

# Reign OF THE EXARCHS™

the World of Darkness

MAGE  
THE AWAKENING



*The Exarchs are real.*

*The Dethroned Queen,  
cast out of the Heavens by wiser gods than she,  
proves they're real. You can doubt her existence,  
but doing so only proves your ignorance.*

*The Dethroned Queen was real.  
Soon you'll see.  
Soon you'll get it.*

*Then you'll believe.*

*— Jonah Reed,  
Seer of the Throne,  
prior to his execution*

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- A complete Storytelling chronicle for Mage: The Awakening
- Five complete and compelling playable stories, each centered on an ancient mystic artifact and building to an epic conclusion
- New spells, spirits, artifacts, characters and legends make this chronicle an exciting example of the game in action



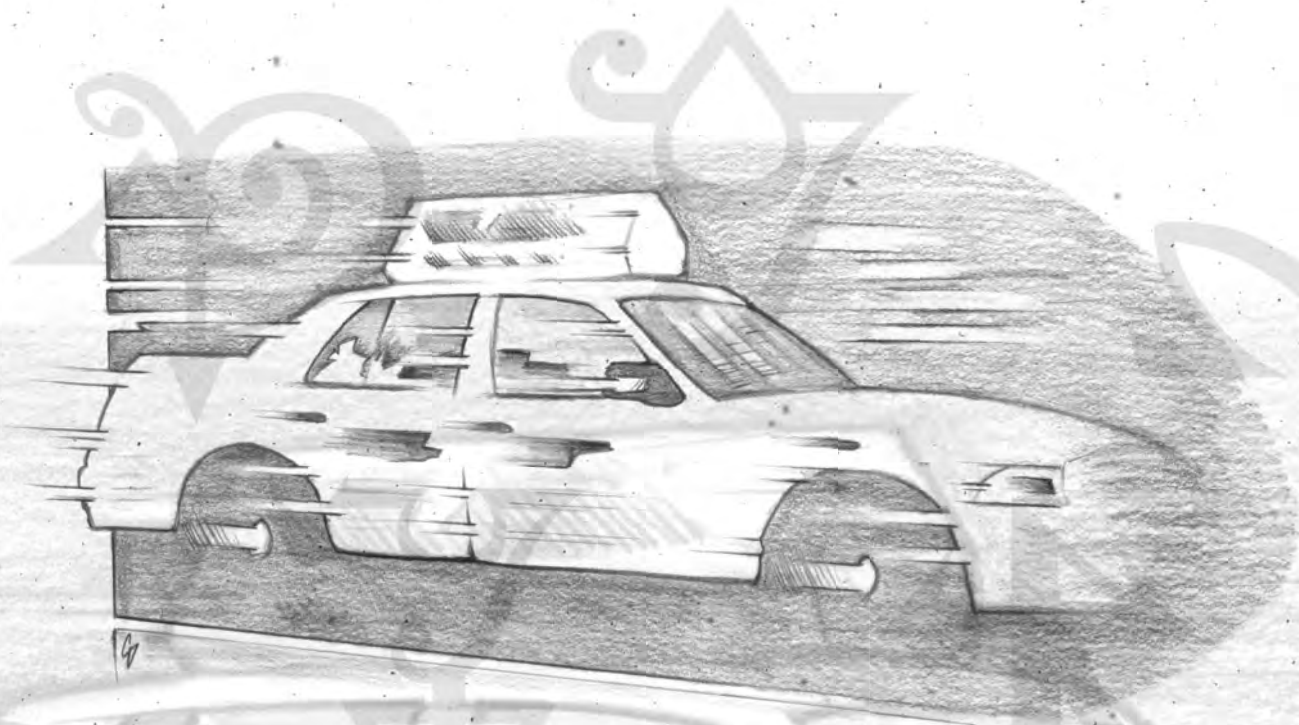
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**MAGE**  
THE AWAKENING





# Proof of Faith

**JIM:** Where we going?

Jim's in the back of the car, behind a pane of smeary scratched plastic flagged with worn and torn stickers that say "Driver carries less than \$100" and "Passenger's Bill of Rights." It's a wide, blocky car and an obnoxious shade of orange. The back seat is one wide ribbed, rubbery bench with bites taken out of its hide. The flesh inside is spongy yellow foam. Everything smells like cigarette smoke and mold.

It used to be a taxi. It used to be Lance's taxi — and still is, off the books — when Lance was using his old name. His mundane name.

**LANCE:** Wouldn't you like to know. Hell, man, if I could know in advance where I was going to be buried, I might ask, too.

**JIM:** If your bosses wanted me dead I'd be dead already.

**LANCE:** It's not all up to them, chief.

**JIM:** I think it is. It's sure not up to you what happens to me.

**LANCE:** We just don't off folks in our back yard, is all.

Lance is driving. When Lance talks to Jim he looks in the rear-view mirror or just leans his head near his shoulder, as if ricocheting his voice off the ceiling into the back of the car. Lance is thin, sweaty from being out in the sun earlier that day, with a junkie's haircut and a worn-out Sex Pistols shirt, tattered into stylishness. He's sitting on his leather jacket. His deodorant's worn off and the box of Camels in his pocket has gone soft with sweat. He fishes it out, craning his neck as he lifts himself up near the roof of the car, and tosses the pack on the dashboard. When he yanks the car back into his lane the pack slides along the dashboard to the passenger side of the car, where Hector catches them without looking.

**HECTOR:** Nobody's getting killed.

**LANCE:** We'll see.

**HECTOR:** Just don't think it's safe to talk where your people might come and listen in.

**LANCE:** Of course, we could do whatever we want out here and just make up a story for our "bosses" later on, if we wanted.

**HECTOR:** Besides, the man who will decide what happens with you is where we're headed. How you act will make him make up his mind to keep you or not. Play along and we'll have to go to the considerable trouble of keeping you. Somewhere.

Hector's sitting shotgun, almost sideways, with his back to his door. When he talks to Jim he looks out of the side of his face at him, or sometimes looks right him, always looking away between sentences. Hector's head is a leathery orb with a furry black buzz cut, fat eyebrows and squinty little slits for eyes. He's got the posture of a street thug and the demeanor of a school teacher. When he catches Lance's cigarettes he pulls pack off the sunny dashboard and stashes them in the open ashtray under the radio.

**JIM:** If you're gonna kill me, I'd like to use the bathroom first.

**HECTOR:** We'll be there in like an hour. Hold it.

**JIM:** Who is this guy who decides? He's not Consilium if he's out here, right?

**LANCE:** You never fucking give up, do you?

**HECTOR:** You'll meet him when you meet him.

**JIM:** What is he, one of your mystagogues? Archivist? Inquisitor?

Nobody says anything.

**JIM:** We caught wind that you had some librarian, some researcher, out in the suburbs. That where we're going?

Lance hocks up a jelly of phlegm and looses it out his window.

**JIM:** How am I supposed to play along if I don't know what I'm supposed to do?

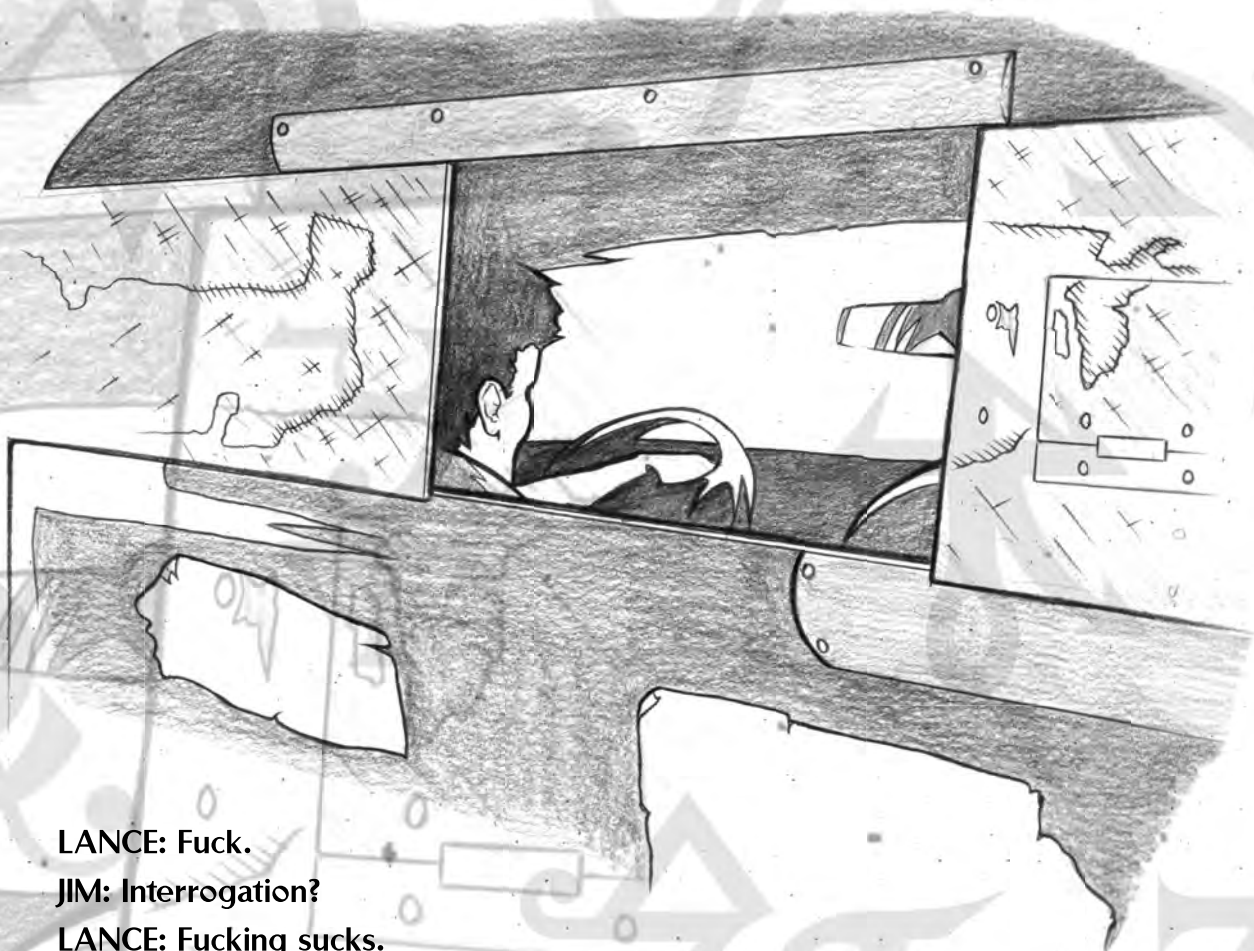
**LANCE:** By keeping your mouth shut, is how. Dick.

**HECTOR:** He asks, you answer. No sweat.

Jim's wardrobe has been narrowed down to his jeans, sneakers and a white t-shirt. Jim's hands are in his lap, bound with a plastic zip-cord. All along the base of the windows and around the door handle are glyphs and magic marks, written with a black Sharpie. When they put him in the car, Jim tried to touch the door handle but couldn't — the glyphs they wrote on the back of his hands pushed him away, like two negative magnets. When he tried to say even one spell, the words turned to screeching static in his ears.

Lance pulls his cigarettes out of the ashtray and squeezes the pack, sniffs it.





LANCE: Fuck.

JIM: Interrogation?

LANCE: Fucking sucks.

Lance tosses the pack out his window.

JIM: Interview?

HECTOR: That depends on you. Answer what you're asked and it'll all be real polite. Doesn't have to be ugly.

LANCE: Unlike your "pylon," we don't bust into your shit and spy on you.

JIM: If I'm gonna be polite, I'd like to use the bathroom first.

HECTOR: There's a bathroom there.

JIM: Yeah, but your fella's gonna want to get down to business, right? We walk in, he's gonna be eager to see me.

HECTOR: You'll be fine.

Jim leans to look out one window. He has to stretch to keep his hands away from the heavy feeling of the glyphs on the door. They're driving down a four-lane road with a wide median of dead grass. Beyond, the world is a row of orderly houses with low green lawns. Huge man-shaped towers made of steel girders straddle the world with their hands on their hips, holding power lines up off the ground, between the people and the sky.

A cloud of tiny black birds lifts off one sagging power line and wheels in the air. Doing laps on an invisible groove in the sky.



JIM: That's not what I see.

Lance chuckles to himself.

HECTOR: How's that, Jim?

Jim nods with his head.

JIM: I don't see this turning out well. Today.

LANCE: Nice. You play to that stereotype, man.

HECTOR: What is that, Jim? Fate?  
Or a tip from your Exarchs?

Jim shifts back into his seat.

JIM: You don't believe.

LANCE: No shit, Jim.

HECTOR: Call me a skeptic.

JIM: I don't know how, after everything you've seen, you can not believe. I mean, I can understand how you might *doubt*, 'cause it's not always easy understand the word — I mean, damn — but how you can accept the Watchtowers and not the lords, I just don't get that.

HECTOR: You may hear them, Jim, but I think you can understand why I might not just take your word on this, you know? The word of a guy who was thinking about killing us? You tell me you've got these gods on high who say you've got to get us in line?

LANCE: Fear tactics, man.

HECTOR: But can you—

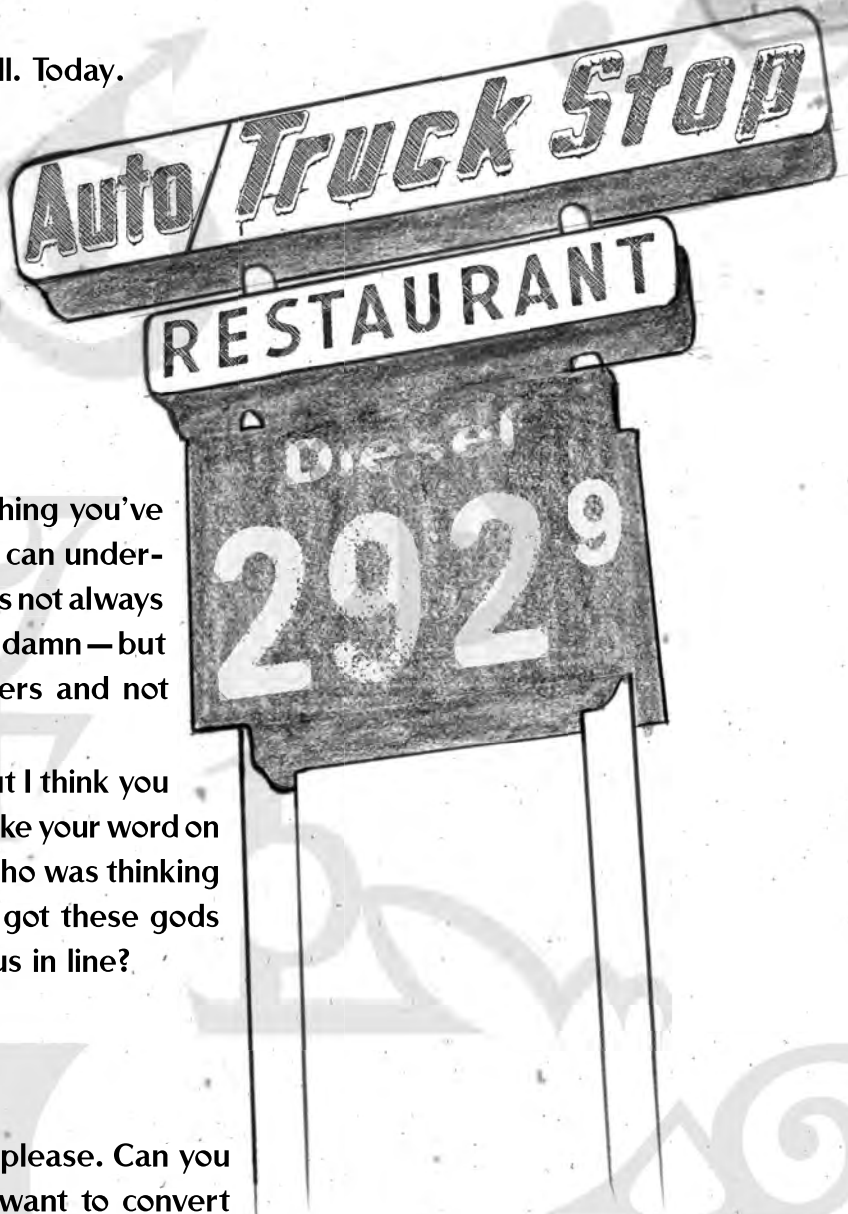
JIM: You say "gods"—

HECTOR: Jim, for one second, man, please. Can you imagine why it is that I might not want to convert blindly to the religion of a dude who was fixing to kill my crew?

JIM: You say "gods." I didn't say that. They're not gods. I mean, that's awfully generous of you, and I'll agree that they're godly or godlike, but this isn't Zeus shit I'm talking about here. That's human folly. That's seeing lightning and calling it a god.

HECTOR: I haven't seen the lightning, Jim.

JIM: No. Yes, you have. Ordinaries see the lightning and call it a god. You people see Watchtowers, see the world change at your fucking word, and you call it whatever it is you call it.





HECTOR: I'm not denying the Watch—

LANCE: Not all of us buy into your Atlantean lords story, Jim—

JIM: It's all Exarchs. It's all the Exarchs. They manning the wheel of the world, man. They're manning the door between heaven and earth. They're the wardens of this shitty prison.

HECTOR: Quote all the Seer spiel you want—

LANCE: You're the prisoner here, man.

JIM: Wait, wait. What's that, Lance?

LANCE: You're the prisoner, here, Jimbo. You're the one in the fucking car.

JIM: Capturing me doesn't set you free. David.

Lance takes a hand off the wheel, spins around in his seat and slams his fist on the plastic.

LANCE: You shut your mouth!

HECTOR: Drive the car!

LANCE: You don't say that! You keep your fucking mouth—

Hector puts a finger in Lance's face.

HECTOR: Lance. Calm it. Keep your eyes on the road, man. Drive the car.

Lance turns back in his seat. Shifts around on his leather jacket a few times.

Hector leans near the plastic pane.

HECTOR: You can that shit, Jim. That's not playing along. That shit's gonna get you killed. All right?

Jim looks out the window. Two seconds go by. He nods.

HECTOR: All right.

Lance sticks his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, under his legs, as best he can, looking for cigarettes. Lance sighs. With an exaggerated swing of his arms he slaps his hands back on the steering wheel.

Hector looks at him. Stares at him. Says nothing.

Lance glances over once, twice, sees Hector eyeballing him, looks back at the road, into the rear-view mirror, back at Hector, back to the road. Hector turns in his seat, faces forward now, and shakes his head. It means "This is stupid."

LANCE: I'm out of cigarettes.

Hector's looking out the window, shaking his head to himself, in tiny increments. Outside, the steel towers pass by. Outside, their power lines pass overhead.

LANCE: I need a fucking cigarette, man.

Hector nods his head for almost a whole minute. It means "I should've known." Up ahead, on Hector's side of the road, is a sign with a Flying J logo on it. "This Exit," says the sign.

JIM: I could really use a bathroom.

• • •



Inside the truck stop, Hector stands by the doors, next to a waist-high box of sunglasses. On his feet, at his post like that, he adopts the complete body language of a stone-cold thug. His stance isn't looking for trouble — it's a fair warning to steer clear of this guy. A father moves to stand between his young kids and Hector as they walk out of the store.

In the parking lot, Lance and Hector argued about how to watch Jim while he sat in the back of the car. They decide Hector will watch Jim while Lance stands in line for cigarettes, then Lance will take Jim to the bathroom. This leaves Jim standing near the door with Lance's leather coat over his bound wrists.

Curious, cautious, Jim starts to form the idea of a spell in his mind. Hector doesn't move, so Jim refines the image, coloring it with pigments from his soul: a finger pushing buttons on a phone. Hector is statuesque, so Jim gives it a name in the High Speech and suddenly, silently, Jim's got his magic: the yuppie browsing sports drinks pulls out his fragile black cell phone, flips it open and dials.

The yuppie's never called this number, doesn't know it himself. Once the numbers are in, he just holds the phone in his hand, down at his thigh, arm relaxed. In a minute, he'll hang up the phone, never remembering he called at all. Someone picks up on the other end, but says nothing.

Jim can hear the signal in the air. It ripples past him like a weak breeze. It feels like a phone is off the hook in his brain.

To squeeze out the first transmission, praying Hector or Lance can't hear it, Jim feels like he's clenching the hemispheres of his brain like they were buttocks. His thoughts burp out on the cell phone signal to the Seer on the other end of the line.

"They're taking me to see one of their mystagogues. I'm not sure how much they know, but he's going to ask me about the artifact. I can't fight him off forever."

The voice on the other end of the phone says things Jim doesn't want to hear.

"No, I can," Jim transmits with his mind. "If that's what it takes." Jim exhales, too loud, he thinks. Hector looks at him out of the corner of his eye.

The voice on the phone says something else.

"No, north." Jim thinks his electric thoughts. "We're north. Get somebody with a police scanner out here."

The voice asks a question.

"Because in case I survive," Jim thinks.

**HECTOR:** Hey.

Hector's looking right at Jim now. Lance is next to him.

**HECTOR:** Bathroom time, man.

**LANCE:** You should be pretty excited by now.

Jim blinks, like he's coming to. The signal slips out of his mind like a rope through his hands.

**JIM:** Oh, yeah. I love to piss.

**LANCE:** Move it.



Jim takes his time crossing the store, with Lance right behind him. One fat trucker in a revealing t-shirt waddles out of the men's room door as they approach. He smells like cheap hand soap.

Inside, past the sinks, the row of urinals is punctuated by one lanky farmer-looking trucker in a flannel shirt and dirty cap. Jim walks right up next to him.

LANCE: Don't do that.

JIM: Sorry.

Jim moves down two urinals from the trucker, farther from the door. Lance has his leather jacket back now, so Jim's counting on protocol to keep the trucker's eyes off his bound wrists. Jim looks ahead, eyes on the tiles.

JIM: You on a haul?

LANCE: Don't talk to him.

Jim's not sure if Lance is talking to the trucker or him. The trucker hurries up, zips his fly, rushes at the sink and slips out of the room. He has to edge past Lance, who's half-blocking the door.

Jim opens his mouth.

LANCE: Keep your mouth shut.

Jim zips up, flushes. As he walks past the bank of urinals he turns his head towards the cologne machine on the wall. Lance follows his gaze over. Jim brushes his hand against the inside of the trucker's urinal and gets two fingertips of warm piss. If Lance sees him do it, he doesn't say anything.

Jim heads for the sink, touches one of the magic-marker glyphs on the back of his hand with his other thumb.

LANCE: Nuh-uh. Let's go.

JIM: That's disgusting.

LANCE: You'll live. Let's go.

Jim holds the back of his hands up for Lance to see.

JIM: This stuff's not going to come off with one wash.

LANCE: Right now, dick.

Jim makes a face but heads towards the bathroom door, which Lance is holding open for him.

LANCE: And don't touch me.

• • •



As they get back in the car, Jim rubs his middle finger against his thumb, sticky with urine. In his head he pictures the farmer-looking trucker inside his rig, watching an ugly orange car pull out of the lot and back onto the highway. In his mind, the trucker starts his rig and follows them. Jim can feel the electric chill of Mana coming off him and drifting back up through the sky to the Exarchs.

He has to hope it worked.

**HECTOR:** You know what I don't think you appreciate, Jim?

They're back on the highway now. Jim's looking over his shoulder, out the back window. There's a truck back there, a big red rig, and Jim hopes that's his guy.

He straightens himself out in his seat.

**JIM:** What's that?

**HECTOR:** You spit on us because we don't believe in your guys, but you've never had to see it that way. I mean, it's not faith for you, right? To you, these guys — the Exarchs — are like real.

**JIM:** They're real.

**HECTOR:** So it's not faith no more, right? To you it's like a proven fact.

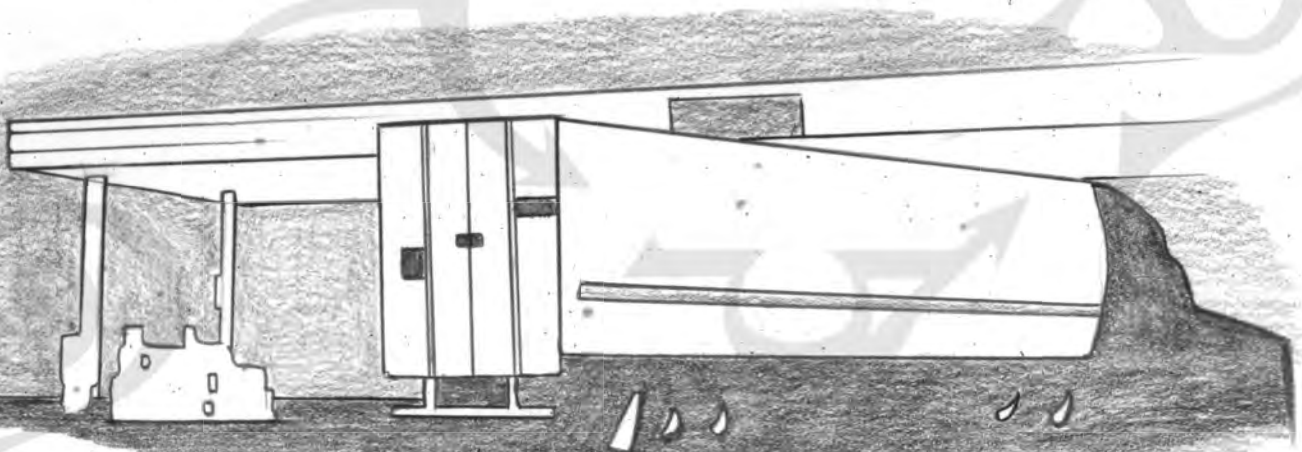
**JIM:** Sure.

**HECTOR:** But we don't have any of that proof. I mean, they're not talking to us. You know? Why is it that I'm the asshole for not taking this on faith when you've never had to take it on faith? It's not like you've done it and I won't. It's not the same thing. I'm a fool because I won't take you at your word?

**LANCE:** You who wanted to kill us.

**HECTOR:** I mean, it's not you I'm supposed to have faith in, right? It's not you I'm supposed to believe in, right?

**LANCE:** You're not an Exarch are you, Jimbo?





Jim looks over his shoulder again. The red rig's in the left lane, coming closer. Jim leans forward near the plastic divider and looks at Lance's speedometer: 65 mph.

Jim leans back.

JIM: What do you guys want, physical proof?

LANCE: It's not us, man.

HECTOR: That would go a long way, Jim.

JIM: You pentacles. I swear to God. What do you think your guy's gonna ask me about? The Dethroned Queen is your proof. The thing he wants? That's his proof.

HECTOR: If you believe the story.

JIM: How can you not? You know your guy does, that's why you're hauling me out here, right? Because he wants what we got.

HECTOR: If it was really hers.

JIM: No, see, that's not in doubt. Good money against bad, your guy knows what we got was really the Queen's. He's looking for a way to cancel out the evidence, though. To say that she was real but the Exarchs — the Exarchs who banished her and her five treasures here to the Fallen — are not real. Because you've all made up your minds already, that the Exarchs aren't real or aren't what we've been telling you they are, and you're terrified that a hunk of metal is going to show you're wrong.

LANCE: Calm down, dude.

HECTOR: The Dethroned Queen could've just been a powerful wizard, right? She could just be another mage from down here.

JIM: You cut away the parts of the legend that you don't like—

HECTOR: Even if she was Supernal, how does that prove everything you say about Exarchs, huh? Are they the only ones working up there?

LANCE: Oh, dude, don't start in with that Oracle shit again. Please.

Jim looks over his shoulder. The red rig is passing them on the left. If he could see him, this would be easier.

HECTOR: Which version of your Dethroned Queen story are we even taking about? The one where she's a homeless medicine woman in India?

Jim rubs the urine on his index finger into his palm. He prays.

HECTOR: The one where she appears in Ugarit in like 1200 BC?

Jim hopes. "You'll be fine," he thinks. "You've got the truck. It's not your life. Just a job."

HECTOR: Or the one where she's living as a whore in Egypt?

Jim pictures the front of the car peeling away in a flash of screaming red metal. In his mind wads of metal come off like torn paper. The plastic pane vanishes into the storm of wreckage that eats up Lance and Hector. There'll be wind in his face. Metal cinders. Streaks of sparks like glowing straw as the chassis grinds against the pavement. Turning his head away from the shrapnel, he'll see the red rig bouncing into a ditch on the side of the road, smashed but safe. "Do it," Jim says, pulling a string in the trucker's mind with his own.

**HECTOR:** I mean, we're a little short on facts here, right? How can you be sure you got the story straight?

Jim watches the truck start to drift.

**JIM:** I know it's important.

Jim looks Hector in the eye, through the plastic divider.

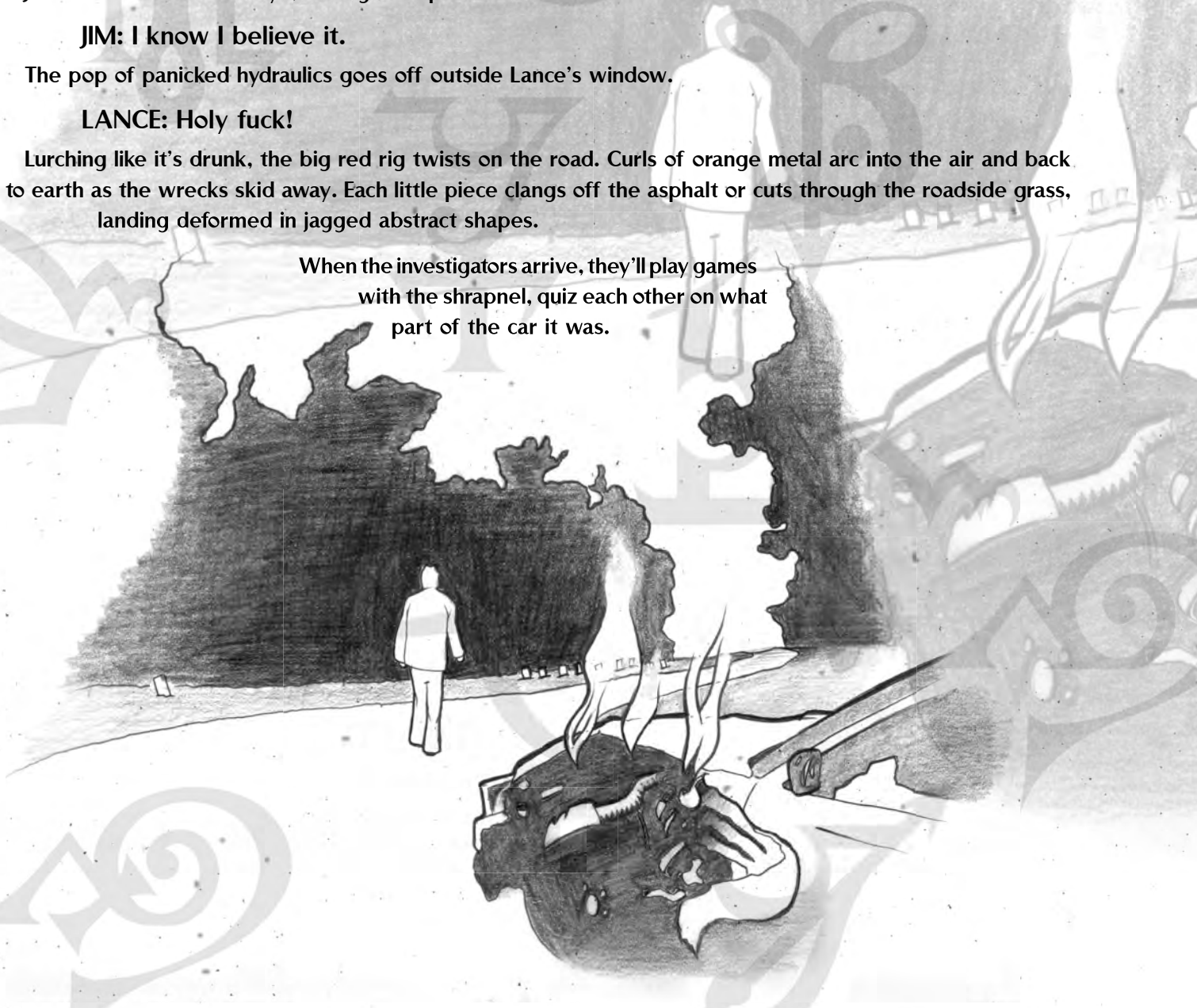
**JIM:** I know I believe it.

The pop of panicked hydraulics goes off outside Lance's window.

**LANCE:** Holy fuck!

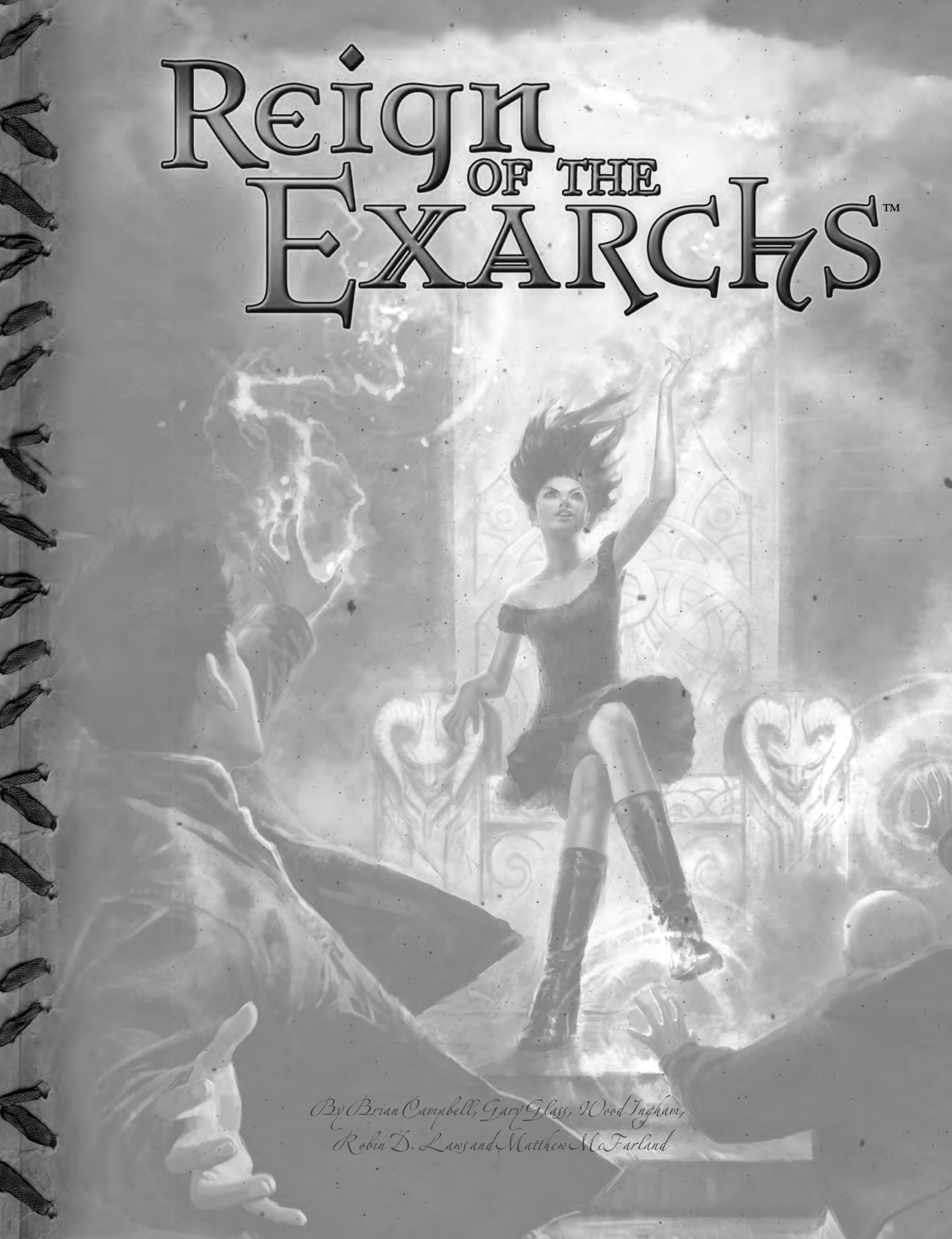
Lurching like it's drunk, the big red rig twists on the road. Curls of orange metal arc into the air and back to earth as the wrecks skid away. Each little piece clangs off the asphalt or cuts through the roadside grass, landing deformed in jagged abstract shapes.

When the investigators arrive, they'll play games with the shrapnel, quiz each other on what part of the car it was.





# Reign OF THE EXARCHS™



*By Brian Campbell, Gary Glass, Wood Ingham,  
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COMING NEXT FOR MAGE

# The Tome of Mysteries



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# Reign OF THE EXARCHS™

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# INTRODUCTION

*Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control. It is determined for the insect, as well as for the star. Human beings, vegetables, or cosmic dust, we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper.*

— Albert Einstein

**Reign of the Exarchs** is a chronicle book presenting five separate stories, each revealing a facet of the power of the Exarchs in the Fallen World. The stories are loosely interlocking, in that information gained in one story will prove useful in the next; while there is no requirement to run one story before any other, playing them in sequence will provide the most satisfaction. The stories do not need to be played immediately after each other; the Storyteller can run other stories of his own in between, before the cabal once again picks up the trail of the Exarchs and follows it into another of the stories presented here.

Each story deals in some way with a secret power that allegedly comes from the Exarchs, though we never actually meet these Exarchs themselves. Every story deals with the Seers of the Throne, to some extent. Each of the five stories stands alone but also advances a very loose plot, one that involves the successive uncovering of five secret artifacts that convey special magical powers. The powers these artifacts convey are useful in each of the succeeding stories, building upon the previously revealed powers.

You can use any of these stories without using them all. Even the climactic final chapter, drawing on the artifacts from each of the four previous tales, can be run without having played (or succeeded) at every component story. Yet you will want to *read* each of these stories before choosing where to begin, in case you want to introduce a character from one story into another or if you want to foreshadow a future story — just in

case. If nothing else, you'll find that each story provides you with interesting examples of antagonistic (and sometimes sympathetic) Seers of the Throne to include in your chronicle, not to mention intriguing dramatic situations to pit the troupe's characters against in your own adventures.

## *Theme: Control*

In a manner similar to the mystery play of an Awakening, the hands of the Exarchs in the Fallen World are hidden behind veils of metaphor. *Anybody* could be the Exarchs' unwitting agent. Just as a Seer of the Throne uses a Profane Urim to distantly control people as puppets, the Exarchs could be doing the same to your best friend, your master or even *you*. Think of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*, John Carpenter's *They Live* and any classic Cold War movies, books or the Gnostic sci-fi of Philip K. Dick (especially *Flow My Tears the Policeman Said* and *Maze of Death*).

But how can you tell when and if the Exarchs are at work here and now? The first story presents one answer to that question by providing characters with the power to directly witness the Exarchs' influence. The other stories build on the dilemma caused by this magical awareness of the Exarchs' hands in mortal affairs.

William S. Burroughs was obsessed with the idea of Control, a censorious authority so pervasive it was like a virus in the mind (what we now call memes). He often personified this tendency toward unconscious self-censorship and self-limitation as the



work of outside agents, Orwellian figures. This is what the Exarchs represent: the *idea* of control. This idea of control is how we all unconsciously submit to authority and rules that we don't necessarily want to accept consciously — how we program ourselves to limit our behavior, thoughts and potential. We shut off entire avenues of thought due to accepted illusions of right and wrong. Language itself can be seen as a control mechanism, controlling what we are allowed to think — without words for certain concepts, can we even conceive of those concepts? Orwell exploited this idea with his Newspeak, and contemporary political advisors such as Frank Luntz use carefully crafted words as hot buttons to control political debate.

Are the Exarchs real? Are they *literally* real? We don't answer that question. This book instead addresses the implications of the idea of control as personified by the Exarchs, but leaves open the possibility that the metaphysical archons and jailers of the Universe are projections of the tendency of the human soul to impose limitations on itself. Maybe it's the higher self's way of setting tests for the ego on its way to Ascension, setting false gates and gatekeepers the seeker must overcome. Or maybe it's the Universe itself acting as gatekeeper, ensuring that only those who have internalized self-mastery can overcome external control — the triumph of esoteric mastery over exoteric control. Or maybe there really is a bunch of ancient archmages who can influence the Fallen World with a metaphysical dictatorship!

### *The Dethroned Queen*

The Prologue hints one version of the legend about a strange mage of old, a woman who claimed to have been one of the Exarchs but who was thrown by her fellow Exarchs from the Supernal World back into the Fallen World. She claimed that five artifacts fell with her, including the royal raiment she had worn in the Heavens; she hinted that whoever could find these artifacts could master the practice of Exarchy and ascend to join the Exarchs' ranks. This mage, called the Dethroned Queen, repudiated her past and her magic. She died from a mundane plague, refusing to use magic to cure herself.

She had a cult of followers who recorded her scant teachings. Her legend is told by many Seers of the Throne, but

few today truly believe in it. Even if it were true, it's so old (dating to the beginning of the Common Era), that surely the artifacts have already been claimed. To those Seers who believe, the Queen is a figure who can teach the ways to Ascension as an Exarch.

Her legend is also told among the orders of the Pentacle, and many variants exist in the Athenaeums of the Mysterium. Now and then, some new clue surfaces that causes a mage or a cabal to go searching for one or more of the artifacts, either to claim them or destroy them. To the orders, the Queen is a figure who can teach others how to evade the power of the Exarchs, to repudiate their rule.

### *The Artifacts of Exarchy*

The Queen referred to the artifacts as a ring, a robe, a scepter, a crown and a throne. Most mages who accept the legend believe that she spoke in metaphor, describing the powers the artifacts conferred, not their actual forms. What forms the artifacts actually do take is unclear (until you read the following stories), although some artifacts seem to be more like grimoires than imbued items — presenting their users with new spells involving the Exarchs, spells that cannot be learned without first activating the artifacts.

The artifacts are spread far and wide. Each story in this book involves the discovery of one of them. They are the MacGuffins that tie these stories together. The stories can take place a world apart, and be run in between whole other chronicles. You can think of the chronicle playing out over time similar to the Harry Potter series: In the first story, the mages get the first artifact and learn a new power. Next year, they play out the second story and get a new artifact, learning another new power and new things to do with the power they learned last time.

Each artifact acts as a grimoire, providing new spell knowledge — but at a price. Using these spells gives casters power to see, ward, counter and even control the minions of Exarchy, but using these spells risks Wisdom. The caster is drawn into a world only he can see, and although it is utterly convincing, it might not be real. And yet, these spells can reward wise use, tempting the caster to use them again . . . and again . . .





# CHAPTER ONE: THE RING

*"It was here," says Aidan. "It was in this room." He's stepping over a toppled bookcase with his hands out in front of him, like a movie director.*

*Sean, by the window, cranes his neck to look between the wooden blinds before saying, "So where did it go?" In the slatted light through the blinds, his military physique looks like it's been cut into a dozen thick slivers.*

*"Don't know. Maybe they've got it with them. Maybe they've hidden it somewhere." Aidan crouches down, leans into the fireplace and squints up the chimney. He keeps his hands off everything. One hand stays on his paunch, trying to hide it.*

*"So? We know where they are, right?" Sean turns away from the window, his back to the wall. "Let's get it."*

*Aidan gets to his feet and peers around the room again. With one foot, he raises a rug off the floor, finds nothing, kicks the rug away.*

*"Aidan. We're this close to it."*

*Aidan nods. "Yeah. But if they've hidden it and we can't get them to talk, we're that far away again. It's not enough to get them. We've got to get them in our hands, where we can control them." Aidan gestures with his hands as if he were shaking a child by the shoulders. "Make them talk."*

*"Okay."*

*"So let them come back here. If they don't have it, we take one of them instead."*

*"And if they've got it on them?" Sean asks.*

*Aidan looks right at him. A band of light from the window shines perfectly across his eyes. "Then we've finally got the Ring. Who cares what happens to them?"*

*By Her grace She leaves this Ring,  
So all might find the Truth they seek.*

—First couplet from *Gifts of the Dethroned Queen*

*"My dear brothers, never forget, when you hear the progress of enlightenment vaunted,  
that the devil's best trick is to persuade you that he doesn't exist!"*

—Charles Baudelaire, from the short story "Le Joueur généreux" (1864)

## *Introduction*

Rather than drench players with an intense introduction to the Exarch myth, "The Ring" gets their feet wet with conspiracy and paranoia about what's real and imagined. You're encouraged to massage the storyline as you see fit to take advantage of conflicts your current chronicle already has in place. Sidebars offer several ideas on how you might accomplish this.

The scenario can be separated into four acts. The first act presents characters with a new Artifact brought to their attention by a strange visitor claiming the Right of Hospitality. The second act leads characters into an elaborate trap designed to besmirch their names and reputations. The third act forces characters to make a choice between sanctum security and political standing. The story ends with retribution, revelation and (hopefully) redemption as they battle the agents responsible for molesting the characters' political and physical well-being. By the end of the story, players will have a greater understanding of much more than etiquette, politics and sanctum security; they will understand that what they knew of the universe may be well short of the actual truth.

## *Theme: Throwing a Curve*

The Awakening opens a mage's eyes to the reality of magic, a revelation that makes the day-to-day grind of a mundane life impossible to pursue. The remainder of the mage's life is spent redefining the truths he once held dear and perhaps the wishful pursuit of Ascension to the Realms Supernal. Player characters face the very same adjustments, either early in a chronicle or later.

What "The Ring" aims to accomplish is to force a re-evaluation of these redefined truths. Do characters have all the information at hand to understand how the Fallen World operates? Have elders withheld this information from the characters because the players aren't ready to grasp it? What if this new knowledge actually leads the characters down a wayward path? Confusion is the operative word for this story, and the more vague and misdirecting you, as Storyteller, are as the story progresses, the richer the outcome will be.

## *Mood: Caught in Conspiracy*

The story begins with a mysterious stranger, turns into a political conspiracy and ends with more questions than when the story began. Though the story deals with an external

antagonist with which players have no previous experience, they should wonder whether other known antagonists are responsible for putting the characters in the political bind in which they find themselves.

When dealing with the Exarchs, nothing is as it seems. If you as Storyteller set up your dominos just right, you can create a milieu rife with perceived conflict and second-guessing.

