to one PC first, as the instigator, to **directly engage a threat**, but you need to keep shifting the focus of your panels so all the PCs involved get the spotlight. No PC should ever completely thrash any other just because of spotlight.

Remember that players usually have a fair amount of control over when they go down. If their conditions are full and they have to mark another, then they go out; but they have options besides marking conditions when they **take powerful blows**. As such, you can rely on that move to help ensure nobody gets taken out too quickly, too easily—the PCs may be faced with some hard



choices about the costs of continuing the fight, but they probably won't go down without warning.

## DEFENDING AND BOOSTING

The only means PCs have to directly intervene when another PC comes after them is to **defend against a PC threat**. On a 7+, the defender gives the opposition a -2 to their roll. **Defend** needs to be against an immediate threat, though, and with PCs against PCs, that should really be limited to dangerous and direct action. A PC can't usually **defend** themselves when another PC tries to **comfort or support them** or **pierce their mask**. Resolve the first move, then let the target of the move make a move in response.

Other PCs can pretty much always help by spending Team from the pool. A PC might scream that they don't want help, but if another PC wants to spend Team to help out, they get +1 to a roll. Players are encouraged to talk out of character about whether or not they want to spend Team.

## PLAYER VS PLAYER EXAMPLE

Huma's pretty frustrated with Vertex's nonsense, especially choosing to let La Espada go during their last conflict, instead of bringing her down.

"So what?" says Jack as Vertex. "You're not the real team leader, that's Hornet. You've got no authority...unless you want to punch me. Is that what you want to do, jerk? You gonna hit me?" I want to **provoke** Huma to back down. Definitely not to hit me!" Vertex has Influence over Huma, so that **provoke** definitely goes off. But Jack gets a miss.

"Oh, yeah, okay. So Huma, I'll turn that around. You get a free **provoke** on Vertex, as if you'd rolled a 10+." I'm **turning the move around** on Vertex, a great GM move in PC vs PC conflicts.

"Awesome! I want Vertex to back down. I'd love it if he apologized, but backing down is enough. 'No, Vertex. I don't have to hit you. Because you're a coward, and you're going to shut up. Right. Now,'" says Rich.

"Ah, I can't back down after that!" says Jack. He thinks for a second. "Yeah...I guess I hit Huma!"

"Oh man," I say. "Okay, well, first mark a condition as a result of the **provoke**, then I think you're **directly engaging a threat**, right?"

"Yep. I'll mark Angry and roll to **directly engage**." Jack gets an 11. "Hah! So I get two options, right?"

"Hold on. I definitely want to defend myself," says Rich. "I saw him coming a mile away. I try to slip out to the side and let him run into a wall." He rolls to **defend against an immediate threat**, and gets a 9. That means he exposes himself to cost, retribution, or judgment, but he does drop Vertex's roll down to a 9.

"You slip to the side, Huma, but it's not enough. Vertex's first punch hits the wall, but he rebounds quickly and catches you with a second blow."

“I choose to resist or avoid his blows,” says Jack.

“Yep. So Huma, you can’t get a good shot in—you were probably a little startled by this, despite your move to slip to the side. Vertex lands a surprisingly solid punch to your face, but nothing too bad. Roll to **take a powerful blow**.”

Rich gets an 8. He debates a few options: “No way am I giving him an opportunity. I’m tempted to lash out again, but my Superior’s not so good right now, so I’ll mark two conditions. Angry and Insecure—I’m doubting myself. I just got punched by Vertex.”

“Yep. Plus, you exposed yourself to cost, retribution, or judgment, right? So yeah. Pick one of your teammates who’s watching and give them Influence over you,” I say.

“Oh, definitely Hornet! Vertex specifically mentioned her!” says Rich.

“Yep, so Hornet, you get Influence over Huma. Huma, you’ve got some nice hits on your face—nothing too bad, but boy do they sting. And you’re keenly aware of Hornet watching you in this fight. What do you do now?”

“I think about stopping for a minute...but I’m coming right back at him. Time to show him what it means to be Huma. I want to **directly engage** and just lay him out on the ground.”

And the fight continues...

Don’t hesitate to let these dramatic confrontations play out—but remember, plenty of interesting things can happen to break these fights up. If there are other PCs there, they get the spotlight, too! They can try to interfere, defend one teammate or the other. If someone gets a miss, they might get attacked by a villain or interrupted by something else dangerous—that happens all the time in comics. Use these tools to help ensure PC vs PC conflicts don’t run too long or take up too much of your attention in the game as a whole.

## USING NPCs IN PLAY

Halcyon City is packed with people for you to put in your game. To create an NPC, give them a name, think about how they look—maybe one distinctive mannerism or physical trait—and a one-word synopsis of how they act. That’s all you need to start! Later, you can add more to flesh ‘em out—abilities if they’re superhuman, or a drive to tell you what they want.

### DRIVES

An easy way to give an NPC more detail is to give them a **drive**: a simple statement of what they want. Always phrase a drive as a “To \_\_\_\_\_” sentence: “To make tons of money”; “To become the new mayor”; “To avenge my sister.” When you need to say what an NPC does, look at their drive—they’ll always angle for an action that in some way brings them closer to accomplishing their drive, though more manipulative NPCs may be subtler about it.

## PC-NPC-PC TRIANGLES

As often as possible, create PC-NPC-PC triangles—webs of relationships in which two PCs have fundamentally different connections to the same NPC.

The Janus's sister? Yeah, she's totally got a crush on the Nova. And the Legacy's mom adores her daughter, but hates that problematic Delinquent—and had herself made the Delinquent's parole officer, just to keep an eye on the guy. That former reformed supervillain is helping the Doomed to potentially overcome her doom, but the Protégé knows that the supervillain was the most dangerous foe her mentor ever fought. And so on, and so forth.

When possible, reuse an NPC instead of creating a new one, so you can create these triangles for your PCs.

## NPC CONDITIONS

For the most part, NPCs don't have that many conditions to mark. The only real way they mark conditions is if a PC **directly engaged** them, and only NPCs with real abilities ever count as threats for that move to trigger—and they're probably villains. (More on villains in a moment.) So don't worry about tracking conditions for anyone except the villains—everybody else simply reacts according to the fiction.

## NPC INFLUENCE

All adult NPCs have Influence over PCs by default, so you don't have to track much when it comes to Influence. They can still lose and gain Influence, so if they ever do, mark that in your notes.

Young NPCs, the same age as the PCs, don't automatically start with Influence over the PCs. But you can ask the PCs if their peers have Influence over them, and record it appropriately.

You can and should use Influence all the time for your NPCs. They can tell the PCs who they are and how the world works left and right, shifting the PCs' Labels and giving cause to reject Influence. If it ever feels like a good moment for an NPC to say something that could shift a PC's Labels, go for it.

## ADULTS

Most of your NPCs will probably be adults, older than the PCs. Remember to make adults seem childish and short-sighted—there's a good chance your natural tendency will pull you in the opposite direction.

In general, adults are older, probably more experienced, maybe even wiser—but they're all still flawed and sometimes vulnerable individuals. They just have a tendency to hide their emotions more, to let them simmer inside instead of letting them burst out all at once. Play up the dichotomy. Don't have your adults be explicitly jerks or wonderful people—have them be both.

## VILLAINS

**Villain** is a catch-all term for the main antagonists in your story. Sometimes villains are straight-up monsters; other times, they have all too human motivations. You might even have a “villain” who’s actually one of the city’s biggest heroes! A villain is simply an NPC important enough—and threatening enough—to get an in-depth workup as an antagonist in your game.

Villains follow the basic rules for NPCs. Build triangles around them, and give them drives in exactly the same way. But there some additional steps for setting up a villain.

### HOW TO MAKE A VILLAIN

Follow these steps to set up a villain, whether making one from scratch or writing up an existing character as a villain:

- Choose a name and generation
- Choose a drive
- Choose one to five villain moves
- Choose one to five conditions

### VILLAIN NAMES

Choose a name that’s fun and exciting to you, and that signals the generation of the villain.

- Gold: Goofy, fun, light-hearted names
- Silver: Grandiose, cosmic, epic names
- Bronze: Down-to-earth, simple, catchy names
- Modern: Meme-worthy, “unique,” clever names

When it’s appropriate, pick a real name for the villain, too.

### VILLAIN DRIVES

Give your villain a drive, a purpose or goal that leads them to action, in the form of a statement:

“To \_\_\_\_\_.” This is the same as giving any NPC a drive, but for villains especially, make your drives point at the villain’s underlying humanity. Instead of “To travel through time,” go with “To correct past mistakes.” Make the drives comprehensible and empathetic whenever possible.

## VILLAIN MOVES

Create three or so **villain moves**, things the villain does, both in and out of fights. Make them descriptive and interesting. Not **punch hard**, but **fire a cosmic punch at the most dangerous target**. The villain moves remind you of some of the villain's signature actions while you use them in a conflict—more descriptive moves give you more to work with.

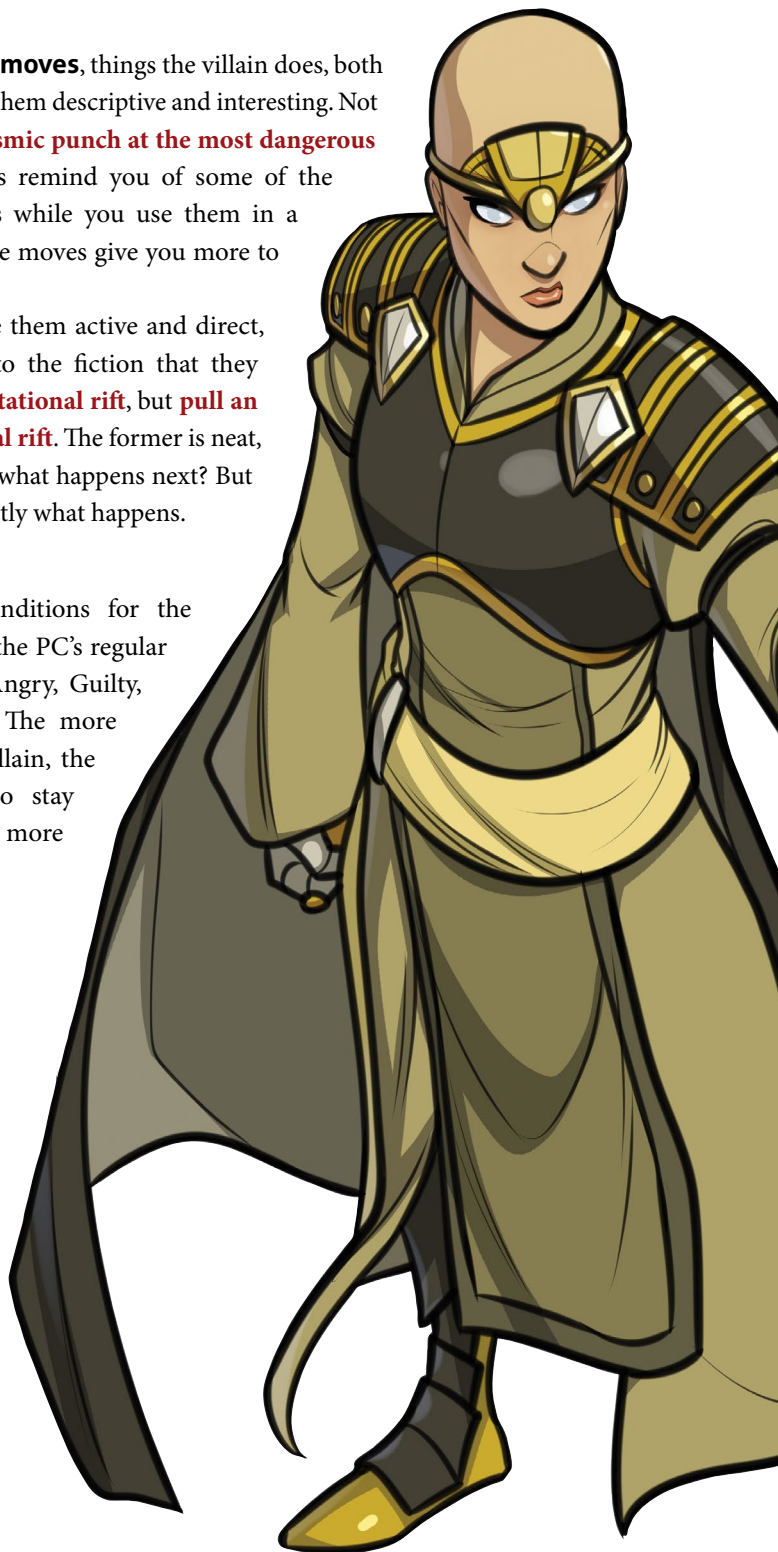
Generally try to make them active and direct, focused on the change to the fiction that they create. Not, **create a gravitational rift**, but **pull an enemy into a gravitational rift**. The former is neat, but also unclear—exactly what happens next? But the latter makes clear exactly what happens.

