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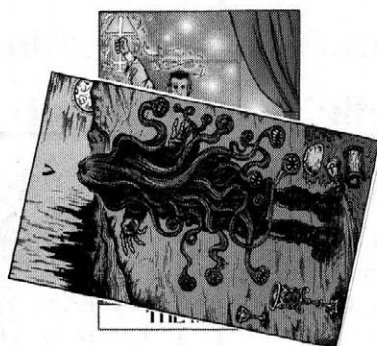


BLACK DOG
GAME FACTORY™

FOR ADULTS ONLY

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A Handbook for the
Gothic-Punk Streets



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Ken "Orphan" Cliffe, whose children keep dying on him. (Well, I liked the damn magazine!)

Bill "Novel Futures" Bridges, for Rage-ing through his first novel (*The Silver Crown*; go buy it — it rocks!).

Phil "Good Doggie" Brucato, for sticking to his own bed.

Ian "Sticky Twins I" Lemke, for passing on the food curse.

Jennifer "Sticky Twins II" Hartshorn, for becoming a none-too-willing recipient of the food curse.

Cynthia "Desperately Seeking" Summers, for promising to be good for the British Toreador.

Laura "Turncoat" Perkinson, for being the latest to leave for the fiction dept. Is it our breath, or do they just get better lunches?

Ethan "Living Room" Skemp, for hosting the daily developers' lounge.

Richard "Undead Undead Undead" Dansky, for taking over the line that is both alive and dead.

Kyle "Poor Rudolph" Allen, for being banned from the reindeer games.

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GAME STUDIO

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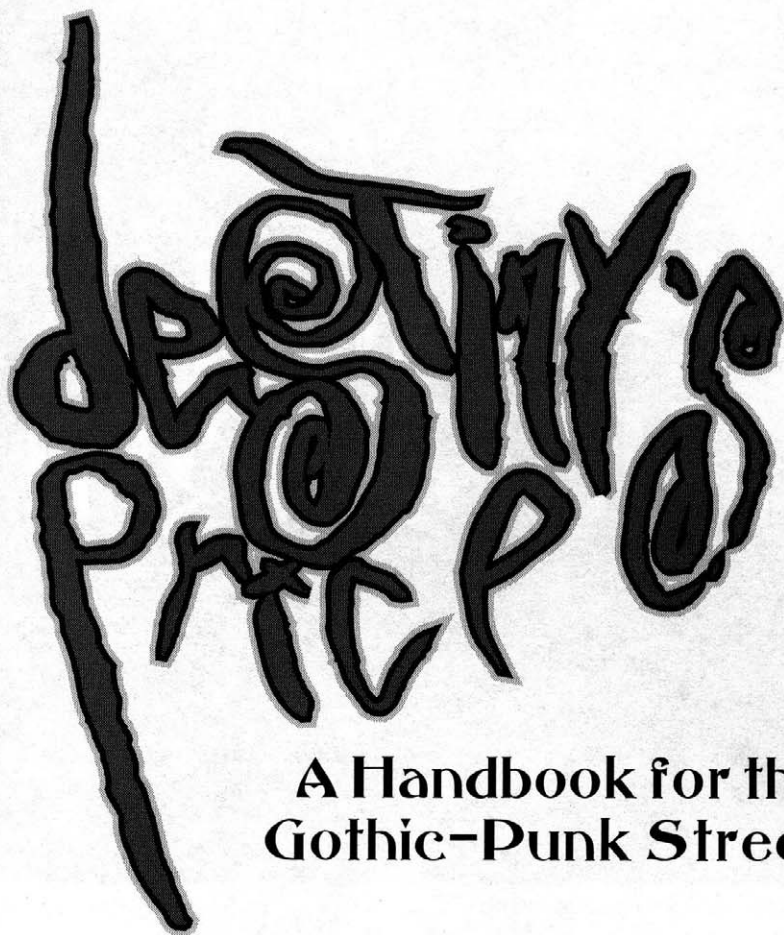
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Printed in Canada

Black Dog Games

Destiny's Price is the initial offering of **Mage: The Ascension** sourcebooks under the Black Dog aegis. This book is to be sold to individuals 18 or older only.

The material contained within this book is intended for mature gamers only, and has the potential to offend or disturb. Please exercise discretion in the use of the material in **Destiny's Price** as some people may find its content or subject matter to be objectionable.



**A Handbook for the
Gothic-Punk Streets**

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Prelude: Flashlight

By Jaymi Wiley



This is what a lit degree gets you — a shitty job and a four-pack-a-day habit. It seems like coughing is the only thing I've accomplished since graduation. If I'd known what the damn things would do to me, I'd have chosen another vice. My dreams and aspirations might as well have been smoke, too. I just wanted a good, reliable job that kept me out of bankruptcy. Twenty years and half a lifetime's worth of coughing, here I am — the maintenance supervisor for a rundown apartment complex.

Supervising this place means you've gotta be there to help tenants twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Each and every tenant has a complaint about their residence. Say the lady in #410 complains about a problem with the heat. This means going into the basement. I hate going down there. It's dark and damp, with unidentifiable noises and sour smells. Basements give me the creeps. I avoid going down into them at all costs. But after fifty or so complaints and a threat to call the city, I decide to check it out.

With toolbox in hand, I take a deep breath and venture down into hostile territory. The flashlight provides very little light, so anything I want to see has to be close-up. Never occurred to me that light bulbs would make a good investment. Now I regret my thriftiness.

The storage area's a wreck. All I see is the chaotic pattern of boxes and tattered furniture, covered in dustbags and racked behind a rusty wire mesh. Each item is carefully labeled with the tenant's name and the box's memory-laden contents. Imbedded into each wall are three small windows covered with sheets; what little winter light enters through them colors everything with an unnatural glow. Overhead, the labyrinth of copper and PVC pipework networks across the ceiling like hissing cobwebs.

I inhale musty, antiquated air and begin to cough. You'd think the doctors and scientists would've come up with a cure by now. Dust dances in my flashlight beam. Beads of water condense around the pipe joints as I search... Ah, *there* it is, the criminal in question. I put the toolbox down and quickly give the patient a once-over. Everything seems to be in working order. I don't get it; what's wrong?

Crash!

The noise sends me flashbacks of all the horror shows I've ever seen. Jason, Michael and hanging hidden corpses come flooding into my hyperactive imagination. *Oh, knock it off!* Slowly I turn, scanning the room, careful not to turn my back to any dark corners. Despite the urge to bolt, curiosity gets the better of me. I have to find the cause of the noise.

That's when I see her. Tucked away behind storage boxes, hiding in a niche in the wall. Scared her out of hiding. Scared me, too. A ball of phlegm lodges halfway up my throat, and I hack it into an unused corner.

I point the flashlight beam directly into her face. She doesn't flinch.

"What in the fuck are you doing down here, kid?" My voice sounds thick. "There's a lot of dangerous things down here. You could get hurt."

Nothing. Only two blank eyes staring back at me.

"Where are your parents?" Another round of phlegm. I resist the urge to spit it at her. Creepy kid. "I haven't seen you around here."

Looking away from me, she whispers, "I don't have parents. It's not my fault. Daddy never wanted me and Mommy got beat up by a badman in funny clothes, and I don't want anyone else to take care of me."

My God. And so young.

After a long and awkward pause, I venture, "What do you mean, a 'badman'?"

"The badman my Mommy works for. He hits her whenever she don't give him enough money. I got scared and left. She never notices me anyway."

Sad shit, and all too typical. I swallow the slimy nicotine lump and move a bit closer. "What's your name, kid? Where do you live?"

"My name's Katryn, and I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

Smart kid. "Well, you're going to have to talk to me. Especially if you want my help. Now..."

"I don't need your help," she says defiantly. "This is my home now. I am never really alone. I've got Sam and my dreams, they keep me company. Nobody else wants me." She says it brave, that way that kids can, but there's a sadness in her eyes as she does. She's afraid of living like this, in the streets. She misses her parents, and wants to go home. Pride and fear keep her from coming out. She doesn't trust me. And I don't blame her.

"Don't you miss your Mommy?"

Pause.

"Nobody wants me." Her whisper nearly gets lost. There are tears beneath that brave kid-voice. "Once the police found me and tried to put me away. But I stopped them. They won't bother me or Sam anymore. This is my home."

She stopped the cops? I shake my head. This isn't any place for a child to grow up. Frustrated, unable to reply, I look her over. Cutest little thing. From the dim light, I can

tell she's no older than twelve or thirteen. Probably younger. The street's a sad place to be a kid.

Dark brown eyes peer through shaggy, raven-black hair which hangs in her face like willow boughs. Her frail frame shows the bones through her tattered and worn clothes — clothes so old that the colors have almost been cried out. She doesn't wear shoes.

She owns few possessions. It's cold down here, and a faded, rat-eaten yellow blanket carefully laid in a heap on the concrete carpet is her only protection. She cradles a love-worn brown teddy bear, missing its button eyes. That, I guess, is Sam. Other than the bear and myself, she's alone. The image is not what you'd call pleasing to the eye.

How long has she been like this? Anger rises: How can our society allow this to happen? To anyone? This could've been my kid, once. It could've been me. I'm torn between offering to help her out and leaving her there to fend for herself. Nobody wants to live like this, but nobody wants to help. If our situations were reversed, would someone do the same for me? Not likely.

Remembering that I placed a sandwich in my toolbox, I take it out and offer it to her. Hesitant, uncertain, she slowly reaches out to take the plastic-wrapped sandwich. Our hands touch.

It happens suddenly, like a cold shock.

"I can see death on you," she says. "It stains your colors."

"What?"

Her voice deepens. "The death, your cough. You should be more careful of what you put inside you."

Suddenly I needed to get away.

"Uh... sure, Katryn. Whatever you say." I fumble in my pocket, bring out my scuffed — and all-too-thin — wallet. "Hey, look, here's twenty bucks. I know it's not a whole lot, but it's all I've got." My fingers, I admit, are shaking a bit, and it's not from the chill in the air. "Why don't you go and get a decent meal, maybe go to a shelter. Living down here, y'know, it's not the greatest of places..."

She silently declines the gift. I stand like a fool for a minute. Her survival wars with pride as she unwraps the sandwich. Pride wins, I guess. Shrugging, I put the money back. She doesn't even wave as I slowly back away.

I still wish she would've taken the cash. It's the least I could do to help, without getting in too deep, anyway. I take one last look at her before heading back upstairs.

At the top of the stairs, I click the flashlight off. It's dark down there, a lot darker than I'd like it to be. I couldn't live down there. I hope she doesn't stay.

Later on, I go back down, just to check up on her. Nothing. Not even the plastic wrap. Maybe she found her way out. Maybe she went home after we spoke. I hope so. She had the saddest eyes. I have no idea how she got down there. I'm not sure I'll ever find out, either.

There was something weird about that kid.

I haven't coughed in hours.



Introduction

*Not about to see your light
But if you wanna find hell with me
I can show you what it's like
Till you're bleeding
— Danzig, "Mother"*



The streets are cool, aren't they? Cracked concrete scattered with glass, brick towers and steel spirals rising to a night sky, glowing with graffiti tattoos. Bass-thump heartbeats, trashfires, neon winters, asphalt summers. The streets are sex and death — the ugliest kind of beauty, a whoresmile promise to make the night seem sweeter. Right?

Wrong.

Let's be straight, you and I: if we're lucky, we don't know shit about the streets — the real back-alley hells. We might cruise the clubs, do a few drugs, thrash out our frustrations in some hardcore dive, but we don't really *know* a goddamned

thing about survival in the inner city. We just like to play let's pretend. Nothing wrong with that — it's an improvement, I'm told, from eating out of dumpsters. But if we're going to do it, we oughta do it right.

We tragically-hip gamer types are drawn to the streets like writers to an over-used metaphor. The streets are all we wish we could be — hip, sexy, dangerous, alive, mysterious and lethal. We swallow the folklore like ripple and cum, gagging on it even as we lick it from our lips. But, in the end, we're full of shit, because the streets are not our home. Not if we're lucky.

Others aren't so lucky; this book, in many ways, is about them. And about those Awakened who walk among them.

How to Use This Book

This isn't a book about Technomancer plots, demon-horde incursions or vampiric puppetry — not really. It's about the people your mages might meet, should they spend time among the street folk — the hookers, urchins, gangbangers, cops, winos, Blood Dolls, runaways, club owners and innocents trapped in the shark pool. This is not supposed to be a comforting book to read. The Gothic-Punk world has been alluded to, hinted at and spoken of in hushed dramatic whispers. Perhaps it's time to look beyond the quotes and metaphors and explore what we might see on a trip there. **Destiny's Price** details the nastiest side of the Gothic-Punk streets — the seedy bars, crackhouses, flophouses, jails and murder cellars of this dark reflection of our own mistakes. It's not a ride for the squeamish.

Destiny's Price isn't street gospel; in the end, it's just a book, with many liberties taken and sights unseen. It isn't meant to be a comprehensive sourcebook for every city in the industrialized world, nor will it allow you to walk unmolested through your local slums. We will, however, try to get past the usual gamebook bullshit here, and offer you some insights into the real heart of the Gothic-Punk landscape — the people who live there, the company they keep, and the rules they live by.

Any street-smart mystick knows that there's a pulse in the heart of the beast. Each city has its own beat, and anyone who wants to dance to it should learn how if she doesn't want to step in shit — or worse. Consider this book a guide to the dance-steps of the Gothic-Punk streets — a guide any World of Darkness player or Storyteller should be familiar with.

Chapter One introduces the hows, wheres and whys of urban street culture, from one who lives there. **Chapter Two** provides an extensive introduction to organized crime groups and subcultures. **Chapter Three** offers tips, motivations and rules for the mystick who visits — or works from — this dangerous world. **Chapter Four** includes a handful of ready-made settings, which can be used intact or cannibalized for inspiration. **Chapter Five** contains non-player street folk who might cross your players' paths in any number of ways. Finally, the **Appendix** offers a helping of less-than-glamorous tools for the street-level Storyteller — weapons, drugs, and other goodies. A selection of suggested films, books, comics and music albums can also be found here.

Other Storyteller Games

Destiny's Price isn't just for **Mage** players; it works equally well for **Vampire**, **Werewolf**, **Wraith** or **Changeling** chronicles. Most supernaturals know the street scene — vampires hunt and conspire within the underworld, and Garou battle the Wyrms that coils in these urban hells. The daily death toll adds numerous Restless to the Shadowlands, and many of these ghosts want revenge (remember *The Crow*?). Even the fae know the inner city's secrets, and



cherish the many fascinating adventures and nightmares that well up from the urban cesspool.

In other words, this is a general sourcebook. Use it as you will.

Theme

There will be poor always

Pathetically struggling

Look at the good things you've got

— Jesus, from Rice & Webber's *Jesus Christ, Superstar*

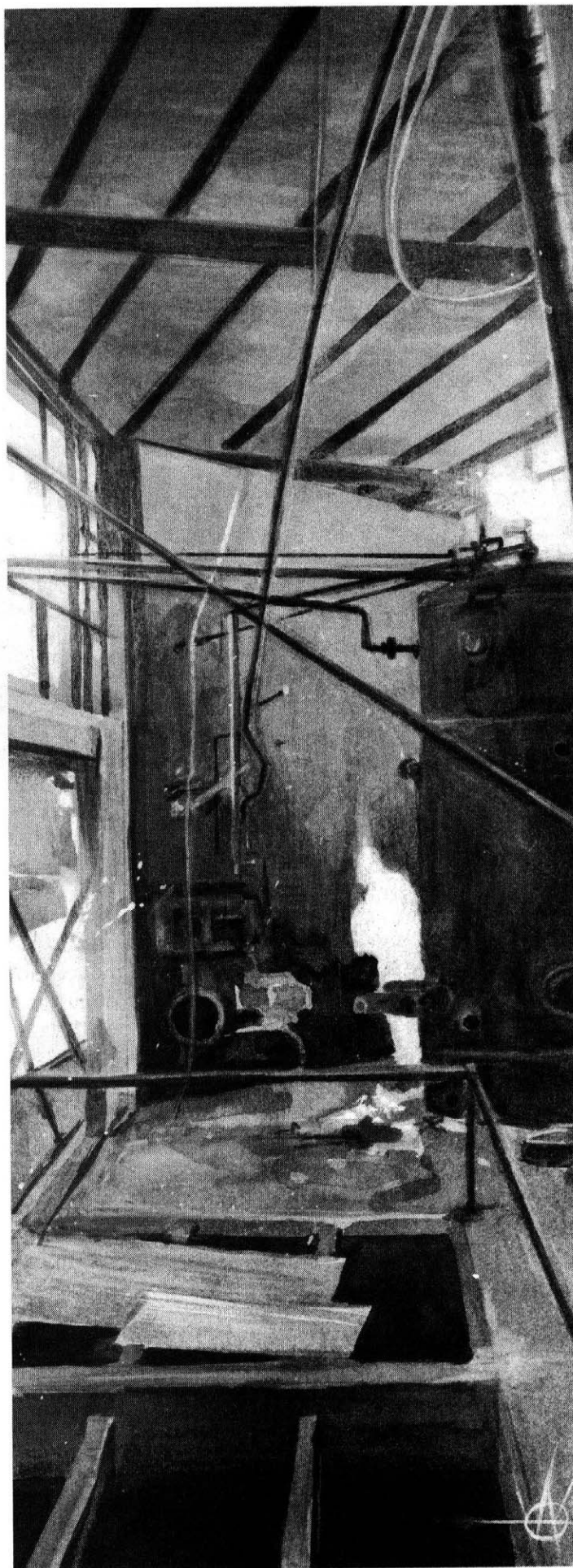
The oldest cliché in the book says the streets are like a jungle. That's bullshit — a jungle has more rules, and more civility. There's a certain back-alley protocol, true, but anyone who lives among the urban wastelands knows that those rules are broken nightly with blood and steel. No one with a heart can look at this chaos and do nothing if she has the power to change it — for better or worse. The war for reality may begin here, in a place with so much to gain and so much to do.

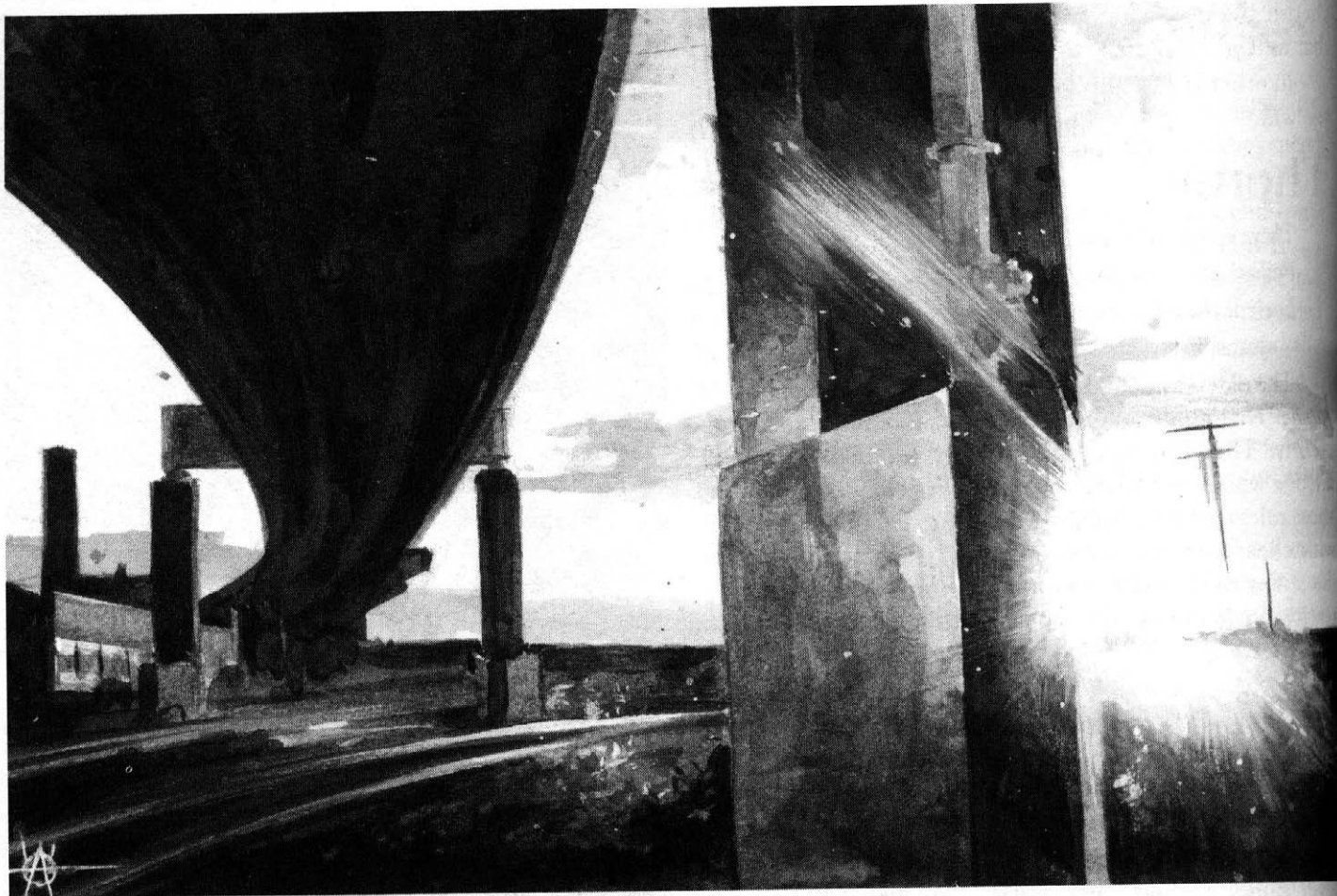
The best mages seek Ascension of one kind or another; for most, this Path is a worldwide goal, not a personal one. The twisting Path of street-level Ascension holds fistfuls of challenges for the mage who dares to make a difference here — and many rewards, as well.

The human element should never be far from a street-level game. Though they might look like parts of the landscape, the people here — from the wino to the bookie, from the single mom to the gangsta — are human beings, vital and loaded with potential. Inner city Sleepers keep one eye open out of survival habits. If a mage can bring some magick into their lives — and survive the experience — she may find worthwhile allies, hardcore foes or dedicated converts to her cause.

Whatever Path she follows, a mage cannot help but be affected by an urban journey. Stories in the inner cities are tales of horror, revenge, despair, desperation, survival... and hope. This last may be the most important; even in the worst slums, dives and pits, some hope remains. Coaxing it out and bringing it to bloom — or to ruin — may be the most meaningful thing a mystick ever does.

Frankly, the odds suck; a do-gooder is liable to end up decaying in a dumpster, sewer or polluted river. Even a Nephandus who comes in overconfident may find himself feeding rats with his own flesh. But struggling towards some goal gives meaning to the apparently meaningless. By offering his players something beyond Technomancer-smashing and Umbra-hopping, the **Mage** Storyteller brings a new dimension to the game — the responsibility that comes with a mage's power.





Mood

The myths are not total bullshit — there is a vitality to the underside that “normal” society can never match. And we love it. We fucking eat it up, in movies, games, comics, music and TV. We love to watch our well-oiled little machine come apart at the seams. Cocky with the scent of blood, we stare at our own worst reflection with disgust and fascination. Scary as it is, the image makes us hot.

Street stories carry a perverse glamour; their sleaze, violence, passion and decay stir the darkest parts of our souls even as they sicken us. Street-level tales should carry this heady mix through atmosphere and gut-level excitement. The swirling barroom reek, the bass thunder of boom-cars on rain-slicked asphalt, the threat of violence and the thrill of battered flesh — these are elements no street game should be without. The mood in these wastelands is tense and alive, terrifying but triumphant.

Storytelling Mature Themes

In street-level games such as those explored in this book, the question for Storytellers is not so much which theme or themes to pursue, but how to incorporate them without offending (or pandering to) your players.

Perhaps the best thing a Storyteller can do is to talk to the players individually about their limits before beginning a chronicle with mature themes — even if the players are her

close friends. As a Storyteller, you might tell a player that you’re thinking about starting a story whose primary themes are sexual hatred and alienation, possibly involving rape or sexual violence. How would the player feel about this sort of story, and where would his or her limits lie?

If the player objects to exploring this theme altogether, ask him for suggestions or offer some alternatives. If he finds the particular vehicle for the theme unacceptable if it directly involves his character, step it down a notch by having a character’s friend be involved instead, or alter the vehicle itself.

Treat players with respect and never force them, through peer pressure, guilt techniques, or any other means, to participate in a story whose themes offend them. On the other hand, gritty street-level games don’t grow out of Pollyanna; if they stir up some discomfort and even fear there’s some good Storytelling and playing going on there. Just be sure to encourage players to communicate with you and amongst themselves so that if boundaries are exceeded everybody knows to stop.

For a longer look at storytelling mature themes, communication between players and the Storyteller, and coping with problems that arise, see **Love Beyond Death**, sourcebook for **Wraith: The Oblivion**.

Yo! Common Sense 101

There's something sexy and enticing about our dark sides; many people get so caught up in that glamour that they destroy themselves. Others really want to get away, but don't know how, and lack the means to leave even if they did. The best way to avoid traps like addiction, disease, injury or prison is to "keep the gators fed," as Stephen King puts it, and learn the harshest lessons from fiction, not experience. By roleplaying amid the neon backwash, we can satisfy our craving for darkness without the real-life risks — and costs. Gothic-Punk street-cruising is, or should be, only a game.

Lexicon of the Street

Few are born with the gift of gab; if you have it, it's like oil on the machine. Things run smoothly. But for those who don't, when the situation gets hairy, you'd best play it quiet and cool. The following section provides a few terms which might help along the way.

Word to the wise here. If you're unsure of which subculture you are dealing with, shut up. As you've probably noticed, some of these terms mean very different things to different people. Walk softly and stay strapped.

B&D: Stands for bondage and discipline; also **BD**.

Bagman: Person who carries a package of something illegal, i.e., drugs or money in need of laundering.

Basehead: Person who's generally useless because she's addicted to freebased drugs. Baseheads frequently wander the streets like zombies, lending a creepy haunted air to bad neighborhoods.

Bitch: Generally a derogatory term for a woman, but it's not just for ladies anymore (esp. in gay circles). Call a man a bitch if he's being a bitch, and watch him turn green. Also a term for professional female dominant.

Bitchslap: A fast and vicious blow, usually done by surprise. From an obvious pimp term.

Block party: A neighborhood festival featuring music, food, gambling and good-natured drinking.

Blood Doll: Someone who shares blood and acts like a vampire for thrills.

Bloods: A large group of affiliated gangsters, originally from South Central Los Angeles, who wear the color red.

Bloodsports: Special service some professional dominants offer which involves cutting or piercing for the purpose of sexual arousal. Also camaraderie-inducing group torture sessions, where members of one group bond by torturing members of another. Also a term for pit fighting, sometimes between human combatants.

Bondage: Tying someone up or being tied up for the purpose of sexual stimulation or titillation.

Bonkers: Insane. Also **Bugfuck**.

Bugging: The street equivalent of geeking-out. Getting crazy, both good or bad.

Buster: Coward.

Butch: The masculine (and often dominant) partner in a gay relationship. Also refers to a man or woman who acts flamboyantly male. See *fem*.

Chicken: Virgin or child wanted sexually. Also an old term for coward, or for a suicide-dare.

Chickenhawk: Older person who pursues teens for sex, usually an older man who pursues young boys; also a pimp who hangs out at bus stations in big cities waiting for young girls to step off the bus so he can recruit them as prostitutes.

Chilling: Just hanging out, being cool; low stress.

Chica: Hot girl; can be an endearment or an insult.

Chopped: Custom-built or modified; also mutilated, killed in a quick or gruesome way, or given a sex-change operation.

Citizen: A suburbanite, or a mostly law-abiding person.

Cosa Nostra: Mafia. Also **The Mob**.

Crack whore: Person who will do anything (esp. appalling sexual acts) in order to acquire crack cocaine.

Crib: The place you live, or mostly hang out.

Crip: A very large group of affiliated gangsters, originally from South Central Los Angeles, who wear the color blue.

Curbstomp: Vicious street-fighting technique where a victim is placed open-mouthed on a curb, then gets stomped in the back of the head. This breaks his teeth and dislocates his jaw. Considered assault with intent to kill in many states.

Daisy chain: A sexual linking of three or more of either or both sexes in a line; can be linked with mouth-to-genitals, hands-to-genitals, or genitals-to-genitals or anus.

Deep: Having lots of folks in your gang.

Def: Used a few years back to describe things that were good or cool.

Dis: Short for disrespect; on the streets, respect might be all you have, so guard it well.

Discipline: Dominant sexual role play, usually involving transgression and punishment.

Dome: Head, as in "I'll put a bullet through your dome."

Domina, Dominatrix: Professional dominant, usually female but sometimes male; person who gives customers a sexual thrill by exhibiting power over them. Such services do not usually involve actual sexual contact with the dominant, although the submissive is sometimes permitted to masturbate.

Dope: Aside from the obvious drug connotation, dope can also mean good or valuable.

Down: To be down with some body is to be supportive, to be willing and able to provide support and/or backup.

Dose: To sneak some substance (usually a drug) into someone's food or drink; also a measured portion of a drug.

DP: Double penetration, i.e., two penises in either one orifice, or one in the anus and the other in the vagina of the same individual at the same time.

Drag: Cross-dressing; also a bad thing ("That's a drag"), sloth ("Quit draggin'"), or a toké from a joint, cigarette or pipe.

Dungeon: Place equipped with torture implements and restraints for professional dominants to work out of; also a term for a well-equipped playroom belonging to amateurs.

Dusted: Wacked-out, or treated with PCP; also refers to something or someone destroyed or killed ("We dusted that fucker.").

Dyke: Lesbian; can be either an insult, a greeting, or a compliment, depending on who you are and who you're talking to. **Faggot** is the male equivalent.

Escort: Can be non-sexual, but generally refers to mid-to high-end prostitute who does outcalls to good hotels or incalls to a comfortable apartment.

Feet: Police, cops.

Fem: The feminine (and often submissive) partner in a gay relationship. Also refers to a man who acts effeminate. See *butch*.

Fibbies: FBI agents and other federal enforcers.

Five-O: Cops; also **The Man**.

Fix: Dose of something a person is addicted to; also a crooked set-up usually intended to give a gambler an edge. ("Put your cash on Tyson. The fix is in and he's going to take a dive for ten percent of the take.")

Flavor: Comes from taste. Your taste in clothing, or whatever, is your style. The flavor is that style.

Fluffer: Person who prepares a male sex video actor to perform, i.e., person who gets him hard.

Fly: Up high like Superman, bigger than life. Fly is like super-cool.

Foul: Out of line, rotten behavior.

From the shoulder: To attack with fists; also to speak plain and honest.

Gangbanger, Gangsta: A gang member. Gangbanger (or **'Banger**) often refers to gang members who tend to do more fighting, as opposed to dealers (*hustlers*) and pimps (*macks*). Also a term for a person, usually female, who has sex with a large group of people, usually male, either willingly or unwillingly (see *Train*).

Gat: Firearm. From Gatling gun.

Ghetto star: Like an O.G., only more so, and famous for it in the hood.

Go head up: Start a fight, to not back down from a confrontation.

Hard boy, Hardcase: Merciless professional thug.

Highside: Wiping out your motorcycle and skidding across the pavement.

High-roller: One who's on top of her game, paid, well off and in control.

Holding: In possession of something illegal, usually drugs. Also keeping information from someone.

Homie, Homes: Though it still indicates a neighborhood friend (**Homeboy**), using this term is a good way to get laughed at (esp. if you're white).

Home invasion: A group break-in, during which residents are raped, tortured and sometimes killed while the house is being robbed and trashed.

Hood: From neighborhood; the general vicinity of your home, or a common ground.

Hoodoo: A curse; often fearsomely effective. Also **Mojo**.

Hubba: Crack cocaine.

Hustle: Put effort into something illegal; to whore. Also means to scam people through gambling (esp. at pool) or sex.

Hyped: Hyper, excited.

Ill: The sick shit; one oar in the water, just not right.

Incall: Sex appointment when a prostitute receives a john at an apartment or house operated by the service he or she works for. See *outcall*.

Jack: To forcibly redirect to one's own purposes; to steal, take away, or commit a hold-up.

John: Male customer of a prostitute.

Juice: Power, leverage, street-pull.

Jumped in: Initiated into a gang, usually involves new member being beaten up by current full members.

Kickin' it: Like chilling, only more social. Relaxing with your homies.

Life, the: Working in the sexual profession, usually as a prostitute.

Loc: One who is crazy or being crazy. From loco. Like getting amped up before a fight.

Mack: Pimp, or just a hit with the ladies. Bela Lugosi was the mack...

Made his bones: Killed someone, usually for initiation.

Made man: A full member of the Mafia; also someone who has earned a place in some other gang or organization.

Mistress: Woman whose expenses are covered by one man in return for sexual favors and companionship; also term for professional female dominant.

Nine: Short for 9mm handgun.

No Walking J/O: Many SM clubs will have signs which say this; it means patrons are not permitted to walk around masturbating openly (J/O is for jacking off).

Numbers: Popular form of illegal gambling where a different three-number combination is chosen daily. Gamblers guess the combination (or the numbers in it) to win.

O.G.: Original Gangster; respectful term for members with experience and seniority.

One-percenter: Outlaw biker.

Outcall: Sex appointment when a prostitute meets a john at his apartment, house, or, most commonly, hotel. See *incall*.

Out the back door: Leaving dead, usually from jail.

P.C.: Protective custody; also called "punk city" by convicts, who disdain those placed there.

Peel a cap: Like scalping, only with guns, bats or whatever. To kill by damaging someone's head.

Pimping: To control prostitutes for your financial gain. Tends to be used more for street-level prostitution.

Piper: Crack-smoker.

Pop a cap: Archaic term for shooting someone.

Pro: Prostitute, working-girl.

Props: Proper amount of respect. Also tools of a sex specialist's trade.

Protection: Can be genuine, as in a threat of bloody retribution should a protected individual be bothered; also a racket where the "safety" one purchases is from the protector.

Pulling the train: Being the first person in a *daisy chain* or a train.

Punk: Chump. Also used to describe people into punk music and lifestyle.

Queer: Gay man; often used as a term of defiance in the gay community (as in the group Queer Nation).

Red-top: Refers to the tops of the vials that crack cocaine comes in.

Retaliation: Like blood price in rural culture; the family (or gang) of an individual who has been harmed has the moral right to kill members of the attacker's family (or gang).

Ricebag: An insulting term for a Japanese motorcycle.

Ride: Car, vehicle.

Road rash: What you get if you highside your ride. Common scars on bikers.

Rough trade: Dangerous sex, sexual partners, or situations entered for a masochistic sexual thrill ("You like rough trade?").

Run up on: Sneak attack.

Scene: SM, bondage, or discipline interaction performed for an audience at an SM club or party; also refers to any subculture — fetish, drug, gay or lesbian, etc. — to which one belongs.

Set: A gang, or one branch of a gang.

Shag: To fuck, usually violently.

Shank: To stab, from the term for a prison knife. Also rape.

SHARP: SkinHeads Against Racial Prejudice; they dress much like Nazi/white supremacist skins, but beat up Nazi/white supremacist skins rather than ethnic minorities or homosexuals.

Sheep: A sex slave, often female, shared within a group.

Shot caller: Gang leader, decision maker.

Skin: Skinhead; also an older term for a rubber (condom).

Slapping skins: Having sex.

Slippin': Not paying attention; fucking up, making mistakes.

Slumming: Upper-class persons going to lower-class establishments or locales, generally for entertainment.

SM: Also **Sadomasochism** or **S&M**. Refers to practices which are usually sexual in nature and involve exchanges of pain.

Smack: Heroin, **H**, **Horse**.

Snuff: Underground porno which features real mutilations and deaths.

Strapped: Packing; carrying a weapon, usually a gun.

Streetwalking: Low-end prostitution involving standing outside and soliciting business from passing vehicles.

Submissive: This may be a person who provides the service of letting a customer exhibit sexual mastery over him or her; more often it refers to a man who pays a professional dominant to be cruel to him, beat him and verbally humiliate him etc.

Train: A succession of sexual partners, usually male, for a single person, usually female, who may be willing or unwilling. Also called a **Gangbang**.

Trick: Customer of a prostitute; also used to refer to a whorelike sexy female, or a single act of prostitution. Also a term of disrespect for a cowardly male.

Under his knife: Protected by; also indicates dangerous surgery.

Vigorish, Vig: Massive interest due on a loan-shark's loan (usually 20% per week).

Wack: Crappy, foul.

Wacked: Insane, as in wacko. Also means murdered ("We wacked him and left him in the river.").

Watersports: Being urinated on or urinating on someone else for sexual stimulation or titillation. Generally considered humiliating; a service offered by some professional dominants.

Wired: Wearing a listening or recording device. Also hyped on drugs, or seriously into computers or other technology.

Word: Truth, as in "I give you my word."

Work: To have sex, or to solicit; to perform a dangerous activity. Also a common term for body alterations like piercings or tattoos.



Under the Knife: A Guided Tour

Don't like my lifestyle?

Fuck you!

— Ice T, "Hustler"



It still brings a bittersweet smile to my face remembering how scared he was of the airplane when he left. He wasn't scared of Amit or Yakov, with their Uzis and their freedom in a pipe. He wasn't scared of the Fibbies, with their hidden handguns and their quickly flashed badges. "I'm a businessman," he told me. "All I care about is the bottom line, and this Lebanon thing can give me the competitive edge I need. I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth, but this could put me over the top." I'd looked up at him, nauseous with terror, afraid that he was going to send me back to Mommy and Daddy. He'd looked into my wide, frightened eyes and, misreading my fear, he said, "And you, of course. All I care about is the bottom line and you."

He told me he'd be back in less than a month and said I should "mind the store." He told me no one would fuck with me 'cause I was still under his knife. I hadn't had the abortion; I'd miscarried. Maybe my parents would take me back. High school was numbing, but at least nobody there was going to try to kill me for my boyfriend's stash. But then Jim had put his motorcycle-jacketed arms around me and he smelled like wet leather and cigarettes and I said okay.

Only that was three months ago and I've run out of money to pay the dickhead slumlord and he said I was going to have to find another coin soon if I didn't have the green stuff. I couldn't let that evil man take away Jim's apartment and all of his possessions. So I accepted advance payments for some of the hashish Jim is supposed to be bringing back. I'd go home now, but



what if the people I owe figured out where to find me? Then they'd get my parents, too. The first time he met Jim, my father told me that the only protection you have from people like that is if they don't know you exist. My mother also says she's going to explain birth control to me next year when I'm 18. Thanks, folks.

Maybe when I'm 40, if I ever get to be 40, my parents will sit me down and tell me how I could have made it through high school. How I could have made the other kids stop laughing at my blue-dyed hair. How I could have made the teachers stop condescending when I knew I was smarter than they were. How I could have taken care of the "store" and Jim's apartment and our few possession without whoring and without risking selling stuff I don't have. I have no idea whether I'm in serious danger yet or even if I ever could be. The fucking users talk tough, but I don't know if they mean it. I don't know the rules, but I just can't go home.

Mostly, I stay curled up in a little ball on the double-bed-sized mattress Jim keeps right on the floor, no boxspring or frame or anything. The blankets still smell a little like wet leather and cigarettes and it's comforting. I wish Jim would get back, though. I know he'll know what to do. He always knows what to do. Well, except for going on the airplane; he'd never been on an airplane before. But I know he'll take care of me when he gets back. And that knowledge gets me through.

So what's your story, whitebread? What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this, as they say? What're you looking to score here, sweetheart? Drugs? Cash? Guns? Love? Everyone runs a scam here, girl, and if you think otherwise, you don't know shit.

You don't know shit, do you? You look like some fresh-escaped housecat in headlights, just before the poor thing gets squashed by a semi. Whatever you're here for, you'd better learn the language, or the shit I've seen will look like the first day of kindergarten next to what they'll do to you. I'm Sonya, and I don't shake hands. That means you haven't got a weapon, you know, and that's not something you ever want the streeties to think.

Don't look up, dipshit! You look like a tourist. Don't look down, either. You'll look like a victim. Stare straight ahead, and learn to watch your peripherals. Check your back without looking like you're doing it. It's the best way to stay alive. Look ahead and mind your business. If someone meets your eye, get ready to fight, 'cause that's either an evaluation or a challenge.

You think it's strange that some street punk like me knows how to use words like "peripherals" and "evaluation" in a sentence? You think we're stupid here? Guess again. There are all kinds of education, sweetmeat, and they don't

all come from classrooms. I don't know what your scam is, but we might be able to help each other. One-time offer — join my class, and owe me for it, or walk away and take it on your own stupid head. Do you want me to clue you in? Cool. We'll talk about the price later. For now, just look straight ahead and listen when I talk to you. Don't say a goddamned word unless I tell you to. Before you can speak, you're gotta know the language.

Street Talk

*He who knows does not speak;
He who speaks does not know.*

— Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

*My vocabulary is very
Clever like a trick hand,
Sinkin' em like quicksand,
Making the competition feel
Like they need a kickstand...
None of them can get with me.
You better never act new, Nuff' respect due.*

— Big Daddy Kane, "Nuff' Respect"

People on the street don't talk dumb, they just talk different, and those who don't know the meaning of the words project their lack of understanding onto the speakers. "I didn't understand a word he said; he must be ignorant..." Every group, every subculture, develops its own terminology, its own slang and style of communication, and if you listen carefully, you can tell exactly where someone's coming from just by their speech. So if you're trying to fit in, do a lot more listening and a lot less talking. Not everyone on the street talks like they're on Yo! MTV Raps, and if they do, odds are good they're fakin' it anyway.

Attitude will take you a long way, but action speaks louder than words. Suburban brats offer each other a fair amount of slack when it comes to spinning *harder-core than thou* tales. They don't call their cohort's bluff for fear that their tall tales may be called onto the carpet in return; the foundations of their bad boy images are shaky 'cause they're just posing and they know it. Be prepared to back up your stories, and better yet, make the stories happen. Knowing the language is like having a passport; if you fake it badly, you will get caught, and it's no small task to fake it well. The first rule is, if you *think* you sound silly, you *do* sound silly, and that's not going to convince anyone, not even those who don't know the dialect. You've got to feel it. They say that animals can smell fear. That's how they pick the weak ones from the pack. You've got to have a lot of confidence not to be selected as easy prey. You've got to speak it like you mean it.

Choices and Perspective

When history books are full of shit

I become the anarchist

I'm pissed at this

— Red Hot Chili Peppers, "Johnny Kick a Hole in the Sky"

Why do people live this way? You don't have to ask out loud — I can read it on your face. Why would we live in condemned buildings and urine-reeking tenements, ripping folks off or selling babies for a pipe of crack? Why do it? Sweetheart, if you want to know the streets, you've gotta learn the reasons.

Some are born to the streets and some descend there. Why would anyone choose to be hungry or in fear for her life? Why would someone with no home blow his cash buying rounds of drinks for his acquaintances? Why would a 12-year-old boy sell crack from his bicycle? Why would a 14-year-old girl suck cocks in bus stations when she could be anywhere else? Would anyone choose to sleep on a heating grate when he could go to a shelter? Would anyone choose to shoot heroin when rehab was available? Would anyone choose to have a baby knowing she could not provide for it without selling her body?

Fuck, yeah. We all have choices. We all have options. Some of us have options which suck a little more than other people's. Or a lot more. But, for the most part, we make our own beds; we just don't always enjoy sleeping in them. And, of course, different people's lives suck for different reasons. Have you ever met anyone who genuinely considered herself a criminal? Didn't think so. Most people feel that they just do what they have to do. That's all.

Who truly knows what is right and what is wrong? What is good and what is evil? Why do so many accept another man's word? So many of us fail to think critically; accepting the official view, we fail to question authority.

Most citizens don't see it that way. They live in a simplified, predigested, fabricated world, like rats in a maze. But what about the rats that escape the maze? The men in white coats will do their best to put you back in. But, you see, even if you're the smartest rat in the maze, you only get the reward *they* give you, and there's not much to go around. For the ones brave enough to escape the maze, life is far from simple. The world hidden away, under the desks, under the maze, is a dangerous one. That's where the toxins are spilled, that's where the shards of glass are swept, that's where the bigger, meaner, smarter rats already live, and they're pretty hungry. That's the price of freedom. You have to learn to take care of yourself.

Yeah, with freedom comes danger and discomfort, but there's also vast opportunity. The opportunity to forge an existence according to *your* rules, according to *your* values. In order to be free, you must seek the edge. Go where the controllers don't fucking dare to tread. Learn the subtleties of edge culture and you can use it as your shield. Perhaps only a fool would live in a minefield, but if she knew how to walk among the bombs, perhaps she'd be the safest fool, in or out of a minefield. A wise man lives on top of the mountain, not because it's easy, but because it's hard.

Righteousness is a matter of perspective. There is no one true way. Were the colonists who pulled shit like the Boston Tea party evil men? The British certainly thought so, and lots of the colonists who were afraid to "rock the boat" did, too. Those ruffians were revolutionaries, and revolutionaries are always defined as bad and dangerous people by the establishment they seek to upset. Their revolution was successful, and it spawned our government, our country, our society. We, as Americans, look upon them as heroes, their hearts filled with goodness, idealism and bravery. They slapped the face of the Monarchy. They escaped the maze. To most of us, they're the shining example of righteousness. But whose truth is real? In reality they were idealists, striking out against tyranny, but reality also dictates that there were some real motherfuckers raiding those vessels as well, guys who just got off on wrecking shit up, pillaging, and pissing off the pigs. Does this mean that there were both Good people and Bad people engaged in the same act, defined separately by the same deed?

Suppose for a moment, that there is no good, there is no evil. Perhaps there's only "appropriate" and "inappropriate." Some of the biggest crime lords of our time were the original gangsters of the 1920s. They were cutting each other down in the streets with tommy-gun drive-bys and raking in the big bucks, all over illegal alcohol. Many of those that lived were caught and imprisoned for huge portions of their remaining years. They were the baddest of the bad, evil men corrupting the genteel society around them, and yet, today our government sells the same alcohol, and taxes the hell out of it. Now, is the government evil, or were the gangsters not evil? Both did the same shit. Who's right, and why?

Today the "authorities" tell us to fear a new breed of gangster. He hangs out, fully strapped, on the corner of, say, Houston's murderous 5th Ward. Now, he's public enemy number one, and they say he just doesn't give a fuck. He places no value on human life. They say he's a monster. But look at it through this gentleman's eyes. He's a fucking patriot, keeping armed guard over the land that he calls home. He alone makes the cash to pay the rent, to get new clothes, to buy simple groceries. Are his concerns being properly represented in our hallowed halls of Government? Not likely.

Being on the fringe does not make a person senseless. Drive-bys and carjacking and beating lonely masochists for pay might seem horrific to someone whose main worry is whether the neighbor's lawn is more expensively manicured than her own. It's always easy to hold someone else's motivations in contempt. Well, check your contempt at the door, bitch, if you're planning to walk down these stairs. You went to college? Well, keep it to yourself, but don't think that means you're smarter than anyone else here. Some of us went to college too, but we know enough to keep our mouths shut. Don't get me wrong; a lot of asphalt-dwellers respect education. But if you don't know how to walk the walk, really walk it like a native, well, trust me; you won't be able to work it.

A number of different sorts of folks inhabit the streets. In a sense, the underworld isn't really in a location, or even a group of locations per se. It's everywhere. Street is a way of life. Street is a set of rules for life. Live by the sword; die by the sword. Once you eat just six pomegranate seeds, you'll never really escape Hades.

Take welfare once. There may be no stigma, no shame in that, where you are, but you'll be forced to take under-the-table jobs in order to make enough to pay back your government benefactors. And once you eat from that second hand, it always has some hold on you. It's hard to flee fast enough and far enough to outrun everything that might haunt you.

The problem is also one of binary world-view. Either I would never break the law. Or. I would break the law. Either it's sacred. Or. It isn't. And, if even once it isn't, you undergo a permanent change. A veil is lifted and you always see the other way a thing could be done. The underground way. The way that leaps from the shadows with a Tijuana switchblade and a willingness to do what needs to be done.

Most street people hustle a little bit, but it's nothing major. Shoplifting and the short con. Enough to get by. A woman might be a clerk in the local liquor store. That'll pay the rent and let her drink her supper with an employee discount. But if she has a hot date, she might just bus it to a mall crosstown and go shoplifting at Victoria's Secret. It's not organized crime; she probably doesn't even think of herself as a criminal. Everyone she knows does it. Everyone who gets any action anyhow. It's only when women like her get caught that it gets ugly. Women like her just don't get acquitted, and jail time makes the heart grow harder. Jail time can just be destructive, or it can function like college for the criminally inclined. Yes, the things you learn are important, but identifying yourself as someone who can do what you're learning is more important. And, naturally, one does make connections.

Downward Spirals

*Now you're clean and so discreet I won't say a word
But most of all, this song is true
In case you haven't heard
So come on, stop your cryin'
We both know money burns
So honey keep on tryin'
And you'll get what you deserve*
— Guns 'n Roses, "My Michelle"

Sometimes the city is very cruel. Sometimes there are no jobs to be had. Not as a clerk in a liquor store. Not even as a part-time bagman. Many denizens of the streets try not to get too attached to anything they own, for fear that some day they'll have to sell those possessions for basic food or shelter. It's living close to the line. And from time to time, some day arrives and they end up below the line. Sometimes you have nothing left to sell but yourself.