## *Act 1: Hospitality*

"The Ring" begins with an unexpected visitor before noon, with one or more player characters available to receive him. His clothing is unremarkable, resembling garb worn by autumnal commuters in the cooler climes of northern Europe or the American east coast. Gaunt and unkempt, he has obviously fallen upon hard times. And woe to any caught downwind of him. His only possessions are the clothes on his back, two small belt sacks hidden beneath his peacoat and a shoulder pack that looks to have a few books and sundry items in it.

"My apologies for the intrusion," he says in a crisp British accent, with a nervous glance over his shoulder. "I am Gawain, second-degree master and former member of the cabal of the Broadening Mind. I invoke the Right of Hospitality for a period of three days so I might recuperate from my wounds and gather my thoughts."

Players who respect and uphold the Great Rights (see *Sanctum & Sigil*, p. 26, to expand on these) should, if reluctantly, grant Gawain entry into their sanctum, but this doesn't prevent them from invoking a Great Right of their own — the Right of Sanctuary. If the players forget to invoke it, Gawain will offer to follow the Great Right despite the players' oversight.

## **Great Rights 101**

If your players haven't had an occasion to invoke the Great Rights or have them invoked upon the characters, this is the ideal time to teach the players the importance of the Great Rights in Awakened society. If players choose to reject Gawain's request, give them a second chance to change their minds. Drill into them the consequences rejecting an invocation could have upon their cabal, especially if someone who is

as versed in politics as Gawain appears to be were to relay his experiences to the Consilium.

Since Gawain wishes the player characters no ill will, this situation provides an instance of Right invocation prevalent within mage circles. Players who might believe this to be a trick can be assuaged with the knowledge that invoking their own Right — Sanctuary — covers their behinds and gives them *carte blanche* permission to kill the transgressor should he be caught acting in an aggressive manner against the cabal.

### *Gawain*

**Quote:** *If you had seen even a tenth of the things I've witnessed, you'd be on the run, too.*

**Background:** Gawain grew up as Thomas Thatcher, son of a prosperous stockbroker in Manhattan. Despite the silver spoon with which he was born, Thomas maintained a particular disdain for others who used their family's wealth as an excuse to belittle or ignore those among the lower classes. Though he tried to gain acceptance among them, he found their prejudices against him to be just as pronounced. Bitter, he withdrew from society into the comforts of imagination and study.

An avid reader, the vast majority of his recreational reading was fantastical in nature. This predilection served him well when he Awakened by way of astral journey during his sophomore year in college. As he awoke, he perceived the world as he had always wanted to perceive it — a setting abundant in Truth shrouded in mysteries he couldn't wait to unravel. Adopting the shadow name Gawain — a knight of Arthur's Round Table who had always been one of Thomas's favorite literary characters — he dropped out of college and shifted his focus to the arts Arcane.

Together with a fellow collegiate, Gawain founded the cabal known as the Broadening Mind. Their aim was the simple pursuit of occult knowledge. When the two were indoctrinated into the Mysterium, the cabal narrowed its attentions to lost Artifacts. The mages of the Broadening Mind, with no permanent home to call their own, wandered the forgotten corners of the world and grew accustomed to a nomadic lifestyle. The cabal members, basing their searches on vague references in esoteric publications, had modest success. In all, they recovered seven Atlantean Artifacts, all of them one-of-a-kind relics that established the Broadening Mind as one of the Mysterium's favorite cabals and earned members individual accolades.

Their run of good luck ended when they came upon the legend of the Dethroned Queen and decided to track down each of the five Artifacts mentioned in the myth. For three years, they poured over texts, tracked obscure leads and questioned those who were in position to have learned more about the myth. During the fourth year, the Broadening Mind conducted a vote determining whether the cabal should resign itself to defeat. Gawain was the only one who voted to



continue the search. Unwilling to give up the quest, Gawain left the Broadening Mind to continue on his own.

Two years later, Gawain's search fortuitously concluded. Assisting another cabal in defeating a Seer pylon in Northern Ireland, he aided in the recovery of numerous enchanted items and Artifacts from the pylon's fallen sanctum. As a reward for his support, the cabal gave Gawain one of the Artifacts, what appeared to be a bell clapper with gems embedded in the clapper's head. Only after he had departed and researched the item within the privacy of his hotel room did he realize the item's identity — the Ring of the Dethroned Queen.



Tapping the Ring's power, Gawain uncovered a side of the Fallen World he couldn't comprehend. Using Mage Sight, he sensed that there was more to his surroundings than he knew had been there. Mages he trusted bore scents and auras that appeared nigh near alien. Unsure what he was experiencing, he tracked down the others of the Broadening Mind to seek their counsel. Confused by Gawain's accounts, two of the cabal's four members, Lark and Marcus, used the Artifact as Gawain had. For each, the experience was different yet no less disconcerting. To complicate matters, all three saw different targets — objects, people or locations — afflicted by the strange sight. The two who refrained from using the object suggested giving the Ring to the Mysterium for further study. Gawain and the other two refused, citing instead a need to research the Artifact further. A furious debate ensued, culminating with the dissolution of the Broadening Mind.

Lark and Marcus joined Gawain in his search for the remaining four Artifacts, but they weren't alone. Unbeknownst to Gawain, a survivor of the pylon he helped to destroy (out of town when the attack transpired) had an Arcane link to the clapper and was biding his time for the ideal moment to exact revenge and recover the stolen Artifact. That moment came two months later in Wales. Lark and Marcus succumbed to the attack, but Gawain's Acanthus luck kept him out of harm's way. He escaped unscathed, but was crushed by the deaths of his colleagues.

That was eight months ago. Gawain's been on the run ever since. He doesn't know who's pursuing him, but knows when they're coming (yes, the Seer found help) with Ring Sight. He has also pieced together how they're finding him. After learning all that he could from the Ring, the time has come to let others carry on his battle.

**Description:** Gawain is a tall British national in his early 40s, with narrow features and graying, neck-length black hair. As mentioned above, at the opening of this story he is shabbily dressed and visibly wounded. Several cuts and burns mar his gaunt face, and his left pant leg is stiff with a swatch of dried blood.

When Gawain casts magic, he exudes the scent of a musty library, a most discomfiting sensation to experience while outdoors.

**Storytelling Hints:** Despite his appearance, Gawain is a well-mannered gentleman. He is difficult to rile. Rather than raise his voice when offended, he will instead point out the errant behavior and request that the offense not be repeated. He'd prefer to engage in small talk first before answering pointed questions. Favored topics include literature (sci-fi and fantasy), travel and Atlantean theory.

He won't divulge the existence of the Ring to his hosts while staying with them. Instead, he will gauge his hosts' worthiness and fortitude with questions about the cabal's past successes. To loosen his hosts' lips, he'll regale them with tales of his own exploits while with the Broadening Mind, stories that might remind people of Indiana Jones.

When he thinks no one is paying attention, he'll cast Ring Sight to confirm that his would-be hosts aren't tainted or

his pursuers aren't close. If caught in the act, he'll admit to checking for signs of those pursuing him and ask forgiveness for his paranoid ways.

**Dedicated Magical Tool:** A broken silver pocket watch with the numbers represented by dice

**Real Name:** Thomas Thatcher

**Path:** Acanthus

**Order:** Mysterium

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 4, Wits 4, Resolve 3

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 4, Composure 3

**Mental Skills:** Academics 5, \*Investigation (Magic) 4, \*Occult (Artifacts) 4, Science (Archeology) 5

**Physical Skills:** Athletics 3, Larceny 2, Stealth 2, \*Survival 4, Weaponry 2

**Social Skills:** Expression 2, Socialize 3, Subterfuge 3

**Merits:** Encyclopedic Knowledge, Fast Reflexes 2, High Speech 1, Language: Latin, Language: Russian, Language: French, Status: Mysterium 4

**Willpower:** 7

**Wisdom:** 6 (Paranoia)

**Virtue:** Charity

**Vice:** Pride

**Initiative:** 6

**Defense:** 3

**Speed:** 10

**Health:** 7

**Gnosis:** 4



**Arcana:** Fate 4, Time 4, Space 4, Prime 3, Life 2, Death 1, Matter 1, Mind 1, Spirit 1

**Notes:** *Fate* — Interconnections (•), The Sybil's Sight (•), \*Ring Sight (•), Fortune's Protection (••); *Life* — Pulse of the Living World (•); *Prime* — Supernal Vision (•), Magic Shield (••); *Space* — Omnivision (•), Untouchable (••), \*\*Arcade (•••), Teleportation (•••); *Time* — Momentary Flux (•), Temporal Eddies (•), Glimpsing the Future (••), Shield of Chronos (••), Acceleration (••)

\*Ring Sight learned from exposure to the Ring

\*\*See p. 22.

**Mana/per Turn:** 13/4

**Weapons/Attacks:**

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Brawl	(B)	—	—	2
Knife	1(L)	1	—	5

**Armor:** 4 (Fortune's Protection)

### *Hosts and Guest*

As a guest of the player characters, Gawain follows the lead of his hosts. He opens his bags to ease whatever concerns they might have regarding his possessions. Among the items on his person is a bell clapper with 10 small gems embedded along the equator of the clapper head. If asked what the object is, he explains that it's an Artifact he is willing to share his knowledge of before he departs. The rest of his possessions are comparatively mundane — a copy of Robin Hobb's *Fool's Errand*, a leather-bound journal, assorted pens, toiletries, brushes and magnifying glasses.

When he receives treatment for his wounds, his healer discovers a parchment writ with old scars and new scars-to-be. Gawain's current injuries include burns, lacerations of varying depths and a bullet wound to the thigh (where his pant leg soaked with blood). It's apparent that he used a low-level Life spell to stem the bleeding, but there is still much healing to be done. All wounds are mundane in nature and can be easily healed with basic successes.

The player characters will surely have questions to ask of their new guest, but Gawain will oblige only after his wounds are tended and he's allowed to settle into his room (requested with gentlemanly aplomb, of course). He begins discussions with small talk, complimenting the cabal members on their hospitality and whatever architectural or interior design merits mention. The more accommodating the characters are during the small talk, the more Gawain will share during questioning.

- *From whence the wounds came:* Gawain will admit that he is currently being pursued by agents unknown, but immediately assures his hosts that he has sufficiently eluded his two pursuers for the time being and believes he easily has two weeks' reprieve before he need worry about them again. The reason for this is simple, though he doesn't explain to the characters. He has cast a "Ward" spell with the Space

Arcanum upon the Ring with a potency high enough to make it difficult for his pursuers to locate him or the Artifact. He knows his skill exceeds that of the antagonists', and, historically, they've needed roughly two weeks to finally break through his imparted protection upon the Ring.

- *Who his pursuers are:* Gawain acknowledges he's not positive who they are, only that they assaulted two of his colleagues and him eight months previous. When reminded of Lark and Marcus' deaths, he pays sincere respect to them and their sacrifice so that he got away. When pressed to divulge the fallen mages' identities, he says only that they were fellow members of the Broadening Mind and requests that the characters show respect in letting Lark and Marcus rest in peace.

### "Just Between Us . . ."

Gawain isn't a simpleton. After eight months of running, he's surmised that his pursuers aren't chasing him but the Ring he carries. He also understands the nature of the Ring itself, that it displays the Exarchs' hand within the Fallen World, and that those pursuing him are Seers of the Throne.

If you, as Storyteller, wish to make this story one of "seek and destroy" — finding the five Artifacts of the Dethroned Queen and destroying them before they fall into Seer hands — Gawain can be used as the vehicle to make this happen. Have him take another Mysterium mage aside and share his knowledge about the Ring and the truth about his pursuers. It then falls to the player to convince the others of his cabal to assist Gawain in the endeavor.

Keep in mind that Gawain doesn't know what the ultimate intent of the Artifacts is, only that the Seers want them, so they should likely be 'destroyed.' You can then use the events described in the next four stories to muddle player intentions or cause in-fighting within the cabal.

*Why he's being pursued:* Gawain says he isn't sure, but he suspects his pursuers are mages who might be upset with members of the Broadening Mind. In truth, Gawain knows full well that his pursuers must have an Arcane, sympathetic connection to the Artifact he carries.

*His background:* Gawain admits to being an Acanthus mage of the Mysterium, though it's been some time since he last dealt with the order. Characters of the Mysterium will immediately know of the Broadening Mind and the cabal's accomplishments as soon as they hear the name uttered. They will also realize Gawain's role within the cabal and corroborate

his identity. All of this could be done before any questioning occurs, easing the severity of the other characters' inquiries.

Other questions will be answered, but Gawain will keep knowledge about the Dethroned Queen and her Artifacts close to his chest.

### *Swapping Stories*

During his three-day stay, he will engage members in casual conversations about past glories and near brushes with death. Any Mysterium mages in the cabal will be engaged more than the rest, but all are given the opportunity to brag about their scars and trophies. His amiable demeanor and genuine desire to hear their tales of adventure and drama should further ease any tensions or doubts the characters might harbor.

Gawain is the perfect guest. He makes as little mess as possible, offers to wash his own dishes and takes great pains to stay out of everyone's way. When he departs, nothing is taken, and his room is left just as it was when he arrived.

As the time draws near for him to depart, he makes good on his promise to share his knowledge about the Artifact. If the cabal as a whole was a good host, he will leave the Artifact on a table in the foyer (or whatever room in which the cabal regularly gathers) with a note that reads:

*"By Her grace She leaves this Ring,  
So all might find the Truth they seek."*

—Gawain

Otherwise, the note and clapper will be left for the most gracious character. Either way, Gawain departs in the early morning, taking care to leave a formal note of thanks to the cabal apologizing for his hasty departure. With that, he is gone.

Gawain isn't meant to be followed, but players who attempt to do so must successfully locate his resonance, discern which kind of spell was used, then ascertain which portal he stepped through, not to mention recognize that he used Teleportation as he crossed the door's threshold. At the very least, players will know firsthand that Gawain wasn't exaggerating his ability to elude his pursuers.

### *Left Behind*

Gawain uses his mastery of Space to depart from the region. After finding a secluded area in which to cast, he covers his resonant signatures with Prime 2 ("Veiling") and casts a spontaneous "Arcade" spell that creates multiple portals. He chooses one of them and casts a "Teleportation" rote to yet another destination as he steps through.

With Gawain's departure, life continues on as normal for the player characters. There is no requirement to immediately launch into the next act of this scenario. In fact, the scenario

works best the longer you postpone its continuance. The primary reason for this lies in the distance placed between Gawain and his pursuers. It will take at least a month for the Seers to regain Gawain's trail through mundane means. Until then, Storytellers are encouraged to further other plots they have in mind (or those already in progress).

Characters with Wisdom of 7 or higher will quickly learn the risks involved with using the Ring's spell. This could very well disincline others from using the Artifact at all. At this point in the story, this is fine. There is plenty of time for them to revisit the Artifact later, especially if they know that others are willing to sacrifice their lives to steal it.

Handling what characters reveal via research depends on how you want the rest of this story to progress. Provide vague answers or limited results in the event you want the majority of characters to use the Artifact. If you want them to understand how dangerous the Artifact is and its need to be destroyed, reveal more "on the nose" results that point directly to what it is they have in their possession. If you're undecided or indifferent, leave the chronicle's direction up to a critical Investigation or Occult success.

In the event you want players to find the poem in its entirety, here is the poem in full:

*By Her grace She leaves this Ring  
So we might find the Truth we seek.  
She leaves this Robe of mystic night  
So we might dwell beyond Their sight.  
This Scepter drawn She leaves for all  
To brush aside Their distant calls.  
She leaves to us this Crown of souls  
To twist Their thralls toward our own goals.  
By Her grace She leaves this last;  
A Throne whose seat will let us pass.  
—From Gifts of the Dethroned Queen*

Discovery of the poem could come from a computer keyword search, an intense scrutiny of the region's Mysterium vaults or inquiries made out of town through well-connected allies. How much is revealed depends entirely on how vague you wish to be. Burnt parchment might bear portions of the quote along with snippets of the poem in full, or references online might give credit to others who could lead players to the next clue (at a nominal price, naturally).

### *New Spell: Arcade (Space ●●●●)*

The mage can cast up to three portals (see **Mage: The Awakening**, p. 238), each to a different destination. As with "Portal," the more familiar the casting mage is with each location to which he creates a doorway, the easier it is to successfully cast the spell.

**Practice:** Weaving

**Action:** Extended (target number is based on the degree of sympathetic connection with the most difficult location chosen)



**Duration:** Transitory (one turn)

**Aspect:** Vulgar

**Cost:** 1 Mana

The target number is determined by the caster's sympathetic connection to the most difficult destination to connect to.

Connection	Successes
Intimate	3 successes
Known	5 successes
Acquainted	8 successes
Encountered	12 successes

This spell is an all-or-nothing proposition, with the total number of successes determined by the least-known destination. For example, if the caster is acquainted with two of the destinations but has only encountered the third, he must accrue 12 successes to cast the spell. If he rolls eight successes, and is then halted, the spell doesn't take effect.

Each portal of the "Arcade" spell can accommodate one person of Size 5 or less per turn (larger people can spend two turns squeezing through). Each success added to the target number allows the mage to widen all portals so that one additional person can pass through per turn.

All "Arcade" doorway entrances and exits can be placed anywhere that allows a person of Size 5 or less enough freedom of movement to enter or exit in a single turn. Note that, without applying the "Portal Key" spell described in **Mage: The Awakening** (p. 240), the caster cannot limit who can use the "Arcade" doorways. Nearby enemies can attempt to step through, too. Additionally, people can be forcibly thrown into any of the doorways as long as a hold is first achieved in a grapple action (see "Unarmed Combat," p. 157 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**), after which the grappler can shove the person through a doorway as an overpower maneuver.

#### **Mysterium Rote: Hall of Doors**

**Dice Pool:** Intelligence + Academics + Space

Mysterium mages use this rote to muddle their escape or divide any pursuers foolish enough to follow. Well-traveled mages also use this spell when the need for a "divide and conquer" approach is necessary. Mysterium mages use this rote to research time-subject matter, while Adamantine Arrow mages use "Hall of Doors" to set up impromptu ambushes against their foes.

### *The Ring of the Dethroned Queen* (Artifact ●●●)

Durability 6, Size 1, Structure 7

**Mana Capacity:** Maximum 11

The first of five Artifacts left behind by the Dethroned Queen, the Ring's name doesn't describe what the Artifact looks like, but rather what the Artifact releases when activated. In the shape of a bell clapper roughly nine inches in length, the Ring's head is spanned along its equator by 10 evenly



spaced, small stones: a diamond, ruby, emerald, sapphire, onyx, amethyst, moonstone, amber, jade and aquamarine. On the head's bottom is a sigil akin to Atlantean glyphs, but not even decipherable to experts in the High Speech.

Activation occurs when the user spends one point of Mana (either her own or the Artifact's) and taps the clapper against a solid surface — either wood, plastic, metal or stone. While bystanders hear the sound they would expect to hear a piece of metal to make when struck against the selected surface, the user hears a bass-rich tone that reverberates deep within the user's soul.

Shortly after activating the Ring, the user experiences a sensation that something was cast but is waiting to be processed. This feeling will linger indefinitely until the user decides to cast **Mage Sight**. Regardless of which **Mage Sight** spell she casts, the user will instead see that which correlates to her strongest major Arcanum (Storyteller's choice in the event the two are equal).

**Death (Grim Sight):** In addition to the standard effects listed for this spell in **Mage: The Awakening** (see p. 134), the mage also notices that certain people have tags upon their bodies, much like the toe tags used in a morgue. This tag could be wrapped around a finger, an exposed toe or dangling from an ear. Closer inspection of the tag reveals no writing, only a hint. What's more, the resolution of the tag varies from one person to the next, ranging from hinted (just noticeable) to quite clear (the lines upon which words are written are only slightly blurred).

**Fate (The Sybil's Sight):** In addition to the standard effects listed for this spell in **Mage: The Awakening** (see p. 150), the mage also notices that certain people have more distinct threads than others. How the threads manifest varies, ranging from dragged behind to hanging overhead like the strings of a marionette being put into use by an unseen puppeteer.

**Forces (Read Matrices):** In addition to the standard effects listed for this spell in **Mage: The Awakening** (see p. 163), the mage also notices that resonant energy emits a hissing whisper that's nearly coherent, as if someone were yelling from the other side of a soundproofed door. Again, the effect varies from barely audible to distinctly present, a clear indication that unknown forces are currently at work.

**Life (Pulse of the Living World):** In addition to the standard effects listed for this spell in **Mage: The Awakening** (see p. 181), the mage also detects the presence of parasitic infection around the target's aura. The effects vary from

slight discoloration to massive parasitic growth all about the target's person.

**Matter (Dark Matter):** In addition to the standard effects listed for this spell in **Mage: The Awakening** (see p. 194), the mage also picks up a tangible gravitational pull emanating from the target itself. The effects range from light tugging to a weirdly powerful pull that can only be broken if the caster deactivates the spell.

**Mind (Third Eye):** In addition to the standard effects listed for this spell in **Mage: The Awakening** (see p. 206), the mage also gleans an unseen presence just outside her field of vision. The effect ranges from shadows just beyond view to "knowing" that a strange being lurks over her shoulder and freezes the caster from looking back.

**Prime (Supernal Vision):** In addition to the standard effects listed for this spell in **Mage: The Awakening** (see p. 221), the mage also sees resonance in a color heretofore never experienced, so foreign, in fact, that the caster can't even begin to describe it to others. The effect varies from just perceptible to blindingly omnipresent.

**Space (Spatial Awareness):** In addition to the standard effects listed for this spell in **Mage: The Awakening** (see p. 233), the mage also perceives a bizarre warping of space seemingly centered on the mass of an influenced subject. The effect ranges from minor tweaks of distance and shape to major warps that could disorient the most talented of Mastigos.

**Spirit (Second Sight):** In addition to the standard effects listed for this spell in **Mage: The Awakening** (see p. 246), the mage also sees individuals and locations as "echoed." The effect varies from hazy outlines trailing behind a person as he walks to multiple mirror images tracing after a person as he walks (or along a building as the user walks by it).

**Time (Temporal Eddies):** In addition to the standard effects listed for this spell in **Mage: The Awakening** (see p.

258), the mage also discerns a subtext of time in everything. The effect varies from seeing a shadow of a person's youth to witnessing a fully fleshed visage of the target as an old man or woman.



All of these skewed perspectives are governed by the relative influence the Exarchs exert upon the target under investigation. People, objects or locations lightly manipulated by the Exarchs trigger the minor effects listed, while those targets strongly influenced by the Exarchs exude major readings.

Or so it seems. The power attributed to the Exarchs by the Ring may in fact be some other Supernal power, the magic of the Seers of the Throne being recast in some way, or it might be an elaborate magical hallucination manipulated at the will of the Exarchs. There is no reliable means to verify the assertion of the Exarchs' power. What a mage sees with the Ring Sight is clear — what it means is not.

Peering through the fabric of the world to the Supernal stitches underneath is an act of hubris. Mages with Wisdom 7 or higher must make a degeneration roll when this power is used.

### *Ring Sight (Chosen)*

#### *Major Arcanum •*

The mage gains a specialized form of Mage Sight that enables him to see Exarch influence upon the people, objects and places of the Fallen World.

**Practice:** Unveiling

**Action:** Instant

**Duration:** Prolonged (one scene)

**Aspect:** Covert

**Cost:** 1 Mana

This spell enables the caster to detect the otherwise hidden resonances altered by Exarch manipulations. How these visions are perceived depends upon which Arcanum this spell is driven by. Refer to the descriptions given for each Mage Sight in "The Ring of the Dethroned Queen" section, but ignore the Mage Sight description itself. For example, casters using this spell with Time only see the subtexts of incarnation, not

the standard effects for “Temporal Eddies” listed on p. 258 of **Mage: The Awakening**.

The effects discerned by this spell increase the more manipulated the target is by Exarch influence. People, objects or locations lightly manipulated trigger minor effects, while targets strongly influenced by the Exarchs exude major readings.

Casting this spell is an act of hubris; mages with Wisdom 7 or higher must make a degeneration roll upon casting. This spell cannot be learned without first experiencing its effects via the Ring of the Dethroned Queen.

**Rote:** This spell can be learned as a rote only at the Storyteller’s discretion.

**Dice Pool:** Wits + Occult + Chosen Major Arcanum

### Using the Ring Beyond the Story

Some player cabals may be more willing to experiment with the Artifact than others. If you are Storytelling such a troupe of players, you have a critical choice to make that could directly influence how the players handle this and the other stories of **Reign of the Exarchs**.

One approach is to amp up the paranoia. It’s reasonable to assume some measure of

Exarch manipulation enforced upon ranking officials of the local Consilium given their influential positions within Awakened society.

Combined with other perceptions received concerning direct threats, players could lose trust in Consilium motives and could very well make moves to unseat one or more officials from their positions.

Another approach is to have the “Ring Sight” spell show the characters what they *want* to see. In effect, players externalize their desires of guilt or innocence through the results of their occult investigations with this spell. The woman a mage loves couldn’t possibly be guilty, so she doesn’t register as anomalous by Ring Sight.

Conversely, the rival cabal across town can’t be up to any good, so the cabal members and their sanctums come across as less than kosher — despite the lack of mundane evidence to state otherwise. If you choose to enact this approach, keep in mind that the Exarchs wouldn’t repeatedly manipulate inconsequential mages or mundane targets, so “taint” should be on the lower end of the spectrum. Even the slightest hint of negative influences should convince a character of the target’s guilt.

A third approach is to go the opposite direction and have other characters whom players trust appear “fainted.” Be these characters allies

or other players in the cabal, the ramifications could set into motion internal dynamics that will either galvanize the players as a cabal or shatter alliances altogether. As the most unpredictable of options, this can take your chronicle into directions you never imagined it going.

### Act 2: Frame-Up

The player characters discover a disturbing trend. The resonance surrounding their shared sanctum is slowly shifting beyond the cabal’s desired parameters as the citizenry of the neighborhood live in fear. An investigation into the cause reveals a rash of home invasion crimes that range from theft to assault and intimidation. Even those customarily responsible for committing such acts — local gangs and the like — are similarly victimized.

Characters have a vested interest in solving this problem, especially if they maintain a Hallow or ley line. Unless they manage to capture those responsible, the widespread fear could alter the resonance so severely their cabal’s progress could be set back for months, if not years.

This frame-up is very intricate. Therefore, you should stretch as much time as need be to realistically explain how the antagonists were able to set all of the frame-up up. Read through the “Antagonists” section for details on each Seer, the rotes at each one’s disposal and how each one prefers to operate, both alone and as part of a team.

### Chasing the Clues

The amount of information collected depends on what resources and contacts players have to invest into their inquiry. Police contacts can provide characters with stolen goods inventories, witness descriptions of the invader(s), times and dates when the home invasions occurred and contact information for every victim who reported a crime within the last two weeks.

Items stolen vary depending on the neighborhood affected. If the shared sanctum exists in an industrial zone, capital expenditures such as computers, printers and lightweight specialty equipment make up the bulk of the inventory list. Residential neighborhoods report appliance thefts such as televisions, microwaves, personal computers and DVD players.

### Boondock Sanctum

In the event that the players’ cabal’s shared sanctum lies in the middle of nowhere away from the prying eyes of the public, you will need to come up with some creative means of disrupting the cabal’s sense of security. The discovery of slaughtered indigenous animals could certainly cause a stir, particularly among the local animal populations. Use of dynamite to disrupt waterways or roads will severely hamper travel. Damming rivers and creeks will have a serious



ecological impact and cause no end of grief for cabals with nature foremost in their minds.

Consider what natural phenomenon determines the cabal's preferred resonance and do whatever is necessary to disrupt it short of assaulting the cabal itself. The idea is to make the players look into the situation, not engage them in a battle.

If your players have no shared sanctum, disrupt activities for two or three players with crimes in their respective neighborhoods and leave it to them to decide upon the next course of action.

The descriptions of the home invaders are grossly inconsistent. Whereas one witness describes a tall, gangly man of Asian descent, another witness describes a small, portly African American with a scar across her left cheek. No two accounts match. Given the number of reports turned in (whatever value is commensurate with a crime wave based on the region's population), the likelihood of anything matching up is slim to none.

The times at which these crimes were perpetrated are also inconsistent. Morning, afternoon or night, the time doesn't seem to matter. However, there is one correlation: all the addresses lie within an approximate circumference around the characters' shared sanctum.

Similar reports can be garnered through other contacts. Rival gangs accuse one another of hiring thugs — an ironic accusation — to fuck with their operations. Claims adjusters report a rash of reports within a specified radius (coincidentally around the shared sanctum). Industrial insiders sullenly report manufacturing delays due to stolen or damaged equipment vital to production. Whoever is perpetrating the crimes is pointedly letting the cabal know that (a) they know where the cabal is and (b) they mean to do the cabal or its members harm.

### *A Closer Look*

With multiple sites to investigate further, characters can easily find opportunities at one location or another to get a closer look at a crime scene. What will strike them first is the lack of mundane physical evidence. Security measures such as cameras and motion sensors fail to trigger or are short-circuited. Industrial sites with dust, dirt or other debris on the floor will bear foreign footprints that inexplicably stop before reaching any exits. Doorknobs, windows or other means of entry will likewise be clean of foreign prints. While Sleepers investigating the matter logically conclude that the assailants got help from the inside, players can justifiably surmise that something supernatural could well be afoot.

Use of Mage Sight confirms this. Entry and exit occurred with the use of one or more Space spells, and Forces helped deactivate or render useless any and all electronic security

measures within the infiltrated area. These findings are consistent with witness accounts that the intruders — one per crime scene — “came out of nowhere” and proceeded to torture the witnesses with macabre glee. If specialists of Mind have a chance to probe one or more victims, the mages will find lingering effects of Mind spells cast upon the witnesses to amp up their fear (see “Emotional Urging” spell, p. 208 in **Mage: The Awakening**).

The same pattern is more or less repeated at other crime scenes — one assailant “comes out of nowhere” doing whatever he or she can to cause the victims great fear and dread. Couple the witnesses' fear with threats of torture and death, and it's no wonder the local resonance is adversely affected.

### **Using the Ring**

The bulk of this section covers standard magical results that can be gleaned by visiting the various sites. The investigation advantage goes to players who use the Ring or Ring Sight to obtain additional information. They will immediately detect a modest amount of “taint” at each location. If a player manages to roll three successes or more on his Ring Sight roll, his character can also discern a faint trail he can follow for a distance before the trail dissipates; an exceptional success leads him right to the final destination outlined in “Framed.”

All locations the character manages to find on this trail direct the characters toward the same point. Simple extrapolation on a map will reveal the point of convergence, at which time you can skip ahead for the continuation of this scenario.

Who is responsible for these blatant acts against the players' cabal? Based on the information collected, there's no telling how many are involved. The antagonists could be any number, from a group of decently skilled mages to a potent Solitary with a score to settle. Is another cabal within the Consilium acting against the characters? Perhaps an outside agency is responsible. Whoever the antagonist is, he's done his homework. This should make the players concerned, if not nervous.

### *On the Offensive*

Not long after, the cabal receives an unpleasant visit from a Consilium Herald. He (or she) will notice the resonance shift in the neighborhood and will pay a visit to ascertain whether the cabal is implementing the change on its own, or if the effects are out of character control. If a ley line is involved, the Herald would be on much more serious business — to inform the cabal that another cabal wants the resonance shift to be reset

to its previous state. This should put significant pressure upon the players to rectify the issue immediately, lest the cabal finds itself hauled before the Consilium for judgment and recompense.

Players have few options available. Unless they use Ring Sight (see p. 24) to garner further details, they must wait until another crime occurs before they can follow up. The antagonists will deliberately leave behind bigger clues as to their whereabouts with each invasion they conduct, and the longer the investigation takes, the more the antagonists will believe that the players haven't tapped the Ring's abilities. (Your characters would have found the antagonists earlier otherwise, and the antagonists know this due to their experiences in trying to catch up to Gawain).

Should players attempt an ambush, it won't be wholly successful; there's no rhyme or reason to the Seers' targets beyond their proximity to the shared sanctum. The best that characters can hope for is an immediate recognition when a home invasion has just taken place. Contacts with the police can notify the characters where the latest hit location is and how long they have before authorities arrive. If characters are within a block of an invaded location, they could come upon frantic victims who — unbeknownst to the players — were allowed to escape and cause a scene outside that gets the characters' attention. Any characters who find a way inside are rewarded with a glimpse of one of their foes.

However the scene plays out, three things must happen:

- Characters should see an antagonist making his escape.
- The Seer of your choice escapes through a "Portal" spell big enough to show the destination on the other side.
- The Seer does nothing to obscure detection of his magic or nimbus.

Each event should transpire in such a way that the characters have no suspicions anything is amiss. If characters don't enter the invaded structure, have the Seer come out where the characters can see him, maybe even encourage them to follow him back inside. The deliberately large portal can be passed off as a spell cast out of the Seer's control. And the haste with which the Seer had to get away explains his failure to mask his mystical mark upon the Fallen World. Done properly, players won't anticipate the antagonists' ambush until it's too late.

### *Framed!*

The trail ultimately leads to a building or house on the outskirts of the players' cabal's recognized patrol zone; you decide which structure best fits into your chronicle. Ideally, the area should be one under contest with a rival cabal or in an unclaimed territory for which there is no responsible party. The intent is to encourage players to think about political ramifications in the event something goes wrong (and they will). Do the characters notify the other cabal(s) and seek permission to investigate, or do they attempt to resolve the problem quietly without getting any other cabals involved?

The answer depends entirely on the nature of the cabal's relationship with its neighbors and the general course of your chronicle outside of this story.

## Seeking Help

Some players' cabals might opt for the politically safe route and notify the other cabal of the situation. Should the relationship between the approached cabal and your players be indifferent or amicable, give the players permission to investigate on their own and seek aid only if the situation is too great to handle. This will politically charge the stage as the story progresses, as one cabal has a legitimate gripe to bring forward to the Consilium.

If the neighboring cabal has already been established in your chronicle as a major rival, it's very doubtful the rival cabal would give blank check permission to your players. One option is to have one or two rival mages accompany the characters as observers to guarantee the situation doesn't get out of hand. Another option is to let the characters go it alone but watch from afar to ensure that player interests don't stray. The rival cabal's reaction to events as they unfold could range from grudging support during Consilium inquiries to staunch opposition, whichever works best for your chronicle as a whole.

An examination of the structure's surroundings reveals little out of place. Sleeper presence is normal for the time and place. Mundane security measures are as to be expected (cameras in standard positions around industrial complexes and automatic floodlights for private residences). A slight complication arises when the characters notice a patrol car making its rounds of the block, but this is easily avoided with a little patience, as the patrol moves on through distant parts of the neighborhood.

The structure itself looks nondescript, but any use of Mage Sight reveals a definite mystical presence about the location, one that points to it being a sanctum or, at the very least, a safe house for the perpetrators the characters are seeking.

Ring Sight reveals much more — an overwhelming aura of "taint" the likes of which the characters have not encountered. As the target structure is the only one bearing this aura, characters should shed any doubts they might have that the location isn't the one they're looking for.

Using Mage Sight around the building reveals no spells of protection, but three successes or more will uncover a larger spell set up within the building, beyond the characters' sensory limits. A glance around the area reveals a small object with an altered resonance resting in the middle of the street. Closer inspection shows the object to be an enchanted penny embedded into the asphalt.



The penny has two contingent Forces spells imbued in it. The first is a “Sound Mastery” spell that plays back a recorded contextually appropriate sound bite from one of the characters at high volume. The word or phrase should be one that a person would yell as a directive command, such as “Now!”, “Shoot!”, “Fire!” or “Go!”

The second spell, “Light Mastery,” activates immediately after the first one completes. The second spell sends a beam of intense visible light from the penny toward a traffic mirror, which bounces the emanation through a window in the house, which in turn triggers the contingent effect of an imbued item within the house — a “Control Electricity” spell that switches a current to a bare wire. Sparks fly, igniting the gas build-up within the target structure.

The blast will most definitely bring back the patrol car with sirens blaring. This, coupled with the sudden crowd that spills out as witnesses claiming to have either seen or heard the characters’ involvement in the explosion, should make players realize how big of a pickle they’re now in.

Keep track of possible or realized breaches against the Lex Magica as the characters struggle through the dilemma. Attempts to subvert witness accounts will be extremely difficult considering the high numbers and immediate police presence on the scene. Most characters will choose to flee, perhaps the best option. Any who stay will be taken into custody (protective or otherwise) and held for questioning. How characters conduct themselves will figure prominently in their subsequent trial before the Consilium.

### Embedded Penny

The penny possesses two separate, contingent conditions required to trigger its imbued effects — attempting to physically remove the penny from the asphalt or casting the Prime spell “Analyze Enchanted Item” upon it.

If the characters surround the penny on all sides, the focused beam of light will strike whoever stands (or sits) between the penny and the targeted reflective surface. Encourage the obstructing character to move by asking if he wants to make a Dexterity + Athletics roll for the character to avoid getting struck by the beam, with a failure resulting in a temporary interference before he gets out of the way and allows the beam to progress along its path.

### *How It Was Done*

The following is outlined so you as Storyteller understand the series of events that led to the characters’ current predicament. For details on the antagonists of this story, refer to the “Antagonists” section at the end of this chapter.

When Gawain fled via his “Arcade” spell, Aidan’s sympathetic link to the Ring led him through the right doorway. What he didn’t anticipate was Gawain’s use of “Teleportation” as he stepped through. Knowing the Ring was nowhere to



be found, Aidan and Sean were forced to take to the road and hope for the best.

You can choose the starting point of the Seers' search based on how much time you want to lapse between Act I and Act II. Given the substantial head start Gawain had on the Seers, they will come across the Ring well after Gawain has given it over to the characters. The Seers, with their auras masked by Prime, spend several weeks carefully watching the characters' sanctum. Aidan will manage to capture mundane audio recordings of the characters through well-placed devices about the sanctum and vehicles they use, then transfer an applicable one to the embedded penny.

The use of imbued items (the penny and the sparking wire) is a simple trap that plays into a mage's ingrained flaw of wanting to know everything. This ploy, though, doesn't guarantee success. This is where Sean comes in. After the items are imbued and the physical trap is set, Sean meets people in the area who are the most likely to be present when the explosion goes off. Choosing one, he possesses the body each night until the characters follow the deliberate clues that lead them into the trap. As soon as the explosion occurs, Sean relays what he "saw" and who was responsible.

Complications to any of these plans could arise during the course of your chronicle. The best way to proceed is to be patient. Wait for the players to make actions that allow the Seers to progress their plots. Once the trap is sprung and the story unfolds, the players will have a greater appreciation for their foes, and will hopefully learn from the experience in future storylines.

### *Act 3: A Political Nightmare*

The players should realize the enormity of the political challenge before them. Neighbors will be screaming for reparations for the explosion and its aftermath. The Sleeper response will most definitely catch the Consilium's attention, as well as any breaches of mage law that occurred during the characters' departure from the scene. Pressure will be added if one or more cabal members were caught at the scene by Sleeper authorities.

After several hours pass, a Sentinel will pay the cabal a visit and demand an explanation. When told of the frame-up, he will give the characters 24 hours to accumulate evidence proving their innocence, after which time they are to appear before the Consilium for judgment. If the characters breached the Lex Magica as they left the scene, the Sentinel should lay into them and, depending on the severity of the breach(es), hand down temporary punishments until the Consilium can decide the matter. Punishments could include banning the use of spells or putting certain characters under house arrest.

### *Proving Innocence*

The characters can prove their innocence in several ways. The best evidence is the embedded penny. If a character has it (they triggered the contingent effect by picking it up and kept the penny with them), then they need only present it for study, or study it in their sanctum to discern information

about the mage who created the penny. Otherwise, they will have to return to the scene of the explosion in order to recover it.

The other way is to interview witnesses and discern whether they were manipulated, either by money or magic. Players could reasonably assume this was the case based on the number of witnesses who claimed to see something. Odds are slim that the majority of witnesses would remember so much about the incident given the vulgar natures of the spells involved and how Disbelief makes most forget what they witnessed. Occult investigations on these witnesses will reveal evidence of Mind magic upon them. This can be done covertly by one mage as another mage questions the witness, or at a distance while the police are questioning the witnesses (apply penalties accordingly).

Any attempt to return to the scene will be risky unless the characters take measures to mask their appearances. Place authorities on site for a minimum of four hours, with a small patrol keeping vigilant watch afterward. The destroyed structure will have police tape around it, and a team of arson investigators from the fire department will scour the remains for clues as to the cause. By the next afternoon, characters with police Contacts can learn that the explosion was a deliberate act of arson resulting from the ignition of leaked gas by a bare wire.

Characters caught in the act of performing their own investigation will complicate matters more. Police Contacts will clam up due to a strict, self-imposed gag order on the department. The likelihood of being recorded on video also increases due to the heightened security and news coverage on the scene (unless the setting of your chronicle is accustomed to bombings).

### *Consilium Reaction*

How the Consilium reacts depends on the relationship the character cabal currently has with the Consilium. Does the cabal keep out of local politics or is it deeply entrenched? Have characters erred in judgment before and thus left a bad impression upon the Council, or would this be the characters' first transgression of note? Do they have allies who could offer support or give them the benefit of the doubt when they say they were framed? What about rivals — are they powerful within the Consilium, and how quickly would they like to leave your characters as social carrion?

Here are suggestions covering each eventuality so you can incorporate your chronicle's past and future into the flow of this story.

#### **Politically Active Versus Politically Inactive**

Any transgression of the Lex Magica is a serious offense regardless of the offending cabal's political leanings or involvement. The Lex Magica applies in matters of recompense, favors and social punishment.

For cabals that are too new to a Consilium to be overly involved in Awakened politics, the consequences of this story aren't terrible. Sure, the punishment will be severe if the cabal is found guilty, but no other cabals or officers of the

Consilium will find much to take advantage of due to the cabal's lack of regional influence among local mages. This isn't to say that politically savvy mages can't take advantage *at all*, just that their options are significantly reduced.

Opportunistic cabals looking for support on issues that concern them could blackmail the characters into political servitude. In return for speaking on the characters' behalf and putting the other cabal's political weight behind the characters, an opposing cabal could impress the characters to champion its agendas during political discussions and thus increase its power within the region. Other cabals might employ similar tactics to garner military support against supernatural entities plaguing their borders or territories — including other mages of the Consilium during a political coup.

No matter how greatly a new cabal suffers, the suffering can't compare to the suffering felt by politically minded players' cabals caught in the same predicament. The more politically powerful the players' cabal is, the greater the potential fall as a result of this frame-up. Longtime allies could distance themselves to maintain political favor within the region. Characters holding Consilium positions such as Herald, Councilor or even Hierarchy could find their positions challenged by those who deem these characters too incompetent to serve. Favors cultivated over time and saved for the right moment could be wasted seeking support during this time of manufactured crisis. Even if the cabal is found innocent on all charges of impropriety, the ramifications will be felt long after this sordid affair concludes.

#### First Transgression Versus Repeat Offender

Mages expect other willworkers to be as wise as they are, so any transgression — be it the first or the fifth — is

looked upon with great disdain, especially if the transgressors breached the Lex Magica.

That being said, Consilium officers will give a slight benefit of doubt to characters who had managed to keep their robes clean prior to this perceived transgression. If they claim they were set up and had no responsibility in the explosion, Councilors will demand proof to support this claim. The expectations will still be high — mages are an arrogant lot — but a nonexistent "rap sheet" in the Consilium libraries will certainly bode better for the characters as this storyline unfolds.

A players' cabal with a history of transgressions — small or otherwise — shouldn't be given the same courtesy. Whereas Heralds or Sentinels might be sent out to help a players' cabal with a clean record gather proof of the characters' innocence, Councilors will demand that a troubled cabal find its own proof, regardless of the risk the characters might face trying to obtain it. Even when they do so, the mages trying the characters will go over the evidence with a fine-toothed comb, looking for any reason to discount the claim.

None of this will help either cabal classification if breaches of the Lex Magica occurred *after* the explosion. A cabal could go from clean to repeat offender for being so foolish in its reaction to the frame-up, and will be punished accordingly despite confirmed evidence the cabal had nothing to do with the explosion itself.

#### Support from Allies

There is no greater barometer of friendship than hardship. A players' cabal caught in this bind can find out quickly who in the Consilium are genuine allies and who were pretenders. If the characters have established a well-grounded relationship with another cabal in the Consilium, that other cabal may



be willing to extend a little love to the characters and aid them in their attempt to prove their innocence. Naturally, this aid won't come without a price, but aid will be there, and any aid is better than none.

Although this rarely happens, allies might go to the political mat for a players' cabal if the allies believe the characters are innocent. In effect, the allies place their political future within the region in the characters' hands. Should the characters come through, the friendship will be galvanized and thus create a strong political force within the region. A players' cabal with little to no investment in local politics could find itself thrust into the thick of it all and come out smelling better than the cabal did prior to the frame-up.

Conversely, characters who fail to prove their innocence will bring their allies down. Consilii will treat the allies as if they caused the breach and will punish them for the unwise decision to support a cabal in the wrong. What once were allies should now become bitter enemies who will go to the ends of the earth to exact revenge for this tremendous social downfall.

### The Corruption Within

Chronicles dealing with a corrupt Consilium could go in another direction and find the characters guilty, regardless of whatever evidence proves them otherwise. A cabal that stuck by the characters' back could remain a staunch ally and aid the characters in their push to oust the current regime.

### The Rival Response

Rivals established during the course of a chronicle will have varied reactions. Some will be ardent opponents who push for severe penalties against the characters and rebut any claims of frame-up no matter what evidence might be presented. Cunning rivals, however, could see an opportunity to rape the characters politically by offering support at an exorbitant price. This could be in the form of an Artifact (not the Ring unless the characters were foolish enough to mention it publicly), serious political favors (assisting the rival in taking down the Hierarch) or raw power on a regular basis (monthly payments of tass).

The greatest foe the characters should face are those cabals directly affected by the plotted incident — those cabals that control territory bordering or in which the explosion occurred. Not only is there collateral damage involved, but the effects on the local resonance will be profound. Cabals that rely on a specific resonance will demand recompense for the efforts expended recouping from the incident. Even if the player cabal is found innocent, these victims could insist that the characters brought this about because they weren't wise enough to recognize the ruse beforehand.

A good way to tweak with your players' perceptions of a rival is to have that rival support the characters *without any request for recompense*. The reasoning is simple: the rival

wants to be the one to bring down the characters and won't be satisfied unless he does so when the troupe's cabal can't claim weakness due to an outside agency. Nobody picks on my brother but me, as it were.

### *While You Were Out*

The Seers' next plan of action is to search the sanctum once its members are otherwise occupied. Having set up the ambush, the seers will take positions near the sanctum and conduct a stakeout to determine when the Consilium intends to conduct its inevitable hearing on the incident. The Seers will obscure their supernatural auras with Prime to avoid detection and do what they can to catch conversations among characters and whatever visitors drop by.