## CONDITIONS

Choose one to five conditions for the villain. You choose from the PC's regular conditions list: Afraid, Angry, Guilty, Hopeless, and Insecure. The more conditions you give a villain, the greater their capacity to stay in the fight, and the more dangerous they'll be.

- 1 condition:  
barely a threat
- 2 conditions:  
bit of a fight
- 3 conditions:  
threatening villain
- 4 conditions:  
dangerous villain
- 5 conditions:  
true arch-villain

You can always adjust a villain's danger and longevity by giving them more conditions or taking away conditions.



## EXAMPLE VILLAIN

First, I choose the villain's name and generation. I want a powerful villain who's been around for a while, so I pick the Silver generation. I want a name that sounds menacing and over-the-top: I settle on the Dread Queen. I can give her a real name later, if I need one.

Then I give the villain a drive. The Dread Queen is forming in my head as a regal villain, arrogant and in charge of some nation. I think she enacts grandiose plans, but ultimately, she's driven by a relatable urge: "To protect and grow her sovereign nation." Next, I give the Dread Queen some villain moves. I stick with three for now—if I really feel the need for more later, I can add them on.

**Reveal a dangerous high-tech weapon or doomsday device**

**Unveil the perfect countermeasure or counter strategy**

**Twist probabilities in her favor with her Quantum Circlet**

Next, I give the Dread Queen four conditions to show how dangerous she is: Angry, Guilty, Hopeless, and Insecure. The Dread Queen is never Afraid.

I jot down some notes about who exactly she is—a monarch from another dimension who came to Halcyon City during a multidimensional shift. Her country came with her and floats in the ocean near the city. Halcyon is her first target for conquest.

And she's all set and ready to go!

## VILLAINS IN A FIGHT

Here are the core guidelines that villains follow in fights:

- When a villain gets hit hard, by trading blows or in other situations, they mark a condition as appropriate.
- When a villain marks a condition, they make a move from the condition moves list immediately, before the PCs act again.
- When you need to say what the villain does next, look to your GM moves, their villain moves, and the condition moves.
- When a villain needs to mark a condition but can't, they are defeated.
- Villains can flee or give up long before all their conditions are filled—don't think they have to fight to the bitter end.

Villains, and NPCs in general, always try to clear conditions—they always choose to open up after a PC's successful **comfort or support** move.

Beyond always seeking to clear conditions as the result of a PC's successful **comfort or support** move, villains clear conditions when you think it fictionally appropriate, most likely after time has passed (page 86) and they've had the chance to get over their feelings.



## CONDITION MOVES

These are GM moves for villains to make immediately after they've marked a condition, and any time you'd make a GM move after that.

### AFRAID

- **Hide out of harm's way**
- **Flee from danger or difficulty**
- **Lash out without thought at a threat**
- **Plead for mercy**
- **Throw up blocks and walls**

The Afraid condition moves are about blocking and fleeing, about escaping from danger, with the exception of **lash out without thought at a threat**. Mark Afraid for a villain if you want them to try to escape or protect their interests.

### ANGRY

- **Vent through unthinking violence**
- **Break the environment**
- **Shut down conversation**
- **Lash out at any vulnerability**
- **Escalate the situation dangerously**

The Angry condition moves are about intense overreaction and amplifying the situation. Mark Angry for a villain if you want them to fight and struggle dangerously.

### GUILTY

- **Seek forgiveness**
- **Sacrifice anything or everything for redemption**
- **Turn to the unthinkable**
- **Implicate others in guilt**
- **Reveal the nature of their drive**

The Guilty condition moves are about making the villain more relatable and human. They let you try to redeem a villain or to show an inner pain that pushes them to drastic action. Mark Guilty for a villain if they understand the terrible nature of the things they do, but aren't sure what else they can do.



## MOOKS AND COLLECTIVE VILLAINS

Superhero stories are chock full of enemies who don't rate as highly as a villain. Heroes tear through tons of robots and clone-slugs and other myriad chumps. How do you represent these foes in **MASKS**?

You can always write up a group of individuals as a single villain. Give the group a drive, conditions, and moves just like normal, and describe what that group is doing collectively. Only do this when you really want to signal that this group is a genuine threat. For example, you might write up a robot army as if it were a single villain, to indicate the threat that the giant group poses.

Otherwise, treat groups of NPCs just like any other NPCs—by and large, the PCs can toss 'em around without problem. Remember that PCs have to **directly engage a threat**, not just anyone, and if those mooks are just mooks, then they certainly aren't a threat.

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## HOPELESS

- **Give up without a fight**
- **Burn down the world around them**
- **Seek any light in the dark**
- **Undermine others' beliefs**
- **Veer toward drastic and terrible action**

The Hopeless condition moves are about escalation or de-escalation. They let you make the villain give up, or take an outstretched hero's hand...or they let you make the villain escalate in terrible ways. Mark Hopeless for a villain if they're losing badly, and you want to either ratchet the overall tension or bring things to a close.

## INSECURE

- **Double down on broken plans or ideas**
- **Follow the lead of someone else**
- **Doubt and question their own allies and plans**
- **Admit wrongful action**
- **Recede into the background**

The Insecure condition moves are about social interaction. They let you make a villain talk, explain, or interact on a level other than conflict and violence. Mark Insecure for a villain if they doubt themselves and those around them, and you're interested in having a different kind of interaction.

## BEHIND THE MASKS

The playbooks your players choose tell you more than just their specific abilities and moves—they tell you the issues and themes your players are interested in seeing during the game. That may change over the course of play; it might turn out that the Doomed is surprisingly interested in their romantic interest, or that the Outsider is actually interested in their dual identity. But those playbooks flag what kind of conflicts the players want to see in the game.

As much as possible, keep in mind what moves and options they select—those options give you further clues about what they want to see during play. But don't worry about this too much. Ultimately, the players are in charge of their own characters and making their moves come into play.

Pay close attention to the contents of this section: the playbook moves. Each playbook comes with a few GM moves, catered to that playbook's specific issues and elements. Use these moves when you could make any other move to drive attention to those thematic pieces of each character.

### THE BEACON

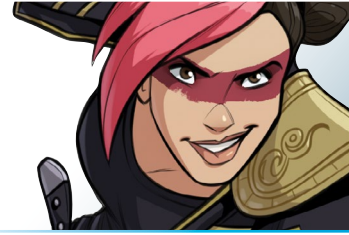
- **Draw attention to their inadequacies**
- **Praise their best traits**
- **Make them pay for their audacity**
- **Compare them to the others**
- **Play to their drives**



The Beacon is about being the “straight man” to everybody else’s crazy, over-the-top superhero. They’re normal, through and through, and there’s a strong argument to be made they shouldn’t be with this team—and it’s your job, as GM, to make that argument. Put pressure on the Beacon to prove why they belong. Doubt them. Make them insecure. And then give them chances to shine, doing whatever it is they do best. Pay attention to the Beacon’s drives—those tell you what the Beacon is hoping to do, and you should try your best to help the Beacon mark them off, at least one per session.

## THE BULL

- **Endanger their love**
- **Bolster their rival**
- **Reveal dark secrets of their past**
- **Attack with someone just like them**
- **Swarm with mundane forces**



The Bull is hyperfocused on their love and rival, by default. Go with that. Play up those relationships. Make their love endangered, and their rival bolstered, to give them chances to react. Sometimes, flip it to keep things interesting—endanger their rival and bolster their love (maybe with a competing love interest).

The Bull comes from some dark past, some weapons program, something that made them so destructive. Bring that up, and don't ever let them totally forget what they are, especially by using villains and other enemies just like them, or by swarming them with mundane forces to watch them prove what a weapon they are when they overcome.

## THE DELINQUENT

- **Put them in chains**
- **Give or take an audience**
- **Give them conditional love**
- **Show them the line**
- **Offer a helping hand**



The Delinquent is likely to be a rebel without a cause as well as a performer looking for an audience. They're cynical and sarcastic, yet desirous of honest, naïvely positive relationships. Play to all sides of their character. Restrict them with rules so they can break free, but also offer them support and help tie them up with relationships too.

Sometimes, put them in front of an audience of watchers who love their antics; other times, take away that audience and leave them cold and alone. Give them love, but only by attaching a price to it, and never let them forget that there are powers above them setting the rules and boundaries.

## THE DOOMED

- **Mark their doom track**
- **Offer a chance to further their cause**
- **Remind them of what they could lose**
- **Push them to the brink**
- **Offer temporary relief with a cost**



The Doomed is fatalistic and grim. Adding a Doomed to your game inherently puts death on the table, and makes your entire game a bit darker. Don't ever let them forget that they're doomed. Have other characters reference it, add bits of description about it to the fiction, and make them mark their doom track.

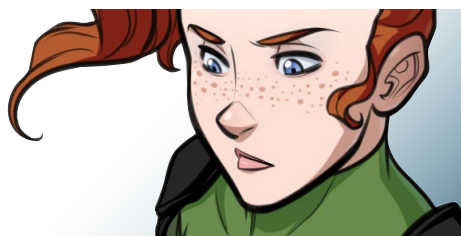
Show them the best of the people around them, people who care about them—make them want to stay here in this world. All the while, edge the Doomed closer and closer to the brink, hitting them hard, so they have to resort to their doomsigns and other resources for victory. Try to remember their conditions for advancing their doom track, so you can make moves toward those.

For the doomsign **Infinite Powers**, make sure they know they can take an *ability* from another playbook for a one-time action—not a move from another playbook.

Talk to them to make sure you have a joint understanding of what the triggers that advance their doom track look like. And don't worry about giving them a final confrontation with their doom. If it makes sense in the fiction, give them the opportunity to overcome it, but they'll have to contend with their doom, one way or another, thanks to their advances.

## THE JANUS

- **Bring their obligations to bear**
- **Endanger someone from either life**
- **Make their lives cross over**
- **Put more obligations on them**
- **Take away their mask**



The Janus is about the double life, the nature of having two identities. Push them on it. You're in charge of saying when time passes, so you're in charge of saying when the Janus has to roll for their social obligations—don't skimp on it. Continually ask them which life they're in. If someone doesn't know the identity they're currently in, ask the Janus if the Influence they hold over that person would really apply.

Make both lives tough. Their superheroic life is obviously difficult, because the team as a whole will be mixed up in crazy drama. But they need specific pushing from their mundane life and the obligations therein. Have those in their mundane life lay obligations upon them. Put the people in their mundane life in danger as much as those in their superheroic life.

Give the people in their mundane life opinions on the people in their superheroic life, then make them all interact. And when they're at the mercy of dangerous foes, or the situation warrants...unmask them.

## THE LEGACY

- **Remind them of their traditions**
- **Compare them to the past**
- **Make them answer their family's concerns**
- **Raise expectations on them**
- **Honor them**



The Legacy is caught up in a tradition of heroism, and having one at your table makes family important. Every PC will be compared to the older generation to some extent, but the Legacy has direct predecessors, alongside rules and traditions they've sworn to uphold. Make those prior heroes matter more by talking about them often and having them show up at the worst possible times.

Keep pushing on them what their legacy means, but don't hesitate to diversify that meaning—what it means to prior members of the legacy may not be the same as what it means to the public, and they'll all expect different traditions to be upheld. Constantly compare the Legacy to their predecessors, and use the comparisons to shift the Legacy's Labels. Give them further duties, obligations, and missions directly from their own legacy; if their legacy has famous enemies, then catching or defeating those foes is a great additional burden to saddle them with.

Sometimes, sit them down for a talk with members of their legacy to discuss their recent performance—and don't let them off the hook. Remember that you're ultimately responsible for making the move for the legacy trigger, to see how members of the legacy respond to the PC's recent actions; don't let that slide for too long.



## THE NOVA

- **Remind them of past collateral damage**
- **Reveal a terrible truth of their powers**
- **Make their powers flare out of control**
- **Stoke their conditions**
- **Introduce threats only they can tackle**



The Nova is pure power, and they're likely to think they can handle nearly any threat—what's more, they're probably right. But they can't do it without paying a high price, and that price drives the playbook. Having a Nova at your table should amp up the power level of the threats and dangers the heroes deal with—the Nova plays for high stakes, and they've made the mistakes to prove it.

Never let the Nova forget the past damage they've caused. Have people hold grudges or explain why they're worried about the Nova's self control. Sometimes, cause the Nova's powers to flare out of control, to lash out and cause further damage.

The Nova's heavily tied up in their own head—play with that. Show them that their powers are truly dangerous, or come from an insidious source, or have an inherent cost, and let them deal with that terrible truth. Play to their conditions, their anger or their fear or their insecurity, and harp on them, while giving them opportunities to take action to clear those conditions.

## THE OUTSIDER

- **Draw attention to their differences**
- **Make a request from home**
- **Introduce a monitor from home**
- **Accept and support them in their moments of weakness**
- **Provoke their beliefs and practices in tense situations**



The Outsider is a stranger who's interested in fitting in. Don't ever let them forget the struggle. Call out how they look, act, and think differently, especially using NPCs with Influence over the Outsider to shift their Labels. Give them a reason to stay—show them the best parts of Earth, and accept them when they're low.