Oh, it starts off easy. Pull up your shirt, sweetheart, and I'll give you twenty bucks. Then it's blow jobs. Then actual fucking. Then more specialized activity. Boys can get in on the sex action too. Don't be shy. It takes all kinds to make the world go 'round. There are people, even some high-rolling people, who like having a dick up some crack whore's ass, who like watching her furiously scratch her head while thin blood rolls down her emaciated flanks. It takes all kinds. And some are a lot less nice than others.

Prostitution can be a way out. Sometimes it's a ticket to uptown hotel rooms with clean, sweet-smelling ivory sheets and smoked salmon artfully arranged on ebony platters. Sometimes it leads to domination and other upscale sex work. Professional dominants need serious wardrobes of leather and latex and intimidating shoes as accouterments for their specialized skills, and quantities of equipment like that just can't be tossed in a bag upon eviction. But prostitution can definitely provide the seed capital to build a nice dungeon. Or the way out can appear in the form of a rich client who wants to buy rather than rent. Sometimes a smart boy or girl manages to save those pennies and the house in the safe clean suburbs takes care of itself. Sometimes the fast money comes big and fast and it doesn't stop for a long time. Fast money. Not easy money. A sex worker with something in the bank can afford protection and a sex worker with something in the bank can afford to say no if he doesn't like something a client wants.

There are whitebread losers who like to call prostitution a victimless crime. With his semen still warm in some 14-year-old boy's mouth, you can hear one explain that the whores are the real victims. Well, yes, in the case of that sort of john, the whore probably is being victimized, but the bottom rank of any profession is always victimized. A low-level whore will let a john tie her up and beat her whether or not that's her kink. A low-level actress will let a director



do the same. A low-level writer will do work on spec. Poverty and lack of success are the enslavement, not the type of employment — sex work or otherwise.

Once a girl has sold access to every orifice of her lily-white bod, what else can she sell if she still really needs to make rent? The street teems with bullshit micro-conmen. It doesn't matter if you're not holding; you can still sell the stuff. A girl who's down and out can try to trick people out of their cash. Or she can sell part of the farm, as it were. Selling blood to hospitals is easy if the donor is disease-free.

Most clinics and suchlike will not let any donor give more often than once a month, and then only if the donor is more than 125 pounds. Sometimes there are other interested parties. Rumors abound of whores who ended up either on easy street or on a slab because of some wealthy customer who liked their blood. Tales have it that some johns actually want the whore to ingest some drug, shoot heroin or smoke crack or snort cocaine or what-have-you, and then they like to drink the prostitute's blood once he's high. Strange but true. It takes all kinds.

A human body has a lot more in it than just red stuff, though. Word on the street is you can get \$15,000 for a kidney, \$35,000 for a lung. We all have choices. We all have options. Some of us have options which suck a little more than other people's. That's all. Try sleeping in the Port Authority in New York City for one week. Then tell the class how much you fucking love having two kidneys. Of course, word on the street also has it that not all organ donors are volunteers. No one actually knows anyone who brags about it in bars or anything. "A round of drinks on me! I just rolled a homeless person for his vital organs!" Nope. Never hear that. Don't mean it doesn't happen. Just means people don't like to talk about it. The small-timers always spill their guts in public, but the real operators shut the fuck up. Keep their lips, like, hermetically sealed. And when the real operators are done with a job, the donors aren't telling tales.

Yeah, some organ donors don't just give just a part of themselves to better the lot of their brethren. It takes all kinds and desperate people will commit all kinds of atrocities. There's no such thing as an inhuman atrocity. Organ-legging is like snuff films or kiddie porn rings, as far as the way it's perceived. Some evils are elusive; no one knows anyone who has actually seen the crime perpetrated. No prosecutor has ever made the evidence stick. But people just believe it happens. Who knows why? Maybe it's in the collective unconscious. Maybe we simply need to believe that someone out there is worse than we are. Whatever. Most people with an ear on the underground have also heard stories of nobodies kidnapped for small change and turned over to monsters who hang the victims from the rafters, torture them, and shower in their blood. It takes all kinds to make the world go round. It probably happens.

Reps

No one can deny that street people do disappear from time to time. Most subcultures of the underworld follow a protocol of "Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies." It's pretty normal not to know a guy's last name. Hell, you might call him Romeo or Iceman or Blue or fucking Dracula. Or you might call him Fred, but never know if his mamma called him that. If the guy disappears, you can't exactly file a missing persons complaint to track down your bud Needle, short for Needle Dick the Bug Fucker. After all, the nickname did come from some grisly incident you weren't privy to. And social security and the passport office don't seem to know anyone who goes by that name.

Additionally, a lot of the folks a guy hangs with may be on a catch-as-catch-can basis. If they show up, cool. If they don't show up, nobody really pays it no nevermind. Anonymity's common on the street, and most folks like it that way. It makes life easier for people who want to be known for who they are when they hit the dance floor, when they outdrink everyone else at the bar, when they score with the ladies. The guy who scrapes the chewing gum and graffiti off the stadium bathroom walls doesn't necessarily want to come across like a janitor when he paints the town red. Conversely, a drug dealer may not want to advertise where she lives. The down and out don't really flourish from too much attention, y'know. It's not pleasant to have somebody else examining a gent's lack of a future. Odds are, the janitor doesn't want to go to jail, but he may not want to act like he follows the straight and narrow even if he does. In a world where most folks are steamrolled by society, it's not too cool to say you deliberately kiss the iron fist of the State. The more productively criminal also tend to shy away from any lasting concrete attention, too. It's one thing to flash a wad, to buy a few rounds, to have sex with three lovely young ladies who were not paid, thank you very much. But well, it's quite another thing to take the fillies back to your own place. If no one knows where the pusher man lives and no one knows his name, no one can turn him in for the reward money. It is that simple.

Of course, there are stars in the world of grime too. Some folks just can't take a low profile. It doesn't sit well with them. There are the well-known mobsters and high-rollers, the gang leaders and club owners. There's the convenience store owner who shot the last three groups who tried to rob him. Shot 'em dead and kept his store open in the same place. There's the barkeep with the purple hair who always knows who's holding. There's the pimp with the zebra-striped Cadillac and the whores with missing fingers. There's the crazy homeless guy who tells everyone how he was attacked by dog people. There are a lot of people who seem brightly lit against a background of both shadowy figures and churchgoers who think maybe it'll be better in the next life. Basically, most people form a desperate gray mass; the flashy, memorable individuals are the exception rather than the rule.

The streets are home to all manner of small-time hoods. Sure, some of them dream of bank heists and drug cartels, but then again, lots of nice suburban middle-managers order get-rich-quick videos from late night infomercials on VH-1. It don't mean much. The small fry dream not only of riches but of organization, of respect, of family. The closest most of them are likely to come, though, is impressing some girl with a carjacked BMW. Anyone who drives a BMW on this side of the tracks is likely to be able to muster swift and hideous retribution, even from beyond the grave, and that counts for plenty if you're the one we see behind the wheel. After all, there's no point in doing something really flashy if no one notices. At the very least, a little bragging is in order.

Trouble is, a rep is a target. That's where a lot of little fish go — down a fucking shark mouth for not being wise about what they did, or to whom. Drive that BMW, and folks will know you're the one who ripped it off. Sell the car and flash the wad and chances are, sooner or later, folks will know you did the jacking. In the street, rumors can kill. A rep is a warning sign; it's also a "Kick me" sign, too. A little rep is good, it keeps folks from taking too much advantage of you. Too high a profile, though, is deadly. Those gunslingers in the Old West went down because someone else wanted to make a rep by icing them. The same holds true today. Names are power, and they can burn you.

Where Do The Ragged People Go?

One has watched life badly if one has not also seen the hand that considerably kills.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Booze dispensaries are ubiquitous on the bad side of town. Liquor stores are plentiful and convenience stores tend to ignore the niceties of governmental regulation, and more business takes place in bars than anywhere else. Nightclubs are plentiful, too; owning a nightclub gives prestige to a high-roller, and lowlives love going to music dives to take advantage of middle-class kids looking for a thrill. Hell, sometimes the middle-class kids are looking to do a little illegal business, too, if you know what I mean. Of course, many nightclubs also serve as fronts for more organized illegal activities. Say the password and you can head back to the gambling room. Talk it right and she might not be just a stripper. Sit in the designated booth and she'll give you a hand job while whispering sweet obscenities in your ear. And so forth.

Then there are the places where the really serious business takes place. There's the restaurant where the yakuza hangs out, the deli where the Mob keeps the computers for the numbers rackets in the back, the Chinese joints where the local tongs do business. Even you know the urban legends about the blood-gamblers' fighting pits or the spe-



cial secret clinic in every major city where the Mob goes to get bullet wounds repaired. A clinic where people get discretion and new faces if they need them.

People from other parts of the city are drawn like proverbial moths to these places. Businessmen with special sexual needs descend into the underworld to satisfy them. Painters, writers, musicians and others require the heartbeat of the city to be creative. Sometimes an artist needs to get tangled up in the viscera of the thing she wants to express, and sometimes she just ends up here 'cause she wasn't good enough, lucky enough or sober enough to stay middle-class.

Self-proclaimed do-gooders arrive in the inner city in droves. Many of the most diligent activists are ex-creative types who want to give back to the city which has given them so much. A good farmer rotates his crops and nurtures the soil in order to keep reaping. Some few helping hands really believe they're on the righteous path; all they seek is to do the right thing as they know it.

Isn't that why you're here, sweetheart? To save us all and bring us some kind of white light and hope? Fuck you *and* your intentions! Most of us can see right through that shit — see right through to the way certain folks like to apply their bourgeois values to things they have no right to even try to understand, see right through to the way these people try to dictate and even legislate what they can't understand. The do-gooders want to roll around in the muck; they want to get dirty without guilt; they want to lord it over us poor unfortunates who, by being inferior, make the do-gooders seem so fucking saintly — at least in their own eyes.

Slumming is slumming is slumming, no matter what face you put on it. You go someplace lower class and degenerate and dangerous, someplace where anything can be had for a price, someplace where you, the most normal person you know, are exotic. Well, you probably do it to be thrilled, to be entertained. Different people just try to put different faces on their entertainment. Some of us are more comfortable with guilt than others; some of us can lie to ourselves. Part of the thrill is questioning your own motivations as you risk it all in an anything-goes environment. The other part of the thrill comes from immediacy. It's much easier to work up passion over whether or not you get to eat or even live through the night than whether or not that bit of office politics went well today. Some part of the human fundement craves adventure. Some part of the human fundement just doesn't know what's good for it.

The sinister parts of the underworld are so glamorously horrific that they stand out big-time, but the really numerous places are the tenement flats — the endless rundown apartment buildings all over the city. Fucker slumlords purchase them from the state for back taxes and charge the shit out of the poor shmucks who've got no place else to live. Sure, I guess it's hard to get rich when your tenants are all

deadbeat jobless lowlifes, but the parasites who tend to own such buildings have no problems evicting people quickly and often, then selling their shit in secondhand stores, no matter how many children those tenants've got or how totally no *place* to go they have.

There are also lots of abandoned places in the wasteland of the city's center. Hard-up folks squat in abandoned houses and office buildings. They move their stuff in so they won't have to pay rent, even though they know that the police can chase them off any time they want to. It's nasty — holes in the floor, bugs, leaks, no running water, heat, mail service or anything — but it beats a fucking grate and a cardboard box, especially if you've got a family. Every so often, the cops do come around and clear the condemned buildings out, but most of the time they've got better things to do.

There's worse things than cops, though. Sometimes a gang or mob will take over a whole building, either a totally abandoned one or one where they've scared away — or killed — the previous occupants. It's just a different type of eviction. Occupying an entire building makes it easier for them to avoid eavesdroppers, and it's also easier to put the word out on the street about the new crack house in town that way. You set up a room for people to get over one high and get around to wanting a new one. You have rooms for living and rooms for storage and rooms for the valuables. And anyplace where there are drugs or money needs more than one guard at all times. That way, screw-ups and betrayals take a little more effort. It's all a question of organization. The average crack gang doesn't have much organization, but every bit helps, and locale works wonders.

Coming down from a high in a crackhouse is actually luxurious for many folks. Most crackheads can't expect more than the gutter to come down in. Homelessness can mean a number of different lifestyles in the underworld: squatting, bench-warming, the classic cardboard palace — with jail time as an option when it gets too cold — bumming crash space from pals until you use up all your friends' good will, or even slavery. Those street whores don't come from nowhere, y'know, and the worst of them don't have anyplace better to go. Flophouses and missions are an option, I guess, but most of them are more dangerous than the streets, and the do-gooders who run them have their own agendas. For some of us, freedom is more important than crash space.

The absolute worst, from what I hear, are the sewers. Totally desperate or utterly wacked fuckers go underground. Mutant alligators have nothing, I'm told, on a human sewer-crazy. If you stick around these streets, Snow White, I'd advise against crossing under bridges or near large culvert openings, especially after sunset. You never know what kind of foul shit might come after you.



Targets and Sanity

I was neither liked nor respected in my boys' boardinghouse. I was teased to begin with, then avoided and looked upon as a sneak and an unwelcomed oddity. I fell in with this role, even exaggerated it, and grumbled myself into a self-isolation that must have appeared to outsiders like permanent and masculine contempt for the world, whereas, in truth I often secretly succumbed to consuming fits of melancholy and despair.

— Hermann Hesse, *Demian*

The streets are rife with loons. Some are escapees from prison psych wards and mental institutions who hit the streets to evade the shrieking voices in their heads. Escaped prisoners and patients may be afraid to apply for a lease, for fear of being found out, or may simply not have enough ID to apply. Sure, fake identities are available on the street, but they cost money. To get money, a homeless person needs to work for it, steal it, beg for it or find it in the trash. Try to get a job with no ID and no address! Some disreputable places might hire you, but they won't sign any paychecks until they get verification of identity and home. Kind of a semi-legal freebie for them. Once in a while, a homeless person may luck out and get a job in some gray area, but many of those jobs are extremely fucking vile. Sometimes a woman might just want a man to chop some wood for her, or a gang might occasionally need one-shot bagmen, the temps of the criminal underworld. Or maybe the Don needs some blood or a new kidney. Or maybe that homeless person is going to be sold out to some shady creep who wants truly unspeakable favors, the sorts of things which are spoken of in hushed whispers even on the bad side of town. Every city has a legend like the one of Old Nine Lives, the streetie who can tell spellbinding stories of his narrow brush with death and torture by things not even human.

Some of these folks from institutions did not leave willingly; they were forced away from shelter and medication by downsizing and budget cuts. Let's hear it for the balanced budget! These individuals are more likely to have enough identification to qualify as more than nonpeople. They may be able to get certain kinds of state aid, but they're usually screwed without a fixed address, too. Still, they can often use a shelter as their mail drop, even if they prefer not to actually live or even sleep there. Most importantly, homeless people with ID can frequently get societally legitimate work so long as they're willing to lie about having an address.

Most of the streeties in these first two groups are really totally bugfuck, bonkers, wacked, out of their minds. There's a fear of insanity, you know; it hasn't really been acknowledged since medieval times, but in the inner city, the Dark Ages never really ended. Literacy is limited and superstition and oral tradition shape most of our views. Television is larger-than-life; it is entertainment, a window on an impossible world. Stories, rumors, boasts — talk is reality. That

fear of insanity is primeval, and primeval fears flourish in this environment. Oh sure, some shrink can hold forth on the nature of lunacy; a person must be of a certain genotype and there are environmental factors without which all abnormalities might remain dormant. Bullshit! Insanity threatens our world view. World view is reality. Reality is everything. Insanity is a threat to the very fabric of reality. And most people feel in their guts that this must be catching. So the really wacked street people are avoided. They might be contagious! The more "upstanding" members of inner city society leave the loons alone to keep from being contaminated by tales of little green men, and vision quests, and Government plots against war vets, and vampires who stake one another out for the dawn, and grisly secret murders done by serial killers, and bums who turn into dogs under a full moon. Sometimes the terror of the more "sane" folks allows street crazies a backstage pass to things most of us never see. But some street dwellers see things meant to be kept secret, and those people disappear.

Other folks are normal by a more common standard — just so down on their luck that they live in the streets, kids in tow, begging and scavenging from dumpsters. These are the homeless who seek something else: pregnant teenagers, slumlord victims, the recently unemployed and those hopelessly between leases. Living in the street is more dangerous for these people than it is for the crazies — a homeless person who strives for a more accepted role in society accepts society's values. He's sane. Touching him won't bring the evil eye. Sanity is a liability for such homeless people; they scare no one and can be mugged and raped with impunity. They're unimportant enough that no one is likely to miss them, but they're normal enough not to be frightening. Most of them are better looking and healthier, too; that makes them prime meat for snuff porno rings and organ leggers. And because they want something better, the dumber ones are more credulous when snake oil salesmen softly purr about how all they have to do is have a little snort of this, or accept Baphomet as their personal savior, or whatever else is called for by the victimization menu of the day. I know whereof I speak, believe me.

Homeless folks are generally exempt from serial killers, gangbangers and other underworld predators. A textbook serial killer is generally motivated at least partly by sexual impulses; they only tend to kill people of the appropriate gender, or sexual preference, race and general socioeconomic status. Starvation tends to deaden the sex drive, too, so very few serial killers really come from the skids. Very few victims can be found in those ranks either. Of course, some young degenerates enjoy setting bums on fire and that sort of thing as a power trip, but that sick, weak shit is usually frowned upon by everybody, so it rarely becomes a pattern.

Gangbangers nearly always kill according to pattern, but they usually kill each other. Live by the gat; die by the gat. Sure, accidents do happen, but the average gang boy or

girl doesn't want to kill a homeless person any more than he or she wants to kill a four-year-old. Most times, you do a drive-by to make the opposition feel constant fear, so their sphincters clench every time a car drives down their street a little slow, so they feel nauseous at stoplights. The point of a drive-by is not just killing; it's to promote terror. Sometimes, as a first warning, the plan is just to shoot up some jerk's house when nobody's home. The message is, "Hey buddy, clean up your act 'cause next time the place might not be empty when we come calling." A drive-by is a PR deal the whole way. So killing anyone who just couldn't be involved is pointless and bad for the image. The mainstream newspapers like to make a big ruckus about the accidents. Oh no, a child got shot, boo hoo, blah, blah, blah. They never cover the ones that go well, or, if they do, it's just a little inside note saying so many youths were killed or whatever. They never mention that the deed was done in record time, with surgical precision and an unprecedented body count. They don't care about the finer points of the matter.

Indifference

This weekend, 35 youths killed in gang homicides.

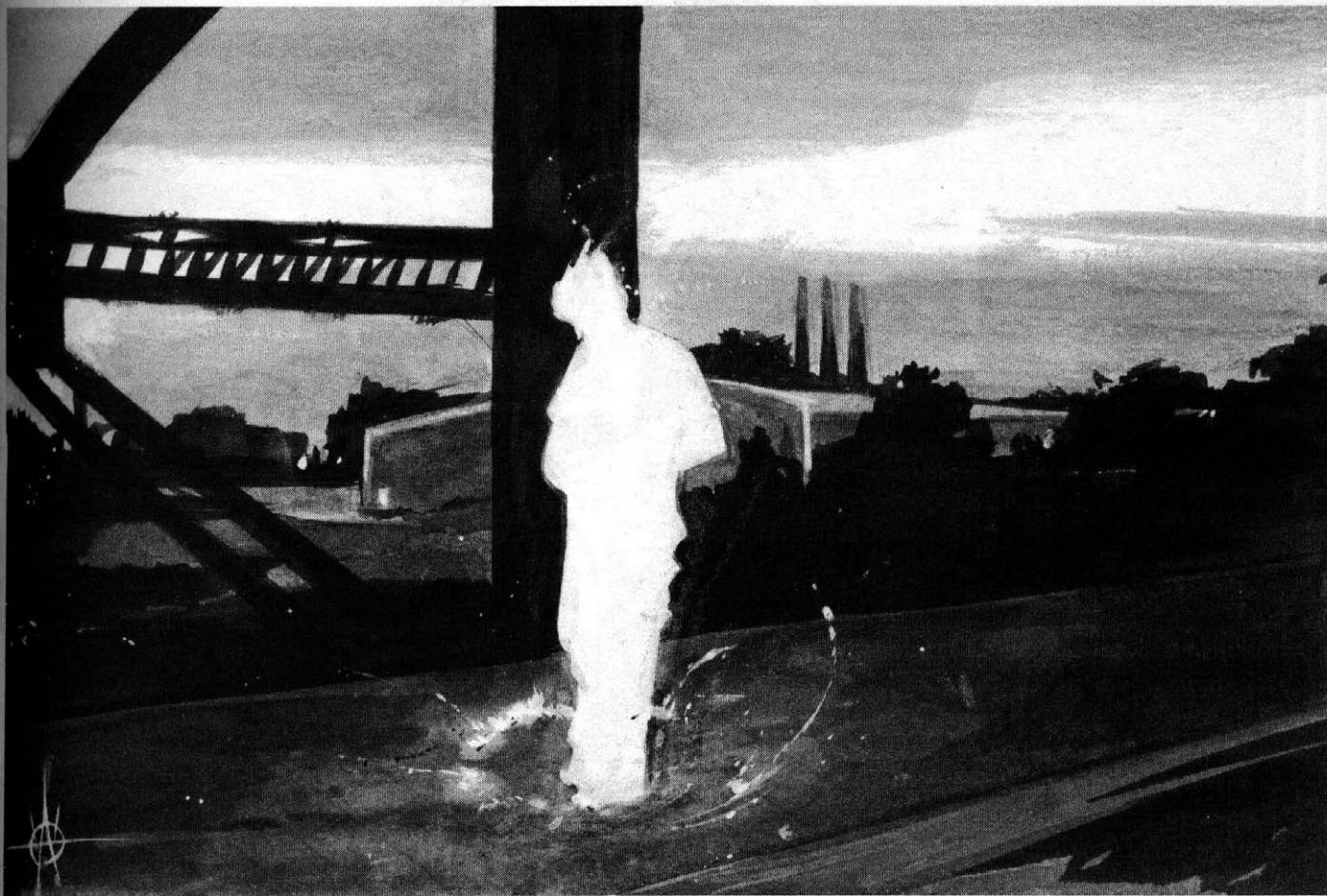
Now sports.

— Body Count, "Now Sports"

Then again, when have those in tight with the status quo ever been fair in their coverage of the disenfranchised? Every time some fat-shit politician wants to make a rep and underplay his own corruption and salary, he whines about welfare queens and unwed mothers and how we have to balance budgets and all that old crap. Rich-ass filmmakers love to glamorize the streets on the movie of the week, but you won't see any of them out here until a ghetto burns, and only then it's for as long as the cameras stick around. Those of us who live here don't see shit from on high unless that shit is falling on our heads.

You wanna know why we don't play by the rules, Snow White? Anger. Righteous anger, desperation and fear. There's the feeling that this is just not fucking fair and it leads to a vicious cycle where underclass marauders feel justified in taking from others. There's a sense that we're just using street smarts to get back some of our own, and fuck anyone who gets in our way. Why should we care? No one else does.

Well, if you still want to cruise this asphalt, you're probably a moronic do-gooder who hasn't understood a word. You might last the night, but, honey, you won't go home unscathed. At the very least, you won't make a difference. If you want to change things well, look at stuff from street level. Don't just waltz in and tell everyone how to make their lives better. How the fuck do you know what a pre-op transsexual prostitute wants? Ever been one? Ever even cared about one on a personal level? All right then. If you wanna stay alive, learn to empathize.



More likely, you entered the Darkness looking for power. There's a lot of power loose in the hard parts of the city. The rules are different here. The advantages are different. I think we'll have a king if anyone ever really manages to meld the strengths of the clean glass business towers with those of the cruelest and most immediate parts of the city. Of

course, maybe you're just entering hell to follow your heart, looking for someone you love or coming to be with someone you love. In that case, good luck to you and if you're ever in trouble in my neighborhood, tell 'em you know Blue Sonya and you're under my knife. Go on now.



Nowhere to Go but Down (Culture)

*Cause nobody's safe in the fast pace of the rat race
So keep your hoodies on and your boots laced.
— EPMD, "Nobody's Safe Chump"*

Wednesday, July 16th



Why don't it rain, I like the rain. Everybody hiding inside like it's gonna kill them, you got the whole city to yourself when it rains. Nobody stops you for nothin', it's cool.

Timboots is like the rain, cool, and everybody run inside like he's gonna kill them, difference is he just might. He's smooth around his crew, but he's like everybody else's worst nightmare, wants to be like Monster Kody, just don't give a fuck

Gang-Banger. He thinks there's just too many people in the world. He says it's like R.I.P., the only time you rest in peace is when you dead, the only time the world will be at peace is when we all dead, no wars, no fights, no hunger, no nothin. He's kinda twisted, but don't nobody fuck with him, not for long anyway. Most 'bangers find some shit to get all hyped about, maybe you said hi to their girl, maybe you looked at them funny, maybe you wore red instead of blue, maybe you called their Mamma a trampy-ass-nappy-head-foodstamp-ho, but 'boots'll wreck your shit up for breathin his air. In a way it makes just about the same amount of sense, but some just don't see it that way.



The People

*They're the people that you meet
When you're walking down the street,
They're the people that you meet each day
— Sesame Street*

Street folks are not ciphers or drones. In case you've made the mistake of thinking that everybody falls into either "crook" or "victim" categories, remember that people don't fit into neat subheadings, not even here. (Game statistics, for those who want them, can be found in Chapter Five.)

Once that point's made, there *are* certain things that can be said about city folk. First of all, they're not all criminals, not even by the extended definition of the word. Second, they're not all sheep, either. Plenty of people just try to make a living out here, and even they don't fall into neat "rich" and "poor" slots. As bad as things are in the urban wastelands, some city-types do okay. Others get by, but even then, at least, they're honest. The criminal wears the face of the city, but there're lots of folks hidden behind that mask.

Human Nature

Anyone you meet — whether they're a Mafia hit man, a Korean shopkeeper, a welfare mother or a Food Not Bombs activist — is an individual, with all the loves, fears, motiva-

tions and imperfections that implies. While the environment shapes a person's character (see Chapters One and Three), he or she is still a human being, something power-mad mages or rampaging Garou would do well to remember. As far as the law is concerned, killing a human being is murder; even if it's done in a place where the cops don't go, you'll be fucked if someone catches you doing it. As far as the people themselves are concerned, they're watching out for number one, and thus not easy to kill. In the inner city, self-preservation is hardwired into you at birth. Street folks — even if they're Allies, Contacts or Mind-Dominated servants — won't usually walk into bullets, offer their throats or kill your ex-wife without some kind of compensation for the risk. Even if they get it, they might scam you on the side, or at least keep the things they did for you in mind later. Street memories die hard, if at all.

People in the World of Darkness are *scared*. And with good reason; things happen that keep them afraid, things they cannot explain. Bodies turn up mutilated in horrible ways. People disappear, sometimes in broad daylight. Sudden events, like blackouts, ruptured gas mains and firefights that end before you realize what happened are common occurrences. Hollow laughter booms from open windows high above, and people who were once your friends turn distant or perverse. Things go *wrong* in this world, and few mortals understand why. On the streets, folks live in fear.

Exchange

Knowing the local barter system is important. Although drugs are common, money isn't. Information, though, is a key trade element. No matter what you do or where you do it, someone usually notices. Given the right incentives, that park chess-player, bartender, whore or cop can remember some pretty significant stuff. Whether or not it's true becomes your problem.

Debt is common currency when folks are short of cash. Lots of people deal in trades — favor for favor, item for item — when they can. A bag lady is more likely to keep you informed of what she sees if you find her a nice place to live or retrieve her favorite scrap book from those assholes down the street than if you offer her a wad of cash. She may well be insulted if you flash the bills — after all, she's not a fucking charity case! Although lots of people get up to their necks in debt, most will avoid giving up too much of their room to move, no matter what they need. If some city-dweller finds himself too far in hock, he'll probably take off. Good luck finding your contact then!

Pride and honor mean a lot, too. When you don't have much money, your self-respect becomes that much more important. Like the bag lady above, most streeties don't take well even to implied insults — people are often killed for less. Gangsters join out of a quest for respect; after all, if you're a member, people fear you, protect you and look up to you. The money's nice, but that respect can't be bought. Honor, an extension of respect, becomes sacred ground. After all, if your rep gets screwed (by your own actions or others' words), your respect goes down the toilet. Hence, city folk often cling to their honor long past the point where suburbanites would've given in. This is often what makes junkies so pathetic — they've not only destroyed their bodies, they've pissed away their self-respect, and no one else respects them, either.

To survive in the urban hells, natives watch their backs. Even the most honest folks — i.e., most of them — aren't naive enough to believe in human goodness. Everyone has an angle on the street; newcomers should be prepared to pay their dues. Longtime streeties already know the coin.

Class

We like to believe that we live in a caste-free society. Those on the street know what bullshit that is. By the very definition, the so-called underclass experiences an alienation few middle-income people ever know. This shapes the views, behaviors and attitudes of even the kindest urban dwellers. The folks near the bottom may be starving students, fallen millionaires, working joes or the hard-core poor — where you were makes no difference. It's where you are that counts.

It seems to be human nature that those who have cash and power try to parlay it into even more. This money has to come from someone, and it doesn't take Karl Marx to see

the greed that drives a slumlord, loanshark or corrupt politician to take it from a poor man's pocket. As the disparity widens between those with the money and those without it, the latter fall into a fatalistic mindset. Nothing matters, you can't make a difference, so what the hell — do what you want. What're they gonna do to you, anyway? What *haven't* they already taken? Looking at things this way, urban mistrust makes sense.

Almost everyone wants to become better off than they are. Money makes a difference, but the look can be faked. It's not hard to mug some businessman or to lure some runaway into prostitution and turn her ass into your stash. Money can buy things on the street, but respect really isn't one of them. Some people still haven't gotten the message, though, so being rich — or at least looking rich — sets a person off from the rest of the crowd. And often makes him the next victim. People, especially street people, aren't fond of someone with more money than they have unless they're running a scam.

In European cities, class cuts some fairly rigid lines. Many urban subcultures began as British or German kids snubbing their noses at the upper classes. The popularity of punk, rap, hip-hop, reggae, heavy metal and rave began in the inner cities of Europe, where frustrated working class — or welfare class — folks turned their anger into music. The same is often true in America; since the '70s, most working folks have seen their earnings decline, their expenses go up, and their possibilities narrow into three avenues: "honest" poverty, hopeful hard work, or crime.

Resentment against the "haves" fuels the crime of the "have nots," even though the victims don't usually have anything either. If this doesn't make sense to you, remember the last time someone had fucked you over so badly it hurt. Recall how furious it made you. Then imagine feeling that way all your life. Lots of people in the underclass don't feel they can look forward to anything better than that rage. Anything that relieves it — religion, television, violence or other drugs — is better than that endless frustration. This isn't an excuse, merely an explanation. If you plan to play in the street, it helps to understand.

Urban Tribalism

Violence is a characteristic of people who are searching for identity. When people have lost their identities they become violent.

...In the extreme, murder is simply a form of violence which, in a society battered by technology, determines accurately whether or not you are real.

— Nelson Thall

Whoever said that we could all live like brothers never spent much time cityside. If you want to see your racial divisions, they're here. Lots of folks still buck the line, but the neighborhoods cut pretty cleanly down the color bar, and the locals keep them that way.

Although many people try to transcend the place where life has placed them, most minority groups — from blacks to Irishmen, from Chinese immigrants to Cambodian refugees — usually end lumped together in largely exclusive neighborhoods. This is due to immigration (ever moved to a country where you didn't speak the language? Who would you live with?), good intentions (housing projects seemed like a good idea at the time), legal segregation (which has only been technically illegal in the U.S. within the last 35 years), and simple prejudice. When segregation and subjugation (real or imagined) combine, the result is hostility toward any "outsider" who enters your group's territory. Whether this means an Italian girl visiting a black guy, a Cuban man moving in with his white lover, or a Jewish shopkeeper opening a store in a Korean neighborhood, a lot of dead folks can attest that things often turn ugly.

Most cities — most towns, for that matter — have places where one ethnic group predominates. People's reaction to an intruder of a different group might range from indifference to murder, depending on how lightly the newcomer steps. Is he just walking through? Let him know he's in your home. Is he looking to score? Get his cash and show him the exit. Is he setting up shop? Discourage him. Is he fucking your sister? Kill the bastard.

"Ethnic group" doesn't only apply to race, here; religion, nationality, sexual orientation, even politics and sports can be significant. The Cuban in the Puerto Rican neighborhood may be Hispanic, but she's not welcome. If you root for Chelsea at the weekend games, don't get caught on Arsenal ground if you know what's good for you!

Unfortunately, these modern clans aren't as self-protective as their forbears were. Although urban communities often safeguard their own kind, their criminals freely pillage their cousins. Most of the good works — and most of the crimes — performed inside an urban ghetto stay "in the family." This can be helpful, like neighborhood watches or block parties, or devastating, like inter-gang warfare, addiction and domestic abuse — sources of agony across every ethnic or gender line. Sad but true fact: the majority of people robbed or killed in the city were hit by "their own kind." Some people claim that this fratricidal phenomena is intentional — that some outside parties want (fill in the group of your choice) to kill themselves off. Who knows? In the World of Darkness, they may be right.

Subcultures

Subcultures are extensions of the clan mentality; common ground between individuals goes deeper than race or gender. People tend to gravitate toward what they know, especially in a hostile place. And few places get more hostile than an urban wasteland.

These rough generalizations aren't official "teams" or "character classes." Members rarely consider themselves

part of the same "family," even if they do share certain similarities, and lots of people "belong" to more than one group. Most folks within these subcultures, however, use terms only they understand, hold certain things sacred, and spend their time in common pursuits. Most will know something about others like them, even if it's only a popular hangout. While you won't exactly find the Musical Misfits Guild House downtown, certain similarities are there for those who look.

"Honest" Folks

This term's kind of a misnomer — some of these folks are more crooked than the criminals they supposedly avoid. All the same, society views some groups as being more "normal" or law-abiding than others. These subcultures make up the majority of inner city folk.

- **Laborers:** Road workers, bus drivers, maids, repairmen — these are people that make a city function. From the waitress to the shipping clerk, these near-invisible folks miss the "glamour" that goes with more familiar street archetypes. Nevertheless, these thousands of "subcultures" comprise the largest percentage of any setting — the working class.

- **Families:** Sure, everybody has families, but these people either try to make the best of a bad situation or lock themselves into decaying orbits with each other. In either case, these families identify themselves so closely with each other that everything else becomes secondary. Single-parent homes, extended clans, young newlyweds or domestic battlegrounds all qualify as subcultures unto themselves. If you belong to one, you're often stuck with it. Whether you rise or fall, you take your family with you.

- **Activists:** People who need meaning in their lives often venture into the inner city to make a difference. Some fail, others succeed, but most manage to apply just enough damage control to keep the whole place from going completely to hell. Homeless advocates, educators, foster parents, slum rebuilders and food suppliers have their hands full here. In some cities, they encounter more resistance from the authorities than from the criminals, who often recognize the good they're attempting to do.

- **Slummers:** Thrillseeking rich kids, closet-queer tycoons, bored housewives or jaded suburbanites all flock to the inner city to find their drug of choice. While many such visitors come downtown alone, the smart ones travel in groups. Whether the search leads them to cocaine, forbidden sexual encounters, stolen goods, new friends or an early grave depends on the slummers, their tastes and the people they encounter.

- **Businesspeople:** Whether you're a shopkeeper, a pizza joint owner, a pawn shop operator or a slumlord, you can make an "honest" living by running a business in the inner city. While the majority of such entrepreneurs are honest, a good many jack prices up and cut corners to keep

their expenses down. After all, who cares if those wetbacks in your tenement have heat, so long as they pay their rent? The differences between "your work ethic" and "those lazy scum" also lead to problems; the class gulf (see above) causes plenty of friction on the streets these days.

- **Civil servants:** Cops, teachers, firefighters, city clerks, utility workers — these people tend to the city in its constant state of crisis. Most of them see the worst the slums have to offer, and many risk injury or death just by coming into work, and yet they collect less in a year than drug dealers make in a week. Some go corrupt, take bribes or turn bitter; some simply refuse to work in certain places, and those areas deteriorate even faster; still, others persevere. Despite the foul working conditions and shitty pay, these folks find their calling in service few cities deserve.

- **Religious organizations:** There are many souls to be saved. What better place could there be to start? In poverty and misery, faith often becomes all one has to hold onto. Churches, missions, shelters, cults, circles and religious activist groups find plenty of urban recruits. The deeds they do may range from feeding the homeless to sacrificing newborns to Satan. God isn't dead in the city — He's just taken on a multitude of forms. Not all of them are pleasant.

"The Shunned"

These groups may not actually bother anyone else, but society views them as odd, worthless or threatening. Most of them form tight bonds with others like them to avoid persecution. Whether this works or not is open to debate. These are often the loneliest city dwellers; few groups, even criminals, will have anything to do with them. Except, of course, to regard them as prey.

- **Vagabonds and derelicts:** For whatever reason, these wanderers have lost everything. Many are addicts, some insane, others merely unlucky or rebellious. Either way, such people are avoided at best, attacked at worst. Stereotypes aside, bag ladies, drunks, hobos and panhandlers can be of any age; the most tragic of all are the street children, who may grow up effectively invisible — if they grow up at all.

- **The homeless:** It can happen to anyone, really; a lost job, a bank foreclosure, a sudden illness without health insurance. Many of these folks are willing to work, but have no car, no references, and no place to get clean. Who would hire them? Runaways, young couples, AIDS victims, veterans and other people with nowhere to go end up on the street. The depression many of them feel is fueled by the casual indifference they get from most people. Some turn to crime to break free, but most just try to survive and hope things get better.

- **Crazies:** These are the madmen in our midst, genuine psychotics whose delusions can be terrifying to encounter. Serial killers, bar stalkers, compulsive brawlers, urban hermits and people who scream obscenities at empty air frighten even the toughest criminals. Most of these maniacs prefer



solitude, but some congregate into packs (see "Street Gangs") or go about their business, invisible until some final act makes their madness somebody else's problem.

- **Starving artists:** Everyone wants to be in show business. Not everyone can be. Most large cities have cultural centers and universities where aspiring dancers, musicians, writers and actors congregate. Some of them work hard and wait for the break; others are wannabes who sit around the bars, schools and clubs trying to act artistic. While most starving artists are young and enthusiastic, some have been at the game a long time. Either way, they can be the most interesting people a player character might meet.

- **Sex professionals and subcultures:** As prostitutes, strippers, pimps, escorts, shop owners and phone-sex operators know, sex is a business. The extremes can range from barefoot crack whores and child hookers to slick call girls, massage artists and high-class specialists (see later this chapter). The sexual underground, where people with unorthodox tastes gather to share them, suffers a similar stigma. While many "deviants" are as law-abiding as anybody, open homosexuals, Blood Dolls, fetishists, transvestites and urban primitives are often regarded as freaks by more "normal" folks, who find their practices revolting... or enticing.

- **Musical misfits:** While punks, rappers, ravers, metalheads, urban cowboys, Goths, Deadheads and demi-Rastas don't seem to have much in common, each subculture shares the following common traits: youth, an alienated mentality, rebellion and an identity largely defined by the music they adore. Outsiders might mistake these folks for gangsters, but very few of them commit crimes more significant than shoplifting or underage drinking. Their clothes, language and pastimes just reflect — and influence — the musical subgenre of choice. If you don't understand it, fuck you anyhow!

Independent Criminals

Active threats to society, these lawbreakers function within their own sets of rules. Unlike the organizations in the following section, independent criminals answer only to themselves. While some larger group may pull their chain or supply their drugs, these groups don't have initiations, ranks or formal membership. You either belong or you don't.

- **Rogues:** Pickpockets, cat burglars, serial rapists, killers and even private detectives, these guys answer to no one. Unlike the professional crime rings or made men, these independents work quickly and quietly. The things they do may range from misdemeanors to capital offenses, and they usually know more about other rogues than they'll easily let on. Many player characters fall into this category — the lone street hunter who pursues her own destiny, and to hell with the law.

- **Scam artists and hustlers:** Grifters, card sharks, gamblers, pool sharps and sex hustlers make their money off of other people's trust. Maybe their grift is illegal, like prostitution or gambling, or perhaps it's just a legitimate activity twisted, like mail fraud, repair scams or high-stakes games. Either way, these cheaters come on like buddies, slant the circumstances in their favor, collect as much money as their mark can offer, and disappear. Some work in groups, setting up the sucker for the other partner's scam, while others work the game alone. Either way, the pay is good and the risks are generally slighter than those of drug dealing or violent crime.

- **Slavers:** Slavery still lives; though illegal, it flourishes behind high-security doors, inside the warehouses and sex parlors the cops never visit. Some folks are kidnapped from bus stations, street corners or shopping malls; others sell themselves for drugs, love or other addictions. Either way, the slaver gives one human being to another and makes a profit in return. Some of these hard souls sell animals instead (see Appendix), or subcontract to larger organizations like the yakuza or Mexican Mafia snuff rings. Some peddle cheap labor, like illegal immigrants, and others handle hot cargo like child porn or blood and organ "donors." What kind of person sells people? Well, don't we all, in one way or another? Perhaps the slaver is just more honest about his exploitation. Then again, maybe he's just a sick fuck. Who knows?

- **Professional thieves and smugglers:** Carjackers, burglars, chopshop operators and jewelry thieves make tidy livings taking what isn't theirs. Some move the stuff themselves, while others keep their stash or sell it off. Most operators have set territories where they make arrangements with the local cops and mob, though various independents travel around, avoiding the heat by shifting their focus. Smugglers and fences can run anything from drugs to guns to stolen merchandise — if there's a market, there'll be buyers. As a rule, most professional thieves and smugglers avoid violence — why risk the jail time? — and live simply. The hotshots burn out fast. Smart operators know it's a survivor's trade.

- **Thrill-killers:** One of the most terrifying images of the modern age is the murderer who kills simply because he can. Maybe he's insane, maybe too sane — either way, he views himself as a new breed, a hunter who culls the human flock. The rush lets him know he's alive. Some thrill-killers work in teams, offering gruesome prizes for creative kills; others operate on their own, sometimes training an apprentice or two going down in flames. *Natural Born Killers*, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, *Heathers* — these are the media icons of the thrill-killer. Is his morality *really* that much different than a vampire's, a Garou's, or an Euthanatos mage's? It might be a good question to ask...



Organized Crime

Johnny Brunetti tugged nervously at his shirtcollar as he waited for his ride to show up. The damn thing felt too tight, and waiting in the hot sun didn't help matters.

Finally the car pulled up — a dark red Cadillac with tinted windows, Stefan Marrera's car. Johnny heard the click of the automatic door locks as he stepped off the curb, so he opened the door and climbed in the front seat.

The inside of the car was pleasantly cool and dark. Johnny felt a little better at once. "Hey, Steve, how ya doin'?" he asked the driver.

Stefan Marrera, a cold, hard-bitten man whose fine suit did little to hide how dangerous he could be, glanced over at him briefly. "I'm fine, Johnny. You know Paul DeLuca?" he asked, waving his hand at the man in the back seat.

"No, never met him." Johnny twisted in the seat until he could extend his right hand to him. "Pleased to meet' cha," he said as they shook hands. DeLuca didn't reply.

"So what's goin' on, Steve? Why'd you ask to see me?"

"Well, we gotta go meet with someone. It's about the 37th Street numbers bank."

Johnny hesitated for a moment, then asked, "That place? Is something the matter? Ain't I running things right?"

"No, Johnny, you're not. We did some checking. The books are about five grand short."

Johnny turned pale. "Listen, Steve, I don't know nothing about it, I swear. Everything over there's been runnin' just fine, just fine, I don't know who..."

Marrera lashed out, slapping Johnny with the back of his right hand, cutting his face with his diamond ring. "Shut up!" he growled, never taking his eyes off the road. "Lucky Frankie spilled the whole thing to us when we asked him. We know you been skimmin' money off the top. The place has come up short before. Now we know why."

"Steve, I swear I ain't done it! I swear!"

Marrera said nothing in reply.

A few seconds later, Johnny asked weakly, "So who we goin' to meet with?"

"Gino Inserra," Marrera replied.

Johnny turned even paler. Inserra was an undertaker.

"Criminal" has a fuzzy definition on the street. To most outsiders, a criminal breaks society's laws for his or her own purposes, and doesn't give a shit for the pain he causes. In the underworld, most folks with any form of power or prestige are "criminals" in the common sense — they break the laws to get what they need. To folks like Blue Sonya, those laws — like the laws of common reality — just don't apply.

They're not only useless, they're deadly. Playing the law-abiding chump can get you killed.

Some folks, however, are more criminal than others; the things they do may be pragmatic, but they aren't pleasant. More often than not, these people gather together into organizations with a common purpose — drug trafficking, protection rackets, revenge, profit or survival. Such organizations are usually as dangerous to each other as they are to their victims. Wars erupt over turf, resources, grudges or general principle. No matter what side of the street a mystick walks, she'll end up in someone's gun sights sooner or later.

Goals and Motivations of Organized Crime

The goals and motivations of virtually any organized crime group can be summed up in two words: money and power. Money is self-explanatory; criminals organize themselves in the hopes of maximizing their profits. Power is a little harder to define; in general, it means freedom to chart your own course, and to control the lives of others. It also means preserving your freedom by evading or controlling the police and other organizations — mortal and otherwise.

It's not hard to notice that most organized criminal groups, from street gangs to tongs, center within minority groups. Even in their home countries, the Mafia, yakuza and Triads often oversee the welfare of the common people (so long as those people cooperate), rather than the ruling class. Despite their activities, such groups still offer their members and protectorates some measure of defense — at least as they see it — against outsiders and oppressive authorities. To disenfranchised immigrants or outcasts, the crimes these groups indulge in are forms of rebellion, empowerment and revenge. Though it's cold comfort to their victims, the members of most gangs and criminal organizations don't see themselves as "evil"; to them, they're doing what they must to survive and prosper in a harsh world. And fuck anyone who gets in their way.

Organized criminals often have a degree of power in the underworld; some have some pull in ordinary "civilian" life as well, based on their money, prestige, position, specialized skills, or other factors. Some criminal organizations deliberately seek civilian power — drug cartel leaders, for instance, sometimes run for high political office in their home countries. A criminal's power may be curtailed by the nigh-feudalistic dues and "respect" he must pay to another, more powerful criminal, or by the watchful eyes of the police, but nonetheless he still has some power. Many criminals wouldn't have it any other way; they would never trade in their lives, dangerous though they may be, for the predictable and boring nine-to-five life of an office worker or factory laborer.

In general, organized crime is not motivated by revenge, sadism, lust or other emotions. Individual criminals may be driven by these things, but criminal organizations as

a whole are not. Criminal groups prefer not to let such factors enter into their decision-making process; it's "bad for business" to let one's heart rule one's head.

The Mafia

Since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.

— Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

History and Background

Most Americans are familiar with the Mafia, if only through the movies. Indeed, the terms "organized crime" and "the Mafia" are often used as if they were synonymous, though they're not.

The Mafia began in Italy (or, more specifically, in Sicily), but its exact origins are unknown. Even the meaning of the name is disputed. Most experts believe the Mafia was "imported" to America by Italian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Then, as now, it was an organization open only to males of Italian extraction; non-Italians could not belong, though some members of other groups (such as the Irish or Jews) might be associated with it. The Italian term for the Mafia is *la Cosa Nostra*, or "this thing of ours" (abbreviated "LCN").

Most tales claim the Mafia's origins lie in semi-feudal "protection gangs," formed to guard small towns from outside oppressions in return for a tribute. The petty (and not-so-petty) vices of locals and outsiders alike supplied the groups' "funds" — rural Italians were not known for their wealth. Profitable "industries" like drugs, prostitution, gambling and extortion were too good to pass up, and became the LCN's stock-in-trade. Most organized criminal groups can point to similar origins.

Despite their brutality, most high-ranking Mafiosi still regard their "fiefs" with paternal affection — and protectiveness. Even today, an area under a don's protection will be conspicuously clean and crime-free. Violent intruders on LCN turf risk horrible punishments — shootings, mutilations and the infamous "turkey parties," where an offender is systematically tortured to death as an example to others.

LCN might have remained a relatively small and unimportant phenomenon if it hadn't been for the Prohibition laws of the 1920s. Making liquor illegal gave the Mafia a whole new "industry," one vastly more profitable than vice rings and shakedown rackets. Those activities continued, but they took a back seat to manufacturing, smuggling and selling alcohol.

With increasing profits came increased violence and sophistication. The Sicilian bosses, or "Mustache Petes," complained about the violence and the lack of respect paid to tradition and "honor," but one by one they were killed or replaced by a newer, tougher breed of mobster. These new leaders, including men such as Charles "Lucky" Luciano and Alphonse "Scarface Al" Capone, formed ties with one another, improving business and profits. These alliances led

Outside Parties

*He's a lover of life — but a player of pawns
Yes, the King of His Sunset lies waiting for dawn
— Jethro Tull, "Bungle in the Jungle"*

Even the Sleepers suspect the dark hands that guide organized crime. Though many leaders of such groups are un-Awakened mortals, most bow to some greater power that offers them a choice — cooperation or extermination. Vampires, mages, evil spirits, hedge sorcerers, ghosts and even minor demons maneuver their mortal pawns for fun and profit. Still, these puppet masters often forget that these pawns have razored edges and jagged blades that can cut a careless master's hand.