Aidan expects the characters to know they're being set up by another mage. Therefore, he will *not* use any spells for eavesdropping. If anything, he will use mundane means to capture what he can. Lip-reading through windows, listening devices planted on the patio and directional listening equipment are all valid methods that could be employed. Characters suspecting they might be watched could put up protections to either prevent or detect most of these means. Provide penalties as appropriate based on the method employed and its proximity to the investigator at the time of casting.

Assuming the Ring is left behind when the characters depart for their hearing, the Seers will wait half an hour before invading the shared sanctum. Aidan's sympathetic link to the Ring will enable him to find it within five minutes of entering, longer if the characters have measures in place that prevent an immediate "smash and grab" of the Artifact in question. Neither character cares about triggering alarms that alert the player cabal of the trespass; Aidan knows that the cabal must first convince the Consilium that the invasion is real before the cabal members can return. What does matter to them are any spells that cause bodily harm, as well as any retainers employed by the characters to keep watch over the sanctum in the characters' absence.

Aidan and Sean would go in partially blind. During their surveillance, they would identify whichever retainers perform regular patrols of the residence. Aidan and Sean would *not* be aware of any familiars the characters control unless these familiars manifest where the Seers could spot them from the outside. Since neither Seer has a Spirit Arcanum, familiars that act aggressively against the trespassers will have a surprise action on them both, after which the Seers will do what they can to get in and out as quickly as possible. Mortal retainers will be treated harshly, more so if they attempt to deny the trespassers' entry or search by violent means. Retainer death is at the Storyteller's discretion, but should you decide to allow it, this would not be out of character for either Seer antagonist.

The fewer safety measures used on the sanctum, the easier it will be for the Seers to find the Ring and take it. Characters who are lax on security should learn a difficult lesson about its importance. The World of Darkness isn't meant to be a happy universe where people can keep their doors unlocked. These antagonists won't be the first to attempt to invade the



characters' sanctum, so better they learn the importance of security now than the hard way against a much larger and nefarious foe.

If the security measures employed by characters are better than average, the characters shouldn't be penalized severely. Aidan and Sean will retreat empty-handed before the situation gets too out of control, but they will not give up their quest to secure the Artifact.

If the characters have alarms in place to notify them when their sanctum is invaded or under attack, wait until a moment you deem appropriate to give this notification to the players. If the characters' case isn't going well, you could have a character receive word in the middle of a Consilium reprimand. Interrupting the tirade would be political suicide, but, at the same time, the characters are wasting precious time that could be spent returning to the sanctum to protect it.

It could wind up that players don't care about their political futures and immediately Portal back to the sanctum. This could set up a lively combat in the middle of the characters' property, with Aidan telling Sean to hold the others off while he continues the search.

#### **The Ring on the Move**

If one of the characters brings the Ring with her as they head to the Consilium, Aidan would know. He also knows that his chances of recovering the Ring are much better if the Ring remains with the player cabal. Though his knowledge of Consilium politics isn't great, he knows that elder mages will put pressure on younger to hand over rare Artifacts. This is a risk Aidan isn't willing to take.

Aidan and Sean will accost the characters in transit, attacking before they arrive at the Consilium. Aidan would know which mage possesses the Ring and will inform Sean of this. The first volley will be against this mage. During subsequent attacks, Sean and Aidan will work in tandem to press the attack until (a) they recover the Ring or (b) Aidan suffers injuries too grievous to ignore (he won't care if Sean falls, and Sean would sooner die than let down his pylon).

Aidan and Sean aren't sloppy. They will take whatever advantages are offered. If two cars are taken, they will make sure the other car can't turn back immediately (i.e., changing a streetlight signal, if the trailing car has the Ring in it, popping a tire). They will also use vulgar magic to accomplish their goal. While they will do what they can to limit Disbelief — waiting for a low traffic area to mount their attack, for instance — they don't care about whatever Paradoxes they incur during the process. The prize is within their grasp, and they intend to seize it.

If the Seers secure the Ring, the characters will have to decide what to do. Do they chase after the Seers while the trail is still hot, or do the characters avoid further punishment from the Consilium and show up to their hearing? If they retain the Ring, they can show up at the hearing with strong evidence that they are indeed being framed by relating the recent attack to the Councilors. While it won't exonerate the characters of any crimes they committed against the

Lex Magica during the escape from the scene, they have firm grounds to clear themselves of causing the explosion by supernatural means.

### **Using Ring Sight in Battle**

When used to view the Seers' auras, Ring Sight reveals them to be extremely "tainted," warped by whatever agency is responsible for causing the taint. If the characters refrained from using Ring Sight prior to this moment, they should now be acutely cognizant of how useful the Ring's power can be. Despite the cost the Ring demands for using it, the ends are well worth it, especially if the characters can identify their enemies by means no other mage has knowledge of.

At the same time, the characters should have some measure of confusion with regard to the other "tainted" objects or people they've identified since the Ring has come into their possession. What does this recent revelation say about the characters? Are they just as bad as these mages the characters are currently at odds with, or is there more to it? As this story concludes, players should want to know more about the Ring, its power and what exactly its power is able to detect.

### *Act 4: Retribution and Revelation*

When all is said and done, it's time to evaluate the situation. Did the characters keep the Ring, or did the Seers manage to secure it for themselves?

#### *Characters Keep the Ring*

At this point, players should realize that the Ring is a significant Artifact to have in one's possession. If they didn't investigate it completely before, they have an excellent reason to do so now. They should also be keenly aware that Gawain's pursuers weren't following Gawain but the Artifact. If you're feeling generous as a Storyteller, give the players an Intelligence + Occult roll. A success helps them realize the Ring is the means by which the antagonists were able to locate the characters' sanctum, as well as track Gawain halfway across the world. As long as the characters have the Ring, they can be tracked down.

#### **The Seers' Next Move**

With the situation as dire as it is, the Seers currently find themselves trapped in a corner. Too weak to attack, they can't mount an effective offensive against their quarry. Yet if they wait, not only will their quarry get stronger, but the characters will also be armed with more knowledge about the Artifact than Aidan cared for them to possess. In addition, odds are that the characters will include others in the

secret of the Ring, making the Seers' goal that much harder to accomplish.

As Storyteller, it's your job to discern the best course of action. Though this way is underhanded, you can improve odds in the Seers' favor by coercing players to keep the Ring's power a cabal secret. If two mages from England are willing to go to such lengthy measures to procure the Ring, what's to say the other cabals of the local Consilium won't do the same? Power this great shouldn't be relinquished. The characters owe it to one another to keep the Ring to themselves lest they lose their edge over everyone else — including the Hierarchy.

Should you choose this angle, you are better off instilling this sense of secrecy as early in the story as possible. Any research performed could lead to this conclusion, as discovery would turn the Awakened world upside-down. Use character Vices against them to ensure they keep the Ring in the house. Lust, Pride and Greed are susceptible to the Ring's depredations. Working these Vices to your advantage gives you more leeway with the Seers' next move. They can bide their time for another optimal moment or wait to see how the players respond.

#### On the Offensive . . . Again

One tack players can take is to go on the offensive. Armed with Ring Sight, the characters can attempt to flip the tables on their pursuers, hunting *them* down and bringing the fight to their doorstep.

To accentuate the misinterpretations of what Ring Sight actually does, you can play up the desire angle mentioned

earlier in the sidebar titled "Using the Ring Beyond the Story" on p. 25. The more players want to find their "tainted" quarry, the more intense this altered resonance leads them true. Besides bringing your story to a quick resolution, it will also serve to confuse players later when they undertake future stories in the **Reign of the Exarchs** saga.

Where do the clues lead? The simple solution would be someplace within the cabal's patrolling grounds. Wounded and anxious to strike again, the Seers might choose to be the defender in this next battle, mounting a last stand close by and therefore employing different tactics to help them succeed when once they failed.

If you decide to have the Seers bide their time, place them beyond the characters' stomping grounds, even in another cabal's territory. Aidan would know this to be the wisest, most secure move to take. Fully aware that the characters must obtain permission from both the Consilium *and* the affected cabal to enter the territory, he would dare the characters to attack. Naturally, the Seers have no way of knowing how the Consilium ruled, and the Seers also don't know whether the cabal in whose territory they now reside bears animosity against the characters. Still, this option again thrusts players into a political milieu, one they must get accustomed to if their characters intend to thrive in Awakened society.

Assuming all the political hoops have been jumped through, it's time to exact revenge. The Seers will do whatever they can to encourage the characters to use vulgar magic. The Seers might even bring the fight out in public to better make their escape.



Unless the players have a cogent plan of attack in place that you find satisfactory or creative, don't make this easy on them.

Keep in mind that neither antagonist would be heartbroken if the other died. Which one succumbs first will dictate how the rest of the story progresses. With Aidan's death, the ability to track the Artifact goes away. Sean must go it alone, tracking the characters instead of the Artifact and relying on interrogation to get the answers he seeks (not a bad proposition considering his mastery of Mind). His tactics would also be comparatively weak. Without knowledge of Consilium traditions, he must resort to simpler traps in order to gain the upper hand.

With Sean's death, Aidan is free to pursue as long as he needs to. More patient, knowledgeable and adroit than Sean, Aidan can be that thorn in the characters' side they can't quite reach, a potentially recurring enemy that pops up at the most inopportune times. This isn't to say he can't be stopped. At some point, he needs to fall, but, of the two, Aidan is the most likely to persevere and annoy.

#### Defensive Stance

Rather than go on the offensive, the players might choose to wait for the antagonists' next attack. This provides a perfect opportunity to instill paranoia into the story. Unsure where the next attack will come from, have the characters' use of RingSight detect subtle taints everywhere, as if their doubts and insecurities are manifesting through their use of the spell. Eventually, the Seers will attack, but draw the wait out for effect.

Knowing that the Seers tracked Gawain via the Ring, the characters might use the Artifact as bait to lure the antagonists into the characters' own trap. Gauge the effectiveness of the trap and react accordingly. A solid setup should be rewarded with success. Poorly thought-out ruses, however, should be exploited, either with the antagonists not falling for it or, worse yet, the theft of the Artifact from the characters' possession. **Mage: The Awakening** rewards wisdom. It should reflect in the storyline's progression if players don't think their plans all the way through.

When the combat occurs, follow the suggestions listed under "On the Offensive . . . Again" above.

#### *Seers Get the Ring*

Once the Ring is in the Seers' possession, they will hastily leave the region. Regardless of who survives, both will return to Ireland, Sean to prove his loyalty to his pylon and Aidan to recover his Profane Urim. What happens next depends on who lives to return.

*Sean survives* — Sean returns with the Ring and turns it over to his elders. The Ring stays with the pylon until such time that the characters track it down and attempt to steal it from the pylon.

*Aidan survives* — Aidan will also return to Ireland, but not directly to the pylon. Instead, he visits other pylons with which he has good relationships and spends time reviewing his options. He will also do whatever research he can on the other four Artifacts of the legend to determine whether he still needs the Ring to benefit, or if the spell is all he needed to learn in order to move on to the next level.

*Both survive* — When they arrive at Sean's pylon victorious, he is heartily congratulated. Things turn sour when Aidan demands that the pylon return his Profane Urim to him per their agreement. The pylon will do so until the Ring is in the group's possession. At a diplomatic impasse when Aidan refuses to comply, he attempts to leave with the Ring. A battle ensues. Aidan (who anticipated this would happen and made preparations accordingly) kills two of the mages before he is overmatched. The three survivors take the Ring from his body and research it at their leisure.

If the characters are to recover the Ring, a road trip will be in their future. But they must first figure out where it is they need to go to find it. One way the characters can accomplish this is to make a sympathetic connection to the Ring or an assailant, whichever offers the better chance of success. Of course, Aidan's frustrations in trying to find the Ring will lead him to take the same precautions. His casting of "Ward" is a Potency 3 spell. After including the sympathetic penalties each caster incurs (see p. 114, **Mage: The Awakening**), penalize an additional -4 dice to break through the "Ward" spell.

#### History Lesson

In case the characters find it difficult to sympathetically locate the Ring, all is not lost. Gawain left much more than an Artifact at the sanctum. He dropped information about himself that the characters can use as clues to the antagonists' current whereabouts. Firstly, he is of British descent, a man of refined background who no doubt spent a goodly amount of time among the nobility of England and the British Isles.

The second major clue came with his declaration of membership in the cabal of the Broadening Mind. Characters who are members of the Mysterium immediately recognize both the cabal's and Gawain's names and their exploits within the order. Requesting information from the vaults to pinpoint major events in the Broadening Mind's chronology would be a simple matter. Even if no characters belong to this order, they would still know that the name refers to a Mysterium cabal of some repute, especially if any of the characters possess a European background (the Broadening Mind's common stomping grounds).

The most important information obtained centers on Gawain's cabal-mates in the Broadening Mind. They established a sanctum in Ireland, one that persevered until Lark and Marcus left to join Gawain on his quest for unnamed reasons.

#### Secrets of the Broadening Mind

Despite the renown the cabal received from others of the Mysterium, few mages were ever aware of the cabal's primary goal, to see whether the legend of the Dethroned Queen and her Artifacts was true. All Mysterium historians know for certain is that Gawain disbanded himself from the cabal due to an internal disagreement with his brethren, went Solitary for a while, returned to the Broadening Mind and convinced two of its members to travel with him.



There are rumors circulating that Gawain presented evidence that brought Lark and Marcus to his way of thinking, but it wasn't enough to convince the entire membership. Only the surviving members of the cabal — Gawain, Illumined and Finneran — really know the entire story, but up to this point none have had reason to share it with the public.

Using the order grapevine to pinpoint Illumined and Finneran's current location will take time the further away the characters are from Britain. Even in this age of high-speed Internet and international cell service, there should be a wait time of one week minimum for the characters to receive an answer. Characters who wish to expedite the search will find it faster flying across the Atlantic and inquiring in person.

#### Waiting for Word

If the characters wait for word of Illumined and Finneran's location before departing, the characters will learn that the two joined the Emerald Eye cabal in Glasgow, Scotland. If contacted by distant means (phone or email), they will insist anything having to do with Gawain must be communicated in person. Only then will they speak, and even then they will be reluctant to provide any information about the Ring, Gawain or their fallen comrades.

Tones change immediately the moment Illumined and Finneran discover that Gawain's pursuers — Lark and Marcus' murderers — stole the Ring from the characters and left town. Intrigued with the prospect of exacting revenge, Illumined and Finneran let spill all they know. They reveal the manner by which Gawain came across the Ring (see Gawain's background on p. 19), as well as guesses as to whom the pursuers might be (confirmed if the characters share information on how the pursuers chased after Gawain by sympathetic connection to the Artifact).

From here, the characters can travel to Aidan's destroyed sanctum or the old sanctum of the Broadening Mind to discern what additional clues they can find.

### Antagonists

This story pits player characters against the two men pursuing Gawain since his departure from Ireland. Both are Seers intent on securing an Artifact they believe to be their birthright to procure.

#### Aidan

**Quote:** *I believe you have something of ours, and we'd like it back.*

**Background:** Aidan always assumed there was a grand conspiracy against him, be it the government, his parents or those he used to call friends. When he Awakened, he knew it.

When the Seers first approached him, he was suspicious of their intentions. Every good turn they gave him he received with a dubious eye and an expectation of the worst. The

worst never came. He grew to trust his pylon and went from being its most unpredictable member to the most ardent supporter.

When Gawain joined forces to destroy Aidan's pylon, Aidan was on the Continent doing research on the Dethroned Queen. He returned to find the pylon sanctum destroyed, then read of his partners' deaths in the paper the next morning. Though the article blamed the tragedy on a busted gas main, Aidan knew better. When he was unable to find the pylon's Profane Urim or the Ring, he was absolutely positive.

The first order of business was to recover the stolen Urim. After petitioning for aid from a neighboring pylon, Aidan and the pylon managed to steal the Urim back from the cabal Gawain had helped. Their deaths did little to sate his desire for revenge. Torturing the last survivor revealed Gawain's name, as well as his ownership of the other Artifact. The assisting pylon demanded to know what the other Artifact was. At first Aidan refused, but when the pylon threatened to keep the Profane Urim for itself, he grudgingly told them.

The tale of the Artifact piqued the pylon's curiosity. The pylon reneged on the deal to return the Urim. Instead, the mages informed Aidan that he would get it back as soon as he retrieved the Ring. What's more, he would be accompanied by one of the pylon's members to improve Aidan's chances of success. With no other options, Aidan agreed.

Through the Arcane connection Aidan maintains with the Ring, he and his traveling companion tracked down Gawain's party and ambushed them in a London warehouse. Aidan and Sean killed two, but Gawain escaped with the Artifact. They have pursued him ever since.

Aidan's top priority is recovering the Ring, but part of the agreement made with the pylon to which Sean belongs was



to return the Artifact to them. Aidan has no intention of doing so, even if that means sacrificing the Profane Urim. He is after a bigger prize, one that will enable him to recover the Urim at his leisure.

**Description:** Aidan is a paunchy man of average height, with thinning red hair beneath a beat-up baseball cap and a pale, freckled complexion. He looks much older due to alcohol abuse in his younger years and a horrible chain-smoking habit he's still trying to kick. T-shirts and sweatshirts comprise the bulk of his wardrobe, most in dark colors or simple white to blend into pedestrian crowds.

Aidan's nimbus is a wash of electrical sparks that crackle about him, followed by a whiff of ozone in the air.

**Storytelling Hints:** Aidan is one calculating, pissed-off Irishman. When behind the scenes, he has the ability to focus his anger toward whatever project he sets his mind to. He can process numerous scenarios in his head and come up with cogent provisions for every occasion. When face to face with those who have earned his ire, he must make a great effort to maintain focus on the goal ahead. This doesn't mean he'll stick around longer than he should, but if an opportunity presents itself to launch a cheap shot at the characters, he'll take it.

Aidan will sacrifice Sean if doing so means getting a second chance to steal the Artifact or escape with it. Sacrificing Sean should be done in such a way that the characters don't recognize the tactic for what it is. For example, Aidan might set Sean up as the trailing mage when the player cabal chases after them, or fake an injury to prompt Sean into protecting him.

**Dedicated Magical Tool:** A D-cell battery with an incomprehensible word etched into it meaning "Power"

**Path:** Obrimos

**Order:** Seers of the Throne

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 3, Wits 4, Resolve 3

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 2, Composure 3

**Mental Skills:** Crafts 3, \*Investigation (Tracking) 2, \*Occult (Resonance) 3,

**Physical Skills:** Brawl 3, Firearms 1, Larceny (Pickpocketing) 3, Stealth 3, Survival 1, Weaponry 1

**Social Skills:** \*Persuasion 2, Subterfuge 3

**Merits:** Artifact (Profane Urim) 7, Fighting Style: Boxing (Body Blow, Duck and Weave) 3, High Speech 1, Language (Latin) 3, Status (Seers of the Throne) 2

**Willpower:** 6

**Wisdom:** 5

**Virtue:** Temperance

**Vice:** Wrath

**Initiative:** 6

**Defense:** 3

**Speed:** 10

**Health:** 8

**Gnosis:** 3

**Arcana:** Forces 2, Prime 3, Space 3, Time 2

**Rotes:** Forces — Read Matrices (•), \*Ring Sight (•), Tune In (•), Unseen Shield (••); Prime — Supernal Vision (•), Counterspell (•), Transform Aura (••), Unseen Spy (••), Imbue Item (•••)

\*Ring Sight learned from exposure to the Ring

**Mana/per Turn:** 12/3

**Armor:** 2 ("Unseen Shield," Forces ••)

*Sean*

**Quote:** *Get on the floor! NOW!*

**Background:** As a child, Sean witnessed his older brother's death as a result of an IRA bombing. The event profoundly changed Sean, callusing his once sensitive demeanor and prompting him to join the military the moment he was old enough to do so. He became a marksman and was soon indoctrinated into Ireland's Special Forces. While inside, he took an astral journey that eventually led to his Awakening at the Watchtower in Pandemonium. Confused, and with more questions than answers, he left the service and wandered about Dublin in search of meaning and clarity.

When the Seers of the Throne found him, they recognized a man in need of direction. Taking advantage of his military training, they instructed him in the nuances of magic and how to use it in the Exarchs' name. Sean took to the instruction quickly and soon became a loyal member of his pylon. He does whatever is asked of him, be it manipulation, intimidation or murder.

Aidan's involvement with the pylon led to the current agreement. Sean, not as versed in the Ring's myth as his elders, is keenly aware of the Ring's importance, as well as the danger he'll be put in traveling alone with Aidan. Sean is anxious to face the challenge and endure. If that means killing Aidan to fulfill his obligation to his pylon, so be it.

**Description:** In his early 30s, Sean maintains his fit physique with strenuous workouts and regular visits to a shooting range. Unlike most of his countrymen, his skin is leathery with constant exposure to the elements, remnants of the harsh Special Forces training he endured. When he speaks, it's in a soft-spoken, confident tone, a tone that leads many who converse with him to innately understand just how dangerous a man he is.

When casting, Sean's nimbus causes nearby shadows to stretch unnaturally then immediately recoil back to normal.

**Storytelling Hints:** A gifted Adept of Mind, Sean's role is one of support. At Aidan's direction, Sean plants all the misinformation involved in the ambush. He's also the primary home invader, letting his military training take over to intimidate and cajole his hostages. He is the soldier of the team, but one who holds little loyalty toward his commander. If the situation gets grim, Sean will take the initiative and take the Ring for himself.

**Dedicated Magical Tool:** A hologram baseball card with an obscure etching in the upper corner that symbolizes thought

**Path:** Mastigos

**Order:** Seers of the Throne

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 2

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

**Social Attributes:** Presence 3, Manipulation 3, Composure 2

**Mental Skills:** \*Investigation 3, \*Occult (Spells) 2

**Physical Skills:** Brawl 3, Firearms (Rifle) 5, Stealth (Crowds) 3, Survival 2, Weaponry 1

**Social Skills:** Intimidation (Veiled Threats) 3, Persuasion 1, Streetwise 2, Subterfuge 3

**Merits:** Barfly 1, Gunslinger 3, High Speech 1, Language (Latin) 1, Occultation 2, Quick Draw 1, Status (Seers of the Throne) 1

**Willpower:** 7

**Wisdom:** 6

**Virtue:** Fortitude

**Vice:** Lust

**Initiative:** 5

**Defense:** 2

**Speed:** 11

**Health:** 8

**Gnosis:** 2

**Arcana:** Mind 3, Space 3, Fate 1, Prime 1

**Rotes:** *Mind*—Aura Perception (•), Third Eye (•), First Impressions (••), Misperception (••); *Space*—Scrying (••)

**Mana/per Turn:** 11/2

**Armor:** 3 ("Misperception," Mind •••)







# CHAPTER TWO: THE ROBE

*The ancient sorceress-queen called the Cold Smile was carried on the backs of her people, hoisted high on a throne lashed together from Atlantean stones.*

*The novice mage, Cymbeline Hand, rides in the back of a pick-up truck, rocking back and forth on bales of hay lashed together with twine.*

*The Cold Smile, the Archmage Qherephis, bent mortal wills with her twisting words, her whorish eyes, her hips as round as the moon.*

*Cymbeline, the simple day-dreamer, softens hearts with her gull-shaped smile, her wondering eyes, her shoulders shrugging with happy uncertainty.*

*Cymbeline steps into the woods and the wildflowers turn to watch. Qherephis comes nearer now, slinking towards the surface of Cymbeline from inside. Cymbeline, her hands on the straps of her backpack, climbs up the rocks to the top of the rise. Qherephis slips her hands into Cymbeline's, getting used to her fingertips from the inside. Cymbeline lays eyes on the deep reds of the bleeding forest and Qherephis whispers in her ear from inside.*

*"It's time."*

HER WHORISH EYES HER  
HIPS AS ROUND AS THE MOON

***Behold, I shew you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.***

**— St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:51**

***For here is authority. In this Robe I rule. In this Robe I hold authority;  
authority unto Death and Beyond.***

**The Dethroned Queen, quoted in the Testament of the Cold Smile (fragment)**

The choice between right and wrong is rarely as clear as we'd like it to be. For the Awakened, this is all the more true. The noblest magician can fall the farthest. A mage can commit the greatest crimes for the noblest esoteric intentions.

Doing the right thing is easy. Knowing what the right thing is: there's the difficulty.

In this story, the cabal will be forced to decide the fate of a young mage, for good or ill. Do the cabal members help a friend to fulfill her destiny? Or do they believe an enemy — a seemingly noble, decent, honest enemy — who tells them that the consequences of aiding their friend could be more terrible than anything the cabal members could imagine?

## *The Pursuit*

Cymbeline Hand, a young mage known to the cabal, has absconded, taking with her an odd pair of artifacts, the Eyes of Salt, which belonged to an important member of the local Consilium (a Provost or Councilor, if not the Hierarch). The troupe's cabal has been asked to find Cymbeline and retrieve the Eyes. If the characters can bring Cymbeline back, that's a bonus. Why the troupe's characters? They know her. She's a friend. They're the ones who are likely to care (see below).

Ever since she was a child, Cymbeline has been having dreams about strange things: ancient landscapes, Body Orchards, Eyes of Salt, a Heart Full of Flies, the Raiment of a lost Queen. The dreams became stronger when Cymbeline Awakened, not long ago. Compelled by intense curiosity, and the constant feeling that there was some important memory that she couldn't quite put her finger on, Cymbeline wondered what her dreams meant.

The skeins of fate draw together, bringing Cymbeline closer to her destiny, seemingly by dumb luck. Apparently by chance, Cymbeline finds her way to the characters' home Consilium. There, again apparently by chance, she discovers that the Eyes of Salt, which she long thought to be no more than symbols in a dream, are real. The dreams become more frequent. She needs the Eyes of Salt. She cannot think of anything else. One night, she wakes up from one of the most vivid dreams she has ever experienced. In a near-hypnagogic state, she steals the Eyes with ease. No alarms, magical or otherwise, ring. No one wakes up. It's almost as if the Eyes want to be stolen.

By the time the owner of the Eyes of Salt discovers that they're missing, Cymbeline, filled with exultation and terror in equal measure, is well on the way to the next place her dreams are leading her to.

What no one knows — not even Cymbeline — is that her genes hold the key to the rebirth of someone, something ancient and terrible.

## *Cxaxa Qherephis*

The Raiments of the Dethroned have vanished and resurfaced periodically during the centuries. Some centuries after the Dethroned Queen died, her Robe appeared, in the hands of Cxaxa Qherephis, a vastly powerful mage. Qherephis, called the Cold Smile, the Swarming Heart, the Splintered Sight, ruled over a million Sleeping souls in her day, using the Robe of the Dethroned Queen as the mark of her authority. Qherephis was foremost among the leaders of the Silver Ladder in her time. Her word was law. To hear her was to obey her, and despair. Her beauty was incomparable, her authority unimpeachable, her anger inescapable, her wrath fatal, often on a terrifying scale.

Whether she was just a mortal mage or not, Qherephis claimed herself to be a goddess, and apparently believed it, too. Either way, she was quite insane. The war that ended her brief, apocalyptic reign resulted in her disappearance. That's all that's come down to the Awakened scholars of today. Her story exists in fragmentary texts, discarded references in obscure works. She's a footnote in history.

At the moment of her final defeat, Qherephis hit upon a plan to escape her own death. She split her soul into three fragments. One fragment she invested in a pair of stone eyes — the Eyes of Salt. She placed the second inside a hollow glass heart, filled with a swarm of immortal flies. And the third fragment she diffused within the blood of her youngest, Sleeping daughter. The ancient Robe that symbolized her power became a key to the archmage's immortality. The Robe was already a potent magical artifact. Although Qherephis could not alter the artifact in any way, it became a symbol of authority — hers, the Exarchs', the Dethroned Queen's — and as such carried enough metaphysical weight to take a place in her plan.

Without a soul, Cxaxa Qherephis died before her enemies could find her, confident that one day her plan could come to fruition. One day she would incarnate, in a direct female-line descendant who would, just as her ancestor and ancient self, would have an Awakened soul. Led by dreams and visions, this one-third reincarnation of the Cold Smile would seek out the Eyes of Salt and the Heart Full of Flies.

Having brought themselves together, the three fragments of the soul seek out the Robe. At the moment Qherephis'



descendant touches the Robe, Qherephis' memories and personality will assert themselves in this new body. At this stage, aware and in complete control of her future self, Qherephis will tear out her own eyes and heart with her bare hands, replacing them with the Eyes of Salt and the Heart Full of Flies.

If someone stops her from doing this, Qherephis will have failed. After a few days, she'll fade into the brain of her descendant like a vague, inconsequential dream. Her descendant will find herself with a greater share of power, but will have the freedom to create her own destiny. If Cxaxa Qherephis succeeds, the mind and soul of her descendant will be consumed, erased irrevocably in the burst of power that brings about the ancient mage's rebirth.

Cymbeline Hand is Cxaxa Qherephis' last female-line descendant, and the reincarnation of the ancient archmage. Like a puzzle box, the mystery opens itself inside Cymbeline's head, and at the moment she touches the Robe, the solution will bring enlightenment — and annihilation.

### *Choices*

Everything that happens from now on depends upon the intervention of the troupe.

Cymbeline is even now throwing herself headlong into terrible peril, as she seeks the Heart Full of Flies in a Verge known to some as the Body Orchard. If the cabal doesn't get there in time, or if the characters choose not to follow her in there, Cymbeline's journey ends, as, unable to escape, she becomes part of a grove of flesh for eternity.

If the characters rescue Cymbeline, she shows them the Heart Full of Flies and begs them to help her find the last piece of the puzzle, a Robe, which once belonged to a Dethroned Queen.

Whether or not the cabal decides to help her or not, Cymbeline discovers that the Robe is in a place called "Witchend." Witchend, it turns out, is an idyllic village, apparently the perfect community, and under the control of a small group of Seers of the Throne. The Seers hold the Robe, and the Seers have been warned by their usual indirect means that Cymbeline is coming and that she is terribly dangerous, although they have no idea who or what she really is.

Although the Seers aren't all that powerful, Cymbeline isn't a match for them on her own. If the cabal doesn't help her, she'll be killed or, worse, brainwashed into becoming a faithful servant of the Exarchs without ever seeing the Robe.

If the cabal agrees to follow Cymbeline to Witchend and help her to find the Robe, new dilemmas open up for the characters. The Seers, who are pleasant, personable and well-intentioned, attempt to convince the cabal that Cymbeline is dangerous and must be stopped.

Things are no longer black or white. The people of Witchend are happy. The Seers are reluctant to resort to violence. Cymbeline is clearly obsessed, without knowing exactly what the result of her quest will be.

The single most significant choice the cabal has to make is whether to see Cymbeline's dream through to its completion.

As the story comes to its climax, it's up to the characters to decide whether to stop Cymbeline — and when.

### *Theme*

The theme is free choice versus destiny. The cabal's choices will dictate whether Cymbeline Hand lives or dies, and whether Cxaxa Qherephis remains dead, or effects her rebirth. Cymbeline wants to be free to follow her dreams, but if her fate now lies in the hands of the cabal, is she really free? Is she doomed, whatever the result?

Meanwhile, a group of Seers of the Throne manipulate the destinies of their idyllic village. But do they really? And even if they do, is that such a bad thing?

### *Mood*

The mood of this story is anticipatory. Just around the corner, something is coming — something terrible and wonderful. Cymbeline projects an edgy, twitchy energy as she daily grows closer to the culmination of something that she's waited her whole life for. The flesh-trees in the Body Orchard quiver, as if in trepidation of what is to follow. Through dreams, the study of scripture and the interpretation of prophecies given in tongues, the Seers in Witchend know that Cymbeline is the harbinger of something dreadful and must be stopped, if they are to keep control.

The pathetic fallacy comes into play: the cabal is confronted with spectacular dawn skies. The wind rushes at the backs of Cymbeline and her protectors. Clouds loom — an oncoming storm.

This breaking-through of the future into the present expresses itself as speaking in tongues. There are some who think that glossolalia is the language of angels, given by the Holy Spirit to edify humanity; others consider glossolalia to be the purest language from which all human language once sprang, an elemental expression of emotion and human potentiality. The mouths of the flesh-trees in the Body Orchard speak in tongues. The messages the Seers in the Witchend Residents' Committee believe they receive from the Exarchs are given in tongues by one of their Sleeper allies and interpreted by one of the mages.

### **How Powerful?**

This story works best with a cabal of mages who have some experience, but not too much.

Mages who have four or five dots in any Arcana (particularly Spirit and Mind) will, at best, find some of the challenges in this story to be pushovers. At worst, they can completely derail the story.

### *Introducing Cymbeline Hand*

This story works best if your troupe has a reason to want to find Cymbeline. The characters might have heard of the Robe

(and its mention may well be enough to get them interested further), but they won't know that it's involved straight away. Why should they care about Cymbeline?

You might want to try to introduce Cymbeline as a member of your supporting cast some time before this story begins. The troupe should have cause to like her and to care for her. Maybe she has an opportunity to help them out (perhaps she's even accompanied them as they've uncovered the legacy of the Dethroned Queen).

She didn't Awaken all that long ago — maybe one of the characters was present at her Awakening and took her under his wing. Or maybe she's a relative — a cousin or a kid sister whom one of the characters promised to look out for and look after.

Or perhaps she became romantically involved with one of the cabal members. Unable to commit fully and unable to understand why herself, Cymbeline could lead a would-be lover along a hard, painful road. Her tragedy would lead to heartbreak, especially if her lover were one of those who helped her find her destiny.

Alternatively, you could, of course, substitute a supporting character whom the troupe already cares about, and have that character play Cymbeline's part in the drama that unfolds.

### *Cymbeline Hand*

**Quote:** *Did you ever feel . . . when you were a kid . . . like you were actually a princess or a film star's kid or something, and you were mixed up in the hospital when you were a baby, and, like, one day, they'd realize, your real parents would catch on, and they'd come and find you and take you away? No? No. No reason.*

As a child, Cymbeline Hand was too pretty and too good at sports to be unpopular. But she never really had any close friends. She was always distant. Her teachers noticed it. So did her parents. They'd come over from Ghana shortly before she was born, and were desperate for their little girl to fit in. The child psychologist said that her disconnection came from feeling as if she was not part of any country, that this was common among the children of immigrants and that she was bright and resilient enough to grow out of it.

It was more than that. The psychologist's interpretation didn't explain the dreams that Cymbeline had been having, practically since she was born. She'd been told in her sleep that she was destined for something, that she wasn't who she thought she was, that she was something more. At 18, Cymbeline Awakened. It came as little surprise to her, as if Awakening were the culmination of every moment of her life up until then.

But her Awakening was no more than a step along a longer road. There was someone else in the Watchtower with her. Her, but not her. The dreams have become more vivid, more frequent. A mirror that isn't a mirror. The Eyes of Salt. A Heart Full of Flies. A village. A Body Orchard. A woven mantle, stitched with sigils. A sky heavy with storm clouds.

Cymbeline has become obsessed. She needs to follow this through. She needs to find her way. She took to traveling.

The dreams govern where she goes. When Cymbeline settled in a Consilium far from home, she did so for a reason. Curiosity — or some other urging — led her to discover that the Provost's collection of artifacts included the Eyes of Salt — real, hard, cold and tangible. She found where they were kept and broke in, three nights in a row, spending the whole night staring at them. The fourth night, she took them without even thinking, and ran away.

**Description:** Cymbeline is of average height, and clearly exercises a lot. Her hair is braided in cornrows, accentuating her chiseled features and dark, almond-shaped eyes. She wears loose-fitting, practical clothes.

Cymbeline's nimbus is like a white, cold wind, loaded with flakes of snow, whirling around her limbs and face.

**Storytelling Hints:** Cymbeline is friendly, bright, sharp and funny. At the same time, she finds it hard to connect with others, and, most of all, she's driven by the dreams that have been with her almost since she was born. She feels she has no choice but to follow through her destiny, although it terrifies her. When on the track of her future, she will not be stopped, unless by force.

Although she's never seen the Heart Full of Flies or the Robe, her heritage — as well as the now-nightly dreams — means that she has an intimate sympathetic connection to each of the Artifacts (see **Magel: The Awakening**, p. 114). The dreams push her in the general direction, and the simple Space 1 spell "Finder" takes her there.

Cymbeline doesn't know this, but her dreams are actually dependent on her questing for their source. The one feeds the other. If she begins to flag, or to lose hope, the dreams



—and Cxaxa Qherephis' ancient influence—begin to fade. After a week or two of not trying to dream, Cymbeline finds that the dreams become increasingly rare. After a month, Cymbeline no longer cares, and Cxaxa Qherephis' hope of resurrection is gone forever. Cymbeline loses her dots in the Destiny Merit. She spends the rest of her life feeling as if something's missing, a vague sense of regret for something she's never had.

**Dedicated Magical Tool:** A 100-year-old necklace of Ghanaian origin, a family heirloom

**Real Name:** Cymbeline Hand

**Path:** Mastigos

**Order:** Silver Ladder

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 3, Wits 3, Resolve 3

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 2, Composure 2

**Mental Skills:** Academics (Geography) 1, Investigation 2, Medicine 1

**Physical Skills:** Athletics (Running) 3, Brawl 1, Drive 1, Stealth 2, Survival (Sleeping Rough) 4

**Social Skills:** Empathy 1, \*Expression 2, \*Persuasion 1, Streetwise 2, \*Subterfuge 1

**Merits:** Destiny (Bane: Apathy) 4, Direction Sense, Fleet of Foot 1, High Speech, Language (Fante) 1, Striking Looks 4

**Willpower:** 5

**Wisdom:** 7

**Virtue:** Fortitude

**Vice:** Envy

**Initiative:** 5

**Defense:** 3

**Speed:** 11

**Health:** 8

**Gnosis:** 2

**Arcana:** Mind 3, Space 2, Life 1

**Notes:** *Mind* — Aura Perception (•), Multi-Tasking (•••); *Space* — Finder (•), Spatial Awareness (•)

**Mana/Per Turn:** 11/2

**Armor:** 2 ("Misdirection," Mind ••)

#### Cymbeline as a Player Character

Another option, which might be fun if your troupe is particularly good at roleplaying, is to allow one of your players to play Cymbeline herself. If you try this, make sure you get to talk it through privately with the player beforehand: tell her that Cymbeline's goal is to follow her dreams, and describe what she's going to do when she gets all three Artifacts together. You don't have to tell the player *exactly* what could happen to Cymbeline after that, but you should let the player know that if she succeeds in following up on her vision, she's not going to be playable any more.

Having Cymbeline as a member of the troupe really just means that you have a deputy Storyteller. If you're ambi-

tious, you can play through Cymbeline's dreams (or you can just pass notes to Cymbeline's player, telling her what she's dreaming about at the right time). You could also, as an option, play out the theft of the Eyes of Salt and the finding of the Robe.

Finally, you could simply substitute one of the players' characters for Cymbeline. Again, the player has to be willing to take this on, and be able to play the part. And, of course, if Cymbeline succeeds, that's the end of Cymbeline, meaning that the player will have to have a new character, with a sizeable and probably well-deserved experience point bonus at character generation.

Having one of the cabal go on the run and lead the other members to what could be her own doom could be a powerful and memorable roleplaying experience.

## Scene One: *The Body Orchard*

In this scene, the characters set off to find Cymbeline Hand. Tracking her to a magical place of horrific significance, they must decide whether to follow her to the end of her road or leave her to her fate.

### *Beginning In Medias Res*

If you're so inclined, you may want to play through the cabal's efforts to track down Cymbeline, roleplaying through the meeting when the Hierarchy (or one of the Consilium or Provosts) gives the characters their mission. The cabal will have to work out where she is — possibly using any of a variety of spell effects in conjunction with Space 2 to take advantage of sympathetic connections drawn from their relationships with her. Scrying only gets a mage so far — the cabal members will still have to rely on their wits and brains to figure out where she is and where she's heading from clues in her surroundings.

An ingenious Storyteller with a talent for spinning things out could even tie other stories into the cabal's search. As the characters go on the road, always one step behind their missing friend, they could have any number of adventures on the way (even, perhaps, playing through the other stories in this book). If you play the story through this way, this scene begins as the cabal is finally about to catch up with her.

Alternatively, it's sometimes better to cut right to the chase, throwing the troupe directly into the action with a brief summary of the situation — the characters have followed Cymbeline this far, and they know she came this way no more than half an hour ago.

They're just inside the edge of a wood, walking in, following clues either magical or mundane (for example, a sympathetic spell, a Time effect, showing that she was here only a few minutes ago, or even just a line of footprints). Suddenly, they realize they're being watched.

## Location, Location, Location

The Body Orchard can be as far or as near to the cabal's hometown as seems appropriate — on the other side of the world, or a few dozen miles away.

On the other hand, it's best not to have the Body Orchard too close. It needs to be at least several hours' drive away (if not a plane flight), so that the cabal has a chance to talk with Cymbeline. The Body Orchard should also be reasonably remote, so that there isn't any urban center around. You could put the Body Orchard, for example, in the Scottish Highlands, or in a forested area in Colorado or Washington state.

Remember that a piece of supernatural real estate as strange as this one shouldn't reasonably exist without being noticed within the radius of any healthy Consilium's influence. The place should plausibly be an unknown quantity to the cabal.

## *The Body Orchard*

The woodland is beautiful — it's like spring. Wildflowers of a dozen different kinds carpet the woodland floor, catching the dappled sunlight in brief flashes of color as it filters down through the trees. The air is fresh and fragrant. No birds are visible, but there's birdsong in the distance. A squirrel, sitting on the forest floor, sees the cabal and, startled, suddenly hurtles up into a tree, out of sight.

Within a few steps, the cabal has walked into the Verge. The transition isn't obvious to begin with, but soon, a vague feeling of unease begins to take hold. The sound of birdsong has stopped, and there is nothing at all to replace it. The blues, yellows and whites of the wildflowers are gradually replaced by fleshy pinks and bloody reds. The flowers are still swaying, but there is no wind. The leaves on the trees, a few minutes ago green and vibrant, are now yellowed, and have a strange, thick, rounded look to them. The bark on the trees looks smoother, like rough skin, the furrows in the bark looking a little like open wounds.

The colors start looking wrong somehow, artificial, like an oversaturated photograph. The further into the woods the cabal goes, the stranger things get.

Mage Sight reveals that the entire area is magical — the trees, the flowers, the ground, the very air — and the Spirit 1 spell "Second Sight" gives away that the cabal has crossed the Gauntlet without even realizing it.

Characters who make successful Wits + Composure rolls (or other successful Perception rolls, such as Wits + Survival) realize that they're being watched. A mage who gets more than one success notices one of the following things:

- In a knot in the trunk of one of the trees, an eye opens, and watches the cabal. If the eye notices it's being closed, it

closes. Another eye opens somewhere else. The eyes open and close so quickly, it's quite possible that the first couple of times, a mage might doubt his senses.

- High up, one of the fruit trees has fruit that look like human hands. A mage who watches them long enough sees them flexing and twitching.

- A crack in the bark of one of the trees is leaking sap that looks and smells like blood and pus.

- Some of the flowers have human mouths for blooms: red, wet quivering lips surround white teeth and flickering tongues. The mouths look like they're speaking. A mage who bends over and listens very carefully will hear the flowers whispering in tongues. Anyone who picks one of the flowers can do so easily, but causes all of the mouth-flowers to erupt in a shrill, feminine scream that fills the wood, and nearly deafens everyone. Then the flower that the mage picked rots away in his hand into a small mass of slimy decayed flesh, in a matter of seconds.

- The arrangement of trunks and branches in a small copse of trees looks, from certain angles, like a collection of headless, legless human torsos, male and female. Branches sprout from joints that look like armpits and bend like human arms, before branching off further and sprouting with bloody leaves. Knots in trees look like nipples, knees, elbows and skin blemishes. Some of the trees have grown together in ways that look unnervingly human. A mage can see, out of the corner of her eye, some of these torso-trees twitch, obscenely. They never move when she's looking right at them.

Don't inundate the troupe with these things, and don't feel you have to use them all. Let them interact with each other and let the players make Wits + Composure rolls when they say they're specifically looking.

Spirit magic does affect the strange fleshy plants here — technically, they're made of ephemera, but aside from their odd behavior, they're completely harmless, and they behave otherwise as plants behave, albeit plants made of flesh.

Summoning spirits doesn't work here. There *are* spirits here, but they're rooted to the ground. A spell such as, for example, the Spirit 2 spell "Lesser Spirit Summons" doesn't do anything other than make some of the flowers all turn toward the mage casting the spell, or make a tree incline its limb-like branches in the mage's direction.

Spin the cabal's journey through the wood as long as it works to create in the characters a sense of unease and rising disgust, but don't spend so long that the players get frustrated or, worse, bored.

The characters are here to find Cymbeline. All the time they should be following traces left behind. Maybe they find an earring, lying in a patch of (unsettlingly pliant) bare earth. Or perhaps there's a footprint. Don't let them forget why they're here.

## *The Grove*

At a dramatically appropriate moment, when the cabal has seen enough of the outer circle of the Body Orchard, the characters catch up with Cymbeline.





The cabal hears another scream — an inhuman, ululating cry of anguish unlike anything they have ever heard before very near.

Within a few dozen yards, there's a clearing, a vaguely circular opening in the middle of a grove of trees. The grove surpasses all of the freakish phenomena the cabal has seen in the Orchard thus far, compounding the freakiness all in one place of horror. The ground is covered with fleshy leaves that look like freshly sliced slivers of skin. Mouth-flowers lick their lips and frantically speak in tongues. Blades of grass look like locks of human hair and swish back and forth. And the trees are all composed of remolded human flesh: the torsos that compose the tree trunks rise and fall, and make the sound of

tortured breathing between screams that come from mouths with no faces. The place smells like a butcher's shop.

Cymbeline stands at the far side of the clearing, facing one of the trees. She's got her back to the cabal, but she's doing something with one of the trees. In her hand is a Swiss Army knife. If the cabal members make themselves known, she turns, smiles and greets them excitedly.

"I've found it," she says. "It's here. It's here!"

If she turns (or if any of the cabal try to get into a position to see what she's doing), the cabal can see she's holding a Swiss Army knife, and digging into the flesh of a female torso that's part of the tree. She turns and keeps digging under the torso's left breast, apparently unaware of the thrashing of the tree and the screaming, which gets worse and worse.

Cymbeline hasn't slept for 36 hours. She looks terrible: haggard, dead on her feet. Only the dreams and the visions are keeping her going. Without turning from her grisly work, she'll try to explain to the cabal what she's doing. Her hands and forearms are covered with blood.