But provoke and prod at their beliefs, make them decide if they really want to commit to this strange place. And never let them totally forget their home. Even if they don't think they have direct contact to their home, send them missives from where they come from, making myriad requests, everything

from “Collect this” to “Come home!” Introduce characters from their home who come to Earth for at least some time, who watch the PC and judge them.

Having an Outsider at your table means you should introduce other aliens and cultures. Play up other outsider groups. Make Halcyon City, and the universe, full of strange, wonderful, and terrible people.

## THE PROTÉGÉ

- **Convey their mistakes**
- **Bestow wisdom, wanted or unwanted**
- **Hold up a mirror to them**
- **Give them exactly what they need at a cost**
- **Endanger their mentor**



The Protégé is about their relationship with their mentor—so you have to make that mentor show up a lot. The Protégé also makes past generations of heroism matter far more than many playbooks, so be prepared to introduce those older heroes if you’ve got a Protégé in play. But focus on the mentor—chances are good that the mentor will have opinions of everyone on the team, not just the Protégé.

The mentor is here to teach the Protégé, so they should always be telling the Protégé what the PC has done wrong, and providing new advice and knowledge. They don’t have to be mean about it, but inherently just pointing out the Protégé’s mistakes should drive them up the wall a bit. The mentor can provide the team with great resources and information, too—but always at a price, most often that the team follow the mentor’s rules or suffer through another lesson.

Make the mentor awesome, too—make them someone the Protégé might genuinely want to be. And then show them the costs of the life that the mentor leads, so the Protégé can see what they’re becoming. Show a mirror to the Protégé, and ask them if they really want to be this person, or someone different.

And sometimes, put their mentor in danger, with the only salvation coming from the Protégé themselves. Give the Protégé the chance to show their mentor everything they’ve learned.

## LIMITED EDITION PLAYBOOKS

Check out the the **MASKS** supplements for more playbooks to use in your games, including:

- The Brain, a genius who created their own worst enemy
- The Harbinger, a time traveler from the future, here to avert a terrible past
- The Innocent, a time traveler from the past, here to avoid becoming something awful
- The Joined, a dual character, two people seen as one and navigating that divide
- The Newborn, a brand new entity trying to learn about the world and how to act
- The Reformed, a former criminal and supervillain trying to be better
- The Soldier, an operative of an agency serving a higher cause
- The Star, a celebrity focused on fame and the demands of their audience

Each of these playbooks is more complicated than standard **MASKS** playbooks, so you should be wary about adding more than one or two to your game—but each one will inject some awesome stories into your game!

## THE TRANSFORMED

- **Reject them**
- **Show how they are feared or hated**
- **Attack them with unthinking hordes**
- **Remind them of what they've lost**
- **See their true self**



The Transformed looks different, can't hide it, and feels insecure about it. They bring into play issues of being different and wanting to fit in, but from a different perspective to the Outsider. The Outsider might be able to teach Earth something—there might be a compromise. The Transformed, though, used to be normal...and never will be again. The Transformed won't find compromise with those around them. The best they can hope for is acceptance.

Reject the Transformed and show the negative reactions their form provokes. People fear and hate them for how they look, and their struggle is about overcoming those perspectives; so provide plenty of rejection. Attack them with unthinking hordes, especially from a “villagers with pitchforks” perspective. Show them the things they've lost and can't do anymore.

Sometimes, though, give them a reprieve. Don't do it too often, but have NPCs see through their visage to the real person beneath. Sympathize with their pain and support them. It will make the next rejection all the more painful.

## WHEN YOU'RE NOT BUSY

These tips and tricks aren't crucial to running **MASKS** successfully—you'll be fine if you stick to the agendas, principles, and moves earlier in this chapter. But these may give you some tools to take your game to the next level!

**Use splash panels.** In comics, splash panels are gigantic panels, taking up the whole page or even two pages, intricately drawn and showing off the detailed awesome of something. When you feel like something is super cool—some crazy heroic maneuver or some really cool fixture of the setting—describe it in detail like a splash panel.

**Draw maps.** They don't have to be works of art—they just have to help you clarify the situation. What's where. What's at stake. Draw them on whatever's available—again, don't worry too much about quality here. The point is to give you all the information you need to share the fictional mindscape during complicated situations.

**Fill in the backstory.** Ask questions about the past. Definitely the PCs' own pasts, but the past of Halcyon City, too. Only ask questions the PCs would actually know the answers too, but keep in mind that a huge portion of Halcyon City's superhuman history is public knowledge. Fill in your Halcyon City with these answers, and build on them.

**Use time jumps.** If things seem to be slowing down, jump forward in time, especially between sessions. It doesn't have to be very long—even a week or two lets you move things to a different place, as well as trigger a few of the PCs' moves based on the passage of time.

**Share the spotlight.** Your comic is about the whole team, so shift between them, especially when someone hasn't spoken up in a while. Cut back and forth between multiple scenes, too, to keep tension up and to give everyone some spotlight. Make sure all the main characters in your comic get their chance to show up in your panels.

**Take breaks.** While playing, take breaks, especially when you're not exactly sure what should happen next. Take a few minutes to think about it, and come back refreshed. Don't hesitate to end the session at a time that feels right, even if it's a bit early. Don't push yourself too hard—keep up your own interest by giving yourself reprieves.



# CHAPTER 8: THE FIRST SESSION

## **BEFORE THE FIRST SESSION**

Time for your first session! The beginning of your adventures in Halcyon City! There will be plenty of robo dinosaurs in your future, I assure you!

Your first session will involve a lot of character creation. That'll be the players' job. You, on the other hand, are responsible for setting up their first adventurous forays into Halcyon City's superhuman world.

Here's what you need to do to make that first session go smoothly.

## **MATERIALS AND PREP**

Print out every playbook you're using in the game and make sure you've got at least passing familiarity with each one. Limiting what you offer to the players changes the nature of the game a bit—for example, if you want a lighter game, don't offer the Doomed—so think carefully about which playbooks you're offering.

Print out the other necessary sheets for the game, including a basic moves sheet for every player. Grab some index cards or post-its, pencils, and dice. You can find the sheets you need to print online at [www.magpiegames.com/masks](http://www.magpiegames.com/masks).

Read through this book before you get to the table. You don't have to go through every inch of *THE MASKS* (page 93) or *THE FUTURE* (page 113), but definitely skim them. *HOOKS AND ARCS* (page 181) is most important after your first session, but it can give you some good things to look out for during this first game.

Depending on how much time you have at the table, you might want to prep a villain in advance. If you can make a villain at the table, connected to the PCs and their issues, you should try to do that—but if time's a factor, come to the table with one ready. You can even put the villain out there and ask the players to come up with a connection to them during character creation.

## **STARTING THE FIRST SESSION**

You've got your crew assembled—huzzah! Now it's time for character creation.

Spread out the playbooks and give a brief overview of each. If you've got the time and want to get in the mood, you can have players dramatically read the flavor text out loud. Answer any questions that come up, and make suggestions to players as you ask them what issues interest them. Make clear that choosing a playbook is more about choosing the issues and themes their character will focus on than anything else. Refer to *THE HEROES* (page 39) for more information on how to create characters.



In particular, draw your players' attention to the pieces of each playbook they're likely to skim over—their Moments of Truth and their team moves. Those can tell them a lot about the kind of character they're playing, so make sure they see them up front.

Encourage the players to talk about their choices out loud, to build up excitement and share input on each other's stuff. No pressure, though—each player can create their character through whatever process best suits them. Once almost everyone's done, start character introductions, going around the table one at a time, with each player explaining who their character is, what they look like, what they can do, and the answers to their backstory questions.

## ASKING PROBING QUESTIONS

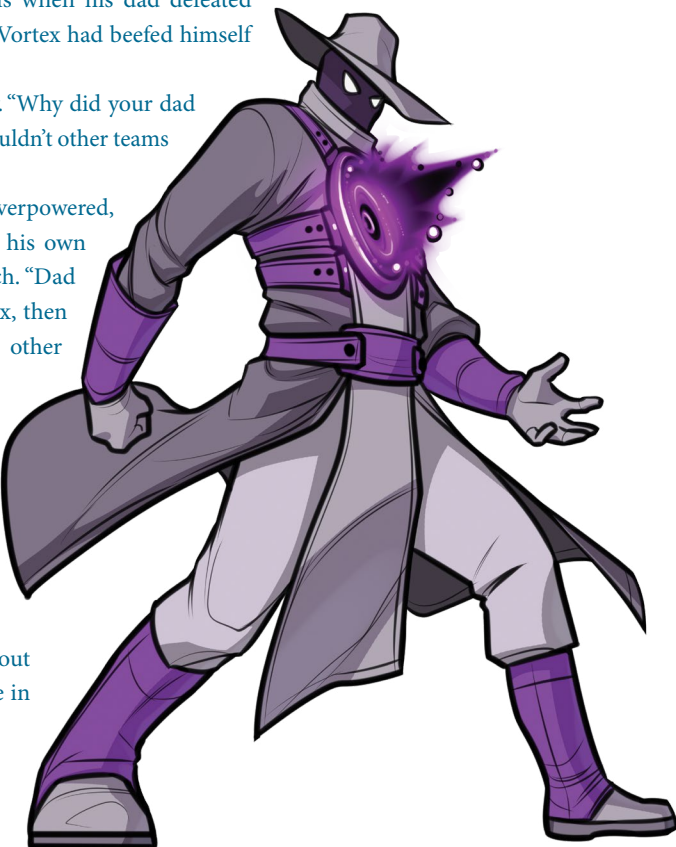
Players don't introduce their characters in a monologue. Like everything else in **MASKS**, it's a conversation; ask questions throughout. Explore their characters, and your version of Halcyon City, with pointed questions aimed at fleshing out their explanations.

Rich is introducing his character, Huma the Legacy, to the group (for more about Huma's character creation process see [THE HEROES](#), page 40). He explains that the greatest story of his legacy is when his dad defeated Vortex single-handedly, after Vortex had beefed himself up using neutron star matter.

"Tell me a bit more," I say. "Why did your dad have to fight Vortex alone? Wouldn't other teams have been on the scene?"

"Yeah, but Vortex was so overpowered, he just sucked them all into his own personal black hole," says Rich. "Dad managed to knock out Vortex, then fly in there and pull all the other heroes out."

"That's awesome! So your dad not only stopped the bad guy, but saved everyone as well!" I say. "Can you name one or two of the heroes he saved?" I'm trying to get the names of a few other possible NPCs, while also fleshing out some of the important people in our Halcyon City.



“Yeah, how about...I don’t know...let’s go with Fastball and Red Eagle,” Rich says.

“Excellent!”

Rich continues, saying the city widely has a positive impression of the Huma legacy.

“Yeah, totally. What about other heroes, though? Folks like Fastball and Red Eagle? Are they grateful? Jealous? Awed?” I ask.

“Oh, I like that it isn’t positive. Let’s go jealous, actually. They didn’t love my dad,” Rich says.

“Why’s that? What did your dad do that really got their ire up, and how did you, Huma, find out about it?”

“I saw an exchange between them at the house. They yelled at Dad, claiming that he took credit for what they’d done.”

“Did you hear any details?”

“No, I don’t think I did. To this day, I still kind of wonder about that.”

“Awesome!” I say. “Please continue!”

In general, you can work with generalized answers and drill down to specifics later—after all, it’s a classic trope of comic book fiction that characters’ full backstories only really get fleshed out over time, through flashbacks and whatnot.

That said, if you feel like you need more information from their answers, their answers are probably non-specific, based on generalities, big loaded terms, or ambiguous details. Drill down to specifics when you feel like you need more information. When a player says, “My dad was a criminal,” ask “What did he do? Why did he do it?” When a player says, “The city generally thinks I’m pretty good,” ask “Why? What did you do that earned their trust? What does it look like, that they think you’re pretty good? Action figures? News reports?”

## ***DURING THE FIRST SESSION***

Your goals in your first session are to:

- Help your players create their characters
- Prime Halcyon City with plenty of cool material and events to build on
- Show off who these characters are
- Go through most of the mechanics of the game (and definitely all the basic moves)
- Create an awesome first issue of your comic

That first session, a fair amount of your time will be eaten up by character creation. Usually, it takes about one or two hours if you’re asking questions and exploring each character to get to your first scenes.

Once the characters are created, take a break and prepare a villain if you don't have one already (page 155). Pull in a villainous character they've already set up, or create one tied into at least one PC—it's important to have a cool villain for an awesome opening sequence. Create a villain you're excited to show off!

Dive right in with an opening scene that's all about a fight. Frame it evocatively as a comic book. Describe panels that show off different parts of the city before zooming in on your chosen location for the fight. Then show off the villain destroying something, causing mayhem, pursuing their drive. Finally, go to each PC one at a time, and ask them how they enter the scene, allowing them to play up how cool they are. Maybe let them make one move, but keep this limited—you want to get all the PCs into the scene before any of them start doing too much.