The hidden world's influence on organized crime may be the only thing that keeps it from taking over the cities entirely. By sheer numbers, cash and power, organized crime could theoretically displace every government on Earth if all the groups united. The vicious competition for mortal power, however, keeps dark manipulators at each others' throats, even during lulls in the violence. This infighting helps make organized crime its own worst enemy.

No one can say just how many gang wars and confederations begin as supernatural clashes or alliances. For the most part, however, organized criminals do not know the true nature of their supernatural guides. They may whisper — carefully! — about the odd sonofabitch who makes even the *capo* turn pale when he speaks, or the geisha whose talents command even the mightiest *oyabun*, but they rarely (if ever) say, "My boss works for Clan Tremere!" The laws of the shadows, arrogance and plain self-preservation prevent the puppet masters from showing their hands too much. As many would-be manipulators have found, it's dangerous to dismiss strong-willed mortals as mere pawns — especially when those mortals pack heat and know how to use it!

Organized criminals tend toward paranoia and clannishness. If some outside party — even a powerful one — seemed threatening to the group, a hunt would begin. As superstitious as many street folk are, a supernatural creature or Awakened being would *definitely* seem like a threat! Those who would command the armies of organized crime must be subtle, careful and generous. Even then, these "soldiers" still have minds of their own.

The Players

Organized crime leadership involves a perilous dance. So many interested parties — vampires, mages and even werewolves — work their way into gang structures that a would-be leader soon owes his allegiance to a host of benefactors (not all of whom he knows). Any leader with a bit of self-preservation will make contingency plans of his own; even if those plans are based on mistaken beliefs, they can still be effective.

Every so often, the supernaturals behind the scenes show their hands. Power struggles, upsets and strange "acts of God" regularly unseat both mortal and Awakened gang leaders; thugs and assassins attack folks who get too close to a leader's vital interests; cash flows increase or dry up; odd "coincidences" or powerful entities give a criminal group an edge. By and large, however, these players remain in the shadows while the Sleepers do the dirty work. For most supernaturals, it's easier to influence than to control outright. Leaders make good targets; it's best, then, to let the mortals take the bullets while you groom the next in line.

Vampires are the most obvious controllers; many clans — and individuals — have contacts within the local crime groups. Through cash, threat, seduction and domination, they infiltrate the highest ranks of an organization and "suggest" a leader's actions. Ancient vampires weave their way into urban power structures over decades or centuries, and deal harshly with newcomers. Some vampire clans, notably the Setites, Giovanni, Brujah and Gaki, are renowned for their command of the underworld. The extent of their involvement (or lack thereof) is left to the Storyteller to decide. By their nature, Kindred are drawn to the vice trade and sexual underground. Although their information networks are quite good, most regard their prizes with contempt and dismiss most mortal doings as "the pointless scurrying of ants." Other parties use this blindness to their benefit.

Some werewolves, hated by their cousins for their affinity with technology, back their human Kinfolk in leadership struggles, or occasionally achieve leadership status themselves. Such "Glass-Walkers," as they're sometimes called, wage bloody wars with other Awakened "competitors" when they can and sabotage their efforts when more violent methods become impractical. Most Garou-backed groups specialize in violence, information and cash.

Several mage groups, especially the Syndicate Technomancers, maintain alliances with the street high command. Early struggles between the vampires and Syndicate (and its forerunner, the Guild) rocked criminal organizations around the world during the 1800s and early 1900s. At the moment, both groups maintain a rough truce, broken by occasional gang warfare or nudges from outside allies (like a HIT Mark in a prince's haven or a news exposé about some vital NWO operation). Paranoid as they are, neither group exposes their true nature or deeds, lest the other party gain a valuable edge. Technocratic groups concentrate on the money to be made from dealing legal and illegal goods, though some Progenitors use the streets as testing grounds and dissemination channels for new and interesting drugs.

Few Tradition mysticks associate with criminal organizations long-term. Some may belong to gangs or families, but few achieve lasting rank, as other, more powerful parties edge them out. Many hedge wizards, witches, cultists, hounsans and such gain control of small groups through their powers. More powerful manipulators often ignore or recruit these "play magicians," or mistake them for True Mages and either avoid them or destroy them.

Occasionally, a gang leader will come under the direct sway of a demon, ghost, Umbrood or Unseelie fae noble who wants to play rough. Groups led through such unholy alliances tend to concentrate on corruption, revenge and violence for its own sake. As one can imagine, these organizations pack a nasty surprise for would-be turf invaders.

It's said that the Nephandi command all the armies of the night, through subtle corruption of the vampires and mages at the top of the food chain. The truth behind this nightmarish suspicion may remain a mystery until the day the Fallen make their move...

to the formation of "the Commission," a governing body for the Mafia, by Lucky Luciano in 1931. Supposedly the Commission exercised control over all Mafia gangs and families, and enforced its dictates through an organization of hitmen known as Murder, Inc.

The Mafia's fortunes continued to improve during the 1930s and through World War II, when certain New York mobsters were supposedly instrumental in preventing dockworker strikes. For many years the Federal Bureau of Investigation denied that the Mafia existed, claiming that its work was the work of unaffiliated gangs. The Kefauver hearings of the 1950s, Attorney General Robert Kennedy's anti-Mafia campaign in the early 1960s, and the testimony of mob defectors such as Joseph Valachi brought the Mob into public view.

Since the 1960s, various law enforcement organizations have attempted to destroy or curb the Mafia, to little effect. Although the Mafia today is said to be less powerful than it was 20 or 30 years ago, and seems to be losing ground to many "newer" organized crime groups, it's still quite strong. The oldest and most entrenched organized crime group in America has no intention of being destroyed or replaced anytime soon.

Structure, Organization and Internal Relations

The primary unit of the Mafia is a "family" — a *borgata*. The term is deceptive; the members are not all related to one another, though some may be through blood or marriage. A family is generally named after its founder, or the person in charge of it. The so-called "Five Families," foremost among approximately 24 in America, are the Bonnano, Columbo, Genovese, Luchese and Gambino families, though their status varies from year to year. There may also be "sub-families" within a family.

The head of a family is known as a *capo*, or sometimes as a "don." This *capo* maintains tight control over the family — his word is law — and tries to make the family's operations as successful as possible. He's not directly involved in any of his family's criminal activities, but is entitled to receive a share, or "cut," of any money anyone in the family earns. This leader keeps careful track of what's going on and passes orders to his underlings through a series of intermediaries, usually his *sottocapo* and *consiglieri* (see below). This insulates him from being connected to a particular crime, making it very difficult to arrest and convict him. Family members who don't pay the *capo* his cut, or who fail to show him the proper respect, usually suffer a gruesome fate.

The *capo*'s second-in-command is his "underboss," or *sottocapo*. He acts as the boss's intermediary to the family's *caporegimas* (see below), assists and advises him, and acts on his behalf if necessary. Some families have more than one underboss. One of them is usually considered to be the *capo*'s chosen successor, though this doesn't always happen.

The *consiglieri* ("counselor") also advises his boss. This *consiglieri* isn't part of the regular hierarchy, and generally has no power to give orders to lower-level personnel. Instead, he advises the boss on family matters. Possible *consiglieri* include retired bosses or other experienced members, the family's lawyer, or similar persons whose wisdom the *capo* trusts. There may be other persons that the boss turns to for advice from time to time, but the *consiglieri* is considered his main counselor.

The *caporegima* ("captain"), also called a "lieutenant," is the next on the chain of command. This street boss and "operations supervisor" is also responsible for transferring money to his superiors. A family will probably have dozens of captains, each of whom has earned his rank by proving his ability to make money. In most stories, the highest-ranking Mafioso the characters will encounter will be a *caporegima*.

A *caporegima* controls a group of *soldatos*, or "soldiers," of varying size. A soldier is a rank-and-file member of the Mafia. Other names for "soldier" include "made man," "button man" or "wiseguy." Each one runs a given criminal enterprise (for example, the drug smuggling ring operating out of the 33rd Street pier); they may run others with the permission of their family. Non-members in a soldier's territory fear and respect him; they often have to obtain his "permission" before they open a business, expand an existing business or do anything significant in the community.

Below the rank of *soldato* are two informal ranks, "associates" and "protectors." Associates are non-members who do the Mafia's scut work — running numbers, driving trucks, working in money-laundering businesses. Protectors are non-members who use special skills or influence on the Mafia's behalf, like mob lawyers, mob accountants and corrupt officials who pull strings for the family. Unlike made men, neither associates nor protectors have to be Italian.

Looming over the family structure of the Mafia is the Commission. Generally the Commission is composed of the bosses of the Five Families, plus the bosses of some other prominent families. It settles interfamily disputes, and tries to prevent families from doing things that would be bad for the Mafia as a whole (such as "hitting" important government officials). This Commission's dictates are enforced by a squad of hitmen known as Murder, Inc. Some of these hitmen have demonstrated far-from-human abilities. It's said that shadowy masters (possibly vampires of Clan Giovanni) control, or even constitute, the Commission.

Membership

The "made" members of the Mafia may only be Italian males. Non-Italians and women can never become Mafiosi. The closest women get to LCN is as wives, mistresses, girlfriends, prostitutes or employees. Non-Italians may be associated with the organization, but they're never full members. The number of true Mafiosi in the United States is quite low; typical estimates range between 1,700 and 5,000 "made men." The number of associates is, of course, much higher.

Joining the Mafia is no easy task, even for an Italian male. Long before being considered for membership, a prospect must have participated in many crimes. He'll eventually be asked to commit crimes with members of the family; such crimes often include a murder, hence the phrase "making your bones." Once the candidate proves himself to be a capable, stand-up guy, other members are asked if they object to him for some reason; corrupt police officers may be asked to run a records check on him to dig up dirt. If he passes this "test," all the prospect needs is a "sponsor," a family member who will vouch for him. Sponsorship is no casual relationship; a member may be punished if the prospect he sponsors turns out "sour" (incompetent or a traitor). After being sponsored, the prospect is initiated (a minor ceremony may take place), and vows to put the family and its interests before his own. From there, he's a full-fledged Mafioso.

Why join? Why put yourself in so much danger? Well, there's the money, of course; many Mafiosi become quite wealthy. On the other hand, some never make much more than they would in a "legit" job. But they've got something the average guy on the street doesn't: respect. People respect them. Folks in the neighborhood watch as they walk by. They speak deferentially. They ask their permission before they do important things, like starting a new business. The made man is a member of a powerful, respected organization, and that's worth a lot in the eyes of someone who's been looked at as "second-class" all his life.

Codes of Conduct

Mafiosi are expected to adhere to two rigid codes of conduct: *omerta* ("silence" or "manliness") and *rispetto* ("respect"). *Omerta* means that a Mafioso *never* becomes an informer. *Rispetto* commands absolute loyalty to higher-ups, including obedience to all orders and paying a "cut" of all money earned to the boss. Violations of these codes may be punished by death — a messy, painful object lesson.

Crimes and Operations

The Mafia is involved in many different kinds of crimes. Some of the most prominent include:

- **Gambling:** This is said to be the most profitable of all the Mafia's activities. It ranges from "numbers" operations (a type of daily lottery in which players try to pick three-number combinations) to "bookmaking," or illegal sports betting.

Gambling draws money to the Mafia the way a flame draws a moth. The risk, the excitement, the thrill of winning; these intoxicate the people who participate. For some, it's the dream of sudden, unearned wealth — for people who have nothing, the possibility of being given \$100 or \$1,000 just for picking the right series of numbers or the winning team in a ballgame is mighty attractive. For others, just being involved in something illegal is a thrill itself. People want those thrills, and the Mafia exists to provide.



• **Drug smuggling:** Despite popular stereotypes, LCN trades heavily in both heroin and cocaine trafficking. Though its influence has diminished through competition from other organized crime groups, the Mafia remains heavily involved in the drug trade. Look around you at the human wreckage on the streets: the glassy-eyed junkies, the twitching addict-thieves, the women selling themselves for heroin cash. All brought to you courtesy of the Mafia.

• **Labor racketeering:** Imagine the power of shutting down massive construction projects with a few phone calls, or dictating when and where certain ships will be unloaded or certain goods sold. Then imagine making tremendous amounts of money from those same activities. If you can imagine that, you can understand the Mafia's involvement in labor racketeering. LCN has long been known for its control over many different unions (including the teamsters', restaurant and hotel workers', longshoremen's and various construction unions). It can use this control to siphon funds from union coffers, force businesses to pay "protection money" to avoid being unionized, or control the labor supply in a given industry so as to favor Mafia-owned businesses.

• **Loansharking:** Desperation will drive men to do foolish things; money — or the lack of it — makes men desperate. The Mafia's aptly-named loansharks feed on this despair by loaning money at usurious interest rates. This *vigorish* can vary from 20% per week (the standard arrangement in many cities) to as high as 150% per week or more. Someone who gets too deeply into debt to the Mafia may have his legs broken or his head blown off, as is so often depicted in movies and fiction, but it's more likely that the Mafia will take over his business or blackmail him into helping them in some other way instead.

• **Crimes against property:** Robbery, burglary, hijacking, auto theft, arson, confidence games, fencing, forgery: You name it, the Mafia's got its hands in it. The Mob also uses its resources to finance and equip other thieves, or to run elaborate con games. Some Mafiosi like to participate in this sort of thing for quick cash. Others like to show off their cleverness by planning and pulling off elaborate schemes, or by committing sophisticated swindles and cons.

• **Crimes of violence:** The Mafia's penchant for violence is well-known, and well-deserved. It operates protection rackets ("Pay up, or maybe you'll have an accident...") and even engages in murder for hire occasionally, though its lethal resources are usually reserved for use on its own wayward members. Mafia "hits" are usually arranged to be virtually impossible to trace; the killer may be flown in from another city, given a gun to perform the hit, and then immediately flown back home after the killing. Supernatural hit men may have even more arcane methods of invisible murder....



The Yakuza

In the light of day,
Yet in a dream he talks of a dream,
A monster among monsters,
He intended to deceive the whole crowd.
— Zen Koan, from *The Gateless Gate*

History and Background

The yakuza (pronounced “YA-ku-za”) is the form of organized crime native to Japan. In recent decades it has also migrated to the United States. There are estimated to be approximately 100,000 yakuza gangsters in Japan, and as many as 26,000 in the United States (as compared to no more than about 5,000 made members of the Mafia).

The precise beginnings of the yakuza are unknown. Some people, particularly the yakuza themselves, tell of a noble origin involving Robin Hood-like opposition to roving gangs of bandit *ronin* (masterless samurai). Others, including most scholars, trace the gangs’ origin to nomadic bands of peddlers and gamblers common to Japan’s highways and fairs in the 18th century. The name “yakuza” comes from the term for the worst hand in an old Japanese card game.

For most of their existence, the yakuza gangs concentrated simply on crime. By the late 19th century, however, their influence in politics, particularly right-wing politics, grew. The disastrous end of World War II did not end the yakuza, however. Like the rest of Japan, they survived the war and adapted to life in the modern world. Today the yakuza are stronger and richer than ever, and many members continue to influence the political life of Japan.

Structure, Organization and Internal Relations

There are three basic types of gangsters in the yakuza: *tekiya* (who are usually linked with crimes such as protection rackets, drug dealing, extortion, labor racketeering, and so forth); *bakuto* (gambling and vice crimes); and *gurentai* (“hoodlums,” who usually commit crimes of violence). Each type generally works with a gang of similar members, and each has its own unique structures and customs.

The *oyabun-kobun* relationship is a yakuza focal point. Usually translated as “father role — child role,” this signifies a relationship between the *oyabun*, an older member, who “adopts” and instructs the *kobun*, or younger member. Essentially, this form of apprenticeship demands total devotion and loyalty from the younger man as payment.

The term “oyabun” also refers to gang leaders, since a leader acts as father to all gang members. Each such *oyabun* controls a territory known as a *nawabari*, or “roped-off area,” in which his authority is unquestioned.

Like the Mafia, the yakuza are organized into families, or *ikka*; the term “clan” occasionally applies as well. Clans usually have one of two basic types of organization. The first is the *gumi*, meaning “company,” “association” or “gang.” Within this hierarchical structure, the chief *oyabun* of the gang is sometimes known as a *kumicho* or *kaicho*. This person does not commit crimes himself, of course; like a Mafia *capo*, he merely passes orders to his underlings. Below the *kumicho* there is a second-in-command, and a *consiglieri*-like group of six men (the *sanro-kai*, or advisors). Below the second-in-command, a group of 12 of the gang’s leading bosses, functions as the *gumi*’s “Board of Directors.” The ranks below these 12 correspond roughly to the positions of captain and soldier in the Mafia; terms for these persons vary from gang to gang. A member’s position within the *gumi* is generally based on his earning capacity and personal power (i.e., the number of men who owe him loyalty).

The second type of gang is the *rengo*, a form of “federation” of gangs. It is much less centralized and monolithic than the *gumi*. It usually consists of a sort of “partnership” of several powerful *oyabuns*, who act as a “ruling council” for the group as a whole. There are also gangs known as *kai*, or “associations,” which may have either type of structure. Various supernatural beings, from independent spirit-sorcerers to Shadow Lord Garou or the elusive Bushi clan vampires, have been linked to the fortunes of the yakuza, especially in recent years. More than one tale claims that the true rulers of most *rengo* are, in fact, ghosts.

Membership

The yakuza is open only to males, but they need not be Japanese. The yakuza has long been a road to power for disaffected groups in Japan, including Koreans, Chinese, members of the *burakumin* (the “untouchable” caste of Japan), and the *boso-zoku* (“hot rod” gangs which roughly resemble biker gangs). Yakuza recruits undergo a training period which may last six months, a year, or more. During this time they perform menial jobs for their *oyabun* and learn about the gang’s basic criminal activities. If they prove to be good at the gang’s activities, they gradually learn more and become part of existing criminal operations. Final initiation into the gang often involves a small ceremony of introduction.

Unlike Mafia membership, membership in the yakuza is not necessarily for life. Recruits can “flunk” their training, or quit. Even after he formally joins a gang, a member can leave if he wishes.

Traits

Yakuza members do not hide their existence; gangs in Japan often have official lapel pins, banners, group newspapers and even offices open to the public! Naturally, yakuza in America are not quite as blatant. In either place, members often dress in a distinctive “flashy” style, usually involving

white clothing. Some try to dress like Mafiosi from American movies, and often have a recognizable hairstyle, which can vary from time to time and gang to gang. Yakuza, as a rule, like expensive jewelry and big American cars.

Many yakuza members sport elaborate tattoos, which often cover the entire body; such designs always stop short of the neck and hands, so that they are hidden when the gangster is wearing a suit. Some gangsters even get these tattoos put on in the extremely painful old-fashioned method, to show their bravery.

Yubitsume, or finger-cutting, is an infamous yakuza ritual. When a gangster displeases his *oyabun*, for whatever non-fatal reason, *yubitsume* is the typical punishment. It involves cutting off one (or more) of the joints of a finger and then presenting those pieces to the boss. Many gangs preserve the fingers and keep them at their headquarters, to show the members' devotion to the gang. *Yubitsume* is still common today; roughly half of the living yakuza have performed it at least once.

Codes of Conduct

The yakuza of earlier days are said to have been fairly honorable as criminals go. They attempted, at least in some ways, to adhere to the warrior's code of *bushido*, and took it upon themselves to protect the citizenry from (outside) gang activities and from the activities of independent criminals. Most tried to follow the philosophies of *giri* ("duty" or "obligation," meaning a certain sense of honor and loyalty) and *ninjo* ("emotion" or "compassion"), which sometimes conflicted with one another. Lastly, they had a code of conduct, called *jingi*, which described members' relationship to one another, and included elaborate rituals of greeting.

Sadly, many of these ideals and customs, if ever they truly existed, are no longer a part of the modern yakuza gang. Like the Mafia, yakuza gangs do have "unwritten laws," such as not revealing the organization's secrets or cooperating with the police. But today's gangsters are violent and cruel, and much less "honorable" than gangsters in past days are said to have been.

Crimes and Operations

Some of the yakuza's more significant crimes include:

- **Drug dealing:** These gangs traffic largely in amphetamines, methamphetamines, and similar drugs, both in Japan and in the United States. It's said that as much as half of the yakuza's income derives from drug sales. In America, where quick thrills are what people want, they sell methamphetamines, which give a fast, long-lasting high. In Japan, where drugs are often used to increase productivity, amphetamines that keep salarymen awake are the hot item.

- **Financial crimes:** These include simple extortion operations (which the Japanese emphasis on "face" makes easy), *sarakin*, or loansharking, and groups of *sokaiya*, or "shareholder's meeting man." The latter criminals are uniquely Japanese — they're corporate extortionists. A *sokaiya*'s common tactic is to buy a few shares of a company's stock (which entitle him to attend shareholders' meetings), then threaten to show up and make a scene at the meeting unless he's paid off. Rather than risk the embarrassment and disturbance, many companies simply pay up. Some *sokaiya* work for the corporations and try to stop this sort of activity from occurring, but the typical *sokaiya* is a greedy leech who earns his money through blackmail and foul behavior.

- **Gambling:** The *bakuto* gangs control the yakuza's illegal gambling businesses. Approximately 25% of the yakuza's income is said to come from various illegal gambling operations.

- **Vice crimes:** Beneath Japan's refined exterior, vice thrives. From secret back-alley bordellos, where sordidness hides among silken sheets; to typical streetwalkers offering blowjobs and handjobs for a few yen; to the white slave rings, which trick Western women into coming to Japan and then force them into sexual slavery: the yakuza run it all. They also smuggle pornography from America to Japan, where it commands high prices.

- **Gun smuggling:** Handguns are illegal for most people to own in Japan. The yakuza make a great deal of money buying guns in America, smuggling them into Japan, and reselling them (usually to other gangsters). This trade has increased yakuza profits and raised the level of violence in gang conflicts.

- **Assassination:** Many tales link the mysterious ninja assassins to yakuza activities; after all, there's always money to be made from taking people out of others' way. Although most *gumi* prefer to reserve violence for those people who interfere with the clan's activities, some are said to hire out free-lance murderers, especially to businessmen or government officials who can perform services more valuable than cash. Such groups keep professional killers, especially ninja, in reserve, and operate or sponsor remote training camps for the secret assassin clans. (See Chapter Five for sample stats.)

- **Corruption:** Like other organized crime groups, the yakuza are heavily involved in activities like money laundering, bribing government officials, and infiltrating and subverting labor unions and other institutions. Politics, both open and covert, offer many opportunities for infiltration and control. Many yakuza members are strongly right-wing, and seek to push their country's policies in that direction.

Chinese Tongs and Triads

Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness. Thereby you can be the director of the opponent's fate.

— Master Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

History and Background

The roots of Chinese organized crime date back to at least the 17th century, as secret societies dedicated to overthrowing the Manchu Dynasty. These secret societies were known as *Triads*, from the concepts of Heaven, Earth and Man. The Triads grew quickly, and eventually became more or less a form of local government in many areas of China. By the 1850s they had gained enough power to launch the Taiping Rebellion, a massive uprising against the Manchu. It lasted for many years, but by 1864, after the Opium War ended, the Manchu destroyed the rebellion. Many Triad members left China for Hong Kong or the United States.

Many Triad members remained in China, however, and continued to agitate not only against the Manchu, but against all foreigners who “invaded” China. By this time, the Triads were so persecuted that most members turned to crime to support themselves. This proved so successful that by about 1900, most Triads had put aside their political ambitions — they were now nothing more than organized crime groups. When China became a republic, however, many of these men who had opposed the Manchu emperor for so long became rich and respectable. Chiang Kai-shek used the Triads as a sort of “secret police” to support his government and his Kuomintang army.

Even the Japanese occupation of China before and during World War II did not limit the Triads. Not only did the black market (and thus, Triad profits) greatly increase during wartime, but the Triads worked out an arrangement with the Japanese to provide the invaders with intelligence. The Japanese, for their part, destroyed all police records about the Triads!

The Communist takeover of China in 1949 drove even more Triad members to Hong Kong and the United States. For many years the result was gang warfare, but eventually the Triads learned how to work together better, to the mutual profit of all. Through their domination of much of the world's heroin trade, modern-day Triads have grown powerful and wealthy. As 1997 and the Communist takeover of Hong Kong draw nearer, many Triad members flee to Canada, the United States and Europe, bringing their criminal enterprises with them.



The Tongs

Meanwhile, the Triads' American brethren were not idle. Triad members who came to the United States in the 19th Century did not perpetuate the Triad system exactly; instead, they created "tongs" (which means "town hall" or "clan brotherhood"). The tongs were not entirely criminal; in many ways they formed a support network for Chinese in America, who were subjected to many forms of discrimination and abuse. In time, the tongs virtually controlled the Chinatowns and made great profits by controlling the trade in drugs, sex, gambling and other forms of vice. By the 1920s Chinatowns around the country had (largely unearned) reputations as dens of vice.

During the 1920s, the tongs began fighting. A series of bloody "hatchet wars" followed, ceasing by the 1930s. Although increasing Chinese immigration and the loss of customers due to World War II lessened the tongs' control over vice crimes, they continued to control the Chinatown underworlds.

Today many tongs, often known as "benevolent associations" to the public, still control crime in the Chinese communities and maintain links to the Triads, the Mafia and other forms of organized crime. These "benevolent associations" form a fraternal organization devoted to helping Chinese people in America, and many don't participate in crimes at all

(though outsiders believe all tongs are corrupt). All major Chinese criminals, however, belong to one tong or another. The violence that marked tong relations in the 1920s has returned in the 1990s in the form of street gang warfare, drive-by shootings and bloody attacks that leave innocents and criminals alike dead in their wake.

Structure, Organization and Internal Relations

Triads are usually hierarchically organized. Each "level" in the hierarchy has its own code number; for reasons related to mystick Chinese numerology, most of these numbers begin in "4" and are evenly divisible by three (in the World of Darkness, this custom may have some numerological significance for mages associated with Chinese organized crime). The Triad's overall leader, referred to as a "Dragon Head" or "Hill Chief," is number 489. Immediately below the Dragon Head, and roughly equivalent to a Mafia underboss or lieutenant, are positions such as the 432 (messenger or liaison) and the 438 (Incense Master or recruiter). The third rank is the 426, or "Red Pole," the Triad's enforcer and organizer, the man responsible for Triad discipline and security. Of about the same rank as the Red Pole is the 415, a functionary in charge of finances, money launder-

Storyteller Notes

• The Mafia

The Mafia has a rich tradition of lore and custom that many players know. "Rules" like the "no drugs" rule, the "no hands" rule (family members must never lay hands on each other), being "taken for a ride," or "hitting the mattresses" (hiding out during a gang war), and the like can be used to identify the Mafia and its activities to the players. Regardless of whether or not the Mob actually does these things in real life, they often do them in the source material. Storytellers should feel free to use such concepts if they wish to.

• The Yakuza

The Storyteller can best convey the feel of the yakuza by emphasizing its uniquely Japanese aspects, such as the crimes of the *sokaiya*. Depending upon what level of realism the Storyteller wishes to convey, he can create yakuza members who display a strong sense of honor and duty, and even follow the code of *bushido*.

When the yakuza are portrayed in comic books and other source literature, they're often linked with Japan's feudal assassins and spies, the *ninja*. The Storyteller may wish to do this as well, since *ninja* are so often associated with anything Japanese. If so, *ninja* clans have probably allied themselves with specific gangs, giving each gang a source of "field troops" and combat specialists to draw upon.

• The Tongs

Mage is, of course, a game about modern-day magick. Since the Chinese have an extensive magickal tradition that is very different from that of the West, Storytellers may want to use the presence of Chinese organized crime to introduce this kind of magick into their stories. A little bit of research in books on Chinese folklore and mythology will give the Storyteller a lot of ideas for spells and plots; watching some cheesy kung fu movies or *Big Trouble In Little China* won't hurt, either. This sort of story can also be a chance for Akashic Brothers to use both their combat and noncombat skills in an appropriate setting.

A fine example of this is the Household of the Jade Demon, from *The Book of Chantries*. The Jade Demon, a powerful Chinese mystick, uses his powers and those of his minions to control all of the Chinese organized crime in Chicago. The reach of his power extends back even to Hong Kong and mainland China. With his powers, a host of magickal creatures at his beck and call, and a Chantry built at the intersection of the most powerful *feng shui* (ley lines) in Chicago, the Jade Demon is a foe to challenge even the most powerful troupes. Imagine the characters' surprise when they start to investigate (or become a part of) Chinatown gang violence, only to discover what's really going on behind the scenes!

Last but not least, when running stories centering on Chinese organized crime or Chinatown, Storytellers should remember what a closed society the tongs and Triads can be. Occidental characters should have an extremely difficult time getting close to them, though the judicious application of magick may help — slightly.

ing, Triad administration, and the like. At the very bottom of the hierarchy are the ordinary members, the 49s.

Tong organization may be similar to Triad organization, though many are somewhat simpler. The abbreviated form involves a leader called a "chairman," his vice-chairman, and two "secretaries" — the English secretary (an advisor and administrator who usually speaks good English) and the street secretary (who controls the tong's men). Below these ranks are the "first grade," or experienced tong members, and the "look-sees," or "soldiers."

Many tongs also have one or more Chinese street gangs associated with them (see "Gangs"), some of which are actually run by older tong members. These do much of the tong's dirty work and help run its criminal operations. The gangs are responsible for the violence which has come to characterize Asian organized crime in America; fierce rivalries between gangs of one tong and gangs of another lead to "shoot on sight" policies regarding their enemies. This "shooting" often involves submachine guns, wicked melee weapons, explosives and martial art duels.

Magick and the Triads go together; legends throughout time speak of Triad and tong magicians. It's said among the Awakened that Akashic Brothers participated in some of the earliest Triads, and some still maintain contacts within the Triad societies, to the disgust of many of their brethren. There is speculation that some Triads are led by Grand Masters within the Brotherhood, but, as in so many other things, there is no proof.

Membership

Officials estimate that there are currently 300,000 Triad members worldwide, in about 50 different Triads. Tong membership cannot be accurately assessed, but it is assumed to be much, much larger than the Mafia.

Joining a tong or Triad is no easy matter. A prospective member (only Chinese males can join) must first attract the attention of the Triad (maybe by belonging to a Triad-associated street gang), then be asked to join. He must undergo an elaborate initiation ceremony known as "hanging the blue lantern"; this involves elements of Buddhism,

Taoism and Confucianism, much regalia and paraphernalia (banners, flags, gongs, swords), and 36 blood oaths of loyalty to the Triad. In former times, such rituals might take days, but they're much shorter today. The tong ritual derives from the Triad ritual, but is much shorter and simpler.

Both the tongs and Triads are extremely secretive. They take their membership oaths seriously; a member who betrays the group, talks to the police or reveals group secrets will be targeted for death. Because of this, the natural reluctance of many Chinese citizens to talk to the authorities, and the fact that few American cops speak even a single dialect of Chinese, efforts to infiltrate the tongs have been unsuccessful.

Crimes and Operations

- **Heroin dealing:** Both the Triads and the tongs gain their greatest profits smuggling and selling heroin. Chinese addicts have been "chasing the dragon" for centuries; today they bring that same false joy to the streets of America, where junkies embrace it with their souls.

Both organizations obtain their trademark "China White" heroin through the opium poppy fields of the Golden Triangle, an area in Thailand, Myanmar (formerly Burma), and Laos. By some estimates, the tongs control as much as 50% of the heroin currently sold in the United States. Their links to the banks and finance houses in Hong Kong give them access to elaborate and sophisticated money-laundering techniques to hide their drug money.

- **Gambling:** The Chinese have been obsessed with games of chance for millennia, and the Triads and tongs have always capitalized on this. Most of their often-illegal games are open only to Chinese people, but some are set up for Westerners as well. Some of the most popular games are fan-tan (a card game), mah-jongg and paigow (a game like dominoes).

Other illegal tong and Triad activities, such as murder for hire, protection rackets, extortion, bribery and the like, are often confined to the Chinese community. This is not to say that player characters won't encounter them elsewhere; the vast majority of Chinese criminal operations, however, are connected somehow to Chinatown.

Newer Criminal Groups



The room smelled of mildew and decay. Its walls had that gray look that betokened years of filth, and cockroaches crawled openly across the floor. A single bare bulb glowed in an overhead light socket. The glass in the window was grimy, and broken to boot; the wind whistled through the cracks occasionally. But despite its condition, the room was perfect for what Bobby and his two friends had in mind. No one would hear them in the derelict building — at least, no one who would care.

Bobby, dressed incongruously in a dark blue suit, carried a leather valise with him. His dreadlocks aside, he resembled a Caribbean businessman. In contrast, Bobby's two ugly friends wore the leather and T-shirts one expects from seasoned thugs.

The fourth man, the one the two of them held to the floor, wore only a pair of dirty jeans; his shirt and shoes had been forcibly removed, and he squirmed in the grasp of the stronger men. "Bobby!" he shrieked, "you gotta believe me, I didn't tell the cops nothin'! I swear, man; please, please don't do this!"

Bobby stepped forward calmly. Squatting down, he forced one of his friends to the side, set down his valise, and opened it.

Motioning one of the men to free the prisoner's left hand, he took it in his own, holding it as a comrade would. "I believe you, Ned," he soothed as his right hand reached into the valise for the garden shears. "Like I believe in the tooth fairy." His grip on Ned's hand tightened suddenly. A brief, brutal snip severed Ned's left pinkie. The prisoner screamed. With a few almost delicate, motions, Bobby cut off the other four fingers.

Ned howled and thrashed for a moment, spattering the three men with bright blood. Then his energy began to fade. "He's going into shock," Bobby said dispassionately. "Give him a hit." One of the other men picked up a crack pipe, put in a big rock, and lit it. He jammed it into Ned's nose, forcing him to breathe in the smoke. In seconds, Ned was awake and screaming again.

Bobby went to work on the other hand, then took his machete out of the valise and began on the arms and legs. As the pieces fell off, one by one, the two men put them into a plastic garbage bag. Later they would mail them to Ned's wife and mother in Jamaica. Beneath them now, the man squirmed. His missing limbs made his struggles less effective than they might once have been. At last, there wasn't enough left of him to put up a fight. As the others bundled the pieces away, the pool of blood grew larger and larger....

Unlike the other three groups, who measure their existence in decades or centuries, these "upstarts" have emerged in the last 25 years, the children of a war-torn, drug-crazed world. The growing market for sedation and wealth continues to spawn organizations like the Jamaican posses and Russian Organizatsiya; Entropy-minded mysticks point to the eruption of such cancers as proof of the coming Reckoning, but more optimistic mages claim that such groups have always been around, exploiting whatever markets came to hand. Whatever the truth may be, the following syndicates are brutal, rich and growing at an explosive rate. The "real players" behind them, if indeed, anyone *does* control them, remain largely unknown.

Colombian Drug Cartels

History and Background

Unlike the big three, the Colombian drug cartels are a relatively recent phenomenon. They first became an under-world power in the mid-1970s, when they violently eliminated their Cuban rivals. At present, about 20 Colombian cartels exist, with more in other countries. Two of them, the Medellín cartel and the Cali cartel, are the most powerful; together these two groups control an estimated 80% of the American cocaine trade. At present (mid-'90s) the Cali cartel dominates the trade.

Structure, Organization and Internal Relations

Cocaine cartels usually have a fairly simple organization — associations or partnerships between "families" which, unlike "families" in most organized crime groups, do tend to be related by blood, marriage or godparenthood. This family forms the core of the cartel, and collects a group of followers, henchmen and employees around it. Each cartel tends to be tyrannically ruled by one to three people. These persons are usually male, but, again unlike the previous three groups, it is possible for a woman to achieve leadership within a cartel.

If you count every single coca farmer, production laborer, pilot, chemist and dealer, a cartel may have thousands of members. It also employs "corrupters," men whose function is to bribe and corrupt government officials throughout the Americas and the Caribbean to ensure that the cocaine pipeline continues to flow smoothly.

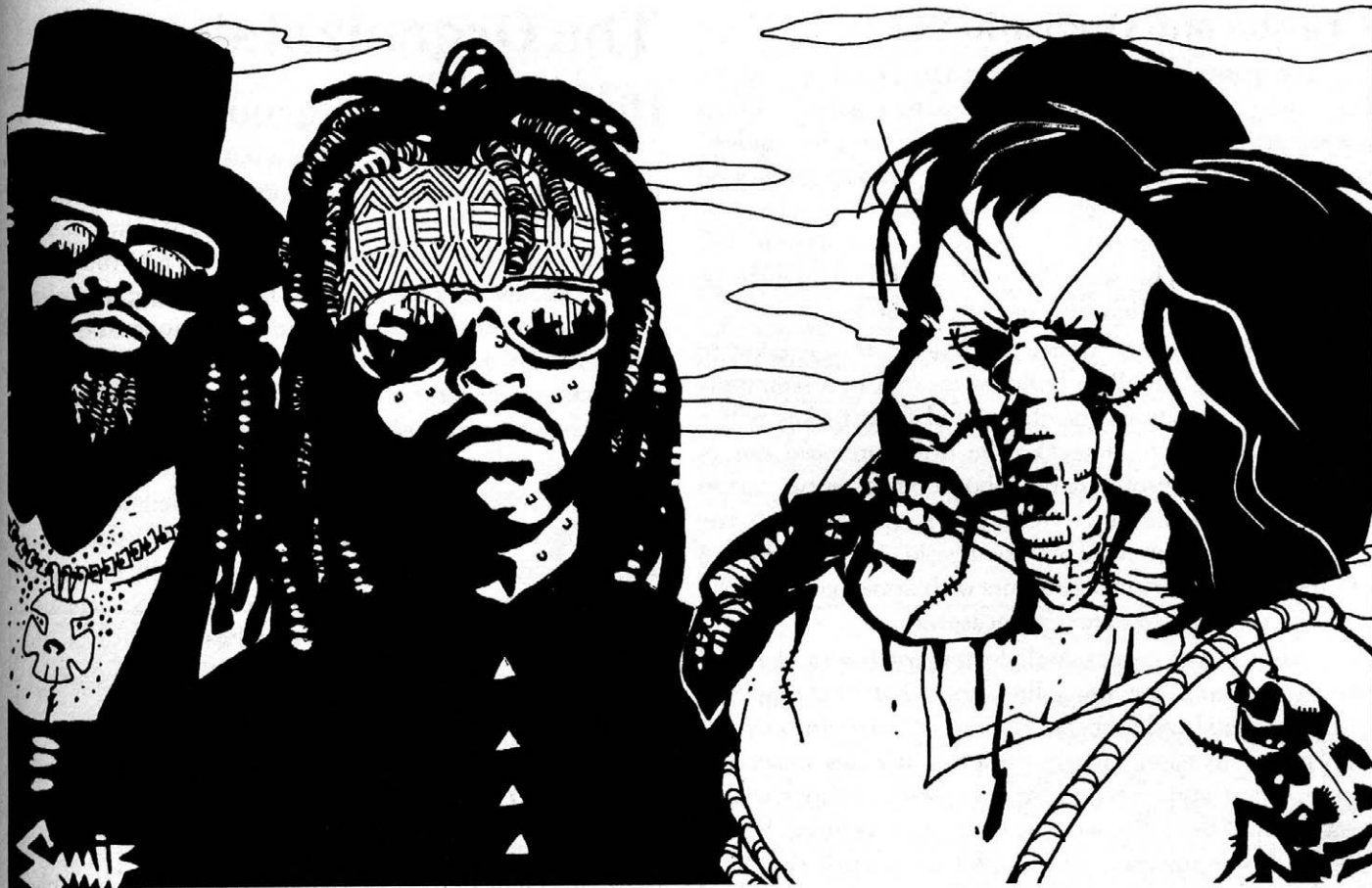
Unlike more rigid organizations, cartels can set up and rearrange their trafficking networks with ease, making it impossible for law enforcement officials to keep up with the changes. These networks are arranged so that each man only knows a few other members. The specifics vary from family to family, and many change over time.

Cartel relations range from fairly loyal and amicable to backbiting and treacherous. The cartels try to use the concept of *dignidad*, "dignity," which is similar to the Mafia's *rispetto*, to ensure loyalty — but it doesn't always work. In a profession where millions and millions of dollars are there for the taking, men get greedy, and betrayal and double-dealing are not unknown. Thus, cartels tend to ensure loyalty through violence instead: If a man betrays the organization, not only is he targeted for death, but his wife and children are as well. The method of killing is never pleasant.

Crimes and Operations

Most cartels are involved in only one crime: the growing, processing, and selling of cocaine. Although many other crimes — murder, terrorism, corruption, etc. — go with the territory, most cartels' members commit them only to further their trade. Some cartels are branching out into producing and selling heroin. Whatever the goods, these trafficking networks extend all over the world.

Many cartel leaders regard themselves as businessman and upstanding members of their community. The most powerful of them are the virtually unquestioned rulers of parts of Colombia, and they use their wealth to build schools, houses, wells and other things that their people need. As a result of this "generosity," and because they provide more and better jobs than most "legitimate" agencies, these kingpins often enjoy great popular support.



Jamaican Posses

History and Background

Jamaican posses are a recent form of organized crime; their origins date to the early 1980s and the political violence which afflicted Jamaica at that time. Many young Jamaican men became involved in these struggles, but fled to America when things turned sour. At first, they worked on setting up networks to distribute marijuana, but the demand for cocaine led them to concentrate on that drug as well (they get the cocaine from the Colombian cartels). Business is so good that the posses have "sent home" for help, increasing their numbers dramatically.

Organization, Structure and Internal Relations

Jamaican posses are gangs of young black men of Jamaican ancestry. The name "posse" comes from the gangs' love of Western movies. Many posse members are illegal aliens; they may have several sets of fake immigration papers. Many posses — Tel Aviv, Riverton City, Montego Bay, Tivoli Gardens — are named after neighborhoods in Kingston, Jamaica.

Posses have a fairly simple organizational structure. One or two gangsters lead each group, though they don't get involved in the street-level crimes. Leadership may be

shared, or may shift from person to person. Their lieutenants move money and weapons back and forth from the leadership to the street. At the posse's lowest level are the drug dealers, who generate most of the posse's profits and commit most of their violent crimes. In some posses, positions in the gang are given military titles: The leader is a "general," his underlings are "captains" and "lieutenants," and so on. A posse leader may also be known as a *don dadda*.

Membership tends to be pretty fluid. A gangster can move from one posse to another without any difficulty or reprisals. This is not to say, however, that the gangs are loose-knit or disloyal; if anything, they tend to inspire a fairly high degree of loyalty and camaraderie. Members who betray a posse are often "jointed" — butchered alive by being cut apart at their joints. The pieces are sent back to their relatives in Jamaica as a warning.

High positions in a posse are open only to Jamaican males. If non-Jamaicans are allowed to join, they remain limited to street-level positions only. Women cannot become members, though they may become drug couriers ("mules") or perform other menial and/or dangerous tasks.

Many posses use Rastafarian slang when they talk. Examples include "beast" (a police officer) and "baldhead" (an undesirable outsider). This slang helps to confuse the police and other outsiders.

Crimes and Operations

The posses' main criminal activity is selling cocaine (including crack cocaine) and marijuana ("ganja"). Drugs are normally smuggled into the United States by "mules," then turned over to the posse. The drugs are shipped around the country either through posse-owned businesses (such as travel agencies or car rental dealerships), or in cars rented by other members. This way, the posse avoids using airlines, buses and trains, which the cops often search.

Once the drugs reach their destination, they're taken to a "stash house," usually a building located in a seemingly ordinary or abandoned neighborhood (this makes police surveillance easy to detect). The drugs are sold out of crackhouses in appropriate neighborhoods; a runner carries drugs in small amounts from the stash house to the crackhouse. Crackhouses are usually old, sturdy buildings: often elaborate, fortresslike affairs with armed guards, solid steel doors, and other security measures.

Other posse crimes include forgery (particularly of identity papers), gun smuggling, auto theft, kidnappings, insurance fraud and robbery. Their most horrifying crime is the "home invasion," where the posse invades someone's house, robs it, and brutalizes the occupants. The men will be beaten and killed, the women raped and tortured. Sometimes a home invasion will last for days, until the posse finally tires of the game and simply kills its victims. As a final touch, the posse burns the house to hide as much evidence as possible. Some posses wait until there's a wedding or party going on, so there'll be even more loot for the taking. Few survivors ever seem to recover from the experience — most become hollow, faded versions of the people they once were.

Jamaican posses have a reputation for extreme violence — even the Colombian cartels fear their anger. Most use high-caliber weapons, assault rifles, and even hand grenades; some say they simply lust after firepower. Some posses, especially those with "sponsors" like the Setite vampire clan, actually train themselves for combat, and many offer rewards as high as \$25,000 to any member who kills a police officer.

The Organizatsiya

History and Background

The Organizatsiya, or Russian Mafia, is one of the newest criminal threats in the United States. Law enforcement officials believe that Russian criminals first came to America in large numbers in the mid-1970s, when some Soviet officials took advantage of new immigration policies to relocate a number of their more dangerous criminals to the United States as "Jewish immigrants." Many of these criminals were part of the various organized and semi-organized gangs in Russia.

These Russian criminals soon came to dominate the underworlds of various ethnically Russian neighborhoods in large American cities, such as Brooklyn's "Little Odessa." Over the past two decades, they have gradually increased in strength and prestige. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, their ranks, like the ranks of criminal gangs in Russia itself, have swollen with ex-Soviet military men and former KGB agents, making the Organizatsiya gangs a fearsome force.

Organization, Structure and Internal Relations

Russian gangs in the United States are not known for their high level of organization. A particular gang will be led by a *pakhany*, or "leader"; he has various underlings. The *pakhany* do not recognize any single overall leader of the Russian gangs (either those in the United States or those in Russia itself). Organizatsiya gangs tend not to stake out "turf," so two or more gangs might operate within the same area. Individual members are sometimes referred to as *mafioski*.

Organized crime in the Commonwealth of Independent States (the former Soviet Union) works a little differently. There, the gangs tend to group themselves along strict ethnic/national lines, and to specialize in certain types of crimes. Gangs from Azerbaijan, for example, specialize in

Storyteller Notes

• Colombian Cartels

Storytellers should remember that the cartels enjoy a well-deserved reputation for extremely violent behavior. They like to use big guns in combat, and when they torture a prisoner for information, chainsaws, cattleprods, live electric wires and butcher knives are often involved. Characters should not expect any mercy when dealing with these men, and should be prepared to give none in return.

• Jamaican Posses

As if the posses weren't bad enough already, many are reputed to have connections to dark voodoo cults. Though no "real-world" evidence that any posses are involved in voodoo practices exists, Storytellers may want to incorporate these elements into their stories about the posses. Voodoo can be used to give the posses a unique "feel," and to make them even more frightening than they already are — and in the Gothic-Punk world of *Mage*, some of the voodoo posse leaders may be hedge magicians or True Mages with potent spirit powers.

• The Organizatsiya

Russian criminals tend to be both extremely brutal and quite brazen in their crimes. They often have little or no fear of United States law enforcement organizations, since many of them are veterans of the Soviet prison system or KGB detention camps. Storytellers should keep this in mind if characters try to get information out of *mafioski* by roughing them up, interrogating them, or threatening them with prison. Members of Russian immigrant communities, accustomed to the oppression of an totalitarian state, are almost completely unwilling to have anything to do with law enforcement officers. This will make it a hell of a lot tougher for nosy player characters to gather information on the Organizatsiya (whether or not they actually have some association with the police).

drug dealing; gangs of Georgians run illegal gambling operations, and so on. Due to the poor economy and general state of social collapse in much of the CIS, the Russian gangs often function as a sort of secondary government, and operate a thriving black market. They're very powerful and, like their American counterparts, utterly ruthless.

Crimes and Operations

In their early years in America, the Russian gangs confined themselves to crimes like protection rackets and petty theft. Since then, they have become powerful enough to "branch out" into more serious crimes, including fraud (primarily insurance and tax fraud); gasoline bootlegging; smuggling (of anything from drugs to jewelry to women, back and forth from Russia); robbery; weapons trafficking;

forgery/counterfeiting; and contract theft and murder (usually employing killers who are flown in from Russia, given instructions and weapons for the job, and then flown right back home after the job is completed, making it virtually impossible to catch them). Most have formed ties with various Mafia families, Colombian cartels and heroin smuggling groups from the Golden Crescent in Western Asia.

Weapons trafficking is perhaps the most dangerous of the Organizatsiya's activities. Due to the breakdown of the Soviet military, weapons and related equipment are readily available on the Russian black market. These weapons can then be resold in America for a large profit. The Russian Mafia may also be involved in attempts to smuggle fissionable material, or even entire nuclear weapons, out of Russia. If this activity continues, the Organizatsiya could become a threat to the entire world.

Gangs



See me hit you

You fall down

— Guns 'n' Roses, "It's So Easy"

Normally the asphalt lot behind the Kwik-Mart was deserted after midnight. Tonight was different. Five people, four men and a woman, were back there, sitting on big Harley-Davidson motorcycles, waiting for something.