The cabal can interact with her, and she'll answer questions and try to explain what she's doing, but she's so exhausted and preoccupied now, she's unable to articulate her excitement. If the characters ask what's here, she'll tell them that there's "the Heart! Heart Full, Full of Flies!" She incoherent. She babbles a few lines about "Eyes," and about "dreams . . . since I was a kid."

She doesn't have time to answer more than a few questions, however, because within about 15 or 20 seconds, she's got it. Triumphantly, she draws from the tree's chest something that's covered in gore, but which can be recognized as an exquisite, anatomically correct model of a human heart, made of glass. There's something moving inside it.

The screams die down, and stop. And then the trees attack.

The trauma of breaking through the Gauntlet sent the flesh-trees of the Body Orchard into a kind of fugue. The pain Cymbeline inflicted as she ripped out the Heart Full of Flies from a tree-trunk's breast jerked the trees back to activity. Their only instinct is to find new raw flesh, which they can mold into more of their own.

### *The Flesh-Trees*

**Quote:** *The sound of glossolalia, from mouths in places where there shouldn't be mouths*

**Background:** The first plant in the Body Orchard — a tree — was crafted long ago by the will of something ancient, nameless and awful. Over the millennia, a few unfortunate humans stumbled into the Body Orchard and fell prey to the Orchard's fleshly foliage. The trees remade their victims, fusing and remolding muscle, offal and bone, transforming them into the trees' own likenesses. Thus the Orchard grew.

**Description:** Each of the flesh-trees is unique — some bear human hands as fruit, or have mouths where genitals or armpits should be. Some are covered with eyes, or have fingers for leaves. Most have trunks made of a human torso, or of two or three fused together, side by side or one on top of the other.

**Storytelling Hints:** The trees are all but mindless. Any attempt to communicate with them (using Spirit magic or Mind magic) only brings the sound of someone speaking in tongues in an urgent, anguished manner. The trees' ability to influence the area is a reflex action more than anything, which they use when their prey looks as if it's getting away. The flesh-trees attempt to grab their victims with their branches before impaling the victims on bloody fingers or biting them to death. This follows the same rules for grappling as given in the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, p. 157; the tree rolls Power + Finesse to make a grappling attack, the same as the tree would with any other attack.

**Rank:** 2

**Attributes:** Power 7, Finesse 2, Resistance 3

**Willpower:** 4

**Essence:** 10 (max 10)

**Initiative:** 5

**Defense:** 2 (The flesh-trees can't actually dodge; instead, they thrash their branches in an attempt to deflect attacks.)

**Speed:** 0 (They're rooted to the spot.)

**Size:** 12

**Corpus:** 15

**Influences:** The Body Orchard 3. The flesh-trees can warp the geography of the Verge, meaning that people running away from the grove suddenly find themselves running right back into it. One of the trees spends three Essence and rolls Power + Finesse to do this. A mage can resist this effect, and try to run faster than the fluid land by rolling Stamina + Gnosis.

**Numen:** Remolding (dice pool 9): The trees can remake the bodies of unconscious or dead victims into more flesh-trees. The flesh-tree rolls Power + Finesse to do so and spends two Essence. If the flesh-tree succeeds, a new flesh-tree grows alongside (or into) the original tree. Victims who are unconscious rather than dead can reflexively resist with a roll of Stamina + Gnosis.

**Ban:** The flesh-trees cannot force a person who has left the grove three times to return. On the third time, a potential victim escapes the trees' clutches; the tree has to let him go. Likewise, if anyone says six key words in the language of the being that created them, the being have to let the potential victim go.

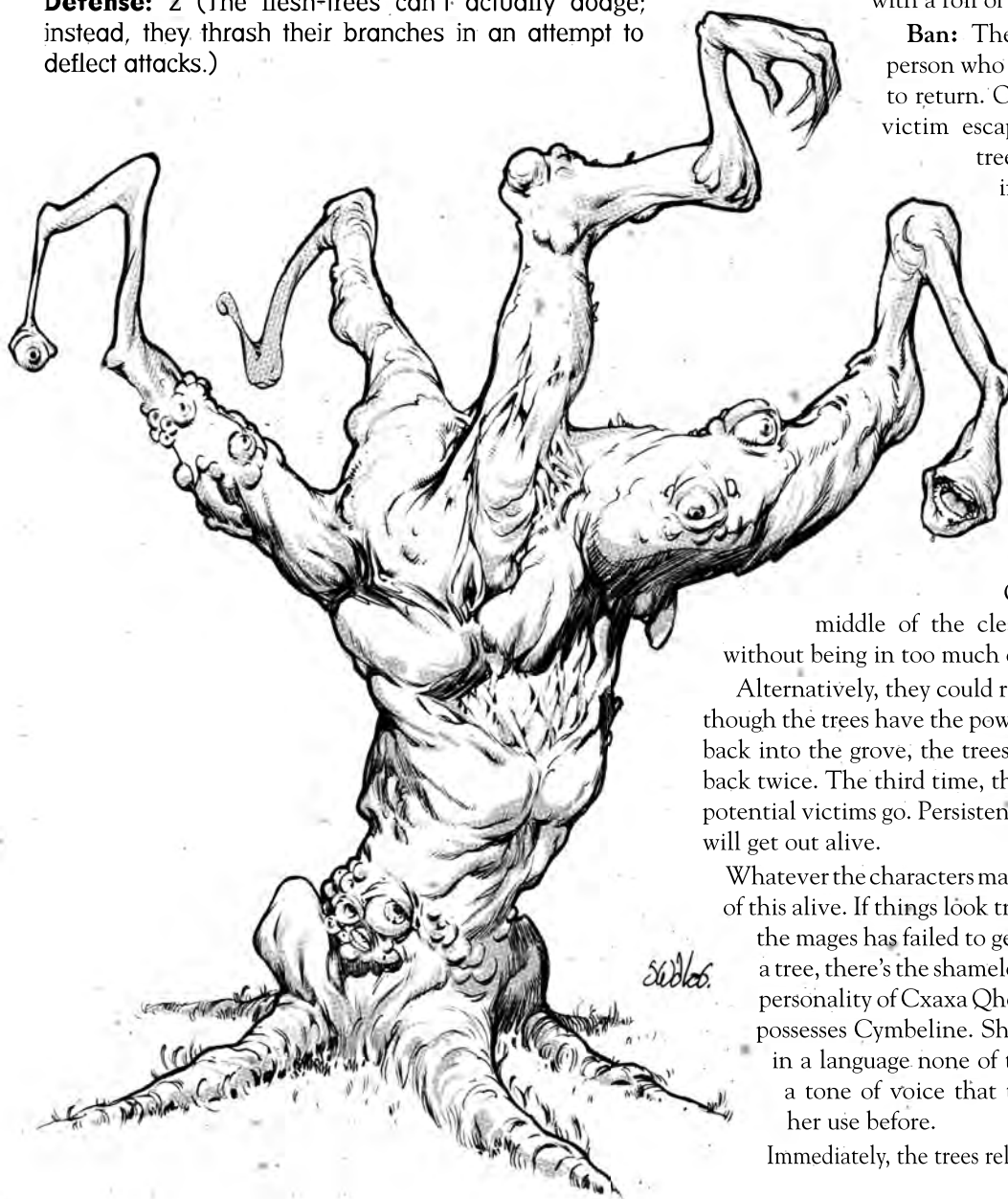
#### Getting Out Alive

Although deadly, the flesh-trees are slow, and they cannot reach into a five-foot circle in the center of the Orchard, meaning that the cabal members could pull Cymbeline back into the middle of the clearing and make their stand without being in too much danger.

Alternatively, they could run, and keep on running. Although the trees have the power to bring their victims right back into the grove, the trees can only bring their victims back twice. The third time, the flesh-trees have to let their potential victims go. Persistent mages who keep on running will get out alive.

Whatever the characters manage to do, they should get out of this alive. If things look truly lethal — say, every one of the mages has failed to get out and is in the clutches of a tree, there's the shameless *deus ex machina* option: the personality of Cxaxa Qherephis suddenly, temporarily, possesses Cymbeline. She screams a half-dozen words in a language none of the cabal has heard before in a tone of voice that the characters haven't heard her use before.

Immediately, the trees relent and put the mages down.



This will inevitably bring questions, but Cymbeline honestly doesn't have a clue what she just said. "It was in one of my dreams," she says. "It seemed right to say it like that."

### *Taking Cymbeline by Force*

It might happen that the cabal decides that their characters aren't going to take any nonsense; instead, maybe the characters just knock her over the head (or, if they're more subtle, use magic) and take her back against her will.

That isn't immediately the end of the story.

If the cabal decides to sneak up on her as she's pulling out the Heart Full of Flies, step up the removal of the Heart — have the flesh-trees attack just as the mages get to Cymbeline. Give them plenty of opportunity to know that they're being attacked and let them (likely) win initiative. If things look bad (or even if things don't look all that bad), it might be a good idea to use the option of Cymbeline's fortuitous incantation to stop things dead, and give the cabal something to think twice about.

Having said that, if the characters come up with a great way of bringing Cymbeline back, let them. Cymbeline can always escape when their guard is down, taking both Artifacts (she seems to find them unnaturally easy to steal). She might even leave them a note, saying she's sorry and promising to come back when she's done.

Although using mind control spells isn't strictly ethical, some mages might consider this a good idea — if you stop the dreams, you stop her going on the run, right? Wrong. The Mind 4 spell "Telepathic Control" can't force people to do things against their nature — and these dreams are part of Cymbeline's nature. She *has* to follow them. The Mind 5 spells "Psychic Domination" and "Psychic Reprogramming" *should* work, but may not truly have the power to reshape Cymbeline's soul. That is, the story can't be ended just by the casting of one fortuitous spell.

### *Doing Something About the Body Orchard*

Some troupes that enjoy researching mystical lore might take a detour and take a little time researching the origin of the Body Orchard. If the characters do, feel free to allow them to find out a few things, although Cymbeline's quest should take precedence — if they spend too much time trying to find out why this Verge is here before paying attention to the main attraction, Cymbeline's likely to take off on her own, driven by her increasingly frequent and vivid dreams and visions.

There are vague hints about the Body Orchard in some existing texts, which describe its dangers, but all mentions of it describe as a place in the Shadow. There is no explanation in the literature as to why the Body Orchard has become a Verge. It could be that the Exarchs wanted it to happen. Through some subtle cosmic influence, they might have opened the way for Cymbeline to bring the three fragments of Cxaxa Qherephis' soul together. Maybe it suits their contradictory esoteric schemes for Qherephis to return as a scourge on the Awakened.

On the other hand, the Verge might be another part of Cxaxa Qherephis' plan. Maybe the Body Orchard was *her*

creation back in the day, and she left it behind as a colossal magical time bomb, ready to cross into the Material Realm when her descendant gained possession of the Eyes.

A third option is that it's simply a coincidence. The Body Orchard became a Verge because it just did, and that's all there is to it. It's just a random occurrence that's fated to happen. Or maybe the Body Orchard's appearance as a Verge is an effect of some as-yet undiscovered law of magical physics, and the proximity of two-thirds of a soul-in-stasis as powerful and ancient as Cxaxa Qherephis' causes the Shadow region in which the Body Orchard lies to cross over, becoming a Verge.

Either way, if the cabal is powerful enough (that is, possessed of sufficient skill in Spirit magic to close the gap in the Gauntlet, if not actually destroy the Orchard), the characters may want to do something about it, or tell someone who can do something about it.

The cabal members may realize that the place is too dangerous to leave as it is, but if they don't, it doesn't have to be a disaster. The place could vanish back into the Shadow. Or, the Body Orchard could prove to be a menace in a future story.

### *Whither Hence*

However the characters escaped the flesh-trees — skill, luck or *deus ex machina* — the cabal has been reunited with Cymbeline, who, still clutching the Heart Full of Flies in one bloodied hand, collapses with exhaustion. The cabal is going to have to get her out of the Verge, and then find somewhere to rest up for a while.

She'll wake up in a few hours, and give the cabal a chance to talk to her. What Cymbeline says should come out, bit by bit, in conversation. She doesn't make a speech. She'll mainly just re-iterate how she has to find "Witchend," and that it's important that the characters let her go there.

If they ask her why she ran away, Cymbeline is happy to explain about the dreams, now that they've been proven true on two counts. She tells them how she feels on the edge of something wonderful and terrible and scary, and she says she has to follow it through. She has to finish this. She doesn't feel as if she has any choice in the matter. She's got to find a place called Witchend, and she's got to find a Robe, which once belonged to a Dethroned Queen.

If the members of the troupe have played through any of the other stories in this chronicle, their ears should prick up. They might start asking more questions.

Cymbeline knows nothing about the Dethroned Queen that the cabal doesn't (assuming she knows anything at all, which might be the case if she's been with the cabal in previous stories).

She says that she had the Robe once before, in a dream, but that the Robe was never hers. But it has meaning. It's important. It has weight. She needs to see it, she says, because then she'll *know* outside of dreams what her life has been leading up to. She'll *know* what her life was for.

If the cabal members don't offer outright to help her (even if they're just doing it because they want the Robe), Cymbeline asks, appealing to whatever relationship the cabal has with her.

The characters can do their duty and bring her back, they refuse to help her and let her look for the place alone or they can decide to help her. If they take the hard-ass option, there's still opportunity for Cymbeline to get away (see "Taking Cymbeline by Force").

If they let her go, they'll have to accept the consequences of failure if they come back empty-handed. Depending on how understanding the cabal's leaders are, the characters could end up getting punished or being sent right back out there again and told not to come back unless they've got her.

On the other hand, there are plenty of ways to get the characters to Witchend independently of Cymbeline.

For example, while playing through one of the other stories in this chronicle, the cabal could find a piece of evidence directing the characters toward the current location of the Robe of the Dethroned Queen, which is in Witchend. They run into Cymbeline there, and events unfold as they did before.

Or maybe one of the characters could receive a text message or a panicked voicemail from a temporarily escaped Cymbeline, begging for help.



The Heart Full of Flies is a perfect model of a human heart, made of what looks like thick glass. Although the Heart Full of Flies is dulled and scratched by age, the ventricles and atria are clearly clouded with what looks like a small swarm of flies, still moving. The blood vessels end about an inch away from the heart proper. The valves are closed and sealed with ancient glass. How the flies got in there — let alone how they survive — is a mystery.

Both the Eyes and the Heart carry a bitterly cold resonance, not just physically, but metaphorically — the kind of cold that comes from discovering something dead. Cymbeline doesn't feel this. To her, the resonance is exciting, creating a fluttering in her stomach that wavers between terror and mad love. She keeps the Artifacts in a rucksack, wrapped in her clothes, and won't let anyone go near them. She instinctively knows if the Artifacts have been taken away from her.

## The Heart Full of Flies and the Eyes of Salt

**Heart Full of Flies:** Durability 4, Size 2,  
Structure 6

**Eyes of Salt:** Durability 6, Size 1, Structure 7

These peculiar Artifacts are clearly magical — Mage Sight reveals as much — but beyond that, they're ciphers. It's impossible to figure out what they actually do. The Prime 2 spell "Analyze Enchanted Item" can only reveal that their enchantment is incomplete: there are missing components. If a mage casts the spell while Cymbeline is holding either the Eyes of Salt or the Heart Full of Flies, the spell will reveal that Cymbeline herself is one of the missing components.

The Eyes of Salt are a pair of pockmarked and chipped stones, made of what looks like some kind of white igneous rock. Flecks of crystal in the stones' surface catch the light at certain angles. The Eyes are not quite spherical — rather, they're about the size and shape of eyeballs.

## Scene Two: The Village

Whether the characters have decided to accompany Cymbeline, follow her or even rescue her, at some point, it's time to go to Witchend. The question is, where is it?

Cymbeline knows vaguely where the Robe is (somewhere in Witchend), but she can't find it with magic. It's hidden from her. She has to find the Robe the old-fashioned way.

Witchend is easy enough to find. All it needs is a trip to a library, and half an hour with access to a few atlases of Western countries (the name should give a clue), or with Google. The only community called Witchend is in Berkshire, England.

Getting there could be difficult. Buying plane tickets to the United Kingdom from, for example, the United States at short notice requires Resources •••. Ingenious but broke mages who are strapped for cash can come up with any number of ways



to get the money, all the way from busking (perhaps using the Mind 2 spell “Emotional Urging” to give people the idea that they want to put \$50 or \$100 bills in the hat rather than ones or fives) through to walking through customs and onto the plane without anyone paying much heed (using the Mind 2 spell “Incognito Presence,” albeit with a penalty imposed by paranoid security guards), hallucinations or outright theft. Still more headaches may occur at London’s Heathrow Airport.

Storytellers with troupes that would rather ignore the specifics of getting there and get into the action should skip the logistics of travel. It may be simply be enough to explain that cabals with few dots in Resources have little or no spending cash while in the United Kingdom. Such cabals may have to sleep in their rental van or camp on people’s farms — all of which leave you ample opportunities to enrich the story with local encounters of your own design.

## Witchend

Witchend is a small village with a population of about 350 people between Reading and Newbury. The village is in the middle of some beautiful, rolling English countryside. At either end of the place, a sign reads:

The village is beautiful. It’s always summer in Witchend, somehow, and the place has the soft-focus glamour of every picture postcard view of Middle England.

The houses, behind beautifully trimmed privet hedges and lawns with inch-perfect stripes, have white front doors and

lead windows. The houses are not all the same, but they’re all meticulously maintained. Five-bedroom family homes with sweeping gables stand alongside Tudor cottages with the original wooden shingles, separated by upright wooden fences and geometrically arranged flower beds. At the edge of the town, elegantly clad elderly ladies kneel in the front gardens of picture-book bungalows, pruning already perfect rose bushes. Some of the houses have thatched roofs, none of which look in need of renovation.

The roads have no potholes. The slabs in the pavements are all in place. None have any cracks. Several houses have classic Jaguars or MGs in their drives — those that don’t have BMWs or Audis.

Doorbells all have the same chime. The curtains are floral and made by Laura Ashley. Inside the houses, the furnishings are soft and tasteful. Most of the kitchens have Agas. Tea is served in exquisite porcelain cups, poured out of china tea-pots. Most houses have large television sets, which are never switched on. The works of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Colin Dexter line every bookshelf nestling alongside the Church of England’s *Common Worship*, a *Book of Common Prayer* and at least two versions of the Bible.

Not one house in the village has a burglar alarm.

The people are mostly mature — no one is under the age of 30. The men wear tailored suits as they commute to good jobs in London or Reading. At home, they dress in sensible slacks and sweaters. Their wives (no one lives here out of



wedlock) dress in pretty floral dresses or sensible twinsets. Their hair and makeup is sensibly done. A few retired couples live in the bungalows.

Some people have dogs and cats — pedigree, of course — but there's no fouling anywhere on the streets.

Everybody's white. They're all polite and easy enough to talk to. They've all got cut-glass Received Pronunciation English accents. Although they'll take note of differences, they will never, ever comment, and they certainly won't stare. It's quite likely that Cymbeline will be the only black face within 15 miles, but even so, the people of Witchend, although they may have their prejudices, will treat her exactly the same as any other stranger they meet: with detached politeness.

Songbirds and squirrels make their homes in the oak-lined avenue that runs down the middle of the town into the village square. You can hear their cheerful singing as you head down the middle of the road. They don't seem to make any mess on the road. The main road is spotlessly clean, as if someone's only just finished cleaning it.

The village green is big enough for a decent-sized cricket match. On one side, the green is abutted by a prize-winning flowerbed, a pictorial design commemorating the 500th anniversary of Witchend's founding. The other side of the green is open to the village square.

In the middle of the square, which works as a roundabout, there's a small, slightly quaint clock tower, which tells exactly the right time, despite being at least 150 years old.

Across the square, in the middle of a thatched terrace, there is a country pub, its cheerful, brightly-painted sign proclaiming it as "The Royal Arch" and a "Free House." Inside, the pub is a picture of congenial, Old World comfort. Groups of mature and elderly men, smoking pipes, prop up the bar or sit around tables. In one corner, a group of ladies meet up for their sewing circle.

Next door to the pub is a village shop, selling basic groceries and household sundries, run by a smiling, rosy-cheeked elderly lady.

There aren't any children here, anywhere in the village. Anyone who makes a Perception roll (Wits + Composure, Socialize or even Streetwise) after about a day in the village notices this.

No one pays much attention to strangers who come in — it's simply not done — although, again, people are courteous if approached, and reciprocate polite curiosity as to where the visitors came from and as to what might bring them to quiet little Witchend.

Perpendicular to the pub and the green is the village church, St. Peter's, Witchend. The church notice-board advertises a village fête in two weeks' time (with "Competition for the Best Cakes, Preserves and a Vegetable Show"). The notice-board also advertises a Morning Praise Service at 10 A.M. on Sunday, and Communion and Healing at 6.30 P.M. A third poster carries a device that looks like a stylized dove, flying downwards, surrounded by flames, and the slogan, "The Spirit is Here!" A fourth advertises an Alpha Course.

There is no police station. There is no hotel or bed-and-breakfast.

## *The Cricket Match*

Unless the cabal makes a point of arriving at another time, the first time the characters arrive in the village green, it's Saturday afternoon and there's a cricket match going on. It's beautiful weather for it. As the cabal members stand by the village green (having, perhaps, just arrived and gotten out of the car), they hear a *thwack*, followed by a gentle ripple of applause. A cricket ball rolls quickly off the edge of the village green and stops at their feet. A big, dark-haired man in cricket whites runs up from the pitch and says, "Hullo there. Excuse me, but would you mind awfully if I got our ball back?"

This is Reverend Jones, the local vicar. He's also one of the Witchend Residents' Committee, the pylon of Seers of the Throne who control this village.

Superficially, he'll be polite and friendly. Inside, he'll be terrified. He recognizes Cymbeline (and if Cymbeline's not here, the same goes for the rest of the cabal) as the individual his pylon was warned about in a recent prophecy. Although he takes pains to come across as a nice chap (he even invites the characters to church on Sunday), he tries to get out as much as he can about who they are and why they're here, before they get suspicious.

He'll also attempt to unobtrusively examine their resonances. Recognizing that they're all Awakened will make him even more uncomfortable (any of the cabal can make a Wits + Empathy roll to spot that the vicar is afraid of *something*).

After a minute or two of chit-chat, he'll smile and apologize — he has to get back to the game.

Assuming the cabal doesn't do anything rash such as attack him or interrogate him in broad daylight, Jones goes back to the game. And as soon as he can, he lets Mr. Evans and Miss Ryden know that the person whom they've dreaded for so long is here.

Now the ball is rolling, so to speak. What happens next depends on who acts first and what they do.

## *All Under Control*

Witchend is completely under the control of the Exarchs. Throughout the five centuries since the village was founded, the Lords of the Aeon have owned every man, woman and child in the village. Not that there are many children here. Children are more difficult to control. They ask too many questions, and can see things that adults often can't. The Witchend Residents' Committee is as much under the Exarchs' control as anyone, although the committee members are supposedly the vehicles of the Exarchs' will in the village.

There is no school in Witchend. There are families with children, but, for most of the year, their young ones are boarding at private preparatory or grammar schools, and for most of the school holidays, the children are either on family holidays or sent away to camps or adventure holidays. At any rate, because of Witchend's lack of children, few families move here, and the village is mostly inhabited by professional couples with no children, or those whose children have grown up and moved away or people who retired.

Everything is orderly in this place. There is no crime, and there never has been, hence the lack of a police station. Everyone seems to get on, and if neighborly discord crops up, the Seers find out about it, and after a chat with Mr. Evans in his office in the town hall, everyone seems to get on just fine.

If the cabal has possession of the Ring, or the characters have learned the magical spell it taught them and are still willing to cast it, they can quite easily see that the entire community is under the control of the Exarchs: every man and woman, every building, every single blade of grass, every songbird and every family cat. The sublime will of the Exarchs makes this place perfect in every way, an idyll where everyone knows his or her place and everyone behaves.

The weird thing is that the three Seers who have inherited the mantle of the Witchend Residential Committee don't do all that much about it. While the entire village bears metaphysical marks of 500 years of Exarch control, there is very little magic here, and the Seers aren't half as powerful as they appear. The fact is that most of the people here like the place like this. The reason they're so nice to everybody is because on the whole, they're nice people. Although the Seers have access to one particularly potent means of thought control (see "The Clarity Room" below), they're mostly loath to use it. Although Mr. Evans can use his "little chats" to modify behavior, he usually doesn't need to. Nine times out of 10, his little chats are just that.

Once upon a time, the Seers in Witchend may have taken control of this place because they wanted a quiet crucible for growing Sleeper agents, but now, the Witchend Residents' Committee does what it does because the committee members honestly believe that it's best for their village. They see what they do as service to the community, and although they may have some friendly disagreements about how best they are to do it, they're of one mind that it's best for Witchend if things there remain exactly the same, which is why, when the Exarchs warned them of the coming of a young mage with a terrible destiny, they became so very scared.

### *A Roof Over Your Head*

If the cabal wants to stay here for more than a day, the characters will have to find somewhere to sleep. They could, if one of them thought to bring the tent, camp out, but since the only piece of common ground in the vicinity is the village green, they will draw a great deal of attention. Likewise, if they sleep in the car (assuming that they'll fit), they'll find that they can't avoid awkward questions from highly curious locals, and very soon from the cabal of Seers of the Throne who run the town.

The characters might have the idea of forcing their way into some of the houses in the town. Some of the people in the village are not currently staying at home — presumably, they're away on holiday. An Awakened burglar can break in and hide from prying eyes (using Matter magic or Forces magic to break in and manipulate locks and bolts, and Mind magic to look ordinary, for example), or manipulate an unwitting Sleeper couple into letting them stay.

The eyes of the Exarchs are here, and if the characters have met Rev. Jones on the village green, the Seers know the

characters are here. If they've gained possession of the Robe of the Dethroned Queen, or know how to cast the spell it contains, they can stop the Seers from scrying their activities, but the spell won't stop the Seers finding other, less magical ways of finding out where the characters are.

## *Witchend Characters*

### *Common People*

**Quote:** "Oh! Good morning. Yes, fine day, isn't it?" (pause) "I haven't seen you around here before. Are you visiting?"

**Background:** Mr. Kelly is a professional in his late 30s or early 40s. He commutes to Reading or London every day, and apart from church, spends his weekend kicking back and relaxing. He loves his wife and teenage son (Christian's boarding in Reading). He accepts that paying his son's school fees and keeping his wife and home mean that he doesn't see his family much. He tries not to think about it all that much, and so remains content.

Mrs. Kelly is a housewife. She spends her days cleaning their sizeable house, reading, doing cross-stitch or baking cakes for the Women's Institute. She keeps busy.

Mr. and Mrs. Vickers are retired. Their children have grown up and moved away, meaning that the Vickers were able to move to this charming little community and spend their twilight years in comfort. They like it here. They received a warm welcome from the neighbors. They think the Residents' Committee does a sterling job of keeping this place so beautiful.

**Description:** The residents of Witchend are invariably clean, smart, healthy and well-heeled. Older people are spry and cheerful, professionals are businesslike and try to project a can-do image and housewives are attractively but never provocatively dressed. They've all got healthy skin. No one is overweight.

**Storytelling Hints:** Although polite, friendly and cheerful, the people of Witchend don't communicate a great deal with each other, let alone outsiders. The residents are happy that way. They don't have much to say, and conversation with people who don't care, for example, about the floral arrangements outside the village hall or the up-coming village fête dries up pretty quickly.

Most go to the church on Sunday, but leave God inside the chapel for the rest of the week.

### **Abilities:**

**Awareness (dice pool 4):** The residents genuinely care about the village, and do tend to spot if things go wrong. They will notice weirdly dressed strangers acting oddly and give one of the Witchend Residents' Committee a call as soon as they can if they get suspicious.

## *The Witchend Residents' Committee*

The three Seers of the Throne who currently comprise the Witchend Residents' Committee are left over after the old-age death of Mr. Smith, their guiding light, a couple of

years ago. Smith was a powerful magician who very rarely used magic, and, of his three remaining pupils, two very much follow that example.

All of the members of the Witchend Residents' Committee (the WRC) were born here. All moved away for the sake of education or career, and all came back after their Awakening — or, more accurately, were brought back by the late Mr. Smith.

There's a framed photograph of Mr. Smith in the village hall. The photograph shows a balding, gray-haired man with a round, genial face, a kind smile and a twinkle in his eye. There isn't a single soul in the village who knew Mr. Smith who doesn't remember him with a great deal of fondness. No one has a bad word to say about the man. Mr. Evans, Mr. Smith's heir apparent, is shaping up to be the same sort of figure, but Mr. Evans has got a long way to go before he's got even a fraction of the stature that dear Mr. Smith had.

The WRC members are all committed churchgoers, and although all are communicant members of the Church of England, they have, just as their predecessors have for 500 years, a slightly idiosyncratic theological viewpoint. The committee members believe that the Exarchs, (to whom the committee members sometimes refer as the Lords of the Aeon) are the benevolent agents of the Most High. It is the Exarchs' will, the committee members maintain, that humankind remains happy and free to live under the Exarchs' benevolent rule, ordained by God. The Exarchs are the Children of God, the WRC members believe. The Exarchs came to Earth as the prophets who foretold the coming of Christ. Jesus Christ was not an Exarch, but he died and rose again so that humankind could be reconciled to God through His love, and not through magic, which is the Exarchs' purpose. Jesus, in their scheme, bought with His death redemption from sin, but "sin," as the WRC members see it, is the sin of blasphemy, and blasphemy to them is the use of magic to further the purposes of God's enemies (and the Exarchs' enemies).

The committee members see magic as practiced by the orders of the Pentacle as an evil thing. Rather ironically, the committee members see the Atlantean orders' goal as a road to a demonic magical tyranny. They have a horror of an age when ordinary men and women exist as slaves to magicians, who defy the laws of the Aeon (as ordained by God and executed and administered by the Exarchs). If anyone ever puts it to Mr. Evans, Miss Ryden or Reverend Jones that this is exactly what they've created in Witchend, they'll simply fail to see how it could be the same, and give 20 very good reasons why Witchend is different and morally vastly superior.

Most of all, the committee members want people to be happy. And most of the people here are. The committee members want people to freely choose to be happy and live under their guidance. And most of the people here do.

Reverend Jones is the vicar of the charismatic Anglican church in the town, and through the services in this church on a Sunday, the Exarchs communicate their will to the Seers.

### *Mr. Evans*

**Quote:** *No hurry, obviously, but I really do feel that perhaps we can get together for a little chat. Maybe we can sort things out.*

**Background:** Born in Witchend, but packed off to boarding school practically as soon as he could walk, Martin Evans Awakened at age 16. Religious, upright and decent, Evans found his powers shameful and dirty — tied up with guilty adolescent fantasies and illicit boyhood sins. He avoided using his powers as much as possible.

During his time reading Classics at Trinity College, Cambridge, that Evans accidentally caught the attention of Philby and Burgess, two Seers of the Throne whose roles as lecturers in the university enabled them to pick out the brightest and best of Britain's Awakened. Philby initiated Evans into his pylon, and explained to him about the Exarchs. Evans found the mythology of the Exarchs easy to synthesize with his own Manichean brand of Christianity, and was able to exorcise the last remnants of guilt over his magical powers.

Beginning what looked like it was going to be a highly successful career in local government, it was a surprise to many of his colleagues when he took a job as an office administrator in the council chambers of the little village where he grew up, having been called by one Mr. Smith.

When Mr. Smith died, Evans succeeded him as the leader of the cabal of Seers who make their home in Witchend.

Mr. Smith had been entrusted by the Exarchs with the keeping of the Robe of the Dethroned Queen, and he passed that duty to Mr. Evans. The Robe has been here since the village was founded, and in that time, no one's come for it. Through the centuries, the keepers have become complacent, safe in the knowledge that there is no reason why anyone would look for *anything* in Witchend. Recently, Mr. Evans has begun to dream about the Robe. He is convinced it's going to be the downfall of everything that he holds dear. He hates the Robe, but what can he do? How exactly does one throw out a millennia-old artifact?





**Description:** Mr. Evans is sturdily built without being fat, and is slightly short. Although his short, sandy hair is graying at the temples, Evans' round, friendly, unlined face gives him the look of a much younger man (he's actually in his 40s). He often smiles and freely makes jokes, but never at anyone's expense. He wears glasses, and usually dresses in a blazer and slacks over a polo-necked sweater. His voice is a soothing tenor. He has a fine singing voice (and in fact sings in a choir in Reading on Monday evenings).

Mr. Evans' nimbus appears as a little cloud of twinkling stars around him, like the magical dust of a wizard from a children's storybook.

**Storytelling Hints:** Although Witchend has been firmly under the control of the Exarchs for centuries, Evans continually feels as if things are slipping away from him. He wants the best for the people here, and he's convinced that the will of the Exarchs is for the best, but he's scared that the people will see him as a fraud. He's desperate to be liked, even by those people he'd count as enemies. In the end, Mr. Evans wants a quiet life and always tries for the easiest possible solution, with the smallest possible amount of conflict.

He's extremely learned (he knows a large number of rites) but he's not nearly as powerful as he could be, and he knows this. Mr. Evans is not a violent man. The Exarchs' message intimated that the Coming Enemy must die, but Evans is convinced that there has to be another way to save the village, and would rather be defeated than compromise his principles on this.

**Dedicated Casting Tool:** A laminated card that he keeps in his wallet, on which is written, in High Speech, the text of Matthew 18: 10: "See that you do not look down on these little ones. For I tell you their angels always see the face of My Father in Heaven."

**Real Name:** Martin Evans

**Path:** Obrimos

**Order:** Seers of the Throne

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 3, Wits 3, Resolve 3

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3

**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 2, Composure 4

**Mental Skills:** Academics 4, Crafts (Cooking) 1, \*Investigation 3, Medicine 2, \*Occult 3, Politics (Local Government) 4

**Physical Skills:** Brawl 1, Drive 2, Survival (Walking) 3

**Social Skills:** Empathy 3, Expression 3, Intimidation 3, \*Persuasion (Bringing About Reconciliation) 4, Socialize 1, Subterfuge (Half-Truths) 1

**Merits:** Contacts (County Government) 3, Destiny (Bane: The Robe) 2, High Speech, Iron Stamina 2, Library (Shared with WRC Pylon) 4, Resources 4, Status (Seers of the Throne) 2, Sanctum (Shared with WRC Pylon) 4

**Willpower:** 7

**Wisdom:** 8

**Virtue:** Charity

**Vice:** Sloth

**Initiative:** 6

**Defense:** 2

**Speed:** 9

**Health:** 8

**Gnosis:** 3

**Arcana:** Forces 4, Mind 3, Prime 3

**Rites:** Forces — Control Light (••), Transmission (••), Call Lightning (•••), Light Mastery (•••), Turn Projectile (•••); Mind — Third Eye (•), Emotional Urging (••), Sleep of the Just (•••), Universal Language (•••); Prime — Dispel Magic (•), Counterspell Prime (••), Magic Shield (••), Armor of the Soul (•••); *Conjunctural* — (Forces •, Mind ••) Directory Enquiry (see below)

**Mana/Per Turn:** 12/3

**Armor:** 4 ("Unseen Shield," Forces ••)

**Magic Shield:** 3 ("Magic Shield," Prime ••) or 6 ("Magic Shield," Prime •• + "Armor of the Soul," Prime •••)

## Directory Enquiry (Forces •, Mind ••)

Sometimes it's useful to know someone's telephone number. A mage using this spell can reach his senses into a mobile phone or into the land line of a building (he only needs to be able to see the phone line leading into the building) and divine its number.

**Practice:** Knowing

**Action:** Instant

**Duration:** Lasting

**Aspect:** Covert

**Cost:** None

A mage who has cast this spell can use the Forces 2 spell "Transmission" to call the number he's just divined without having to pick up a phone himself.

Seers of the Throne Rote: Directory Enquiry

**Dice Pool:** Wits + Science + Mind

Telephones are as much a means of control as they are a means of communication. The Seers know that. As long as you have a telephone, you're never out of reach, no matter how secure the line.

*Miss Ryden*

**Quote:** Honestly, I don't want to appear rude, but you and I both know that it would be better for all concerned if you were to just leave the village.



**Background:** Elizabeth Ryden spent many years working for various charities, even spending some time as a younger woman working as a missionary in Kerala. Coming back to Britain aged 32, she experienced something of a crisis as she began to realize that she was being, as some of her Christian contemporaries had it, “called to singleness.”

Beginning to despair of ever finding herself a life partner, Elizabeth had something of a nervous breakdown, and was while in a psychiatric hospital in Reading she Awakened. An agent of the Exarchs in the hospital brought her to the attention of Mr. Smith in Witchend, and she’s been working for the Lords of the Aeon ever since.

She’s the current chair of the Women’s Institute, and organizes fêtes, sewing circles and jumble sales. All this work keeps her busy, and it almost lets her forget how unhappy she is.

**Description:** Miss Ryden is 46 years old. She’s thin. She wears sensible, matronly clothes, flat shoes and minimal makeup. Her dark hair, which has no hint of gray, is cut in a severe chin-length bob. She looks like she was once very pretty indeed, but her face is now heavily lined, and she hardly ever lightens her expression with any save the tightest and briefest of smiles.

Her nimbus appears as a wake of knife-like light that darts to and fro across her body.

**Storytelling Hints:** Miss Ryden speaks in precise, grammatically correct sentences. She is direct, and, unlike her colleagues, will openly tell the cabal members to leave if it comes to a meeting, resorting to empty but (hopefully) convincing threats.

She is the only one of the Seers of Witchend who is prepared to compromise her principles and resort to violence. She’s the current chair of the local Women’s Institute, and may use this group of 25 ladies as a weapon, trying to use

magic to influence them against the cabal. (Maybe, if things get bad enough, impelling them to direct violence — one 50-year-old housewife wielding a kitchen knife may not cause a cabal to pause, but 25 could be terribly dangerous.)

Elizabeth hates it here. She hasn’t even admitted it to herself, but deep inside, she identifies Witchend and the Residents’ Committee of which she’s a part as a symbol of all the hopes and ideals she had as a girl that came to nothing.

If Cxaxa Qherephis’ return comes to fruition, Miss Ryden might fight — but she might just as easily snap, falling down and worshipping the destruction of everything that holds her down.

**Dedicated Casting Tool:** A gold watch she wears on her left wrist

**Real Name:** Elizabeth Ryden

**Path:** Mastigos

**Order:** Seers of the Throne

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 3, Wits 2, Resolve 3

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2

**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

**Mental Skills:** Academics (Psychology, Religion) 3, Computer 3, \*Investigation 4, Medicine 1, \*Occult 1, Politics 3

**Physical Skills:** Drive 1, Larceny 2, Stealth 2

**Social Skills:** Empathy 1, Expression 2, Intimidation 3, \*Persuasion 2, Subterfuge 2

**Merits:** Allies (Women’s Institute) 3, High Speech, Library (Shared with WRC Pylon) 4, Occultation 1, Resources 3, Status (Seers of the Throne) 1, Sanctum (Shared with WRC Pylon) 4

**Willpower:** 6

**Wisdom:** 6 (Paranoia)

**Virtue:** Faith

**Vice:** Wrath

**Initiative:** 5

**Defense:** 2

**Speed:** 9

**Health:** 7

**Gnosis:** 2

**Arcana:** Mind 3, Prime 2, Space 2

**Rotes:** *Mind* — Aura Perception (•), Third Eye (•), First Impressions (••), Imposter (•••); *Prime* — Dispel Magic (•), Supernal Vision (•); *Space* — Finder (•), Conceal Sympathy (••)

**Mana/Per Turn:** 11/2

**Armor:** 3 (“Misdirection,” Mind ••)

**Magic Shield:** 2 (“Counterspell Prime,” Prime ••)

*Reverend Jones*

**Quote:** Now come on, old chap. That really isn’t fair. That isn’t cricket.

**Background:** An accomplished batsman and a fine rugby player, Tristan Jones could have become a professional in

either sport, but instead passed them up for another love — the Church. Tristan's Awakening was a descent into a world of the dead. He Awakened during a church meeting, and to him, Awakening was like a vision of Christ's descent to Hell and His triumphant Resurrection. Having been accepted as an ordinand in Wycliffe College, Reverend Jones was found by a member of the Silver Ladder, who tried to get Jones to join. Horrified by the mage's pagan beliefs, Jones turned the man away. Jones was recruited by a group of Seers with an ecclesiastical bent not long after his ordination, and by their machinations was given the parish at St. Peter's, Witchend.

Of the three Seers, Tristan Jones is the only one who is married. His wife, Elaine, doesn't know anything about the magic. He loves her more dearly than anything else, even his faith. For him, his lovely wife symbolizes everything good about what he does, everything worthwhile.

**Description:** Reverend Jones is a big, dark-haired man of 31, built like the prop-forward he is during the village rugby season. Unlike many prop-forwards, however, Tristan doesn't have a face like a boxer, instead keeping the same, angular, clean-cut profile he's always had, with a square jaw, an aquiline nose and bright blue eyes under a brow that could easily be referred to as "noble." His dark hair is beginning to thin slightly. He doesn't wear his dog collar outside of church services. In the summer, he can be seen more often in cricket whites. He's friendly and open and doesn't push his faith on others outside church, although he believes that Heaven and Hell are very real.

His nimbus appears as a halo of cold fire around his features, like Moses after having seen the face of God.

**Storytelling Hints:** Tristan Jones' magic has always had a religious, miraculous feel to it, and to him it's always been part of his faith, a spiritual gift of God. His God is loving and benevolent, and Jones' passion is for the people of the village to live at peace with one another.

Aside from his faith and wife, Jones' other love is sport. He often speaks using sporting analogies, and appeals to a sense of fair play if things aren't going his way, or if someone is "cheating." To Reverend Jones, using magic is cheating.

If anything happened to Elaine, Reverend Jones might snap and forget his principles, but even so, he could never bring himself to kill another child of God, even a sinner who uses magic.

**Dedicated Casting Tool:** A medal of St. Christopher that he keeps in his pocket, attached to a key ring

**Real Name:** Tristan Jones

**Path:** Moros

**Order:** Seers of the Throne

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 3

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

**Social Attributes:** Presence 3, Manipulation 2, Composure 3

**Mental Skills:** Academics (Religion) 2, Medicine (First Aid) 1, \*Occult 1, Politics (Church of England) 1, Science 1

**Physical Skills:** Athletics (Rugby, Cricket) 3, Crafts 1, Drive 2, Stealth 1, Survival 1

**Social Skills:** Animal Ken (Dogs) 3, Empathy 2, Expression (Preaching) 2, Intimidation 1, \*Persuasion 2, Socialize 2

**Merits:** Allies (Local Sports Teams) 3, Ambidextrous, Fast Reflexes 2, Fresh Start, High Speech, Library (Shared with WRC Pylon) 4, Resources 3, Status (Seers of the Throne) 1, Sanctum (Shared with WRC Pylon) 4, Strong Back

**Willpower:** 6

**Wisdom:** 8

**Virtue:** Temperance

**Vice:** Pride

**Initiative:** 8

**Defense:** 2

**Speed:** 11

**Health:** 8

**Gnosis:** 1

**Arcana:** Death 1, Life 2, Matter 2, Prime 1

**Roles:** *Death* — Forensic Gaze (•); *Life* — Healer's Trance (•), Purify Bodies (••); *Matter* — Craftsman's Eye (•), Unseen Aegis (••); *Prime* — Supernal Vision (•)

**Mana/Per Turn:** 10/1

**Armor:** 2 ("Unseen Aegis," Matter 2)

## *The Seers' Defense*

The Seers, who form the Witchend Residents' Committee, were warned by what they believe to be a cryptic message from their masters, gleaned from prophecies given in tongues at St. Peter's.

The Seers know that the Coming Enemy whom they have to stop is female and Awakened. They know that "her roots



are far away," which is actually a reference to the fact that she's of an ancient bloodline, but which they interpret as a reference to her ethnic origin. They know that she will come for something they have, which they *must not allow* to be given her, and while no message has ever said what that something is, Mr. Evans has made an informed guess that the object in question is the Robe — what else would an enemy of the Lords of the Aeon want?

The Robe lies in the hidden museum. Some time ago, Mr. Evans placed the Robe in a case imbued with a persistent version of the Space 2 spell "Ward," which is why Cymbeline can't find the Robe simply by using her sympathetic connection to it. If it weren't for the dreams, she'd have never have found it at all. Plus, it's possible that some aspect of the Robe's power is hiding it from her.

As soon as the cricket match finishes (and not before — Jones is quite fastidious on this point, which inadvertently gives the cabal time to investigate), Reverend Jones will call Mr. Evans and Miss Ryden. Within another half an hour, the three of them meet up in the council chambers and discuss what they have to do. Three hours after Mr. Jones first notices the cabal in Witchend, the Seers are ready to act.

Miss Ryden — regretfully — thinks that the Coming Enemy has to die. Mr. Evans and Reverend Jones are horrified by this idea. They're convinced that the mages can reason with, and feel that they have to try this first.

Avoidance tactics are the first thing the Seers try. Mr. Evans disapproves of controlling or influencing minds using magic, but these are desperate measures, and he allows Miss Ryden to cast the spell "Emotional Urging" on a whole succession of villagers. The effect is that wherever the cabal members go, friendly and curious villagers begin to come up to them and talk, despite having very little to say.

The villagers all — politely — ask the same questions. "Who are you?" "So, what brings you to Witchend?" People invite the characters in for tea. People in the pub buy them drinks (enough to get them all drunk) and try clumsily to engage the members of the cabal in conversation. Mr. Evans and Miss Ryden take every opportunity to read the minds of the people who have spoken to the cabal, trying to glean everything they can, and trying to find if the cabal has given anything away.

Other people will try to get the cabal members to come to church on Sunday morning, again in a friendly, open kind of way: "Well, we're off to church right now. Why don't you join us?" It might well be that the cabal members are interested enough to go on their own. While they're there, Mr. Evans and Miss Ryden will try to read some of the characters' minds.

The Seers will try to deflect the cabal from the hidden museum where the Robe is hidden for as long as they possibly can without revealing themselves. However, the Seers, although not stupid, are unimaginative. They expect the cabal to play by their rules. Reverend Jones may be worried, but not worried enough to abandon his cricket match. They won't

miss church on Sunday morning. The community means too much to them for that. The community may be under the control of the Exarchs (see below), but the Witchend Residents' Committee members are only the inheritors of that control. They don't do much to uphold it. Most of their control is because the people in the village freely want to be there and freely want to tow the line.