Once they're all in the scene, trigger **when you enter battle against a dangerous foe as a team** (page 84) to prime the Team pool with some points for them to use. Then go to town. Have an awesome, fun fight scene—but try not to take up the rest of the session with it. Remember your villain's drive: they might try to run away if things turn against them.

Try to get to the aftermath of the fight, if at all possible. Shift to heroes showing up and judging the PCs' performance; to the PCs' loved ones commenting on the events of the battle; to the PCs sharing triumphant celebrations or secrets and vulnerabilities, or comforting and supporting each other.

If possible, you want your first session to hit at least the following mechanics:

- Every basic move, including **take a powerful blow**, at least once
- Label shifts and rejecting Influence
- Conditions, taking them and removing them

Here are some other key things you want to try to do in your first session:

- Bring on the action
- Build on character creation
- Ask questions constantly
- Call out moves when they happen
- Offer moves when the players flinch
- Frame scenes with multiple characters
- Shift their Labels
- Display the adaptations to the superhuman
- Give them a chance to talk

## BRING ON THE ACTION

A huge part of **MASKS** is superheroic action—explosions! Punches! Flying people! Kirby crackle! Energy bolts! Since you're opening with a big fight against a villain, you should have plenty of opportunity to bring on that awesome action. Take advantage of it. Play up the tension of it, and the fun of it. Keep the pace up early, and slow it down after the action scene is over.

## BUILD ON CHARACTER CREATION

The more you reincorporate elements the players have introduced during character creation, the better. You've got a limited time to do it, but make connections and incorporations as best you can. When you need to include an endangered civilian, go for one of the NPCs introduced during character creation. When you need to include a villain, go for someone they've fought before or have a relationship with.

## ASK QUESTIONS CONSTANTLY

Never stop asking for more details throughout the whole first session. Any time a question occurs to you about the fiction, ask it. "What happens to villains after you paste them into the ground?" "Oh, have you ever done that with your powers before? Did you know you could?" "Why would your mom be here, downtown? Why wouldn't she be running from the Blue Hydra?" Those details give you more to play within the setting, especially when you build arcs after the first session.

## CALL OUT MOVES WHEN THEY HAPPEN

You're trying to show off all the basic moves, so be on the lookout for instances when a player triggers one of them. At the very start of play, the other players will probably need a bit more help to pick out when they're triggering a move or to determine which move they're triggering. Model it early and call it out to them, asking, "It sounds like you're trying to \_\_\_\_\_, right?" If they want to trigger a particular move, help them out by asking, "Cool! What does that look like on the page?"

## OFFER MOVES WHEN THE PLAYERS FLINCH

In general, don't tell players what to do—leave their actions up to them. But in this first session, offer some suggestions about moves they might make, especially when they seem hesitant to commit. Always phrase it as a question, based on the fiction—"Toro, you're super strong, right? When Rampage is pushing this bus at you, do you think you'd want to just tear through it—maybe **unleash your powers**? Or maybe you want to slow her to a stop by **defending** the people in the bus?"

## FRAME SCENES WITH MULTIPLE CHARACTERS

Your opening scene is definitely going to include multiple characters—the whole team should be in that initial fight. But as the fight ends, continue to frame scenes with at least two PCs in them, if not more. Try not to have the PCs splinter into solo scenes. If the Protégé’s mentor berates them, do it in front of another PC! It’s the first session, and you want to give them a chance to interact with each other and trigger moves like **defend someone** or **comfort or support someone**.

## SHIFT THEIR LABELS

From the get-go, use the NPCs’ Influence over the PCs to try to shift their Labels. Have the villain tell them who they are—“You’re nothing! You can’t possibly stand up to me!” is a classic—and then make them accept or reject that Influence. The earlier the players get used to the idea that other characters can change their Labels, adjusting them up or down, the better.

## DISPLAY THE ADAPTATIONS TO THE SUPERHUMAN

Show off Halcyon City’s superhuman side in this first session. Remind the players of the past generations of superhumans with statues and monuments around the city. Call out that people are probably used to these kinds of attacks, so they have drills and shelters. In the aftermath, describe the expert clean-up crews moving away rubble. Give the players a sense of place by putting Halcyon City’s adaptations into your panels.

## GIVE THEM A CHANCE TO TALK

Alongside the need to frame scenes with multiple characters is the need to actually let them interact with each other. Don’t try to make everything about NPCs pushing at the PCs—let them bounce off one another. Prod them sometimes—suggest ways they might clear conditions by messing with each other, or suggest moves they might make in their interactions with each other—but let them just have some time to interact directly. **MASKS** is about the team, so give the heroes some time to be a team.

## AFTER THE FIRST SESSION

When you're done with the first session, you'll have a good idea of who these characters are and what they're interested in. You'll have plenty of NPCs to play with, and you'll have backstories to draw on. Let these elements percolate, and start asking yourself questions to draw them together. You're going to use these pieces to build your character issues, your hooks, and your arcs—see **HOOKS AND ARCS** for more (see page 181).

Remember that you're not about to come up with the full plot for the next few sessions—you're creating the tools that will help you structure the next sessions, but you're always going to play to find out what happens and what changes.

### THE LONG EXAMPLE

Here's a longer example, building off all the rules and ideas already presented, to show you what a game of **MASKS** looks like in action, where to go after that first initial fight, and the kinds of situations that might arise. I call out my thoughts throughout the example—what moves I'm making and what principles I'm following—so you can get a sense for what it's like to GM. (See the fight example on page 147 for more information specifically on what running a fight should look like—this example follows that one chronologically, and that one gives you a taste for what the opening fight of your first session might be like.)

In this example, I'm running the game for four players:

**The Protégé:** Hornet—Chinese, female, body armor and utility belt—trained by the armor-wearing vigilante Mantis to be an incredible fighter, Lian Song is far more interested in stopping bad people than any of the superhero dressings. Played by Joe.

**The Transformed:** Rex—Big, green, scaly, spikey, strong and tough, male—formerly a regular high school student, Michael Stafford is now dealing with his strange visage and abilities, and the suspicion and disgust of everyone around him. Played by Matt.

**The Nova:** Fission—Black, male, buzzcut, normal skin, colorful costume—a physics genius named Tyler Wallace, on track for an early PhD before that life was stolen from him by an experiment that gave him the ability to manipulate molecules on an atomic level. Played by Sarah.

**The Outsider:** Skysong—Blue, female, white-haired and -eyed, human body, humanizing costume—an alien from another world, Veriskanathensis came to Earth to avoid being integrated into her people's group-mind before she was ready, and has come to love it here. Played by Andrea.



This example builds off their fight against the Teacher. They've just managed to escape from her twisted trap-realm outside of reality, and have arrived back in Halcyon City with an important tool—a piece of the Teacher's "chalk," something they might be able to use to protect Halcyon City from further threats. But no sooner have they dropped into Halcyon City than...

"So, we see the panel of you guys half stumbling, half falling out of the Teacher's realm, her distorted hand stretching out for you as the portal closes. Then we have one panel of the four of you catching your breath, nothing behind you but a brick wall...and then we have a panel of all four of you opening your eyes and snapping to attention, as we see laser gun barrels lifted up and pointed at you from off-screen." I'm **describing like a comic-book** (page 128), showing a flow of action and shots.

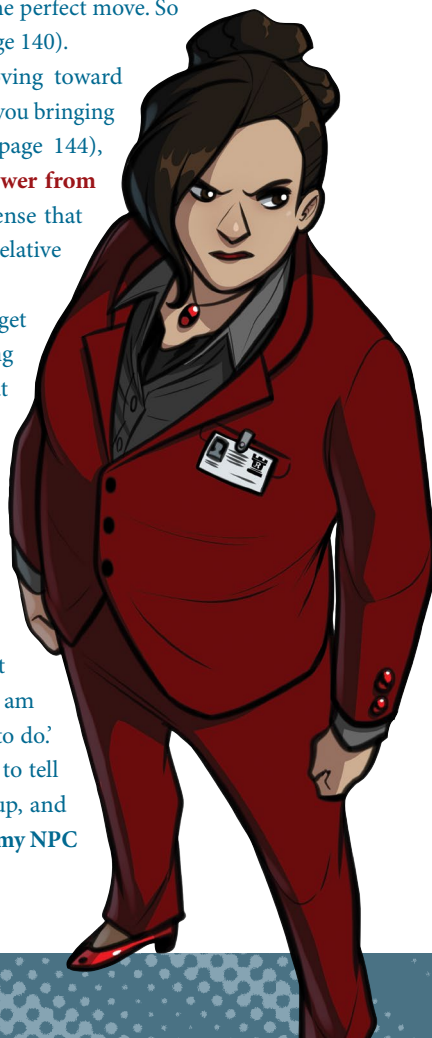
"Oh, darn," says Matt. "This isn't good."

"Nope! It's a whole bunch of guys with Rook Industries symbols on their armor, pointing energy rifles in your direction. They part, and Rosa Rook—CEO of Rook Industries—walks through to stand before you in her red suit." Throughout the whole fight I was **thinking between the panels** (page 133), wondering what Rosa would be doing, and setting this plan into motion seemed the perfect move. So now I'm **announcing a between-panel threat** (page 140).

"We'll be taking that," Rosa Rook says, moving toward Hornet with her hand outstretched. "We appreciate you bringing this back to us." I'm making a **villain move** (page 144), one I've chosen before for Rosa Rook—**seize power from a vulnerable party**—because it makes perfect sense that Rosa would try to take advantage of the heroes' relative weakness and exhaustion.

"Oh, heck no," says Joe. "I am not letting you get your hands on this thing," I say. I shift into a fighting stance. "If you want to take it, you'll have to come at us." Is that a **provoke**?"

"Nah," I say. "Rosa was already here with security guys, she anticipated a fight. You're not really pushing her buttons with threats. Plus, to her, you're just a kid. She looks down her nose at you. 'You are a child, so I expected a certain amount of juvenile bravado, and I am not one to overreact. But please understand—I do not want to hurt you. Please, hand over the chalk before I am forced to show you what my people are prepared to do.' Hornet, she's totally using her Influence over you to tell you who you are. She's shifting your Mundane up, and your Danger down. What do you do?" I'm **treating my NPC**



like a hammer (page 133), and telling them who they are or who they should be (page 142).

"Blech. I don't want to accept it, so I guess I'm **rejecting** (page 80)," says Joe.

"What's that look like?" I ask. To do it, Hornet has to do it.

"I furrow my brows at her and step forward, like I'm getting ready to fight. Should I roll?" I nod, and Joe rolls a 4—a miss! "Oh, no," says Joe.

"Yeah, that's the thing," I say. "You take a step forward to fight, and the security guys lift their guns at you, and you hear them hum to life. These are serious enemies, Rosa's probably got even more reinforcements you can't see, and you're all tired after the fight with Teacher—you're not sure you can win this one. Mark Afraid, and make the shift, Mundane up, Danger down. Because it's a miss, you get to mark potential, too." I have to resort to the mechanics to tell Joe exactly what to change on his character sheet, but for the most part I'm trying to **make my move but misdirect** (page 129)—I'm basing the changes to Hornet's character sheet in the fiction, so the mechanical move looks like it's bound to the story.

"What are the rest of you doing while this goes on? Skysong, what are you doing?" I haven't heard from Andrea in a bit, so I want to **shine the spotlight** (page 146) on her.

"I'm not sure what we should do here—I didn't want to hand over the chalk, but I don't think we can win this fight. I was willing to follow Hornet's lead...but Hornet looks like she's faltering, and that makes me uncertain. I come up beside her and whisper, 'Hornet, maybe...maybe you should just give her what she wants. We're in no shape to fight her guys right now.'"

"Perfect. That sounds like it's a **provoke** to me; she usually listens to you and you've got Influence over her. What do you actually want Hornet to do?" I ask.

"I want her to back down and hand over the chalk, so we can get out of here safely," says Andrea.

"Yep. Roll it!" Andrea gets a 12, including the +1 bonus for Influence over Hornet.

"All right, Hornet, that means you add a Team to the pool if you do it, and you have to mark a condition if you don't."

"Can I **defend myself** here?" asks Joe.

"Well, it's not really an attack, right?"

"Ah, gotcha," says Joe. "Okay, well...then I guess I'll do it. I hesitate for a second, then I hand over the chalk."

"Wonderful," says Rosa. "I'm glad to see some humility. Bodes well for the future of our city." She starts to walk away from you, with her security moving to cover her. Hornet, add a Team to the pool for doing what your teammate asked." I'm **playing Rosa to her drive** (page 131)—to dominate the superhuman resources of Halcyon City and beyond. Rosa got what she wanted, and she's not interested in pursuing this any harder, even though I could imagine this turning into an out-and-out fight.

"Rex, Fission—what are you doing?" I want to **shine the spotlight** on the other characters, because they haven't done much yet in this scene. One of them might start a fight...

"Yeah...I think I'm letting them go," says Matt. "I'm pretty beat up, I've got three conditions marked, and I don't really want to make things worse. Plus...it was Skysong who talked us down...so of course I'm listening to her."

"Cool. What about you, Fission?"