They didn't have to wait long. Distant and faint at first, but then growing louder as it came closer, was the sound of motorcycles — half a dozen at least. In a few minutes a caravan of seven riders pulled into the lot and parked just a few feet away from the first group.

"Your meet, man," said the leader of the group that had just arrived. He was big and broad-shouldered, with bushy red hair and a matching beard — Thor on a motorcycle instead of in a goat cart. In his leathers, no one could take him for anything other than what he was — a diehard biker. His colors displayed the name "Satan's Sinners."

"Thanks for coming," replied his counterpart from the first group. He, too, wore leathers, but the resemblance ended there. This one was short, slight, dark-haired and oddly pallid. He would have looked at home in a library — or an asylum, perhaps — but not on a motorcycle. Nevertheless he seemed confident and self-assured, even breezy. "I asked for this meeting because I have a proposal for you," he said, as if he were in a boardroom. He put a cigarette in his mouth, but didn't light it.

The redheaded biker snorted. "Okay."

"Short and simple. You and your gang come to work for me, and I'll double the money you're making inside of three months."

The larger group cracked up. The pale biker waited for the mockery to die down before he spoke again: "I'd advise you to consider my offer more carefully. There's money behind it — and power." He raised his right index finger to the tip of the cigarette. A bluish spark of electricity leaped out of his finger, lighting it.

"Shit," one of the Sinners said softly. The rest were quiet. Then their leader said, "So you know magic tricks, so what? No fucking way I'm turning my gang over to you."

"One more chance, friend. You won't like the alternative."

"Fuck off, 'friend.'" The big man stood up to start his bike. Before anyone could move, the pale man whipped out a .44 Magnum revolver and blew Thor's face out of the back of his skull. His companions' hands were going for their weapons before the body could hit the ground.

"Ah-ah," the pale man said as he waved his gun back and forth, covering the Sinners and their bikes. "No sense being stupid, folks. One bullet in a gas tank and we'll all take that ride to Kingdom Come we keep talking about." The Sinners hesitated, then moved their hands away from their guns. The pale man's friends also relaxed.

"Much better. My offer still stands, gentlemen. Join up with me — or join your erstwhile leader here in Hell."

Gangs form the root of all armies; from the earliest primitive warbands, the combination of camaraderie, battle and loot has inspired men (and occasionally women) to form gangs, stake out territory, and kick ass on all comers. In the late 20th century, people who've been robbed of their community (or who at least feel like they have been) group together the same way. The ties uniting them may be ethnic, idealistic or simply convenient; either way, the modern street scene owes much of its texture — and its danger — to the gangs who fill the shadows.

Outlaw Bikers

History and Background

Outlaw motorcycle gangs got their start in the 1940s and 1950s as gangs of rowdy, disaffected youths and rebellious World War II veterans bored with civilian life. They first came to national attention through a riot in Hollister, California, in July 1946. Outraged that one of their members had been arrested, a motorcycle club known as the Pissed-



Off Bastards of Bloomington virtually wrecked the entire small town. This event brought them so many new members that they soon changed their name to the Hell's Angels. Other gangs also sprang up.

Presently, an estimated 800-900 outlaw motorcycle gangs exist in the United States, with a membership numbering in the thousands. Most are regional, but four — the Hell's Angels, the Pagans, the Outlaws and the Bandidos — are nationwide organizations.

According to a report by the American Motorcycle Association, outlaw motorcycle gang members comprise only 1% of the motorcycle-riding public. From this comes the term "one-percenter," a term gang members use to refer to themselves.

Organization, Structure and Internal Relations

Although they're perceived as rowdy, anarchistic and disorganized, motorcycle gangs actually have a fairly sophisticated organizational structure. The entire gang is led by a "mother club," the very first gang in the organization. In some cases, this mother club may consist of leaders elected by the entire membership. The rest of the gang is split up into local "chapters" and regional groups.

An individual chapter will usually have a president, vice-president, sergeant-at-arms, and secretary-treasurer.

Each position is filled by election. Still, some important gang members actually wield more influence and power than the elected leaders.

Individual members of an outlaw motorcycle gang prize two things above all others. The first is, of course, their motorcycle — almost always a Harley-Davidson. The other is their "colors," a (usually sleeveless) leather or denim jacket decorated with the gang's symbols and patches, other patches the member has earned for particular accomplishments, and so forth. Each gang's colors are distinctive. A few clubs have, however, abandoned the use of colors in an effort to make themselves less noticeable.

Not everyone with a motorcycle and a criminal attitude can join an outlaw motorcycle gang. A "prospective" has to be introduced to the club by an existing member; from there, the club checks his background. Assuming that nothing "incriminating" turns up, the prospective goes through a probationary period during which his loyalty to the gang and his criminal tendencies will be tested.

Most gangs consider women to be the property of a particular member (that member's "old lady") or the entire gang (a "mama" or "sheep"). These women are used as drug couriers, spies, prostitutes, sexual slaves, and the like, and are considered less valuable than a member's motorcycle and colors. Some women, however, ride and fight as full-fledged members; the men are *their* property, not the other

way around. As any smart biker will tell you, angering the women in the gang is often a lot more dangerous than angering the men. The men can forgive.

Not all motorcycle gangs get along well; many of them war with other gangs. The best-known of these rivalries is the long-standing hostility between the Hell's Angels and the Outlaws.

Crimes and Operations

Motorcycle gangs aren't picky — name a crime, and they're probably involved in it somehow. Chief among their criminal activities are drug manufacturing and trafficking (particularly "ice" — methamphetamine — and PCP), contract murder, arson and bombings, auto theft, assault and battery, robbery, kidnapping and rape. Because outlaw motorcycle gangs have such great mobility, they're hard to catch. A few gangs, including the Hell's Angels, have ties to various Mafia families, and perform contract murders and other crimes for them.

Street Gangs

*Shoot the liquor store clerk in his fucking head
And take what you want!*

— Henry Rollins, "Henrietta Collins and the Wife-Beating Child-Haters"

When kids get pissed or feel threatened, they form packs for self-protection. In extreme cases, these bands become terrorists in their own right. Whether rebellion comes from vials of crack, expensive cars or clothing, computer crime, defiant music or simple mindless violence, it depends more upon the gang as an entity that upon the people inside it — or the forces against it.

Large American cities contain thousands of street gangs, with tens of thousands of members. They outnumber (and outgun) the police; in some areas they virtually rule the streets. These modern warbands, composed largely of teenagers and young adults, range from turfless roving packs of three to five members, to national brotherhoods like the Crips and Bloods. Their crimes encompass everything from loitering and underage drinking to street slavery. Member devotion ranges from noncommittal to blood-oath loyalty.

As terrifying as they appear, gangs pose a greater threat to each other than they do to outsiders. The majority of gang-related deaths and beatings are inflicted against other gangs. Inner-city warfare is reaching genocidal proportions; statistically, the average youth-gang member is safer going into military battle than remaining on the streets. Outside parties — from organized crime groups to supernatural manipulators — often urge their "troops" to continue the slaughter, but most gangs seem ready and willing to kill each other without outside provocation.

This isn't to say that street gangs aren't dangerous to others; people who get between a gang and its desires are

regularly beaten, robbed, raped, killed and even sold. The pack mentality is a terrifying thing; folks lose themselves in it and do things they would never even consider doing on their own.

Types of Gangs

The FBI defines a gang as a group with six or more members, identifying themselves through some name, and using a totem, signal or "colors" to represent them. Criminal acts don't necessarily figure into this definition. There are plenty of different types of gangs running around out there; contrary to the way it looks in the movies, they're not all alike. The types of gangs below can be found on the streets of most American cities.

As gangs expand and members mature, some become huge multi-city organizations, like the larger crime groups they resemble. This doesn't prevent infighting — different cells of Crips or Bloods may declare war on each other rather than against the "rival" organization. In some places, treaties have been struck and truces maintained. The might that an organized, cooperative large-scale gang could wield scares the shit out of most law-enforcement officials. This kind of firepower may be just what some supernatural instigators — or simple mortal ones — have in mind.

Drugs are the street gang's obvious cash cow; they're simple to obtain, easy to move and hellaciously profitable. Not to say that every gang deals in drugs — some commit no major crimes at all, while others indulge in protection rackets, black market fence rings, organized robbery, gang rape, home invasions, or murder. Violence is a hallmark of the street gang; any member who can't fight becomes a liability when trouble begins. To lots of gangbangers, big guns and lots of them send a clear message: "Don't fuck with me." To prove the point, members execute rivals and informants with precision head-shots or hails of SMG fire. Surviving a rumble isn't as easy as it once was.

It's important to remember, when playing gang members, that many youths (or even adults) join gangs for protection, fellowship, cash, respect, or simply a sense of family. A mage who battles gangs would do well to consider that many members have little choice but to join; though they may be hardened criminals, most have simply adopted to their environment the only way they know how. Others, of course, are little more than sadistic monsters who wouldn't be any other way. A mystick who runs with the gangs already knows these things. The distinction between a gangbanger who's doing what he does out of rage or desperation as opposed to pleasure may not matter to a player mage; then again, it may make all the difference in the world.

- **Ethnic gangs:** These groups, which often define themselves in terms of race or nationality, span the spectrum from the media-familiar black gangstas; to nomadic Vietnamese youths with a penchant for ultraviolence; to anti-defamation groups of all kinds which sometimes use

violence to defend their cause; to the Hispanic, Italian and Irish roughboys who "defend" their neighborhoods from outsiders; to red-blooded white boys stompin' bitches, fags and niggers in the name of the Good ol' U.S. of A. Whatever the makeup of the ethnic gang, three things form a common bond: rage, prejudice, and a siege mentality. It's them against the world, and the gang's the only thing most members can count on.

Identity is all-important: ethnic gangs stress clothing, language and behavior that fits their ideal. Most such groups invent rituals, names and code slang or passwords to keep their turf pure. Many actively recruit "their kind," or even demand that local kids join up or face punishment. While a good many have "men only" rules, others include equally-dedicated women. Some girls even form their own gangs and declare war on the boys. Whatever ethnic group or cause you can imagine has probably got gangs dedicated to it.

Like most gangs, ethnic wolfpacks follow hierarchies based on seniority, brutality or charisma. Most gangbangers hold rank based on the length of time spent in the group. Experienced members hold higher "rank" and have a fair amount of power over lower-ranking members. Initiates often have to earn their way in by committing crimes (ranging from vandalism to murder) under a sponsor's supervision, then enduring some form of gauntlet, beating or hazing. While most youth gangs (especially blacks, Hispanics, Italians and Southern whites) are fiercely territorial, others (especially Vietnamese) tend to be nomadic, doing what they will where they will. Wherever gangs are found, clannishness is the rule; if you ain't in the gang, you ain't shit.

- **Skinheads:** These politically-oriented gangs of white youths often come from disaffected blue-collar households, usually ones where a father or other parent lost work due to "hiring quotas" or "goddamn (fill in the ethnic slur)s who take away an honest working man's job!" Paradoxically, many also come from affluent families where they rebelled against their parents' racial tolerance. In any case, most skinhead groups espouse racist beliefs and sport Nazi and white-supremacist regalia. In addition to standard gang crimes, such as theft and vandalism, they engage in racially-motivated assaults and similar crimes. Their name is taken from their distinctive "skinhead" haircuts, and they run in groups of four to 20.

A variety of skinheads, SHARPS (for Skins Against Racial Prejudice), are just as violent, but take their aggressions out on known racists. Although they espouse a doctrine of tolerance and rebel against the "bad reputation" more racist skinheads bring, SHARPS are every bit as dangerous to their intended targets as a "normal" pack of skins. This may or may not be a problem, depending on who you are and how you're perceived.

- **Prison gangs:** Different groups often form protective gangs in prison, usually along racial/ethnic lines. Examples include the Aryan Brotherhood, the Mexican Mafia, the Black Guerrilla Family and La Nuestra Familia. Ties that bind in prison may not come undone after members go free — they may continue to work together "on the outside" to perform crimes. The Mexican Mafia, which has links to the Mexican heroin families, has been particularly successful at this.

- **The cops:** It's a sad but true fact that to most city-dwellers, the police are the enemy. The best of them are little more than well-intentioned boyscouts with occasional good uses, like shutting the couple down the hall up so you can try to get some sleep. Even these cops can be a hazard. ("Thank you for calling us, ma'am" are dangerous words when you live on the street; it never pays to look too chummy with local law enforcement.) The worst cops — and sadly, it seems, the most common — are little more than thugs with badges.

Cops make bad enemies; they have the organization, firepower and legal backup to do whatever they damn well please if they don't like you. Even when bad cops are caught in the act, as in the Rodney King incident, most walk away without punishment. This is especially true in racial crimes, when middle-class fears are fanned to win sympathy for the officers. Cops on the take, who accept payments to ignore or commit robberies, beatings, kidnappings and even murders, seem to be the rule, not the exception, in the urban World of Darkness.

Bad cops tend to run in gangs of two to eight, providing "backup" when one of their comrades gets in trouble. The uniforms they wear provide the same sense of unity as gang colors do. Extortion rackets are common practice; for a payoff, any crime can be ignored. Hardened "pigs" indulge in rape, assault, theft and re-sale of confiscated contraband. If caught, the officers take each others' sides, inventing evidence or perjuring themselves to get their fellow gangsters off the hook.

Police officers are human beings; when pushed to the limit, they can respond as viciously as any gangbanger. Bad cops don't even need to be pushed; they joyfully do whatever they please, secure in the knowledge that the law — which they represent — will support them.

- **Psycho gangs:** The most terrifying urban marauders are the most insane. These bands of crazies, often veterans of some common trauma or incarceration, commit wild sprees of mayhem which only death can end. Psycho gangs may be escaped mental patients, serial killers on a "scavenger hunt," thrill-kill cults, street gangs with a penchant for the bizarre (see "the Freddie" in the *Werewolf* supplement *Valkenburg Foundation*, or the movie *The Warriors*), mad war vets, hippie slasher families, costumed "super-villains" or any other warped combination the Storyteller can think of.

The unpredictable nature of psycho gang crimes makes dealing with them a nightmare for players. Although most freaks specialize in brutal torture and murder (often with some outlandish theme or gimmick), some might prefer to steal all the laundry in a given neighborhood, burn the churches down, dig up graveyards, or even fight crime. Psycho gangs tend to appear in an explosion of violence, terrorize everyone they encounter for a short time, and either disappear or go out in a wild showdown or mass suicide. Sometimes, a little good psychology can restrain the gang (or at least its leaders) long enough to halt the destruction. In other cases, the gang can only be stopped by killing every single member.

Most psycho gangs revolve around a single leader or figurehead, like a portrait of James Dean or a demonic idol. They may or may not be controlled by an outside force (like a Marauder, an Umbrood, or a clever gangster), and might stop if that center of belief is removed. These gangs are unique by their nature; Storytellers are advised to invent an intriguing M.O. and let their imaginations fly when dealing with a gang of crazies.

• **Ratpacks:** Arguably the most loathsome urban predators, the spoiled rich ratpacks come down to the inner city to indulge their vices. Slummers of the worst kind, these often-teenage gangs rape and murder, buy and sell drugs and frame innocent street folk for imagined crimes, all in the name of fun.

Ratpackers don't even have the "bad environment" excuse; they come from wealthy families and receive anything they want. Bored, jaded or looking for attention, they gather into cliques. Sooner or later, some charismatic "leader" (often the best-looking guy or girl in the clique) suggests going into town for a few kicks. These diversions usually start with bar-hopping sprees, degenerate into drug-orgies, and occasionally become gang attacks, rapes and murders. If caught, ratpackers claim that they were attacked or misled by some (often-innocent) "vagabond," or throw one of their own to the wolves and enter extensive therapy to satisfy angry parents.

Few ratpackers are really violent; they may begin a bar-brawl, but for the most part, they content themselves with providing a sellers' market for drugs and stolen goods. Especially vicious rich kids will take their frustrations out on the homeless, beating or killing them for a thrill. Punishing these gang members is difficult; their parents or other authority figures will pull a good many strings to protect — or avenge — these "future model citizens."

• **Vigilantes and terrorists:** Paramilitary gangs who take the law into their own hands, vigilantes and political terrorists strike hard, and fatally, against their hated targets.

Both types operate out of devotion to a cause — religion, ethnic pride, politics, revenge, or the "common good." Their people are highly trained and fanatically motivated.

Some terror groups, like the Black Panthers, Christian Militia Front, or Una Gente Libre, form along ethnic lines to protect their own. Such groups rarely attack those who don't threaten them first, though such threats may exist only in a terrorist's mind. Others, like the infamous SLA or Weathermen, declare war on society in general, planting bombs and sniping at random passerby in the name of their cause. Both types practice assassination, infiltration, weapons trafficking and strongarm tactics, and many stress combat and explosives training, as well as more covert forms of attack — smear campaigns, blackmail, extortion and threats.

Vigilantes may act alone or in concert; either way, they pinpoint criminal elements (which might, in some cases, include a mage or cabal), and isolate and eliminate their targets. These gangsters usually prefer violent solutions; anything less is "pacification" only, and never lasts. Witch-hunters qualify as vigilantes, as do citizens groups like the Guardian Watch Patrol and the Black Masks, or lone troubleshooters in the "masked hero" mode.

In the World of Darkness, corruption and crime are prevalent enough to have spawned hundreds of vigilante and terrorist groups. Some hunker down in bunkers waiting for the end of the world (which may be closer than they think), while others take to the streets. Through legal and black-market channels, they hoard high-powered weapons, gather like-minded friends, and take on any threat. Out of necessity, they prowl the underworld, striking fast and leaving little evidence. Many have some influence off the battlefield — friends in high (or low) places, cash resources, or neighborhood goodwill — which makes open confrontations difficult. Such gangs usually number between two and 40, though larger organizations exist. The zeal that drives these folks makes them implacable enemies — and dedicated allies.

Storyteller Notes

Storytellers can do whatever they want with street gangs. There are so many different types, with different outlooks and levels of criminality, that one can be found to suit any scenario. Storytellers shouldn't feel limited by the descriptions given above; you can create whatever other types of gangs you need.

Storytellers should try to portray the typical motivations that drive young men and women to join gangs: grinding poverty (why make \$4.25 an hour at a burger joint when you can make a \$1000 a day — or more — down on the corner selling crack?), a desire for power and control over one's life, boredom or rage. Despair is often king in the city, and this should come through in the attitudes and actions of the city's children.

The Sex Industry Underground



O was happy René had her whipped and prostituted, because her impassioned submissions would give her lover proof that she belonged to him, and also because the pain and the shame of the lash, and the outrage inflicted on her by those who forced her to pleasure when they took her... seemed to be the very absolution of her sins.

— Pauline Réage, *The Story of O*

Sex is primal. It's scary, tempting and essential for our survival. "The world's oldest profession" acknowledges that for as long as communities have existed, there have been those whose sexual needs and passions went beyond what that community would accept. And wherever there's forbidden fruit, there's money to be made.

Many of the players in the sexual underground aren't there for cash, though — they're there because something beyond profit compels them. It could be an alternative lifestyle, a taste most would call perverse, or simple desperation. By most societies' laws, these people are criminals. The morality behind their actions may be more difficult to judge. (See "Subcultures.")

For the sake of generalities, we can divide the people within the sexual underground into three rough categories: consensual, non-consensual and professional. The consensual ones frequent the sex clubs or work the films and clubs because they want to; maybe they have special tastes or predilections, or perhaps they just enjoy the scene's dark glamor. Non-consensual sex workers are trapped — they're the sex slaves, child hookers and addicts who live the Life because someone or something holds them to it. Professionals find there's a great deal of money to be made from selling sex; they may act out of desperation, joy, idealism or greed, but they have a more of a choice than the sad slaves who have nowhere else to go.

As a result of marginalizing laws and general societal repression, the sex industry has strong ties to the underground life of the city. While much of what the sex industry produces is entirely legal, it's like a giant phallic iceberg, with a lot more beneath the surface than above it. The industry divides up along the lines of whatever business your pleasure is, but within each of these categories, people exist in consensual, nonconsensual and professional roles.

How does one become a hooker or stripper? You might just as well ask how a person ends up working at McDonald's. While many, especially underage hookers, begin as run-aways, some gravitate toward sex work through boredom, necessity or opportunism. Some can't find anything else to do; for others, the pay can't be beat. Still others are trapped somehow, either through actual slavery or by their own choices. One boy toy might become jaded and cold through prostitution, while an aspiring dancer who strips on week-

ends finds the attention exciting. There are also pagan priestesses, sex therapists and other healers (Sleeper and otherwise) who end up legally classed as hookers. When it comes down to it, sex work — at least consensual sex work — is often just a job. Sure, it might get scary, unpleasant, even dangerous, but then, don't most jobs? For some folks, there are worse options.

• **Stripping:** Strip clubs form the first and most visible part of the sex-industry iceberg. The stripping world consists mostly of women who take it off for men in clubs, fantasy services and their own living rooms. Though frowned upon, stripping is generally legal, so long as there's no contact involved. Those in the know, however, may often be able to acquire illegal or more specialized services from the dancers or from other employees of the club. Folks likely to be let in on a given club's secrets include friends of the establishment, local vice cops, sex press, drug dealers and any bands or other performer celebrities coming through town.

Certain corporate salesmen know all the good clubs, and understand how to acquire the less legal forms of entertainment there as well. ("When the guys from the Japan office come in, take them over to Show World and make sure they get whatever they want — boys, girls, coke, farm animals, whatever. And don't forget to get photos this time.") Given just the obvious dancing and overpriced drinks which strip clubs offer, most are so conducive to doing corporate business that many cities boast papers which include Best Strip Club for a Business Lunch in their yearly vote.

• **Straight prostitution:** This refers to non-kinky (rather than heterosexual) sex for sale. Like stripping, the heterosexual market is much larger than the homosexual one; while gay hustlers exist, they're very much in the minority. If one accepts the figure that 10% of the population is gay, this makes sense. Because a higher percentage of homosexuals than heterosexuals have trouble finding a free sexual outlet, the percentage of the whoring industry which services that market is probably around 15%-20%. Men, of course, make up nearly all of both markets.

In most countries, it's difficult for women to purchase sexual gratification because women are in greater danger in the places where such things are sold and, of course, women's sexuality is often artificially constrained by society. *American Gigolo* notwithstanding, most tricks are not performed by men or for rich women. If you can show me a man who claims he makes his living by prostitution or domination or the like and he says he only does chicks... well, I'd like to take the opportunity to show you a liar.

Straight prostitution may be as inexpensive as \$15-\$20 for a speedy blow job in an alleyway or as pricey as \$3,000 an evening and up for a college girl who'll get by hotel security,

who can eat with the correct fork and may be able to get you intelligence on the competition. The players here include streetwalkers, call girls (and a few call boys), pimps and agencies, and of course the johns.

The old stereotype of the kind-hearted hooker in love with her brutal pimp is *not* the norm. As foul as most pimps appear, they serve a practical purpose to the girl on the street; beating up deadbeats, breaking up tricks which go bad and warning the girls about troublesome johns. Would *you* walk around by yourself with no protection at night in the bad part of town? This isn't to say that pimps are sweethearts; they can be loathsome, protective, careless, shrewd — in other words, they act usually like any other businessman. The girls in a pimp's string are his living. The relationship may not be equal, but it's often pragmatic.

Houses of prostitution, where a number of girls or boys will hang out in the living room and line up for customers, are generally safer and more lucrative than streetwork, although the line-up process can be demeaning and demoralizing. At the upper end of the industry, pimps and madams really function like temporary agencies; they screen prostitutes for acceptability to the clientele. When they get an order in, they call the girl at home, or on a beeper or whatever, ask if she's available and tell her how to get to the client. Sometimes the customer will want to talk to the person whose services he's buying on the phone before committing; other times, he just looks chooses his "selection" from a photo album. Either way, the house — unless it's a slave shop or snuff house — takes care of its workers as well as possible.

• **Heavy Kink:** Serious money changes hands for special treatment. If you've got the cash, there's somebody out there who can meet your tastes. You'd better have lots of money, though — the heavier the kink, the richer the ride.

Leathersex is trendy these days in hipper circles, but most people don't travel in hipper circles. Most of the buyers and other daytrippers in the SM/BD crowd get more involved and visible within the scene than straight-sex johns do. These individuals include Goth-industrial clubbers, kids in expensive clothes, and corporate execs who lead by day and submit by night. More jaded scenesters enjoy more esoteric kinks — bloodsports, beatings, hermaphroditic lays, children, even murder (both simulated and real).

Simple economics dictate that people who provide hard-to-find services can charge more when they find customers. A mid-range professional dominant may run you only \$80 for a half-hour, but a submissive will cost more like \$130 and more unusual practices will be extra. A mistress who knows how to do good erotic cutting or cock-and-ball torture can command a higher price. Some of the really good dungeons offer lower prices for these services in well-appointed fantasy fulfillment rooms — places set up along various themes (medical operating theater, mad scientist's





Storyteller Notes

Sex industry encounters can be convenient springboards for adventure. People visiting some club to see women get hot wax dripped on their tits... well, they might not tell their friends where they're going. They might not tell anyone at all. And that makes them fair game for all sorts of predators.

People involved in the industry may do it for plenty of reasons: because it turns them on, because the hourly wage rocks, because it's glamorous and fun to talk about at parties. They may do it for creativity, for love, for simple survival. Ever seen a tired attorney bringing home the bacon to his wife? He may hate his job, find it morally bankrupt, and still plod through it day after day. A little cultural relativism points out that we are all very much alike beneath our chosen codes of conduct.

Player characters may have to address issues of humanity (or Humanity, for vampires), morality (where's the line between snuff porn and the average Toreador games?), personal sexuality (imagine a Celestial Chorister in a debate with a happy prostitute) and various other issues when confronted by the sexual underground. Just bear your players' sensibilities in mind — roleplaying, even with heavy issues, should be fun, not abusive.

lab, Inquisition torture chamber, wicked witch's lair, etc.). This is sort of chain store economics for the world of kink.

Despite the high prices specialists often charge, their profit margin is slimmer than you'd expect — all that equipment costs. The potential big bucks are here without having to marry them, though, and the job security is better because fewer people have the aptitude and older women are still seen as desirable. Since most folks think that real dominas don't give a fuck, you can get paid for abusing someone for wishing they could pay you to fuck them.

- **Media:** The sex industry media is primarily legal; unlike other activities, you write your name and address on the evidence. The players here are people who perform sex on camera, writers of erotica, publishers, directors, distributors, and all the regular jobs publishing and filmmaking require. The people attracted to these jobs come from both sides of the tracks and tend to be kinkier than average. Porn stardom is often more desirable than street or house work — it's legal, you can be famous (or infamous), and there's more safe sex here than in other areas of the business. Unless you're a fluffer. Then it's your problem.

Deep underground, snuff mills and kiddie rings turn out the lowest form of pornography. Many... unusual... parties (especially vampires, cultists, and the mysterious Seventh Generation conspiracy (see the *Werewolf* sourcebook *Rage Across New York*) operate in this poisoned world. There are no questions of consent here — the "stars" are dragged

in and used up by people as evil as can be imagined. This kind of pornography is hard to find; the dedicated pervert connoisseur, however, knows where to look. As do those victims who survive the experience — and who come back looking for their tormentors (see the Order of the Rose, also in *Rage Across NY*).

• **Other:** Smaller subcultures exist across all aspects of sexuality. There are fetish fashion parties and porno movie theaters and massage parlors and gay bathhouses and peep show emporiums and tranny bars. But, gentle reader, you probably get the gist by now and that's quite enough titillation for one read.

Conclusion



*And if love remains
Though everything is lost
We will pay the price,
But we will not count the cost
— Rush, "Bravado"*

Not a pretty picture, is it? Yet despite the hatred, despite the suspicion, greed and desperation which drives the inhabitants of these decaying hells, hope and love survive. You can

see them in bright murals and basketball courts, hear them in Sunday choirs, watch them at work in the block parties and Food Not Bombs gatherings, feel them in the handshake of a friend. No matter how bad things get, the people persevere.

The streets are a crucible — they either purify you or burn you away. The people who live there feel the fire; what it does to them is their own affair. Some prosper, others stagnate, many fall. Mages, of all people, should understand

the trials involved in this urban underworld. Power, adversity, temptation, destruction — all the elements are there. Maybe that's why some of them are drawn to the streets — the territory is more familiar than it first appears.

If you want to understand the underclass, look at the world through their eyes. Under the shit, neon and graffiti there's a vital pulse beating. Call it defiance or acceptance, dedication to making the best of things or determination to break away and start again. The cities are dying, but the people are not dead yet.

Here's the prize would-be saviors seek, whether they're werewolves, mages or just plain folks: inspiration. The chance to offer another something to strive for. Fostering a belief in something better. Even if it's all a sham in the end, the illusion is better than nothing.

Everywhere in midnight streets, people are looking for love, searching for faith.

Sometimes they even find it.





Gutter Magick (The Street Mage)

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of the night,

...who were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue amid blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion & the nitroglycerin shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality

...What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!

...Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!

— Allen Ginsberg, "Howl"



Kevin got off the bus at its very last stop and glanced around. He didn't like the look of Regents Square at all — filthy, decayed, dark, as if the sun had never shined there and never would. It certainly wasn't shining now. Across the street in the center of the square stood a statue of a man — presumably the person the square was named after — so covered with pigeonshit and graffiti that it was unrecognizable.

He tightened the collar of his jacket to keep out the wind and moved away from the bus stop. Master Domitius said to come here, so here he was. The purpose of the trip, though, still eluded him. "Take the bus all the way up to Regents Square," the Master had told him. "There is a short building of red brick near there, where, so I am told, harmful activities are taking place. Find out what these activities are and stop them. Your powers, newly-developed though they may be, should be up to this task. At the very least, it will prove...educational."

Well, the bus trip had certainly been "educational." It was like a snapshot of human degradation. Unkempt women with unkempt children, and no father in sight; homeless people riding the bus all day for fifty cents to keep out of the cold; pools of stale vomit and urine from earlier that night that still hadn't been cleaned up. Disgusting, but educational. A lot of people had a long way to go on the path toward Ascension — helping them was going to be a tough job.

So why are you here? What did you, the character or the player, hope to accomplish by descending to these depths? And what are you gonna do now that you're here? This chapter covers the reasons a mage enters (or stays in) the inner city, the differences that background might make on his viewpoint, abilities and resources, and the methods he might use — or avoid — when getting things done.

Although the chapter is written from the standpoint of the urban mystick, the information in it applies almost as well to vampires, werewolves, changelings, wraiths, hunters, acolytes or simply street-born mundanes. For character creation suggestions, see Chapter Five.

Motivations



The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

— Rev. Martin Luther King

The streets. Dark, cheap, lonely. Filled with unfulfilled hopes, and overflowing with despair. Fear and contempt fester here, and from its unassailable constructs of steel and cement Ginsberg's Moloch holds sway. The cycle renews itself generation after generation, city after city: poverty fouls hope, hope turns to despair, despair kills the impulse to change the social environment, to fight back. Crime, suicide, selfishness, pollution, addiction and a host of other evils crawl out of the muck of human despair.

In this environment — an environment that's not, for the most part, manipulated by either the Technocracy or the Nephandi — what good can a mage do? And, more importantly, why would a mystick, who could just as easily cloister herself away in a Chantry to search for theoretical solutions to theoretical problems, want to wage the war for Ascension in this gritty arena?

The Street Mage Uncloaked

Street mages are a special breed whose distinguishing characteristic is hope. Even Technocrats, Marauders and Nephandi retain some hope that their "mission" here will have some desirable effect. Ultimately this profound hope brings a sorcerer to the streets, helps her through hard times, and keeps her there despite the difficulties she faces. With the inner strength to fend off despair, to believe that what

she is doing will make a difference, a mage can endure the physical hardships and inconveniences, psychological torture and spiritual torment that the streets generate; she can even claim some ultimate benefit for herself.

The nature of that payoff depends largely upon the nature of the mage who seeks it: some will be satisfied if they ease the lot of the poor; some, if they fry a druglord's brains; and some (since Tradition mages are not the only ones inhabiting the streets) if they expurgate the street's petty evils and replace them with real evil, like the biblical whitened sepulcher.

Those Tradition mages who remain divorced from the "trenches" are, not surprisingly, those who value the theoretical over the experiential: the Order of Hermes and the Sons of Ether. The often confrontational, dirty, social nature of work on the street — the dealings with the "uninitiated" — do not interest, and often repel, many (though not all) members of these self-appointed ivory-tower Traditions.

That said, what role do the other Traditions play on the street? Why do they dirty their hands? The answers to these questions are both personal and social. Because many of them begin their lives on the streets, their histories reveal their personal reasons for remaining there after the Awakening. Most had already witnessed crimes, possibly even the murder of a friend or sibling, by the time they reached seven years of age. *Seven.*

Out of fear, the desire to belong, or friendship, some joined gangs. Some murdered other kids. Some were abused by an adult. Some were pregnant by the time they were 14. Others were addicts in their teens. And still others just witnessed these catastrophes in the lives of their friends, relatives and acquaintances — and that was enough for them. Not all street mages spend their early years fending off

trouble; some lead relatively nondescript lives on the street before their awareness. Nevertheless, some personal realization may have compelled them to remain there, be it an attachment to the neighborhood, a fascination with danger, or the wish to rid the streets of some perceived urban corruption.

What eventually distinguished these mysticks from similar street-raised Sleepers is that they found themselves again — they began to understand the mutability of reality, and in that they found hope. Or perhaps that hope was their destiny and, with it, a new understanding of reality found them. Still others come to the streets not having ever lived there. While the roots of their reasons for being there do not grow in the neighborhood's soil, they may nevertheless reach just as deep.

The Wellsprings of Involvement

Mages are for the most part highly self-motivated individuals with steel-clad wills when it comes to molding reality. While the goals of whichever group they join (see sidebar) may influence a mage, she's more likely to have one or more personal, concrete reasons for risking her life on the streets. While the motivations that compel urban mysticks (or "trench mages" and "gutter gremlins" as some Ivory Tower mages refer to them) to live and die in the ghettos and slums are many, mixed and complex, they can be encapsulated into a few basic motives:

• Hope

Without the confidence that sacrifice will change the mage's environs for the better, why bother? Much of the street's indifference and anger originates from hopelessness and despair. A mage, by her very nature, is a willful being. Without hope that she can change things on the street, however, she's as good as the despairing Sleepers she tries to help. Street mages must cultivate a continual internal supply of hope — otherwise, the streets quickly sap their resolve. This is not to say that street mages are idealists; rather, they are the most candidly "realist" of all mages. However, like the gangbangers, Mafia, yakuza and serial killers they often oppose, street mages must stockpile their own odd form of ammunition: hope born of a realistic assessment of their own abilities.

• Love

Compassion, charity, sympathy, empathy, concern and friendship are all powerful motivations that reveal a mage's underlying love for humanity. However, a mage need not pass out the rosary beads and say 3,000 "Hail Marys" a day to prove her love; the risks and sacrifices she takes daily on behalf of others reveal the mage's true bent. The gruffest, most unendearing wizard may be the first to step in front of the bullet headed for the prostitute's heart. The quietest Dreamspeaker may sacrifice years of her life helping ease the pain of the sick and elderly. Sometimes the degree of inconvenience a mage is willing to endure is the most telling

Views of the Streets

The Traditions

Akashic Brotherhood: In such a crucible, one is tested to his limits.

Celestial Chorus: The streets are just one more place for us to bring faith and Ascension to mankind. Although the conditions are usually squalid and the people dangerous or despairing, it is in just such places that our work most needs doing.

Cult of Ecstasy: Wow! So many things to see, to do, to experience! Even amidst all this squalor, there is meaning. For the good of everyone concerned, we have to weed the garden and allow the blossoms there to grow.

Dreamspeakers: The streets and cities strangle our Mother and epitomize the corruption of these reckless times. The first step for those who would Ascend: Leave the city!

Euthanatos: A hunting ground second to none.

Order of Hermes: A sinkhole for such as the Hollow Ones. When the time comes, the streets will be swept clean.

Sons of Ether: At best, a source of useful experimental material and data; at worst, an exemplification of the power of the Technomancers and the evils that they control.

Verbena: The streets are a curse and an abomination. Though there is a vitality there, it is a sick and leprous one. Best to avoid them entirely.

Virtual Adepts: The virtual streets of the Net are more exotic and fascinating than anything found on the streets of the city. Still, we find enough useful things — and recruits — on the streets to make keeping in touch worthwhile.

The Technocracy

Iteration X: The sad proof of the fallibility of both flesh and machine. A source of spare parts, but not good for much else.

New World Order: The cities must be purged if mankind is to survive. Give succor when possible, exterminate otherwise.

Syndicate: A useful spectacle. Although we abhor the ways these Masses apply themselves, it would be a shame to waste such a wonderful fund-raising opportunity. Those who cannot raise themselves from the sewer do not deserve to be saved.

Progenitors: On one hand, the cities are a wound in need of cleansing and sterilization. On the other, if the Masses want to medicate themselves so badly, who are we to disagree? At least *our* drugs have a purpose.

Void Engineers: This is why I left.

The Others

Nephandi: The ultimate proof of the truth we know. All reality will be better off when it's put out of its misery. We just speed the process along, and have some fun in the bargain.

Marauders: Kind of like a coloring book and a box of crayons; someone already scribbled in the book and broke half the crayons, but that just means it needs fixing all the more.

Crafts and Orphans: (fill in the blank)

Hollow Ones: The streets are reality — life unalloyed with hypocrisy or glitter covering up the dirt and scum and blood and bullshit. Depressing, ain't it?



sign of her compassion for humanity; her identity and personal history shape that innate compassion into a force for humanity's betterment.

- **Ethics**

Idealistic mages crave justice, honor or equality. By their very nature, such principles spring from intellectual and moral foundations. Without some kind of passion to back them up, such logical ethics often fall apart under the onslaught of harsh urban realities. More often than not, mages who rely upon honor or principle alone must stockpile hope, reinforcing fragile theory with the steel barricade of experience.

- **Regret/Guilt**

The flip side of the idealist soldiers of the Ascension War are the battle-hardened soldiers of experience. Such mages often grow up in the streets and try to break away by turning their backs on those around them. Through some traumatic event — the death of a sibling, the rape of a lover — they later find that they must return to clean up the streets from which they earlier escaped. A mage native to the streets may initially refuse to fight the local druglord, even though his friends in the barrio are being targeted for business. Later, after his little brother dies of an overdose or his childhood friend is killed in a gang war, he is overwhelmed with regret that he didn't act sooner, and he returns to rid his barrio of the drug menace. Guilt and regret can be powerful motivators, and often relate somehow to...

- **Hate**

Bad personal experiences leave scars. Even observations can hurt a great deal. Pain often fuels anger. While a street mage may claim she does the things she does out of her love for humanity, she might actually be acting out of revenge, frustration, lust, bigotry or other negative emotions.

- **Arrogant Pride/Insecurity**

A strange combination at first glance, but an inexperienced mage or cabal might think that they're a force to be reckoned with. The streets seem like an easy place to start. Of course, if they survive, they quickly discover the innate cunning of their "easy" foes. Sleepers, properly outfitted with information, allies, contacts or other weapons, easily match the talents of inexperienced or overconfident mages.

Mages with the arrogance to think that cleaning up the streets should be easy haven't encountered the morally "gray" decisions that affect real people's lives. Should an addict whose addiction was forced on her by a druglord be made to surrender her child to the law? What if her relatives, who had the legal right to care for the child during her recovery, were members of the druglord's inner circle? What if the kid wanted to be with them?

On the flip side are mages who may be strong-willed enough to manipulate reality, but who are insecure in their identities as “saviors of humanity.” These mysticks might take to the streets to prove their goodwill, not just to others but to themselves.

• Greed, Envy or Kicks

Some mages take to the streets for personal gain or thrills. They may see opportunities to become wealthy or well-respected — by deposing a local druglord and taking his place, or by benignly taking over the Don’s “business” to run it in a less-destructive fashion — or try to raise quick cash with “just a little heist.” Some might feel that blood money taken from murderers is less “dirty” than killcash they earn themselves, while others consider themselves “better” than the criminals they displace, even if they do the same things. Under the facade, many such mages are angry that “scum” have things they could never get themselves — money, sex, fame, respect, even fear. They make themselves feel better by taking those things away, never realizing that they’ve become “scum” themselves.

Others just get off on the adrenaline charge of an outlaw lifestyle. Many thrill-seekers try to justify their actions — “I’m really out here to clean things up” — but they really crave the midnight glamour and the opportunity to play in the mud for a while.

Neither mage will see her corruption coming. Maybe she really can withstand the temptation to become a criminal with more punch than most; maybe she won’t even care.

• Certámen

Some mages come to the streets to duel with their colleagues (see “Certámen” in **The Book of Shadows**). Such duels might spring from any of the motivations above, including pride. In the city, certámen need not involve physical fighting; instead, it often involves Ascension-oriented accomplishments such as saving a shelter from bankruptcy or breaking as many crime rings as possible.

Mages often have complex and sometimes conflicting reasons for wanting to do what they do. Their presence in the streets is a result of their personal histories and experiences, as manifold and varied as our own. Rarely, if ever, will a mage act purely out of hate or love. Rather, he may take to the streets for *all* the reasons listed above, and for others not listed. Keep this in mind, whether you are creating a Nephandi antagonist for your chronicle or a Tradition mage in an ongoing street-level story.

Spit and Vinegar: What Mages are Made Of

Hope and personal motivation are not the only two characteristics of the street mage, although they may be the most basic. Their personal characteristics, as well as those of the cabal to which they belong (if they do), have much to do with how well mages can adapt to life on the streets.

• Personal Characteristics

Many successful street mysticks share a number of characteristics beyond hope and strong personal motivation. They’re often aggressive, dedicated, accustomed to hardship, emotionally perceptive, and/or empathic. Dedication and aggression help street mages to persevere when confronted by the ugly truths of the street, while empathy helps them to ferret out the motivations of their fellow city-dwellers. Empathy also enables mages to assist Sleepers better by understanding what they want or need.

• Cabal Characteristics

Squatter cabals don’t last long unless they know the streets and understand the dangers they face there. It isn’t enough to simply assume that the cabal’s only enemy is other mages. There are plenty of Sleepers who benefit from the status quo and don’t want it to change. If a cabal blunders blindly into a situation in which it disrupts the norm, it may face gangs, the police, angry locals, vicious killers or badmouthing drifters. Any of these can pose direct problems, such as a fight or a pursuit, or indirect problems, such as eviction or surveillance.

For these reasons, street Squatter cabals are typically tough, small, highly mobile and well-connected. Usually, at least one or two of these mages are streetwise, and one or two more have been through the school of hard knocks. If a cabal has too many members, it risks complications like infiltration or outside suspicion; for this reason, most Squatter cabals who survive usually have only five members at absolute most. The limited membership, along with limited possessions and reliable mundane transportation, also helps Squatter cabals remain highly mobile in case of discovery or pursuit.

Perhaps the most important attribute of the Squatter cabal is the information network it cultivates. Most Squatters have taken a lesson from the New World Order: information is power. Thus, they retain a network of eyes and ears, from the newspaper vendor at the street corner to the nosy landlady and her toy poodle who’s “always getting loose” in the apartment complex.

Allies

It is said that the great Verbena Street Master Siehchang learned respect for Sleepers when the peddler Nino Ortega, whom Siehchang later named Friend, taught him the virtue of mercy and saved him from hubris. Nino, a mere Sleeper, ordered Siehchang to heal a man who had tried to kill him. Reluctantly, Siehchang agreed, and a month later the man saved his and Nino's lives.

Sleeper allies are among the most valuable assets a mage can have. They often give mages the inner strength to continue their mission on the streets or reconnect them with their own humanity in ways that only Sleepers can do. They can be a mystick's eyes and ears...or his heart.

All sorts of people ally themselves with mages (see **Ascension's Right Hand** for more specifics). Mysticks might gather family, friends, debtors, former lovers, children, followers, gangs and sidekicks to their aid. These acolytes and allies may be supernaturally inclined or thoroughly mundane, romantically attached or "bonded" through adventure.

Whatever their characteristics, allies can form the heart and soul of a mage's motivation to remain on the street. An ally can be someone whose life is falling apart because of alcohol or drug addiction, or a community leader

who serves as a role model for the local boys. They can be members of gangs who defend their turf and their loved ones from the encroachment of other gangs, or devotees of a mage's grassroots cult. They can be love interests, pesky young adorers, objects of elusive mystique, indebted hardass cops, or underground hackers game for some thrills. When creating a street mage, remember to take a look at what sort of alliances she might have made during her time on the street, for allies are often crucial ingredients in the formula for survival there.

Past History

Many mages who Awaken on the streets share common backgrounds with their allies and friends. In this sense, there is less of a dividing line between mages and Sleepers living in the city than there is elsewhere. Moreover, because of these shared backgrounds, there is often less difference in philosophical, economic and political perspective as well.

Mages arise from nearly all backgrounds; in their "former" lives they could have been gang members, shopkeepers, hookers, drifters, cops, outcasts, street people, starving artists, aging radicals, street preachers, runaways, palm readers or social workers. Each of these histories carries with it a set

Running a Streetwise Character

Why would a character rummage through a dumpster, in search of some morsels of day-old lunch, when many don't bother to mind such details as eating? What would motivate a character to dispense \$20 hand-jobs under the table of a barely-lit strip club if she never bothers to pay cab fare? Unless the players just "got off" on the idea, odds are good that nothing would motivate them to do these things. Oftentimes, details like cash flow and food get overlooked in our stories. We assume they are taken care of, like many of us have been taken care of, but life on the street is a little less nurturing. Where does the rent come from? Roleplaying a nine-to-five would probably be about as boring as working it. But make sure players have to take into account the petty fact that shoes wear out, cheap cars break down, cheap guns fail to function, bullets cost money and gas is expensive these days. You need fast money, but fast money is dangerous. The spare change gained from kicking over newspaper dispensers will only get you so far.

Many people on the edge are looking for fulfillment at a much lower level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. They're not looking to save the city from some outside threat. They're probably not terribly concerned about global warming. Many don't even care who the President is. Some do, but most people on the street are struggling to fulfill physiological needs — food, shelter, warmth. Where's the next hot meal coming from, and what is it gonna take to get it? This is especially true of those relatively new to the streets — the outcasts and runaways, or the blue-collar family that just ran out of legitimate work.

Those who've been around a few years begin to be more concerned with safety issues, the second level of Maslow's hierarchy. Where can a bag lady store her hard-won prized possessions? Where can a junkie score a clean batch of smack, and maybe even a clean needle, if he's smart? Where's the best place for a homeless person to crash to avoid getting rolled in his sleep?

The third level is Belonging and Love; this is where your gang mentality stems from. Things may be tough all over, but life is just a little more livable if you know somebody's watching your back.

The fourth level, Self Esteem, is the area that a lot of street inhabitants have a lot of trouble with, no matter how long they've been down. They may have all the food they could want, a nice warm dry secure place to sleep, lots of friends and acquaintances, basically everything they need, but the greater society looks at them with pity. The "comfortable" society goes on and on about how much it must suck to live "like an animal"; they yell useless advice out their windows like "Get a job!" but fail to realize that an experienced homeless person is living off the land, like a farmer lives in the country. That yuppie, yelling out his window, on average, is probably \$20,000 to \$100,000 in debt, taking car payments, credit cards, and mortgages into account. A guy like that, his employer basically owns his soul, and once he pays that debt off, his assets are no longer worth nearly as much as he shelled out. In the big equation, that homeless person is much better off than the yuppie, and deep down the yuppie knows it, and hates it. But even if a street urchin achieves self-actualization though fulfilling all her needs and structuring her existence in a way that makes complete sense to her, it's still very difficult to keep her head up when most people treat her like plague-ridden vermin.

Keep your character's needs in mind. The ways she does things, views things and reacts to things are rooted in her needs, and in the ways she fulfills them.

of experiences that have shaped the mage into what she is today. An Awakened gang member may remain on the streets to help solidify territories so that no more blood is spilled over turf wars; he may try to transform gangs into productive social groups, or he might simply protect his

former gang. An Awakened street person might help develop shelters and rest centers for the homeless, while a radical might join the Euthanatos to clean up the "waste" in the city. When creating a character, think about how the history shapes the individual's choices.

Street Methodology

*There's a hard moon rising on the streets tonight
There's a reckless feeling in your heart as you
head out tonight*

*Through the concrete canyons to the midtown lights
Where the latest neon promises are burning bright.*

— Bob Seger, "The Fire Inside"

In order to function appropriately in the street environment, a mage has to adapt to and work with that environment. A mystick who

expects to breeze onto the street and take care of things through a combination of power and attitude had better guess again. Though most of the people on the street know nothing of magick, they have their own ways of dealing with strangers who threaten them or their territory. A mage who discounts them or their methods is likely to get himself in a lot of trouble.

The trials of the urban struggle make a difference in the way a mage's Traits function. though most of these variations come out more in the story than on paper, they're worth addressing. An urban sorcerer's tactics (or Kindred's, or Garou's, for that matter) also warrant some discussion. The ability to shape reality means little when you're virtually alone and you don't know the lingo...

Backgrounds

A character's Background Traits can make a lot of difference to city-bound mages. Surviving the street is often not so much a matter of a person's personal power as it is his connections and resources in the urban environment.