The Seers could control the people of the village more directly, and could use them as a powerful weapon against the cabal, but the Seers don't want to. Mr. Evans believes that forcing the people to do something against their will, even for the greater good, would violate everything he stands for. Miss Ryden might ignore him if things start looking grim and could use the people to attack the cabal, but Mr. Evans and Reverend Jones will not put the people into danger under any circumstances. These two are willing to die for the people they supposedly control. Mr. Evans and Reverend Jones see themselves as the villagers' protectors, and won't abuse that trust.

Mr. Evans' scruples about mind control don't extend to the Awakened. He believes that by their very nature they're the potential enslavers of humanity, and won't hesitate to try to get the characters into the Clarity Room (see below). He knows its effect won't be permanent on them, but he hopes that it'll have enough of an effect to either make them leave town or feel better disposed toward him so that he can have an opening to talk them into leaving town. If he gets his hands on Cymbeline, he'll try and use the Clarity Room on her again and again. He won't realize it, but this is actually the most effective way to stop her short of killing her. As time goes on, she'll forget her quest, and the danger will fade. After enough time in the village, Cymbeline could end up as another one of the Seers, brainwashed by mundane means into happily doing whatever the Exarchs want.

Mr. Evans might try to get the cabal into the Clarity Room by calling one of them on their mobile phone (he's got a rote to find out telephone numbers) and inviting the group for a "little chat." Then he'll lead them into the Clarity Room and try desperately to bring them round.

If this doesn't work, the Seers' efforts become more open and more futile. Miss Ryden is the only one of the Seers who can bring herself to direct violence, and even then, she can't take the cabal on her own in combat, whether magical or not.

In the end, the biggest factor on the side of the Seers is that the whole village appears to be under their control, and this gives them the appearance of looking a whole lot more powerful than they are. Random calls and text messages, a succession of people all asking exactly the same question, one after the other, and a church service with more than 100 people all speaking in tongues can be quite creepy and intimidating, if presented right.

If worst comes to worst, the Seers will confront the cabal directly and attempt to tell how dangerous Cymbeline is and how terrible the consequences will be if she doesn't leave and give up on her quest.



## *Cymbeline's Quest*

Cymbeline is desperate enough now that everything she does is directed toward finding the Robe. It may be all the cabal can do to stop her from openly asking people in the village if they've seen the Artifact.

Her first thought will be to investigate the church, and if the cabal members don't accompany her or talk her out of going there, she'll go there on her own.

If Cymbeline goes anywhere on her own, the Seers get her. They tie her up, lock her in the church cellar and keep her drugged (with prescription painkillers). Then, the following day, they take her to the Clarity Room (see below) and talk her out of her mission. And they do that every day, combining it with sleep deprivation, drugs and alcohol and other basic thought reform techniques, such that Cymbeline's quest is brainwashed out of her in a matter of a week. (Or, rather, temporarily suppressed. Mundane coercion can't recast her soul.)

Meanwhile, if the cabal starts asking questions, the Seers'll come out in the open, telling the characters that Cymbeline is all right, and that what the Seers are doing is in her best interests.

This may be good enough for the cabal members. The greater likelihood is that they'll try to rescue her.

If Cymbeline is with the characters when they find the Robe in the hidden museum gallery (see below), she becomes highly agitated, and attempts to smash the case, no matter when they see it. If she gets to wear the Robe, even once, the personality of Cxaxa Qherephis begins to assert itself. Thereafter, she tries to find a time when she can be alone with enough time to complete her rebirth.

After the church, the museum is Cymbeline's second choice of places to look. If she goes on her own, she finds the hidden door, smashes the glass case and cuts her own eyes and heart out on the spot. See "The Return of Cxaxa Qherephis," p. 61.

## Witchend, USA

Storytellers who would rather not send an American cabal across the Atlantic might want instead to situate the Seers' ideal community in the United States. The paraphernalia of an English village doesn't fit an American setting, obviously, so instead imagine Witchend as an affluent satellite town somewhere in New England. Well-heeled commuters live in sizeable suburban piles. Picket fences are white. Houses have well-maintained front porches with beautifully maintained floral hanging baskets. Flowerbeds are arranged perfectly. Trees are symmetrical, and leaves only fall in a way to look pretty. Lawns are flat and well trimmed. Rather than a pub, the place has a country club, and the council chambers, the

Clarity Room and the museum are all there.

The (Pentecostal) church meets in a more modern church building, and has a choir who wear bright blue robes. The Seers are still all white, just like everyone else. Mr. Jones plays softball rather than cricket. Mr. Evans was at Harvard rather than Cambridge. Miss Ryden is in the DAR rather than the WI; furthermore, the American version of Miss Ryden owns a rifle and a handgun, and isn't afraid to use them (she has one dot in Firearms).

Imagine the town as being a cross between the suburban worlds presented in the films *Blue Velvet*, *Pleasantville* and *The Stepford Wives*, with a bit of *Desperate Housewives* thrown in. The people are just as affluent and just as clean-cut.

However Witchend is portrayed, wherever it's found, Witchend is a stereotype. The village is so artificial and so idealized in its normality, it's ever so slightly creepy. Wherever you find the village, it's always summer in Witchend.

## *Ye Shall Know the Truth, and the Truth Shall Make You Nice*

Twice a day on Sunday, nearly every single person in Witchend cheerfully goes to church. In a country in which only one person in 20 takes part in any religious observance more than once or twice a year, this isn't so much unusual as downright freakish.

The characters may be curious enough to see what the entire village is doing here (if they haven't been invited by a villager, under Miss Ryden's influence).

Troupes unfamiliar with the church scene in the United Kingdom will be surprised to find a morning service at the church to be quite a lively affair. There are pews and an organ, but the vicar will happily explain if asked that this is only because there's nothing he could do about them — the organ hasn't been used for years. Instead, there's a band, composed of a guitarist, a bassist and a drummer, and they sing modern worship choruses. Mr. Jones' sermons are warm and emotional. While, on the one hand, they promote niceness, decency and honesty, they also betray a rather Manichaeian worldview. In Reverend Jones' world, good and evil are locked in a constant spiritual battle.

Mage who hear one of the vicar's sermons and who make a successful Intelligence + Academics roll notice that he's saying things that aren't completely orthodox. For example, he uses the term "Lord of this Age" to describe angels, when the Bible uses the term to describe Satan.

If Reverend Jones spots a mage in his congregation (the vicar needs to make a Wits + Composure roll to spot quiet

visitors as the church is quite dark and crowded), he'll mention witchcraft, too. He'll be relatively gentle about it, and will stress that even someone who indulges in witchcraft can be redeemed, but he'll not shrink from saying that magic is a terrible, terrible sin.

Reverend Jones may be busy, but Mr. Evans and Miss Ryden, however, are sitting in the congregation and looking out for the cabal. These two will attempt to read the minds of at least one of the mages (using the Mind 3 spell "Telepathy") in order to get some sort of idea as to what they want. Neither Evans nor Ryden is particularly skilled with this procedure, and mages can notice that they're being contacted telepathically with a roll of Composure + Gnosis.

### *Words from the Spirit*

At the end of the service, the really surprising things happen. The vicar institutes a time of open prayer. He invites those who need healing or prayer to come to the front of the church and receive the Spirit. The people who go to the front of the church kneel at the communion rail and the vicar prays for them — then they collapse.

Some people begin to cry. Several people in the congregation start speaking in tongues. Every so often someone else is "moved by the Spirit" to interpret what the tongue-speakers are saying.

Mages using Mage Sight won't detect any magic here — there isn't any. These are natural phenomena, which occur without magic in churches across the United Kingdom every Sunday.

However, mages who choose to use magic granted by the Ring can see that some of the people who speak in tongues, and some of the interpreters, fall momentarily under the sway of some Supernal force (arguably the Exarchs). It can be either, both or neither.

The messages are all cryptic things such as —

"See, God will do a new thing in the communities around us," or

"There's opposition to work of the Spirit in some of the hearts here, and the Lord says, don't be afraid, for His love will keep you from falling," or

"Satan's assault is coming, but the Spirit is ready to guard us against the traps of the Enemy. Have faith! Don't falter!"

Some of these messages are believed by the Seers to be inspired by the Exarchs. Some messages aren't. The three Seers, all of whom are present at every church service, can't tell the difference and so make sure that they take note of them all. Besides, just because some of these prophecies happen to come — indirectly — from the Exarchs doesn't mean that they're of any value.

It was through comparing, contrasting and cobbling together the interpretations of several of these messages in glossolalia that Mr. Evans, Reverend Jones and Miss Ryden began to realize that something awful was coming to Witchend.

## The Toronto Blessing

Between 1994 and 1996, a wave of unusual phenomena swept evangelical churches across the English-speaking world. It was called "the Toronto Blessing," after the Canadian city in which these things first happened. People collapsed in ecstasies (being "slain in the spirit"), spoke in tongues, were overcome by fits of "holy laughter" and exhibited strange behaviors during church services. Although the extreme manifestations of this phenomena died out as quickly as they had begun, a whole sector of churches experienced a small revival, and today many churches across Britain still regularly house these phenomena. The "Alpha Course," a modular guide to Christian belief, was developed in one of the largest of these churches; hundreds of British churches now run Alpha.

For someone unused to this phenomenon, the experience of being surrounded by people collapsing in ecstasies or speaking tongues can be quite unsettling.

The interesting thing is that, demographically, a disproportionate number of those who attend such churches are affluent, white, middle-class professionals. The stereotype of the British Christian has changed over the last 10 years: once, she was a dour old lady. Now the stereotypical British Christian is an educated, married person, possibly with a young family and certainly with a substantial income. These people are morally upright and socially active, but, more than anything else, they're really *nice* — cheerful, friendly and just the tiniest bit dull.

### *Witchend Village Hall and the Council Chambers*

Witchend Village Hall is a well-maintained Victorian building, not unlike many buildings of its kind, with classical pillars and a small pediment showing the date of its building (1866). The village hall open to the public on Monday to Friday, and on those days, an elderly woman sits at a reception desk in the foyer. The receptionist, Mrs. Edwards, has worked here for 30 years. She files, answers the phone and makes the tea for Mr. Evans, who keeps an office here.

Inside, there's a hall with a carpeted floor. Along one wall are stacks of chairs, enough to seat 200 people. There's a stage at one end of the hall. The hall is used by lots of different groups in the life of the village — the Women's Institute, the amateur dramatics group, the Parish Church Council — and is regularly cleaned. There's a small but adequate backstage



area, which contains a number of props from plays put on by the amateur dramatics society.

The building has clean and well-kept cloakrooms. There are a number of rooms on one side of the main hall, which serve as the council chambers. A small boardroom sits next to Mr. Evans' small but well-appointed office, and a lounge area, where Mr. Evans takes people for his "little chats." This is the Clarity Room.

You have to walk through the hall to get to the boardroom, walk through the boardroom to get to the office and go through the office to get to the Clarity Room. Mr. Evans will proudly talk about each room to newcomers as he leads them through to the Clarity Room, as if giving a tour of his home.

### *The Museum*

There is a door to one side of the foyer (the opposite side from the council chambers). There is a sign on it, saying:

WITCHEND MUSEUM  
OPENING HOURS: TUESDAY TO FRIDAY,  
10 A.M. TO 4 P.M.

The museum has a number of old objects, in no particular order: a china dinner service from the 18th century, a collection of Roman coins, a flintlock musket and a Parliamentary Helmet from the Civil War, an edition of the Tyndale Bible, some photographs of the village from the 19th century, a

painting of Witchend from the turn of the 20th century and some other sundry objects.

At one end of the hall, there is a penny-farthing bicycle on a pedestal. Behind the bicycle is a door. No one normally takes any notice of the door, since it was once imbued with an effect similar to the Mind 2 spell "Incognito Presence." The enchantment isn't particularly strong, and any mage who gains two successes on a roll of Wits + Gnosis is able to notice that the door behind the penny-farthing bicycle is of importance. The door isn't locked, but the museum does have a CCTV camera (Wits + Composure or Larceny to notice), which feeds into a screen in Mr. Evans' office. Mr. Evans often works at night, and it's possible that he's in the office when the cabal finds the hidden door, whether it's day or night.

### *The Other Gallery*

Behind the hidden door is a second gallery room, which has exhibits of a far more interesting kind. This was Mr. Smith's collection, and the Seers keep it here as a memorial to him.

Cases claim to hold objects such as the head of John the Baptist (a skull with a thin cover of desiccated skin), a stuffed Rat King (a dozen rats, joined together by their fused and knotted tails), a fragmentary piece of stone from the Lighthouse at Alexandria, an unlabeled idol that looks like a brutish fish-headed man with three-lobed eyes, a bottle of something black and ancient (its label says it contains blood

from the stigmata of St. Francis), a number of black-and-white photographs of crop circle formations from various places in Berkshire, a dried fish on a plaque (which apparently fell from the sky as part of a rain of fish on the second of September 1939) and other wonders. None of them are magical.

However, in an unmarked glass case at the far end of the gallery, pinned to a canvas backing is the Robe of the Dethroned Queen. The case has been imbued with the Space 2 spell "Ward," and is padlocked, but otherwise, there is nothing stopping the cabal from taking the Robe. Its primary means of defense, over the ages, has been the Robe's innate capability to hide itself from notice.

## The Robe of the Dethroned Queen (Artifact .....)

Durability: 5, Size 5, Structure 10

**Mana Capacity:** 12

The Robe of the Dethroned Queen was said to carry the power to conceal power from the Exarchs on high. When an Awakened magician wears the Robe, she is all undetectable by the Exarchs. Even against other terrestrial mages her power becomes difficult to sense or assess.

While wearing the Robe of the Dethroned Queen, Qherephis managed to rule her people with arcane power without ever attracting the attention of agents of the Exarchs. With the Robe simply in their custody, the Seers of Witchend have managed to occult their power for decades, rendering their idyllic little town hidden from wizards who would pervert it. The Robe even hid the town from the destructive resonance of hype and excess popularity that sometimes consumes such small towns. Thus the easy-to-miss hamlet became the hiding place of an ancient artifact simply by not attracting attention to the artifact's inherent powers of occultation.

The Robe itself is a long, heavy woven mantle adorned with a few bronze plates and a simple rope tie. It has a complex, almost medieval pattern to it, like a knitted *Book of Kells*, with Atlantean runes in place of Latin letters. It's length and cut resembles a Greek Orthodox vestment more than any Classical garb typically associated with it in myth. Some speculate, however, that the Robe has been gradually changing its style and form over the centuries to better keep itself hidden from the notice of the Exarchs.

Any mage wearing the Robe enjoys the benefits of five dots in an equivalent of the Occultation Merit (even though that Merit normally maxes out at three dots). This Artifact can also be used to cast or learn the Space 3 spell, "Destroy the Threads."



In addition, the Robe's woven words reveal a special variation on the "Complete Invisibility" spell (Forces 5) that hides the caster only from the sight and magic of the Exarchs and their servants (witting or not). This is a Forces 4 spell.

Simply using the Robe's powers is an act of hubris for mages of Wisdom 6 or higher. (Learning a spell from the Robe is an additional act of hubris at the same level of sin.) The Robe defies the cosmic station of a Fallen World being's position beneath and in sight of the Supernal world — it was never meant to be worn on Earth and used against the Exarchs.

Some Pentacle mages posit that the Robe's powers are, in fact, an elaborate ruse on behalf of the Exarchs and their minions. In fact, the Robe merely reveals its wearer to be *trying* to hide from the Exarchs. Minions play along to take advantage of the wearer's overconfidence, then follow her back to her people or a more cunning strike. These cautious Pentacle mages may even be right. Is it worth dabbling with the tools of the Exarchs if there's any chance that doing so plays into their hands?



## *The Clarity Room*

Whenever Mr. Evans wants to meet up with someone for one of his “little chats,” the Seer sits with his guest in the same tastefully decorated room in the village’s council chambers.

There are four comfortable chairs and a small table, on which there is a little stack of coasters. There, over a cup of tea brought in by dear Mrs. Edwards, Mr. Evans just talks, never raising his voice, never being anything other than cordial. After half an hour with Mr. Evans, most people feel a lot better. Their problems and complaints never seem quite so serious. Mr. Evans’ answers to their questions make them feel a lot better. Everything seems a whole lot clearer.

Mages who get one success on a Wits + Composure roll or a Wits + Crafts roll while in the room notice that there’s something odd about the structure of the room, but they can’t put their finger on it. For every success after the first one, tell them about one or two of the following:

- Although, by an optical illusion, the walls look straight, they’re actually very slightly curved.
- None of the angles in the room are right angles.
- The window sill isn’t parallel to the floor.
- The striped turquoise pattern on the wallpaper doesn’t repeat itself — the pattern just looks like it does. Each iteration of the pattern is in fact entirely unique.
- The light fittings on the wall don’t all shed exactly the same amount of light.
- The brick tiles around the open fireplace look the same at first glance, but actually, they’re all slightly different shapes. They still tessellate perfectly — but they shouldn’t.

The weirdest thing about this is that the combination of odd details in this room has the cumulative effect of making anyone sitting there feel comfortable and well-disposed to Mr. Evans, as he sits in the armchair by the fire.

Anyone using Mage Sight sees that the entire room is magical. The room itself is imbued with magi, carrying a cheerful, friendly, twinkly, calming kind of resonance. Both the physical fabric and décor of the room are part of the casting ritual for the spell.

The room is a trap. The only clarity the room grants is the clarity that Mr. Evans and his colleagues want their guests to have. The room’s magic makes the Clarity Room an effective brainwashing tool. However, Mr. Evans hates using it, and hardly ever activates its powers. He’s likeable and persuasive enough on his own to be able to convince people that it’s better for everyone if they get along. He considers it a matter of personal pride that virtually all of the people in the village are decent and law-abiding of their own free will, and that all he did was talk them round.

What Mr. Evans doesn’t know is that Miss Ryden has begun to use the Clarity Room on the villagers behind his back. She’s of the opinion that it’s too useful and practical an item not to use, and she doesn’t share Mr. Evans’ scruples about it being better for people to make up their own minds.

She has used the room while Mr. Evans was out of town or out of the council chambers. Mr. Evans is too trusting to even

suspect so far, and if he found out about what she’s been doing, his reaction is likely to be disappointment rather than anger.

## The Clarity Room (Imbued Item .....)

**Mana Capacity:** 11

This room, built into the council chambers 30 years ago by Mr. Smith, has the Mind 5 spell “Psychic Reprogramming” built into the angles of the walls, the position of the window, the shade of paint and the shape of the door.

All Mr. Evans (or either of his colleagues) has to do to activate the room’s spell is to say the words, “So I understand that you have a few problems,” and then to talk about how the Seer would like the recipient of the spell to reform his behavior. The spell costs one of the room’s Mana points, each time the spell is cast.

## *The Return of Cxaxa Qherephs*

At the moment that Cymbeline dons the Robe, Cxaxa Qherephs possesses her. Cymbeline gains the Gnosis and Arcana of the ancient mage; Qherephs, meanwhile, has full access to Cymbeline’s memories. Qherephs knows that if she doesn’t complete her ritual of rebirth within a day, she will fade into Cymbeline’s personality forever. At the first opportunity, Qherephs tries to give her companions the slip.

Qherephs doesn’t care about keeping the Robe. Its only purpose to her was as a metaphysical key, the symbol that joins the three shards of her soul. The cabal might suddenly find Cymbeline’s behavior puzzling: she puts the Robe down, or hands it to one of the cabal (“Take it. It’s yours”), smiles and says that they can all go home now.

If Mr. Evans was present in his office when the cabal got into the hidden gallery, he’ll make his way there as quickly as possible, in hopes of somehow stopping the characters.

If he gets there after Cymbeline has donned the Robe, Cymbeline is quite capable of casting any number of powerful and vicious magics, quite possibly killing him on the spot.

Again, the cabal will probably take heed of this.

When the characters have gotten out, Cymbeline/Qherephs tries to get out of their sight, because she knows they’ll never let her finish her task. She might, for example, sneak off while their backs are turned, or even tell them that she needs to go to the bathroom.

If the cabal somehow manages to keep Cymbeline in sight for a whole 24 hours, Qherephs fades. Cymbeline keeps Qherephs’ Arcana, while her Gnosis falls to 3. Cymbeline then spends the rest of her life wondering what she’s missed.

If she manages to get out of the sight of her comrades, even for a minute, Cymbeline/Qherephs begins the final rite of rebirth.

She rips off her shirt and kneels down with the Eyes of Salt and the Heart Full of Flies in front of her. Then she tears her eyes out with her fingers, and inserts the Eyes of Salt, which knit instantly with her optic nerves and become her own eyes. Then, letting out a shriek, which can be heard by every soul in the village, she reaches inside her chest and rips out her heart.

The cabal members hear the scream — if they run to investigate, they find Cymbeline kneeling on the ground, a gaping rent in her chest, covered from head to toe in her own blood. She holds the Heart Full of Flies in her left hand, and her own still-beating heart in the other. She looks up with her featureless eyes of pockmarked stone and smiles, coldly.

Then she inserts the Heart Full of Flies into the gap in her chest. An icy cold wind howls around Cymbeline and the cabal, whether they're indoors or outside. The rent closes up, and Cxaxa Qherephs is reborn.

If the cabal realizes that the Heart Full of Flies is the key to something awful happening, the characters have the chance to grapple the Heart from Cymbeline and smash it. As long as it's intact, Cymbeline remains alive, however, and will fight to get it back. As long as she has it, she needs only one turn to insert it in her chest.

The Heart, when smashed, unleashes an enormous swarm of flies, the buzzing of their wings like the roar of a jet aircraft.



They get everywhere, and make action virtually impossible (–5 to all actions) for about 30 seconds, and then dissipate as quickly as they appeared. When they're gone, Cymbeline lies dead on the ground, still staring, still smiling.

On the other hand, if the characters don't do this, or hesitate, and Cxaxa Qherephs is finally reborn, she thanks them and gets up. Still half-naked and covered in blood, she walks out into the village, and then travels from house to house, building to building, killing the inhabitants. She only spares those who bow down and worship her — and the cabal.

If the characters try to stop her, she uses magic designed to immobilize them, shut them up, control their actions (forcing them to watch what they've been complicit in) or knock them out. She won't kill them to begin with, since they were the friends of Cymbeline Hand, to whom she owes her new life, and because without them she would never have been reborn. She might even tell them this.

If they keep fighting, Qherephs gradually gets tired and uses more lethal magics. The cabal (and the Seers, if Qherephs hasn't got to them first) might be able to bring her down, but there's a small likelihood of their doing so.

After she's massacred enough villagers to satisfy her savage joy at being reborn, Qherephs vanishes. If Miss Ryden remains alive, she might bow down and offer herself to Qherephs as her servant. If so, Cxaxa Qherephs takes Miss Ryden with her.

### *Cxaxa Qherephs*

**Quote:** *Bow down.*

**Background:** Returned to the world in all her mad, lethal glory, Qherephs finds the world changed. Cymbeline's personality is now completely washed away. Although Qherephs knows everything that Cymbeline knows, and remembers everything that Cymbeline remembers, she is not Cymbeline. Cymbeline's soul is consumed by Qherephs', and can never be regained.

**Description:** In the body of Cymbeline Hand, Qherephs is covered with her own blood, streaming down her face like tears, a swathe across her naked torso. She strides effortlessly through the paths of Witchend like the bloody queen she is, murdering everyone who does not bow down and worship her. All the time, she smiles, but her smile doesn't touch those terrible, blank stone eyes.

Qherephs' nimbus is as Cymbeline's, only more so: a howling snowbound wind that surrounds her, a small blizzard swirling around her limbs.

**Storytelling Hints:** She is the Cold Smile, the Swarming Heart, the Splintered Sight. Qherephs always intended to reawaken. Hers is the authority of an ancient world, and she demands it be recognized. If not, she has the means to force it to happen.

If she finally escapes, she will attire herself in raiment befitting a regent of the Ascendant Direction: amassing jewels, robes, tattoos and perfume and a retinue of psychically dominated Sleepers, she'll try to rebuild her dominion on earth again, possibly using the now utterly devoted Miss

Ryden as her agent. However, before then, there's revenge on those who would kill Qherephis. The servants of the Exarchs and theirs will be her sacrifice.

Qherephis doesn't need the Robe. To her, it was only a means of rebirth. She knows how to cast its spell, and needs no toys. Besides, she can't use the Robe again. If she wants to be reborn again, she needs another metaphysical symbol.

Qherephis is cold and arrogant. At the same time, she is disappointed and irritated at the fact that her magic is so degraded, and that she is so very much weaker than she was before. It took many more centuries for her plan to be fulfilled than she thought, and the power kept in Cymbeline's fragment of her soul was much diluted. Still, there is time to grow again, after her business in Witchend is finished.

**Real Name:** Qherephis

**Path:** Mastigos

**Order:** An ancient iteration of the Silver Ladder

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 4, Wits 5, Resolve 4

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4

**Social Attributes:** Presence 4, Manipulation 4, Composure 5

**Mental Skills:** Academics (Geography) 1, Investigation 2, Medicine 1

**Physical Skills:** Athletics (Running) 3, Brawl 1, Drive 1, Stealth 2, Survival (Sleeping Rough) 4

**Social Skills:** Empathy 1, \*Expression 4, Intimidation 5, \*Persuasion 4, Streetwise 2, \*Subterfuge 1

**Merits:** Direction Sense, Fleet of Foot 1, High Speech, Iron Stamina 2, Language (Fante, and the ancient language of Qherephis' People) 2, Striking Looks 4, Status (Ancient Silver Ladder) 5

**Willpower:** 9

**Wisdom:** 2 (Vocalization, 4; Megalomania, 3)

**Virtue:** Fortitude

**Vice:** Pride

**Initiative:** 8

**Defense:** 3

**Speed:** 11

**Health:** 9

**Gnosis:** 7

**Arcana:** Forces 5, Life 4, Mind 5, Prime 5, Space 5

**Rotes:** Mind — Aura Perception (•), Multi-Tasking (•••); Space — Finder (•), Spatial Awareness (•)

**Mana/Per Turn:** 20/7

**Armor:** 5 ("Misdirection," Mind ••)

**Magic Shield:** 5 ("Counterspell Prime," Prime ••)

### *Afterword*

The characters can choose to leave at any time, and leave Cymbeline to her fate. If so, they're going to have to live with what happens to her. If Cymbeline ends up in the hands of the Witchend Residents' Committee, she'll at least be happy, but she'll never be free.



The cabal can choose to destroy the Heart Full of Flies at any point, with the same effect — a swarm of flies covering anything, and the death of something wonderful in Cymbeline Hand, although if she still has her eyes and heart intact, she at least keeps her life.

If they destroy the Heart, the cabal members have the corpse of a friend on their hands. If any of the Seers are alive, they beg the cabal to leave. The Seers are not violent people, and their only concern is to keep their village peaceful. They don't want to see the cabal again. The Seers won't allow the cabal to leave with the Robe, however, and if the cabal members want it, they will have to fight for it with what reserves of magic they have left, likely succeeding. Getting away with the Robe makes enemies of more of the Seers, and word may get around, from one pylon and Ministry to another, gradually making the cabal marked men and women, if they weren't already.

If Cxaxa Qherephis is reborn, the players will have eventually to come to terms with what they've been party to. Qherephis leaves, hoping one day to regain the key to immortality.

She's out of this story, but at some point in the future, Cxaxa Qherephis could return. Taking control of Sleeping minds, and gaining agents who would seek out Artifacts that could carry the same metaphysical weight as the Robe.







# CHAPTER THREE: THE SCEPTER

He tries to touch his corpse's face, but his hand slips into the sweaty skin, through bone to brain.

He yanks his hand back, takes a deep meaningless non-breath into the projection of his body — into the idea of his lungs — and lets the breath out. His astral body clings to the low, jagged ceiling of the cave like smoke. Piled on the rocks below him are his friends' bodies. They lie like dead leaves around the stump of a stone altar, from which juts a narrow, delicate Scepter dressed in jewels.

He recognizes the altar, the deep glyphs cut into it. He recognizes the Scepter, the way it vibrates like a plucked string. He recognizes the faces of his friends. But he doesn't have any words for any of it, doesn't know where he is or who these people really are.

He's sure, though, that the body below him is his. He floats down to the floor of the cave, next to his corpse, and leans in as close as he can. He watches a dwindling sphere of sweat run from the eyebrow, over the eyelid, to the lashes, where the sweat hangs for a long second, and then spends itself into nothing running down the cheek into the ear.

The body moves.

It's a twitch, a flutter the follows a thin, wet breath. His body is alive. They're all alive.

There's still time.

THE SWEAT HANGS FOR A LONG SECOND  
AND THEN SPENDS ITSELF INTO NOTHING

*Then they gave me my staff of office, confirming me as one of them. It bore a curse, they said, awaiting those who dared purloin it from me. It would steal from its would-be thieves, taking their selfhood, and replacing it with a sham. As they said this, they drew back, alarmed by an expression on my face, which they took to be pity for the curse's victims. "Never fear, my queen," they said. "There will never be a prettier falsehood."*

— Chronicle of the Dethroned Queen

*O memory! thou midway world  
'Twixt earth and paradise,  
Where things decayed and loved ones lost  
In dreamy shadows rise.*

— Abraham Lincoln

## *Introduction*

"The Scepter" opens in the outwardly tranquil gated community of Sutterton Farms. The players take on new roles, as ordinary people leading lives of quiet desperation in and around this exurban enclave. What the players don't at first realize is that these new personae are transfigured versions of their usual mage characters. In reality, the mages lie unconscious in a German salt cave, arrayed around the Scepter of the Dethroned Queen. The Scepter, activating a complex pre-programmed defense mechanism called the Omnium, has cast them into an Astral Realm within the Temenos. The Scepter has populated this illusionary environment by drawing on the characters' memories, yearnings, fears and desires. In this world of buzzing leaf blowers, hissing lawn sprinklers and smooth-riding sports utility vehicles, they enter a new Sleeping life. They face the microscopic crises of mundane existence, forming powerful attachments to their illusionary friends and family at Sutterton Farms. To prevail, the mages must first recognize that their environment is a deceptively mundane nightmare. Having recalled their true identities, they must go on to recover their magical powers. As they do this, they may discover that, like lucid dreamers, they can seize control of the illusion, bending it to their desires. To completely escape the identity-bending trap, they must find the disguised representation of the Scepter, then muster the force of will required to shatter this illusory realm — and the new loved ones who reside within it. Meanwhile, a fatal deadline looms: their bodies lie neglected in the cave, slowly dying of dehydration.

## *Theme*

This story extends the overall theme of Control to the characters' very identities. The Scepter has exercised control over them by recasting their memories and environment. To regain their stolen selfhood, they have to steal that Control from the Scepter. But in so doing, they risk the ultimate act of hubris, slaying illusive loved ones who represent the best parts of themselves — their most deeply held hopes and longings.

## *Mood*

Before the players twig to what's going on, "The Scepter" evokes a mood of upper-middle-class angst and ennui, familiar

from such media works as the movies *American Beauty*, *Garden State* and *The Graduate*, as well as the television series *Six Feet Under* or the fiction of John Cheever.

After the characters realize that they've been stripped of their true selves, the mood shifts to one of existential horror, in which the boundary between reality and illusion becomes alarmingly blurry. In this head-game phase, the story travels the territory of films such as *Existenz* or *The Tenant*, or the novels of Philip K. Dick.

## *Scene Zero: Prelude*

"The Scepter" destabilizes the players by throwing them without explanation into the imaginary reality of Sutterton Farms. The investigation that leads them to the Scepter plays out only in flashback, occurring when the mages start to recover their memories midway through the story.

Plant the seeds for this shift one session before you start this story, by inserting a lead to the location of the Scepter. If your players are especially sharp, which necessitates an additional layer of indirection, hide this amid other unrelated plot developments in mid-episode.

The plot thread can be extremely tenuous: the cabal is made aware of an individual who knows another person who might or might not have stumbled across a passage in a document that may refer to the Scepter, or could be about something else entirely. Where possible, make this first point of contact a character already known and at least semi-trusted by the cabal. The contact should be someone who knows what the cabal is looking for.

The mages may be pursuing their quest for the Dethroned Queen's Artifacts so secretly that none of their contacts are aware of it. In this case, ask all players to make their choice of one of the following rolls: Intelligence + Investigation, Intelligence + Occult or Wits + Socialize. The player with the best result gets the lead. In the event of a tie, pick the player who's enjoyed less spotlight time recently. In the first two cases, the character finds a reference while trawling through footnotes in his reference library. In the latter instance, the character bumps into a hanger-on at a party who supplies the tenuous lead.

Before your players leave for the night, make sure you have up-to-date copies of all character sheets.

### *Prep Phase*

"The Scepter" requires some preparation time.

Most importantly, you'll be re-imagining all of the characters as mundane inhabitants of a gated community called Sutterton Farms.

Locate this housing development as close as you can to the usual center of your chronicle. If gated communities are unknown in your chosen location, find a local equivalent. Any discrete, artificially isolated tract of upper-middle-class housing will do.

Ideally, you'll be creating characters who are unrecognizable as translations when you first hand them out, but who may, in retrospect, be seen to be versions of the original characters.

Use basic World of Darkness character sheets to record the translated characters. Retain the characters' genders and basic physical characteristics such as height and apparent age. Characters may gain weight and/or lose muscle as their heroic qualities are discarded in favor of worn-down normality. Outward aspects of appearance such as hair color, dress sense and the presence of body piercings or tattoos should change to match the aggressively maintained normality of an affluent, conformist community. If your cabal is an ethnic polyglot, but a realistically depicted affluent enclave near your chronicle's locale would be mostly lily-white, you may want to alter the backgrounds of certain characters. Srinivas Patel might, for example, morph into Steve Peters. Foreign-born characters become fully acculturated: Russian émigré mage Yelena Bogdanov becomes an American-born character of Russian extraction, who speaks without an accent and gives little thought to her heritage.

Recast the characters' current core concepts in as sharply mundane a fashion as you can. Each character gains a dull, comfortable safety at the expense of individuality and passion. A hard-nosed Adamantine Arrow warrior might become a security guard patrolling the community, his flabby belly a testament to an alarmingly elevated donut consumption. An intrepid scholar-explorer becomes an instructor at the high school, required to teach a pabulum curriculum to bored, oversexed students. A Shaman who once trucked with animal spirits is now a veterinarian at the local animal shelter. The Moros Necromancer is now a blank-eyed undertaker, fleecing grieving relatives until their credit ratings scream for mercy.

Avoid the thrilling, ultra-competent character concepts roleplayers gravitate to when asked to create mundane, contemporary protagonists. If a character has a military background, he's not a former SEAL, but a beleaguered head of a Navy recruiting office who suffers from chronic back problems. The FBI profiler-turned-mage becomes a frazzled housewife who writes unpublishable novels about a feisty female FBI profiler. Pick security guards over cops and community college instructors over occult investigators. Change celebrity types into waitresses and copy shop clerks dreaming of their big break.

Select names that subtly evoke cabal members' real or shadow names, but be careful not to give the game away. Avoid anagrams; they usually stand out as peculiar, and are easy to spot. Use the same initials but a different pattern of syllables, or the same number of syllables but different sounds.

Change traits as follows. All Attributes are reduced to a maximum of two dots, with the exception of the character's highest Attribute, which may be three dots, provided that it is not Resolve or Presence. If two or more Attributes tie for first place, pick the one that best fits the new concept, provided that the Attribute is not Resolve or Presence.

Characters lose all dots in the following Skills: Occult, Larceny, Stealth, Survival, Streetwise.

The following skills lower to one dot: Investigation, Medicine, Politics, Brawl, Firearms, Weaponry.

All other skills drop to two dots.

All Merits other than the following are dropped: Allies, Ambidextrous, Barfly, Common Sense, Fleet of Foot, Language and Resources. Allies are translated into similarly mundane Contacts; a procurer of rare alchemical ingredients is now the manager of a candle boutique. Resources top out at three dots. (Shabby, street-level mages with few possessions may actually gain a dot or two of Resources to fit into the affluent setting of Sutterton Farms.) Language is limited to one dot: foreign characters speak their mother tongues and English, while others speak English and the second most common tongue in the area. For most of the United States, that means Spanish.

Although the Artifact, Enchanted Item and Imbued Item Merits are suppressed, a faint hint of them remains. Translate each article into a mundane equivalent. Until Awakened during the course of the story, the objects function as any other normal object of the pertinent type. Some of these can be marked on the new character sheet. An enchanted sword could become a security guard's baton, for example.

If the revised version of the item is too mundane to ever appear on a character sheet, mention the item in passing early in the game, as unobtrusively as you can. For example, the Robe artifact from the previous story might become a balled-up sweatshirt left behind by an ex-sweetheart, which the character keeps in the glove compartment of his Subaru. To note that on the character sheet would be a huge tip-off that the article's seeming triviality masks something important. On the other hand, if you slip the sweatshirt in as a bit of description when the character gets into his car, inclusion of the article will seem like a mere snippet of character nuance. Likewise, the magical ring from the first story can become a wedding or class ring here — but should not become the focus of undue attention early in the narrative.

Just as the Sutterton Farms illusion dulls the characters' positive qualities, it also softens their more obvious shortcomings. Only the following Flaws remain: Addiction, Behavior Blind, Coward, Embarrassing Secret, Forgetful, Racist/Sexist, Speech Impediment. An Embarrassing Secret that overtly ties into the mystical continuity of the World of Darkness

becomes banal. A character who hides the fact that his mother turned into a vampire instead worries that her DUI record might come to light. The only permissible Addictions are to alcohol or prescription pain medication. (This is not to say that more serious addictions are unknown in real-world gated communities. Remember that Sutterton Farms is, at least on the surface, an idealized version of the good life.)

Vices and Virtues are unchanged, though their expressions are less dramatic in a mundane setting.

As the use of a basic World of Darkness character sheet suggests, none of the characters' spells or Arcana is available to them as they begin play in their transformed state. They also lack Mana and Gnosis dots.

After you've completed the World of Darkness character sheets, complete a transitional Mage sheet for each character as well. This sheet contains all of the traits of the World of Darkness sheet, plus the original character's Gnosis score. As the characters regain their awareness of their true selves, they will gradually add elements of their original characters to this transitional sheet. This sheet remains valid until they exit the Scepter's Astral Realm, at which point they regain their normal character sheets.

### *The Loved Ones*

During the story, you'll work to develop bonds of affection between the transfigured mage characters and denizens of the Scepter's illusionary world. These friend and family characters are projections of each character's innermost unrealized desires. To create these characters, you'll need to determine what these desires are. In many cases, the answers will be obvious to you. Some players will make their motivations abundantly clear and emphasize them to the hilt. Other more circumspect players may give you less of a glimpse into their mages' inner lives.

Advance planning can help you discover unplumbed depths in the characters. Create tangential scenes in earlier adventures to test the characters, forcing the players to articulate what they care about, through their in-game behavior.

If this technique fails, or if you have little time left as this story draws near, abandon subtlety. Require a Composure + Gnosis roll from each character whose yearnings remain unspecified. Do this when none of the targets have "Mental Shields" or similar spells activated. Smile in the faint, sinister way Storytellers use when player characters are targeted by unseen magic, and ask each player to specify a deeply-held emotional yearning. This applies even to target characters who've rolled a huge number of successes. At the time, the players will think this significant, even ominous, but when nothing comes of it, they'll forget it. Meanwhile, you've found the last piece of information you need to complete your preparation for "The Scepter." Once you've determined what each character's yearning is, imagine a person who would, in a contemporary setting of heightened banality, satisfy that desire. A mage who yearns for his long-lost first love can now be married to a perfect, pliant, if somewhat unimaginative, version of her. An embittered

loner might bond with a snot-nosed punk who reminds the character of himself, before he traveled down the path of regrets. A protective earth-mother figure might find herself riding herd over a swarming brood of needy foster children. A mage hunting down the mentor who betrayed and tortured him could enjoy a supportive friendship with a fatherly employer down at the Home Depot.

### *Keep Reading*

Because much of this story's action must be tailored to the particularities of your group's cabal, "The Scepter" is especially open-ended. It provides a general structure but leaves the specifics of scenes up to you. Each of the following sequences will require some advance prep, bolstered by adroit improvising.

### *Scene One: Be in the Dream*

When your players have gathered, tell them that you'll be running a side game for the next few sessions. Hand them their World of Darkness character sheets. Casually misdirect any players who suspect a direct connection to their mage characters.

If they immediately see the connections anyway, don't panic. The story won't be ruined. The players will simply experience their sense of unease, that something is subtly wrong with reality, sooner than they normally would. Admit nothing; if you play the next sequence straight, they may forget their initial misgivings.

### **Motif: Cell Phones**

To affect and monitor the invented reality, the Omnium must place a representation of the Scepter within the invented reality. This poses a risk: if the players find this illusionary image of the real object, they can exercise control over it, effecting their escape. To throw them off the trail, the Scepter has disguised itself as the ultimate signal of invisible power in a modern world, a communications tower.

Throughout the adventure, as subliminally as you can manage, keep repeating the motif of cell phones and wireless technology. Mention cell phones as often as you can get away with. Each of the characters has one. Their loved ones have them. The people they want to control have them.

The Scepter has also created a number of red herrings, which you should weave into your descriptions from the beginning of the story. Handbills for the Reach Experts search engine firm should, for example, appear throughout Sutterton Farms. Unlike the cell tower, these can be referred to obviously. Don't overdo it, though; astute players may smell a rat if you're providing stronger-than-usual hints.



## *Dramas of Control*

The story opens with a series of low-key personal dramas. Prepare a suitable sequence for each character in advance. These are ordinary conflicts, potentially full of emotion but without the menace or jeopardy we expect from a roleplaying session. In each instance, the focus character is tempted to exercise control over others. If he succumbs, he satisfies his inner Exarch, and increases the Scepter's hold over him. He also gets a reward of some kind, whether it be money, status or pure satisfaction.

As an example, some first scene conflicts might include the following:

The security cop gets a chance to abuse his authority over a scruffy trespasser.

The harried teacher is tempted to fudge a kid's grades in exchange for a promotion.

The idealistic veterinarian is lured into a lucrative but less idealistic job in the equestrian industry.

The housewife with literary ambitions gets the chance to show up a haughty member of her book club.

The undertaker senses that a grieving but attractive widow would be easy prey for a seduction attempt.

The real estate agent knows she'll earn brownie points with the boss if she keeps a tattooed goth couple from buying a house here.

The rebellious teen discovers an opportunity to sabotage the career of his demanding stepfather.

If you get stuck, look to Vices for inspiration. If the character is secretly doing phone sex work from home to pay her crushing mortgage, and her Vice is Gluttony, the scene could involve a tortuous confrontation with the tub of ice cream in the basement freezer. She wants to control her shame by diving headlong into it, punishing herself with high-fat food. Can she resist its siren call?

Create these scenes in multiple stages, giving the characters several escalating decision points. The ice cream sequence can start with a simple craving, which the character can easily resist. Then she sees a commercial for ice cream on television. A neighbor comes over for chat and hints that a mid-afternoon snack might be nice. After she leaves, the character takes a call from a client she finds particularly shameful, triggering another bout of low self-esteem that can be temporarily cured with a heaping dollop of Fudge Ripple.

In play, each scene begins with a description of the character, and of the smotheringly bucolic housing development. In each instance, descriptions of place reinforce the theme, reminding us how these communities attempt to shape, deny and control nature. Emphasize Sutterton Farms' unnaturally green lawns, its batteries of sprinklers, its monster houses' artificial surfaces and its overly elaborate security measures. Point up the conformist urge that Sutterton Farms represents: the houses are all designed according to the same three sets of plans. All the moms drive SUVs, while the dads take mid-priced sports cars to work. Private cops constantly prowl the development's snaking laneways.

Where two characters' concepts would smoothly interlock into one scene, you may find it useful to combine them, especially if you're running for a larger-than-average group. In general, though, these play as solo sequences. Cut between players, playing each scene in small fragments, as you'd see in an ensemble TV drama. Switch focus whenever the scene takes a new direction, or the involved player seems stumped or otherwise pauses to think. Vary the order in which you move from player to player, to keep the players engaged and on their toes.

Allow players to observe scenes they aren't involved in. These doppelgänger versions don't have any secrets they need to keep from one another. Even players who are normally restless when the focus is off them are likely to pay rapt attention here, trying to figure out just what the heck this weird side game of yours is all about. Proceed blithely on as they voice their confusion. Cognitive dissonance is the root of this story's horror.



Each scene offers the focus character a choice between selflessness and Control. Play the devil's advocate with insidious gusto. Emphasize the benefits the character will gain if he succumbs. Enumerate the pressures a controlling gesture will relieve.

All characters start the game with two-thirds of their Willpower already spent — making Vice indulgences all the more tempting.

Challenge yourself to eke maximum drama and excitement from the most minimal of story elements. Imagine the aforementioned scene of the phone sex worker and the tantalizing ice cream. How many steps can you break it into? What descriptive details would help you hype it to epic proportions?

When the decision resolves, the scene concludes. Leave the defining decision to the player; do not require rolls to resist.

Characters who succumb to Control's temptation in these opening scenes gain one dot in a secret trait called Control. There is no limit to the number of Control dots a character can accumulate.

### Food, Drink and Sleep

Throughout these early scenes, slip in as many offhand references to the ex-mages eating and drinking as you can manage without tipping your hand. This provides an important clue to their true condition. Oblique references work best.

You might describe a character clearing out a half-dozen extra-large fast-food drink cups from the back seat of her SUV, noticing that her fridge is empty yet again, or gasping at the size of the monthly grocery bill. Set as many scenes as you can in restaurants or coffee shops, or in front of soda machines and water fountains.

Other inhabitants of Sutterton Farms do not consume as much food and drink as the protagonists do. The other inhabitants don't comment on the seemingly insatiable hunger and thirst of the transformed members of the cabal, either.

### *Orchestrated Cuts*

During the early sequences of this story, you can maintain pacing and emphasize the characters' loss of control and identity through orchestrated cuts between scenes. Standard roleplaying practice gives the players control over pacing and scene changes. They decide where to go and when. Scenes typically end only when the players run out of actions to take.

Here you should feel free to shift time and location as needed to advance your scenes. Do you need an ex-mage to leave his house so he can bump into his wish-fulfillment character? Just go ahead and announce it:

"An hour later, you go down to the supermarket to pick up some fish sticks. You're pushing your cart down the aisle when you see Wendy, the cute new employee at the copy shop."

As the example suggests, take the power to make minor decisions for the characters to maneuver them into the situations you need. If that means you're filling in behavioral details such as a taste for fish sticks, so be it. These are assigned characters and an experimental-seeming story: your players will be more inclined to accept this violation of the usual power arrangement between Storyteller and player. However, once scenes begin, cede all decision-making back to the player.