"I...don't think I want to fight them, but I don't think I want to just let them go, either. I want to be able to track them. I want to figure out where they're taking this chalk," says Sarah.

"Oh cool! How would you do that? Is that something you've ever done before?" I'm **asking provocative questions** (page 133), in this case about Fission's powers, so I can **build on the answers** (page 133) later.

"I'll extend my awareness and tweak one of those energy guns just a bit, so it starts leaking an energy trail, something I can sense. Right? I've got control of stuff at the atomic level, so I'll be able to track it. And no, I don't think I have done this before—it's one of those applications of my powers I've wondered about, but haven't tried," Sarah says. I'm aware that Fission is a Nova, so his powers generally give a fictional justification for at least trying a huge number of things—so even if this has never happened before, I'm being a **fan of the PCs** (page 82) by going with it.

"That's awesome!" I say. "Roll to **unleash your powers**, you're extending your senses! You're doing it subtly, but it's still an unleash." Sarah rolls a 9. "So that means you can either mark a condition, or it's temporary or unstable," I say.

"Wait, can I **spend a Team out of the pool to help ()**?" asks Joe.

"How would you do that? Fission is doing something pretty specific to his crazy powers, and he's trying to keep it on the downlow," I say. I'm not against the idea, but we've got to follow the fiction.

"Ah, yeah. Hmmm. Can we say that I've been helping Fission figure out some of the things he can do? We've been training together, after all," Joe asks.

"Yeah!" says Sarah. "So maybe I figured out that I can do this during one of those training sessions."

"Yep, and I recognize what you're doing, the little flares of energy from your fingertips. To do it, though, I have to help you get into a meditative state that Mantis taught me. So I start chanting quietly towards you, 'Close your eyes, clear your mind, focus yourself, be empty,' and so on. So that's what I'm doing right now, trying to help Fission focus," says Joe.

"Yeah, that's cool! Spend one Team out of the pool: that makes Fission's roll a 10." I'm **playing to find out what changes** (page 126), and I like this—it adds a relationship and partnership between Fission and Hornet that wasn't clearly there before. Yeah, it's a bit of a retcon, but it fits with the fiction we've established, it's interesting, and it's allowing for a cool thing right now.

"Okay! So there's an energy trail that you can follow, Fission. When you decide to pursue it, chances are good it'll take you to wherever they put the chalk—although that doesn't mean it'll be undefended." I'm following the fiction here, but I'm also **revealing the future, subtly** (page 140). I'm flagging to the players that they should expect a fight if they go after the chalk.

“In the meantime, though, you guys sound pretty beat. What are you doing now, Rex?” Matt hasn’t done much during this conversation, so I want to make sure he gets some spotlight.

“Hm. I think I wanted to talk to Skysong about what happened, and stuff in general. Y’know. Also, because I have that crush on her,” says Matt.

“Perfect!” Rex is taking action, so I don’t have to make another move here. If he hadn’t proposed this scene, and all the PCs just wanted to rest for the night, I would cut to some later moment and make a move again, but I don’t have to. “I’ll cut to that scene, but I want to make it clear where everyone else is going. Hornet?” I ask.

“Ah, I’d probably go file a report with Mantis—she likes reports after I go into any other extradimensional realm—and then I’m going to hit the sack,” says Joe.

“Awesome. What about you, Fission?”

“Same general idea. I’m going back to our base, taking a shower, and then going to sleep.”

“And Skysong? Rex is going to try to talk to you, but where would that be?”

“Oh, after today’s stress, I’m going to make myself hot chocolate—truly, the greatest of all Earth drinks—and chill out on the couch.”

“Awesome! And that’s the end of the scene—check to see if you cleared any conditions by taking action during that scene.”

“Does letting Rosa Rook have the chalk count as running from something difficult?” asks Joe.

“Absolutely!” I say. “You were basically postponing your conflict with her, at least in part out of fear. **Clear Afraid** (page 88).”

After everybody else checks and clears any appropriate conditions, I start to set the next scene...

If you’d like to see more of this long example, go to [www.magpiegames.com/masks/long-example](http://www.magpiegames.com/masks/long-example), and you’ll get to see what more interpersonal scenes between the characters might look like!



## CHAPTER 9: HOOKS AND ARCS

When you run **MASKS**, you'll inevitably have an impulse to plan stories in advance. Maybe you think one of the PCs should choose to leave the team for a corporate sponsored team that turns out to be a trap set in motion by the Dread Queen, eventually discovering the trap but ultimately overcoming it thanks to their new teammates. All that has to happen is for the PC to choose to leave the team and fall into the trap, right? And you—as the all-powerful Gamemaster—can just *make* that happen.

Don't do that.

You play **MASKS** to find out what changes. Even the GM doesn't know exactly what will happen. You definitely won't know what the PCs will do or who their characters will choose to be. Any plan you come up with pales in significance to what happens if you let the story evolve naturally—and enforcing your plan would take away the PCs' right to make choices in the story.

Instead of figuring out what will happen, you need to do another kind of preparation to run **MASKS**. You create pairs of **hooks**—people or fictional elements tied to individual PCs, pulling them in different directions—and **arcs**—a connected series of fictional elements that try to change Halcyon City, most likely for the worst.

### HOOKS VS ARCS

Hooks are tools for focusing on the PCs and their stories. They remind you of what characters most strongly pull the PCs in different directions, and they give you guidance on how to use those characters during play. Hooks come in pairs: two characters that put two different Labels in conflict for the PC—Danger vs Savior, Freak vs Mundane, Superior vs Danger, Savior vs Freak, etc. Each character is an individual hook. The two hooks aren't necessarily directly in conflict with each other; the pairing isn't about those two characters fighting each other, but instead about discovering which path the PC will follow.

Arcs, on the other hand, are tools for tracking overarching issues in your game of **MASKS**. Instead of focusing on any individual PC, they give you the chance to build on the escalating problems facing the team. When Vanquish's alien invasion fleet is getting closer and closer to Earth, that's an arc. When the Teacher is assembling an army of brainwashed, extradimensionally infected children, that's an arc. Arcs help structure your overall story, and give you a way to pace the conflict over multiple sessions.



## BUILDING HOOKS

Each hook is an actual character that pulls a PC towards a Label. Pairs of hooks are always focused on one PC, in particular on the two Labels by which they might be defined. The simplest way to come up with a pair of hooks for a PC is to ask: “Is (PC) a (Label) or (Label)?”

Think of this question as if you’re a reader of your game’s comic book series. Where do you think the main characters are going? How do you think others see them? What do you think is pushing them to take action? Setting up hooks flags these issues and ideas so you can emphasize them during play.

Build some hooks after your first session of play, and always look at them between sessions. If you feel that a given pair of hooks has been resolved—especially if the PC has locked any of the Labels involved in the pair—then you should create a new pair of hooks for that PC. In general, hold onto a pair of hooks for about three or four sessions before changing up the conflict and focusing on a new set of Labels.

When you build a new pair of hooks:

- Choose the PC that they’re centered on
- Choose the Labels involved
- Assign NPCs to the pairings



## CHOOSING THE PC

Ultimately, you need at least one pair of hooks for each PC so you have something to guide you on how to pull each PC's self-image. When you're choosing which PC to build a new pair of hooks for, though, only choose PCs who either don't have hooks yet or who've resolved their last pair of hooks.

When you pick the PC, take a look at their Labels, who has Influence over them, whom they have Influence over, and anything else of note about their character.

## CHOOSE THE LABELS

Each pair of Labels charts a different kind of conflict, a different set of issues. The pairing of Danger vs Savior, for example, is about the tension between destructively defeating enemies and saving lives; the pairing of Danger vs Freak, on the other hand, is about the fine line between appearing strange and powerful, and appearing to be a genuine threat.

Each Label in a hook comes with an impulse that tells you a general direction and drive that hook uses to push the PC toward that Label. For example, a Freak hook might feature an impulse of "To isolate and drive away," and a Mundane hook might feature an impulse of "To make normal." When you use those hooks, look for ways to have the Freak hook drive the PC into isolation, making them feel different and separate and alone, while the Mundane hook offers normalcy, both by making them feel normal and by telling them to hide their strangeness and act "normal."

### PAIRING: DANGER VS FREAK

This pairing is about power—especially when it gets out of hand. PCs involved in a Danger vs Freak pairing are often the most powerful of their team, capable of rewriting existence or causing massive destruction. Those around them question whether they can be trusted with their power—maybe because they're kids or because they have more power than anybody should be trusted with.

- **Hook Impulse — Danger:** To remind them of collateral damage
- **Hook Impulse — Freak:** To play up their strangeness and capabilities

### PAIRING: DANGER VS MUNDANE

This pairing is about fear. PCs involved in a Danger vs Mundane pairing are viewed with understanding by those close to them, and fear by others—until things go wrong, and the fear may spread like wildfire. But can they show those who fear them that they're just a person at heart? Or will they turn out to be the threat everyone worries can't be stopped?

- **Hook Impulse — Danger:** To mistrust and provoke
- **Hook Impulse — Mundane:** To interrupt dangerous situations

## PAIRING: DANGER VS SAVIOR

This pairing is about heroic roles. PCs involved in a Danger vs Savior pairing are torn between defeating enemies and saving lives. When they're caught in a dangerous fight, they're not sure if they should take down the villain fast and hard or if they should focus on keeping people safe at the cost of potentially letting the villain escape.

- **Hook Impulse — Danger:** To push towards a fight
- **Hook Impulse — Savior:** To push away from a straight fight, towards saving lives

## PAIRING: DANGER VS SUPERIOR

This pairing is about control. Superior characters are good at looking around, taking in the environment, understanding it, using it...and provoking other people to do what they want. Surgical strikes and efforts. Dangerous characters are good at punching enemies in the face, at letting loose, at breaking things down. Characters caught in these arcs are stuck between precision and uncontrolled venting.

- **Hook Impulse — Danger:** To infuriate and provoke
- **Hook Impulse — Superior:** To point out failures of control and planning

## PAIRING: FREAK VS MUNDANE

This pairing is about fitting in, usually focusing on one of two angles: either the PC is especially strange, notably different from the people around them, and unsure if they'll ever fit in...or they're especially normal, and they don't feel different *enough*. Either way, the people involved in this pairing push them either further in sync with the normal people of Halcyon City, or push them to be alone, separate from the people around them by their own strangeness.

- **Hook Impulse — Freak:** To isolate and drive away
- **Hook Impulse — Mundane:** To make normal

## PAIRING: FREAK VS SUPERIOR

This pairing is about being special. A character who is caught in this pairing hears voices on one side telling them they're better, stronger, and more capable than everyone around them, and voices on the other side calling them a worthless monster. Either way, they're struggling to make sense of what their difference *means*.

- **Hook Impulse — Freak:** To call out the flaws of strangeness
- **Hook Impulse — Superior:** To praise the power and ability of strangeness

### PAIRING: FREAK VS SAVIOR

This pairing is about responsibility. What responsibilities does someone with intense power have? Are they beholden only to their own power? Or are they burdened with the need to make use of their powers for the greater good?

- **Hook Impulse — Freak:** To praise immense power and abilities
- **Hook Impulse — Savior:** To place responsibility

### PAIRING: MUNDANE VS SUPERIOR

This pairing is about human connection. Characters with a high Mundane can connect with other people on a meaningful level...but they can't get those people to reliably do what they want. Characters with a high Superior, on the other hand, can manipulate other people and their environment much more directly, but they're more aloof and detached from those people. With this pairing, play up that detachment, the cost of feeling superior and the compromises required of being mundane.

- **Hook Impulse — Mundane:** To require compromise for connection
- **Hook Impulse — Superior:** To detach and distance from others

### PAIRING: MUNDANE VS SAVIOR

This pairing is about saving others—protecting them from outward *and* inner threats. Saviors are great at stopping a car flying through the air at someone's face, but Mundane characters can actually make people *feel* better, and might even be able to save villains from themselves.

- **Hook Impulse — Mundane:** To ask for empathy and mercy
- **Hook Impulse — Savior:** To demand defense and protection for innocents

### PAIRING: SAVIOR VS SUPERIOR

This pairing is about whether heroes should be proactive or reactive. Saviors respond to threats...but superior PCs read the situation and manipulate those around them to take action. They solve problems proactively, at the cost of being coldly removed from those around them. Which method is truly heroic? Fighting the good fight or winning the war?