Many different Backgrounds are appropriate to the street; a few of them are discussed below. Remember that the types of Backgrounds a character has may depend on whether he "grew up" on the streets, or has just learned to get along there. Someone who grew up in the 'hood will, for example, tend to have better contacts and a more in-depth knowledge of the area than someone who's simply street-savvy through experience.

Those Backgrounds not discussed are not inapplicable to street mages; some Traits don't display enough of a difference between a street mage and a non-street mage to matter.

Allies

The types of Allies available to streetwise mages are practically unlimited. Some of them are obvious: policemen, who can help a character avoid the law; criminals, who

can give the mage an "ear" in the underworld; taxi drivers, with their matchless knowledge of the city and ability to move around it virtually unnoticed.

However, beyond these obvious choices, there are still numerous possibilities. In the street environment, an Ally is most useful to a mage not for the extra power he can provide, but for the information he can gather and pass on. When viewed this way, the field of potentially useful Allies becomes broader. A few examples of street inhabitants who might make good Allies for their ability to collect "dirt" include bartenders, newsstand operators, street musicians, homeless persons, street preachers, numbers runners, sex-shop owners, street urchins, nosy old women (the kind who spend their days watching what their neighbors are up to), prostitutes, couriers and trash collectors. These people are constantly on the street, paying attention to what's going on. They're a window on the street that the mage can gaze through, a window he might have trouble finding otherwise. Although they're not nearly as "powerful" as the mage, there are times when they're worth their weight in gold.

Arcane

Fading into the street-level environment is not only fairly easy, it's often a good survival technique. A streetwise mage can define his Arcane in the street setting as simply "looking like" he belongs there. A streetwise mage with a high Arcane rating will be very hard to find amid the "rabble" of the street — hard even for his friends, in some cases.

The mage may want to set up roundabout ways for people to contact him if need be: "blind" phone numbers and post office boxes; information drops; contacts. In a sense, this is a completely different kind of Arcane — the mage herself isn't that hard to spot, but she's damned hard to find. A seasoned street survivor can take this kind of Arcane to a high art; finding her is going to be next to impossible if you don't know the right people to ask and the right code words to get you in. (Andrew Vachss' character Burke is a master of such misdirection.)

Of course, it is possible for the mage to draw attention to himself through his activities — asking around about a particular individual is likely to draw that individual's attention to you, regardless of the level of your Arcane. Arcane should never be used as a foolproof "smokescreen" behind which the mage can hide.



Avatar

Life springs eternal

On a gaudy neon street

Not that I care at all

— Sheryl Crow, “Leaving Las Vegas”

The appearance of a street mage’s Avatar is, of course, up to the player or Storyteller. The choice of the Avatar’s appearance offers an opportunity to say something about the mage, or to express something about his inner character. A mage who knows the street may have that knowledge reflected in the appearance of his Avatar.

An Akashic Brother with a known penchant for challenging gangbangers, for example, might have an Avatar which looks like a fierce dragon or an ancient samurai warrior. A Virtual Adept’s Avatar would probably take on a high-tech appearance. A mass of digitized blips of light; a body made out of neon tubing; a half-computer, half-man shape: all are possibilities. A Hollow One’s Avatar would reflect some aspect of the urban decay and hopelessness that those mages see around themselves: a man-creature made of bricks and windows, or a shadowy shape composed of reflections of the city in oily pools of water on the streets.

Channies

Even a powerful Master needs a place to sleep at night, and street mages are no exception. For the urban mystick, a Chantry isn’t just a place to congregate with brother mages and practice magick without fear; it is (usually) a place where the dangers of the street can be temporarily forgotten, where the sorcerer’s native paranoia and caution can be ignored and trust can be expressed. Thus a Chantry is doubly precious to a street mage.

Street Channies, that is, Channies located in the street-level environment, are not especially different from other Channies. They’re often located in places not normally associated with Channies, though — slums, ghettos, abandoned warehouses, rusty old cargo ships that haven’t left the docks in years, or even in the sewers. Such places are less likely to have Nodes than most Chantry locales, and may well be Squatter Channies.

It’s possible to have a more “traditional” Chantry at the street level, of course. It’s just a step or two off the street into a church basement or attic, the back of a tiny bookstore, the storeroom of a homeless shelter or an old walled-in graveyard.

The type of Chantry that a cabal of street mages desires really depends on the “feel” of the campaign or the characters. Some groups simply “feel” better when envisioned in a Squatter Chantry in a burned-out strip mall than in the backroom of an occult bookstore.

Destiny

A street mage can have a Destiny like any other sorcerer. The fact that he associates with something most people consider "low," dangerous, and even disgusting doesn't mean that great things are not in store for him.

Having a Destiny may indicate that the mage is fated to "clean up the street" — or to be cleaned up by it, as the case may be. A combative mage will probably have a "street Destiny" associated with fighting. Perhaps a particular crimelord becomes the mage's archenemy, and the two of them battle until the crimelord and his organization are destroyed, though the mage himself dies valiantly in the process. A more peaceful mystick, like some members of the Celestial Chorus, may have a more peaceful Destiny. He might be fated to save an entire neighborhood from some disaster, or even just from poverty and hopelessness. He would spend his all-too-short lifetime struggling against the feelings of despair and anxiety that afflict the area, and eventually vanquish them — but be broken or killed by the stress and strain involved. The grateful inhabitants of the community, consciously or subconsciously recognizing the mage's contribution to their welfare, bury him in a vacant lot that becomes a verdant park. Thus, in death as in life, the mage is making the neighborhood a better place.

Familiar

Mages who call their Familiars while in a street environment had best remember the old adage about watching what you wish for — you might get it. The sorts of creatures that might be attracted include stray cats and dogs, pigeons, rats, one of those crocodiles we all know live in the sewers, seagulls or a large cockroach (ugh!). Mages whose cities include a fairly large park or "natural" setting may acquire more "traditional" companions, such as songbirds, squirrels, serpents or toads. There are also some "wild" creatures, such as raccoons and falcons, living in cities (dumpsters and pigeons make good food sources). And if the mage tries for a Familiar near the city's zoo, who knows what she'll end up with?

Influence

A street mage's Influence can extend to include the underworld and street-level society as well as "ordinary" society. For example, a mage or Technocrat who happens to also be a "made man" in the Mafia will have a lot of Influence on the street, even if the average citizen doesn't know him from Adam. Influence can also stem from reputation — a willworker who's known for sticking up for and helping out "the little guy" will command a lot of respect in some circles, while one whose combat prowess has been proven on the street is not likely to be dissed by gangbangers trying to make themselves look big at someone else's expense.

Street Influence may be taken into account when using the Streetwise or Intimidation Talents, depending on the situation; a Cultist of Ecstasy with four dots of Influence might reduce his Streetwise difficulty rolls by -1 or -2 when searching for a place to jam. These Talents, particularly Streetwise, help the character "pitch" his Influence so that he makes sense and does the right things in the street-level culture.

Mentor

Bringing a street mage's Mentor into a story can provide a wealth of roleplaying material. The most obvious of these is the situation where the Mentor is streetwise, but the player character is not. In this situation, it falls upon the Mentor to educate his pupil about the dangers and opportunities the street can provide.

Mentors who educate their students about the street do it in the same way that they educate their students about magick: they guide them through street society, teaching who's who and what behavior is acceptable; they help them avoid dangerous rivalries and enemies (the Mentor's enemies will, of course, automatically become enemies of the student); and they show them what the street-level power structure is all about.

A street mage's Mentor does not necessarily even have to be a mage! Knowledge of the street may be so valuable that a mystick will take, as part of his character, a "street Mentor" who teaches him about the street, not about magick. The street Mentor may know nothing about magick, or may be a recent convert. Such a Mentor doesn't have to be especially powerful, just knowledgeable. A former gangbanger now confined to a wheelchair by a drive-by shooting can teach the mage all about the street, even if he can't run or walk.

Node

When creating Nodes for street-level mages, players and Storytellers should choose locations that have some flavor and "feel" to them. An ordinary, boring location just won't do. Some examples of possible sites:

- An old church graveyard, its gravestones pushed over or covered with graffiti by marauding youths.
- An old pagoda in Chinatown, right in the heart of a Chinese tong's territory.
- In the sewers, in a large, manmade cavern where several large sewer lines meet.
- Abandoned subway tunnels.
- On top of the highest hill in the city.
- In the attic of a large Catholic church in the middle of Little Italy.
- A large tree in the center of a small wooded area in the middle of one of the city's parks.



Note that not all of these locations are necessarily good ones for Chantries. Not many mages want to do their magickal experimentation in a sewer, for example, nor would many non-Asian mages feel comfortable hanging around in Chinatown. And who's to say that abandoned subway tunnel is going to remain unused? But such is the price of power, and such is the toll exacted by the street.

Resources

People on the street are often poor, but a street mage need not be. One interesting source of money comes from an unlikely source: crime. Many criminals, particularly those involved with drugs or gambling, handle fantastic sums of money on an everyday basis. When a mystick defeats them, that money's his for the taking. Some mages may balk at this, and instead turn the money over to charity or some other deserving institution — a modern-day “Robin Hood,” as it were. But others will justify it as a way to support their own wars against crime, the Technocracy, or whatever other foe happens to be involved.

Some sorcerers become criminals themselves in order to earn money; after all, not every willworker is lily-white or pure of soul. Some see crime as a road to power and wealth, and possibly even Ascension.

Sanctum

There are plenty of suitable places available for urban Sanctums. Since few places seem more “mundane” than the street, a Sanctum provides a street mage with a welcome retreat from “reality,” and, like a Chantry, a place where the Awakened can escape from some of the local dangers (at least temporarily). Examples might include abandoned amusement parks, condemned buildings, dojos, gardens, churches, parks or nightclubs.

Merits And Flaws

This section discusses some important aspects of various Merits and Flaws (see **The Book of Shadows** and **Ascension's Right Hand**) for street mages. This list is by no means exhaustive. Most Merits are extremely useful to street mages, and the Flaws are correspondingly deadly. In some cases, Storytellers should consider “adapting” Merits and Flaws from other categories to this one. For example, the Enemy Flaw from the “Mage Ties” category could be carried over to become Street Enemy: the mage has one or more enemies on the street that want to kill or ruin him. They probably don't know that he's a mage, nor do they care; they just want to hurt him, and hurt him badly, as revenge for something he did to them (or maybe *several* somethings).

What is Streetwise?

Being streetwise is not about having the coolest leather jacket, but it may be about being on the guest list. It's not about being the hardest motherfucker on Earth, but it's about being able to take care of yourself, no matter what. It's not called *street-tough*, it's called *street-wise*; it's about using your brain, not waving your gun or talking trash. In essence, you must become an urban native; a city has a lot of resources, and you must learn to use them to your advantage, just as a tribesman in Africa knows his territory. He knows what plants have healing characteristics, and which ones are poisonous, and he didn't learn this by putting everything he came across into his mouth. He opened his eyes and ears and observed the animals, the true inhabitants; he learned by their example.

Being streetwise on the lowest level is being aware of your surroundings, first from a geographical perspective. One should be intimately familiar with the lay of the land, as it were, and not just the road map. Know the alleyways, the open doors and windows, know the escape routes and dead ends, know how to get to the rooftops and the basements. All of these can be useful, depending on the situation. A character should know where the back doors are to the street-level restaurants, and where they lead. It's also useful to know what times various places open and close. Planning to escape through a dry cleaner/laundromat won't do you much good if it's closed, but the all-night pool hall is near by, and they don't ask many questions. One should even be somewhat familiar with the public transportation routes, times and fares. Are there any trains a character could hop onto, hobo style, to ease her transportation needs? Once a person has this knowledge, she will be, and thus act, much more comfortable and confident.

The trick is not to wander around wide-eyed like some lost child. The predators on the street can smell unfamiliarity and discomfort, and if you're paying more attention to the landmarks, the street denizens will eat you alive. The bonus for taking some time to learn this type of information, aside from the obvious ease of getting around town, is that once you're familiar with the layout and construction of one urban environment, those general rules can be applied to just about any similar place. You will begin to be able to predict where an alley must be, where a doorway must lead, whether a ground water drainage sewer will be wide enough to use as an escape route or safe place to hide for a while.

From there you've got to know the inhabitants, both specifically as well as generally. Be aware of how many people can see you, how close are they to you, and whether or not they're watching you. Use the natural attributes of your surroundings; watch people around you in the polished glass reflections of storefront windows and reflective chrome surfaces. Being aware of, and in control of, your personal space is of the utmost importance. The farther away a problem is when you detect it, the more time you will have to deal with it. This all may sound very simplistic, but it's amazing how few people really pay extra attention once they're out of their element. Get to know the "regulars"; give the local bums a sandwich and a beer; run subterfuge for local gang members hiding out; be cool with the streetwalkers, but don't waste their time. Develop contacts; a little goes a long way when people are close to the edge. But don't be a savior — a lot less people want to be saved than most newcomers initially believe. Most people are where they are for a reason and it's usually not the obvious one. A city has a million eyes and ears; use this as an advantage. If you don't, someone else will.

Next, have an understanding of what kind of resources are readily available. Trash is trash to a kid from the suburbs, but bums know there's good food to be found. Know where the trash is coming from and you may find it very useful as well. Underground recording artists know where the studios and record stores are, and they also may know that such places frequently discard slightly less than new equipment and blank tape. With a little effort, one could save a fortune. Hackers have known about the merits of dumpster-diving for some time; corporate offices always have some juicy tidbits of useful information in their trash, if you know how to use it. It's even been rumored that stacks of blank driver's license cards have been found behind the city motor vehicle department. Surely the right people could find this to be a very valuable commodity. Resources also include things like rental lockers in bus stations and all-night bowling alleys. Sometimes you want to ditch something in a safe place for a little while.

You may even wish to place a few of your own resources. A city affords a lot of nooks and crannies that hardly anyone ever pokes their nose into. Wrap up a spare firearm and a few shells, or any other useful but not super-valuable piece of equipment, in some old newspaper and stow it up above a removable ceiling tile in the public bathrooms of a couple of seedy restaurants. Odds are fair that no one will ever look up there. Bury a little extra cash, in a plastic baggy, in the soil of the decorative shrubbery outside the towering office buildings. You never know when that may come in handy for you or for a friend in need.

Basically, a streetwise character has attained the kind of familiarity within the urban environment that many people only attain within their own home. She should be able to freely move about a city with the confidence of a person in her own house, even in the dark. She knows where the dangers are, how to easily get what she needs. She knows how to take care of herself, no matter how fucking grim it gets.

Addiction

With the easy availability of so many hard drugs on the street, this Flaw can be a dangerous one indeed (see the Appendix). The temptation to succumb to the dozens of blissful poisons may be too great to resist. Players should be cautious about taking this Flaw; then again, the story potential for a character who manages to overcome his addiction is great indeed....

Crack Driver

A must for car-chase scenes!

Dark Secret

A mystick's "third career" as a street vigilante who uses his magick to hunt and kill criminals — or to become one of those criminals — could be considered a Dark Secret by some groups.

Hideaway

Very common in the street environment. A "safehouse" can be a real lifesaver in more ways than one.

Intolerance

Given the prevalence of minorities at the street level, taking a race-based Intolerance may be a major (though not inappropriate) Flaw. Depending upon the chronicle's background, the Storyteller may consider increasing the value of this Flaw accordingly.

Jack-Of-All-Trades

The miscellaneous Knowledges and Skills associated with this Merit can be a big help when a mage is trying to disguise himself or pass himself off as someone else. Natural Linguist offers similar benefits.

Loyalty

In the street environment, this Merit is most commonly found in gang members, cops, Mafiosi, and others who belong to organized groups. With some organizations, such as the yakuza or tongs, Loyalty is almost universal among the members; in others, such as some gangs or Mafia families, there are members who will "sing" at the drop of a hat. Cops with Loyalty are usually more dedicated to the law itself than to their precinct. The Storyteller should remember that a criminal's Loyalty is often based on fear of the consequences if he's not loyal; someone who can credibly threaten him with a similar fate right away may be able to break him. Lawmen are much harder to dissuade once they make up their minds.

Obsession

From Batman on, the concept of the obsessed and vengeful crimefighter has held a powerful attraction for many fictional and gaming characters. Mages, too, may

suffer from this Flaw. It can be combined with Vengeance, Dark Secret and other Flaws to create an interesting, if emotionally disturbed, character.

Sleeper Society Merits & Flaws

All of these are extremely appropriate for street mages, for obvious reasons.

Underworld Ties

The uses of this Merit are obvious. Characters with it need not belong to the Mafia or street gangs — cops, writers, street people, reporters, politicians and more businessmen than you'd believe have ties to criminal elements. See Chapter Two for a few of the organizations a character might be familiar with.

New Merits And Flaws

Street Ties (2 pt Merit)

You've spent a lot of time on the street, and usually have a pretty good idea who to talk to locate someone or get information. This Merit doesn't guarantee success — or survival — on the street, but it makes it easier. Characters with Street Ties may reduce their Streetwise difficulty rolls by -2 in appropriate situations. Storytellers and players are encouraged to elaborate on this Merit by creating networks of informants and contacts that the character interacts with regularly.

Street Rep (1-2 pt Merit or Flaw)

People know you. Maybe you creamed a roomful of enforcers, maybe you have a way of surviving tough situations, or perhaps you just have a really good PR person running scam talks about you. In any case, people know your name. Whether this Trait becomes a Merit or a Flaw depends on what you're known for. Characters known for good things — helping needy people, contributing time to help teach city kids, etc. — will buy this as a Merit. Those known for darker deeds — killing hitmen or cops, getting all your charges dropped, trashing folks who get in your way, etc. — must buy it as a Flaw. Either variation will make you a hero in someone's eyes and a target in others'.

Beholden (1-3 pt Flaw)

You owe somebody something, and some day they'll call the marker in. Exactly who you owe, and why, and how much, depends on the value of the Flaw and the Storyteller's twisted imagination. The value of this Flaw is based on how great a favor is owed — for example, if the person saved your life, that's usually a three-point Flaw. Other reasons why you might be Beholden include: someone has dirt on you; you borrowed money from them; they did you a favor; they saved the life of someone important to you; they kept you (or a loved one) from suffering some horrible fate.

Criminal Record (2 pt Flaw)

For whatever crime you may or may not have committed, you are remembered by City Hall. You cannot vote, jobs will be hard to come by, and people who know about your record won't trust you, no matter what happens. Erasing the record means buying off the Flaw first.

Paradox

It's either real or it's a dream

There's nothing that is in between.

— The Electric Light Orchestra, "Twilight"

Paradox, the bane of mages everywhere, can be a particular danger for urban mysticks. Street people, cynical and tough, are likely to treat "unusual" coincidences with skepticism and disdain. In order to avoid the terrifying effects of Paradox, street mysticks need to become particularly adept at coincidental Effects. Vulgar magick is likely to get a street mage in real trouble of one sort or another.

Fortunately, the street-level environment and its inhabitants offer mages many opportunities for disguising their spells. These opportunities fall into two major categories, described below. Of course, street mages should be careful to vary their Effects enough to avoid the Domino Effect.

Virtual Adept Chaoticians talk about the "chaos factor"; according to this theory, any significantly taxed or

advanced reality breaks down. Storytellers should remember that a significant chaos factor applies in most major urban areas. Things change constantly, and people learn not to depend on any one thing for very long. Thus, the parameters of coincidental magick can vary wildly (see **Mage Second Edition**, Chapter Eight: "Magickal Geography and Influence"). For example, "normal" reality will be strong during daylight hours — but at night, anything can, and often will, happen, from strange creatures appearing in back alleys to mysterious explosions and similar events. However, when Paradox hits, the backlash is pretty damn severe.

The Living City

Cities resemble living beings, constantly passing through stages of growth and death. Even as a city expands and grows, parts of it are falling into ruin, decay and "death." Both of these phenomena offer chances to disguise magick.

As a city expands and grows, many potential "accidents" can occur. Accidents abound on construction sites, for example, and if a mage happens to be fighting an enemy in or near one, he may be able to take advantage of "falling loads of bricks," "out-of-control machinery," and so forth. Similarly, a growing city means more people, more automobiles — and hence more automobile collisions. Perhaps a willworker's foe "accidentally" gets run over by an out-of-control vehicle.



The decaying infrastructure of many urban areas offers similar resources for the clever mage. Old buildings collapse. Water mains and gas pipes explode. Faulty electrical wiring causes fires. Blackouts occur. Mages need to be alert to their surroundings and the "disasters waiting to happen" in them.

Beliefs

Criminals are a superstitious and cowardly lot...

— Batman

A wise man — or a wise mage — will take advantage of his enemy's weaknesses. The various urban subcultures have a host of beliefs ranging from the commonplace to the totally stupid. As shapers of belief, mysticks have an edge when causing events to follow peoples' expectations. Smart mages might cover their Effects through any number of ways:

- **Superstition:** Even in the modern world, lots of people are afraid to walk under a ladder, live on the 13 floor of a building, or break a mirror. To a superstitious person, bad things that happen to someone who does one of these things are not unnatural — they are inevitable. A mystick who knows that his enemy is superstitious may be able to tailor his magick so that it resembles "bad luck."

- **Miracles:** People still believe in miracles, too. The Celestial Chorus has a reputation for the miraculous, but other groups — especially Dreamspeakers, Verbenas and Progenitors — perform acts that qualify as miracles to some cultures. Naturally, this sort of thing works best around religious sites and similar locales; relatively few miracles occur in the middle of decrepit slums or old junkyards.

- **Stage magic:** In a world where David Copperfield the stage magician is better known than the literary character he named himself after, stage magic can act as an important "screen" for a willworker's Arts. Stage magicians are famous for elaborate illusions and frightening tricks. When a street mage needs to, so to speak, pull a rabbit out of his hat, a bit of "sleight of hand" may go a long way towards convincing observers that it's "all an illusion." Of course, this sort of thing only works in appropriate circumstances — stage magicians rarely give impromptu street shows — but the opportunities do occur. (See the Blatancy Talent in **The Book of Shadows**.)

- **Enquiring minds want to know:** many people believe what they read in supermarket tabloids. Even those who are entirely skeptical of such stories are aware of the stories themselves. This offers mages a perfect condition in which to use coincidental magick. If a spell can be disguised as a UFO event, a sasquatch, a manifestation of "the Devil," or Elvis, observers may just fall for it.

- **Chi effects:** Stories abound about the amazing things that martial arts masters can do. Some people believe that they can deflect bullets, smash through walls and leap over just about anything. Members of the Akashic Brotherhood

often benefit from the widespread popularity of Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee and Jean Claude VanDamme. Chinese communities have especially flexible "rules" about martial arts Effects.

- **The Lucas/Spielberg Syndrome:** "Er, ah, we're filming a movie, ma'am; that was just special effects. The camera crew? Well, uh, they're in that building over there, filming from behind that window. Listen, we could use some extras for some crowd scenes tomorrow; if you'll go to the address on this card and sign up, they'll pay you fifty bucks to be in the movie! Okay, see you then!"

- **Technology:** Technomagick, as most mages know, dominates the industrial paradigm. With the popularity of science fiction films, a wide variety of coincidental Effects can be excused as "secret government technology." Still, those same ideas make technomagick vulnerable to disbelief: "Hey, I read *Omni*, and I never heard anything about that! That's impossible!" Accessing a satellite link is pretty difficult to do if there's a blackout, and computers with their cords pulled aren't supposed to be able to work....

- **Bad trips:** A street mage will sometimes encounter people under the effects of drugs or alcohol. He may be able to make his magick appear to be a hallucination or side effect. Even if the witness isn't affected by these substances now, a little bit of fast talk may convince him that he's suffering from the DTs or an acid flashback.

When the Hammer Falls

This same flexibility of reality can backfire, however; the chaos factor also dictates that any form of predictability will spiral out of control. An Effect that was coincidental one turn may become vulgar the next with little explanation, especially if there's a lot of magick in use at the time. These wild variations are left up to the Storyteller's discretion, but it's best to assume that if the Tapestry's taking a beating, it will tear sooner or later. And when it does, things may get nasty.

Paradox takes vicious forms in the urban environment, and these backlashes can use the same "excuses" that a mystick can. Physical backlashes caused by "spontaneous human combustion" or electrical mishaps, Paradox spirits in the form of angry Loa, demons or muggers, Flaws that cause a mage's skin to melt in front of a group of hopheads, and other sorts of strange but not inexplicable phenomena may strike the mystick who screws up in the 'hood.

The form an Effect can take might also reach out of the caster's control (see the effects of hubris in Chapter Nine of **Mage Second Edition**): a subtle Life-based spell might suddenly cause all the plants in the area to grow; a Force bolt might cause a small sonic boom. These alterations might call attention that a smart mage would prefer to avoid — especially if they turn a coincidental casting into a vulgar one.



Someone Else's Turf

Most of the time, when a mage is "on the street," he's going to be on someone's "turf," or territory. A few areas may be considered "neutral territory" or a "meeting ground" of some sort, but most important locations will be claimed by one group or another.

Depending upon whose turf the mystick violates, this could be a minor matter, or something of deadly import. Most mages are not going to worry too much about interfering with some low-level street gang's turf; any wizard worth his salt should be able to handle a group of kids — even heavily-armed kids — provided he doesn't do anything stupid. But sometimes the mage is going to tread on the toes of the street's major players, like the Mafia or the yakuza. There's also the possibility that other mages or the Technocracy will carve out street turf, and a mage player character could run afoul of them, too.

When a mage steps on to someone's turf, the response he gets is likely to depend on how he acts. If he's just exploring, maybe looking for a particular person or some information, and isn't bothering whoever rules the turf, he will probably receive some sort of simple reminder or warning as to who he's dealing with. Usually this warning will be subtle — the mystick will see someone following him or showing up wherever he goes, for example. This "shadow" makes certain the intruder doesn't make any waves. Once he and his masters realize what the mage is up to, they won't bother him, provided he doesn't bother them. Another, less subtle, sort of reminder would be to confront the trespasser forcefully, to impress upon him the consequences of rash actions. This isn't so much to start a fight as it is to ensure that the mage knows who *not* to bother. A smart willworker will know what he's getting into from the beginning and conduct himself accordingly, so such overt warnings shouldn't be necessary.

A trespasser may also be able to avoid misunderstandings by contacting the group running the turf in advance and explaining himself. By setting up a "meet" to let them know what he's doing, the mage shows respect for the people in power, something that's always appreciated. This gives her an opportunity to explain what she's after and the scope of her activities, so that the group can decide up front how much freedom to allow her.

If the mage's reason for being on the turf is more severe — say, he's seeking information about a member of the group who runs that turf — then the response will be correspondingly more extreme. If the group in question respects or fears the mage, they'll probably send him a warning first, perhaps through his acolytes or Allies. People on the street know to take this sort of "grapevine" warning seriously, and a street mage should as well. If that doesn't work, or if the group has no respect for the mage, the first warning he is likely to receive is a forceful confrontation,

like a minor beating. If the beating fails, or if he doesn't get the message, greater amounts of force, including outright attempts to cripple or kill him, will be used.

In some cases, the group the mystick is offending won't attack him directly — they'll respond with a trap or an indirect assault of some sort. The group understands their turf and the people in it better than the mage ever will, and they will use these resources. Consider some of the following examples:

- With the help of one of its underlings or allies, the group slips information to the mage that the person he's looking for can be found in a particular run-down apartment building. The mage shows up to investigate, only to find the building filled with the group's heavily-armed soldiers.
- The group plants a bomb in the mage's car. Even if it doesn't kill him, it sends a strong message.
- By asking their own questions, the group finds out who's been asking questions for the mystick. This leads them to one or more of his Allies or acolytes, or maybe even to his "street Mentor." One of these people is "taken care of" — beaten, killed, raped, framed for a serious crime — as a way of warning the mage off.
- An assassin from out of town is hired to "deal with" the mage. Since this killer is not a local, the mage will probably never recognize him as a danger until the killer is right on top of him. Maybe the killer's mission isn't a lethal one — maybe he's been ordered only to break the mage's arms, or rough him up a little — but nevertheless, the mage should have a fight on his hands.

Most groups that are powerful enough to control a lot of turf are also smart enough not to do anything stupid, meaning anything that will attract the authorities' attention or put them in a position where the intruder can fight back easily. Storytellers should keep this in mind when mages become involved with people and things that are, perhaps, bigger than they realize.

The Code of the Street

Chao was halfway across the street when he heard the first scream. He vaulted over a car and ran quickly to the mouth of the alley. No one really paid any attention to what was going on, though a few people seemed surprised to see the strange Chinese guy running into Snake's "punishment" alley. Nobody messed with Snake.

From the alley, he heard a whimper of pain, and a woman's voice sobbing "No, Snake, I ain't done it!" A switchblade sniked open.

Chao moved forward, swift and sure. As Snake brought the knife back to cut the woman, Chao grabbed his arm. The wet crrakk as the elbow gave way was followed by a scream from the pimp, much louder than the hooker's cry a few moments before. Chao pivoted and threw the man against the opposite alley wall, where he fell, unconscious, in a pile of other trash.

He turned back to the woman, who had staggered back against the wall of the alley. Though she wasn't bleeding, her arms were clutched across her stomach, and a dark bruise formed underneath her left eye. He could feel her pain, both emotional and physical.

He reached out towards her with one hand, asking, "Miss, are you all..." He never had a chance to finish the question. Before he could react, her right fist cracked across his face. The blow didn't hurt him — he'd taken far worse without flinching — but the shock stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Who the fuck are you, Hop Sing?" the girl shrieked at him, outraged. "Fuckin' Robin Hood? Get the fuck away from me!"

"But... but I thought..." Chao began, confused.

"I don't need your fucking help," the girl said, half angry, half sarcastic. "He's my man, I don't need you coming between us." Chao watched as she went over to the pimp and began to try to comfort him, then turned in disgust and walked out of the alley.

The so-called code of the street is best summed up with a single phrase: *Mind your own goddamned business.* Just as criminal groups don't take kindly to people messing around in their territory, most people on the street, suspicious and alone, don't want anybody messing with them. This is true even if you're trying to help. Sometimes people don't know what's best for them.

Some folks prefer to be left to themselves, because asking for help can create problems. Needing help is a sign of weakness, and on the street, looking weak brings out the wolves. Street folks want to sort things out on their own, even if these "things" are going to get them hurt or killed on their own.

Willworkers are going to violate the code of the street a lot. After all, one of their principal reasons for being there, helping themselves and others to Ascend, is going to involve interfering in a lot of lives. Many times all you're likely to get for your trouble is a stare, a curt word of warning to "Keep away from me," or a slap in the face. Ingratitude and hostility are sometimes as strong from the would-be victims as they are from their attackers. Since many of the menaces a street mage deals with are not known to (or even visible to) Sleepers, they may also think the mage is crazy, making them even less likely to want to have anything to do with him. Such is the lonely path of magick.

Should this discourage the mystick? Not at all. Sometimes making sacrifices for others is a thankless task, but that doesn't make it any less worthwhile.

On a similar note, people who realize that a street mage is doing something "unnatural" or causing a lot of "coincidences" are even more likely to fear and avoid him. It is a natural human tendency to fear the unknown, and in the modern world nothing is so unknown as magick. The best reception the mystick can hope for is simple avoidance. At worst, the mage may be accused of being a Satanist or something even less savory. Street mages should be prepared to deal with this; not all magick can be coincidental all of the time.



Acolytes

Not everyone the street mage encounters will be afraid. Some will realize that something unusual is occurring, and accept it, and even assist the mage as his aide, guardian and friend. These people are, of course, acolytes.

Street mages can attract acolytes from a number of unlikely sources. All that is required is that the potential acolyte possesses something inside of himself, something pure that allows him to see the good in the Awakened and what they do.

Some possible sources for a street mage's acolytes: homeless shelters, charities and soup kitchens; churches, cults, and other religious groups (and even some quasi-religious organizations, such as self-help groups); shops and businesses that sell things that mages use (such as bookstores and crystal shops); gangs (that the mage has somehow impressed); students; gamers; computer freaks; bars and nightclubs.

Some Tradition-specific sources of acolytes:

- **Akashic Brotherhood:** The mage's dojo, or other dojos.
- **Celestial Chorus:** Churches and other religious groups, street preachers and their "flocks."
- **Cult of Ecstasy:** Clubs, bars, coffeehouses, artists, bands, pornographic bookstores and movie theaters, whorehouses.
- **Dreamspeakers:** Voodoo and Santeria groups, urban renewal committees, homeless types, children.

- **Euthanatos:** Vigilante groups, law enforcement agencies, hospitals, paramilitary "militia" organizations, gangs, neighborhood watch groups.

- **Hollow Ones:** Any of the sources used by the Ecstasy Cultists, students, disaffected street youth (or disaffected youth in general), gangs.

- **Order of Hermes:** Bookstores, libraries, universities, offices.

- **Sons of Ether:** Gamers and science-fiction fans, universities, electronics stores.

- **Verbena:** cults, New Age and neo-Pagan groups, related ethnic subcultures.

- **Virtual Adepts:** Computer freaks, electronics stores, students, computer-oriented bands and artists, universities, computer BBSs.

A street mystick's acolytes, in conjunction with his Allies (if any), can be a big help in setting up his "network." Each acolyte will know people who can feed him information. Each one has a pair of eyes and ears to help the mage find out things. Acolytes (and Allies) increase the mage's ability to gather information dramatically.

However, a street mage needs to be cautious when dealing with his acolytes, since they may not be as reliable as more traditional followers. Street folks have a lot of pressures tugging at them, including simple survival, that may make devotion to the mage and his causes a secondary consider-



ation. Consider, for example, the case of an acolyte who has an alcohol or drug problem. If offered a large amount of his substance of choice to betray his master, would he do so? That depends primarily on the demands of the story. Acolytes without such problems may still be susceptible to the lure of money, or threats to self or loved ones.

Betrayal always causes great danger for a street mage. Not only will it expose him to his enemies, but his secrets and methods may be exposed to them as well. He may be left with no one to turn to, and nowhere to run. The Technocracy relishes the opportunity to use a mage's friends against him this way.

Information Networks

Like anybody else on the street, a mage requires information to operate efficiently—information about other operators, about potential jobs, about who's controlling whom, and a thousand other subjects. There are two basic ways for a street mage to obtain information: traditional means and magick.

Traditional Information Gathering

"Traditional" means are ways that a Sleeper would obtain information: networks of contacts, intimidation and threats, reference libraries, favors, bribery (see "Research" in *Mage's Drama* chapter). For the most part, they work just the same for mages as they do for Sleepers, though sorcerers may be able to use magick to make their research easier (see below).

One important exception to that last statement concerns the willworker's network of contacts. A mage's information network will generally be built around his Allies and acolytes. This gives him an important powerbase to work from when he sets up his network. Each of these people will be crucial to the mage's ability to gather information, since each one knows a variety of people on the street that he can turn to for dirt: "I tell you what. I got a friend who's got a friend who knows somebody that might know something about that. Lemme get back to ya."

Being a member of a mage's circle of contacts is not necessarily a safe job. While it's true that befriending a wizard provides a certain level of protection, it also attracts his enemies. Rival factions and a hundred more mundane foes see the contact as a way to strike at the mage, to deprive him of something valuable, to lure him into a trap. When a mage's enemies uncover one of his contacts, death may be the best thing that person can hope for. Best to watch your back, eh?

Gathering Information Through Magick

Mages can also gather information through magickal means, from sophisticated spells which analyze trace evidence for clues, to mental magicks that lay a subject's thoughts bare. The following list, by no means exhaustive, provides some examples of how mages can do this.

• **The Dream Background:** By using Dream, mages can gain access to the universal unconsciousness. This grants them an almost unparalleled source of information. A mage with enough dots in Dream can enhance his Streetwise Talent, thus opening up all sorts of avenues of information.

• **Correspondence: Immediate Spatial Perceptions** Effects can be used to calculate precise data about crime scenes. **Co-Locality** Effects can be used to spy on people.

The **Correspondence Sensing** Effect is an excellent tool for surveillance and observation — if one knows where to look. **Divided Sight** is another means of surveillance, and is particularly useful when a mage needs to follow the activities of several persons at once. **Filter All-Space** is a criminalist's dream. With only a piece or two of trace evidence from a crime scene, a mage can use this Effect to track down a criminal. It may take time, but it will be a hell of a lot quicker than an ordinary police investigation.

• **Entropy: Perceive Entropy** might be used on clues and trace evidence that have “broken down” or decayed to trace back to what they once were like and gather information from them. The **Locate Disorder** Effect can be a big help to any mystick studying or planning to infiltrate an organized crime group.

• **Forces: Perceive Forces** has many forensic applications. The **Darksight** Effect, which allows mages to see in the infrared and ultraviolet spectra, can assist in crime scene investigations. Many types of trace evidence can only revealed under infrared or ultraviolet light. Forgeries, for example, can be detected with infrared vision. Ultraviolet vision comes in handy at murder scenes when used in conjunction with a chemical called luminol. When sprinkled over an area, luminol makes even tiny amounts of blood visible by UV light.

• **Life: Sense Life** could perhaps be used to perform magickal autopsies, or to analyze a character's DNA (for purposes of DNA fingerprinting, a way of identifying criminals from trace evidence their bodies leave behind).

• **Matter: Matter Perceptions** helps when conducting magickal autopsies or analyzing forensic evidence. **Alter Matter** can be used to hide or erase the trace evidence the mage himself leaves behind. The **Analyze Substance** Effect is particularly useful in crime scene investigations.

• **Mind:** This Sphere is useful for obtaining information from human subjects instead of physical evidence. The **Telepathy** Effect, for instance, is ideal for interrogating someone — it doesn't even leave any traces!

• **Time:** The ability to see past (or future) events is an extraordinarily useful one when a character is investigating a crime — in fact, it is so useful that it is likely to spoil “murder mystery” scenarios unless the GM plans in advance for postcognitive abilities, or forbids their use.

Clever players can no doubt come up with other Effects or rites that will assist in their search for information.

The Awakened and the Law

*do you want to take a life
do you want to cross that line
'cause it's a long way back from hell
and you don't want to come w/me*
— Danzig, “Long Way Back From Hell”

Kevin leaned back against a wall of wooden crates, clutching his left shoulder with his right hand. He was shaking uncontrollably, exhausted. Only the agonizing pain in his shoulder kept him awake. If this is what they call a “flesh wound,” he thought, the term doesn't do it justice. He tried to look at the wound, but the sight made him nauseous, and he looked away.

Three drug dealers — two fried almost beyond recognition by Kevin's lightning bolts, one with his heart exploded in his chest — lay amid brass bullet casings and bags of white powder. The sight did little to cheer the mage. Then he heard the sirens — faint at first, but getting closer. Shit! he thought as he struggled to his feet. Shit, shit shit! Now what do I do? How the hell do I get out of this?

Dealing with the Law

Being a mage (or werewolf, or vampire, or anything else for that matter) does not immunize a character from the law. A street mage is likely to come into contact with the law many times in his career, and many (if not most) of those times there will be a potential for real problems. Mundane punishments and problems abound, and few mages have reached Ascension from a prison cell.

Mages have two basic ways of dealing with the police: traditional means, and magick. Traditional means include hiding out (Chuntries and Sanctums are especially good for this), invoking favors, bribery and even hiring a good lawyer. Mages will generally use these methods just like a Sleeper would, while vampires excel at manipulation and outright mind-control.

Suppose that Jason Fivestones, a mage of the Order of Hermes, has been arrested on charges of assault with intent to kill (he was “punishing” a teenage punk who nearly beat a friend's son to death). He uses his “one phone call” to get in touch with Guinhaevar, a member of his cabal who knows some people in the justice system. Guinhaevar calls her contacts at the police department and the prosecutor's office, trying to get the charges dropped. The punk, however, has a rich and powerful father who's following the case, so the charges against Fivestones cannot simply be dropped without causing problems for the department and the prosecutor. So Guinhaevar gets the prosecutor to recommend a good criminal defense attorney for Fivestones. Since the prosecutor is likely to be at least a little sympathetic to Fivestones, the odds are that the defense attorney can get him a good deal, or maybe even get him off entirely (particularly if he has no prior record).



Magickal means run the entire gamut, from using Mind magicks (or Domination, the Delirium or illusions) to mentally control or frighten cops, district attorneys and judges to quick getaways involving Correspondence magick and fighting your way out of a police cordon using raw force. To use the example from the previous paragraph, suppose that for whatever reason, the defense attorney fails to get the charges against Fivestones dropped or reduced. Fivestones is sentenced to serve five years in the state penitentiary. He knows he can use Correspondence magick to escape, but he wants to be unobserved while he does so, to avoid Paradox. (If Fivestones didn't know the proper Correspondence Effects, he could also escape with invisibility, shapechanging or many other kinds of magick.)

The next day when he's out on the yard, he starts a fight with another inmate (being sure to pick one who deserves a good beating) and gets thrown in "the hole" (solitary confinement) for it. When the guards come around to check on Fivestones a few hours later, he's gone! No one can explain the escape, but no one can find him on the penitentiary grounds either. Fivestones is now a fugitive from justice, but that's better than being a prisoner — and with a little bit of creative magick, no one will be able to recognize him (or his fingerprints) anyway.

Regardless of the methods they use to deal with the police, willworkers and other Awakened beings should remain wary of them. Most cops aren't corrupt, but many are, and some of those are controlled by parties the mage would definitely prefer not to tangle with on his own. Even honest cops have firepower, reinforcements, and extensive information networks.

Gathering Information From the Law

The police and the judicial system are not just potential adversaries, however. They can also be excellent sources of information. The police need lots of data to perform their job properly; their records are vast and detailed, and can be very useful.

While an ordinary Sleeper might find it nearly impossible to access police records, it's an easy task for a mystick. Mind magicks applied to the right records clerk will open the entire file system for the mage's use. Correspondence magick allows him to spy on the police as they work. A Virtual Adept can hack into the police computers, the FBI's NCIC (National Criminal Intelligence Center) computers, or the DEA's NADDIS system. (Caveat — not all police information in all jurisdictions is kept on computer!) Perhaps a mage's Ally or acolyte is a cop or judicial system official who can gather the information for him. The possibilities are limited only by the player's imagination and the Storyteller's deviousness.

Laws Affecting Mages

All laws affect mages, of course, but some moreso than others. A discussion of criminal law as a whole is beyond the scope of this book. This section, however, discusses a few laws and legal doctrines that mages can use (either to avoid being caught or convicted, or to frame an enemy), though the information is, of course, brief. Players and Storytellers who want further information on these subjects can research them at any law library.

Criminal Defense Law

The following defenses to crimes may prove particularly useful to mages and other player characters:

- **Crime prevention:** In general, a person is allowed to use force to prevent a crime, to the extent that such force seems reasonably necessary to prevent that crime. Thus, the amount of force allowable varies depending upon the crime: deadly force could be used to prevent deadly or especially dangerous crimes (such as murder or armed robbery), but using deadly force on an unarmed thief would be illegal.

- **Self defense:** Anyone is entitled to use force in his own defense. A mage who is without fault (i.e., who did not start or provoke the attack) can use any amount of non-deadly force that is reasonably necessary to protect himself from an imminent unlawful attack. Deadly force may be used where the character reasonably believes that he is about to suffer death or great bodily harm. The governing principle is the *reasonableness* of a character's belief regarding the crime he is about to suffer; for example, it isn't usually reasonable to respond to someone who's punching you by using deadly force, but using deadly force against a knife-wielding assailant would be acceptable. A few states also require the victim to attempt to retreat (providing he can do so safely) before using force in his own defense.

You can also attempt to defend others from becoming crime victims. The standards governing the "defense of others" defense are more or less the same as those for self-defense.

- **Protection of property:** Force can be used to protect property, but not as much force as you could use to protect yourself or someone else. Deadly force generally can be used only to protect one's home. Only non-deadly force may be used to protect other types of property.

- **The insanity defense:** Since mages are involved with magick and all of its esoteric trappings, they may be seen as "eccentric" and thus candidates for an insanity defense. However, the term "insanity" has a particular legal meaning. It signifies that a defendant (the person being tried for a crime) either did not know the wrongfulness of his acts, did not understand the nature and quality of his actions, or lacked the mental capacity to conform his conduct to the requirements of the law (even though he knew that what he was doing was wrong). Thus, merely professing a firm belief in magick is not enough to get the character off on an insanity defense — belief in magick does not necessarily mean that a character does not know what is right and what is wrong. If the character claims

that "the Devil" was controlling him and using him to commit murder, then he might be eligible for the insanity defense.

If a mage successfully uses the insanity defense, he will be found "not guilty," but will be involuntarily committed to a mental institution until "cured." His stay at the institution may wind up being longer than the sentence he would have received for the crime he committed!

- **Evidence law:** In order for a defendant to be convicted on the basis of physical evidence, two things are necessary. First, the evidence has to be successfully linked to the defendant; second, the evidence must have been properly seized.

Linking evidence to a defendant usually isn't difficult. Some types of evidence are direct traces of a particular defendant. Examples include fingerprints, DNA samples, hair samples, and so forth. Other types of evidence can be connected to the defendant because someone saw him with them, or the evidence was found in his possession. However, the prosecution has to show that the "chain of possession" has not been broken. This means that the possession of the evidence has to be traced from the defendant, to the police, to the courtroom (see the O.J. Simpson trial for an example of a fouled chain of possession). This is why the police "bag and tag" everything they find on a suspect or at a crime scene and send it to a secure "evidence room" at the police station. If the defendant can show that this "chain of possession" has somehow been broken, he may have a defense.

In the case of a mage, magick can be used to tamper with evidence and destroy the link to him. Life or Matter magicks can alter the nature of a particular object so that it can no longer be associated with him. Some other types of magick may simply make evidence "disappear" — the prosecution's case disappears then, too.


The other important aspect to evidence in a criminal case is that it must have been properly seized. This means that it was taken from the defendant with a valid search warrant, or in a situation where legally there was no need for a search warrant. There are six basic exceptions to the requirement that a search warrant be used to obtain evidence: searches incident to a lawful arrest; seizures of items in "plain view"; searches of vehicles based on probable cause (i.e., probable cause that evidence of a crime will be found in the vehicle); searches made with the consent of the person or owner; "stop and frisk" situations; and searches made in "hot pursuit" or when the police reasonably believe that obtaining a search warrant will put them in danger. (Note: this is an incredibly brief overview of the law pertaining to search and seizure. The standard reference work on this subject exceeds 3,000 pages.)

If evidence was not seized pursuant to a search warrant or under one of these exceptions, it cannot be used in court (to do so would violate the defendant's rights under the Fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution). Cases thrown out for this reason, or because an arrest was illegally made, are usually said to have been "dismissed on a technicality." Even though this happens a lot on TV police shows and in comic books, in fact this sort of dismissal rarely happens in real life.



Blood and Asphalt (Settings)

*Golgotha Tenement, city of souls
Give me your down and your weak
Give me your dollar whores
Down the boulevard, children are sold
To people wading through your streets of gold
—Machines of Loving Grace, "Golgotha Tenement Blues"*



The whole situation reminds me of when Crystal, Klent, Marv and the rest of them ran into that weird voodoo witch at Carding Mill who predicted that they'd die and be reborn as "carriers." I was with them; she wouldn't explain what she meant, but she was so fucking intense it scared me.

It's not the details that remind me of the situation, but the weird fucking chills the whole thing gave me. There's something about this Black

Angels business that isn't as obvious as it seems, something more than just a gang wanting the theatre for their own.

I've got this nasty feeling — although nobody wants to hear it from me — that Crystal and company are slowly falling into a rut: every night they go down to SPIT — that's the rundown danceclub around the block — to stir up interest in this idea they have for a new club. They think it'll "apocalyptically transform the thinking of the average clubgoer," I don't know how. They skulk around SPIT for awhile, maybe getting a crowd together to go up to The Barrows to smoke and talk among the graves. Most days, the five of them get together and jam, practicing for their Goth-blues debut at Club Royal. They're not very good.

Other days, Crystal takes these great clothes she finds in the basement and sells them to Patty at the consignment shop; Crystal must have a ton of stuff stashed away down there, because it seems to be one of their primary sources of cash. Julie and Dee work part-time as stringers for the Gazette, so they're usually out during the day. Klent and Marv read a lot, and sometimes Marv goes out 'blading and ends up saving someone's life or helping granny cross the street. Sometimes his stories are so amazing that I think they're just bullshit.

Now and then, the whole group meets with these two weird fuckers from across town. They're really pale and have a sick sense of humor that matches Klenton's at his worst. They seem to like watching old movies with us, but they have a fucking alternate sense of bonding that Crystal and Jules are getting into: I saw the four of them sipping blood from a goblet they were passing around while watching one of Ed Wood's cinematic fiascoes. After that, I started going to SPIT when these two came around.

But that's it — that's what they do. They used to walk the streets, piss off punks, break up fights, that sort of shit. Now they move from the club to the theatre and back again, worrying more about their ideas and ideals than the people that live around them. That's what's got me shivering; for them, it's fucking intense... and fucking cold.

Storytellers can use all the help they can get. In the spirit of cooperation (or at the very least consideration), we offer the following settings, which can be used intact in an ongoing chronicle, or cannibalized for suggestions for new and different locations of your own.

The Burning Bush Convent



And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil, and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden...