Midway through the story, when the characters' true identities reassert themselves, drop this technique, returning to the standard conventions that allow players to decide where they go and when.

### *Soothing Company*

After the characters conclude their flirtations with control addiction, they then encounter the supporting characters who represent their deepest yearnings. Because you're inter-cutting the first set of scenes, they may not all wrap up at the same time — especially if some players succumb quickly and others hold out until you run out of new ways to tempt them. Thus the wish fulfillment sequences may start earlier for some characters than others. If a player finished her first scene quickly, try to break up the wish fulfillment sequence into smaller parts, to create the feeling that she's getting her share of spotlight time. Alternately, you could improvise a way, perhaps using the orchestrated cut method (see sidebar), to give her character a walk-on role in the control addiction sequence of another player.

In each of the following scenes, the focus character is given an opportunity for momentary but significant happiness, as brought about by the wish fulfillment character. To achieve these good feelings, he must take an active step to overcome the source of his own greatest discontent. However, happiness has its price: it sets up the story's ultimate conflict, in which the mages must destroy the friends and loved ones they've bonded with.

Build each scene as follows. Review the wish fulfillment character you've created for the mage in question. Ask what it is in the mage's real life that prevents her from achieving her deepest yearning. When possible, locate this obstacle in the mage's own personality. Create a representation of this psychodrama as a conflict in Sutterton Farms. As with the previous scene, break it down into a series of sub-scenes that develop, heighten and finally resolve the conflict.

For example, a mage may be in love with her stepbrother, but be too ashamed to act on her quasi-incestuous feelings. Here, her Sutterton Farms persona meets a wish fulfillment character who looks and sounds just like the stepbrother. Here, too, she must overcome a sense of taboo to win her love, but in Sutterton Farms the gravity of the obstacle is diminished. Here he's only a coworker at the daycare center, which has a policy against staff fraternization. The scene plays out the moment of conflict in which she must decide between obeying the rules at her job or gaining happiness by initiating a relationship, consequences be damned.

This sequence might break down as follows. In a set-up scene, a confidant at work tells the wish fulfillment character that the object of her affections seems interested in

her, too. Then the confidant warns that the boss is on the warpath over the company's sexual harassment policy, and may fire the character if she's caught dating a colleague. In scene two, the ex-mage bumps into her potential soul mate outside of work and feels torn by a powerful, inexplicable longing — as if she's known him all her life. This scene gives her the choice of approaching him, risking a minor breach of the rules she lives by, or suppressing her feelings for him. Subsequent scenes depend on her decision. If she chooses desire, she must successfully hide her growing relationship from her boss. If she chooses the rules, she finds herself in a series of situations in which her desire is again tweaked, until she does something to drive him away once and for all.

In addition to the following consequences, each time a character overcomes a challenge to bond more fully with a designated loved one, he gains one dot in a secret trait called Wish Fulfillment, kept track of by you. There is no limit to the number of Wish Fulfillment dots a character can accumulate.

Create crib notes for each of these sequences using the following format:

**Wish fulfillment character:**

**What character represents to mage's true self:**

**Obstacle to happiness:**

**Set-Up Scene:**

**Conflict Scene:**

**Consequences of embracing wish fulfillment character:**

**Consequences of rejecting wish fulfillment character:**

**Example 1:**

The short-form version of the above example would look like this:

**Wish fulfillment character:** Brad Stover, coworker at daycare center

**What character represents to mage's true self:** Her stepbrother

**Obstacle to happiness:** Need to obey the rules

**Set-Up Scene:** Confidant says, "he likes you, but boss will fire you if you go for it"

**Conflict Scene:** Run into each other at the Laundromat

**Consequences of embracing wish fulfillment character:** Having to hide rules transgression from the boss

**Consequences of rejecting wish fulfillment character:** Continued heartache

**Example 2:**

**Wish fulfillment character:** Ada Muncie, his mother

**What character represents to mage's true self:** Liberation from his sense of abandonment by his real mother

**Obstacle to happiness:** Ada is sick

**Set-Up Scene:** Discover that Ada has been concealing symptoms

**Conflict Scene:** Convince her to seek treatment

**Consequences of embracing wish fulfillment character:** Must sacrifice other goals to be with her as she recovers

**Consequences of rejecting wish fulfillment character:** Worsening isolation and alienation

**Example 3:**

**Wish fulfillment character:** Jeff Blundeen, delinquent in training

**What character represents to mage's true self:** His own painful adolescence

**Obstacle to happiness:** Jeff has learned to keep everyone at a distance and isn't looking for a mentor

**Set-Up Scene:** Find Jeff committing act of vandalism

**Conflict Scene:** Catch him planning a serious crime

**Consequences of embracing wish fulfillment character:** Taking responsibility for a troubled kid

**Consequences of rejecting wish fulfillment character:** Jeff is sent off to juvie

**Example 4:**

**Wish fulfillment character:** Andrea Gold, head of Residents' Association

**What character represents to mage's true self:** Desire for prestige and power

**Obstacle to happiness:** If character can successfully befriend Andrea, the character will become Andrea's hand-picked successor to prestigious title

**Set-Up Scene:** Vies for Andrea's favor with ambitious rival

**Conflict Scene:** Andrea lets her guard down, seeking a shoulder to cry on over her disintegrating marriage

**Consequences of embracing wish fulfillment character:** Gains authority, but also responsibility for an increasingly unstable Andrea

**Consequences of rejecting wish fulfillment character:** Her rival is elected, embarks on a campaign of petty harassment against her

## Awarding Experience

The characters' false personae do not visibly earn or spend experience points. Though not at first apparent, their underlying mages' true selves still earn experience points. Secretly assign experience points at the end of any session prior to the discovery that the World of Darkness characters are disguised versions of the cabal. In lieu of the points for the Learning Curve and Heroism categories, assess up to three experience points for roleplaying, where one point is acceptable, two points is strong and three points exceptional.

As soon as the characters recover their memories, award experience as usual. However, no experience points may be spent until the characters return to the Material Realm.

## *Perceiving the Dream*

Once you've established each character's control-related temptations and the relationships to friends and loved ones, each of these story threads continues until the troupe begins to suspect that there's something strange about Sutterton Farms, and that their characters may not be who the players think they are.

Because you're using World of Darkness rules and character sheets, the players will be waiting for the supernatural elements of the story to manifest themselves. They'll accept a little bit of mundane drama as a setup for the horrors you have undoubtedly planned for them. The players may not be sure if they're waiting on a vampire infestation, a werewolf attack or something else, but they'll be expecting something nasty. This out-of-character expectation fuels the growing unease your players should feel as the story continues. *The weird thing about Sutterton Farms is that there's nothing weird going on at all.*

Instead, you'll continue to build on the ideas established in the opening scenes. The characters encounter new forms of their control temptations. Whenever they succumb, they gain a new dot in the secret Control trait.

The consequences of the characters' interactions with their loved ones also continue. If the characters fail to bond with their loved ones, give the characters new opportunities, or introduce new wish fulfillment characters tailored to the ex-mages' current behavior. If they get closer to their loved ones, create threats to their loved ones that intensify the relationships even further. Every time these relationships deepen, assign an additional dot to the characters' secret Wish Fulfillment trait.

Find ways to interweave the various developing plotlines, as you'd see on a serious TV soap such as *The Sopranos* or *Six Feet Under*. If one character's mother is in the hospital, another's friend might be admitted, too. Bring loved ones into conflict with other ex-mages. The delinquent protégé of character A might throw a rock through the window of character B. Use these intersecting plotlines to create connections between protagonists.

As you extend the mundane drama of Sutterton Farms, vary the mood between desperation and satisfaction. The Omnium's trap is compelling because it seems real. If it were entirely hellish, the captives' minds would rebel against it. The same would hold true if it were too obviously perfect.

Eventually, the players will start looking for the missing mystery. The latent weirdness of Sutterton Farms can be detected in any of the following ways:

### *Absence of Occult References*

Players who suspect their characters are in a horror tale may seek out references to the occult. The Scepter's illusory reality has one major flaw. In the Scepter's effort to prevent the mages from recovering their magic, the Scepter has stripped its imaginary world of all supernatural reference points. There are no occult bookstores in any of the nearby towns. The mass market booksellers don't have occult sections. Magazine racks

are empty of all New Age, paranormal and Fortean titles. No amount of channel-flipping yields a documentary on witchcraft, ESP or UFOs. Newspapers don't have astrology features. Even fictional depictions of magicians are missing from this world: no *Harry Potter*, no *Bewitched*, no *Lord of the Rings*.

Internet searches reveal a similar absence of occult information. Supernatural terms yield zero results on any search engine. The characters find themselves unable to recall URLs of paranormal sites. A handful of images of book and DVD covers can be found, but files and texts are unavailable, even on file-sharing networks.

If asked, the inhabitants of Sutterton Farms have heard of the occult, at least through its pop culture manifestations. They don't think, however, that there's anything particularly odd about the fact that none of the cable stations carry *Charmed*, or that the video stores carry no fantasy titles. Also, they cannot be made to see that this is peculiar or alarming, under any circumstances. Instead, they react to continued queries with blithe disinterest, dismissing the subject as trivial. Characters who continue to press it are regarded as mildly eccentric or completely delusional, depending on their vehemence.

This is a major tip-off to the manufactured nature of the characters' reality, but the players lack an in-game reason for pursuing it. When a player asks to look for information on the occult, ask her to justify it. If the explanation is unconvincing, forbid the character from pursuing this line of inquiry, on the grounds that the player is bringing in out-of-character knowledge. Clever players will then seek ways to logically introduce the occult into the story, so that they'll then be able to justify the search.

Once a player has cobbled together a halfway-credible explanation for an occult search, whether this occurs on the first attempt or later, require her to roll Wits + Resolve, with her Control trait as a penalty. This roll represents an attempt on the part of the mage's unconscious to reassert itself and begin reassembling its buried identity.

### **Roll Results**

**Dramatic Failure:** The character not only decides against looking for occult materials, but concludes that their absence is absolutely normal. No such materials have ever existed; to look for them is a sign of mental illness. Require the player to follow this directive to the best of his ability.

**Failure:** Inform the player that the character has decided to look for those things, but only later, after taking care of a more urgent matter. Then supply a trivial reason, appropriate to that character, for the procrastination. For example, the security guard may be distracted by the need to file his daily reports. Whenever the player asks again to look for occult materials, the character instead goes off on another absurd tangent.

**Success:** The character may now actively search out occult materials.

**Exceptional Success:** Per success, but the character also realizes that outside influence of unknown origin tried to prevent him from even being curious about the occult.



Note that all results, including extraordinary failure, tell the players that something strange is happening. However, unless they score a success, their *characters* don't know it. This split between player and character awareness is intentional, in accordance with the unease this story is meant to evoke. The split parallels the split between the mages' real identities and the false personae created by the Scepter.

### *Hunger and Thirst*

Sutterton Farms is a death trap, keeping the mages' souls occupied while their bodies lie without food or water in a German salt cave. Fortunately, the Scepter is unable to completely sever the link between mind and soul. On a subconscious level, the mages remain dimly aware of the slow physical deterioration of their bodies. Their trapped astral forms respond to this buried knowledge by drinking huge quantities of illusionary water and gorging themselves on food that provides no nourishment. The challenge for the characters is to become aware of this unconscious behavior and recognize its strangeness. If a player asks to examine his character's own behavior for peculiarities, allow a Wits + Investigation roll.

#### **Roll Results**

**Dramatic Failure:** The character suffers a backlash effect as the illusion attempts to reinforce itself against her efforts to see through it. Roll Composure + Resolve; on a failure, the character becomes neurotically attached to the idea of her own normality, and that of the world around her. She suffers a one-die penalty on all subsequent attempts to see through the illusion of Sutterton Farms. When faced with irrefutable proof of the illusion, she becomes agitated and suffers a one-die penalty on all actions for the duration of the scene.

**Failure:** The character notices nothing peculiar about her behavior.

**Success:** The character realizes that she's been consuming huge quantities of food and drink, without ever satisfying her hunger and thirst.

**Exceptional Success:** Per success, plus the character realizes that all of the other ex-mages she's been in contact with have been exhibiting the same behavior.

Ideally, per the sidebar on p. 70, you have already been salting your narration of early scenes with subliminal references to food and drink, laying the groundwork for this revelation.

### **The Ticking Clock**

As the mages' transmuted astral forms wander about in Sutterton Farms, their bodies are slowly dying of exposure and dehydration in a chilly salt mine. (Malnutrition is taking a toll on their bodies, too, but death by total starvation takes anywhere from eight to 12 weeks. Thirst will kill them long before then.)

Every 24 hours, make secret Strength + Stamina rolls for each character to see if the character suffers damage from exposure. As soon as

characters fail a roll, they begin to take one point of lethal damage per day. After that first failure, the damage is automatic; no further rolls against exposure occur.

After four days have passed, the characters are at risk of death by dehydration. Make a Stamina roll every 24 hours, until the character fails. After the failure, the character takes one point of lethal damage per day, in addition to any damage from exposure. As with exposure damage, this accrues automatically after a single failure.

If a character's real body dies, his astral self suffers an immediate, fatal collapse. The illusion makes this seem like a heart attack, stroke or other realistic cause of sudden death. With the body dead, the soul cannot be revived. Particularly creative improvised spells might summon the victim's ghost.

### *Dreamless Sleep*

Souls in the Astral Realm need no sleep. The characters in Sutterton Farms sleep only to the extent necessary to preserve the illusion of real life. However, if the characters closely examine their sleep habits, they'll notice some curious anomalies. Any player asking about her character's sleep habits earns a Wits + Investigation roll.

#### **Roll Results**

**Dramatic Failure:** Same as given above, for dramatic failure at the "Hunger and Thirst" roll.

**Failure:** Character notices nothing out of the ordinary about her sleep habits.

**Success:** The character realizes that she never seems to dream. This isn't normal sleep, in which one forgets almost all of the details but retains a vague recollection of having dreamt. There are no dreams, period. Oddly enough, she notes none of the expected ill effects, such as anxiety or exhaustion, associated with dreamless nights.

**Exceptional Success:** The character is inspired to compare sleep patterns with her loved ones and acquaintances. If she follows through with other cabal members, she finds that, over the past few days, they all tend to fall asleep and wake up at the same time.

In fact, no one is sleeping at all; astral projections don't slumber. The illusion works to put its victims to bed at the same time, then fast-forwards to the next morning in the space of an instant.

Outside sources prove of little help in further investigating this anomaly. The illusion attempts to realistically stall any attempts to consult sleep experts. The characters will be forced to make appointments many months in advance. Offices are closed when they call, or they'll be shunted to voicemail. Characters can see their general practitioners but get no useful insight from them. Books on the subject have been checked

out of libraries and are out of stock at local bookstores. The books can be ordered online but never arrive.

## *No Wider World*

To maintain a complex illusion requires a great deal of magical power. Even the Omnium cannot create an illusion of unlimited scope. Similar to the setting of a video game, the world outside Sutterton Farms only stretches so far. The Omnium can fill in additional details when necessity demands, but only for brief periods.

This world consists of the gated community of Sutterton Farms and a series of pretty, tree-lined roads leading to a zone of exurban sprawl. The zone's bland and repetitive architecture includes shopping malls, plazas, schools, public institutions and office structures. If the characters are not employed in Sutterton Farms, they work in this sprawl zone. Various sectors of the sprawl bear dull, geographically untethered names such as Bellevue, Mill Creek, Rockwood and Almondbrook. (If you want, substitute the names of the real bedroom communities outside the city where your chronicle is set.)

Characters who don't work in the Sutterton Farms enclave itself are employed nearby, in the sprawl. The sprawl meets all of their everyday needs, from food to services to shopping to entertainment. They need never go outside the zone.

If they do try to leave the sprawl — for example, to head for a nearby big city — the illusion resists them. Its modus operandi recalls one of those dreams in which you're trying to get somewhere but find a never-ending series of obstacles frustrating your progress. Would-be escapees suffer engine breakdowns, wrong turns, detours and road closures. Their cell phones ring, informing them of crises big and small requiring their attention back at Sutterton Farms.

Outside communication with the nonexistent wider world is possible. It's much easier for the illusion to generate a voice on the other end of a phone line in Detroit than to create a credible version of the Motor City for the characters to visit. Images on television and the Internet are likewise fairly easy for the Scepter to create. It's only when the characters try to physically leave the sprawl that the world steers them back to their cozy, conformist homes.

The illusion attempts to maintain itself with maximum verisimilitude. The Scepter picks the least improbable manner available to maneuver the characters toward home. Stalling tactics only work in a pinch. When possible, the illusion attempts to satisfy the underlying desire motivating the characters to leave the illusion's confines. If they're heading to a big city to score some drugs, they find a local supplier. If they want to talk to an academic, they discover

that an expert in the field is giving a lecture tomorrow night at the local library.

Even so, the players, depending on what their characters try to do, may eventually see the gears and cogs moving, and realize that their environment is arranging itself to keep them within a small area. Though this insight is better left to player-level deduction, you could allow a round of Wits + Investigation rolls if the story has ground inextricably to a halt.

## *Reawakening*

Your troupe may find an alternate way of discovering that they're living in an illusion, as plausible as any supplied here. Allow the players to pursue this route, improvising appropriate challenges to their ultimate success.

Whenever a player/character voices the *possibility* that the characters are trapped in an unreal world, or that their identities have been taken from them, he gets a chance to glimpse the real situation. Secretly roll Wits + Gnosis, where Wits is the current trait for the false persona and Gnosis is the base character's true number of dots.

### **Roll Results**

**Dramatic Failure:** The character resists all attempts to see beyond the illusion. She cannot try this roll again, no matter how many times her player voices the possibility that Sutterton Farms is unreal. The character is incapable of definitely stating that the world is unreal (which would otherwise unleash a full revelation; see below.) When another character attempts to reawaken her (see below), she refuses to accept the truth of his revelation. She gains a three-dice bonus on her contested action to resist the reawakening.

**Failure:** Nothing happens.

**Success:** The character shudders uneasily, as if someone has just walked over her grave.

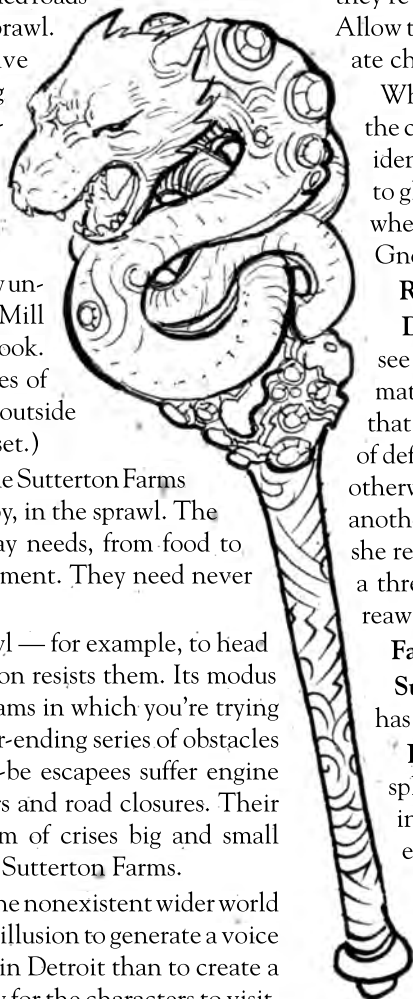
**Exceptional Success:** The character experiences a split-second vision of her real self lying sprawled out in a dimly-lit cavern, face-first on a natural stone floor encrusted with salt crystals.

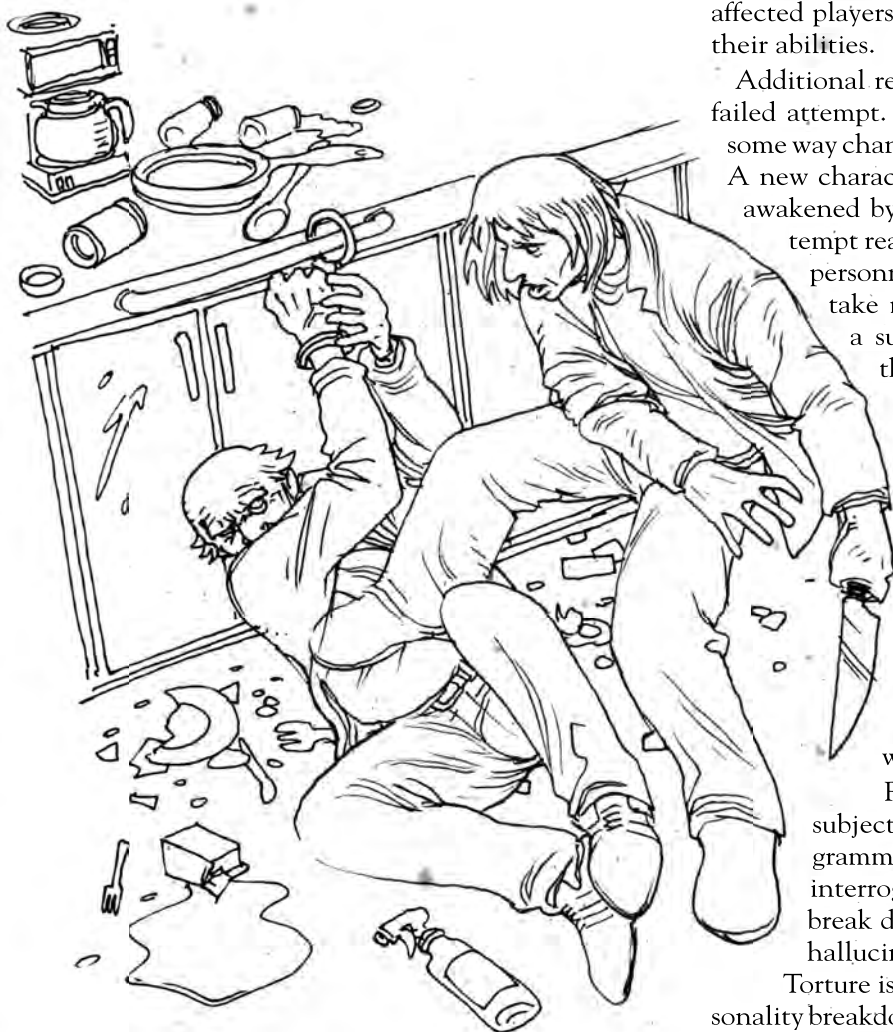
The first time a player or character makes a *definite statement* that the world around the group is unreal, or that he and others have had their identities stolen, he experiences a shattering vision that reveals the truth. No roll is required to experience this initial vision:

*You are floating near the ceiling of a small, dark cavern. It smells of salt and urine. You look down and see a group of a bodies sprawled on the floor. They are arranged around a gilded, altar-like construction, from which a jeweled Scepter juts. You recognize one of the bodies as your own.*

Interpolate your own narration here, describing the mages.

*The bodies are breathing shallowly but appear comatose. They seem dehydrated and emaciated, and have voided their bladders. You realize that these are the real selves of your friends and you. You are not really in Sutterton Farms. You are in a cave somewhere, and you are dying helplessly.*





Now hand the transitional character sheet to the player experiencing the revelation. (As you'll recall, this is the same as the World of Darkness sheet for his false persona, except with a Gnosis score added.)

The other characters cannot experience this vision simply by repeating the visionary's statement. He must reawaken them by persuading them of the truth of his vision. How difficult this is depends on the extent of their investment in the imaginary world. Reawakenings play out as extended contests. The visionary makes an Intelligence + Persuasion + Gnosis roll, contested by the subject's Resolve + Composure + Control + Wish Fulfillment.

If the persuading mage prevails, the subject is awakened, experiencing the same vision. Resisting characters who win their contests attach themselves even more firmly to the illusion. If their Wish Fulfillment trait is greater or equal to their Control trait, they laugh off the revelation as a crazy joke, and are incapable of taking it seriously. If their Control trait exceeds their Wish Fulfillment, they react with fear and vehemence, viewing the visionary as dangerously mad. Instruct

affected players to play these responses to the best of their abilities.

Additional reawakenings may be attempted after a failed attempt. However, each new attempt must in some way change the circumstances of the encounter. A new character can make the attempt; characters awakened by another mage can then go on to attempt reawakenings of their own. If a change in personnel fails, the mages may have to undertake more radical measures to break down a subject's false identity. As they regain their spells and use them to reshape their astral environment, they can attempt reawakenings with displays of obvious, vulgar power. They might improvise magic to suppress a subject's Control dots. (The Mind Arcana would be especially appropriate to this task.)

More extreme methods of personality breakdown may prove effective. If the players get stuck for ideas, invite them to make Intelligence + Intimidation rolls; on a success, provide them with the following suggestions:

Reawakened mages may choose to subject illusion-addled colleagues to deprogramming techniques, isolating them in an interrogation-style setting and attempting to break down their false personalities. Doses of hallucinogenic drugs might also do the trick.

Torture is an even faster method to achieve personality breakdown. Assign a bonus of one to three dice for credibly invasive methods. Even when performed for the subject's own good, such harsh treatments constitute acts of Hubris.

Every time characters successfully resist reawakening, their attachment to their false identities grows stronger: they gain another dot in Control. Successive failed attempts therefore increase the difficulty of the procedure.

Prolonged deprogramming efforts are noticed and actively resisted by the Scepter's astral world. Nosy neighbors happen by to free restrained subjects. The cops may interrupt the cabal's LSD buy in a strip mall parking lot. The community's security detail takes a dim view of screams emanating from ongoing torture sessions.

### *Missing Time*

The mages regain their Gnosis scores when they learn to see Sutterton Farms as a false reality. To regain their Arcana and the spells that flow from them, they'll have to remember who they really are. They can do this by figuring out how they got into the salt cave.

The characters' lost memories come back in stages, working backwards in time from their imprisonment

in the Scepter's hiding place to the point at which they first began to search for the Artifact. When they uncover this last set of memories, their entire identities come back, too. Then they can begin the process of regaining access to their Arcana.

Whenever the characters begin to access their lost memories, the Omnium resists. As with any extended reawakening attempts, inhabitants of the world work to distract and frustrate the characters as they jog their memories. The Omnium can even marshal its creation's inanimate objects to its cause. The illusion could cause a car to crash into the house where the group is meditating, or send in a team of firefighters in response to a false alarm.

When the recollections stop flowing, the efficacy of the method used to recover them ends. The cabal members must then find a new method, which in turn works until the world interrupts them again.

While the players first mull possible methods of memory recovery, allow all participants an Intelligence + Medicine + Gnosis roll. If the roll is successful, the character realizes that freshness of mind is an advantage, and that each character should attempt memory recovery in turn.

The first time a given character delves for lost recollections, he gains a one-die bonus. On the second try, the attempt is unmodified. On each attempt after the third, he suffers a cumulative one-die penalty. For this reason, it is better for all of the characters to attempt memory recovery in turn.

Specific methods of memory recovery include the following:

**Meditation:** The character achieves a state of inner calm and quietly focuses on her desire for additional memories. Success on a Resolve + Gnosis roll yields one memory snippet.

**Sense Memory:** The subject stimulates memory by evoking a sensation from the original vision of the salt cave. This can involve exposure to cold, or to the smell of salt or urine. Success required: Stamina + Gnosis.

**Muscle Memory:** The subject arranges himself in the exact position he saw in the salt-cave vision, triggering a memory. Success required: Dexterity + Gnosis.

**Hypnosis:** A facilitating character places the subject in a hypnotic trance. The hypnotist must score an Intelligence + Medicine success.

**Sensory Deprivation:** The subject cuts himself off from all sensory input for several hours. Success required: Stamina + Gnosis.

**Drugs:** The subject stimulates his memory with a hallucinogenic drug. Note that the illusionary realm may waste the characters' precious time by confronting them with a series of obstacles if they go out hunting for a suitable mind-altering substance. Success required: Stamina + Gnosis.

## Limits of Illusion

You might ask yourself why, as the mages challenge the astral reality of their surroundings, the Scepter's illusion plays fair with them at all. Why does it give them even a chance of finding hallucinogenic drugs? Why doesn't the illusion attack them with a phalanx of riot police or thugs summoned from the ether?

The answer is that, similar to the creator of a work of fiction, the illusion must pay heed to its audience's willing suspension of disbelief. The world of Sutterton Farms is drawn from the characters' own memories. If anything too bizarre or dreamlike happens, they'll see through the illusion immediately, possibly spontaneously recovering their memories and control over their Arcana. The more plastic reality seems, the easier it becomes for them to realize that they, too, can manipulate their illusionary environment. Only in a few minor areas — the absence of occult materials — is it worth the risk to depart significantly from mundane reality as the magicians know it.





**Séance:** The magicians can use the trappings of spiritualism, even a homemade Ouija board, to contact their subconscious minds. Success required: Intelligence + Gnosis.

**Trauma:** The character submits to a beating violent enough to cast him into a state of altered consciousness. Success required: Gnosis with a bonus of X, where X is the number of points of bashing damage endured in the attempt.

**Shock:** The subject places herself in a situation of physical danger so acute as to trigger an adrenaline rush — not the minor thrill of a bungee jump, but a soul-wrenching confrontation with likely death. She might electrocute herself, endure a car accident or allow her colleagues to drown and then revive her. Success required: Stamina + Gnosis.

If the players run out of ideas, characters can roll Intelligence + Science. Each success suggests a method they haven't thought of.

Allow any credible-seeming methods not on the above list.

### Roll Results

**Dramatic Failure:** The character internalizes the Scepter's fear of exposure and develops an anxiety reaction to all future attempts to recover memories, which now face a two-dice penalty. This is in addition to any other penalties accrued, including those from previous dramatic failures.

**Failure:** No memory is recovered.

**Success:** The character recovers the next memory during the sequence of flashbacks listed below.

**Exceptional Success:** The character recovers the next two available flashback sequences.

### Flashback Sequences

These sequences are presented in *précis* form so you can flesh them out with details appropriate to your group. Alter any strategies your players be unlikely to employ. Have them overcome the described obstacles using their favorite tactics and spells. At the same time, keep the details fuzzy in the early flashback sequences. Even if your players suspect the upcoming revelation, try to preserve the mystery and suspense for as long as you can. This description assumes a default chronicle of world-spanning metaphysical intrigue. You may need to change the description substantially if your chronicle does not fit this model.

**Sequence One:** The mages bash open an old wooden door and enter the salt cavern. They advance slowly on a golden Scepter contained in a glass vitrine. One of the group carefully checks the area for possible booby traps. Another raises a hammer to smash the case. Then everyone in the room suffers a painful convulsion. The characters see themselves falling to the floor. Everything goes black.

**Sequence Two:** The characters, in black paramilitary gear, burst out of an elevator, to confront a group of startled security guards. The characters, using their standard *modus operandi* for an invasive operation, quickly overcome the guards. They pull out a map, check it with a flashlight and head to an old wooden door.



**Sequence Three:** The characters cut their way through a chain-link fence. It's night. Behind the fence is a lonely, decrepit-looking industrial or military installation. It seems abandoned. It's cold and damp. The surrounding area is forested. The signage on the fence is in German. (For those who read the language, it translates as: *Private Property, Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted.*)

**Sequence Four:** The group emerges, scratched and shaken, from a wrecked van. They check on the driver's condition. He's a thin, bald man in a black turtleneck sweater and worn jeans. He's also very dead, his neck broken, his face bloodied. Beside him is a metal briefcase. After a short debate, one of the group takes the briefcase and moves toward a chain-link fence.

**Sequence Four:** The group sits in the back of a van, driven by a thin bald man with an unappealingly lumpy head. He chain-smokes French cigarettes and sings old Soviet propaganda songs. The van drives down a muddy road through a temperate forest. Suddenly, there is an explosion under the tires. The van flies up into the air.

**Sequence Five:** The group gets out of a cab and waits in front of an abandoned inn. The signs are all in German. A van drives up. The bald man gets out. The group gives him the metal briefcase. He opens it; it contains a heavily tattooed human hand. The man examines the hand, nods and ushers the group into the van.

**Sequence Six:** The group enters a cluttered antique shop. A sour-faced, obese, older woman looks at them through a strange spyglass. Eventually, she nods and invites them into an even more cluttered back room. She hands them the briefcase and a map to a deserted road in the northern German state of Schleswig-Holstein, near the Danish coast.

*Sequence Seven:* The group moves through the streets of what seems to be a German city. They evade a troupe of suspicious-looking street performers, who are looking at the characters too intently. Lost, they wander around until they find an antiques shop, and stride purposefully in.

*Sequence Eight:* The group's contact tells them that he's got a lead for them on the Scepter they're looking for. All they have to do is meet with an ally in the northern German city of Kiel. The contact takes a picture of each of them with a Polaroid camera, then writes their names on the cardboard borders. "I'm not sure what this means, but there's apparently a risk you'll lose yourselves. So here's a reminder of who you are." The character experiencing the flashback sees his or her image and name. Suddenly his or her true identity, and the identities of the rest of the group, come flooding back.

### *Assembling the Answers*

From this set of memories, the willworkers should be able to work out what has happened to them. They must understand the nature of their trap in order to escape it.

The players may figure out that the Scepter has trapped them in an Astral Realm in the Temenos on their own. Failing that, they can figure it out an Intelligence + Gnosis roll. A little later, when the mages have awakened their Arcana, they can use them to gather suggestive clues or, in some cases, divine the truth outright. When the mages recover their dots in Occult, they can make Intelligence + Occult rolls.

### *Reawakening Arcana*

Once the characters remember that they used to be mages, expect their first item of business to be the recovery of their powers.

To recover full or partial use of an Arcanum, characters must engage in a symbolic ritual invoking the Arcanum's symbolism. Any appropriately dramatic and interesting ritual provides some chance of success. Characters may participate in a group ritual to recover use of the same Arcanum. A ritual loses its boundary-breaking emotional potency after its first use; after that, a new ritual must be devised to recover additional dots in the same Arcanum. Rituals might center on activities such as the following:

*Death:* Characters might exhume a grave, have themselves buried alive or kill an (apparently) living creature

*Fate:* Play Russian roulette, engage in a high-stakes poker game, attempt a Houdini-style escape from a water-filled coffin

*Forces:* Set one's own house on fire, base jump from a tall building, lash oneself to a tree during a lightning storm

*Life:* Rescue a wounded animal from a busy highway, engage in potentially procreative sex, protect a tree from the axe

*Matter:* Ingest a variety of inert substances, get bludgeoned by clubs made of various materials, drive a car into a brick wall

*Mind:* Employ mental concentration to ignore the pain while holding one's hand smoldering over a candle, spend hours in sensory isolation, devour a human brain

*Prime:* Defend the rituals of one's colleagues against attack by interlopers, disturb the rituals of one's colleagues, reconstruct a magical text from memory

*Spirit:* Dance ecstatically (wearing a mask resembling a spirit encountered in previous chapters), fast until a hallucination of an animal totem is triggered, go on hallucinogenic trip and attempt to interact with archetypal figures

*Space:* Complete a dangerous obstacle course, run a debilitating marathon, shoot a difficult target

*Time:* Attempt to perform a difficult task within a strict time limit, expose oneself to the elements while staked to a sundial

The base roll for any of these attempts should be based on an Attribute and Skill combination relevant to the activity performed + Gnosis. When no obvious roll presents itself, use Resolve + Composure + Gnosis. In either case, the ritualist's dots in Control are used as a penalty.

The more emotionally potent the activity, the greater the chance of success. The following bonuses apply to the roll concluding any ritual:

- Involves physical risk to the mage's astral persona: +1 to +3 dice, depending on severity of risk and possible harm, where +1 risks a few points of bashing damage and +3 brings a significant chance of death

- Includes definite self-inflicted harm: +1 per two points of bashing damage, +2 per two points of lethal damage

- Involves physical risk to a loved one: +1 to +3

- Is emotionally fraught, risking humiliation, loss of control, rejection or other strong negative emotions: +1 to +2

- Is an act of Hubris requiring a Wisdom roll: +4

#### **Roll Results**

**Dramatic Failure:** Characters who have already recovered a dot or more in the Arcanum in question now lose one dot.

**Failure:** No result.

**Success:** Character regains one dot in the desired Arcanum.

**Exceptional Success:** Character regains all lost dots in the desired Arcanum.

Most players will quickly start experimenting in an attempt to regain their powers. After a few failed attempts to work spells, they'll likely come to the ritual idea on their own. If they remain stumped, allow a round of Intelligence + Wits + Gnosis rolls to provide the crucial inspiration. Do likewise if no one guesses that upping the stakes of a ritual increases its efficacy.

### *Reawakening Traits*

Other traits return in tandem with recovered Arcana dots. For each character, make a note of the total number of Arcana dots to be recovered, and make note of thresholds for the one-third and two-thirds mark. When characters recover one-third of their Arcana dots, their Power and Resistance Attributes return to normal. When characters recover two-thirds of their Arcana dots, they regain their Resistance Attributes and Social Skills. When they fully recover their

Arcana dots, they regain their Mental and Physical Skills, as well as their lost Flaws and any Merits that might logically apply to the exurban world of Sutterton Farms.

### *Skin Deep*

At this point, the real characters' appearances return to normal. Flabby security guards transform into buff Special Forces types. Frustrated housewives regain their status as alluring sirens. Forbidden ethnicities resurface. These changes reflect the full recovery of the imprisoned cabal members' self-images.

Physical possessions, on the other hand, do not return. The ex-Navy SEAL still lacks his full arsenal. Magical tools, enchanted items and other props of the sorcerer's trade are still edited out by the Sutterton Farms environment. (They can be recovered with further effort, though; see "Seizing the Dream," below.)

Residents of Sutterton Farms generally take no notice of the characters' changed appearances. They'll still relate to them as the pudgy rent-a-cops, soccer moms and bedraggled salary workers they used to be. Perhaps more disturbingly, the physical environment continues to reassert these discarded, frumpy identities. When characters look in mirrors, they see their fake selves staring dully back at them. The same is true when the character is photographed or videotaped.

Mages unprepared for this effect may suffer an identity backslide when they first encounter it; see below.

### *The Farms Strike Back*

The Scepter monitors the characters' activities and quickly recognizes when they're working to regain their Arcana. It responds with a series of interruptions and obstructions.

As much as it can, it confines the nature of these obstacles to the quotidian reality the Scepter has already established.

First, it attempts to continue the storylines the characters involved themselves in while mired in their false selves. It plays on their emotions, either negative or positive. If a mage established a relationship of power and control over a Sutterton Farms denizen, the Scepter's programming contrives a situation in which the character must choose between recovering his magic or allowing his control to slip. If the willworker-turned-enclave security guard was making it his business to hassle a gang of young delinquents, the ne'er-do-wells now zoom by him, breaking the speed limit on their way to commit an act of vandalism. A mage who's spent her time in Sutterton Farms obsessing over her firm's paperwork gets an urgent call from a harried underling, telling her that the company's back-up hard drives have undergone a critical failure.

Characters must make Resolve + Composure – Control rolls when refusing these opportunities to satisfy their control addictions. On a failure, they become distracted, suffering a one-die penalty on any rolls made during that scene to recover lost Arcana. On a dramatic failure, the penalty is three dice. Naturally, characters are free to postpone their identity recovery efforts to go off and deal with these threats to their sense of dominance.

## The Omnium

Although this text periodically refers to the Scepter doing this or that, it is not sentient. Rather, its shadowy makers programmed it with a complex series of self-defense mechanisms, called an Omnium, to prevent the Scepter from falling into non-Exarch hands. The Omnium merely runs a series of pre-determined responses to the cabal's actions. Think of the Omnium as an pre-technological computer program, powered by spells instead of a motherboard, hard drive and operating system. Many of the Scepter's specific choices are plucked from the characters' own minds. When it senses that its prisoners are acting against it, the program searches the mages' minds to find the most effective and credible action the environment could take against them.

Once the Scepter is finally grasped and used, the Omnium goes dormant. It reactivates only when all of the magicians who have ever used it die. Once more, it uses its automated defenses to trap any willworkers who approach it, unless they're already willing servitors of the Exarchs.

The Omnium is sophisticated, but its programming can't foresee every eventuality. Flaws in the scheme, which may allow the characters to defeat the Omnium, can be chalked up to failures of foresight on the part of the Omnium's original creators.

A user of the wand who experienced the events of this story can later cobble together the above theory on a successful Intelligence + Occult roll.

When appeals to control addiction fail or prove difficult to contrive, loved ones contact the characters, reporting increasingly desperate crises. These scenes are also tailored to the loved ones in question and the inner conflicts they represent. A character who established a nurturing relationship with a troubled daughter receives a phone call from her, announcing that she's swallowed an entire bottle of sleeping pills. A character desperate for the respect of artistic peers gets a surprise, last-minute invite to join the area's top painters at an impromptu gallery reception, and so on.

Scenes with loved ones are be calculated, whenever possible, to provoke identity backslides (see below).

To turn down a plea for help from a loved one requires a supreme act of will, as represented by a Resolve + Composure + Wish Fulfillment roll. Even if the characters suspect intellectually that these are not real people, the characters find this fact difficult to accept emotionally.

### Roll Results

**Dramatic Failure:** Characters immediately obey their loved ones' requests. When and if the characters return to their Arcana-recovery rituals, they remain distracted by their

loved ones' suffering. Characters take a two-dice penalty on all rolls to recover lost Arcana.

**Failure:** Characters immediately obey their loved ones' requests.

**Success:** Characters successfully repress the impulse to help their loved ones, and may continue what they're doing.

**Exceptional Success:** Characters ignore the request, successfully hardening their hearts against future entreaties. Similar requests in future scenes are resisted with a two-dice bonus.

Both control addiction and loved ones scenes should continue to thread through this section of the story. Drawing on the willworkers' knowledge of soap operas and other serial narrative forms, the Omnium improvises its dramatic developments to unfold out of one another, as the resolution to one crisis brings about a new situation, which then leads into a fresh crisis. The Scepter does its best to run out the clock, confounding the mages with compelling distractions, so that they'll be unable to regain their powers — or worse, begin to consciously manipulate their astral environment — before their bodies back in the Material Realm die.

When the Omnium is unable to create credible interpersonal scenes, it resorts to other obstacles that would otherwise arise from the cabal's weird ritual activities as the characters attempt to restore their Arcana:

Sutterton Farms security guards show up to beam flashlights in their faces and ask contemptuous questions when the characters trespass, disturb the peace, break noise regulations, endanger themselves or otherwise flout the development's strictly conformist rules of social conduct. Refusals to obey development security result in calls to the police, who show up in force, sirens wailing, SWAT teams at the ready.

Rituals may be interrupted long before they reach the point of legal intervention. Friendly neighbors stroll up to shoot the breeze. Pesky kids attempt to tag along. Cell phones ring at concentration-shattering moments. Physical props necessary to the ritual fail in undramatic but frustrating ways: guns jam, shovels break, tanks of gas turn out to be empty.

To a person, Sutterton Farms residents react with extreme distress to claims that their world is unreal or that the characters are sorcerers from another plane of existence. Such claims cause exquisite and obvious pain to a character's loved ones.

The Omnium energetically contrives to have at least one of its prisoners committed to psychiatric evaluation, either after apprehension by law enforcement or at the behest of a worried loved one. An earnest psychiatrist listens with worried brow to the character's attempts to explain his bizarre behavior. Characters unwise enough to mention that this world is an illusion, that their identities are unreal or (worst of all) that they're really magicians from another plane of reality are considered delusional, and signed over for permanent institutionalization. Even more dangerously, characters may be persuaded that their memories of being willworkers questing for a legendary Scepter are delusional. The agent of persuasion is a white-coated font of genuine concern named Dr. Alan Driver.

### Dr. Alan Driver

**Quote:** *You're clearly very intelligent, but a high IQ is no protection against mental illness.*

Worried illusionary mental health professional Dr. Alan Driver approaches his patients with a weary sense of concern and an indomitable determination to see the mentally ill get the very best treatment contemporary pharmacology permits.

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 4, Wits 4, Resolve 4

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2

**Social Attributes:** Presence 5, Manipulation 3, Composure 4

**Mental Skills:** Academics 4, Computer 2, Investigation 2, Medicine 4, Science 3

**Physical Skills:** Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Drive 2

**Social Skills:** Empathy 4, Persuasion 4, Socialize 3

**Willpower:** 8

Pit Driver's Presence + Medicine versus the character's Resolve + Composure – Wish Fulfillment. If a character with psychiatric experience attempts to use it in the interview, his own knowledge of delusional disorders forces him to acknowledge that his behavior perfectly fits a diagnosis of schizophrenia. His dots in Medicine are applied to the shrink's roll as the character becomes an accomplice to his own permanent assignment to the mental ward.

If he wins the contest, the character suffers an identity backslide (see below.) Apply the difference between his successes and the resisting character's successes as a penalty to the mage's roll against Identity Backslide.

### *Identity Backslides*

As the mages readjust to their true selves, the willworkers' original identities may seem unfamiliar, even arbitrary. In moments of weakness, some may prefer their false personae to their real identities. During these moments of drifting ego identification, they run the risk of reverting, momentarily or permanently, to their old identities. Ego shifts may be provoked by images of their old selves (especially if glimpsed in a mirror or seen in a photograph taken after their recovery; see above), by crises of conscience or by encounters with loved ones. Any incident that makes the dulled existence of Sutterton Farms seem more appealing than continued life as a mage may, at your discretion, trigger an episode. Characters must always roll to check for identity backslides when their players unfavorably compare a real identity's circumstances to that of the mundane incarnation.

To avoid an identity backslide, roll Resolve + Composure + Gnosis. Apply Wish Fulfillment as a penalty. Further penalties apply if the character:

- has been surprised by the revelation that his reflection/photographic image has not updated to his true form: –1
- has recently committed an act of Hubris: –2
- has yet to work magic since identity recovery: –1
- seems more likeable or sympathetic in false identity than in real one (as determined by Storyteller): –2



## Roll Results

**Dramatic Failure:** Character reverts entirely to his false form, returning to the configuration on the World of Darkness character sheet handed out at the beginning of the story. Character again loses all memory of his real self.

**Failure:** Per dramatic failure, but the effect lasts only until end of scene.

**Success:** No effect.

**Exceptional Success:** Character is heretofore immune from further identity backslides.

Characters may, through an act of will, deliberately revert to their false identities. A Resolve + Gnosis + Wish Fulfillment + Control roll is required.

## Roll Results

**Dramatic Failure:** Character returns to her false form permanently, again forgetting her real self. Traits return to the configuration given on the World of Darkness character sheet handed out at the beginning of the story.