- **Hook Impulse — Savior:** To highlight impending threats
- **Hook Impulse — Superior:** To present opportunities for action

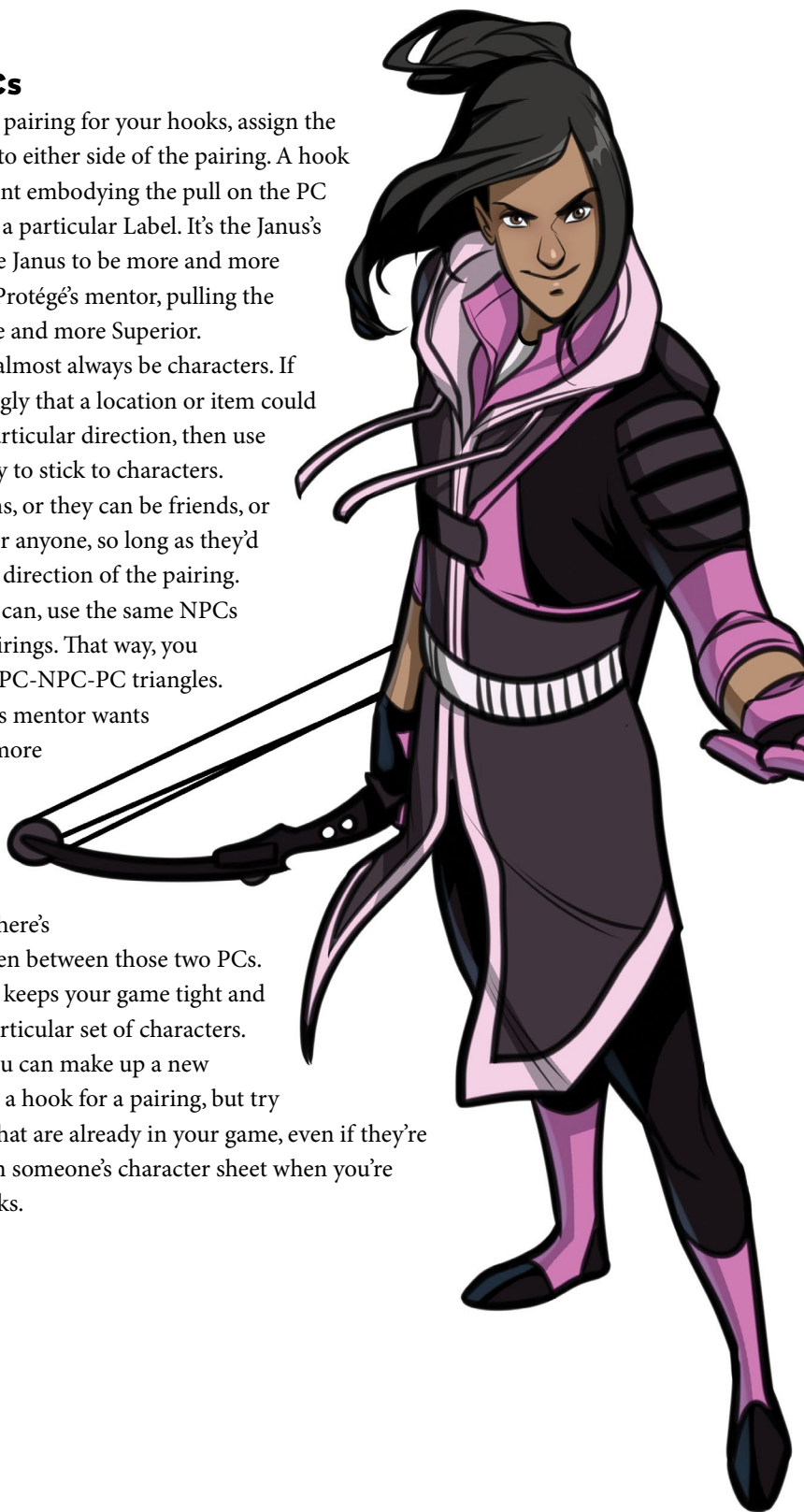
## ASSIGN NPCs

After selecting the pairing for your hooks, assign the hooks themselves to either side of the pairing. A hook is a fictional element embodying the pull on the PC in the direction of a particular Label. It's the Janus's mother, pulling the Janus to be more and more Mundane. It's the Protégé's mentor, pulling the Protégé to be more and more Superior.

Hooks should almost always be characters. If you feel very strongly that a location or item could pull the PC in a particular direction, then use it as a hook, but try to stick to characters. They can be villains, or they can be friends, or family members, or anyone, so long as they'd pull the PC in one direction of the pairing.

Whenever you can, use the same NPCs across multiple pairings. That way, you instantly generate PC-NPC-PC triangles. When the Protégé's mentor wants the Protégé to be more of a Savior, but continuously tells the Transformed they're a Danger, there's instant tension, even between those two PCs. Reusing the NPCs keeps your game tight and focused on that particular set of characters.

If necessary, you can make up a new character to use as a hook for a pairing, but try to use characters that are already in your game, even if they're only mentioned on someone's character sheet when you're filling in your hooks.



## HOW TO USE HOOKS

Set up your hooks between sessions. Doing so makes you think about who these characters are, and ask yourself questions about what they might become.

During play, use your list of hooks as a reference sheet for your moves. When you're at a loss for the next scene, bring the characters together with their hooks, and pull them towards the Labels involved. Set scenes using the hooks, and push their Labels hard. If you need to make a hard move, have one of the hooks take Influence on the PC and shift their Labels.

Use your list of hooks to remind you of the character's big, primary issue, as well. NPCs not even directly involved in the pairing can still poke and push and pull at those Labels. When you aren't sure which Label to shift, think about the pairings and the hooks, and try to angle for those Labels.

At the end of every session, ask yourself if it's still an open question whether the PC is one Label or the other. Does the player think it's resolved? Do you? If so, then change that pairing to a new one. If not, then keep that pairing steady, and think about other ways to pull on those Labels with those hooks.

### SAMPLE HOOK PAIRING

I'm brainstorming a pair of hooks for Rex, the Transformed. Rex so far has been pretty surly; he's clearly distraught about his transformed body. He has a high Freak and an especially low Mundane...but he also saved Skysong, and he's been acting more like a Savior, especially with her around. I know I can't make Skysong a hook—she's a PC—but I'm thinking about the questions for Rex: maybe “Is he a Freak or a Savior?” or “Is he a Danger or a Freak?”

Ultimately, I settle on “Is he a Freak or Mundane?” It fits his Labels as they sit right now, and I can more easily think of hooks for the pairing. For Freak, it's clearly Samuel Searley, the television pundit who loves to talk about how terrifying Rex looks. I'll need to tweak what Searley says a bit moving forward to focus more on Freak than Danger, but it's an easy fix. For Mundane, I'm thinking about Grasshopper's little sister, Ciara. Rex met Ciara when he saved her from Carlo the Assassin—and I think it's interesting to have Ciara treat Rex like a normal person. We haven't seen them together on screen yet, but I like reincorporating the same character, and creating a PC-NPC-PC triangle with Grasshopper.





## CREATING ARCS

The plans of villains and antagonists in Halcyon City are sometimes as simple as, “Rob a bank!” “Steal a McGuffin!” But the PCs also have to save the city from grander, more dangerous, more dramatic threats, problems that span across multiple issues of your comic and multiple sessions of your game. Those threats and problems are your arcs.

Each arc has a cast of NPCs and other fictional elements (places and objects of importance), an arc type, and three phases. It represents a combined set of threats, dangers, and issues that feed into each other to create a larger set of problems facing the PCs.

Arcs aren't plots—they're not lists of things that will definitely happen. They're compilations of what the antagonists and dangers of Halcyon City might bring to fruition—how they might change the city. They're a way for you to track what the big, overarching difficulties in the city are, and what you should be drawing on for future sessions.

To build an arc, follow these steps:

- Choose an arc type
- Build out the cast
- Fill in the phases
- Create custom moves (optional)
- Give it a name and description

## CHOOSE AN ARC TYPE

There are 5 kinds of arc you could make:

- Corruption — something good, positive, or helpful is made dangerous and threatening
- Invasion — threats and enemies fight their way into control
- Restriction — those with power place constraints on those without
- Destruction — threats and enemies break and destroy what stands in their way
- Restoration — the heroes push to repair what damage has been done

Each arc type comes with several subtypes to further define exactly what the arc is about and to give it an impulse—an overarching tendency for the arc, a way to understand where the arc is heading. Arcs also come with their own moves, which you can make any time you could make any other kind of move, to push an arc further along its particular issues.

## CORRUPTION

Corruption arcs are subtle and dangerous. They undermine the good of Halcyon City, turning friends to foes, heroes to villains, hope to fear.

### **Corruption Subtypes:**

- Falling Hero (impulse: to commit to a rigid code of ethics)
- Greedy Power (impulse: to wield power selfishly)
- Stolen Innocence (impulse: to make terrible decisions)
- Twisted Truth (impulse: to spin lies)
- Traitorous Ally (impulse: to betray)

### **Corruption Moves:**

- Pontificate about the true nature of things
- Present enticing gifts with strings
- Offer a temporary alliance
- Twist the narrative publicly
- Make threats, subtle or not

Corruption arcs almost always involve at least some cast members acting as the corruptors and some acting as the corrupted. The transition is never immediate—the PCs get to see the change.

## INVASION

Invasion arcs are about dangerous forces seizing useful or desirable resources for themselves. Invaders are hoping to take control of something by force, not aiming to destroy it. You can't control something that's destroyed.

### **Invasion Subtypes:**

- Aliens (impulse: to subvert or eliminate those in power)
- Criminals (impulse: to seize territory at any cost)
- Outsiders (impulse: to subvert or eliminate those without power)
- Time travelers (impulse: to control the actions of predecessors)
- Spies (impulse: to take control of valuable resources)

### **Invasion Moves:**

- Pour forth a horde of soldiers
- Directly assault a stronghold
- Secretly infiltrate a stronghold
- Demand submission
- Capture innocents

Invasion arcs can be subtle or direct, depending on the situation and the invaders. Sometimes, aliens pour from a portal over the city...other times, they shapeshift and secretly infiltrate important agencies.

## RESTRICTION

Restriction arcs are about powers exerting their might to lock down the heroes and others in the city. Restriction arcs tighten around the PCs, trapping them into rules and situations in which they're supposed to be unable to take action.

### **Restriction Subtypes:**

- Law (impulse: to outlaw and restrict)
- Military (impulse: to crack down on rampant elements)
- Agents (impulse: to control how others use power)
- Heroes (impulse: to uphold tradition)
- Corporations (impulse: to protect their interests from any threat)

### **Restriction Moves:**

- Deploy surprising strength and force
- Offer a warning
- Interfere in heroic situations
- Create new rules and restrictions
- Reward obedience

The casts of restriction arcs are the faces of forces much larger than the PCs, be they superhero teams, corporations, or law enforcement agencies. Play up the inexperience and youth of the PCs during a restriction arc—this is the quintessential “parents laying down a new curfew” arc, but at a superheroic level.

## DESTRUCTION

Destruction arcs are about breaking pieces of the world. They're always about destroying some specific thing, not *everything*. Everyone at the table knows that if Halcyon City explodes then the game would be over. An individual villain's plan may be to destroy the world, sure, but the arc is about destroying something specific.

Notice that the subtypes for a destruction arc refer to the target of the destruction—not what is doing the destroying.

### **Destruction Subtypes:**

- Defenders of the City (impulse: to draw out defenders with danger)
- Item of Power (impulse: to smash and grab)
- Prison (impulse: to free the restrained)
- Authorities of the City (impulse: to break tradition)
- Dangers to the City (impulse: to hunt and pursue doggedly)

**Destruction Moves:**

- Leave a trail of rubble and fires
- Endanger innocents with collateral damage
- Break the bindings on a danger
- Destroy a public landmark
- Explain the necessity for destruction

Always tie destruction arcs strongly to the human motivations of the villains and antagonists involved. The destruction they seek is always strangely justified to them; it's not a real arc if they're just doing it for fun.

**RESTORATION**

Restoration arcs are about fixing damage, healing wounds, and making the world right again. Often they're about cleaning up the mess of another arc.

Note that some of these subtypes are callbacks to other types of arcs. If someone's trying to undo the damage done by an arc in the past, they're likely calling on the relevant subtype here.

**Restoration Subtypes:**

- Redemption (impulse: to draw into the light)
- Reclamation (impulse: to repel through force and battle)
- Rebellion (impulse: to subvert through chaos and mayhem)
- Reconstruction (impulse: to rebuild despite danger)

**Restoration Moves:**

- Reveal a rebuilt threat
- Uncover an old secret
- Rally the people to a cause
- Destroy the forces in power
- Share a vision of the future

The PCs may want to restore things on their own, but always have NPCs looking to restore pieces of the world. The methods NPCs choose to fulfill their restoration plans will still put them at odds with the PCs.

## BUILD OUT THE CAST

Once you've chosen what kind of arc you're assembling, fill out the cast, a list of NPCs involved with that arc. A few of these characters will be obvious. If you're creating a destruction arc, whoever's doing the destruction has to be a cast member. If you're creating an invasion arc, the lead invader and their forces need to be listed under the cast. But flesh out the cast with other characters as well, people who aren't necessarily on board with the overall plan of the arc, but who have a vested interest in the situation in some way.

Focus especially on characters you write up as villains. Remember that in this context, "villains" don't have to be evil (and in fact, shouldn't be so *obviously* evil). They just have to be antagonistic, clear opponents for the PCs to face. Try to have at least three or four of these villain cast members for your arc.

For each cast member, think about how their drive in general relates to how they'd interact with this arc in particular. What would they want out of it? Whose side would they be on? What's their angle?