— Genesis 3:22-23

Burning Bush Convent is a place of rest for the weary and a place of renewal for those who are searching. The Sisters there believe that outreach ministries are the only way to perform God's will (in fact, their motto is "deeds, not words, are the portal to God's Kingdom") and that they have a special mission set aside for them. The oldest Sisters say that the convent was founded in the 1960s, when a fiery Moses appeared to them in a vision and ignited their love for God like the Biblical burning bush. These Sisters are telling what they believe to be the truth. However, the truth is that they witnessed the death of a Celestial Chorister who overstepped Paradox's



bounds and ended his existence in a column of fire. The beauty of the truth — that death inspired life in these women — is something to be admired. But ultimately, it really doesn't matter what inspired these Sleepers, only that, like their mage counterparts on the streets, their hearts burned with hope for the downtrodden and they found that their wills followed suit.

Description

An apartment-building-cum-rented-storefront used for church services, the convent opens onto a wide alley filled with tents that house the homeless during the summer. The nuns serve one meal a day from May through October, and offer referrals to local employment matchmakers. The idea is so popular among the needy homeless that Burning Bush's shelter has become known as Tent City to many of them. Regulars at Tent City most often are single mothers and their children, the temporarily unemployed, and minimum wage employees looking for additional work. Some people who classify as mentally ill also reside there, but they are in the minority and are usually referred to facilities with qualified counseling staff. The Sisters have also found it necessary to lay down some rules in Tent City: no drugs, no alcohol, no stealing, no fights, a minimum attendance of one chapel service a week, no seconds at the soup kitchen, see a Sister before taking a cot, respect others' privacy and no arguing with the nuns or volunteers. That's the way it is — the nuns treat everyone equally, including any mage characters who come their way.

The Sisters have started another outreach program that counsels various groups on the "Christian" perspective regarding homosexuality, drugs, extramarital sex, divorce and other concerns the nuns have about city life. The drug and divorce discussion groups, in particular, have helped some street kids and older adults cope with the problems in their lives and, in some cases, have gotten them back on their feet. On the other hand, the homosexuality group admonishes participants against gay and lesbian lifestyles; the program tends to attract participants who already dislike their own homosexuality and convince them to "purify" themselves before God. Because it is not a forum for open discussion, the small percentage of homosexual participants who want to investigate a gay Christian lifestyle come out confused and discouraged.

Throughout Tent City, where many of these counseling programs are held during the summer, exhilaration charges the air like electricity — exhilaration at the perceived success of the Sisters' outreach ministry and gratitude on the part of the poor, the homeless, and the unguided who have benefited from it.

While their mission has been a success, the convent is not without its problems. Last year, someone poisoned the food that the nuns served to the homeless, and many folks ended up in the hospital as a result. Neighbors have encour-

aged negative media attention toward the convent. They feel threatened by the strong presence of the homeless, whom they equate with the mentally ill; in fact, one man was beaten up just a few blocks down the street, though neighborhood bullies denied any involvement. Additionally, although the convent receives generous funding from Trinity Church (just a few blocks down), the money barely covers food and rent for the nuns and the homeless. It is difficult to find volunteers in a largely indifferent city, a fact that may form the difference between the convent's continuing or terminating its outreach services.

Layout

Burning Bush convent is composed of four sections: the convent itself where the nuns keep their modest but private quarters, the chapel where they hold small church services every night, the soup kitchen where everyone is fed and counseled, and, in the summer months, Tent City, where the homeless can find cots and friendly faces.

To Sleepers, there is something indefinably strange and exhilarating about Tent City; it resonates with energy and hope even in the midst of the city's squalor. Mages will notice a small knot in reality in the Tent City alley, a tiny Node that resonates with hope and a sense of community. The Node is not large enough to have attracted any attention yet, but given enough time...

Regulars

Characters who are drawn to the Burning Bush convent for whatever reason may meet Sister Maria Inez, one of the Sisters who claims to have seen Moses, and two of the Tent City regulars: Jeremiah Stanton, a chronically unemployed janitor, and Rosalie Hearney, an ex-cop.

Sister Maria Inez

Background: One of the eldest nuns at the inner-city convent, Sister Maria also has the most experience with life. She grew up in a small town on the West Coast in the 1940s, and, by the time she was 16, had run away, become a hooker, and had two children out of wedlock. She had no money and no food — one infant died of malnutrition, while the other she was forced to abandon on the doorstep of a mansion outside the city. After that, desperate for both financial and emotional support, she began living with a man she did not love and clung to him despite the fact that he beat her up almost every day. For nine years she struggled with his alcoholism, and for four years more she struggled with her own.

When she had finally had enough, she joined the Catholic church as a nun. After 10 years or so had gone by, she and a number of other Sisters witnessed the miracle of Moses and decided to start their own convent, with an emphasis upon an outreach ministry. Although she's not a particularly spiritual woman, Sister Maria loves the convent

and finds the unspoken support she craves in her sisters. While her demeanor is tough and street-hardened, she's full of empathy and love — perhaps more so than any of the nuns at Burning Bush. She is devoted to the convent's cause because she was once in the unfortunate position that many of Tent City's residents are now in, and she wants to help.

One of Sister Maria's few self-indulgences is that of tracking down the daughter she had to abandon almost 35 years ago. She asks anyone who's willing to help her, and rewards them with the heart-wrenching tale of the abandonment, made even more pitiful by the gruff, teary manner in which she tells it. A normally hardened veneer reveals the internal ache of personal tragedy whenever Sister Maria is asked to tell her story.

Image: A thin, tall woman in her early 50s, Maria shows her Mexican ancestry in rounded features, dark skin and bold brown eyes. She keeps her voice low, even and ever-patient, unless, of course, she speaks of her own sins. Under most circumstances, Sister Maria maintains a quiet dignity and kindness; her old fire, however, still smolders under her black robes. Those who strain her considerable patience endure a tongue-lashing in Spanish, English and Latin combined.

Roleplaying Hints: You are very devoted to your work and your faith; God changed your life for the better, and you hope to be His instrument to do the same for your charges. You still have bad dreams on occasion, although you quickly forget them if you pray heartily upon awakening. The only chink in your armor is your lost daughter — you are secretly terrified that she may have fallen into the same life you once did. One day, God willing, you'll find her; and you're terrified of what might happen then.

Jeremiah Stanton

Background: Of those to whom Sister Maria ministers, Jeremiah Stanton has become a Tent City regular, returning every spring without fail for the last five years. Jeremiah grew up in a small duplex just outside of the slums; his father was a conductor at the train station and he was expected to be one as well.

Jeremiah's star didn't shine as brightly as his father's. Every now and then Jeremiah finds employment as a janitor, but is typically let go after a month or so, as he never shows up on time. He is a dreamer whose visions of the remote future place him as a landscaper for a golf course or a mansion. He never enjoyed the drudgery of cleaning up after everyone else; he wants to find a creative outlet that will let him leave the poverty, the stink, and the death of the city. As if self-fulfilling, this dream, coupled with the fact that Jeremiah now views the people at Tent City as family, keeps him unemployed and with those he loves.

Image: A middle-aged black man of indeterminable age: Is he 40, 50 or 60? No one knows, and Jeremiah isn't telling. His skin is loose and slightly wrinkled, with baggy eyelids and

callused hands. No matter how he dresses, Jeremiah always seems to be slumping in oversized clothes — surprising considering his height (5'11" or thereabouts). Because of this, his body type is hard to discern; he looks flabby, but moves with surprising grace. His eyes always seem to be staring at some otherworldly landscape. Perhaps they are.

Roleplaying Hints: You say very little, and there is a measured grace in your movements. Your mind is always at least a little bit occupied with pictures of shady gardens and manicured lawns; it's a vision you discuss only infrequently. You know where you want to be in ten years; you just haven't taken the first steps in that direction yet. Soon...

Rosalie Hearney

Background: Another Tent City regular, Rosalie's view of the convent is as complex as her view of life. Like many of its residents, she sees her stay at Tent City as temporary; she does not belong there — she's just benefiting from its services for the time being. At the same time, she revels in the "squalor" of living from hand to mouth, wallowing in self-pity and full of disdain for the others sharing her canvas roof.

About six years ago, Rosalie's career took a dive when she shot a kid during a drug bust — only the kid turned out to be just a rubberneck. She tried to explain it to the Chief, but he just accused her of thinking "they all look alike." Fact is, that's what she *was* thinking, but she didn't want to admit it. So she lost her job (not technically, but traffic cop just didn't do it for her), lost her boyfriend because of the scandal, lost her apartment and almost put a bullet through her own head. She didn't have the courage, though, and ended up traveling from shelter to shelter, drinking and taking drugs. The irony of her taking the very drugs that destroyed her career eats her up inside.

Finally, Rosalie ended up at Burning Bush. She's returned three years in a row, even though at the end of the every season the Sisters tell her, with a smile, that they hope they won't see her again. Rosalie is in a rut; she feels helpless, unable to crawl out of the pit that she has fallen into. Nevertheless, she returns because she feels herself pulled to the place, like air into a vacuum; the energy of the Burning Bush convent fills the empty void that was once her heart.

Image: A wasted-looking white woman, Rosalie appears much older than her 28 years. Her filmy green eyes contrast badly with her pepper-shot black hair — the combination makes her look paler than she already is. Broad-shouldered and muscular despite her years of drug use, Rosalie resembles a stereotypical lesbian so much that she loudly proclaimed her sexual exploits (with *men*, thank you) throughout the precinct just to shut the jokers up. These days, she still keeps her curly hair cut short. Who wants to comb all that nasty street shit out of your hair, anyhow?

Roleplaying Hints: So you've made a few mistakes in your time — who hasn't? Still, it doesn't seem fair that people like Ollie North get to try to run for President and



you're stuck here without a home. If you thought you could get yourself on your feet again, you might be strong enough to do so—but you don't *feel* very strong. If someone gave you some kind of inspiration, something besides a pep talk, you might get your drive back, but until then...

Reputation

See above.

Story Ideas

• One of the Sisters or a resident at Tent City tells the characters about the founding of Burning Bush Convent. The details of the story seem too realistic to be a vision, and the fact

that the convent is located on a Node makes the tale even more suspicious. Moreover, the clues seem to indicate that the mage who succumbed to the Paradox backlash has been reincarnated as one of the convent's residents, without a mage's Avatar or memory of his past life. What is the truth behind the founding of the convent and can the characters unravel it?

• Jeremiah Stanton decides he is going to pursue his dream: he will create a beautiful garden in the inner city. The problem is, some watchful Technomancers mistake him for an ambitious Verbena. The characters get wind of their plan to kill Jeremiah and destroy his garden; can they help? And can they turn his plans into something advantageous to the whole community while they're at it?

Club Eat Me (Trash Bar)

*Distant places we dare to venture
Death has passed our lives away
—Liers in Wait, "Morning Star"*

The club is situated on a barren street called Fascination, lined with boarded-up shops and warehouses with broken windows. The street is terminally dirty and the cops don't cruise through the area after dark. Theoretically, there are beats which intersect the the corner of Fascination and 9th, but the cops who drive them tend to forget to pass that way past the time when the sun warms this part of the slums.



Club Eat Me has some surprising policies. Most night spots try to avoid problems by only letting certain types of people in, and nearly all nightspots worry about zoning and liquor laws. Eat Me lets anyone in who can scrounge up two bucks and then depends upon the bouncers to deal with trouble later on. Eat Me's bouncers are the terror of the neighborhood. All of them have shaved heads and perfectly chiselled torsos and they move with remarkable grace considering their bulk. At first glance, the bouncers appear to all be identical and male, but repeated examination shows slight variations among them. And, actually, it is somewhat

difficult to discern their gender. Not that anyone is likely to give them a hard time about it. What does a 300 pound bouncer get for his evening out? Any fucking thing he, she or it wants.

Eat Me's all-comers policy leads to an interesting mix of people on all nights, despite the perpetual migraine throb of obscure techno. Clubgoers used to try to request other genres, rap, Goth, etc, but the regular deejay put a stop to that. Jason the Magnificent spins every night but Friday and Jason only likes obscure techno. The creep lost a hand in a back alley brawl a few years back and he had it replaced with this totally weird steel prosthetic. The last guy who requested that Jason play something the crowd knew had his tongue torn out by that metal hand. Some patrons suspect that Jason had some kind of religious problem with the request (the man had wanted to hear Messiah). No one, however, is taking any chances, so the sound remains the same. Besides, most club folk like to be able to (quietly) complain about the music.

Despite the all-techno mix, some nights pull more from one demographic or another. Saturdays are Manhole at Club Eat Me. This is the big money-making night for the gay boy prostitutes and the purveyors of poppers and designer drugs. The bar usually does the biggest numbers on Saturdays too. Club Eat Me is perfect for men to trot out their best PVC undies even if they're definitely not ready to put their lifestyle choices beneath the narrow-minded scrutiny of their daytime world peers.

Weeknights tend to pull smaller crowds of mostly locals, primarily small-time hustlers and gangbangsters. Crack, pot and Brand X booze are the big sellers on no-theme weeknights. Vagrants, attracted by the lack of dress code or need for ID, also used to come in from the cold and the rain when there was bad weather. Two bucks is a decent price to get out of a miserable soggy cardboard box from 8 PM to 4 AM. Recently, though, there have been stories of disappearances circulating among the streeties. The gutter nickname for the place is Roach Motel.

Layout

From the outside, Eat Me looks pretty unobtrusive — a plain black one-story on the fringe of the warehouse district. With all the graffiti sprayed across the facade, the Eat Me logo (done in lurid acid-fuckup style) gets lost. The plain wooden door betrays a few nicks when you look at it close-up; if you rub your finger across it, bits of dried blood come off on your hand. That's the rumor, anyway. To try it, you have to move the bouncer who stands, rain or shine, across the doorway. Just inside the outer door, there's a box office manned by Ember, an Asian Goth chick with a spiderweb chain linked to piercings across her face. Once you pay your two bucks, a second bouncer moves aside and opens the second door. Once you go through it, you're totally on your own.

Inside, the place is like a cave, all black with little passageways where one could cop a joint, a rock or a quick fuck. After passing through a long narrow corridor with side pockets leading to the restrooms, a visitor enters the main dance floor area. A plain bar extends the length of the floor (which is cramped and battered, not that anyone cares), and stairs lead up to the deejay booth where Jason lurks. Off to the side, a second passageway opens out to a second bar, a couple of pool tables, and a small stage. No bands play here (a few tried, but they got booed off the stage), but strippers (male and female) often do. The whole place has the familiar beer/sweat/cigarette miasma of the seasoned nightclub, and everything is plain and black. Management doesn't lose sleep over their expenses.

If you know the right bribe for the bouncers, they might tell you about the secret meeting rooms between the main and second areas. Here, a couple of nasty black couches, a throw pillow collection and some tattered blankets form a cum-stained rendezvous point for special parties. You can still hear the ever-present techno, but the muted sound reminds you of a heartbeat as you sink into whatever bliss you chose to purchase. No one bothers the guests in these rooms except the roaches and rats that occasionally scurry across the pillows. Most folks don't seem to mind.

Reputation

Kids from the suburbs revel in these evil tales as they flock to Club Eat Me on Friday nights, drawn by the fairy glamour of danger, the promise of cheap drugs and sex, and a juvenile desire to say to their peers, "Are you going to Eat Me this weekend?" With different guest deejays all the time, Fridays boast the most mixed crowds, bringing in heterosexuals and homosexuals, suburbanites and the locals who want to sell them something special.

Club Eat Me never cards. Never. Story has it that some rookie cop once tried to bust one of the bouncers at Club Eat Me for letting a pair of ninth graders from the burbs into Manhole. Nothing happened to the twosome that they did not enthusiastically participate in, but apparently the father of one of the boys had found out and pulled every string he knew how to start a sting operation to close the club down. Word is that these two 14-year-olds made \$2,000 between them that night letting chickenhawks blow them. Ah, the recuperative powers of youth... So anyway, the dispatcher sent out the one cop so wet behind the ears that he was willing to go. A lot of people saw the bouncer crush the man slowly against the cement side of the building, heard the bones snapping, saw the man's insides drip down the wall and plop wetly to the sidewalk, but the body was never found and the stories the witnesses told were all implausible fables of inhuman strength. That rookie police officer was never seen again, dead or alive, but the dispatcher somehow ended up with a raise. At least, real soon after, the dispatcher got hair implants to correct his male pattern baldness. And that weird shit costs. And no more cops showed up on Fascination Street.

Regulars

Jason the Magnificent

Background: Jason is a bitter hostile fuck. His daddy was a pusher and his mamma was a whore. Neither of them were very good at their chosen professions and neither of them were very good to Jason. Most other folks have done nothing to change the deejay's impression of the world as filled with craven venal losers. It's been maybe eight years since Jason trusted anyone. He'd made the unfortunate mistake back then of being in love with his landlord. She was pretty and seemed vulnerable, a junkie ex-dominatrix who had made sufficiently good to buy a crumbling old house and rent out rooms. Jason had paid for her rehab, would have done anything for her. But when she relapsed and starting shooting smack again, somehow she blamed Jason. She said that if he really loved her he would understand that her body just needed the heroin. In an apparently forgetful junk-induced haze, the woman forgot to cash Jason's checks and then evicted him for nonpayment of rent.

The deejay hasn't been the same since. He spent a lot of his time homeless wandering the streets by day with his CDcart in tow and spent the nights in clubs where the purity of the techno beat let him ignore the desires of the flesh. Jason knows there's something funny about the owners of Club Eat Me because they fixed his hand when he ruined it. The fix might not have been conventional, but Jason likes it. There was no way the hospital would have taken him with no insurance and no ID, anyway. Because Jason refused the needle, the owners of the club sapped him by way of anesthetic before taking him to their secret lab. Jason lives in the deejay booth during the day and he's pretty sure the lab is somewhere in the building or nearby. But he is grateful to his benefactors and has no interest in invading their privacy.

Image: Jason is in his late 20s, has a shaved head and face, and keeps in fabulous shape through a strict calisthenics regimen. He can often be witnessed dancing jerkily around the deejay booth. A big square-jawed man, he still looks microscopic next to Eat Me's bouncers. Jason is dark-complected and obviously some sort of ethnic mix, although the proportions of his ancestry are unknown even to him. His midnight-black clothing displays his muscles (and claw) to grand effect, and suggests a punk-Nazi poster child.

Roleplaying Hints: You hate most of the people who come to the club, but it's an angry disappointed hatred. You want them to be strong and they want to revel in the baseness of their natures. Despite your disinterested pose, you're looking for a flag to rally behind. You know you are vulnerable to smooth talkers, so you enjoy keeping most people at bay with loud music and fear of you and your metal claw.



Diana

Background: Diana tends the back bar at Club Eat Me on weekends. (Only the main bar is open during the week.) Diana comes from a long line of well-meaning alcoholics and is no exception to the family rule. Her father died last year and her mother is not a well woman, but Diana tries to be optimistic and put on a happy face. The customers love to tell her their problems; Diana secretly believes that if she takes enough of their pain into her heart, maybe some understanding deity will save her and her mother from her father's fate.

Image: A tall, skinny, blonde pony-tailed bartender with one broken front tooth and a ready smile, Diana speaks with a coarse Southern accent, which she continually tries to mellow into a Daisy Mae drawl. It never works. Despite her annoying voice, Diana's pretty easy on the eyes — an effect she accents with tight leather vests, denim cutoffs and choice Goth jewelry.

Roleplaying Hints: You know the dirt on most of the patrons, but your main concern is for the well-being of others. Your main ambition is to just be happy and healthy and live and let live. You're drunk a lot of the time, but at least you're a friendly drunk.

Jon Dough

Background: Jon is one of half a dozen enforcers for Club Eat Me. Jon's recollections of any life before this one are limited. His parole officer seems to think this is drug-related but doesn't send him back to the pen; at least Jon has a job, which puts him head and shoulders above most of the other hardcases the officer sees. Jon strikes terror into the very souls of most patrons as he efficiently and passionlessly does what needs to be done to keep order in the establishment. Once, some Nazi skinhead yelled a bunch of racial epithets at Jon, but the big man just looked confused. Maybe he would have eventually responded, but the racist was wolfpacked by a group of eight SHARP skinheads; no one will ever know now.... Another time, some gangbangers came by the club, seemed pleased and amazed to see the bouncer and called Jon by a different name. He gave them the same look.

Image: Jon is huge and so black that he barely shows up in club light. The folds on the back of his neck are visible because he keeps his head shaved, but the rest of him is all glistening hairless muscle. Like the other five bouncers, he wears a grey sleeveless button-down coverall with the club's insignia on the breast pocket.

Roleplaying Hints: Sometimes the female people who work for the club management make you feel strange urges you can not explain. Other than that, you're generally in a sort of

fugue state. You don't get excited, but both extreme violence and terrorizing people give you a weird calm pleasure. Confusion and hostility are your two most common demeanors.

Ember

Background: Word has it that Ember was a Bangkok stripper who got her name by specializing in the Cambodian cigarette trick. People say a lot of shit. Ember doesn't say much, and what little she does say comes through in a lilting accent. She doesn't sound so much Chinese or Japanese as just plain alien. Her tattoos — and she has lots of them — are amazingly well-done and feature spider motifs. No one at the club has ever seen her with a man, though she and Diana seem close. No one pegs Diana as a dyke, though, so most people just assume Ember sleeps alone.

Word isn't far from the truth; Ember's lover has been dead for quite some time. She had him stuffed in all the right places. Originally from Tibet, she traveled to the U.S. with an odd gentleman with very powerful and delicious blood. When he died in a nasty brawl, she stuffed his remain herself and preserved his blood in a jar, which she keeps in her fridge. Now she works the box office at Eat Me Wednesday through Monday and spends her off-nights at Ravenscream (a local Goth bar) looking for new friends with sweet blood. She's mortal, but just a bit more strange than she appears...

Image: A slight and exotic woman with Oriental eyes and pale slim features. Piercings in her eyebrows, nose, lips and ear anchor a silver chain web, and tattoos wind across her arms, hands and torso. She rarely speaks, and is almost unintelligible when she does.

Roleplaying Notes: You have found that silence only adds to your mystique. You're learning English slowly — your lover never taught you — but savor the space between words more than the sounds themselves. Your companion was so intoxicating, wise and sensitive that no mortal could ever match him. Diana draws you in ways you can't describe — not sexual, but compelling anyway — but everyone else could be dirt for all you care.

Story Ideas

- An obvious vampire starts hanging around the club, maybe even trying to grab a quick snack from one of the characters. What will they do with him? And what happens if Ember finds out about him? Who do you support, if anybody?

- The characters witness a doctor of some sort making a quick repair on Jon's torso in the alley behind the club. (At first they may take it for some sort of sexual tryst...) Will the characters help Jon remember who he used to be? What sort of drug dealing and gang violence could this embroil them in? Will they instead befriend the doctor in the hopes of getting free and much-needed care? Or will they all end up dead?

The 57th Precinct



Bowels of the Devil

*Let me tell you what the motherfucker eats
His stomach's filled with my homeboys
Guts made out of steel and concrete
— Body Count, "Bowels of the Devil"*

Description

The 57th Precinct is a small police station in the inner city. It was built in the early 1970s as part of the city government's experiment with "community policing." The idea was to set up a series of smaller police stations staffed with longer-term assignments, so that the public could get to know the officers better and become comfortable with them.

Some people believe in Santa Claus, too. Most of the folks in the area liked the idea of having more cops around, but didn't want to get close to them — cops couldn't be around all the time, after all, and their friends just became targets. So, instead of "community policing," what the city ended up with was a lot of precinct houses too small to handle the increasing amount of inner-city crime.

The precinct building is over 20 years old, and it shows. Budget shortfalls have left little money for upkeep and maintenance, much less renovations and modernization, so the place just struggles by, year after year, becoming a little bit more run-down each day. Inside and out, the place appears faded, its life leached out of it by the day-to-day struggle against the bad guys, the bureaucracy, and apathy. Despair and futility sometimes seem to ooze out of the cracked windows and dirty offices, eager to consume the cops and the citizenry. The patient is dying, and the paper-pushing doctors down at City Hall don't want to do anything to resuscitate him.

But for all that, the officers that work at 57 have at least a little bit of affection for the place, and a strong bond of camaraderie between them. The best of them have struggled long and hard to make things better for the neighborhood, and even though the area's gradually become worse and worse, a place infested by gangs and crackheads and welfare addicts, they still keep trying. The 57th's cops aren't all saints — some of them are on the take, some of them are racist, some of them just don't give a flying goddamn about things anymore — but most of them are good people.

Layout

The 57th Precinct stationhouse is a three-story brick building with a basement. It is built partly into the side of a hill, with parking for police cars in the rear. Thus, the front door (the one leading to the street) is at ground level, and there is also a rear entrance into the basement (to the



holding cell area) that is at ground level with the parking lot.

Regulars

Captain Jerome "Jerry" Petaluma

Background: Jerry Petaluma was born in the city, and has lived here all of his life. As a young man he joined the Marines and saw action in Vietnam; he still retains some of the skills he learned there. Like his father and his father's father before him, he became a cop, and a good one. He patrolled the streets for years, both as a regular officer and as a sergeant. Later he became a lieutenant, though he refused to spend most of his time jockeying a desk and doing paperwork; he preferred to be out on the street. Eventually, however, age caught up with him, and he began looking for a different way to serve the force. When the captain's position at 57 opened up, he applied for it and got it. He's held the job for 12 years now, and by all accounts has performed excellently. He is something of a born leader — able to make decisions and stick with them; cool-headed in a crisis. He inspires a great deal of loyalty in his men.

Image: Captain Petaluma is a relatively fit man in his mid-50s who exudes confidence and competence. His hair is black, with hints of gray beginning to creep in. He has the sort of rawboned look most often associated with laconic movie cowboys.

Roleplaying Hints: You are always in control of yourself and able to exert leadership. This is not to say that you're unfriendly or somber — far from it — but you know who's in charge, and expect everyone else to know it, too. You are as devoted to his men as they are to you; you spend a lot of time trying to make their jobs easier by badgering anyone you think can help you get more funding, equipment or police cars.

Sergeant Ralph Schwartz

Background: Ralph Schwartz has been a cop for the past 20-odd years. He worked the street for most of those years, but as he got older he got more out of shape, so he applied for a desk job. For the past six years or so he's been the night-shift desk sergeant at the 57th.

Sergeant Schwartz's life is in a shambles. His children have grown up and moved away, and his wife of nearly 20 years has left him. He finds himself middle-aged and alone, without anyone to turn to for comfort and companionship.

Rather than take to drink, Sgt. Schwartz has thrown himself into his work. He acts like a sort of "father figure" for many of the younger cops, whether they want him to or not, and spends a lot of his off-duty time in cop bars. He hates to go home to his quiet, empty little apartment, and avoids doing so as much as he can.

Image: Ralph Schwartz is middle-aged and overweight, with a mildly protruding potbelly. His hair is brown and his complexion somewhat florid. On duty he wears his uniform, which he keeps pressed and well-cleaned; off-duty he wears casual clothes appropriate to his age and the situation. Since his wife left him he's lost interest in whether his shirt goes with his pants and things like that, though he's not a slob.

Roleplaying Hints: You are a genuinely caring figure who is deeply concerned about all of "your" men down at the 57th. But your whole life has come to revolve around the police force, and that's unhealthy. If things don't go well for you on the job, you're likely to become depressed and really let yourself go to seed.

Reputation

The 57th Precinct's officers are regarded the same as any other cops — some residents of the precinct like them, some don't, and other are indifferent. No serious allegations of abuse or corruption have ever been brought against the precinct's officers.

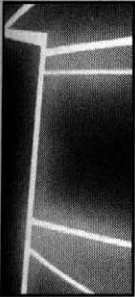
Story Ideas

- One of the evidence clerks has taken to selling drugs on the side. Only a small portion of any large drug seizure is used as evidence in court, and the rest is destroyed by the clerk. Instead of destroying the drugs, this officer, Calvin Meyers, is selling them back to drug dealers on the street. He's hoping to branch out into selling weapons and similar items, and could even be bribed to contaminate evidence if he could do so safely. Player characters will notice that something is up when they find out that the amount of drugs in a particular neighborhood has not decreased at all, despite the fact that there are no new players on the drug scene.

- Members of a gang in the neighborhood have been getting beaten up on a regular basis. Their story is that large groups of cops are attacking individual members and beating them savagely. Are there some rotten cops, or are members of a rival gang putting on policemen's uniforms before attacking their enemies?



Napier Court (Weird Basketball Court)



I seen him out at the Court again. Dribblin' like he was still alive, y'know? Had a gut cut open from here to here and dry blood all over his jams. Nasty. I think he saw me lookin' at him, though, 'cause he turned around and looked me right in the eye. No shit, man, right there! And you know what? I about shit my pants, 'cause there ain't nothing like lookin' into the face of a dead man who won't stay dead.

You can go bounce it at Napier Court. Me, I'll walk the six blocks to 29th street. You wanna play ball with ghosts, you got the right place. I want nothing to do with it.

Are the legends of Napier Court urban folklore or stubborn hauntings? The folks around the Court, they'll swear the latter. Some tales say it was an Indian burial ground before the whites bought Manhattan; others call it a dumping ground for gangland kills — the kind the mob didn't want the cops to know about. One persistent legend states that two workers died in a nearby housing project; their company buried the bodies beneath the Court to avoid paying insurance claims and said the men just disappeared after they got

their pay. Whatever the truth may be, the folks living around Napier Court want nothing to do with it. Even the meanest b-ballers avoid its cracked tarmac and faded lines.

On first glance, the Court looks like any other downtown basketball battleground. Red brick apartments wall it in on three sides; a rusted chain link fence with a missing gate separates the Court from the street, and four poles stand at opposing ends, forming two play areas. The confined nature of the place marks it as a trap even without the supposed hauntings — local wisdom states that ten murders happened there, and many more assaults and rapes. The place's sinister rep, however, comes from the ghosts that seem drawn there.

According to longtime residents, strange things began around the Court in 1965, as racial tensions hit critical mass. When three boys were found gutted like fish and hanging on the fence, cops and locals alike assumed that some gang had taken the poor kids down. Late-night visitors soon reported odd cries, like war whoops and screams. Tales spread of war-painted Indians who leapt from the shadows, brandishing tomahawks. The stories were wildly inaccurate — the appa-

ritions sounded more like John Wayne Apaches than New York Mohawks, and no one ever went to the hospital to have his scalp sewed back on — but the stories persisted. Napier Court became a place where kids dared each other to go after dark. Three or four of these adventurers were never seen again. By '69, only the bravest kids shot baskets at Napier Court — and never after nightfall.

Every so often, strange winds and odd voices swirl around Napier Court; kids killed in gang fights show up there after dark, bouncing the ball off the backboard with a sound that carries for blocks. Local priests and the occasional parapsychologist show up at the Court, but nothing happens while they're there and nothing they do lasts for long. Every so often, someone defies the local ban — a desperate couple go there to neck, or a fresh punk stays the night to earn himself a rep. Some of these folks come out with harrowing tales. Others don't come out at all.

Is the Court a dark Node? A haunt? Some group or entity's killing ground? Or just a nexus for urban folklore? The truth is left to the Storyteller's whim. Napier Court is an enigma, and may never be truly solved.

Layout

The Court itself lies in a rotting section of Alphabet City. Three apartments boarder the place; narrow alleys run between them and onto the blacktop. A 15-foot chain link fence runs across the fourth side, though its gate is long since gone. The blacktop is cracked and weed-tufted; it hasn't been re-paved since the late '60s.

Like everywhere else in the inner city, graffiti covers the Court's surrounding brick walls. The slogans and images, however, have a disturbing tone about them. Many of the painted images have an eerie tribal look to them, as if some ancestral nightmares were dredged up and splattered across the brick. The artistry of these works is unmistakable.

Napier Court exudes silent menace; even in bright sunlight, the place lies in shadow. Passers-by feel disconcerted, as if something small and hideous had crawled across their feet. At night, the Court feels chill, regardless of the season. A cold and sludgy Quintessence stirs beneath the asphalt, but the Court is no common Node. It does, however, possess some unearthly — and nasty — Resonance.

Regulars

No living person frequents the Court, though some may venture there for some short errand. A whole family of ghosts, from Indian warriors to slain street kids and even a cop, have been spotted there, though none of them are said to have been killed nearby. Some persistent apparitions have been dubbed Chief Benjamin, Howdy Cross, Tasha Rey and Bobby Fe Martin.

Reputation

See above.

Story Ideas

- A player character's friend defies the legend of Napier Court; he is last seen huddling in a far corner of the Court, talking to himself at midnight. His parents are inconsolable, and his disappearance intriguing. Has he been spirited away? Or is he somewhere in the Otherworlds nearby? And what sort of beings rule the Court? Umbral pranksters, Restless Dead, or some more mundane (if no less horrifying) agency — a cult, a gang, a vampire, or some other creature which only feeds at night...

- One of the player characters sees an apparition on the Court. What is it? Who is it, and why has it appeared? The answers, in this case, should not be obvious. something beyond simple haunting is going on here. Only the dullest mage would ignore such a fascinating challenge.

New Horizons Youth Center



What are you trying to say? I'm crazy?

When I went to your schools?

I went to your churches?

I went to your institutional learning facilities?

So how can you say I'm crazy?

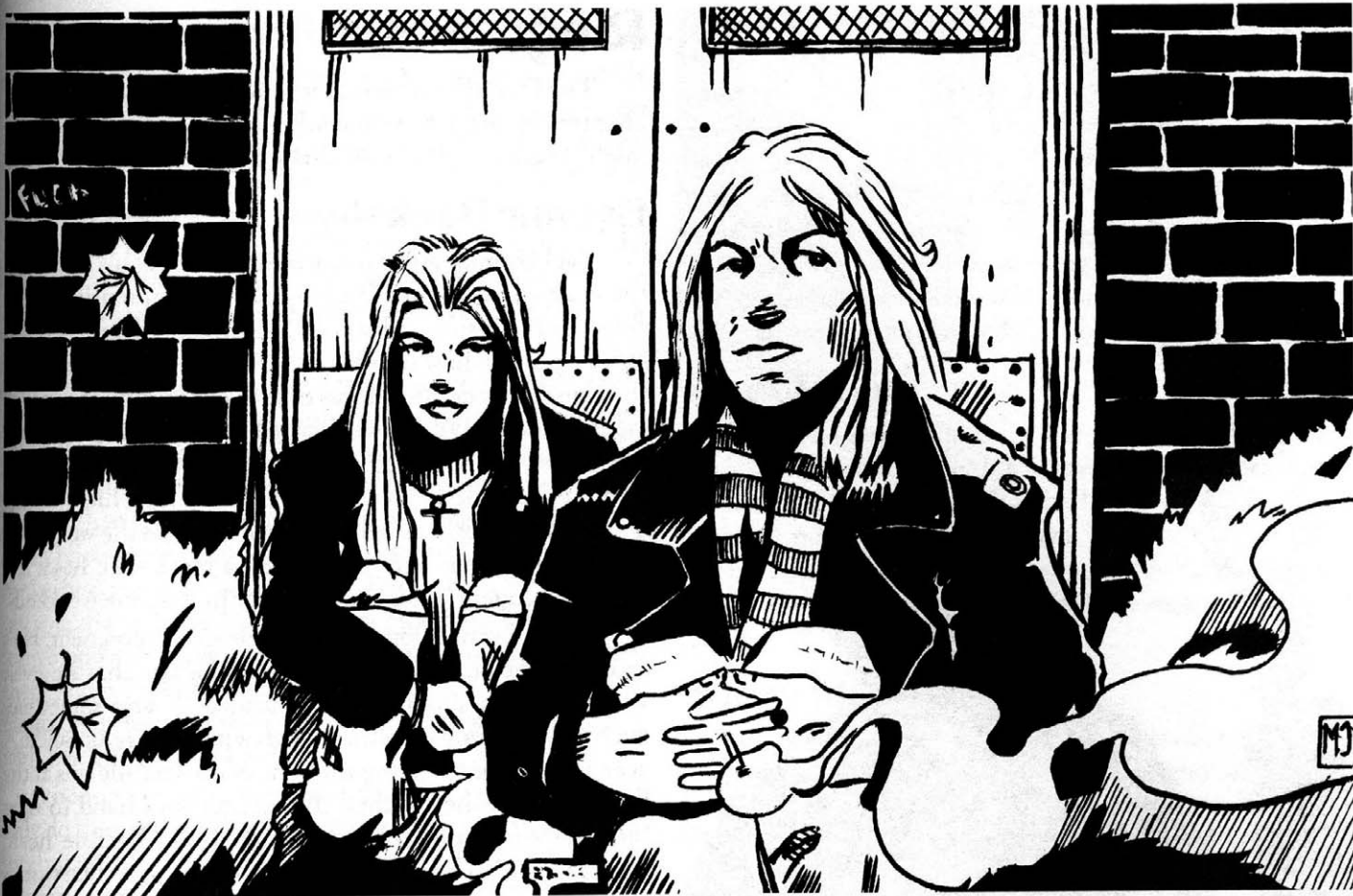
—Suicidal Tendencies, "Institutionalized"

Located in the low-rent portion of the slums, New Horizons Youth Center is a long-term locked rehabilitation facility for offending male minors. Kids who are admitted are not allowed to see their brothers or sisters, and many of them do not have living mothers or fathers. Gangbangers, drug dealers, and other kids who exhibit antisocial behavior comprise the majority of the Center's inhabitants.

Conditions at New Horizons are horrendous: the rooms are filthy, physical and sexual abuse is common, and adequate care is nonexistent. Many of the kids have been in and out of such facilities, moved to a new one when overcrowding becomes a political problem. To make matters worse, deaths are occasionally reported. A police investigation is pending, but bribes, overwork, and indifference have delayed the process.

Description

A tall brick building, stained black by pollution and graffiti, the Youth Center looks more like a prison than a center devoted to changing the outlooks of disturbed youths. Steel bars stripe the few windows there are (mostly on the fifth floor), while wide alleys with overflowing dumpsters decorate



the building's surroundings at street level. In back, there's a small half-court area for basketball encircled by a 10-foot-tall rusting chain-link fence topped with a foot of barbed wire.

The pitiable thing is that New Horizons is a relatively new facility, founded only seven years ago by a small committee of concerned social workers. About five years ago, New Horizons' financing was dropped from the state budget as a "low priority" expense. Since then, the building and the quality of care there has deteriorated quickly.

Because of overcrowding in all of the city's youth shelters, New Horizons has recently instituted a new program called the New Horizons Trust Plan. In theory, youths considered at lowest risk of antisocial behavior are allowed to participate in this "outpatient" plan whereby they may earn points that allow them to leave the facility on weekends or on certain weekdays. If they violate this trust by exhibiting poor behavior, their privileges are taken away and extended to someone else on the list. In reality, many of the most dangerous or notorious kids are allowed to take advantage of this plan by bribing the doctors and other staff personnel with the drug money they earn on their forays.

Layout

New Horizons is a firetrap — a brick building five stories tall, with one fire escape that has not been inspected

in years and few windows, all of which are barred. Eight kids live in each room, with 48 to a floor. After one of the kids escaped and killed a cop, the fire escape to the roof was walled up with brick and concrete despite fire codes. In theory, the gravity of the offenses committed by the residents at New Horizons increases with each floor, almost a modern parallel of Dante's *Inferno*. First floor residents generally are allowed weekend leave via the Trust Plan, although in practice many of the fifth floor kids are granted it, as well.

Part of the first floor is devoted to a ward for the infirm and the mentally unstable, and each floor thereafter has a counselor's room tucked away at the end of the hall to keep control of the boys. Most counselors choose to spend the night in the sick ward behind locked doors. Because of this, the boys spend most of the night looting the clothes and other possessions of newcomers on their level, as well as breaking them in on the hierarchy there.

None of the boys has ever seen the basement, although it is rumored that the doctors keep some of the real nutcases down there. The truth is that the doctors keep the basement locked because one of the founders died down there seven years back — heart failure, although his companions heard an eerie, howling wind just before he screamed and slipped. The matter is still kept quiet.



Regulars

The facility contains more staff and inmates than this chapter can list. Characters who visit the center, however, might encounter the individuals below nearby.

Evenne Backsby

Background: After accidentally shooting his brother in the head at six, Evenne Backsby has been busted at least 20 times for possession and sale of drugs in school, breaking and entering, and a host of other minor offenses. Two years ago, the cops finally decided it was time to put Evenne in a locked facility, since they couldn't seem to keep him in a correctional institution (they suspect bribes). Since then, Evenne has bribed the doctors at New Horizons into letting him into the Trust Plan, which enables him to sell drugs on the weekends. New Horizons has hurt his business a bit, but he has a few friends arranging "sales" meetings for him on the weekends.

At 15, Evenne considers himself an entrepreneur. He's so confident of his ability to evade the law that he even works the area around New Horizons — and sometimes even New Horizons itself, although with some reluctance. A year ago, he was bartering with one of the technicians at the facility. When he touched the technician's hand to offer him the stuff, the technician smiled and Evenne heard voices inside his head — scrambled, eerie voices like worms eating at his brains. That scared him. Although he continues to do business with the technician, he dislikes it intensely — that's precisely when he hears the voices. Characters may wish to investigate these "voices," as Evenne is quite sane.

Image: A winningly handsome boy with a good salesman's grin, Evenne combines Anglo and Hispanic ancestry into an angelic package. If he didn't command the respect he does, this pretty boy would be the butt-buddy for half the floor. As it is, he holds several boys — and a few of the women who work at the facility — in his palm with his looks and charm. Not all of the bribes he provides are financial. Although he's supposedly limited to the castoff clothing New Horizons provides, Evenne always looks dapper and slick, and speaks with an assurance beyond his years — not cocky, just confident.

Roleplaying Hints: All your life, you've been able to take care of yourself just fine by simply talking to people. You're a very smooth operator, and even New Horizons itself is only another opportunity to you. The only thing that bothers you is that freaky technician — you really don't like things that you can't figure out. Most of the time, you're calm and collected; it's when those voices kick in that you start to get a little nervous.

Trubble Meeham and Nicosia Smith

Backgrounds: One of New Horizons' "inmates," Trubble Meehan is notorious for his promiscuity and his violent temper. He's never allowed outside the facility, but his girl, Nicosia Smith, shows up faithfully every day as a gesture of love and leaves without getting a glimpse of him. In truth, Nicosia is a co-dependent. She ignores the reality of the situation, which is that Trubble uses her to support his ego and has no regard for her situation whatsoever except how it affects him.

To make matters worse, Trubble is HIV-positive and has infected a number of girls in the neighborhood. He claims it was an accident, but it is widely known among his friends that he knew he had AIDS before having sex with them. Whenever the topic comes up, Trubble gets violent; when Nicosia gingerly brought it up with him a year ago, he broke her arm and beat her up, but, scared to be alone, Nicosia didn't leave him. As New Horizons does not perform blood tests, none of the psychiatrists and social workers there know Trubble has AIDS, and Nicosia is keeping her mouth shut because she doesn't want Trubble to break up with her for spilling the truth.

Nicosia's parents have forbidden her to see him. Not only do they dislike Trubble's temper, they're afraid that an interracial relationship might destroy her life. Moreover, unaware that Nicosia already has the AIDS virus, her parents fear that Trubble will impregnate their daughter.

Image: Trubble has Mexican and Irish ancestry, and looks like a white boxer; Nicosia is a pretty African-American girl with cornrows, soft eyes and a sad smile. She comes across as a sweet, loving woman who talks a bit too much about her boyfriend. If characters have a more than cursory conversation with her, they'll notice that she's troubled and will probably be able to guess why.

Roleplaying Hints: (Trubble) You don't give a shit for anybody or anything except yourself. You ain't gonna give up sex because of this AIDS thing, and you really hate it

when people try to spread it around. Nicosia's all right, but the bitch has to know her place, that's all. You're loud, proud and cocky; you're a real man, and nobody better forget it.

(Nicosia) Trubble's not a bad person like everybody says he is; if he hits you, you believe it's your own fault. You really need him in your life and are terrified of doing something that might make him break up with you. You love your folks; why can't they understand that you love Trubble, too? If anybody approaches you, be polite but sad, and try not say anything that might make Trubble mad.

Reputation

For good reason, most of the residents around New Horizons hate the place. It's noisier and uglier than anything else in their neighborhood, which is quite a feat. Plus, with the new outpatient program, the "scum" are spilling out onto the streets again. In essence, most residents of the area view New Horizons as a human sewage containment facility.

Story Ideas

- Evenne Backsby has become desperate. His greatest source of income is from the technician who seems to be driving him mad, and he does not know what to do. Greed drives him on, while fear pulls him back, and he can feel his mind being torn apart slowly, like burlap unraveling. He comes to the characters because a friend of a friend has told him that they may be able to help. What the characters don't know is that the Nephendi are on a recruitment drive in the youth center. Will they be able to help Evenne recover the twisted parts of his soul and stop the corruption?

- Trubble escapes from New Horizons, and the characters hear rumors that he's hunting a hidden Nicosia because she's admitted that Trubble knew he had AIDS. Simultaneously, the local TV news is trying to find Nicosia and is broadcasting her whereabouts. A player character's friend asks him to help Nicosia. Can the characters do so without attracting the attention of the media?



Men of Dust (Characters)

1. In the beginning Man created God; and in the image of Man created he him.

2. And Man gave unto God a multitude of names, that he might be Lord over all the earth when it was suited to Man.

3. And on the seven millionth day Man rested and did lean heavily on his God and saw that it was good.

4. And Man formed Aqualung of the dust of the ground, and a host of others likened unto his kind.

5. And these lesser men Man did cast into the void. And some were burned; and some were put apart from their kind.

6. And Man became the God that he had created and with his miracles did rule over the earth.

7. But as all these things did come to pass, the Spirit that did cause man to create his God lived on within all men: even within Aqualung.

8. And man saw it not.

9. But for Christ's sake he'd better start looking.

— Ian Anderson, liner notes for the album *Aqualung*



Perkins was giving me the severe dressing-down. He'd interrupted me while I was working late, so I really had no patience for his bullshit. I wanted to tell him to hassle me during working hours. He stood there inside my cube, spewing a lot of stuff about how I'd lost the company the proposal. I didn't feel at fault. All I'd done was refuse to go through the security clearance process. I thought he was full of shit, a giant over-stuffed hefty bag of excrement crammed into a gray suit.

He thought he was hardcore because he sometimes used "harsh language" around the secretaries. Words like "damn" and occasionally "crap." Some badass. But I hadn't been planning to kill him. I've got a good life now. I've got the house in the burbs, the pretty blonde wife, the two kids — a boy and a girl and both in private school. I never took welfare, not even when I needed it. Now I'm set, and it's really important to me that my kids get everything I didn't. Fuck, I practically enjoyed signing the orthodontist's checks for my daughter. So it made sense to let Perkins live. I could miss a promotion if he gave me a truly lousy performance evaluation, but the man didn't have the authority to fire me or anything serious like that. No reason to risk everything I worked so hard for.

Only then Perkins said something he shouldn't have. Maybe he sensed that I was not impressed by his blustering. I don't know. He said, "Are you even listening to me, you miserable cocksucking excuse for an account rep?"

"You know what, Perkins?" I said quietly.

"What?"

"I once cut a guy's dick off for calling me a cocksucker."

The man in the gray suit blanched.

"No, really. I sliced it right off. Used a Swiss Army knife so it took a fair amount of muscle to make the blade go through. My arm hurt like a bitch afterwards. I think I sprained it, but I couldn't afford to have a doctor look at it at the time."

"Maybe we should discuss your performance later."

"There's no time like the present," I told Perkins.

So it was really my own fault for opening my big fat mouth. Probably, I could have just laughed off my crudeness. Passed it off as stress. But then again, Perkins could have repeated the story. And someone might have checked, and I just can't see anyone at my company being able to handle that knowledge and live and let live. So it wasn't a temper thing. I swear.

No, I don't think I really had any choice in the matter. I worked fucking hard to actually learn something from a prison education course. Most of the other inmates didn't get anything useful from their classes, but I studied hard, improved my vocabulary and grammar and learned computer applications. I kept myself going one day to the next by fantasizing about when I could put my book learning together with the salesmanship I already knew. I already paid my debt to society. I did my fucking time. I'm not sorry I beat Perkins unconscious against the frame of my cube. And I'm not sorry I put him in the back of my Honda

Accord and drove him someplace where I could take my time. Good thing he decided to take a meeting with me after business hours. His mouth felt great on my dick, hot and wet and spasming helplessly as I dislocated his jaw. Totally different experience from my wife, who of course I'm gentle with. I love my wife.

Funny thing, though. This suburban lifestyle may be getting to me. I was okay when I was prying up that sewer grate in my old neighborhood, but I felt kind of vaguely ill as I watched the body float slowly away before I replaced the grate. Once upon a time, that sort of thing wouldn't have bothered me at all. Not that I really mind that I might be getting soft. After all, I've got a good life now.

The streets are not peopled with faceless drones; the folks your mages encounter should have some degree of weight and personality. Naturally, no Storyteller can invest a full background history into every wino or gangbanger; all the same, good supporting characters will have motivations, desires, prejudices and quirks. Non-player characters without these facets leave no mark on their world — the game — and just end up as names and statistics. There's no tragedy to their deaths or value to their deeds. If they mean nothing to you, they'll mean nothing to the player characters.