**Failure:** Character fails to transform.

**Success:** Character transforms back to false form, and can return to real self on a Resolve + Composure + Gnosis roll that exceeds the number of successes scored during the roll to revert to false form. One such roll is permitted per scene. Character retains all memories of her true self.

**Exceptional Success:** Until she escapes from Sutterton Farm, character gains permanent ability to shift from one form to the other.

## Using Arcana in Sutterton Farms

Willworkers face the following alterations to their magical capabilities while using their Arcana in the Scepter's Astral Realm. Most alterations are limitations, but a few work in the willworkers' favor. These would not, for the most part, apply if the mages' souls were freely traveling through the Temenos.

**Death:** There are no ghosts or genuinely dead people here — just illusions. Even the personae of the magicians are illusionary. Their real bodies are dying back in the Material Realm. There is still energy, however, so most effects based on the decay or entropy of abstract forces still apply.

**Fate:** No changes.

**Forces:** Though unreal, the Forces here are meant to resemble those of the Material Realm. The magician can still target them, but at a two-dice penalty.

**Life:** Life spells may be used on the mage's false personae. Other inhabitants of Sutterton Farms are illusions, not living beings or the souls thereof. However, because the inhabitants resemble living beings, the characters maintain a mystic correspondence to them, and can still be affected, albeit at two-dice penalty to all spell rolls.

**Matter:** There is no real Matter here, but the Matter mage is still able to manipulate its illusionary equivalents, but with a two-dice penalty.

**Mind:** After the willworker realizes that the people here are complex illusions, their minds become easier to dominate. Most Mind effects targeting them enjoy a two-dice bonus.

**Prime:** The apparently living inhabitants of this astral reality are in fact complex illusions. Any Life spell that targets a living person in the Material Realm can be wielded as a Prime spell in regard to Sutterton Farm residents, animals and plants. If one of these illusions apparently dies, any Death spell that would target their equivalents in the Material Realm can be used as a Prime spell here. If the wielder of an equivalent Prime spell is already a practitioner of Life or Death (depending on the spell being used), the spell is cast at a bonus of 2.

**Spirit:** Although spirits can be found in astral space, the Scepter has kept them out of Sutterton Farms. There is no Twilight here. Any effect dependent on either spirits or Twilight remains impossible even when this Arcanum is awakened.

**Space:** Space may not be used to escape from the Temenos. Objects cannot be moved from the Material Realm to the astral plane. Objects, souls or entities could presumably be imported from elsewhere in the Astral Realm, but at a penalty of two to four dice on spell rolls.

**Time:** Attempts to glimpse the past of Sutterton Farms yield only a misty blankness.

## Solving the Mystery with Magic

Characters may not have completely figured out where they are as their Arcana return to them. Even if they know the basic outlines of their dilemma, they'll likely attempt to gain further information through the use of their powers. The following is a non-exclusive list of ways in which spells can be used to penetrate the mystery of Sutterton Farms.

**Death:** All attempts to locate or contact ghosts fail. This is an area with absolutely no ghosts, and no Twilight. Death magic worked on apparently slain Sutterton Farms residents has no effect, because they never really lived in the first place. Attempts to sever or manipulate their souls fail; the inhabitants don't have souls. All of these facts are very strange, suggesting that the characters are somewhere other than Earth.

**Fate:** The "Interconnections" spell reveals that all residents of Sutterton Farms are connected to all members of the cabal. Only those residents who are already known to have obvious relationships to one another display interconnections under the spell. This points to the fact that all of these people have been dredged from the memories of the protagonists.

However, if the willworkers then do something to cause residents to claim a pre-existing relationship, an interconnection then appears. For example, a character performs "Interconnections" on a resident, and finds only connections to members of the cabal. She then asks the resident what his hobbies are. The illusion creates an answer that it didn't have before. "Poker," the resident replies. The character then asks who the guy's poker buddies are. He names three other residents. If an "Interconnections" spell were then performed on him, these connections would now show up. This strongly suggests that the environment is a sort of Potemkin world, developing its details only as needed, in response to their probing.

*Life*: “Sense Life” reveals only the presence of the willworkers, and even then as dim sparks of life force inside unliving shells. When “Sense Life” is cast on other residents in plain sight, they light up as neither alive nor undead. They’re not spirits, or ghosts. They simply fail to register.

Note that this realization can be disastrous to the willworker’s use of the Life Arcanum. If he believes the residents, creatures and plants of Sutterton Farms to be alive, the world will react in kind, reshaping itself as if he successfully used his magic to affect them. Once he knows they’re not alive, the world responds to his altered expectations, and Life becomes essentially useless within its false confines.

*Mind*: Sutterton Farms characters register to mind-reading spells as if they have full consciousness. Their minds can be read and manipulated, and their auras examined. However, the ability of the illusion to realistically detail the thoughts and feelings of its inhabitants is somewhat limited. Whenever a spell, such as “Sense Consciousness,” allows the worker direct contact with a resident’s mind, roll seven dice. These reflect the illusion’s ability to generate a realistic false consciousness. If the successes on this roll are less than the successes scored by the mage working the spell, the mage senses that the intelligences he’s contacting are complex simulations of real human minds.

After this revelation, the worker gains power over these less-than-complete consciousnesses. He gains a two-dice bonus on all later spells involving contact with the minds of Sutterton Farms inhabitants.

*Prime*: Using the “Discern” spell reveals the entire environment as an insubstantial, swirling, foggy space without horizon or reference points. Occasionally, surreal, dream-like images float by. These are always manifestations of Jungian archetypes, often in iconic pop culture forms. On one attempt, the mage might see Marilyn Monroe standing over a steam grate fighting to keep her skirt in place, as in her famous scene from *The Seven-Year Itch*. On a subsequent attempt, the serial killer Ed Gein, representing the Shadow archetype, could amble briefly into view, clad in a suit of human skin.

Give characters seeing their second archetype an Intelligence + Gnosis roll, even if they aren’t asking questions. If successful, they realize that they’re looking through an illusion at the Temenos, and that Sutterton Farms is a complex illusionary realm within it.

*Spirit*: Per the Death Arcanum, there are no spirits, and no sign of a Gauntlet, anywhere in Sutterton Farms.

*Space*: Using the “Correspondence” spell reveals that all of the inhabitants of Sutterton Farms who have interacted with any of the characters are emotionally bound to them. Their loved ones are more bound to them than other inhabitants. None of the residents are bound to each other, even those who should be, logically, such as close relatives. (The spell can also reveal unusually strong bonds the characters feel for their imaginary loved ones.)

Once the characters begin to suspect that they’re in an unreal world, “Scrying” can be used to see the characters’ unconscious forms arrayed around the Scepter back in the

Material Realm. The connection used is that of their souls to their bodies. If the characters haven’t figured it out already, an Intelligence + Gnosis success tells the rest of the story.

“Apportation” can be used within Sutterton Farms, but moving physical objects to the Astral Realm is not possible.

A thaumaturgy attempt with Intelligence + Space (requires at least three dots) can determine the locations of the character’s bodies (in a German salt cave) or souls (in the Temenos). Listen carefully to the player’s wording of the desired result. Unless otherwise specified, the working returns the result for their bodies. Formulations such as “I want to know where our souls are” or “I want to know where Sutterton Farms really is” reveal that the characters are in the Temenos.

*Time*: “Postcognition” spells focusing on periods prior to the beginning of this story yield only a misty blankness. This provides a strong clue to the realm’s essential unreality.

### *Recovering Items and Artifacts*

Representations of the characters’ items and artifacts all appear somewhere in Sutterton Farms, disguised as ordinary objects. To regain their use, characters must locate them and, through an act of concentration, restore them to their true forms.

The Omnium has disguised the items but has been unable to completely sever the connections between the willworkers and their precious accoutrements. A character may not be wearing the astral version of a magic ring (including the Ring of the Exarchs), but it’s still be hidden in a place in some way connected to her. The hiding place often bears an emotional resonance to the character’s false persona. For an embittered divorced dad, a magic ring might be disguised as his discarded wedding ring, buried at the bottom of his sock drawer. For the frustrated housewife, a magic ring could be lodged in the pipes beneath her kitchen sink, as if lost while washing dishes. The idealistic veterinarian might discover that the ring is disguised as the flea collar around her cat’s neck.

Magic staves could be represented as pool cues, yardsticks, fishing rods, rifles or brooms. Grimoires become mass market paperbacks. Swords translate into any number of drab household utensils. Amulets and talismans turn into cheap bits of costume jewelry. The Robe of the Exarchs could be any bit of anonymous cloth, from a balled-up sweater to a dusty curtain.

Ways to find the items include (but are not restricted to) the following:

*Deductive reasoning*: Specify a contained search area; if the object is present, roll Intelligence + Investigation to find the item.

*Intuition*: As above, but use Intelligence + Wits.

*Prime spells*: Items in disguise light up like Times Square when viewed with “Supernal Vision.”

Other iterations of Mage Sight, properly justified, also reveal hidden items. This is especially appropriate if their Arcana relate to the nature of the item. A ring that spits fire could be found with “Read Matrices” (Forces); an amulet that lets you talk to plants would be visible under “Pulse of the Living World” (Life).

*Space spells:* "Correspondence" can reveal the items to which the character is tightly bound. Any inexplicably nondescript items revealed by the spell are surely enchanted items in disguise.

*Time spells:* Clever use of "Momentary Flux" or "Augury" points to the right item.

Once an item is found, it must then be awakened. Its owner (or in the case of shared items, one of its frequent users) rolls Resolve + Gnosis + a relevant Arcanum. Prime is always a relevant Arcanum. Other Arcana are relevant if they could be used to create effects similar to those generated by the item.

#### Roll Results

**Dramatic Failure:** The item crumbles into dust, explodes into flame or is destroyed in some other demoralizing fashion. The item's powers can never be accessed in Sutterton Farms. (The real object is not obliterated, just its illusionary representation. The real object will be waiting, safe and sound, when its owner returns to the Material Realm.)

**Failure:** The item remains in mundane form, its supernatural abilities inaccessible. The item cannot be awakened during the current scene. Future attempts to awaken the item must use a different Arcanum.

**Success:** The item's outward appearance changes, so that it now resembles its Material Realm equivalent. The item's powers are now fully accessible.

**Exceptional Success:** Per success, but the illusionary representation of the item is even more effective than the genuine article, taking on the user's hopes for its potential. The object adds an additional two-dice bonus to any action undertaken using the object.

Note that certain powers, even if awakened, may prove of limited use in Sutterton Farms. Use the ways in which Arcana are altered here (p. 81) as a baseline for such determinations.

### Using the Robe and Ring

Possession of the Ring, once found and re-awakened, gives the wearer the equivalent of permanent "Supernal Vision" within Sutterton Farms. Among other things, this allows the user to find other disguised items (see p. 82) and to home in on the cell tower (p. 68.)

The Robe grants the wearer an equipment bonus of three when resisting the setting's later, more outlandish attacks, as described under "Reality Is Obsolete," p. 84.

### Seizing the Dream

The mages, by experimenting with their restored powers, can discover that they face fewer limits in Sutterton Farms than they do in the real world. As an Astral Realm, whose only Sleepers are figments drawn from the cabal's collective memories, Sutterton Farms is not subject to Paradox. Because the details of the

environment were plucked by the Scepter from the mages' minds, the characters can use their Arcana to alter those ground rules. The magnitude of the changes is bounded only by the protagonists' imaginations, and willingness to disturb the imaginary loved ones they've grown attached to during their brief time here.

Using their Arcana, reawakened mages can manipulate or alter any aspect of the Sutterton Farms reality, including its people, creatures, objects and even natural laws. The characters can achieve effects that, in the Material Realm, could be achieved only by much more accomplished willworkers.

If the players are well into the story and have yet to experiment with direct manipulation of the illusion, allow a round of Wits + Occult + Gnosis rolls. The character with the highest number of successes then intuits that it might be possible.

This process resembles a stripped-down version of Thaumaturgy. The player clearly states the desired result and is then permitted a roll. Players specify the Arcana they're using for the attempt. If they're inventive, they may be permitted to power a single effect with multiple Arcana. Unlike Thaumaturgy in a real environment, here in their illusionary prison they're allowed to attempt any result, however outlandish or potentially earth-shaking it may be, regardless of their rating in the relevant Arcanum. Their chances of success are often better than improvised magic in the Material Realm: the roll is composed of a Mental Attribute, usually Resolve + Skill + Arcana.

These attempts at seizing control of the illusion are contested by the Omnium. No matter how big or outlandish the attempted effect, the strength of the Omnium's opposition is determined only by the illusion's reserves of astral energy. Each Resistance attempt depletes the Omnium's reserves, which are recharged by periods of inactivity.

The number of dice rolled to contest the willworker depends on the number of previous attempts at reality manipulation undertaken by any mage during the current scene:

# of Previous Attempts	# of dice
0	10
1	8
2	6
3	4
4	2

Given the Omnium's finite resources, it does its best to distract and delay the characters, allowing the illusion time to recharge its energy supply. Using loved ones, control objects and any other part of the Sutterton Farms environment that fits the bill, the Omnium tries to force a shift to a new scene. (Scenes are a game abstraction; the Omnium is no more aware of them than the characters.) Every proposed magical effect that is then abandoned by the willworker because of changes to the environment grants a

two-dice bonus to the Omnium's roll. The Omnium tries to generate reasons for mages to abandon their plans, increasing its own power at their expense.

**For example:** Mr. Ossington has been committed to Dr. Driver's mental institution and now wants to escape from his straight jacket and padded room. His Arcana are Death 3, Mind 2 and Matter 1. "I want to use Matter to dissolve that big metal door into a pile of iron filings," declares Mr. Ossington's player, Chris. In the Material Realm, Mr. Ossington would need at least three dots in Matter to accomplish a similar effect, but that's not an issue here. Consulting a similar spell, the four-dot "Annihilate Matter," you decide that this manipulation of astral space requires a Resolve + Occult or Science + Matter roll. This is the first attempt at dream seizing this scene, and so the attempt is contested by a 10-dice roll on your part. Chris, rolling seven dice, scores three successes. You counter with only two successes. The door dissolves, as requested.

It occurs to Chris that he'll soon face opposition in the form of orderlies and nurses. "Next," says Chris, "I want to use Death to kill everyone in this hospital." This would be an outrageous effect in the Material Realm, but entirely within a reawakened willworker's powers in Sutterton Farms. This time he'd be opposed by only eight dice. The environment alters itself to delay him.

"Before you do that," you say, "the cell phone by your feet is ringing."

"Cell phone? What's a cell phone doing there?"

"Good question, but it's there. Do you answer?"

"No," says Chris. "Yes, yes, I answer."

On the other end of the line is Ossington's loved one, the lonely young boy he got to know as the nephew of his false Sutterton Farms persona. The kid reveals that he's inside the hospital, coming to spring him.

"Do you still want to spring him?"

Mr. Ossington hesitates. He knows the kid isn't real, but still feels too much affection for him to annihilate him along with everyone else in the building.

Burly orderlies burst into Ossington's cell to restrain him.

"I use Death to kill all mental health professionals and support staff in the building," Chris amends. You determine that this requires a Strength + Intimidation + Death roll. Rolling seven dice, Chris gets three successes. This is his second attempt, so normally the environment would roll eight dice to counter. However, he's abandoned one proposed action in response to a change initiated by the environment, giving it a +2 bonus. Rolling 10 dice, you get only one success. The orderlies drop dead all around Ossington's feet.

"I use Matter to open a hole in the roof, complete with conveniently-placed rope ladder," says Chris.

Temporarily stumped for an interruption, you can only allow the attempt. This time it will be countered with a piddling six dice.

The following results cannot be achieved by dream-seizing: The Scepter can't be located.

The characters can't use it to return to their souls to their bodies, or to otherwise escape Sutterton Farms. They can alter the nature of their prison, but they can't get outside it.

## *Reality Is Obsolete*

The Scepter's programming goes into overdrive when the characters make this discovery. Under the assumption that they're just one step away from finding the symbolic representation of the Scepter, it steps up the frequency and intensity of its attempts to distract them. Now that the essential plasticity of its astral world is revealed, the Omnium need no longer hold back. It can now launch blatantly illogical counterattacks against its rebellious prisoners. Even so, it prefers to rely on emotional assaults, on the grounds that these are more effectively distracting than displays of illusionary virtuosity. However, characters who've proven completely immune to control temptations and the well-being of their imaginary loved ones are targeted by weirder delaying tactics.

Keep in mind that the Omnium seeks to delay the characters and prevent them from finding its illusionary representation. The Omnium is not programmed to kill their astral forms outright. Their deaths occur in the Material Realm, not here.

Sutterton Farms is drawn from the characters' collective conception of mundane reality. Generating events that are credible within this frame of reference costs the Omnium nothing. Such events never fail to materialize. To deviate from its baseline reality introduces a risk of failure. That risk depends on the degree to which the event challenges the target mage's sense of disbelief.

When the Scepter generates an event that breaks with the internal logic of its creation, the Omnium engages in a contested action against the most directly involved willworker.

The Storyteller rolls 14 to six dice on its behalf, depending on the level of improbability.

An *Improbable* event seems unlikely but does not overtly disturb the reality of the setting. The event might be an inexplicable coincidence, such as bumping into loved ones when they have no logical reason to be where they are. Mildly out-of-character behavior on the part of Sutterton Farms residents also counts as slightly improbable. Acknowledging that the mages really are from another plane of existence or conceding that Sutterton Farms is an illusion count as improbable events. Roll 14 dice.

A *Weird* event that invokes the equivalent of a covert spell effect. For a Sutterton Farms character to speak directly for the Scepter counts as a weird occurrence. Roll 12 dice.

An *Impossible* event invokes the equivalent of a vulgar spell effect. Roll eight dice.

A *Surreal* event is a large-scale disruption of the fictional reality: the sky bursts into fire, the characters drop into a pit of swirling pixels, alien robots fire laser beams. Roll six dice.

The most directly affected Willworker defends with Composure + a relevant Skill + Gnosis or Prime roll. For events that defy the laws of physics, use Science. Counter blatantly magical effects with Occult. For other absurd or unlikely manifestations, such as the sudden appearance of dinosaurs or storm troopers,



use Investigation. Out-of-character actions of loved ones and other illusory individuals call for the Empathy Skill.

If the Scepter succeeds, the desired event plays out. The mages must come to terms with the odd behavior of a loved one, the sudden lightning strike, the UFO landing or whatever other development the Scepter has added to its world. The development has become part of the framework of this imaginary reality. Subsequent attempts by the Scepter's programming to repeat or develop this same event count as improbable at worst. If the event were merely improbable to begin with, it is now normal and requires no further rolls to repeat.

If the Scepter fails, the character responds to the event with disbelief. For a brief, flashing instant, any willworker who is witness to the attempted reality shift catches a glimpse of it. The characters may see that an illusory character was about to say something, but then swallowed her words. An aborted covert magic effect directed at one of them might provoke a momentary shudder. The mages might see a flash of a spacecraft in the sky or a pulsing warp in visual perspective. The Omnium declines to repeat failed events. Instead, it finds fresh ways to confound its prisoners.

After a failure, the Omnium must wait for its targets to complete the action the Omnium was attempting to interrupt before summoning up another reality-bending effect.

**Example:** Mr. Brock is convinced that the Scepter's representation is locked away in the vaults of the local historical society. He's wrong, but the Omnium wants him to continue wasting his time on this fruitless avenue of inquiry, and chooses to reinforce his determination by resisting his efforts. The Omnium intends for a motocross rider to mow Mr. Brock down, appearing at the opposite end of the corridor as Mr. Brock strides toward the vault. This is a Weird event; although it's highly unlikely that a motorcyclist could get inside the historical society building and try to run down the first person he sees, there's nothing supernatural about it. Accordingly, you roll 12 dice to see if the event really happens.

You decide that Investigation is the most appropriate Skill to address the preposterous appearance of a killer motocross rider. Viktor, Mr. Brock's player, rolls Composure (three dice) + Investigation (two dice) + Gnosis (one die), for a total of six dice.

Viktor scores three successes. Unfortunately for Mr. Brock, you get six.

As unbelievable as the cyclist seems, he is now bearing down on Mr. Brock. Mr. Brock runs screaming down the corridor, frantically hoping to find an open door to duck through.

## Health and Injury

Elsewhere in the astral plane, travelers are vulnerable to soul death. Here, even though Willpower substitutes for Health, the Omnium can't kill them outright. By denying the Omnium this capability, the Omnium's mysterious creators shaved several years off its creation time.

Characters who would normally fall unconscious due to incapacitation instead remain im-

mobile but awake. They suffer excruciating pain.

All physical action is impossible. Mental and social actions can be attempted, but at a crippling -5 penalty. Health points can be restored through medical treatment or spells, as those points would be in the real world.

This serves the Scepter's delaying purpose: the other characters attempt to alleviate the victim's agony, instead of pursuing their escapes.

Illusory characters can be killed. They use their Health scores, not their Willpower, to determine damage, Wound levels and incapacitation.

## Finding the Scepter

By now the characters probably know that their bodies will soon die if their souls don't escape Sutterton Farms and return to the Material Realm. The best use of the mages' environment-altering capabilities is therefore a search for the Scepter itself.

The players may intuit this when they realize that representations of their other magical equipment, including possibly the Robe and Ring, show up in the Sutterton Farms world. If the players seem stumped for a course of action, allow a round of Intelligence + Occult + Gnosis rolls to figure it out.

The Scepter manifests as a cell phone tower in the carefully manicured woods behind the Sutterton Farms administrative offices.

The characters can locate the tower in the following ways. (As always, alternate paths to this goal, if credibly explained and well played, should also yield success.)

**Fate:** Divination methods, established or improvised, could lead the mages toward the tower's location. "Interconnections" reveals an incredibly thick web of connections, filling the air like the haze of a forest fire. This result reflects the fact that the Scepter is controlling the destinies of all the residents in Sutterton Farms. Repeated uses of the spell could narrow down the search, as the clot of interconnections grows even thicker as one approaches the cell phone tower.

**Forces:** Casting a "Nightsight" spell shows that Sutterton Farms is buzzing with an incredibly high traffic of signals on its cell phone spectrum. An Intelligence + Science success made on the heels of this discovery further reveals that the frequency actually carries much higher traffic than is scientifically possible.

**Mind:** A "Sense Consciousness" spell, when aimed at the general environment, detects a complex set of psychic signals that are not quite a disembodied consciousness, but in many ways mimics one. Together, the signals possess more processing and perceptual power than the average human mind or spirit. The signals grow even stronger as one approaches the cell tower. This is the Omnium at work.

(By comparing notes, mages working "Nightsight" and "Sense Consciousness" in tandem can agree that these psychic signals are being broadcast on an altered version of the wireless spectrum.)

**Prime:** Using a “Supernal Vision” spell finds that the entire place is thickly resonant with the emotional concept of Control. Characters who gave in to their control temptations radiate it. Everyone’s loved ones give it off. The Ring and Robe give off Control vibes to such a degree that the mage must make a Stamina + Occult + Prime – Control roll to keep the spell active while scrutinizing them with it. (This may be how the group locates these disguised items. The aura of Control grows steadily stronger as one gets close to the cell tower. This resonance is dangerously intoxicating. Any willworker viewing the cell phone tower through “Supernal Vision,” or any other sensory spell, for more than a scene may be negatively influenced by it.) Characters failing a Composure + Prime – Control success roll are emotionally compelled to break off their search. Instead, they seek out the object of their control fantasies, or a suitable substitute. They then attempt to engage in a controlling act. Another mage can snap affected characters out of a control binge with Manipulation + Persuasion – Control or use of an appropriate Mind spell.

**Space:** After the discovery that cell phone signals, Control resonance and/or sympathetic connections are incredibly thick here, and seem to thicken at certain points, Space 2 “Thaumaturgy” could be used to efficiently home in on the spot of maximum signal density.

**Time:** Auguries, divinations and other future-reading spells can be used to narrow down inquiries opened up by other spell results.

Note that every attempt made by the mages to find the tower is staunchly opposed by the Scepter’s programming, either subtly or dramatically.

### *Red Herrings*

To protect the Omnium’s disguise, the Omnium has salted the environment with other objects — even a person — to serve as decoys. Emphasize them if the players seem to be headed toward the cell phone tower with anticlimactic alacrity. If the story has already been packed with incident and seems headed for a proper conclusion, omit or downplay them.

**The Flagpole:** In the playground by the Sutterton Farms community center stands a huge flagpole, in gleaming gold. Residents can explain that it was recently spray-painted as a part of a local tradition. Upon graduation, students of the local high school always paint the pole. Each year they paint it a different color. This year happens to be gold.

Further, the Sutterton Farms Folk Dance Society, which meets every Thursday night at the community center, has posterized the area with announcements for their upcoming maypole dance. They’ll be using the flagpole for this purpose. Players remotely steeped in folklore won’t need Intelligence + Occult rolls to spot this as a magically significant ritual, in which the pole represents life, power and fertility. The willworkers might conclude that this is the Scepter, and waste time accordingly.

As with many of the red herrings, the Scepter reinforces the credibility of the flagpole by vigorously defending it when the mages draw too close. Security patrols cruise by to check up on snoopers. During the day, vigilant young mothers, anxious to keep potential pedophiles away from their children, confront anyone exhibiting strange behavior on a playground. At night, bored teens taunt and hassle anybody creeping around on their turf.

**Reach Experts:** All around the neighborhood, in store windows and on telephone poles, are handbills for an Internet company called Reach Experts. They advertise themselves as a search maximization service; for a fee, they’ll see to it that your site appears high up in the results of prominent search engines. Characters drop the name of the company in casual conversation. Maybe a loved one or control object considers using the company’s service. When the characters get frustrated or express despair over their situation, a tattered handbill lands at their feet. Anagram fans may spot this as a rearrangement of the words “Exarch Scepter.” Allow an Intelligence + Investigation roll, if needed, to decipher this misleading clue.

The Reach Experts is a one-man operation run by a man named Jeff Carson.

**Jeff Carson**

**Quote:** *Frankly I don’t think I have to answer that question from the likes of you.*

Carson is a nondescript man who dresses in conservative work attire at all times, and wears a pair of old-fashioned horn rim glasses. The Scepter has conceived him as an anti-social recluse who tantalizes the prisoners’ suspicions with his paranoid behavior. He’ll conclude that the mages are IRS agents, and will his best to stonewall the most innocent of queries. He protects his modest home business with security measures befitting a mob hangout. Have fun stretching out the complications if the characters attempt to investigate him or infiltrate his home. Bumper stickers and window decals identify him as a gun aficionado. Despite his belligerent attitude, he’s too frightened to use his guns in a fight, though he’ll nervously brandish a hunting rifle when pressed.

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 4

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2

**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 2, Composure 4

**Mental Skills:** Academics 2, Computer 4, Crafts (Electronic Devices) 4, Science 2

**Physical Skills:** Brawl 2, Drive 2, Firearms 4, Survival 2

**Social Skills:** Intimidation 2

**Willpower:** 8

**The Golden Golf Club:** When the mages find themselves at a loss for a next step, they note a story on the front page of the weekly community paper, *The Sutterton Sojourner*. In its feature photo, Stan Burkis, president of the nearby Bay Ridge Country Club, accepts the Golden Golf Club Award in recognition of his 30th anniversary as a club member. The accompanying article waxes rhapsodic over the history of the club. Golf legend Bobby Jones played with it when



he visited the course in 1933. Shortly thereafter, the golf club was then turned into a trophy, which has been passed down from one distinguished club member to another over the decades.

The club, which resides in a glass case at the country club, is not especially well secured. However, area police are quick to respond to complaints made by the wealthy and influential men who make Bay Ridge the center of their social universe.

*Player-generated false leads.* The Scepter encourages mages to follow false leads they come up with on their own. When a character investigates a dead end, the Sutterton Farms environment generates promising indications that the character is on the trail of the real Scepter. It can invest innocent objects with powerful Control resonance, or surround them with the same wireless spectrum radiation the Scepter emits from its cell tower.

### *Shattering the Dream*

After identifying the cell tower as a stand-in for the Scepter, the cabal must exercise control over the tower, seizing it in the false Sutterton Farms reality. As they embark on this attempt, their imaginary loved ones appear to make it abundantly clear that the characters are about to destroy Sutterton Farms — and their loved ones along with it.

To seize magical control over the Scepter, the mages must surround the tower and override the Scepter's control of the illusion. (Alternately, they might devise a means to exert control from a distance, via the Space Arcanum.) The group must rack up a total of X successes, where X equals the number of cabal members present times three. They may do this over any number of turns. Each member of the cabal must contribute at least one success.

The easiest way to do this is through the Seize the Dream Ability (p. 83), which the mages have presumably discovered by this point.

If the players haven't figured this out on their own, allow a round of Wits + Occult + Gnosis rolls as they prepare to deal with the tower. The character with the highest number of successes (or more than one character in the case of a tied first-place result) hits upon this solution in an inspired "Eureka!" moment.

The cabal is free to attempt any plausible alternate solution that allows all characters to contribute at least one success each to the total of X successes.

If all of the mages break away from their extended ritual to perform another action, all successes so far accrued are ignored. When they resume the ritual, they must start again at 0 successes and work their way back up to X.

The Scepter confronts the cabal with three waves of opposition, in hopes of forcing an interruption or, better yet, the permanent abandonment of their attempts to escape.

The first wave is one of brute physical force. This begins as soon as the mages begin their ritual. A huge battalion of security guards, SWAT officers and armed vigilante neighbors shows up to demand the characters' surrender. Foolish characters confront the attackers physically using the Combat rules. Cleverer mages instead use a Seizing the Dream effect to kill, imprison, vanish or otherwise dispose of the attackers in one fell swoop.

In the event of a combat, use traits for police officers, SWAT members and gang members, respectively, to represent this mix of opponents. The Scepter can send as many of these at the cabal as the Scepter requires. Short of a Seize the Dream effect, the characters' best hope if a combat breaks out is to flee the scene. The Scepter then establishes a perimeter of SWAT officers to protect the cell tower. These can be banished by a later Seize the Dream roll, when the players think to call on this Ability.

The second wave is one of temptation. This begins when the mages have accumulated one-third of the necessary successes. Figures representing the characters' control temptations appear in an improbable mass demonstration, taunting the characters. The control temptation figures' mockery takes a common theme: if the mages leave Sutterton Farms, the figures jeer, the business between the characters and the figures is left forever unfinished. The people the characters tried to exercise control over will be free. The figures will have won,

and the willworkers will have lost. These figures are glad to see the mages go, and urge them to continue. Naturally, this is an exercise in reverse psychology on the Scepter's part.

Examples might include the following:

- The punk kid a character kept hassling in his false identity as a security guard throws garbage at the character, shouting, "Good riddance, scumbag! I'll have the run of the place now!"

- The vulnerable coworker a character heartlessly seduced tearfully screams, "Go ahead, get lost! This is the only way I can ever be happy, if you get out of my life forever!"

- The haughty head of the local book club turns up her nose at the character who was once a diffident would-be author. "Yes, you'd better run! We all read your manuscript, and we all thought it was trash!"

The third and final wave of resistance is one of sincere emotional pleading. This wave starts when the willworkers have racked up two-thirds of the successes they need. The characters' loved ones appear to beg for their lives. Examples might include the following:

- "If you seize the Scepter, this whole world will be destroyed!"

- "All of us will be destroyed along with it!"

- "Don't you love us?"

- "You felt for me, I know you did!"

At this point, the Sutterton Farms environment begins to waver and buckle. Its outlines grow less distinct. Edges blur and distort. With each new set of successes, the loved ones suffer as if physically struck. They begin to melt. Flesh drips from their faces. They writhe in agony. Make the players feel the loved ones' distress and horror. The willworkers are slowly murdering their loved ones.

If the mages don't relent, the loved ones undertake one last desperate stratagem. They break character, telling the mages what they really represent, for example, the following:

"Don't you get it? This is the Temenos! The collective unconscious!"

"We represent parts of you!"

"Your hopes, your aspirations!"

"If you kill us, you're killing parts of your own souls — forever!"

If the willworkers persist and gain their X successes, this is exactly what happens. They see Sutterton Farms warp and shudder. Their illusionary loved ones die horribly in front of their eyes. One loved one turns inside out. Another explodes in a shower of blood. Another fades into nothingness, with a last chilling, plaintive whimper: "I still love you, you know."

And then the mages struggle to consciousness in the salt cave. They may now haul their starved, dehydrated bodies into painful, trembling motion. They can stumble to their packs, for their supplies of food and water. They can take the Scepter of the Exarchs from its display case, claiming their richly-deserved prize.

As soon as they pause for much-needed rest, the enormity

of their act strikes them. The people they loved might not have been real, but the people sure seemed like it. Their suffering appeared monstrous, and genuine.

All of the characters must make Humanity rolls, as they struggle with the act of virtual mass murder they had to commit, in order to make their escape.

### *Preserving Sutterton Farms*

Resourceful players may find a way to split the difference, getting out of Sutterton Farms without killing their newly acquired loved ones. For example, the characters might be able to cobble together a work of Thaumaturgy. Give players asking for alternatives an Intelligence + Occult + Gnosis roll. On a success, the characters determine that, if they don't use the Scepter, they might be able to reprogram its complex defense mechanisms, so that the Omnium remains in operation, restoring the illusion a split-second after the characters escape from it.

Prime is the Arcanum best suited to the manipulation of illusions, but depending on how the players justify it, any number of configurations might be possible. Since the operation involves split-second timing, they might argue that Time applies. The willworkers might lend bits of their own spirits to the enterprise, justifying the use of Spirit.

Whatever form this Thaumaturgic intervention takes, it must be worked just before the last successes in the Seize the Dream ritual are scored. As they attempt it, the loved ones continue to press the characters, begging them to give up the entire attempt. "It's safer just to stay here," the loved ones argue.

This is a difficult feat to pull off. Any Thaumaturgy attempt (or other rote or spell that seems to apply) faces a three-dice penalty.

If successful, the players escape, as above. Using an improvised combination of Space and Prime, they can peer into Sutterton Farms, seeing that life goes on as it did before, in all of its mundane, slightly alienated splendor. Their loved ones miss the characters. Their loved ones look at photographs of the mages' false selves, watch them on old videotapes and generally pine away. But at least the loved ones are still alive, and the willworkers have sidestepped a cold-blooded act of Hubris.

Some characters might even want to revisit Sutterton Farms from time to time, now that the illusion is no longer a prison. Again, an improvised combination of Space and Prime could allow this. Sutterton Farms might serve as a fine hiding place to escape from one's enemies, or an emotional retreat from the pressures of willworking.

Even under cabal control, Sutterton Farms may retain some dangers. Mages who come to prefer their imaginary personae may have to make Resolve + Composure + Wish Fulfillment rolls to ever leave voluntarily.

Sutterton Farms is destroyed if anyone uses it for its primary purpose, learning its "Counter Exarch" spell. To keep Sutterton Farms alive, the group must keep it in a safe place



and guard it well. A follow-up storyline might revolve around their attempts to keep another zealous anti-Exarch cabal from taking Sutterton Farms, and the characters' bottled exurban dreamland, away from them.

## *Afterword*

Full recuperation from dehydration and malnutrition takes a while. Unless the characters receive supernatural healing, they remain in a physically and mentally weakened condition for several days after they recover the Scepter. They suffer a -3 penalty on all actions on the first day, -2 on the second day and -1 on the last.

Once they're up to it, presumably back on their home turf, the characters can attune to the Scepter and learn its unique spell.

## *Psychic Repercussions*

Characters who let their loved ones die suffer permanent negative repercussions. The characters were killing archetypal representations of their own aspirations, plucked from the Temenos by the Scepter's magic. Though altered in form, these were real fragments of the willworkers' souls, which the willworkers have now slain.

In each case, determine what dreams, desires or personality traits the loved one represented. The character henceforth suffers general bad luck surrounding these issues. Any rolls to attain similar desires suffer a three-dice penalty.

If a loved one represented a character's desire for acceptance, the penalty accrues in all situations in which she's trying to fit in with a group or win the trust and approval of others.

If the loved one symbolized the character's nurturing impulse, the penalties apply to a wide variety of caring situations, from looking after houseplants to casting healing spells.

If a loved one brought out the character's long-buried love of risk and adventure, penalties apply to all attempts to maintain Resolve and Composure in the face of adversity.

These effects can't be countered by "Counter Exarch." Although Exarch magic created the circumstances that led to the deaths of the imaginary loved ones, the direct cause was a choice made by the characters.

This distinction was crucial to the Omnium's creators. If their prize artifact was to be claimed and controlled, its makers saw to it that its liberators would likely suffer permanent spiritual damage.

## The Scepter of the Dethroned Queen (Artifact .....)

Durability 4, Size 2, Structure 6

**Mana Capacity:** maximum 13

The powers of the Scepter are considerable — but only a handful of those can be harnessed by characters. In the hands of earthly mages, the Scepter cannot be used to create phantom worlds. Willworkers in the Fallen World must

accept the more limited power to suppress or shatter the power of the Exarchs.

First, the Scepter is capable of blocking the power of a Profane Urim (**Mage: The Awakening**, p. 309), either at the source or at the subject. By spending one Mana and activating this Artifact, a mage bearing the Scepter can create a region impenetrable by the powers of a Profane Urim. The dice pool to activate the Scepter is equal to the wielder's Gnosis +4. Each success on this roll extends the radius of the Scepter's interference by 5 yards. A Profane Urim cannot see into this area and subjects within the area unaffected by the magic of a Profane Urim until they leave the area. Once this power has been activated, no Mana can be spent within this zone.

The Duration of the zone is *Prolonged*.

The Scepter also enables a mage to perform uncommonly versatile Counterspells. Regardless of what Arcana a mage knows, as long as she holds the Scepter she can cast Counterspell against a Seer of the Throne or other willing servant of the Exarchs. If she has no dots in the appropriate Arcanum, she rolls her Gnosis alone. The Scepter merely makes it possible for her to Counterspell by keying in on the Supernal magic of the spell, rather than its Arcanum.

The Scepter can be used as a source for Counterspell rote in any Arcana, though once it has been used by a mage to learn a rote, that mage cannot learn another rote from the Scepter. The Scepter's interfering magic willfully disguises and ciphers itself against that willworker in the future.

Finally, the Scepter can be used to cast the equivalent of a "Supernal Dispellation" spell (**Mage: The Awakening**, p. 229).

Using the artifact or learning one of its rites is an act of hubris, requiring a degeneration check for any mage of Wisdom 5 or lower.

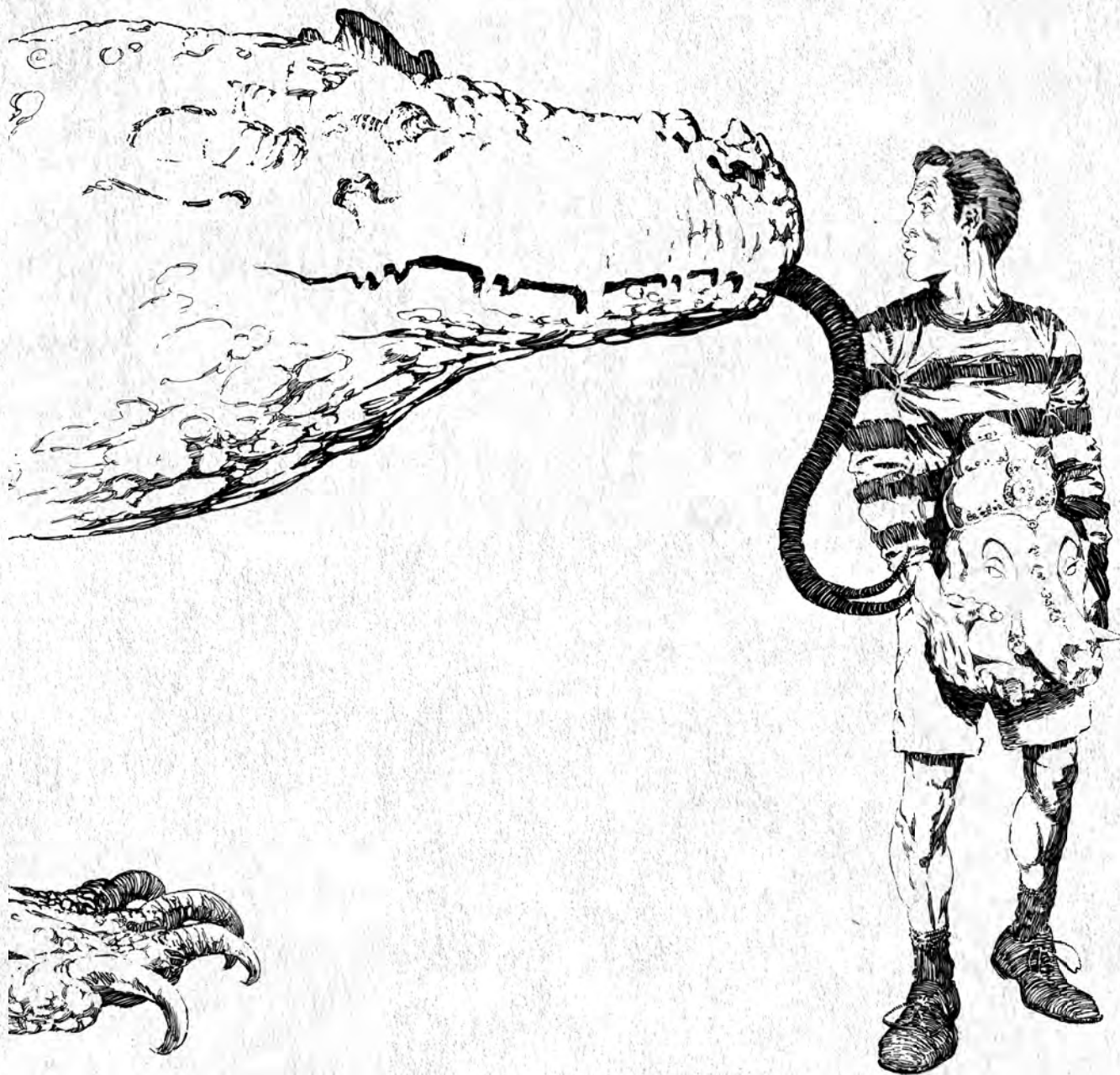
A mage bearing the Scepter gains a +2 bonus when using any of its powers against a minion or follower of the Exarchs. (This includes the work of dupes who serve the Exarchs unknowingly.)

## Counterspell Rote: Counter the Supernal

**Dice Pool:** Composure + Occult + Arcanum

The fear of many Pentacle mages will be that the anti-magic powers of the Scepter are, in fact, dulling the Mana and magic of the Fallen World.

Is it just a tool for Supernal jailors?



# CHAPTER FOUR: THE CROWN

Atal inherited the restaurant from his father, who opened it before the neighborhood was even called Little India. Atal crouches down and picks up the head of Ganesha at his feet. His father brought the statue with him from India. Shards of its body lie scattered all around Atal's feet, mingled with broken glass and splintered wood.

Atal looks up at the graffiti on the walls of the dining room. Glibberish. His superstitious brother insisted upon seeing to it that Atal leave the neighborhood for a time, but Atal won't give up the restaurant to vandals. His brother needs new-fangled mysticism to deal with troubles such as these, but Atal rolls up his sleeves as their father did and gets back to work.

Atal stands up and walks to the sprayed marks over the wall mural of New Delhi and puts his hand to it.

He doesn't hear the pieces of Ganesha's body being crunched under the reptilian foot behind him.

"Ah, papa," he says to the restaurant.

A black tongue knifes toward him in the dark, flicking against the head of Ganesha in his hand.

"Did you have to deal with this?" Atal sets the head of Ganesha down on the shelf.

A long, black head leans out of the shadows behind him into the jagged patch of light falling through the broken windows. A yellow eye, slashed with a black slitted pupil, gleams in the sun.

Atal bends down to stand a chair back on its legs and freezes, his face level with a flat reptilian mouth. He opens his mouth to scream, but the sound is swallowed down a slick pink throat.



***Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.***

**— Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles"**

The Awakened wield tremendous power, and operate in a society very much outside that of the Fallen World. Their enemies are likewise unconstrained by the mundane, and that means that being a mage is inherently dangerous. Subtlety is a tool of survival, and so the Awakened must learn to conceal their plots and motives behind functionaries, cast spells with roundabout effects and use cat's-paws whenever possible.

When the Exarchs enter the equation, this lesson becomes even more important. If the agents of the Exarchs lurk in the Fallen World, calling attention to oneself is asking for violence or domination. But, at the same time, the agents of these inscrutable beings don't occupy some untouchable place on the Awakened "food chain" — they must stay on guard as much as any mage. Compounding this is the fact that the agents of the Exarchs and those who would fight them don't have any real proof that the Exarchs even *exist*. All the Exarchs' agents and those against them have is their own experiences, and so their battles are, in large part, fought on faith.

With so much uncertainty, a mage can't really be sure of much, no matter what side he fights on. This story plays upon that uncertainty, and examines how labyrinthine Awakened matters can become.

### *Theme and Mood*

Although the thematic elements discussed in the Introduction apply to this story, it also has its own themes.

The theme of "The Crown" is *the search for truth*. The Awakened, for all their knowledge and perception, typically find more questions than answers. So it is with this story. As the characters dig deeper into the events surrounding the Artifacts of the Dethroned Queen, they discover a vast web of influence and magic in the area, all leading back to a mage named Anurati Sahley. This should lead them to wonder how many other such webs exist in mage society, and whether they themselves are already entrapped in one. Can they ever find an "end" to this trail of magic and questions? Will doing so involve ascending to the Supernal, if such a thing is even possible?

The mood of this story is *uncertainty*. The cabal can't ever be sure that the Exarchs exist, and that the Artifacts that the characters have found so far (or that they find at the end of this story) have any effect other than instilling perception of a phenomenon that doesn't exist in any objective sense. They, just as Anurati and her ilk, can take the existence of the Exarchs on faith and read their influence into everything, but this is a terrifying attitude with which to live. That it's terrifying, though, doesn't necessarily make it false.

The structure of this story is somewhat different than the others in this book. "The Crown" is presented according to

the layers of events and opposition that the characters face, rather than by presented a linear path of cause and effect. That allows the Storyteller to begin this story at any point, to mix these "layers" in with characters and events from other portions of this book or of the Storyteller's own design and to use the plot points in this chapter either as the main focus of the story or as side plots to another. This last approach is very much in theme with "The Crown." If, during the course of meeting with a rogue mage who has split from the Consilium (but still has information the characters need) the cabal discovers the graffiti tags of Scene One, the characters know about them even if they don't feel immediately compelled to investigate. When the same markings show up outside their sanctums later, they have a frame of reference (and a possible point of contact in the rogue mage).