And as always, try to reincorporate. If you can use villains or NPCs who've already shown up in your game, your game will be stronger and more coherent, especially if those villains or NPCs are also hooks.

## FILL IN THE PHASES

Arcs are split up into multiple phases, to help you track them as they advance and progress through your story. There are three phases to every arc:

**Setting the board:** In this phase, the arc is just getting into motion. The cast is maneuvering and taking first steps, but nothing has come to a head yet.

**Making a move:** In this phase, the arc is in swing. The cast is making moves, pushing towards their goals, and the issues of the arc are coming to fruition.

**Endgame:** In this phase, the arc is hitting the end. The cast is making their final moves, and the issues of the arc are in do-or-die territory.

For each phase of your arc, jot down the plans and intents of the different cast members. Start with any cast members directly supporting the overall nature of the arc, and then move to the cast members either opposing the arc or acting in its periphery. Phrase all their plans as statements of what they're going to do, each one beginning with a verb: "Steal the Quantum Splicer," "Collect evidence on superheroic mistakes," "Find a weakness in the Spike's defenses."

Escalate the plans across the different phases. Make them raise the stakes and build on prior plans. If an NPC's plan in the first phase is "Collect the pieces for the Infinite Portal," then in the second phase, push their plan forward a step: "Open up the Infinite Portal." And in the third phase, push their plan forward into its final step: "Summon the hordes of Deathdream through the Infinite Portal." If you can, create plans that can function independently across the different phases. But in general, it's most important that the plans escalate the sense of danger and potential disaster.

As long as you have three or four plans recorded for your cast, you're good for each phase. If you have more cast members, you don't need to come up with a plan for each and every one.

These plans tell you what the characters involved with the arc will do throughout the game. They let you think between panels (page 133), and make moves accordingly. When you're looking for another way to stir the pot, look to these plans. Have your NPCs pursue their plans, making moves and stirring up trouble. When two of your NPCs have resolved their plans for the current phase, either failing at them entirely or succeeding, move onto the next phase and start making moves from those plans.

You can always come in and adjust your NPCs' plans if necessary. Don't feel beholden to them if the situation changes substantially—your NPCs would react and adjust their intents.

## **CREATE CUSTOM MOVES**

If you want to further develop an arc, make some custom moves for it. These moves are still always aimed at the players (not you). You're giving the PCs more ways to interact with the arc and its issues when you create a custom move.

For more on making custom moves, see **CUSTOM MOVES** (page 197).

## **GIVE IT A NAME AND DESCRIPTION**

Finally, give your arc a name: something evocative and descriptive, that you'd see at the front of the comic book issues to flag they're all part of the same storyline. Make it fun, something that'll remind you what the arc is actually about: "The Starborn Invasion" or "The Spider's Web" or "The Doom from Within."

Then, write a few sentences of description, tying the arc together and making the stakes clear. Since you're the only one looking at your arcs, you don't have to worry about making them crystal clear, so long as you have enough that you can use them at your table and know what they're about.



## HOW TO USE ARCS

Your arcs provide you with a framework to help guide what moves you make and what actions your NPCs take. When you're at a loss, look down at your arcs for some guidance. You can always make arc moves when appropriate, and you can frame scenes around the PCs encountering and dealing with the plans of the arc's cast.

Keep track of when the plans of the cast members are resolved during the arc, too. Remember that once two such plans are resolved for any single phase of the arc, you should move to the next phase. Use the current phase of the arc to help determine how hard you should be making your moves. As you advance phases, the tension should increase, and your moves should get harder.

When two plans of the third phase of your current arc have been resolved, then the whole arc should resolve. Reassess the current state of the city, and between sessions, build a new arc.

### SAMPLE ARC

**Name:** The Future Perfect

**Type:** Invasion (time travelers)

**Impulse:** To control the actions of predecessors

### CAST:

- Future versions of Grasshopper, Huma, Toro, and Dusk, known respectively as Antlion, Huma, Crush, and Penumbra
- Ilijah Intrepid, interdimensional traveler trapped in Halcyon City and looking for a means to escape
- Doctor Infinity, time traveling android trying to keep the whole length and breadth of time safe from causal wounds
- Dominus, time traveling apotheosis of metahumanity, seeking to ensure their own creation by controlling the past

### DESCRIPTION:

Antlion, Huma, Crush, and Penumbra travel back in time from the future to ensure that this pivotal series of events go exactly as they remember. The adults, collectively calling themselves “The Hammer,” aim to force the young heroes to destroy dangerous villains forthright, ensuring that their younger selves come to understand how important direct, overwhelming action is. Doctor Infinity reacts to the incursion by attempting to destroy the young heroes herself, to ensure their future selves will never time travel, while Dominus sees them as threatening the entire potential of his future, and Ilijah Intrepid sees them as a potential ticket home.

## PHASES:

### Phase one — Setting the board:

- The Hammer: find and confront their younger selves, testing their abilities to **assess the situation**
- Doctor Infinity: unleash a weaker, generally insignificant, villain on the team to uncover their current weaknesses in this timestream
- Ilijah Intrepid: make contact with the Hammer and offer them his assistance in exchange for help getting home
- Dominus: offer information to the young heroes to sway them against their older selves

### Phase two — Making a move:

- The Hammer: push the young heroes to destroy an enemy—any of Doctor Infinity, Ilijah Intrepid, or Dominus
- Doctor Infinity: directly strike against the young team members
- Ilijah Intrepid: earn passage out of Halcyon City by pushing the young heroes to ridiculous lengths with terrible traps
- Dominus: build a temporal stabilizer and prevent all time travel, thereby stopping the Hammer and protecting their timeline

### Phase three — Endgame:

- The Hammer: put their younger selves' loved ones in danger to force the young heroes to destroy an enemy
- Doctor Infinity: destroy all of Halcyon City to destroy the young team members
- Ilijah Intrepid: steal the time and dimension traveling technology of the Hammer at any cost
- Dominus: confront the Hammer in a massive battle and destroy them

## CUSTOM MOVES:

When you **pierce the mask** of your older self, roll + the Label they now embody instead of Mundane.

When you **reject the Influence** of your older self, always take +1.



# CHAPTER 10: CUSTOM MOVES

At this point, you've seen all kinds of moves: basic moves, playbook moves, team moves, and on and on. Those moves show the flexible nature of **MASKS**... and you can take advantage of that flexibility by making your own moves—**custom moves**—that serve your particular game.

Every move is a bit of mechanics designed to promise that something cool and fun will happen when it's triggered. Custom moves let you make new promises that fit what you want out of your game. You can make your own game of **MASKS**, your own version of Halcyon City, honed to your particular interests through these custom moves. Here's an example:

When you **run through the Exemplars' combat training simulation**, roll + Danger. On a hit, you impress the Exemplars with your performance; take Influence over one of them. On a 7-9, you get banged up along the way though; mark a condition, your choice. On a miss, you break the rules of the simulation or damage the simulation permanently—and you can count on the Exemplars to let you know everything you did wrong.

This move fleshes out the Exemplars and their base. It could be tied to an arc that involves them—a restoration arc, or maybe a destruction arc aimed at them—but it doesn't need to be! You can just add moves like this to spice up your game, to add flavor and definition and depth to your version of Halcyon City. It's a way to ensure that something interesting happens when the players interact with particular pieces of the setting.

## BUILDING CUSTOM MOVES

Moves generally consist of:

- A trigger: "When (something) happens..."
- An outcome: "...then (something else) happens." This might include a roll of the dice, or it might just be something that happens.
- Stakes: If the move does have a roll, say what happens on a 10+, a 7-9, and a 6-.

You've also got to define the 10+, 7-9, and miss results: a 10+ means things generally work out; a 7-9 means there's some cost or complication; and a 6-mean things usually get worse.

Beyond those core components, though, you need to make sure any custom moves you create do two things:

- Trigger on an interesting and uncertain action
- Lead to outcomes that push the fiction forward

## TRIGGERS

The key to making good triggers is that the actions themselves need to be interesting and exciting, and only likely to occur when there's actual uncertainty about what will happen. You don't want triggers based on boring actions, and you don't want triggers that come up too often.

Here's a move with a bad trigger:

When you **lie to an adult**, roll + Superior. On a 10+, they buy your lie. On a 7-9, answer their questions, and you're good. On a miss, they see right through you...and you're in trouble.

The trigger is so non-specific, the PCs will trigger it all the time, even when it isn't all that interesting, even when an adult would absolutely believe their lies. It's not evocative on its own, and it won't lead to interesting fiction as a result. The trigger would be stronger if it were more focused, like when you **feed false information to the Exemplars**.

Here's a move with a better trigger:

When you **make a statement to the cameras**, roll + Superior. On a 10+, choose three. On a 7-9, choose two.

- you convince the viewing audience to see your team according to a Label of your choice
- your statement will bring you an opportunity from a viewer
- your statement frames you, in particular, as a successful and noteworthy hero of the city; mark potential
- you don't anger or upset anyone important or powerful with your statement

On a miss, your statement goes awry, and listeners interpret your words in the worst possible way.

Now, it's about a specific instance, something that won't happen all the time. It says something about your game, too—your game is, in part, about what your PCs say to the public of the city. And finally, there's uncertainty attached to that trigger. We don't know what happens when one of your PCs makes a statement to the cameras, and that's why we have the move.

## COMMON TRIGGER TYPES

**Character action:** Moves can trigger when a character takes action. To make a strong move, always tie that action to specifics—action in a particular place, against a particular character, with a particular item, and so on.

**The Overbrain's Helmet:** When you **put on the Omnihelmet and telepathically search for someone**, roll + Freak. On a hit, you learn exactly where they are and what they're doing right now. On a 7-9, the connection is stronger than you expected; give them Influence over you or mark a condition, your choice. On a miss, you find them, but you alert the Overbrain to your location; brace yourself.

**Situation:** Moves can trigger due to the specific situation a PC is in, usually because an NPC or the environment takes action. The PC still has to be there and be involved, though, for the move to trigger.

**Bloodhounds:** When **Agent Hersh and her metahuman detectors are hunting you**, roll + Mundane. On a hit, you can avoid detection if you flee, now. On a 10+, you get the drop on Agent Hersh—you can ambush her or let her pass, your call. On a miss, they've got you dead to rights.

**From now on:** Moves can trigger as soon as you take them, and the effects go on continuously. They don't need an explicit trigger.

**New Exemplar:** [When you take this move and ever afterward...] Sign the contract and join the Exemplars. Take +1 ongoing any time you wield your authority or speak publicly. While you're part of their team, you can never reject the Exemplars' Influence over you.

**Right now and done:** Moves can trigger once, as soon as you take them. Again, no explicit trigger is needed.

**The Forge:** [Immediately after you take this move...] When you go into one of VENOM's Forge brainwashing tubes, it rearranges your mind and memories to make you a weapon. Shift your Labels around however you want, so long as your overall total remains the same and Danger ends at +3. The GM tells you what memory you lose during the change.



## EFFECTS

Triggers are only one half of a move. You need to know what happens when a move is triggered, too, and those effects need to be interesting and cool all on their own. Good effects push the fiction forward and lead to more moves. If a move doesn't produce clear new paths after it's been triggered, then its effects are weak.

Here's a move with weak effects:

When you try to pass the threshold of Magus Everard's Sanctum, roll + Freak. On a 10+, you get in. On a 7-9, you get in, but only if you give Everard Influence over you. On a miss, you can't get in.

None of its possible outcomes are particularly interesting. Getting inside the Sanctum is interesting, but only because the Sanctum itself is interesting—this move doesn't make it any more so. Giving Everard Influence allows for a Label shift, but devoid of anything else, that's not very interesting and it's detached from the fiction. The miss just plain shuts down the fiction.

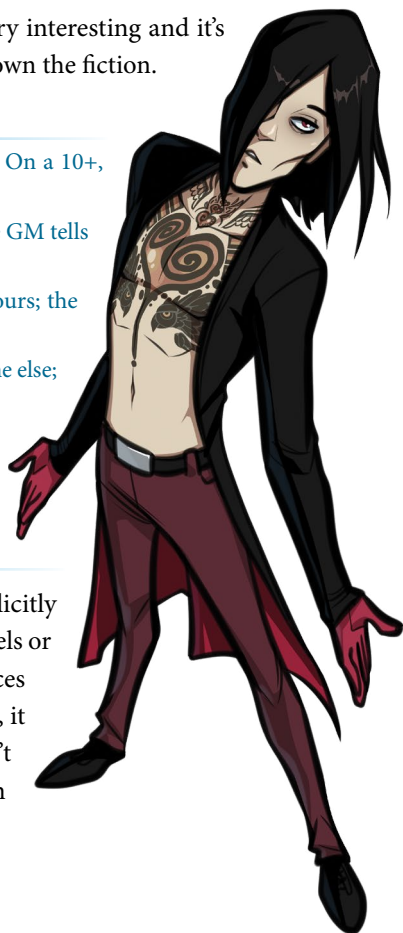
Here's a move with much better effects:

When you hack into Rook Laboratories, roll + Superior. On a 10+, choose two. On a 7-9, choose one.