You don't need copious background notes about these folks; a general motivation, description and a handful of personality quirks will be all most non-player types ever need. Really important roles should be fleshed out a bit more, of course, and might even warrant their own character sheets if their abilities come into play often. The majority of background characters, however, will simply need personality and purpose — a *raison d'être* beyond their role in the story.

General Ability Templates

The following stats represent broad ranges of character types. Note that any of them (including **Streetwalker** and **Call Girl**) may be of either gender. The Attribute and Ability listings are pretty straightforward; the third listing represents additional skills that such characters may have. Though few will have more than two of these optional Abilities, experienced specialists might have as many as four. The equipment listings reflect items each given type could have within easy reach.

Type Explanations

Beat Cop covers the average police officer, while the **Detective** and **SWAT/Riot Cop** rate specialists at law enforcement.

The **Thug** listing can cover any number of character types — club bouncers, Blood Dolls, minor gang members, pimps, thieves, serial killers, barroom bullies, etc. More competent street fighters usually rank as **Gangbangers** or even better.

Streetwalker refers to girls and boys who work the streets, while the **Call Girl/Stripper** type covers the better classes of prostitute, specialists (dominas, masters, submissives) and exotic dancers.

Vagabond/Street Person types live by their wits and the kindness of strangers, while the **Urban Shaman** and **Cultist** actually have some knowledge of the hidden world and how to deal with it.

Ninja are listed for Storytellers who want to add them to stories featuring the yakuza (Chapter Two). Though these stats represent normal human assassins, some ninja may have powers (see Chapters Four and Five of **Ascension's Right Hand**) beyond those of mortal men and women.

Average people have stats of 2 across the board for the most part, and whatever Abilities their profession might suggest (Artistic Expression, Athletics, Craft, Bureaucracy, First Aid, whatever).

Beat Cop

- Physical 3, Social 2, Mental 2
- Alertness 2, Brawl 2, Bureaucracy 1, Computer 1, Dodge 2, Drive 2, Firearms 3, Investigation 2, Law 2, Leadership 1, Melee 1, Police Procedure 3, Stealth 1, Streetwise 2, Technology 1
- Area Knowledge 3, First Aid 1, Linguistics 1 or 2
- Lt. revolver, pump shotgun, billy club, handcuffs, badge, flashlight

Detective

- Physical 3, Social 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3
- Alertness 3, Brawl 2, Bureaucracy 2, Computer 2, Dodge 1, Drive 2, Firearms 3, Intimidation 1, Investigation 4, Law 2, Leadership 2, Linguistics 1, Lockpicking 2, Melee 1, Police Procedure 4, Stealth 2, Streetwise 4, Subterfuge 3, Technology 2
- Computer Hacking 1, Disguise 2, Fast-Talk 1, Interrogation 2, Intrigue 1, Scan 2, Search 2, Sense Deception 3
- Lt. revolver, handcuffs, radio, lockpicks, badge, flashlight

SWAT Officer/Riot Cop

- Physical 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Mental 2
- Alertness 2, Brawl 3, Bureaucracy 1, Dodge 2, Drive 2, Firearms 3, Intimidation 2, Investigation 1, Law 2, Melee 3, Police Procedure 2, Scan 2, Stealth 1, Streetwise 2, Technology 1
- Climbing 2, Demolitions 3, First Aid 2, Heavy Weapons 1, Lockpicking 2, Pilot 2
- Lt. auto pistol, riot vest & helmet, submachine gun or pump shotgun, billy club, plastic riot shield or rappelling gear, radio, badge

Thug

- Strength 3, Dexterity & Stamina 2, Social 2, Mental 1
- Alertness 1, Brawl 3, Drive 1, Dodge 1, Firearms 2, Intimidation 2, Melee 2, Law 1, Streetwise 2 to 4

Common Traits

Most supporting characters will have Attributes of 2 or 3 across the board, with the occasional 4 if there's some reason for it (ratings of 5 are possible, but really unusual). The following Abilities are pretty common; most street characters, if they are at all involved in the world around them, will have two to five of these Traits, with ratings of between 1 and 4, depending on the character.

| | | |
|------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|
| Alertness | Dancing | Area Knowledge |
| Athletics | Drive | Culture (street) |
| Brawl | Fast-Talk | Hearth Wisdom |
| Carousing | Gambling | Law |
| Expression | Lockpicking | Linguistics (slang, ethnic languages) |

Intimidation
Melee
Scrounging
Survival (urban)
Seduction
Streetwise
Subterfuge

Common Merits & Flaws

| | |
|-------------------|--------------|
| Code of Honor | Addiction |
| Concentration | Dark Secret |
| Acute Senses | Hatred |
| Fast Learner | Hero Worship |
| Black Market Ties | Ward |
| Police Ties | |
| Underworld Ties | |

Allies, Influence and Resources are the only Back-grounds most street-level Sleepers will have. Some unusual characters, however, may have Destiny, Dream, Mentor or even Arcane if they have a touch of the otherworldly about them.

Really significant supporting characters, or un-Awakened player characters, can be built with the usual mortal point base, if you wish. (6/4/3 Attributes, 11/7/4 Abilities, 21 "freebie points." See **Ascension's Right Hand**, **Halls of the Arcanum**, **The Hunters Hunted** or **Project Twilight** for details.)

- Area Knowledge 2, Carousing 2, Gambling 2, Interrogation 2, Lockpicking 1 to 3, Scan 2, Scrounging 1, Stealth 1, Torture 1
- Knife, brass knuckles, club, lt. pistol, drugs

Gangbanger

- Strength 3 to 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3 to 4, Social 2, Mental 2
- Area Knowledge 3, Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Drive 2, Firearms 2, Intimidation 3, Law 2, Melee 3, Streetwise 4

- Carousing 2, Demolitions 2, Dancing 2, First Aid 2, Gambling 2, Interrogation 2, Investigation 1, Leadership 2, Linguistics 1 to 3, Lockpicking 3, Survival (urban) 2, Stealth 2, Torture 2, Traps 2

- Hvy. pistol (auto or revolver), submachine gun, knife, razor or brass knuckles, drugs, gang colors, lots of cash

Streetwalker

- Strength & Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Social 2, Perception 3, Intelligence & Wits 2

- Alertness 1 to 3, Brawl 2, Law 1, Melee 1, Seduction 1, Streetwise 2 to 5

- Athletics 2, Dancing 1, Fast-Talk 2, First Aid 1, Linguistics 1 or 2, Misdirection 2, Scrounging 1, Search 2

- Sleazy clothing, small knife or razor, makeup, purse or wallet, cheap drugs

Call Girl/Stripper

- Strength 2, Dexterity & Stamina 3, Social 3 to 4, Perception & Intelligence 2, Wits 3

- Alertness 1, Brawl 2, Law 2, Linguistics 1 to 3, Melee 2, Seduction 3, Streetwise 3 to 5

- Acrobatics 2, Athletics 2, Carousing 2, Culture 1, Dancing 1 to 3, Disguise 1 (transvestites), Escapology 2, Etiquette 2, Expression 2, Intrigue 2, Scan 1, Search 2, Style 2, Torture 2

- Provocative clothing (or lack thereof), cosmetics, mace, drugs, props (whips, restraints, mask, ropes, etc.)

Vagabond/Street Person

- Strength & Dexterity 1 to 2, Stamina 2 to 3, Social 1, Perception 3, Intelligence & Wits 1 to 2

- Alertness 2, Brawl 1, Linguistics 1 to 2, Melee 2, Scrounging 1, Search 1, Survival (urban) 3 to 5, Stealth 2, Streetwise 2 to 5

- Area Knowledge 3, Artistic Expression 2, Awareness 1, Camouflage 2, Intuition 3, Intimidation 2, Lore (any kind) 1 or 2, Subterfuge 1 to 4, Tracking (urban) 2

- Cast-off clothing, prized possessions (anything from real valuables to junk), cheap alcohol, concealed weapon (mace, razor, small knife)

Urban Shaman/Cultist

- Physical 2, Charisma 3, Manipulation & Appearance 2, Mental 3

- Alertness 1, Awareness 2, Brawl 1, Expression 2, Hearth Wisdom 2 to 4, Intuition 1 to 3, Linguistics 2, Melee 2, Occult 2 or 3, Stealth 2, Streetwise 3

- Animal Training (cats, dogs, birds, rats) 2, Artistic Expression 1 to 3, First Aid 2, Fortune Telling 3, Herbalism 2 to 4, High Ritual 2, Instruction 1, Lore (any) 1 to 3(!), Misdirection 2, Scan 2, Sense Deception 3: perhaps even 1 to 4 in some Hedge Magic Path

- Ritual objects (knives, drugs, musical instruments, icons, beads, paints, poppets, etc.), ethnic clothing or robes, herbs or incense, pets

Ninja

- Physical 3 to 4, Manipulation 3, Perception & Wits 3

- Acrobatics 3, Athletics 3, Awareness 1, Brawl 3 to 4, Climbing 3, Culture 2, Dodge 3, First Aid 3, Lockpicking 3, Meditation 2, Melee 3, Secret Code Language (clan) 2, Sign Language (clan) 1, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 2 to 4

- Archery 3, Blind Fighting 2, Camouflage 3, Crafts 2 to 4, Demolitions 3, Disguise 4, Escapology 4, Fast-Draw 2, Fast-Talk 3, Firearms 2 to 4, Interrogation 3, Herbalism 3, Hunting 2, Mimicry 3, Misdirection 3, Scan 3, Seduction 3, Sense Deception 2, Tracking 3, Traps 4

- Appropriate clothes (nightsuit, disguise, or camouflage), exotic weapons (sai, ninja-to sword, throwing blades, etc.), mission gear (rope, climbing tools, poisons, guns, special devices, etc.)

Characters



You've got to live indoors. If you live outdoors, nobody thinks you're a person.

— Janusz Glowacki, *Antigone in New York*

The following characters can be dropped as is into an existing game, redone slightly as supporting characters, added as acolytes, used as possible templates, or simply read for insight and inspiration. Each one has certain characteristics—his Background, Image, Roleplaying Hints, and Possible Roles in the story. Few have any Traits worth noting; those who do have the appropriate ones listed.

Captain Crucifix

Once, I was a sinner, a bad sinner, worse than any of you! I drank baby's blood and worshipped the Devil on an altar of human bones, I fornicated with prostitutes and filled my body with drugs and poisons that rotted my brain away. But then I was saved! Jesus took my soul and lifted me from the garbage, dusted me off and set me on the Path of Righteousness! Now I'm here to minister to you in His name, and I see filth and degradation, faithlessness and doom. You believe in nothing! If there were even an honest pagan among you, there'd be some hope.

Background: Whatever his real story may be, the street preacher dubbed Captain Crucifix (for the seven-foot tall cross he carries on his daily missions) underwent an extreme conversion. Now his pulpit is the street corner or the college campus, and his message contains more condemnation than salvation. This does not, as you can imagine, make him a popular guy. Abrasive and confrontational, he appears to enjoy his martyr's role. He's not without his good side — he is as free with his money as he is with his preaching if the beneficiary seems to really need some help — but it's difficult to see it, especially if you disagree with him. He is, of course, on a mission from God, and no one can tell him otherwise.

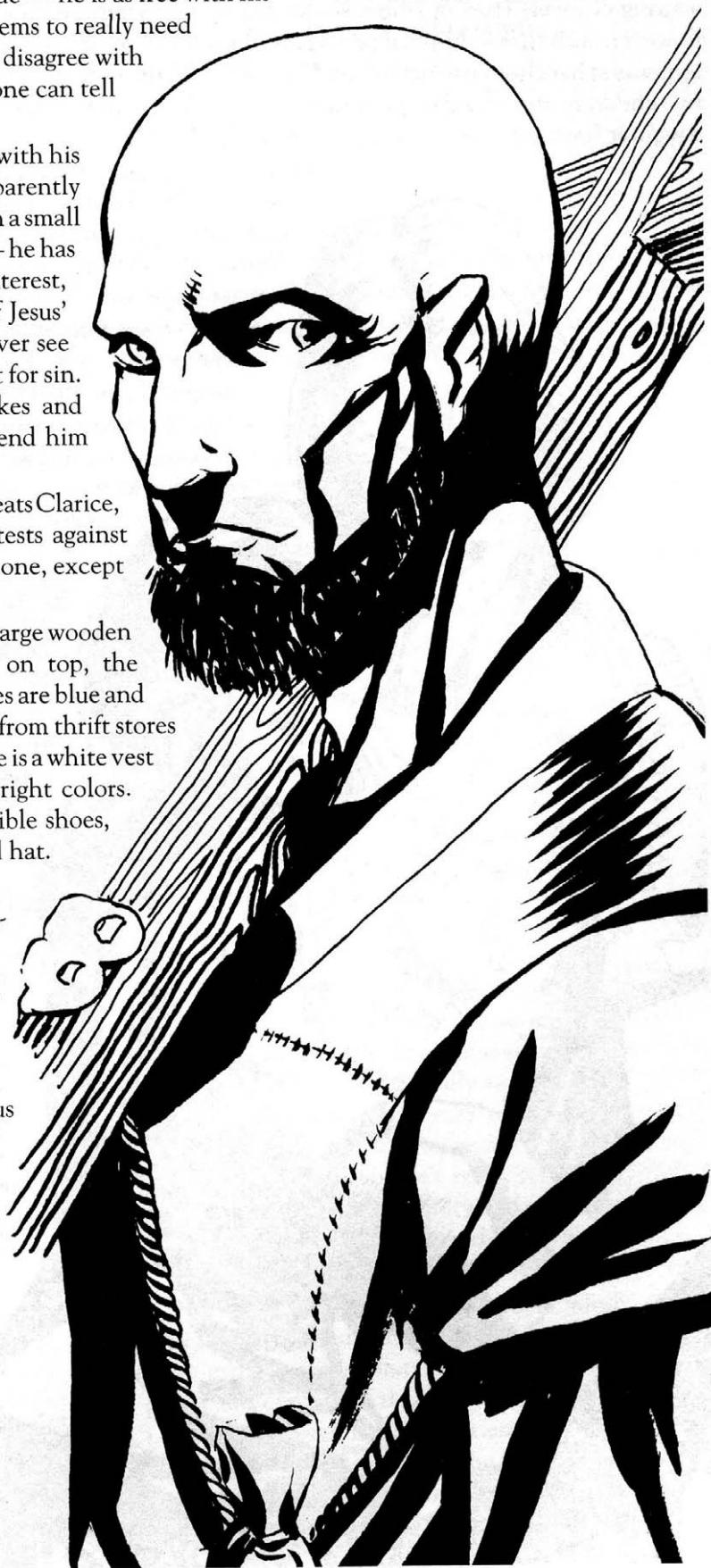
The Captain practices what he preaches; he lives with his wife (a guilt-ridden woman named Clarice who apparently knows her place and passes out tracts without a word) in a small loft apartment. No one knows where he gets his cash — he has no regular job and little property. If approached with interest, he will expound on his life of sin and the wonders of Jesus' forgiveness. He feels, however, that few people will ever see such grace — they refuse to believe in it, and forsake it for sin. He's no Bible scholar, and frequently makes mistakes and misquotations. Pointing these misconceptions will send him into a rage, and he can yell a long, long time.

When he isn't preaching, the Captain prays, browbeats Clarice, works soup kitchens, and occasionally organizes protests against shops or organizations he feels work for the Devil. No one, except maybe Clarice, knows his real name.

Image: A stocky white man in his mid-40s, with a large wooden cross carried over his shoulder. Though he's bald on top, the Captain's beard is black shot through with gray. His eyes are blue and seem focused far away. His dark pants and shirts come from thrift stores and Goodwill; the most distinctive item in his wardrobe is a white vest with a portrait of a suffering Jesus on the back in bright colors. Clarice dresses in plain, concealing clothes and sensible shoes, her light blonde hair bound up underneath a battered hat. Neither one will meet your gaze directly.

Roleplaying Hints: Rant endlessly — and sometimes accurately — about the evils of the world around you. If someone approaches you, remember the sinner you used to be; trust no one, except Clarice. If a person really needs a hand, and asks your help in Jesus' name, do whatever you can to assist him.

Possible Roles: Annoying preacher, contentious savior, acolyte for some mysterious other party, local color, protester outside the Chantry.



Kathleen and Jessica Brutelli

I don't really need anybody's help — I'm just going through a bad time right now. If you don't wanna help me, fine. I'm not asking you to. I'm just hungry, that's all, and my kid hasn't had a good meal in days. But I'll manage. Don't worry about me.

Background: When she was younger, Kathleen had potential; she was smart, vibrant and attractive, and had friends, a string of lovers (two of whom she ended up marrying) and a promising career in retail management. Three factors, however, undid her — bi-polar personality disorder, chronic insecurity and a craving for melodrama. A series of breakdowns ate away at her close attachments and her sanity. By the time she'd turned 30, Kathleen had ruined her credit rating, birthed two children, and ended two marriages, badly. Now in her mid-30s, she goes from shelter to shelter with her six-year-old daughter Jessica in tow — no money, few friends.

At first glance, Kathleen seems like an unlikely street person; she's still intelligent and often charming. She has a passion for cats, speaks with a wit that belies her depressed state, and appears to be very caring on first acquaintance. Deep inside, however, Kathleen's self-esteem remains in ruins, and she latches onto prospective friends with a quiet desperation. Her new friends soon find her to be an emotional and financial sinkhole — she forever needs money, succor and favors, and offers little in return except promises and advice. When refused, she uses guilt, suicide threats and real or imagined crises to get others to take care of her...just for a while, of course.

Kathleen is a pitiable specimen; her mood swings strike from nowhere, and her eccentricities and hygiene contrast poorly with her wit and faded beauty.

Many former friends tried to help her through "bad times," but soon realized that those times would never end. There was always another problem, another breakdown, another stroke of bad luck. She refuses to take medication ("I'm fine") and spends any cash she gets on cigarettes and clothes. Surprisingly, she does not drink or use drugs, though she has been known to gamble. Kathleen lives in terror that social services will take Jessica from her, and avoids food stamps or similar efforts from fear of discovery. With the right medication — or magick — she might still turn her life around. Doing so, however, would require more patience than most people could muster.

Jessica's lot is a sad one; she has inherited her mother's crisis mentality and love of dramatic behavior. Though she's a cute kid, Jessica is dirty and underfed. Kathleen's perpetual depression has left her daughter emotionally sickly, and Jessica has learned all the worst ways to get attention. From time to time, Kathleen links up with a new boyfriend, and Jessica thinks she has a father again. She is always disappointed, and trusts nothing to last.

Image: The years have not been kind to Kathleen. Once, she was tall, slender and attractive, with long red hair, greenish eyes and a clear complexion. Years of smoking, bad eating and oversleeping have left her pale and scrawny, with stringy hair and an unpleasant smell. She doesn't have good dental hygiene, either, and it shows. Her glasses are battered and scratched, and her hippie-type clothes — long skirts, tie-dyed blouses and ragged jeans — are faded and patched throughout. She's a voracious reader, however, and whip-smart. Her vocabulary is enormous and her wit quick and sharp. When she meets a new friend, Kathleen makes an effort to get herself in order, but when things settle down, she lapses into her old patterns.



Jessica is tall for her age, but painfully thin. She shares her mother's coloring, taste in clothing, and hygiene. She regards all strangers with a wary glare and throws sullen fits to get attention.

Roleplaying Hints: You deserve better than you got; good friends are just so hard to find. You know that putting up with you can be a trial, but you'd do it for *them*. God knows you have before. If only you could get past this bad streak of luck — there's still so much you can offer, once you get on track. Show new acquaintances how good a friend you can be, and let the old ones know how much they've let you and your daughter down.

Possible Roles: Girlfriend, minor helper, leech, pet project for redemption, witness, victim.

David Gryce

Grief tears at my heart, and fear of death gnaws at my stomach.

— *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Background: As long as he can remember, David Gryce has been fascinated by the history and languages of the ancient Near East. Since he was a boy, these subjects have practically been an obsession with him. If you ask him how he developed this interest, he can't tell you — to the best of his recollection, it's always been the predominant aspect of his life.

Gryce lives off a small but modest trust fund established for him by his late parents. He rents a small studio apartment in a dingy old building in one of the more rundown sections of town. It holds his bed, a worktable, some sophisticated computer equipment, and a hot plate for heating meals; the rest of it is filled with books, notebooks, and other tools of the devoted researcher.

Every day he gets up, gathers together the books and notes he needs for the day, puts them in a backpack and takes the bus or the subway to a museum or library where he spends the entire day studying Sumeria, Babylon and the other civilizations of the ancient Near East.

Gryce carries one other thing with him when he goes out: a .357 Magnum. Although he's never been the victim of a crime, he's absolutely terrified of becoming one, the more so because he believes (correctly) that anyone who mugged him would damage his precious books and notes. Every time he goes outside, he becomes incredibly cautious — paranoid, really — and constantly looks around, wary of potential threats. Sooner or later, someone's going to come after him, but he's ready for them! After one class on gun safety and acquiring a large pistol, Gryce is another Bernhard Goetz incident waiting to happen.

Fortunately for his own peace of mind, Gryce has found another means by which to guarantee his safety. He has somehow become convinced that he will be safe from attack if he can inscribe the entire text of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* on the walls of his apartment in the original Sumerian. For some years now, he has meticulously chis-



eled cuneiform characters into his crumbling plaster walls. When he finishes, he will put away his gun and walk the streets with a new confidence, but that time is far from now.

Image: David Gryce looks like an impoverished graduate student. He wears worn jeans, old T-shirts, button-downs and sports jackets. He has Coke-bottle glasses and goes ill-shaven. He carries an old backpack full of books and papers with him wherever he goes.

Roleplaying Hints: You just want to be left alone to pursue your interests. If you were more sociable, you could become a professor and archaeologist, but that's not the path you've chosen. You're incredibly leery of strangers, painfully shy, and generally miserable whenever you aren't allowed to pursue or talk about your studies. However, if player characters come to you for information or help with research, you prove to be a learned and able source of information, eager to impress them with your knowledge. You can read and speak Sumerian, Assyro-Babylonian, Akkadian, Aramaic and Hebrew.

Notes: In addition to normal human stats, Gryce has three or four dots in every conceivable Knowledge relating to ancient Near Eastern history.

Possible Roles: Crime victim, instant-vigilante-turned-media sensation, researcher; source of information, contact.

Robert O'Sullivan

That's wonderful hair, if you don't mind my saying so. Do you? Oh, good. It's so hard to know what to say to a pretty girl these days — or do you prefer "woman?" I'm sorry, I don't mean to offend you, and if I did, I apologize. But like I said, you have beautiful hair, and I mean that.

Background: Robert O'Sullivan is a serial killer. Known in the tabloid press as "the Blonde Slasher," O'Sullivan stalks, rapes and butchers young women, preferably blondes.

O'Sullivan grew up in a strict household, raised only by his mother. He had two sisters, both (like his mother) with blonde hair. His mother was extremely repressed, and would not tolerate any discussion of sex or sexuality in the house. As a result, the only way Robert could learn anything about "the facts of life" was by peeping at his sisters while they dressed. Eventually, this became such a problem that his mother forced him to move into the basement. For most of his adolescence, Robert sat down there in a windowless room, with only a small black-and-white television and smuggled-in pornography to keep him company.

He moved out of his mother's house and into an apartment when he graduated high school. Despite his relatively high intelligence, he worked (and continues to work) at a succession of menial and unrewarding jobs.

O'Sullivan first began raping women at about this time. He attacked 11 before he grew bold enough to actually kill one of them. Since then he has butchered eight more

women, each killing more brutal than the last. His victims are all white blonde women, usually with long, wavy hair, around the age of 20.

O'Sullivan is a textbook example of antisocial personality disorder, more commonly known as *sociopathy* or *psychopathy*. He's completely self-centered, caring only for himself and his own gratification. His emotions are stunted; situations which would arouse or excite normal people do not affect him much. Instead, he has to experience extreme stimuli — rape and murder — to achieve sexual gratification. He feels no guilt or remorse for his actions, has no real sense of morality or ethics, and does not seem to comprehend that society's rules and laws apply to him — he breaks a lot of laws in little ways, like speeding and running red lights, just for the hell of it. Furthermore, the concept of "consequences" is foreign to him; he lives entirely for the moment — threats of punishment in the future mean nothing to him.

But he's not stupid. He realizes that sooner or later he will probably be caught, and he prefers not to go to jail. To this end, he has accumulated a large collection of Satanic and occult literature. If captured, he plans to claim that "the Devil told me to do it" and try for an acquittal on the basis of insanity. An asylum is much easier to escape from than a prison, after all.

Robert's typical *modus operandi* is to cruise around the neighborhoods and bars until he finds a likely prospect, then follow her until he can get her alone. Then he confronts her, knocks her unconscious with his fists, ties her up with the rope he always carries in his car, and takes her somewhere secluded out in the country so that he will not be disturbed. After raping (and often sodomizing) his victim, he kills her by stabbing and slashing her with a large hunting knife that he keeps in his car. Then he hacks the body into several pieces with a butcher knife and dumps them in different places. He is particularly careful to hide the hands and head, to make it as hard as possible for the police to identify the victim. Because of the precautions O'Sullivan takes, the police have very little forensic evidence with which to identify him (and in particular, no fingerprints). The police do, however, have a detailed and relatively accurate psychological profile.

As time goes on, Robert's killings will become increasingly horrific, and increasingly daring. He will require more and more extreme stimuli in order to become aroused, leading him to take all kinds of risks in order to capture victims.

Image: Robert looks like an average lower-class individual. He's not particularly well-dressed most of the time, though he can be if he has to (if he thinks it will help him lure in a victim, for instance). He has black hair and dark eyes, and a short black beard.

Roleplaying Hints: Your outward insecurity masks your seething hatred for women in general. It frustrates you to no end that your manners and good conduct actually seem to drive women away. Maybe if you were a rotten guy, they would flock to you in droves — they always seem to love losers. Nevertheless, your mother brought you up properly. Never curse, no matter how mad you get. Never forget your manners, no matter how rude others might become. If you say something rude, apologize. You have your own ways of expressing your frustration, and they are much more creative than simple profanity.

Possible Roles: Enemy, mystery to be solved, subject for psychological examination, pawn of Infernal powers.

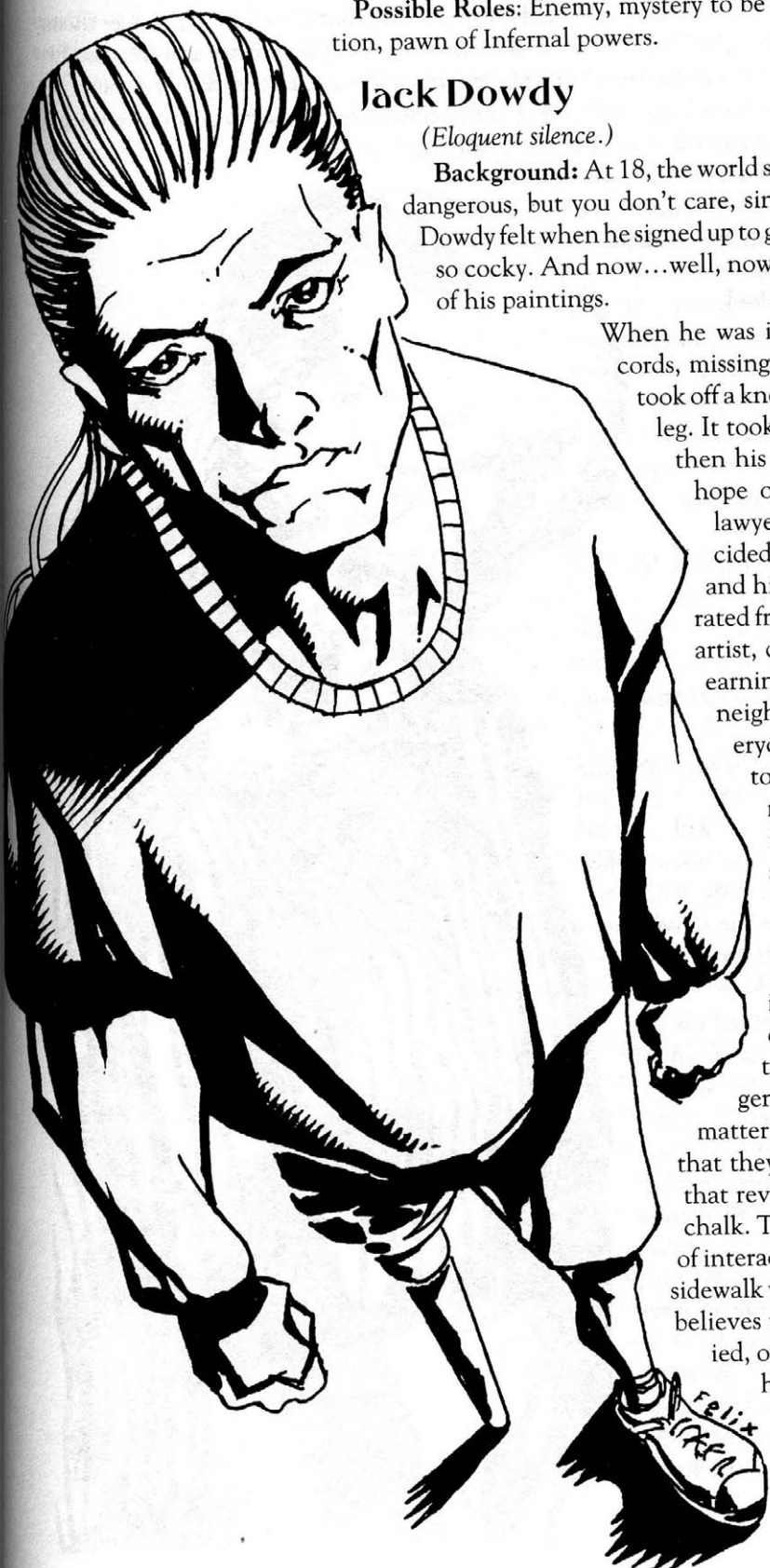
Jack Dowdy

(Eloquent silence.)

Background: At 18, the world seems much larger. It's exciting and sexy and dangerous, but you don't care, since you feel immortal. That's the way Jack Dowdy felt when he signed up to go to Vietnam. A few weeks into it, he wasn't so cocky. And now...well, now he feels the whole world could fit into one of his paintings.

When he was in 'Nam, one bullet cut through his vocal cords, missing his jugular by a centimeter, and the other took off a knee. The doctors couldn't save his voice or his leg. It took him a long time to accept the loss, and by then his scholarship had run out and he'd lost any hope of pursuing his dream of becoming a trial lawyer. When he returned to the States, he decided to use the two things he had left: his brain and his hands. Depressed and feeling alone, separated from his war buddies, he set to work as a street artist, depicting the horrors of war on canvas and earning enough money to get by. Soon he was a neighborhood favorite, a standby, someone everyone could count on being there from one day to the next. Although mute, he communicated more of what he was feeling and his interest in other's lives through his paintings than any of the speaking people around him.

After a few years of working on canvas, Jack's perspective on painting gradually began to change. He began to see all human interaction as an ephemeral thing, ghostly in quality, but with a strange, intangible persistence that gets passed down from one generation to the next. Ultimately, it didn't matter what people discussed; it was the simple fact that they interacted that made any difference. With that revelation, Jack changed media from canvas to chalk. Today, he reflects the ephemeral permanence of interaction by producing chalk masterpieces on the sidewalk which get washed away with each rainfall. He believes that, though they cannot be possessed, studied, or canonized, they make an impression on the hearts of those who pass by and see them, and in that sense they change the viewer. To him, the chalk drawings touch the essence of the ephemeral permanence of human interaction.



Since the war, Jack has also become a good listener, hearing emotions and problems that others would miss in casual conversation. That, combined with a razor-sharp intellect and a somewhat cynical wit that is rarely expressed (and when it is, it is expressed only through his drawings), gives Jack excellent source material for his drawings, which nowadays no longer focus exclusively upon the theme of war.

If there's one thing that insults the artist, it is the assumption that casual passers-by make about him: that he must be stupid or socially inept because he's mute or because he works on the street. In reality, he is far from stupid and actually quite urbane.

He's amused when people skirt his drawings on the sidewalk; he actually would prefer that they walk right over them, underlining his theme of ephemerality even more strongly. Those who know Jack well respect his wishes and tread on his work. Once Jack has made friends with someone, he clings to them as if they might suddenly dissolve into thin air.

Image: A well-proportioned man in his early 40s, with long, stringy hair, a day-old beard, a good tan, and penetrating light brown eyes. The missing portion of his lower right leg is obvious; except for the scar on his throat, if you're particularly talkative and don't ask him any questions, you might not notice that he is mute. Jack's clothes smell deliciously of Cavendish tobacco, which he smokes heavily after finishing a drawing. His fingertips and the pants at the remaining knee are always chalky, and scars along the wrists are evident if you look.

Roleplaying Hints: If in a "conversation" with someone, nod and pay keen attention. Wave casually if someone you know walks by, but not so long as to break off a conversation. If someone asks you a question, never write out an answer. Instead, draw it. If they have the patience to await your response, you know they care about your opinion or the information you have to offer.

Notes: Jack's Artistic Expression rating is 3.

Possible Roles: Informant, messenger, witness, local color, sympathetic ear, victim.

Onassis

Where am I from? Where are you from, patzer? What do you mean, where am I from? I'm from every place I've been, of course!

Background: Onassis practically grew up in the park playing chess and checkers with the old men, the gamblers, the addicts and the occasional bona fide chess master who would charge five bucks for a game with a "world champion." Now he's an old man in the park, but at least he doesn't play checkers. Actually, Onassis, if he competed, could teach Vishy Anand a thing or two, but he doesn't compete — at least, not in the sense that everyone understands. No, he competes in a special way, in a way that will never make up for the pain he feels at the loss of a loved one.

When he was younger, a gangbanger raped and killed his wife. He grieved for a long time. After he had recovered from his depression, he returned to his roots — the park — to wage warfare on violent crime in his own silent way. As a park regular, he hears all the rumors, gossip, news and clues about the neighborhood underworld that circulate among the low-lives there. He takes each piece of information, sculpts that tidbit into a metaphorical chess piece, thinks thirty or forty moves deep, then moves the piece. Often this simply means dropping information into the right ears, spreading rumors of a bust to a target gang, then having another gang target them in a preemptive strike. His favorite tactic is to encourage gangs to destroy each other. Other times, working through his connections, he sets a gang leader up for a violent crime and calls in the police. He's astonishingly creative with his information, and rarely, if ever, allows his opponents to see the hand that moves the pieces.



This is part of the reason that he has chosen the alias Onassis. Other park regulars suspect that, as a history buff and something of a conspiracy theorist, his alias also has something to do with his self-perceived (and quite accurate) standing as chess master, but they cannot be sure, as he refuses to discuss his choice of names.

Image: A wrinkled old black man with white hair and a bushy gray beard. He smells faintly of urine and strongly of cheap cologne, and always carries a bottle in a paper bag (the bottle, contrary to stereotypes, contains only water). He wears flannel shirts even in the summer and sports suspenders and baggy, patched pants. At his side is a small pouch of breadcrumbs for the pigeons, and another pouch he uses to carry his own handcarved chess pieces. Although he uses a walking stick for his arthritis, his hand gestures often seem suspiciously unarthritic.

Roleplaying Hints: You revel in unexpected and original moves and enjoy listening to and telling jokes because they celebrate the unexpected. At the same time, underneath the kind expressions and happy-go-lucky indulgence in idle chatter, you cling to your bitterness as if it were a lifeline.

With those you don't know, you seem both completely different from who you really are and somewhat superficial, often injecting "Yessir, that's what I always says, '(repeat what other person just said here).'" Although you are not an unfriendly or overly suspicious person, always try to cover up who you really are, including your background, your true personality and your thinking patterns, since you never know how one of your former victims might use them against you. Finally, the Golden Rule: always, *always* be in control and think at least ten moves ahead.

Notes: Although his Physical stats are low, Onassis' Mental stats are fairly high. His Traits include Alertness 4, Intuition 3, Investigation 3 and Streetwise 4.

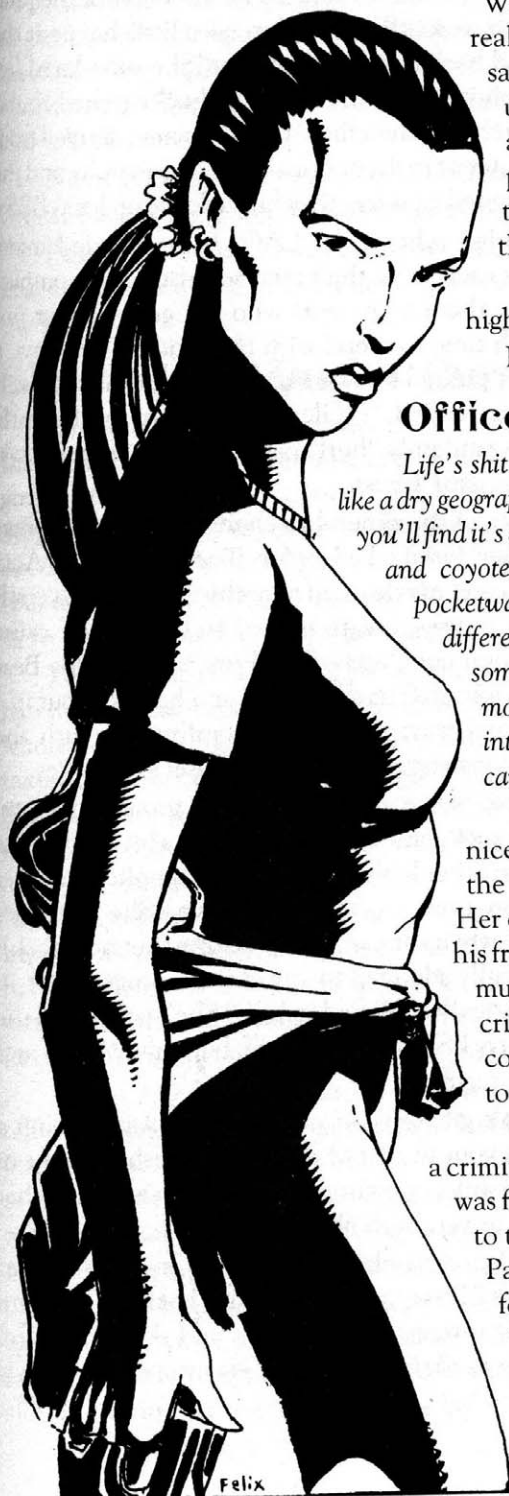
Possible Roles: Informant, plot complicator, witness, mentor, contact.

Officer Silvia Lopez

Life's shit when you're a pollo crossing the American border. At first the canyons just seem like a dry geographical obstacle to cross, but when you're down in them at night under the new moon, you'll find it's a whole different story. You're lucky if all you run across are scorpions, rattlesnakes and coyotes. At least they're predictable. Now, bandits who slit your throat for your pocketwatch or gut you for the few American coins you have sewn into your clothes, that's different. And if you're female, well, better not cross without a Magnum hidden on you somewhere — though God knows how you'll get the money for something like that, since money's what you're coming up north for in the first place. If you're lucky, you'll run into someone like me who'll just send you back to Tijuana. Everything else in those canyons sends you to hell.

Background: Silvia Lopez grew up on the streets of San Diego — not the nice, landscaped streets near Sea World, but the seedy underside of the city, where the Mexican-American *bandidos* hang and where the wetbacks lose their lives. Her own brother Jorge was one of those thieves; in perfect Mexican slang, he and his friends would offer the pollos rides up to Los Angeles for less than bus fare, then mug them when they climbed into the truck. Silvia hated her brother for his crimes against these people, but in those days, Jorge made money any way he could. He was pretty generous with it, too, giving some to their parents and some to his girlfriend to spend on pretty dresses.

Silvia never took his money and still managed to pay her own way through a criminal justice program at CSU and then through the police academy. Her resolve was founded upon a vow she had made to herself years ago that she would make up to the pollos for Jorge's crimes. Silvia has pushed herself hard to join the Border Patrol, although she's still only part-time, as she runs up against a lot of resistance for being a female cop. Sometimes she goes down into the canyons to catch "immigrants" — sometimes to protect them from the bandits, and sometimes even to protect them from the occasional corrupt Mexican *judiciales* who, although they wear the badge, are often no worse than the average thief.



The other half of her job consists of catching thieves and murderers like Jorge on the streets of San Diego. Because she speaks perfect Mexican Spanish and knows all the slang, and because she is female, she is a perfect dummy target for the *bandidos* there. As a result of her job, she has become a consummate actor: She can act as humble and as brave as a hopeful peasant woman up from the corrugated country shacks just outside of Tijuana. Underneath it all, though, she is rock-hard, an emotional stone who keeps all her feelings bottled up, as if saved for use when she is acting the part.

Image: A Mexican-American woman in her mid-30s with brown skin and high cheekbones, Silvia is athletic but petite. She wears her hair long in a ponytail and washes it only once a week. When on patrol both in San Diego and in the canyons, she wears pollo clothes: worn shoes and layers of threadbare skirts, patched pants, vests, and blouses. (Pollos wear layers instead of carrying bags of clothes, and strip off the dusty top layer when they reach the U.S. so they can present themselves in "clean" clothes at their job interviews.) She carries a gun under her vest and a knife strapped to her leg, and always has plenty of Patrol backup. When acting, she will not meet your gaze (when threatened, pollos typically hunker down to display submission — and to survive the encounter). At the station, she could beat you in a staring contest, and, off duty, in a drinking contest. At home, where no one can see her, she sometimes shuts off the lights and cries.

Roleplaying Hints: If you're in the canyons or on the street in disguise, speak only in Spanish (if you don't know Spanish, just speak with a Mexican accent and tell the players you're speaking in Spanish). Act as if you're trying to travel further north away from the border, and ask the players if they know where the closest bus stop is. If you're not on patrol, you're cool and hard to know. While the law is everything to you (even when you're off duty), there is still a bit of the vigilante spirit in you. You don't appreciate wetback jokes, and, in your presence, those who tell them are bound to find that they have committed some costly violation.

Notes: Silvia has the stats of an average cop, plus Subterfuge 3 and Linguistics 1.

Possible Roles: Mentor, investigator of the Chantry, informant, vigilante.

The Latchkey Anarchists' Club

Break your mental fetters, says Anarchism to man, for not until you think and judge for yourself will you get rid of the dominion of darkness, the greatest obstacle to all progress.

— Emma Goldman, *Anarchism*

The Latchkey Anarchists' Club (LAC) is a group of four teenage anarchist computer hackers. Each of them comes from well-off families from one of the better neighborhoods in the city.

The LACs — Sherrie "Acid Queen" Burns, Edward "The Black Prince" O'Connor, Jason "Weasel" White, and Franklin "Teddy Bear" Jefferson — first became friends in junior high school. Their high intelligence and love of computers were what drew them together. They spent hours in the school's computer lab playing around with the computers, arguing politics, and ragging on their classmates. All four were "latchkey" kids, from homes where both parents work; nobody paid much attention to them and they had to fend for themselves for several hours every afternoon.

It was Sherrie Burns who first steered the group into hacking. Always the most cynical and rebellious of the four, she wanted to have a little fun and wreak a little havoc at the same time, and hacking was the answer. She soon lured her friends into joining her. They eventually christened themselves the "Latchkey Anarchists' Club," a name derived from their mutual interest in the political theory of anarchy and the anarchism-inspired messages they like to leave on local BBSs.

Now in high school, the LACs have invaded many systems. They each have their own sophisticated computers, bought for them by parents who felt guilty about not having enough time to spend with their kids. They have a large library of pirated software and data, and have developed a program called "PIGlet," Passwords Intelligently Generated, to randomly "hurl" passwords at computer systems until they gain access.

The nature of the group has changed as the members aged. At first they just hacked for fun. Today, however, Acid Queen and Weasel are devoted anarchists who try to crash systems, plant viruses, create havoc, and otherwise cause trouble with their computers. The Prince and Teddy Bear are both still interested in anarchism and hacking, but in a more intellectual way; they are uncomfortable with the outright maliciousness of AQ's and Weasel's activities.

Even worse, some members of the group do drugs. Sherrie got her nickname because she drops a lot of LSD; she also sells acid to other high schoolers. Her supplier is a biker she meets from time to time downtown. She also uses marijuana and, when she can get it, cocaine (but not crack); she isn't physically addicted to any of these drugs — yet — but is psychologically addicted to LSD. She's persuaded the other LACs to try LSD and marijuana, but only Weasel uses them with any regularity.

The group's greatest "success" to date was causing a three-hour blackout in part of the city by crashing some of the utility company's computers. This was an accident that they have not, as yet, been able to repeat.

The Latchkey Anarchists' Club has a growing reputation on the city's BBSs as a group of skilled hackers. They are known for their interest in anarchism and skill at debate. Law enforcement officials in the city are aware that there is

a group of hackers out there whose pranks are getting increasingly destructive; they would like to find the LACs, but have so far been unsuccessful.

The Virtual Adepts have been keeping a careful eye on the LACs, just like they do on most hackers. They see the group as talented and inventive, but essentially harmless; if they ever got their hands on some equipment or codes that they could use to cause major problems, the Adepts would probably step in and figure out a way to take it from them or disable it. They pay the most attention to Edward, whom they think may be a potential mage. The Technocracy, for its part, also knows about the LACs, and is wondering if it might be able to recruit AQ and Weasel. All three of the male members of the LAC are infatuated, to one degree or another, with Sherrie Burns. The Prince and Teddy Bear are also a little scared of her.

Note: Each LAC member has four dots in Computer, two in Technology, and various other personal skills.

Possible Roles: Contacts, agents of chaos, acolytes, misguided kids in big trouble, saviors, loved ones, pains in the ass.

Sherrie "Acid Queen" Burns

Background: AQ (she *hates* to be called "Sherrie") is the oldest LAC, and the most experienced hacker in the group. She's also more experienced in other ways: She takes drugs, and knows where to find them; she spends time on the street, and knows how to fight (a little); she is sexually active (but not with any of the LACs); and she looks older than she is, so she can spend a lot of time hanging out in clubs.

At 18, Sherrie is bitter, cynical and world-weary. Her parents have never paid her much attention. She's spent her whole life watching them ignore her, cheat the IRS on their taxes, cheat on each other, and use fuzzbusters to speed. She's come to the realization that laws don't matter — she can do anything she can get away with. She knows that the facade of middle-class normalcy is a lie, and that other "nice" things she sees in her life are also lies. This has turned her into a cynical little anarchistic vandal. She loves to use her knowledge of computers to break into systems, plant viruses, rearrange files, and "promote anarchy" while having fun by striking out at others and passing her pain onto them.

Image: AQ dresses to suit her usual moods: in black and other dark tones, with matching makeup. Her blonde hair is dyed black and cut so that it sweeps over to one side of her face, down to her jawline. She projects attitude and defiance; she could easily be mistaken for a Hollow One by an unobservant mage.

Roleplaying Hints: You act like the World's Most Cynical Teenager, and almost qualify — and are vicious and spiteful to boot. You've never had a steady boyfriend or fallen in love, though, so there might be another side to you simply waiting for the right stimulus before it emerges.



Edward "The Black Prince" O'Connor

Background: Edward O'Connor is little more than your standard computer geek with an intellectual fetish for anarchism. He's shy and rather dull-looking, and is much more at home with computers or in the library than in most social situations. The only girl he's ever spent any time with is Sherrie Burns.

Edward's intelligence and gift for debate shows in his discussions on local BBSs; other readers suspect that he is much older than he is. Edward really loves email debates; he isn't entirely comfortable with some of the hacking the group does, and he's trying to persuade Sherrie to ease off on her computer crimes. If confronted by someone who had solid evidence about the group's activities, Edward would collapse like a house of cards and tell everything.

Image: A well-dressed, geeky little pre-yuppie. Blushes easily.

Roleplaying Hints: You feel the guiltiest about some of the LAC's activities, and are trying to get the group to stop them. This is making you something of a pariah, and may eventually lead to them kicking you out altogether. If this happened, you would be despondent; you might even try a spectacular computer crime yourself to get back into the LAC's "good graces."

Jason "Weasel" White

Background: Weasel has been picked on all of his life because of his poor looks, whiny voice, chubby body and generally obnoxious personality. His knowledge of computers has given him a way to get back at his tormentors by changing their grades and mucking around with their parents' electricity bills. His computer pranks are vicious and

cruel, but rarely rise to the level of theft or potentially destructive crimes like Sherrie Burns's. Still, he idolizes Sherrie and will do anything she asks of him.

Image: Short, overweight and ugly, with greasy, acne-marked skin. He tends to breathe and talk in a nasal, annoying manner. His personal hygiene could be better, and his fashion sense could definitely use some improvement.

Roleplaying Hints: You're a follower, not a leader; years of being laughed at and teased have subconsciously convinced you that you're as worthless as people say. You do what Sherrie tells you to, with "suggestions" from Teddy Bear and the Prince taking precedence in that order. If the Prince falls further out of favor, you'll probably work up the nerve to defy your next instructions.

Franklin "Teddy Bear" Jefferson

Background: Teddy Bear is the only black kid in the LAC, and the only one with any acceptance by his high school peers outside of the LAC. Franklin is a skilled athlete and generally a popular student, but by nature he is quiet and shuns the attention he could receive if he wanted it. He prefers the company of his computers and intellectual friends to that of other jocks. Like Sherrie, he knows a little about the city, but he doesn't have as much experience there as she does. He is the least interested in anarchism of any of the four.

Image: A tall, athletically-built young black male. He tends to wear whatever clothes are in fashion; during the cooler months, he is never without his letter jacket.

Roleplaying Hints: You're quiet and reflective, and, like your best friend Edward, are disturbed by some of the things Sherrie and Jason do. If Edward leaves the group, you probably will as well.

Street Creatures



I kept my eyes straight ahead, but I could sense the other dogs gathering around the car. No barking, just low-pitched grunts like wolves nosing the body of an elk they had just downed. The dogs came in all shapes, sizes, and colors. I could recognize traces of their original breeding in some of them, but they were all one version or another of the American Junkyard Dog — loyal, tenacious, intelligent and dangerous — and most of all, good survivors.

— Andrew Vachss, *Flood*

Not all of the denizens of the midnight streets are people. From the ever-present rats and roaches to packs of wild dogs to the most demented urban legend horrors — blind 'gators, giant leeches, deformed once-men, and even weirder things — the back alleys teem with beasts. Folks who wander around the wrong places at night find that there are worse things than serial killers out there....

Urban creatures will never just leap out into full view and attack; they sneak, crawl, slither, leap from shadows, or

rush out howling. From the animals' standpoint, it makes good survival-sense to use cover, surprise and sudden ferocity to hide or attack. If a fight goes badly, most animals will leave ASAP — they're survivors, not cannon fodder. From a narrative standpoint, a fight with wild dogs or a weird bug infestation will seem much more effective if it's played for dramatic value than if it becomes a series of turns and die rolls. Urban animals take their time, stalking trespassers until the right moment comes....

Insects

The filth of the city (and, perhaps, the taint of the Corrupter Wurm, if one believes in such things) causes insects to multiply and mutate in horrific ways. For the most part, mortals see only the fat cockroaches, fleas, silverfish, flies, ants and spiders who infest all but the best urban dwellings. (Even these can be bad enough — see the films *Creepshow* and *Candyman* for some hideous possibilities!) The more remote parts of the city — those which rarely see daylight — shelter things out of entomological

nightmares. Massive roaches, 6" long or larger, scuttle through the subway tunnels. Fat maggots writhe under dumpsters or beneath layers of garbage. Poisonous mosquitoes breed in off-shore dumping barges, and massive centipedes skitter through slum walls, waiting until no one's watching so they can rustle through the trash for an evening meal.

In the tunnels beneath major cities, it's said that undead creatures pour their blood into spawning pools (see **Clanbook: Nosferatu**) to encourage vermin to grow into guardians. The sickening possibilities of foot-long ghoulled leeches, giant blind ants and spiders dripping with caustic venom should be obvious.

Individually, most bugs, even the giant sort, won't inflict much damage beyond the emotional shock of seeing one. Poisonous things like spiders or centipedes may inject venom which causes anywhere from one to ten Health Levels' worth of damage (normal, or aggravated for nasty specimens) over a period of minutes or hours. Giant ghoulled ticks, leeches and maggots might do the same through consumption unless they're removed somehow.

Swarms of bugs are a different story; the Appendix has rules for attacks by large amounts of creeping horrors. Consider ghoulled or Bane-infested insects and arachnids as Large Bugs (6" to 2' in length).

It stands to reason that an attack by hideous insects could inflict some serious emotional shock to the victim as well; nightmarish encounters might cost a Willpower point per scene (or, if really bad, per *turn*!) to withstand without cracking up. Even if a character survives such infestations with his sanity intact, he may want to take showers for weeks on end after he escapes.

Vermin

Like insects, vermin — bats, rats, mice and some birds — are inescapable in the city. While some naturally-inclined characters, like Garou or Verbena, might hesitate to fight creatures that are, after all, just serving an ecological function, these vermin can be a real threat.

Most vermin chew or peck through stuff; given time, they can tear holes in walls, furniture, cages, books, and power cables. Only metal meshes and plates (and sometimes not even that) can stop them. The larger the rat, the more damage it will cause and the faster it will cause it. These creatures also lair in dark places and bite anyone who sticks a hand or foot in without warning. Most such animals are cunning; they use simple pack tactics and can escape all but the fastest traps. Worst of all, most vermin carry diseases; the great plagues of Europe were often carried from town to town by rats and the insects on them. Characters, even large ones like Garou, should be afraid of being bitten by city vermin. Who the fuck knows *what* that bastard has?

Like insects, vermin often attack in swarms; most also carry a fair amount of fear factor with their attacks. Although they're not as hideous as giant insects, vermin swarms might,





at Storyteller's discretion, cost the attacked character a Will-power point to recover from without suffering a temporary breakdown (remember what broke Winston Smith in 1984...).

Disease is best handled as a narrative thing, not as a statistic. Unless the victim received some kind of help, most urban plagues will kill her painfully in a matter of days or even hours.

Vermin (or giant vermin)

Attributes: Strength 2/3, Dexterity 3/4, Stamina 2/4, Perception/Wits 2

Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 2, Stealth 5 (plus flight for birds and bats)

Attacks: 1 or 2 dice

Health Levels: OK, -1, -5 (OK, -1, -2, -5)

Feral Cats and Dogs

Cats are lovely pets — and terrifying predators. Dogs can be man's best friends — or rabid, ravening throwbacks. The very familiarity of these animals makes their wild counterparts that much more disturbing. In the cities, where survival needs have stripped away their domestication, these former pets become feral stalkers. Intruders and would-be food will be tracked until the moment is right. Sometimes, growls, hisses and lambent eyes announce the animals' presence. Other times, nothing seems wrong until it's too late. Then, with a flash of teeth or a flurry of claws, the fight begins.

With luck, skill, patience and perhaps a little mystic talent, a character can befriend these intelligent beasts. This often demands more than a simple handful of food and a "Here, kitty, kitty..." Street-born animals have become suspicious, and attack or flee most advances. Some urban folk (and other things) raise otherwise wild cats and dogs as companions, guards, ghouls and warning systems. Anyone who isn't cleared by the master will be attacked.

While few single cats will attack a human-sized opponent unless cornered, some run in prides that bring down large prey. One scarred, aggressive male usually leads such prides, driving away all other toms and siring litters of kittens, which the females provide for and protect. Feral cats tend to lair in certain places, and often accept handouts from kind (?) old ladies in return for vermin patrol. Dogs often band together into packs of between three to 20. Such packs have leaders, underdogs, territories and even allies. While they tend on the whole to be more willing to befriend humans (and are more easily trained than cats), street dogs can tear a stranger to pieces just as easily, and will usually chase their prey for blocks or even miles. (See the Appendix for pack attack rules.)

Dog bites and cat scratches easily become infected; although comparatively few carry verminlike diseases, most street animals are dirty. This leads to nasty wounds and possible death long after the animals themselves are gone.

Cat (small to large)

Attributes: Strength 1/3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Perception/Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Climbing 5, Dodge 3

Attacks: 2 dice/4 dice

Health Levels: OK, -1, -2, -5/OK, -1, -1, -2, -5

Wild Dog (small to large)

Attributes: Strength 1/4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2/4, Perception/Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3 (large dogs only), Tracking 1/3

Attacks: 2 dice (small)/3 dice (medium)/5 dice (large or vicious)

Health Levels: OK, -1, -5 (small)/OK, -1, -1, -2, -5 (medium)/OK, -1, -1, -2, -5 (large)

Obscenities from the Sewer

The shit that spawns in old city sewers and subway tunnels would make Darwin's hair stand on end. Tales hint at giant alligators, huge albino toads, slimy mucus-things, wet-brained rot-zombies and half-remembered primordial squirmers that will rise someday to engulf the surface world.

Werewolf Storyteller Handbook, **Book of the Wyrms** and **Freak Legion** have multitudes of foul things to spring on players who stray too far into the subterranean darkness. Really sadistic Storytellers might look to Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* for sanity-shattering things from below the earth. These things would certainly require Willpower points to face, and the very worst might even destroy permanent Willpower (see **Mage Second Edition**, Chapter Six) during an encounter.

The horrors below are only the tip of the slimy possibilities. Let your imagination flow into gooey corners and half-remembered dreams...

Wetbrains

Background: These shambling things were once human beings who burned themselves out on drugs or booze. Some say that evil spirits ate their souls while their minds and bodies decayed. In any case, these filth-encrusted things seem only remotely human — and that shred of humanity makes them seem all the worse.

Wetbrains feast on flesh when they can find it, and any morsels will do. Their other cravings haven't been entirely forgotten, either; most rut with each other when the mood strikes them, but they'll gladly turn to more attractive mates if any appear. The diseases and infections these "zombies" carry make the worst African plagues seem dull by comparison. Some might kill a person in screaming hours, while

others would rot the victim into a wetbrain-like state. (See the Appendix for pack attacks of such once-humans.)

Some semblance of their former lives leads wetbrains to gather into communal tribes. Few last for any length of time, although new children may be born into this foul state. The strongest or cleverest such mutations become leaders, taking whatever choice food, mates and pets they want. The new generations often thrive without the drugs that led their parents into this degeneration; those who survive the diseases, cannibalism and predators of the *true* underworld reach superhuman strength and evolve extra-human perceptions. Over time, these wetbrains might become a real threat, especially if they ally with Nephandi or Nosferatu who would expand their influence beyond the deepest tunnels...

Image: Decaying semi-humans, reeking of rot, shit and disease. Many are blind and grope their way through the darkness by pure instinct. Few wear clothing worth speaking of, and their nakedness seems that much more foul. Though their teeth have often rotted from their mouths, wetbrains have jagged, tearing nails. The few who remember how to speak make mushy, froggy sounds.

Attributes: Strength 2 to 4, Dexterity 2, Stamina 4, Perception/Wits 1

Abilities: Alertness 1, Brawl 2 or 3, Melee 2, Survival (Urban) 4, Stealth 4, Tracking 2

Attacks: Strength +1 clawing or biting damage

Health Levels: OK, -1, -1, -5, split open and rotting

Special Abilities: Disease, night sight, foul stench. The specifics depend on Storyteller whim.

Sewer 'Gator

Background: The urban legend standby; these mutants grew from (or were born to) abandoned pets and became subterranean monstrosities which devour raw sewage and occasional repairmen, vagrants and cops.

Sewer 'Gators often hide in piles of garbage or float just beneath stagnant waters. They strike from surprise when their next meal gets too close. Although damn near mindless, they possess the survival-cunning of most urban beasts — they hide when possible, snatch their prey and flee.

Image: Some varieties of this subspecies are blind and pale, while others have their natural coloring. Some remain small and stunted by their toxic environment, while others feed on vampire blood and attain massive size and strength (the second set of statistics).

Attributes: Strength 3/5, Dexterity 2, Stamina 4/6, Perception/Wits 1

Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 3/4, Intimidation 3/5, Survival (Urban) 5, Stealth 3

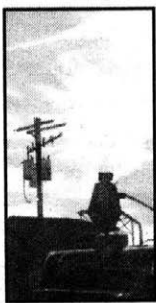
Attacks: Strength +2 bite, Strength +1 tail lash

Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -2, -5, Incap. (small)/OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, Incap. (large)

Street Gear

Would I be amused, would you be impressed, that I had the power to put a hole into your chest, when your kids start crying, and your welfare check's been spent, would I rob a liquor store to get some money for the rent? If I had a gun, If I had a gun...

— The Dead Milkmen, "If I Had A Gun"



This information is offered for game use only. Don't use it for real!

When you're gearing up for the streets, odds are good that budget is an issue, and even if it's not, practicality is. Like the Boy Scouts say, "Be prepared" and travel light. In order to do this, you've got to know how to get the most use out of your possessions. Sure, an H&K MP-5 would do the trick nicely for you, but you probably don't have one, nor do you have a place big enough to hide one. The cowboys who ruled the Wild West didn't survive by having the biggest guns — they were the fastest on the draw.

You've also got to consider the evidence. The less specific and traceable a tool of destruction is, the better your chances are of not getting caught. For an example or two, revolvers are more durable and cheaper than semi-autos, and they don't drop shells. Double-barrel sawed-off shotguns are more reliable than pump-guns, and they don't drop shells either. Wads of rubber bands on the handles inhibit fingerprints. It also helps to know a little about the laws. If you kick somebody with your boots on, that's assault, but if you kick somebody with your steeltoes on, that's assault with a deadly weapon. One's a hell of a lot easier to defend in court. Think cheap, disposable, durable and anonymous.

There are a number of "space-age polymer" (plastic/nylon) products available these days, which are great now that there seems to be a metal detector at every turn. Nylon knuckles share the same shape and function as their old-school brass counterpart, but they don't slow your punch, don't weigh much, and probably aren't as likely to break your wrist when you use them. If you wrap the part you hold with sports tape, you probably won't even leave any fingerprints. Of course, you may still want to wear your gloves. You never know what god-awful diseases your hapless victims might have these days.

There are several nylon knives on the market these days, as well; they don't hold an edge quite as long, but odds are good you won't be using the same one all that often. Both knives and knuckles are very inexpensive, in the \$5-\$10 range, and can be found at just about any surplus store. You should stock up, though, before you go and stick a bunch of poor suckers, 'cause you may have unexpected company next time you go to the store.

Sap gloves have always been a favorite. Nice long leather gloves with copious amounts of lead filings sown into pouches over the knuckles and forefingers. They deliver a crushing blow to one's face, skull, ribs or anything else. They're particularly useful for breaking car windows without gashing your hands, to get to valuable stereo equipment, cellular car phones and easily overridable ignition systems. In one fluid move, a skilled baller could put his hand

through a car window, snatch the collar of the driver, pull his struggling body out through the broken glass, throw him to the ground, stomp on his throat, and probably leave the car still running. Teach him to wear his seatbelt. All this for about \$75 a pair, and they look sharp, too.

A cheaper version of the sap glove can be made from plaster, gauze and wire mesh. You'll see this mostly used by the punk rock cliques. It looks a lot like a cast, but you can squeeze your arm in and out of it. Some even put nails in the end, but this sorta disrupts the disguise, and you have to be real careful when you build the glove and make sure the nails don't punch through the inside of it and destroy your hands when you use the gloves. These are also good for fending off baseball bat attacks, using your forearm to deflect the blows, but there are a limited number of hits they'll take.

Black & Decker makes some truly perverse toys — cordless circular saws, nail guns and mini-hand drills. You wanna see some hard-core bangers turn lily-white and run for cover, pull an electric chainsaw out of your trunk next time you're in a bad situation. The intimidation factor alone should keep you out of trouble, and if you get searched by the cops it looks a lot more wholesome than a broadsword or a Tek-9, provided you remember to wash the brains off when you're through.

There are a lot of concealment products out now which help when one may be being watched by suspicious eyes. Derringers, and several bullets, can be kept in cases fash-





ioned to look exactly like pagers. They even beep if you press the right button. There's also a wallet-gun available; it looks just like a regular leather billfold, even holds your cash, but it's got a trigger and it shoots a few .380 shells. One of these would be pretty useful next time you are asked to slowly hand over your wallet.

You ever see that movie *Desperado*? A couple of guys in that film had concealed weapons built into guitar cases. I guess they were supposed to have trained with them so that they could actually hit someone when they fired the things. Word is, some folks actually have stuff like that, not as powerful, of course — it *was* a movie — but well-hidden and accessible if you need it. I don't imagine it'd be too accurate, but sometimes the extra security might be worth it.

Of course, there are also a number of containers developed specifically for keeping money, drugs and/or small firearms safely hidden in your bodily orifices — that's right, up your ass. You may scoff at this notion, but it's just about the best way to get through security shakedowns. A dog trained to smell drugs or explosives probably won't pick it up, unless you forgot to wash your hands. A security-conscious club owner probably won't be able to detect a derringer with his metal-detecting wand if you get it up high enough into your self, and even if it does barely set it off, you can just claim it's a surgical steel pin in your hip. Odds are good they won't make you submit to a body cavity search, depending on how kinky the clubs you frequent are.

There are devices specifically designed with streetwalkers in mind. Lipstick cases which open to reveal razor blades, mace cans designed as fountain pens or cans of hair spray, and that's not even the high-tech stuff like DMSO/poison powder puffs. A seasoned streetwalker could wrap your head with an extra-large condom faster than you can say "postnatal abortion," and those things never break when you want them to. The cops will probably be joking about how you look like a bald purple Howie Mandel while they rule it "autoerotic asphyxiation." You probably had your pants down already anyway.

There used to be a girl who wore a two-foot long leather pouch with about five pounds of pachinko balls, ball bearings and thumb tacks in it. If you rubbed her the wrong way, she could pound on your skull with it, like an oversized blackjack, or swing it around your neck like a bolo or a thick leather garrote and strangle you. And if you were mean enough to get her on the run, she'd just empty the sack behind her and you'd be head over heels, only to land flat on a bed of a thousand metal thorns. She might just litter the contents onto your dimly-lit apartment stairwell and wait at the bottom for your clumsy unsuspecting tack-encrusted ass to come rolling down the stairwell to meet her and, most likely, your untimely demise.

Tasers can be fun: sex toys to some, brain-scrambling fists of thunder to many more. There are some new models, about the size and shape of a good hefty penlight, available that

shoot electrodes several feet through the air, delivering a pulverizing shock to the victim's central nervous system, even through thick leather jackets. They have a registration system; the buyer submits their ID during the purchase process, and it's matched up with the serial number of the device. The instant the distance taser is used, thousands of particles of microfilm bearing the serial number of the device are scattered at the scene of the incident. This is in an attempt to dissuade offensive uses of the "self-defense" product. But plenty of opportunities for the use of a good nonlethal defensive instrument present themselves on the streets these days.

Another modern street favorite is "fire-mace." No, not pepper spray. Some of the more pyrotechnically inclined have been known to duct-tape click lighters to 2 oz. "personal size" cans of WD40. Although this can be considered somewhat suicidal, given that an accident could easily cost you your arm at the very least, it produces a blisteringly hot 6-foot by 2-foot column of fire and boiling grease that stays aflame on a victim long after they've stopped-dropped-and-rolled. Besides, now you'll always be able to find your lighter in a dark smoky club, when a sweet young thing saunters up and inquires for a light.

You can never be too careful when you're cruising. Stay cool and remember that in clever hands, anything can fuck you up.

Rules for the Black Market, Weapons and Drugs

*When we hunt, we function with one mind
Our collective predictions are as sharp as the
Razor in my pocket, and as dull as the ice
Melting slowly in my glass
My only love is oblivion
— Boingo, "Pedestrian Wolves"*

Black Market Buying

The black market is not K-Mart. Some items will be easy and cheap to buy; others can't be had for any price. It depends on where you are and who you know. For the most part, anything can be bought by someone with the right connections. There are no warranties or guarantees of silence, however — if you're looking for a rocket launcher, lots of folks will know that you are. The more illegal the goods, the more time, cash, effort and danger they will cost.

Characters must make a Wits + Streetwise roll to find illegal goods. Finding is not the same as buying; that demands cash and good behavior. The right Merits (see the various Storyteller system **Players Guides**) can reduce the charted difficulty, and some will make certain items very easy to find.



Weapons

Despite the cash attached to the drug trade, lots of streeties make do with what they can. Concealability, price and intimidation all factor into a gangbanger's choice of tools. Some weapons below might seem "inefficient" by gamers chart-shopping for the ultimate firepower, but they make sense given the circumstances they're used under. Like many things on the street, these weapons are disposable. Use 'em and leave.

Storyteller Notes: Addiction

All drugs are habit-forming to some degree. These habits can range from psychological cravings to physical dependency, with plenty of room in between. For the most part, troupes should decide the long-term specifics of character addiction. Some folks can smoke pot for years and still take or leave it, while others quickly escalate from casual tokery to hard-core crack-piping. While the variables in addictive personalities are way outside the scope of Storyteller rules, we'll offer a few general guidelines.

Substances with "easy addiction" marked under their Effects quickly form strong physical bonds with their users. While some people are more easily addicted than others, consistent use of these drugs will probably cause a character severe problems if she suddenly quits. The more she uses, the deeper she gets hooked, and the harder the addiction will be to kick if she decides to.

Drugs whose OD listing includes "Psychological addiction" hook you emotionally if you do them often enough. You might not really need the drug to function, but *feel* as though you do. Things are just a little easier after you've had your morning toke. Regular use seems like a good idea, and quitting often takes a concerted effort of will.

Other drugs often create some dependency if they're used frequently, but leave a person more room to move. This addiction, whether it's physical or psychological, will make getting straight progressively harder; the more often your character gets fucked up, the more dependent on the chemicals she becomes. Moderation, however, is easier with the other drugs than it is with the first two types.

Addiction to *anything* is a downward slide. A person usually deteriorates emotionally first, and goes through personality shifts. After that, her health deteriorates; Dice Pools or even ratings may decrease as the character sinks, and she depends on the drug more and more often (and in greater quantities). Eventually, her mental faculties fade as well. Unless she makes some great effort, she might join the baseheads, stoners and crack zombies who wander the night.

So why do drugs at all? Many cultures believe that wise use of sensory-expanding substances brings positive insights that balance out the risks. Addiction, they say, says more about the user's stupidity than about the drug's inherent menace. Other folks just crave oblivion, and don't care what it does to them. The line between wisdom and stupidity varies from person to person, and the sentiments about drug use differ from troupe to troupe. Use your own judgment.

Dirty Fighting

Some street gear allows characters to perform odd maneuvers. Other dirty-fighting techniques don't require weapons at all, though they do demand a certain degree of skill. A character who's "been around," or who's been trained in some martial art, may use the moves on the Special Maneuvers Chart, either with or without a weapon. She must have at least three dots in Brawl to use a move barehanded, and at least three dots in Melee to use them with a weapon.

Some tricks can only be done with particular weapons — you can't Double Strike with a chainsaw or Curbstomp with a razor. Assume that you can *only* use the weapons indicated by parenthesis to perform those moves, with the following exceptions:

Curbstomp: Rifle butt, club.

Disarm: Any weapon with which you've got a specialty; includes Brawl.

Double Strike: Quarterstaff. Cannot be done barehanded.

Haymaker: Two-handed sword, quarterstaff, axe.

Lunge: Foil, spear. Cannot be done barehanded.

Pistol Whip: Any firearm with a hard gunstock. No bare hands.

Sweep: Quarterstaff.

Other notes about these maneuvers can be found on the chart.

Drugs and Poisons

Alteration chemistry is usually the easiest thing to find on the streets; although "dry" periods make supplies more scarce and drive the prices up, most kinds of drugs are easy, if dangerous, to buy. The hazards involved go beyond the drugs themselves, and include: bad buys (where the seller dislikes you or attacks you); burns (where you get a substitute instead); busts (where the cops get you); doses (where you get something you didn't expect); muggings (where somebody ambushes you for your cash or stash); ODs (where the stuff is toxically pure); scopes (where you're observed for later pickup); or slams (where a deadly third party nails you *and* the seller).

Each drug or poison type has the following aspects: Vector (the way it enters your system); Appearance (what it looks like); Effects (what it does to you in general); Systems (game effects, if any); and OD (what happens if you ingest too much). **Vampire** players who want to know what happens if their character drinks drugged blood should consult **The Vampire Players Guide**.

One extra note: there's this chemical called DMSO that's referred to now and again. Basically, if it's mixed with drugs or poisons that must be ingested, it allows them to be absorbed through the skin, thus vastly increasing a would-be poisoner's options.

Black Market Buying

| Item | Difficulty | Price Range |
|---|------------|--------------|
| Melee weapons, drugs, hot consumer goods | 5 | \$10-\$200 |
| Handguns, rare drugs, common tech items, stolen pets | 6 | \$25-\$300 |
| Rifles, poisons, virus software, hot cars, jewels, rare animals | 7 | \$200-\$700 |
| Automatic weapons, high-tech goods, people | 8 | \$300-\$1500 |
| Military hardware, precious goods, children | 9 | \$2000+ |
| Anti-tank weapons, armored vehicles, unique goods | 10 | \$3000+ |

Special Combat Maneuvers

| Maneuver | Difficulty | Damage | Notes |
|---------------|------------|----------|--|
| Curbstomp | 7 | +2 dice | victim must be stunned or immobile for at least a turn |
| Disarm | 8 | (disarm) | attacker must roll 3 successes or more |
| Double Strike | +1 | (weapon) | allows one additional attack w/out splitting Dice Pool |
| Haymaker | +1 | +2 dice | lose one die from attack Dice Pool |
| Lunge | 7 | +2 dice | attacker can't dodge for 1 turn before or after |
| Pistol Whip | 5 | Str. +2 | |
| Sweep | 7 | (none) | opponent falls where she's standing |

Protective Devices

(Versus melee or brawl only; firearms negate all but riot vest.)

| Item | Armor Rating | Penalty |
|-------------------------|--------------|---|
| Biker Jacket Reinforced | 1 | 0 |
| Leather Jacket | 3 | 1 |
| Motorcycle Helmet | 3 | 0 (head only) |
| Riot Vest | 3 | 2 |
| Trashcan Lid | 2 | (None, but requires a diff. 6 Dex + Melee roll to use.) |

Firearms

| Weapon | Difficulty | Damage | Range | Rate | Clip | Conceal |
|-------------------|------------|--------|-------|------|---------|---------|
| Mace | 7 | * | 1 | 1 | 3 | P |
| Taser | 3 | 5*† | 10 | 1 | 1 | P |
| Fire Mace | 5 | 4‡ | 2 | 1 | 4 | J |
| Zip Gun | 8 | 3 | 8 | 1 | 1 to 3 | P |
| Sawed-off Shotgun | 6 | 8 | 10 | 2 | 2 | J |
| Concealed Gun | 7 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 1 to 10 | I |
| Concealed SMG | 8 | 7 | 100 | 3 | 50 | I |

* = -2 to victim's Dice Pools for 1 turn/success.

† = no adds from successes.

‡ = sets things afire.

Street Melee Weapons

| Weapon | Difficulty | Damage | Conceal | Notes/(Maneuvers) |
|-------------------------------------|------------|-------------|---------|---|
| • Blunt weapons | | | | |
| Baton/Tonfa | 4 | Str +2 | J | (Haymaker) |
| Bottle | 6 | Str | I | Breaks after 1 blow |
| Brass Knuckles/ Roll of Quarters | 6 | Str +1 | P | |
| Chain | 8 | Str +2 | P | Can grapple, +1 diff. |
| Chair | 7 | Str +2 | I | Breaks after 3 blows |
| Lead Pipe/Crowbar | 5 | Str +2 | J | (Haymaker) |
| Nunchaku | 7 | Str +1 | J | (Double strike) |
| Plaster Cast | 7 | Str +2 | I | Breaks after 4 blows |
| Pool Cue | 5 | Str +1 | I | Breaks after 2 blows; (Lunge) |
| Sap Gloves/ Steel-Toed Boots | 7 | Str +2 | I | (Curbstomp) |
| 2x4/Baseball Bat | 5 | Str +2 | N | (Haymaker, Sweep) |
| Trashcan | 7 | Str +3 | N | "Breaks" after 3 blows |
| Trashcan Lid | 5 | Str +1 | N | Also good shield |
| Weighted Bag/Sap | 6 to 8 | Str +1 to 3 | I | |
| Wrench | 6 | Str +1 to 3 | I | |
| • Sharp Objects | | | | |
| Broken Bottle | 6 | Str +1 | P | Breaks after 3 blows |
| Car Antenna | 4 | Str +1 | P | Extends reach |
| Hatchet | 6 | Str +3 | J | Can be thrown 10 yds., +1 diff. |
| Machete | 5 | Str +3 | J | |
| Nail-studded Glove | 6 | Str +1 or 2 | P | Hurts to use |
| Punch Knife | 4 | Str +2 | P | |
| Razor | 5 | Str +1 | P | (Double strike) |
| Sheet of Glass | 5 | Str +4 | N | Breaks after 1 blow |
| Switchblade | 4 | Str +1 | P | (Double strike) |
| Sword Cane | 5 | Str +3 | I | (Lunge) |
| Throwing Blades | 6 | Str +1 | P | Range: 10 |
| Whip | 6 | Str +1 | J | Can grapple, +1 diff. |
| • Power Tools | | | | |
| Hand Drill | 8 | Str +3 | J | Cannot slash; (Lunge) |
| Large Drill | 8 | Str +5 | N | Awkward; can't slash |
| Hand Saw | 7 | Str +5 | T | Botches hurt |
| Chainsaw | 8 | Str +7 | N | Botches hurt <i>bad</i> |
| Hand Stunner | 6 | 4* | P | See "Taser" |
| Nail gun | 7 | 3 | T | Ranged attack (Rate: 3/ Range: 8/ Clip: 30; see chart.) |

Concealment: I = obvious, but looks innocuous; P = hides in pocket or concealed holster;

J = hides in jacket; T = hides in trenchcoat; N = cannot be hidden on person.

Drugs and Poisons

(Effects last for 12 hours minus Stamina rating unless noted. Most drugs cause minor hallucinations when ingested in great quantities.)

Alcohol: Vector: Oral (drunk) Appearance: Liquid Effects: Euphoria, dizziness
Systems: -1 Dexterity & Intelligence per ounce after the first OD: Incoherence, unconsciousness, death

Amphetamines (Ice, speed, crank, PCP): Vector: Oral (taken, injected, inhaled) Appearance: Pills, powders Effects: Excitability, sharpened perceptions, paranoia, vitality, aggression; easy addiction
System: 1 extra action/ turn for 2 hours; -1 to all Dice Pools for 1 day afterward; possibly +1 to Physical Dice Pools (PCP) OD: shakes, difficulty breathing, loss of coordination & judgment, heart attack

Depressants: Vector: Oral (taken) Appearance: Pills Effects: Sleepiness, lethargy, detachment, mild hallucinations System: -2 Dexterity, Skills and Talents; tasks require extra time
OD: Extreme lethargy, unconsciousness, coma, death

Cocaine & Crack: Vector: Oral (snorted, injected, smoked) Appearance: Powder, "rocks"
Effects: Stimulation, sharp senses, paranoia, aggression; easy addiction System: 1 extra action/ turn, +1 to Perception Dice Pools for 1 hour; -1 to all Dice Pools for 1 day afterward
OD: Difficulty breathing, recklessness, shakes, heart attack, death

Cyanide: Vector: Oral (ingested, breathed); sometimes skin contact (through DMSO)
Appearance: Powder, gas Effects: Dizziness, convulsions, difficulty breathing, death
System: One Health Level damage per turn until purged or cured OD: Death

Hallucinogens (LSD, peyote): Vector: Oral (eaten, drunk); sometimes skin contact (through DMSO)
Appearance: Pills, mushrooms, papers, liquids Effects: Altered senses, loss of concentration or intense focus, hallucinations, nausea System: -2 or +2 to task difficulties (to reflect either focus or distancing), +1 Awareness; might simulate first-rank magical perceptions or Auspex at Storyteller's option
OD: Terror, panic, severe hallucinations or nausea

Home-brewed Poisons: Vector: Oral, skin contact, injection Appearance: Liquid, powder
Effects: Nausea, dizziness, hallucinations, coma, death System: Damage — Storyteller's option
OD: Coma, death

Marijuana & Hashish: Vector: Oral (smoked, eaten) Appearance: Leaves, resin
Effects: Euphoria, mild hallucinations, lethargy, loss of concentration, altered time perception for 1-5 hours
System: none for small doses; +1 difficulty to Mental rolls for larger doses
OD: Panic, nausea, extreme disorientation, unconsciousness; psychological addiction

Opiates (Heroin, opium, morphine): Vector: Oral (taken, smoked), injection
Appearance: Resin, liquid Effects: Mild hallucinations, sensory distortion, lethargy, loss of pain or sensation; easy addiction System: +2 difficulty to all tasks; possibly some mystick insight at Storyteller's discretion OD: Unconsciousness, coma, nausea, death

Raw Sewage: Vector: Oral (inhaled, drunk) Appearance: Sickening refuse Effects: Nausea, vomiting, system shock, death System: Storyteller's option; possibly aggravated damage OD: Death most foul

Smart Drugs: Vector: Oral (taken) Appearance: Pills Effects: Sharpened senses, increased focus, nausea, nervousness, paranoia System: +1 to all Mental Dice Pools for 1-5 hours; often followed by depression or deep sleep OD: Panic, sensory overload, shakes, difficulty breathing, possibly heart attack or psychological addiction

Tear Gas: Vector: Eyes, skin contact, inhalation Appearance: Gas, liquid Effects: Burning eyes, throat & skin, coughing fits System: -2 to all Dice Pools for 10 minutes after escape from gas
OD: Difficulty breathing, possible short blindness or heart attack

Packs and Swarms

Although Chapter Five provides stats for many of the beasts your players are likely to meet, it's quicker and easier, when dealing with a large pack or swarm of creatures, to simply roll to see whether or not they harm a character. From there, just narrate the results.

Each beast type is given a listing on the chart. Roll the Damage listing against difficulty 6 once per turn and allow players to try to dodge or soak the result. This damage is normal, not aggravated. Packs attack once per turn per target, and act on the initiative given on the chart.

If a character dodges, he can move normally; otherwise, his attackers slow him down to half his usual movement. If they score more than three Health Levels' worth of damage in one turn (or if, gods help him, he botches), he's knocked down and overrun. He can only move a yard or two per turn, and the swarm's damage difficulty falls to 5. Bye-bye.

The Health Levels listed reflect the amount of damage it takes to disperse a pack or swarm. An additional two Health Levels will destroy the attackers completely. Pistols, rifles and small melee weapons (knives, brass knuckles, bottles, claws, bare hands) only inflict one Health Level per shot (i.e., they only hit one creature); shotguns, submachine guns, and large melee weapons (swords, staves, 2 x 4s, chainsaws) do normal damage, as do large area attacks (molotov cocktails, frost storms, gusts of wind, explosions). Swarms and packs don't soak; take that as you will.

Note that normal animals do *not* count as witnesses of vulgar magick.

Depending on the size of the pack, two or more characters might be affected, and can attack it in return. Anyone helping an overrun character up can be attacked as well. Under most circumstances, a human can outrun a pack or swarm. Dogs and cats are the exception to this.

| Animal | Damage | Health Levels | Initiative |
|-------------------------------|--------|---------------|------------|
| Small bugs | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| Large bugs | 4 | 7 | 3 |
| Flying bugs | 4 | 5 | 4 |
| Lg. flying bugs | 5 | 8 | 4 |
| Birds, bats, etc. | 5 | 9 | 5 |
| Rats | 3 | 7 | 3 |
| Lg. rats(1' long) | 4 | 9 | 3 |
| Really large rats (2' long +) | 5 | 10 | 3 |
| Feral cats | 4 | 6 | 6 |
| Wild dogs | 6 | 15 | 4 |
| Things that were once men | 3 | 20 | 3 |

If the Storyteller's feeling cruel, she can pass on a disease, infection, or slow-acting poison through attacks by appropriate creatures (rats, rabid dogs, etc.). This might only inflict an additional Health Level or two over time, but will have more severe narrative effects ("You feel weak. The room won't stop spinning, and the sight of water causes your heart to pound its way damn near out of your chest...") until cured.

Example: While exploring a tumble-down warehouse, Sonya the Gangrel and Father Shelly detect a soft scraping, padding and faint growling. After several turns of mystery and suspense (played to the hilt by the Storyteller), a single gaunt dog — a Doberman/Rottweiler mix, from the look of him — staggers into view, snarling. While Father Shelly tries to calm the dog, Sonya discovers (possibly through a Perception + Awareness roll) that the dog is only one of a pack. And that pack surrounds the intruders. As the dogs emerge, slowly and deliberately, the leader yelps and the pack charges.

Both characters are surrounded, and can be attacked. Sonya wins initiative and chooses to dodge as the Storyteller rolls six dice for the pack, narrating the charge, the gnashing of teeth, the baying and flying spittle. Sonya's player succeeds, and the vampire avoids the snapping dogs this turn.

Father Shelly loses initiative, and goes down under a canine horde. The pack rolls three successes; the mage rolls two for his soak and takes one Health Level as a dog tears through his sleeve, ripping his arm open. Abandoning goodness in favor of self-preservation, he summons some holy power and vulgarly conjures a ball of fire (Forces 3, Prime 2), which he flings into the pack. The flames inflict six "Health Levels" on the dogs, setting one or two on fire, and they yelp and shy away. Still, they *are* hungry, and the attack continues...

If Sonya attacks with claws or gun, she'll only add one "Health Level" per shot to Father Shelly's total. Unless one of the pair has a large weapon handy (or unless the mage decides to risk continual vulgar magicks), the pair's best option is to dodge, run and hope they can hide from the dogs. As the warehouse is the pack's territory, this might be difficult...

Suggested Source Material

Do my kisses burn?

Do they take your breath?

You've got a lesson to learn

I'm the kiss of death

— My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult, "Sex on Wheels"

Atmosphere is everything in a street-level chronicle; a little inspiration can go a long way when creating the right feel. Whether you're a player or a Storyteller, we recommend these books, films and artists — each offers plenty to work with.

There's lots of material — fiction and otherwise — about the inner city; the offerings below don't even begin to scratch the surface. They're as good a place to start as any, though — each one is an author favorite.

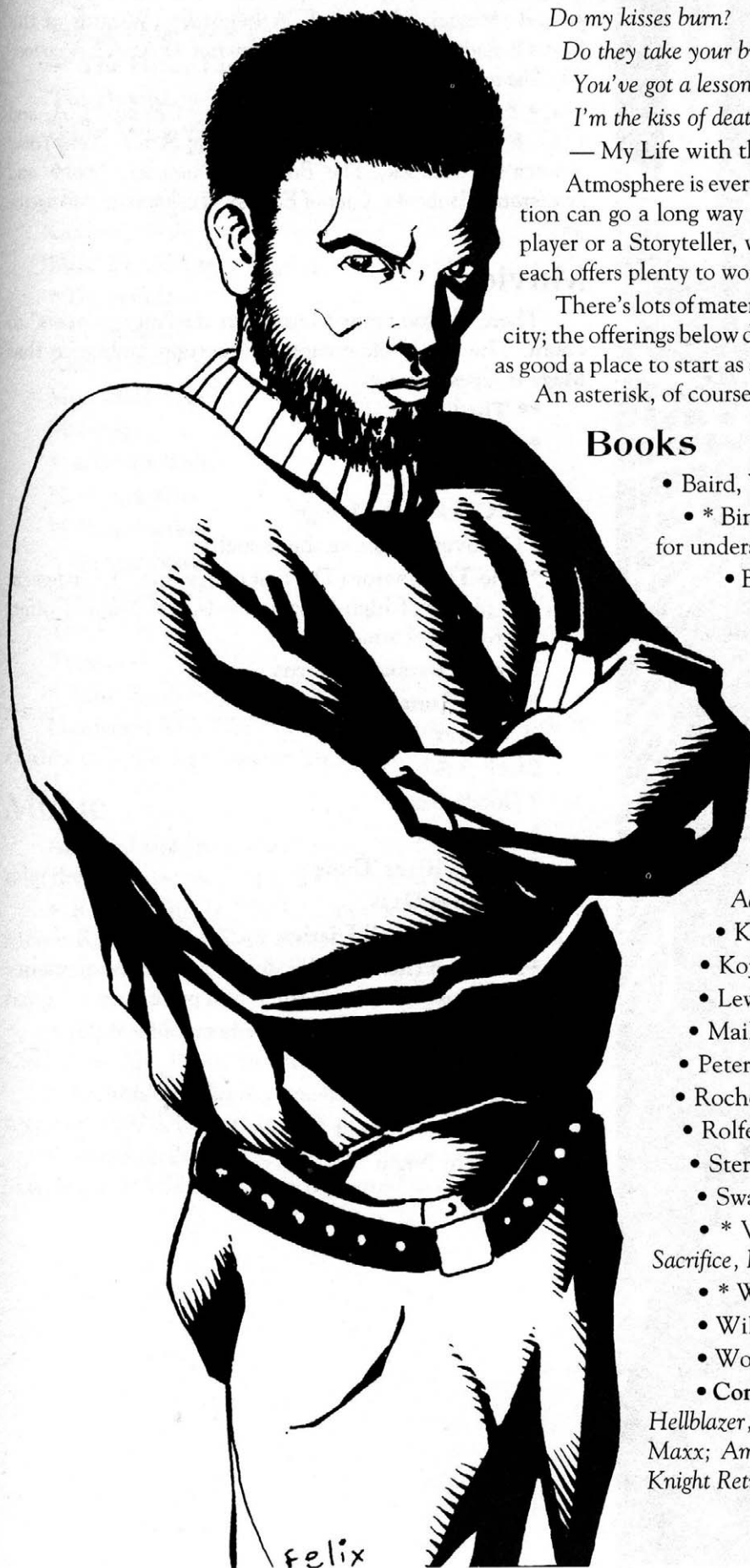
An asterisk, of course, indicates a high-quality source.

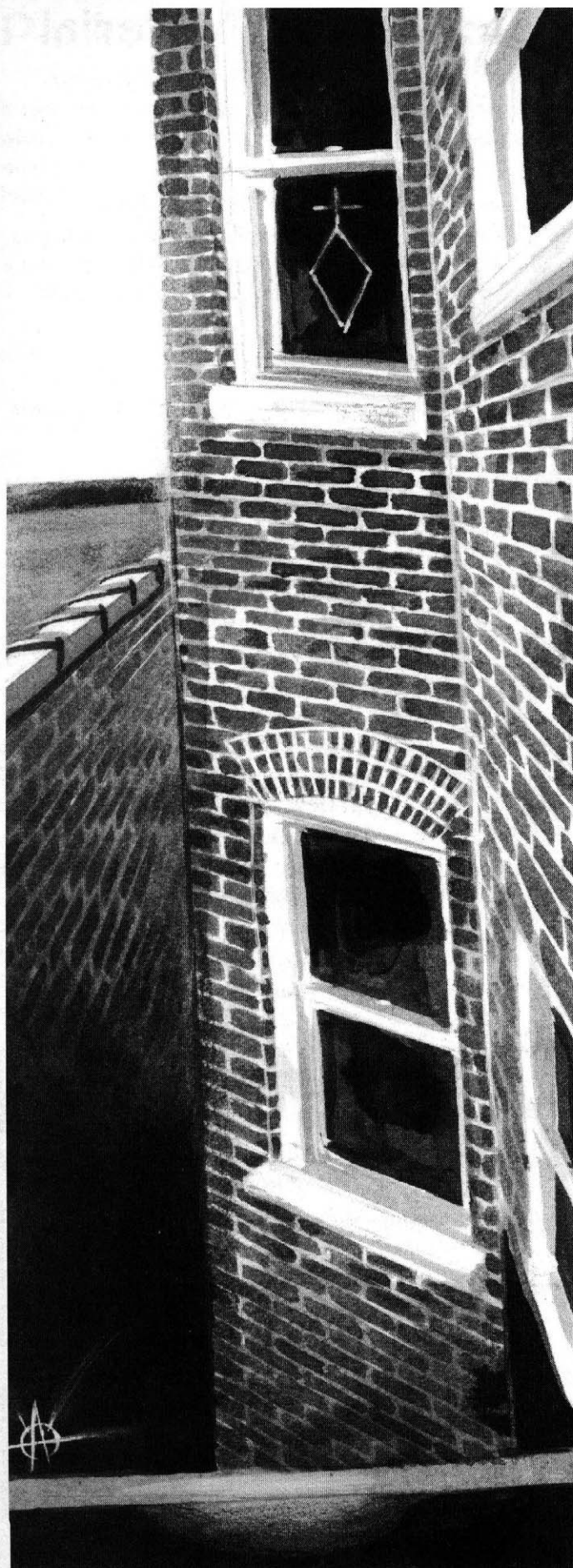
Books

- Baird, Willhelmina — *Crash Course*, *Clipjoint*
- * Bing, Léon — *Do or Die* (This one is a must-read for understanding inner city gangs)
- Brite, Poppy Z. — *Drawing Blood*, *Swamp Foetus*
- Clark, David Aaron — *The Wet Forever*
- * Collins, Nancy — *Midnight Blue*
- * Gibson, William — *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, *Burning Chrome*
- * Ice T — *The Ice Opinion*
- James, Del — *The Language of Fear*
- Janowitz, Tama — *Slaves of New York*
- Jeter, K. W. — *Farewell Horizontal*, *Dr.*

Adder

- Kadrey, Richard — *Metrophage*
- Koja, Kathy — *The Cipher*
- Lewitt, S. N. — *Cybernetic Jungle*
- Mailer, Norman — *An American Dream*
- Petersen, Gail — *The Making of a Monster*
- Roche, Thomas S. — *Noirotica* (ed.)
- Rolfe, Peter & Greeson, Zelma — *Gangs USA*
- Sterling, Bruce — *Globalhead*, *Mirrorshades* (ed.)
- Swanwick, Michael — *In the Drift*
- * Vachss, Andrew — *Flood*, *Strega*, *Blue Belle*, *Sacrifice*, *Born Bad*, *Shella*
- * Wambaugh, Joseph — (anything)
- Williams, Walter Jon — *Hardwired*, *Angel Station*
- Wolfe, Thomas — *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*
- Comics — *Ronin*, ** *Sin City*, ** *John Constantine: Hellblazer*, * *The Invisibles*, *The Crow*, *Spawn*, * *The Maxx*; *Amerikan Flagg*; ** *The Watchmen*; * *The Dark Knight Returns*





• **Other Game Books** — * *Dark Champions: Heroes of Vengeance*, *An Eye for an Eye* (Hero Games/ICE), *Underground* (Mayfair Games); *SLA Industries* (Wizards of the Coast); *Kult* (Metropolis); *Shadowrun* (FASA); *Voodoo: The Shadow War* (Steve Jackson)

• * **Other White Wolf Books** — *Chicago*, *L.A.* and *D.C. By Night*, * *Succubus Club*, *Rage Across New York*, *Anarch's Cookbook*, *The Book of Channies*; *Settite and Nosferatu Clanbooks*; *Cult of Ecstasy*; *Technocracy: Progenitors*

Movies

There are too many films about the "mean streets" to count. The ones below capture a certain ambiance that Mage troupes can use.

** **The Crow**

* **Jacob's Ladder**

The Warriors

* **A Clockwork Orange**

* **Candyman** (Ignore the sequel.)

* **The Terminator** (The first one; while *TII: Judgment Day* has plenty of high-budget thrills, the original offers better street-level atmosphere.)

Batman; Batman Returns

* **Blade Runner**

* **Clockers**

Black Rain

* **Goodfellas**

Lost Angels

* **Do the Right Thing**

** **Strange Days**

* **The Basketball Diaries**

* **Robocop** (*Robocop II* is dumb, but has its moments; the third sequel isn't worth the rental price.)

Highlander (There should've been only one!)

* **Colors**

Predator II

Assault on Precinct 13

Judgment Night

Big Trouble in Little China

Juice

Escape From New York

** The Fisher King

The Butcher's Wife

Bullet to the Head

Kids

Hardboiled

Carlito's Way

Dead Presidents

* Desperado

* El Mariachi

King of New York

Menace II Society

Mobsters

* A Bronx Tale

New Jack City

** Pulp Fiction

* Sid and Nancy

Something Wild

The Killer

Trespass

* True Romance

Hardcore: The Films of Richard Kern, Vols. I & II

(Gritty compilations from an underground auteur.)

Music

An invaluable tool when setting the tone for an urban tale; these artists really capture an urban Gothic-Punk feel.

- **Rock:** Guns & Roses, Concrete Blonde, Sisters of Mercy, Rollins Band/Black Flag, Body Count, Killing Joke, Danzig, Lies in Wait, The Nails, Fear, Suicidal Tendencies, Bang Tango

- **Rap/Hip Hop:** Ice-T, N.W.A., Ice Cube, Blak Czer, Chalice, MC Pooh, Sir Mix-a-Lot, Public Enemy

- **Techno/Industrial:** Nine Inch Nails, KMFDM, Ministry, Front 242, Die Warzau, My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult

- **Soundtracks:** *Colors*, *The Crow* (both versions), *Repo Man*, *Judgment Night*, *Hardware*, *Basketball Diaries*, *Strange Days*



DESTINY'S PRICE

The Test

The wet street mirrored the neon and the dark equally, impassively. At my feet, another life. I swallowed, knelt, felt her faltering pulse. I caressed her cheek. A caress like the angel of death. My throat tightened: Why do I stay? As if in response, the dying girl whispered, "Hold me."

"At what price such power?" asked Siehchang. And again: "At what price such knowledge?"

I was silent. How could I respond?

"Indeed," he said, "who can answer fully to destiny's price?"

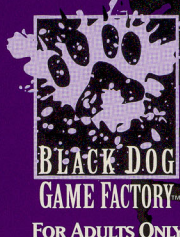
— Kiki Siehchang, Verbena Master, from *The Dialogues of Siehchang and Ortega*

The Price

The streets offer endless questions. This book, however, holds many answers for the Gothic-Punk troupe. Within its pages, players and Storytellers will find characters, settings, new rules, street gear, and some harsh truths about the urban nightmare, including:

- A guided tour of the streets by one who knows them.
- Dozens of characters, settings and weapons, plus details about organized criminal groups.
- Source material for Mage, Vampire, Werewolf, Wraith and even Changeling.

MAGE™



ISBN 1-56504-450-9 WW4040



4500
PRINTED IN CANADA