- you find information that leaves Rook vulnerable; the GM tells you how
- you find information that clears up a question of yours; the GM answers the question
- you find information that fills in a weakness of someone else; name them, and the GM tells you their vulnerability
- you don't leave a trace

On a miss, choose one anyway, but you reveal your intrusion to Rook Security; they know where you are, and they're coming...

In this move, none of the options are explicitly mechanical—they don't provide Influence or shift Labels or anything similar. But they'll all lead to interesting places in the story. No matter what information a PC finds, it opens up new paths for new moves. And if a PC doesn't choose "you don't leave a trace," the GM has a golden opportunity to make a move.



## COMMON EFFECT TYPES

**Direct Effects:** Moves can directly affect the fiction, making changes, causing events, without touching on any mechanical pieces in between.

**The Warden:** When you slap the **Cosmic Warden's Voidcuffs on someone with powers**, they lose those powers for as long as they are cuffed.

**Label swap:** You can create custom moves that change which Labels are used with which basic moves in particular situations. Always make these Label swap moves tied to specific situations.

**Leech:** Powersink saps the metahuman abilities of everyone around him. When you **directly engage Powersink in physical combat**, roll + Mundane instead of + Danger.

**Add options:** Custom moves can add further options to existing moves, expanding how they're useful and making them specific to their surroundings.

**Hall of Mirrors:** When you **assess the situation in the Hall of Eternal Worlds**, add these two questions to the list of options:

- What terrible future for me do I see in one of the mirrors?
- What magnificent future for me do I see in one of the mirrors?

**Inflict a condition:** You can always have custom moves inflict conditions on PCs. Those moves indicate ways that the PCs' emotions can be affected and changed, whether they like it or not.

**Emotion Vampire:** When you **reject Solace's Influence**, mark a condition of his choice in addition to any other results of the move.

**Take or give Influence/shift Labels:** You can use custom moves to affect Influence and Label shifting. The two are intimately tied together, but a move that takes Influence sets up for later Label shifts, while a move that directly shifts Labels is immediate and powerful.

**Just a Child:** The Cuckoo possesses and empowers the bodies of children; it makes the body diamond-hard, yet it still appears as a child. When you **directly engage the Cuckoo**, it takes Influence over you unless you have seen its true form.

**Choose options:** You can set up custom moves that allow players to pick options from a list. The list provides some clear courses for the fiction to follow, without defining exactly which path it will go down. Make sure that all the choices on the list are juicy and interesting, each one leading to new possible moves.

**Paper Men:** When you **take on an army of Carceri drone soldiers**, roll + Danger. On a hit, you win, but barely: you must mark three conditions, and the collateral damage is expansive. On a 10+, choose two. On a 7-9, choose one.

- you escape the fight with only a few scratches and some trauma; mark one condition instead of three
  - you win the fight definitively and seize Carceri prisoners, weapons, and equipment
  - you minimize the collateral damage to the city and those around you
- On a miss, you lose the fight and wake up on a Carceri prison ship. Good luck.

You can play a few tricks with lists of options, too, including setting up negative lists where players choose which of a set of bad options they want to avoid.

**Gaze of the Abyss:** **When the demon creature Gehenna invades your mind**, roll + Superior. On a 10+, choose one. On a 7-9, choose two. On a miss, all three.

- tell Gehenna the person you care about the most in the whole world
- tell Gehenna the one thing you want above anything else
- tell Gehenna the danger you fear the most

**Hold and spend:** These kinds of moves are pretty much the same as setting up a list. The difference is that hold allows players to make their choices later, after they've rolled for the original move, instead of right then and there.

**Plug 'n' Play:** **When you take a dose of Stormbolt Six**, roll + Danger. On a 10+, hold three. On a 7-9, hold two. On a miss, hold one. Spend your hold 1 for 1 to:

- emit an EMP pulse; take out any electronics in your area
- charge your fists with lightning; inflict an additional condition when you **directly engage**
- teleport to any location in sight by riding a lightning bolt there
- stun anyone in your vicinity with a thunderclap

When all your hold is spent, mark a condition and **take a powerful blow** as the Stormcloud Six works its way through your system.

## COMMON CUSTOM MOVE TYPES

Between sessions, you can create custom moves for nearly any use. Here are some of the most common places where custom moves are useful and interesting. Remember that if you take advantage of any of these opportunities, you shouldn't hide it—make sure the players know, so they can use these moves!

### SITUATIONS

Custom moves are great for filling in specific holes in your game. If there's a situation that seems interesting and uncertain, but none of the basic moves quite cover it, that's a good sign you should add a custom move. Superhero stories can span vastly different genres and styles, including all kinds of crazy elements, so don't hesitate to come up with new custom moves to deal with those surprising situations.

### ITEMS

**MASKS** is a game of superhero stories, and superhero stories are chock-a-block full of MacGuffins and crazy super science doodads and fantasy artifacts. Making custom moves for these objects gives them greater importance in your game, and genuinely makes them more significant than just being things that everybody's after.

### POWERS AND ABILITIES

Especially when PCs pick up unique or additional powers, a custom move may be in order. **MASKS** covers a lot of ground with fictional positioning, but custom moves can draw out important and specific powers. This doesn't just have to be superhuman powers—if the Beacon connects with an Internet community of other would-be superheroes, then giving them a custom move to use that network is a great idea.

### FRAMING SCENES

You can use custom moves to frame scenes quickly and skip past some of the action. For instance, if the PCs might infiltrate the superhuman prison known as the Spike, instead of spending time making several individual rolls to unleash powers or **assess the situation**, you could make a custom move that accounts for the whole infiltration in a single roll.

### LOVE LETTERS

When a player misses a session and you want to catch them up, or when you want to start some conflicts fast and hard, love letters are what you're looking for. Love letters give more information and setup than regular custom moves, and they can quickly and easily resolve cliffhangers.

## LOVE LETTER EXAMPLE

Dear Sureshot,

When last we left you, you'd fallen off that crevasse in the Other Realm and disappeared into the darkness. Man, that must've sucked, right?

Let's find out how you're doing here. For better or worse, this is all about your skills, your abilities...the special things you can do. Roll + Freak. On a 10+, you're banged up, but you're still pretty operational, and you can reconnect to your team soon. On a 7-9, mark two conditions, but you're still up and moving. On a miss, you're in deep trouble. Mark any conditions you didn't already have marked. Your body's pretty broken, and if you don't get real help soon, you may not make it back home.

Best of luck, buddy. You'll need it.

Hugs and kisses,

Your GM

You can use love letters to immediately set up the situation, too. This is great for when you're running **MASKS** as a single session one-shot game, instead of a campaign.

Dear Toro,

Make your character like normal, but your starting role for **The Bull's Heart** is Defender.

You don't know your real name. You don't really know where you're from. You might be from a test tube. You might be an amnesiac. You might be a clone, or a secret robot, or any of countless options. Some part of you doesn't want to find out...but some other part needs to know.

The guys in black armor with the weird glowing guns, they've come for you a few times. This most recent attack was the worst, though. You're pretty sure they pull their punches—they're trying to take you alive, not kill you—but this time, they let 'er rip against the city and people around you. Seems they've figured out you actually care if people get hurt...

Let's find out exactly what happened. Roll + Danger. On a 10+, choose two. On a 7-9, choose one.

- you took 'em down quick, and few people were hurt—shift Savior up and any other Label down, if you want
- you caught one and scared him into talking—a first for you, but you've got a lead on who sent these goons
- you didn't let them get to you; if you don't choose this option, mark Angry

On a miss, it was bad. You won, but people were hurt...and they planted a tracer on you. Which you're only finding now. Right as they're coming for you. Mark Angry and one other condition of your choice.

Hope you can handle them!

Hugs and kisses,

Your GM

## SPIN-OFFS

There are tons of custom moves you can make to hone and focus your game of **MASKS**—the game is a framework that's plenty strong enough to manage your permutations. But you can push it hard, too, creating custom moves that really push the game into whole new directions.

Here are a few examples of some big changes you can make with custom moves in **MASKS**.

### SPENDABLE INFLUENCE

When you take Influence over someone, hold the token. You can hold multiple Influence tokens over the same character. Spend your Influence when you choose to:

- take +1 on a move against that character
- inflict a condition on that character
- ask that character a question; they must answer honestly
- (for PCs) shift that character's Labels, one up and one down
- (for PCs) offer that character the chance to mark potential if they do what you want
- (for PCs) give that character -2 on a move against you

This change will have repercussions all over the system, so if you go with it, you'll have to tweak a bunch of other moves a bit. The ultimate effect, though, is that Influence becomes more of a spendable resource, something you accumulate and then use. It makes the game much more directly about emotional manipulation and leverage—most likely, a game with these rules would be darker and more cynical.

### CUSTOM CONDITIONS

When you **take a condition**, write down a word or short phrase to represent the emotional state afflicting you. When that condition would impede you, take -1 to any moves you make. When another PC can take advantage of your condition, they take +1 to any moves they make against you. They really have to take advantage of your condition in the fiction to get the bonus, though.

If you take appropriate action in the fiction to relieve your condition, you can clear it.

Custom conditions allow for a much wider array of descriptions of the emotions the PCs undergo, and they give you a lot more freedom in interpreting when a condition actually affects the situation. But they also lose a lot of their focus and tightness—you no longer have clear situations in which the condition does or doesn't matter, and you lose the clear path to removing the condition.



## HARM

Characters start play with varying numbers of boxes in their harm tracks. PCs always have six. NPCs have a number equal to their conditions.

When you trade blows with an NPC, inflict one harm on them. As one of your choices for directly engaging a threat, you can choose to inflict an additional harm. If you use overwhelming force against a target, you should inflict an additional harm anyway; the GM tells you when that's appropriate.

When you **take a powerful blow**, mark one box on your harm track. If half the boxes of your harm track are marked, you're not doing so hot; what once may have been easy now requires you to **unleash your powers**. If all boxes on your harm track are marked, you're in very bad shape; you're likely to die without immediate help.

If an NPC ever fills their harm track, they go unconscious. Without help, they'll die.

The GM can inflict harm as a hard move.

Maybe you want physical harm to have more meaning in your game. Adding a set of custom mechanics like this makes everyone pay more attention to physical damage, and the threat of dying becomes real. The tone of the game takes a huge swing for darker territory, with death genuinely on the line, and Danger takes on a much greater significance as beating enemies into submission becomes a much more straightforward and effective tactic.

## FASTER ADVANCEMENT

At the end of each session, answer the following three questions. For each yes, mark potential.

- Did we beat a dangerous enemy?
- Did we learn more about a threatening plot?
- Did we connect with each other as a team?

This kind of change may seem pretty small, ultimately, but it plays into many of the other economies and balances of **MASKS**. PCs advance much more quickly when they often get three more potential at the end of the session. But this also strongly incentivizes taking those specific actions described in the move and it takes some emphasis off the existing ways to gain potential—namely, making moves with lower Labels so you roll a miss.

You could tweak the questions attached to this move to really define the specific kind of game you're playing. You could come up with specific questions for every playbook in your game, if you wanted. All of them would drive play down particular paths much more strongly, and ensure PCs reach their upper level advances much sooner.

## TEAM STAT

The team as a whole gains a Team stat, and a Team track with five boxes.



Your Team stat starts the game at +0. Your Team stat can never go higher than +3 or lower than -2.

Whenever you would add a Team to the pool, mark a box on the track instead. When you mark the fifth box, clear it and increase your Team stat by +1. Whenever you would spend a Team from the pool, instead clear one box on the track. If there are no filled boxes to clear, then decrease your Team stat by -1.

When you help a teammate, roll + Team. On a hit, add +1 to their roll. On a 7-9, clear one box on the Team track. On a miss, clear one box on the Team track in addition to any other hard moves.

When you act selfishly, say how your actions ignore or insult your teammates and roll + Team instead of your usual Label on any move. After the move is resolved, decrease the Team stat by -1.

This is a big change, one that messes with a core economy of the game—Team. Team is less transitory; increasing the Team score can feel cooler than just adding Team to the pool. It's also going to be a lot easier for teammates to help each other; even when Team's at +0, PCs will now be able to roll it to help each other out. The added rules might also slow down the game a bit.

## IMAGINARY STORIES

You can tweak, adjust, and mess with this system endlessly. Don't be afraid to try out whatever's in your head for bigger changes, from setting changes to major rules tweaks. Make your game of **MASKS** what you want it to be.

And keep your eyes peeled for the other books in the **MASKS** line, like the **HALCYON CITY HERALD COLLECTION**, **MASKS: UNBOUND**, and **THE SECRETS OF A.E.G.I.S.**, all of which will come with plenty of custom moves to give you tools and examples for your own table. And if you really want to see more, look up other Powered by the Apocalypse games, like **APOCALYPSE WORLD**, **MONSTERHEARTS**, **DUNGEON WORLD**, and Magpie Games's own **EPYLLION** and **URBAN SHADOWS**—though be warned, many of those games have a pretty hard R rating.

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