The scenes in this chapter therefore present trigger events and hooks, rumors that the characters might hear from mages or Sleepers and avenues of investigation and methods of dealing with the adversary of that scene. Ultimately, though, each scene leads to another, and every defeated opponent seems to have a master.

### **Never-Ending Stories**

Beware of sending a message of futility to the players. In a story such as this, in which every victory seems to send the characters on to another battle (literal or figurative), the story can seem interminable. If you try to power directly through this chapter, it can start to feel more like a video "roleplaying" game than a Storytelling game.

Here are some ways to avoid that problem:

- **Break Up the Action:** Don't jump directly from one scene to the next. Take in-game "downtime," and ask the players to detail what their characters are doing during that time. If they wish to investigate the matters of the scene further, fine, but if not, let the characters live their lives. You can also run side stories in-between the scenes of this chapter, weave them into events from the other chapters of this book and generally emphasize that nothing in "The Crown" happens in a vacuum.

- **Let the Victories Count:** Make sure that the players feel they have accomplished something when they complete one of the scenes of this chapter. Don't immediately present the players with the next layer of intrigue. Let them come to grips with what they have accomplished, heal



their wounds and catch their breaths. *Then* pull back the next curtain.

- **Make Sure They Know the Theme:** Starting out this story by reading aloud the Emerson quote at the beginning of this chapter goes a long way toward setting the mood. If the players know that "The Crown" involves cat's-paws, layers of intrigue and hidden agendas, they can be mentally prepared for an involved story.

### *Setting*

This story can take place anywhere, and this chapter doesn't contain setting-specific descriptions or elements (that is, the setting might contain a university, but not mention MIT or St. Andrew's). It is assumed that the local mages have formed a Consilium, but not necessarily that the characters are involved to any great degree. (Or, likewise, that they are ciphers. This story works just as well if the characters are members of the Consilium.)

When running this story as part of the larger **Reign of the Exarchs** chronicle, consider what effects the first three stories have had on the Awakened landscape.

### *The Ongoing Chronicle*

Just as all of the chapters in this book, "The Crown" can be run independently or as part of the larger chronicle. If you are running these stories in sequence, the characters already have access to the Ring, the Robe and the Scepter. This means that they can detect the touch of the Exarchs on many of the agents in this chapter, since they are all working indirectly for Anurati (who is, in turn, a servant of these otherworldly powers).

### **Important Storyteller Characters**

While a complete "Dramatis Personae" section can be found at the end of this chapter, the Storyteller might benefit from having a basic rundown of the important figures in "The Crown" before reading the story:

- **Anurati Sahley:** A Mastigos mage in service to the Exarchs (though not a Seer of the Throne). She wears the Crown of the Dethroned Queen and operates through various cat's-paws, rarely showing her face or even leaving her home.
- **The Ascendants:** Three Silver Ladder mages who believe that they are destined to take over the order and recreate it in their own image. They are actually heavily influenced by Anurati, but wield considerable power on their own.
- **Epimetheus:** A Thyrsus mage interested in spirits and cryptids. He summons the Hungry

Dragon into the Fallen World and sets it on the cabal (at the Ascendants' behest).

- **Sasuha Usum, the Hungry Dragon:** A Materialized spirit of hunger sent to kill the characters.

- **Remainder:** The "wild card" in this story, Remainder is an Acanthus who lives in fear of the Exarchs. His role in the story is entirely at the Storyteller's option. (See below for more on using Remainder.)

Using these items is an act of Hubris, of course, and so players probably won't want to rely heavily on them. They can be extremely useful here, though. The Ring can detect any of the important characters in this chapter as servants of the Exarchs, the Robe can shield the character wearing it from Anurati's sympathetic magic or from any of the opponents' baleful spells and the Scepter, of course, can spell victory over even such powerful foes as the Ascendants. But the prize — the Crown — allows the wearer to *control* servants of the Exarchs, and if the characters are using the Artifacts of the Dethroned Queen, does that make them viable targets for this item's power? Maybe a character using one of the Artifacts suffers an hour of "lost time" within a day of doing so. She might not even notice at first, and has no memory of what she's doing, but gradually the characters might catch on. (Of course, the character wearing the Robe would be immune — until she takes it off.)

If the characters do *not* have access to the items, either because you are playing through "The Crown" out of sequence or because the cabal has destroyed the items as they've encountered them, don't worry. This only means that the cabal is in the dark about the Exarchs' role in this story, but that's not immediately a problem. (Not having access to the items also changes Remainder's role in the story, since he is now the only means the characters have of identifying Exarch-touched people and places.) When the characters reach the end of the story and confront Anurati, they can learn that even *she* answers to a higher power — and, indeed, she serves as though she has no choice in the matter. From that point, they can discover the Crown and what it represents, and perhaps move on to the final story in **Reign of the Exarchs**.

### *Remainder*

The rogue Acanthus called Remainder can serve a number of roles in "The Crown," at the discretion of the Storyteller. Remainder is meant as a kind of combination stalking horse and will-o'-the-wisp. If the Storyteller needs a way to indicate to the characters that the Exarchs are involved in this story, Remainder can provide that information (filtered through his own delusions, of course). If the players already have the Artifacts and are having too easy of a time of the story, however, Remainder can be a red herring, leading the characters away from their true goals or into a dangerous situation. Remember,

though, that just because the players are moving quickly through a story doesn't mean that they aren't having fun or that the game is "too easy" — be aware of your troupe's preferred pace.

Remainder is introduced in the first scene, and subsequent scenes have suggestions on how best to make use of him. If you don't feel the story requires his presence, simply ignore him.

## Scene One: Mark of the Exarchs

In this scene, the characters' sanctums, and various other places in the area, are marked with graffiti and targeted by petty vandalism. The graffiti, though, includes small glyphs meant to allow Anurati to scry the areas easily.

### Rumors for Scene One

The characters might hear the following rumors prior to or during this scene, if they ask around within the Awakened community.

- "I hear there's a new cabal in town, but its members are actively shunning the Consilium. Something about heresy within one of the orders, but I don't know which one."
- "Scrying spells haven't worked well for me lately. Any trouble with yours?"
- "I caught a cab the other day, and the cabbie followed me after he dropped me off. It wasn't until he almost got T-boned by a truck that I lost him."

This part of the story can begin gradually, with the characters receiving word from other cabals in the area that they have been having trouble with vandals. The damage has been slight thus far — some broken windows, smashed mailboxes and the like — but it has been accompanied by graffiti as well. If the cabal has already experienced Chapter One of this book, the cabal might immediately look into the matter using the Ring and attempt to find the Exarchs' influence; but the mages mention that they don't detect anything magical or supernatural about the vandalism.

You can also begin this story by having the characters be the immediate targets of the vandals. This is especially appropriate if the characters have left their sanctum for a time (perhaps one of the previous stories in this chronicle took place in a city other than their hometown), and they discover the damage when they return. If the characters have Consilium Status, they might hear about the problem at a caucus, but if they are fairly cut off from Awakened society, they might not hear about the problem until, and unless, they go searching for other mages.

## Vandalism

Below is a list of possible acts of vandalism that might catch the characters' attention. The important thing is that the

vandalism takes place in areas that are important to mages (not necessarily the players' cabal — how heavily the characters are targeted depends on how many mages are in the area and how low a profile the troupe's characters keep).

- Trees in a yard are scarred with axes or saws
- Mailboxes smashed with bats or blown up with small explosives
- Lawns scarred with tire tracks or destroyed with defoliant
- Car windows smashed or tires punctured
- Roman candles and other small fireworks aimed at house (this *might* start a fire if you want the players to see these acts as true threats, but that's not Anurati's intent)
- Storefront windows at businesses employing, owned or frequented by mages smashed

All of these acts are accompanied by graffiti, but these markings do not all resemble gang "tagging." A character can realize this if the player makes a successful Intelligence + Streetwise roll. If this roll succeeds, the character realizes that while some of the graffiti conforms to inner-city patterns, some of it just looks like random squiggles, while some resembles Arabic lettering (but doesn't actually spell anything). A roll of Intelligence + Academics for an analysis of the handwriting indicates that at least three different people were responsible for the graffiti.

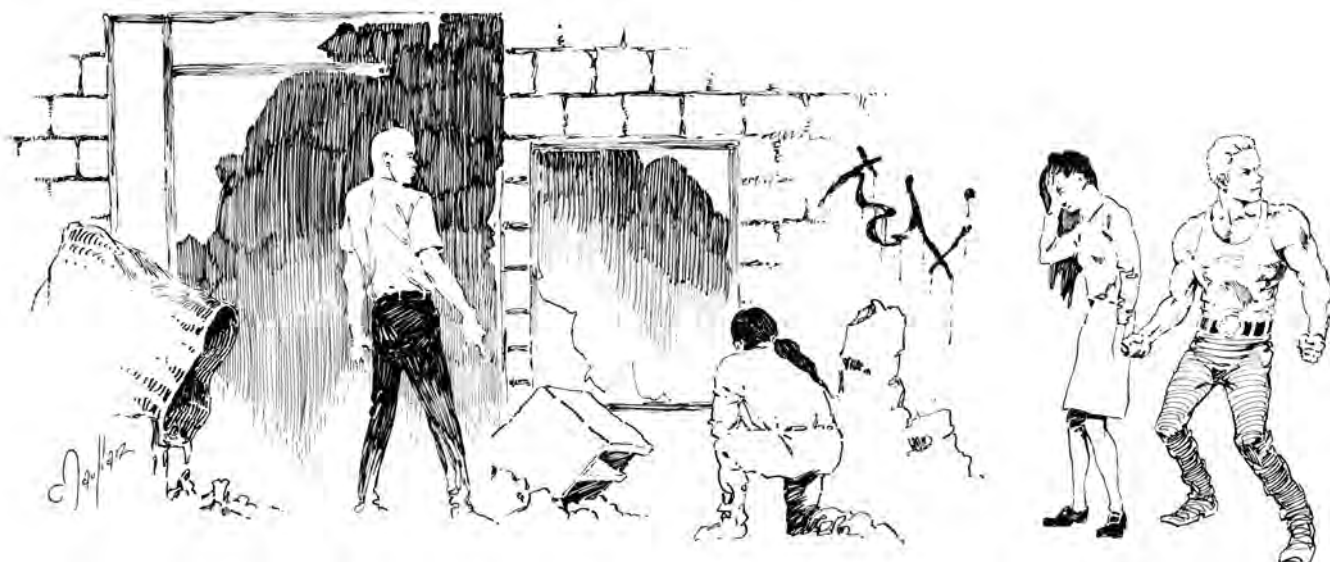
## The Glyphs

The destruction and the visible graffiti are meant to mask the glyphs, of course. The glyphs are inscribed with special ink. It is invisible to normal vision, but shines under ultraviolet light or "black light." The glyphs are painted in unobtrusive places. For instance, if the vandals destroy a mailbox, the glyph might be painted on the side of the post facing the house.

Unlike the Atlantean runes described on p. 119 of **Mage: The Awakening**, these glyphs do not increase the duration of Anurati's magic. Instead, they allow a sympathetic connection between the glyphs and a room in a small motel. The vandals meet there (under Anurati's influence, of course) and mix the paint and receive their instructions. Anurati then uses the connection between the room and herself, and then the room and the glyphs, to spy on the marked areas. (This would result, in game terms, in a fairly heavy penalty to the Space magic, but Anurati is powerful and patient enough to overcome it and is more concerned with not being discovered.)

The characters can detect the glyphs if the characters are clever. Below are four potential ways in which they could see the glyphs, and the players will probably think of others.

- **Forces:** A Forces 1 spell allows the character to see into the ultraviolet spectrum and thus see the ink as though under a black light.
- **Matter:** The Matter spell 1 "Detect Substance" allows a character to locate the chemicals used in such ink, though detecting "paint" is sufficient to sense its presence (though this doesn't allow the character to read the marks, just to know they're there).



- **Fate:** The Fate 1 spell “Interconnections” can detect a sympathetic connection between the glyphs and something or someone a good distance away, but the player needs to build up at least five successes (since the connection between the room and the glyphs is Intimate). The character cannot get any hint about Anurati in this manner.

- **The Ring:** The best method for finding the glyphs, of course, is to use the Ring found in Chapter One to search for the Exarchs’ influence. The glyphs become visible to a character using this spell, but remember that activating the Ring is an act of Hubris for characters with Wisdom 7 or more.

Once the characters can see the glyphs, a successful Intelligence + Academics roll reveals that they were apparently all written by the same person, and the handwriting is different from any of the other graffiti. (This is because Anurati mentally dominates one of the vandals during the inscription of the glyphs, so the handwriting is hers.) A successful Intelligence + Occult roll (only if the character has the High Speech Merit) reveals that the glyphs are not the typical Atlantean glyphs used to extend spells. The function, however, of the glyphs is beyond the character unless the player rolls an exceptional success. If this happens, the character guesses that the glyphs might be used as “bookmarks,” points of reference for sympathetic spells. (The players might come to this conclusion on their own, of course.)

### *The Vandals*

Anurati has mentally dominated three people into doing her dirty work. They are all loners and able to move around the city unnoticed. They are the following:

- **Ahmed Hussein:** Ahmed is a cab driver. He provides transportation for the vandals. His cab, however, is spotless, as he cleans all traces of the group’s gear out after every incident.

- **Monica Bledsoe:** Monica is a part-time student at the local university. (If any characters are in some way

connected to the school, they might share a class or have her as a student.) She is not ambitious, but has a knack for chemistry. (She makes the explosives and other chemicals that the group uses.)

- **John Gendrin:** John is a homeless man who spends much of his time begging outside the university. He is skeletal and obviously mentally ill, and in fact is suffering from AIDS. Anurati chose him because she felt (correctly) that no one would miss him if he suddenly disappeared during the course of the actions.

The vandals meet once a week (the nights vary) at the motel described below. They receive their orders via telepathy from Anurati, and load up Ahmed’s cab with the materials they need. They seldom speak during their operations, and take no joy in the activities. They do not carry weapons of any kind (see “Confronting the Vandals,” below).

Tracking this trio down is difficult. During their normal lives, they retain no memory of their activities. None of them has family or much of a social life, and they all live alone. You can have the characters encounter one of these vandals by coincidence (maybe catching a ride in Ahmed’s cab, being asked for change by John or running into Monica on campus), but this approach might seem a little too convenient. On the other hand, in a story about uncertainty and the unseen Exarchs, the characters might read such a “coincidence” as anything but random. If the characters do encounter the vandals during their “off time” and interview them (which requires gaining their confidence, not an easy endeavor in itself), the characters discover that the vandals lose time every so often, sometimes entire evenings. This might actually be a way to find the vandals. If one of the characters is a psychologist or otherwise works with troubled individuals, Monica or Ahmed might well seek help for these large chunks of lost time.

If the characters are actively searching for the vandals, though, they have a few options.

- **Next Target:** They could try to figure out the vandals’ next target. Spells such as “Augury” (Time 2) or “Shifting

the Odds" (Fate 2) can aid in this endeavor. If the characters wish to try to figure this out without using magic, an extended Intelligence + Investigation roll (10 successes needed, each roll represents one hour of analysis) is necessary. The Dream Merit might also shed some light on the situation. The Storyteller needs to decide what the next target is going to be and when and how the vandals intend to hit it.

- **Tracking the Vandals:** The characters can follow sympathetic threads from the vandalism sites to the vandals, but the threads are weak at best (because the vandals aren't aware of their actions during this time). If the characters track these threads back using Fate 1 "Interconnections" to find threads between the vandalism sites and the vandals, this spell suffers a -2 modifier, but only two successes are needed. From there, the characters can use Space 2 "Scrying" to find the vandals, but they are only at the Acquainted level of sympathy and the effort therefore suffers -8 penalty. If the scrying character also uses the Ring's spell, however, the penalty falls to -4.

- **Other Mages:** The characters might have acquaintances within the Consilium, know mages from the area as Mentors or Contacts or be favored enough within their orders to wield some influence. It is possible that another mage might be able to use magic or Merits that the characters themselves lack in order to find the next target or the vandals. Don't offer up such help unless the players seek it out — the story should be about them, not about the Storyteller characters who swoop in to solve the problems. If the characters decide that they require assistance, though, then they're taking an intelligent approach to the problem. A note, though: the Consilium is compromised, as Epimetheus and the Ascendants are under Anurati's influence. Contacting the Consilium, then, might result in Anurati discovering what the characters are up to. What effect this has is up to the Storyteller; maybe the events of Scene Two begin before this one is fully resolved, or maybe the vandals arm themselves in preparation for a showdown.

- **Remainder:** This young, haunted mage can lead the characters right to the vandals. If they find Remainder lurking around a vandalism site, and if they can convince him that they don't represent his mysterious enemies, he might use his "Sense Them" rote to find the vandals for them. You can also add Remainder in when the characters find one of the vandals; Remainder can be lurking around the pawn, waiting for a chance to investigate further. Remember that Remainder is meant to be mysterious and unpredictable, so even if he's helpful now he might not be later.

### *Confronting the Vandals*

When the characters find the vandals, the characters might be expecting a gun battle or a serious fight. The vandals, however, aren't armed (unless Anurati ordered them to arm themselves as mentioned above) and don't attempt to injure the characters. Instead, they try to call attention to themselves. They scream for help and try to goad the characters into attacking (or even shooting) them. The vandals always act later in the initiative queue than the characters, and reach into coats and pockets as though pulling out

weapons. Of course, the Matter 1 spell "Detect Substance" can confirm whether the vandal is actually packing a gun, but the mages might not think to use the spell. Don't forget to call for degeneration rolls if the characters seriously injure or kill a vandal impulsively, especially with magic.

Where this confrontation takes place is up to you (and dependant on the characters' actions, of course). The vandals shouldn't put up much of a fight insofar as injuring the characters is concerned, but the vandals do try to get the characters detained and/or arrested (which gives Anurati plenty of time to scry into the area and study the characters). Of course, a number of spells, including Fate 1 "Interconnections," Mind 1 "Third Eye" and Prime 1 "Supernal Vision," as well as the magic of the Ring, can tell the characters that these vandals are under mental domination. Dispelling this magic requires beating Anurati's "Telepathic Control" spell. This spell has a Potency of 5, meaning the characters need to achieve at least this many successes on whatever method of countermagic they choose. The Scepter, of course, can disrupt the magic more easily (but don't forget that using the Scepter causes a degeneration roll). The vandals have no memory of their actions once the spell ends, but they each have a key to the same room at a cheap motel.

### *The Hotel Room*

The room, according to the front desk, is booked to someone named John Smith, and has been for some time. The staff is actually quite vexed if the characters bring this room to the staff's attention — they have no record of payment, simply a longstanding record of occupancy. If the characters check out the room, they find the special paint used to make the glyphs as well as chemicals and other supplies.

As they stand in the room, Anurati is using her magic to erase the sympathetic threads leading back to her. This only takes her a few seconds, and the characters only notice if they use appropriate spells within two turns of entering the room. In any case, there isn't much they can do about it — the threads disappear, leaving the characters only with questions.

### *Scene Two: The Hungry Dragon*

In this scene, the characters must contend with a ravenous creature from the Shadow, summoned by a pawn of a pawn of Anurati.

The characters haven't delved deeply into Anurati's business, but they've gotten her attention. Her metaphorical web begins to tremble, and she contacts the Ascendants to deal with the problem. The Ascendants, of course, occupy delicate positions in the Silver Ladder, and so manipulate Epimetheus to do their dirty work. The young Thyrsus attends a caucus of mages in the area (to which the characters might well be invited; see sidebar) and afterwards spends time speaking with Melchior of the Ascendants.



## Rumors for Scene Two

The characters might hear the first two rumors at or before the caucus, while the second two are more appropriate small windows of time after the caucus but before *Sasuha Usum* comes calling.

- "That fellow over there — I forget his name, it's Greek — looks like he's seen a ghost."
- "Be careful talking to that German guy (*Melchior*). He can talk rings around you. Nice guy, just slick as hell."
- "Something slipped into our world last night. I don't know what it was, but it was powerful. Well, it might have been summoned by someone powerful, I suppose."
- "I have a friend in Animal Control, and she's gotten three separate calls about alligators today. She hasn't found so much as a footprint, though."

Melchior is not a Mastigos, but is an Adept of the Mind Arcanum and is extremely manipulative in his own right. He convinces Epimetheus that the characters need to be silenced, informing him that they represent a dire threat to the Consilium. Epimetheus, if he stopped to think about it, could probably come up with some good evidence as to why this isn't the case, but forethought has never been his strong point. He returns to his sanctum and calls for *Sasuha Usum*, feeds it a few rats so that it can stay in the physical world and sets it hunting. He casts "Control Spirit" on the spirit, weaving a complex spell that instructs the spirit as follows: "Hunt down (*the troupe's characters*) and kill them without being seen by Sleepers or harming anyone but your targets." In game terms, this spell is an extended casting that requires nine successes (five for the complex command and four for duration — normally "Control Spirit" only lasts a scene, and Epimetheus wants the spirit to have at least two days). If you wish to determine how long it takes him to complete this spell, roll his Gnosis + Spirit (five dice) as many times as necessary to build up nine successes. Remember that each roll requires three hours of casting, so it could conceivably take him more than a day to complete it. (He can remain awake and alert using Life magic, but crashes afterwards.)

## The Caucus

The caucus can take place as soon after the first scene as you require. Remember that taking some downtime between scenes is beneficial to the tone of the story (especially since this scene moves quickly into the next one), and Anurati is patient about instructing the Ascendants, since she doesn't want to tip her hand.

Space precludes a detailed description of the caucus, but it's actually a better idea to let you determine the particulars anyway. If you present a caucus grounded in the events of your existing chronicle (or introducing elements that you plan to flesh out later), the story gains a depth it wouldn't have if every single scene related back to the main action. Therefore, the caucus can concern the recent spate of vandalism and the characters' findings (should they wish to share them) or can be held for reasons completely unrelated to these events. The characters don't necessarily have to attend, but if they do, they have the chance to meet Epimetheus and even some or all of the Ascendants. Just make sure that you mix in a few other Storyteller characters so that the players don't automatically assume that the Ascendants are behind the players' problems by process of elimination.

This scene will probably be the shortest in the story, and merely consists of the spirit hunting down the characters and attempting to kill and eat them.

## The Hunt

The Hungry Dragon is slightly more intelligent than an animal, but doesn't reason as a human being does. The Hungry Dragon knows that killing a lone opponent is easier than taking on a group, though, and so tries to stalk the characters when they are separated. It doesn't make use of distraction tactics or anything so advanced, but does try to silence the character (by biting her throat) so as to avoid backup arriving. *Sasuha Usum* can communicate with a mage using the Spirit 1 spell "Spirit Tongue," and nothing in the Hungry Dragon's orders disallows it from conversing with its prey. *Sasuha Usum* has no particular loyalty to Epimetheus and will tell the characters who summoned it (though it doesn't know why).

If the spirit is wounded badly (down to its last four Health boxes), it flees a fight and tries to ambush its prey. *Sasuha Usum* cannot rest or take time to heal, though, as it is still under Epimetheus' command. If *Sasuha Usum* runs out of Health, the spirit dies and decays into a blue-red sludge before evaporating entirely, leaving behind the half-digested remains of the rats and any characters the spirit might have eaten.

The characters can simply avoid the spirit. If they hide among Sleepers, it cannot attack them, since doing so would conflict with Epimetheus' orders. If two days pass and at least one of the characters is still alive, the spirit is freed from the Thyrsus' control and can do as the spirit pleases. What it does is up to the Storyteller. It might simply fade back into the Shadow, or the spirit might remain in the physical world and start hunting and eating Sleepers. If *Sasuha Usum* sustained heavy injury, the spirit might decide to continue hunting the characters, but now has no compunctions about falling back to heal and attacking them in view of Sleepers.

Before running this scene, consider how you wish to handle character death. Even with an Armor spell, a mage might fall dead after only a few bites from this creature. If you don't wish to deal with a death in the cabal for whatever reason, make sure the characters have an out — maybe an Ally or Mentor who could show up unexpectedly, or simply a Sleeper wandering by at the right moment to drive off the Hungry Dragon. If you wish to truly engage a *deus ex machina*, Remainder can show up and distract the creature long enough for the character to escape. Better to let the characters escape on their own ingenuity, though.



Since the Hungry Dragon is an indirect pawn of the Exarchs, it can be detected by the Ring (or by Remainder). The Robe can hide a character from the spirit, and the Scepter can erode the spell controlling *Sasuha Usum* (though that doesn't banish it, of course). The "Control Spirit" spell can also be disrupted by normal countermagic, subject to the rules on p. 122 of **Mage: The Awakening**.

### *Storytelling the Fight*

This scene should be played for raw horror. Fighting a bloodthirsty animal is terrifying enough. Fighting a creature that has the capacity to reason, even in a primitive sense, and is bound magically to hunt down and eat particular people is downright horrific. The Hungry Dragon sees living creatures as food, nothing more, and is able to engender this feeling of primal hunger in others using its Influence. While the monster bites into one of the characters, the other might actually start to feel rumblings in their stomachs, their mouths watering at the sight of fresh meat and blood.

The Hungry Dragon hunts like a snake, slithering after its prey and attacking in a quick burst. Feel free to spend Willpower on the spirit's attack rolls — it isn't likely to kill a character in one blow, and a solid hit should convince the players that this monster isn't playing around. If the cabal is martial in nature, the characters might stand and fight, but if not, they might consider fleeing and trying to figure out how to fight the spirit. If they do, give them a little time to rest, and then let *Sasuha Usum* attack from nowhere.

### *Aftermath*

Once the spirit is destroyed, banished or set free, the characters need to consider who sent it. The simplest way to figure this out is simply to ask the creature. The "Interconnections" spell doesn't work, as the creature doesn't seem to have any sympathetic connections at all (Anurati's doing, of course). It *does* register to the Ring's power, of course, but this by itself doesn't help the characters track Epimetheus. If the characters met and conversed with him at the caucus or have had dealings with him before these events, they might simply consider him a potential culprit if they know his fascination with reptiles or cryptids (although motive probably eludes them). More methods of learning about and finding Epimetheus are presented in the next scene.

### *Scene Three: The Summoner*

In this scene, the characters search out and confront Epimetheus, the Thyrsus mage who summoned the Hungry Dragon. In so doing, the characters can learn who pulls Epimetheus' strings, and thus who they have to thank for *Sasuha Usum*'s attack.

Epimetheus can sense the Hungry Dragon's presence in the Fallen World, and knows if the creature has been destroyed or when the spell he cast upon it has elapsed or been broken. If the spirit dies or if the characters break the control spell, Epimetheus begins preparations for their retribution, since

he figures they can probably track the spirit back to him. (He does not know that Anurati removed the threads connecting him to the spirit.) If the creature leaves the physical world of its own volition (perhaps after the two-day duration of the "Control Spirit" spell has elapsed), he is still cautious, but doesn't take any of the steps described on p. 100.

### Rumors for Scene Three

The characters might hear some of these rumors during the course of their search for Epimetheus. Some of these rumors are more appropriate from mages, while others can come from Sleepers.

- "A neighborhood near here had a terrible problem with snakes a few summers back. People were finding them in their kitchen cupboards and everything."

- "I read in the paper that a guy was arrested a few months back for carrying a rifle loaded with powerful tranquilizers. Turns out he had a permit, though, so he wasn't actually arraigned or anything. Still, it was weird — not like there's any bears around here."

- "Last time the Consilium found someone guilty of summoning dangerous creatures into the area, they banished him from the city for a full year. They had a Trickster named Balthasar enforce the binding, I think."

- "Anybody else having trouble with Space magic lately? Seems like threads between things are just unraveling. I talked to a Warlock friend of mine and he muttered something about 'war in the Abode of Demons,' but I think he was drunk at the time."

### *Finding Epimetheus*

As mentioned previously, the easiest way to find Epimetheus is to ask *Sasuha Usum* who summoned it. The spirit can describe Epimetheus (though it doesn't know the mage's name, shadow or otherwise) and his Hallow. If the characters (understandably) don't think to ask the ravenous beast intent on killing them for information, they have some other options.

- **Consilium:** Epimetheus is a member of the local Consilium and of the Free Council. Individuals in either organization can tell the characters that he is fascinated by otherworldly beings and reptiles in particular, but unless the characters take care to conceal their motives in asking the question (or begin some kind of official inquiry through the Consilium, whoever they talk to will warn Epimetheus that he is a wanted man. This gives him time to prepare as described below.

The ease of obtaining information from either the Consilium or the Free Council depends on the characters' standing within those organizations. Order or Consilium Status should play a role. The Free Council naturally wishes to protect its own (although if a character outranks Epimetheus in this order, she can expect better compliance than an outsider). The Silver Ladder in the area is slightly compromised by the Ascendants, meaning that a character asking for help from a member of this order might suffer a slight penalty to Social rolls representing requests for information. The other three orders, however, don't have any particular bias for or against Epimetheus, and, therefore, their cooperation all comes down to how the characters represent themselves.

- **Ask Spirits:** If any of the characters are capable of rousing and questioning spirits, the characters might discover that the area around Epimetheus' sanctum has a history of spiritual turbulence. Anurati, because she has no skill in the Spirit Arcanum, can do nothing to disguise this, and so the characters can look for areas where the Gauntlet is thin. This, of course, might lead them into unrelated scenarios involving unknown Hallows, genius loci or even werewolves, depending on how long the Storyteller wishes to wait before beginning the next scene in "The Crown." Having the characters meet up with an ally or occasional contact of Epimetheus who has no involvement with the Awakened community but sees the characters as enemies of his friend would actually be very much in the theme of the story.

- **Mundane Investigation:** Of course, the characters might decide to pursue more accessible means of identifying Epimetheus. If they heard the rumor about an Animal Control worker receiving calls about alligators, they might follow up on that lead after dealing with *Sasuha Usum*. If they do so (going to appropriate lengths to meet the woman and discover where the calls came from), they can trace back the Hungry Dragon's movements from wherever it attacked them to the neighborhood in which Epimetheus lives. Once in the right area, they can track down his Hallow using magic, look for spiritual turbulence as mentioned above or ask around. If they question locals about the calls, someone eventually mentions "Mr. Cade, the snake-guy."

Another method would be to track sales of exotic reptiles coming into the area. This would require talking with customs officials or exotic pet dealers, and of course mean some legwork from the characters, but the name "Delano Cade" comes up on these lists fairly often. Another option is to scan local online newsgroups dedicated to reptiles and owning them as pets, or to cryptid sightings. Epimetheus is a member of several such groups, and a skilled hacker might be able to track Epimetheus through his online presence. Other names crop up, as well, and the characters need to be careful that they don't anger or frighten anyone along the way, lest someone call the police or word get back to Epimetheus himself.

### *Systems*

Below are some possible rolls that players might make during these investigations. Magic, of course, can add bonuses or provide information that makes these methods irrelevant.

Action	Dice Pool
Obtaining information from mages	Manipulation or Presence + Persuasion + Status (Order or Consilium as appropriate)
Obtaining information from Sleepers	Manipulation or Presence + Persuasion or Intimidation
Online searches	Intelligence + Computer
Searching for spiritual turbulence	Intelligence + Occult (active Mage Sight required; see pp. 277–279 of <b>Mage: The Awakening</b> )

## Confronting Epimetheus

The best course of action is to find Epimetheus before he knows that the characters are still alive and looking for him. The instant he discovers that his spirit servant failed and that the cabal is still around, he assumes that the characters will track him down and starts to take preparations for that eventuality. His actions and how long they take him are described below. The “Time Elapsed” entry refers to the amount of time after he learns that the characters are looking for him.

Time Elapsed	Epimetheus’ Action
10 minutes	Calls Melchior and explains that the creature has failed. Melchior instructs Epimetheus to make the summoning look unintentional and threatens to kill Epimetheus if the trail ever leads back to the Ascendants.
20 minutes	Fortifies sanctum, locking every door and filling darts for his tranquilizer gun.
One hour	Begins performing an oblation at his Hallow.
Two hours	The oblation complete, Epimetheus now has 10 points of Mana handy. He casts “Greater Summons” to call upon nearby spirits and commands them to act as sentries.
Five hours	Locks himself into his sanctum to wait.
One day	Contacts a member of the Free Council and rambles about “enemies of the Awakened.” If one of the characters is a member of this order, she might receive a call for information from this person. If the characters question a member of the Free Council, that member might refer them to Epimetheus or take pains to keep them away from him, depending on how the characters conduct the interview.
36 hours	Casts “Control Spirit” and sends an ephemeral spy to look in on the characters. This spirit might inadvertently lead the cabal back to Epimetheus, of course, but his curiosity and fear overwhelms his already shaky common sense.

The characters might interrupt this string of events at any time. After the first 36 hours, Epimetheus starts to calm down a bit, but his sanctum remains tightly locked, and he keeps his pistol on him at all times. His tranquilizer rifle is never far away (though he doesn’t carry it in public). Needless to say, he keeps the “Ephemeral Shield” spell active as well.

This scene presents information about Epimetheus’ sanctum, Hallow and equipment as well as his tactics so that the Storyteller can be adequately prepared for any course of action the players might take.

## Epimetheus’ Sanctum

Epimetheus lives in a small house in a middle-class area. He is well-known in the neighborhood as the “snake guy,” and enjoys taking his reptilian pets outside during warmer months to enthrall and disgust the local children. He’s thought of as eccentric, but harmless and pleasant, and so a bunch of obviously armed and angry-looking people will certainly induce the locals to call the police. The characters need to be circumspect, making sure they look as if they belong and aren’t there to cause any trouble. If you feel that they might attract attention to themselves, roll five dice for a general Awareness check for the neighbors (modified by traits such as Striking Looks, Occultation and by any bonuses or penalties you feel appropriate). If this roll succeeds, someone nearby calls the police. They arrive roughly five minutes later. If, by that time, the characters have not either left or convinced Epimetheus to talk with them without hostility, they have to deal with the cops (which might be as simple as a Mind Arcanum spell or as involved as a shoot-out, depending on the characters’ actions and your desires for the story).

The house is locked up tight, and all of the locks are spiritually awakened. This imposes a –2 penalty on all attempts to pick them, and the Security rating of the Sanctum (2) imposes a further –2 modifier. Magical attempts to open these locks only suffer the penalty from the spirits, however, while mundane attempts suffer the full –4.

Epimetheus’ Hallow is located in the basement, and it is powerful enough that the players can sense it from outside the house if they have Mage Sight active (Wits + Composure to do so, +1 die if the Mage Sight is through Prime). The Hallow’s resonance is best described as “serpentine.” Mages drawing Mana from it feel a smooth, scaly skin slide across their hands and faces, and their sibilants grow more pronounced for a short while after.

Epimetheus himself is hiding the basement (if he knows the characters are around, and the spirit sentries he summons inform him if mages enter a 20-yard radius around his house), and is armed with a handgun and a tranquilizer gun. The tranquilizer darts require a Stamina roll against a Toxicity rating of 5 to avoid being knocked unconscious. One such roll must be made every turn for three turns after a successful shot with the tranquilizer gun. The Life spell “Cleanse the Body” alleviates the effects of this poison.

Epimetheus, remember, isn’t a merciless killer. He is under the impression that the characters are out to kill him (which



might even be true) and that they represent a threat to the Consilium at large. He has also been threatened with death by the Ascendants should the characters ever trace the Hungry Dragon back to these elder mages. He is, however, a fairly moral and honest mage, and has no desire to fight to the death. He only uses his handgun if he has used up his tranquilizer darts, and warns the characters that he is armed. He is too



flustered to cast any complex spells, though he uses simple ones such as “Coaxing the Spirits” to best advantage.

The best course of action for the cabal might be to try to talk Epimetheus down. He knows that he is hot-headed and impulsive, and if the characters suggest to him that he is perhaps reacting without know all of the facts, he admits that possibility. He still doesn’t trust the characters, though, and wants to take the case before the Consilium before admitting to anything.

What the characters do at this point is up to them. If they go in guns blazing and kill Epimetheus, apart from potentially losing Wisdom, they have lost a good source of information about the Ascendants and effectively put themselves back at square one in their investigations. In addition, of course, the characters have killed a man, which has pragmatic as well as ethical consequences — they must now dispose of a body, and if shots were fired, the police might already be en route. Also, Epimetheus was a member of the Consilium and the Free Council and in good standing with both organizations, and both of them are capable of sending investigators to the house to try and determine what happened to the young Thyrsus. The characters might be able to wriggle out of all of these snares, but it’s probably better if they resort to conversation over bloodshed.

Talking Epimetheus down requires a Social roll. Exactly what Attributes and Skills are involved depends on the characters’ approach, but Epimetheus’ Composure (3) should be applied as a negative modifier. Remember that you can apply Epimetheus’ Destiny dice at appropriate places, but that his bane “shed skin,” can come into play if the characters reveal the truth about their interest in him (casting off doubt and dishonesty as a snake sheds its skin).

If the characters talk with Epimetheus but refuse to involve the Consilium, he sticks to his story about the snake summoning being an accident. The characters can pry the truth out of him by reading his mind, threatening or torturing him, but be mindful of possible degeneration. See the next section for his arguments and for what he really knows.

### *Before the Consilium*

Since it is assumed that “The Crown” takes place in whatever locale you have chosen for your chronicle, the personnel and particulars of the Consilium aren’t detailed here. Instead, we focus on Epimetheus’ story and how the characters can verify or disprove it, what measures the Ascendants take to keep their secrets and possibilities for how the interview (or trial, should it come to that) might progress.

### *Rules of the House*

Initially, an officer of the Consilium hears the case. This might be the Provost of the Council, or (if the players’ cabal isn’t native to the area or hasn’t been there long), the Herald. The matter is fairly serious, though — Epimetheus, by his own admission, summoned a dangerous creature from the Shadow that attacked and tried to eat a cabal. Further wrinkles to this

case might include the Hungry Dragon actually succeeded in killing one of the characters, the creature was freed from its controlling spell and killed or was seen by a Sleeper, the cabal realized the creature was under direct control or Epimetheus wounded or killed one of the characters during the course of resisting questioning. Depending on how the characters present their case, Epimetheus might be imprisoned until the hearing is concluded. On the other hand, if he were cooperative but the characters stepped on some toes looking for him, *they* might be briefly placed under house arrest.

In any event, once some details come to light, the Consilium decides this is a serious enough case that the Council needs to hear it. This means that the Hierarchy and the Sentinel, as well as the actual Council, convene to listen to Epimetheus and the characters plead their cases. Note that the characters might not actually have a grievance with Epimetheus. They might believe his claims that the Dragon slipped into the Fallen World accidentally or they might have killed the creature without difficulty and not bear him a grudge. Their attitude will make a difference when it comes time for mages to start giving testimony.

When running this portion of the story, consider who might be present at the hearing. Is the testimony open to any mage who wishes to attend, or only those with a certain amount of Status within the Consilium? If the latter, might an exception be made for characters with a great deal of stature within their orders? This would allow the Ascendants (who are important in the Silver Ladder, but almost unknown to the Consilium) to attend. Epimetheus won't blow their cover, but is noticeably nervous when they arrive. If any member of the Ascendants attends the proceedings, have the players roll Intelligence + Subterfuge. Success means that the character notices Epimetheus' consternation, while an exceptional success means that the character relates Epimetheus' consternation to the Ascendants' presence. (The player might make this logical leap without benefit of dice, of course.)

### *Epimetheus' Lies*

Epimetheus' story is as follows:

*I was experimenting with gateways into the spirit world. I've done this sort of thing before, and I've always been able to control the things I've called up. This creature was different, though. It was dangerous, vicious. It clawed me up something fierce, and it was all I could do to repel it. It smashed open my tank of feeder rats and ate a bunch of them, and then slithered out a window and disappeared.*

Some logical questions and points of clarification that the characters might think to ask, or that the Consilium can ask if you wish, follow:

- **"You said you were injured, but you seem fine."**

Epimetheus responds (somewhat testily) that he healed himself magically.

- **"Why did the creature hunt down mages instead of Sleepers?"** Epimetheus claims he doesn't know, but specu-

lates that the creature needed the flesh of the Awakened to survive in the Fallen World. Other mages present who are knowledgeable about cryptids can affirm that such creatures are often *thaumivores* (see p. 338 of **Mage: The Awakening**) and thus might not gain sustenance from eating Sleepers.

- **"Why didn't you pursue it?"** He claims that he tried, but that something was blocking his ability to hunt it down. Other mages in the Consilium nod, as they have experienced difficulty using Space magic of late (due to Anurati's meddling and powerful magic). Of course, Epimetheus doesn't know the Space Arcanum anyway, but that's not common knowledge. If asked this question, Epimetheus unconsciously glances at the Ascendants, if they are present. The characters can notice this if a player succeeds on a Wits + Subterfuge roll.

- **"Why didn't you contact the Consilium or your order for help?"** Epimetheus says that he was frightened and ashamed, since he's known for not thinking ahead. If anyone died, he is almost tearful at this point.

- **[Any question that catches him in a lie.]** The characters might point out that the spirit was under a spell controlling it, that the creature attacked *them* specifically or that it told them it was summoned (if the mages talked to it). If Epimetheus is caught in a lie, he glances about helplessly, and stares first at the Ascendants (same roll applies to notice this, but add two dice to the roll) and then at any representatives from his order. He doesn't answer the question, however, and refuses to say any more, standing on his prior statements.

### *Ascendants' Manipulations*

Whether by intuitive cross-examination or his own tongue, Epimetheus is probably found to be guilty of violations of the Lex Magica and in need of punishment. Indeed, he doesn't argue that point. The Consilium might have an established protocol for sentencing this sort of crime, and of course certain mitigating factors (whether the characters speak in favor of Epimetheus, whether anyone actually died and so forth) are taken into account.

The Consilium should discuss the matter behind closed doors, but it's possible that one of the characters is on the Consilium. If so, or if the characters find a way to eavesdrop, the character discovers that the Consilium isn't feeling forgiving. Even if no one was killed, and even if the Consilium members believe Epimetheus is telling the truth about calling the Hungry Dragon up by accident, the mage has proven himself to be a danger to the Awakened.

During the sentencing discussion, the Ascendants enter the room. The characters might see the Ascendants as they brush by on their way in. They introduce themselves (if the characters are present and do not know them) and state that they believe that Epimetheus should be banished from the Consilium and from the area.

At this point, the Council decides to open the subject of punishment up to the Consilium at large. The characters, therefore, can take part in the debates. Again, the logistics of this scene depend very much on what you have decided

about the Consilium. The debate might be very structured, with each side arguing a set number of minutes, or it might take the form of a shouting match. The important viewpoints to know are those of the Ascendants and of the accused.

- **Epimetheus:** Confused, angry and betrayed, Epimetheus is one word away from spilling the beans about his conversation with Melchior. Epimetheus is terrified of the older cabal, though, and so holds his tongue even until sentencing is passed — if the sentence is one he can live with, he'd rather do so than risk death. The characters might be able to gain his confidence if they promise to protect him. If they make any accusation against the Ascendants and it looks to Epimetheus that the truth is coming out anyway, he'll speak up.

- **The Ascendants:** Knowing that the situation is touchy and not able to simply strike Epimetheus dead (at present), the Ascendants decide to remove the focus from him and turn the whole mess political. They speak out against the Free Council, claiming that this “pseudo-order” and its “techno-magic” is responsible for the fiasco. After all, the Atlantean orders have well-defined protective measures for dealing with spirits, which the Free Council apparently feels are beneath them. Melchior, of course, acts as point man for this argument, and if the characters don't shut him down quickly, he soon has the entire Consilium in a rousing debate over the merits of the Free Council as an order and the viability of its styles of magic. During the chaos, Balthasar intends to cause a few lucky turns of fate and get Epimetheus outside, at which point Casper can strike him dead with his command of Forces.

### *Truth Revealed*

How well the Ascendants' plan works is up to you, or rather, up to the players. If they give up and go home or become distracted by the debate about the Free Council, they might miss seeing Epimetheus led outside and felled by a lightning bolt. Pay attention to the players and what their characters are doing — a character who keeps watch on Epimetheus during all of this will notice him leave the room. A character keeping a watch with Mage Sight might notice Fatespells being woven around Epimetheus and might even be able to counter them. (You'll need to decide how potent these spells are.)

If the Ascendants' plan is interrupted at any time during the proceedings (before Epimetheus is killed, that is), Epimetheus breaks down and claims that Melchior put him up to summoning the creature and instructing it to kill the characters. Epimetheus begs for protection from the Moros mage and his powerful cabal. The Ascendants, for their part, laugh at these accusations, saying that Epimetheus was simply caught in his own lies and is trying to shift the blame to his betters. Melchior uses this as further “evidence” that the Free Council is weak and unfit for Awakened society.

If Epimetheus is killed, the Consilium quickly realizes the murder was done by magic, and the members spread out to find the mages responsible. The Ascendants agree to help, and immediately try to take leadership roles in order to lead other mages off their scent. Meanwhile, Anurati starts dis-

integrating the sympathetic threads around the Ascendants, masking their connections to Epimetheus. The characters might notice this, if they think to check, and should be struck by the similarity between this occurrence and the one in the hotel room in Scene One.

Another possible wrinkle here is Remainder. He can confirm, if the characters need confirmation, that the Ascendants and Epimetheus both are pawns of “them” (that is, the Exarchs). The characters might discover this for themselves, of course, and make good use of the Ring, Robe and Scepter during this scene. The Ascendants don't press the issue if their plan to kill Epimetheus fails, though, relying on their station, their raw power and the lack of evidence to shield them from prosecution. Remainder, however, insists that the characters “do something about those old guys — those guys belong to Them.”

## *Scene Four: The Magi Ascendant*

In this scene, the characters research and eventually confront the Ascendants. The characters need to use methods other than brute force, and they can't expect the Consilium's help in this matter, but other options are available.

Once the characters meet with and best the Ascendants (in some way), the characters can actually learn about the spider at the center of this web of influence, Anurati Sahley.

### **Rumors for Scene Four**

The characters might hear these rumors as they search for information about the Ascendants, or the characters might find that no one is willing to talk to them at all (see below).

- “The Silver Ladder's going through some kind of changing of the guard around here. A couple of their people just got sent to other cities.”
- “You know that Melchior guy got deported from Germany, right? Not by the government, though. By some scary-ass mages over there.”
- “You know what I say. Steer clear of any mage whom you can't call by his real name.”

### *Motives*

This scene is the first one in this story that asks the players to be proactive. If they decide, however, that their problems end with Epimetheus (especially if they kill him rather than taking him before the Consilium), they might not ever track down the Ascendants. What should the Storyteller do in this instance?

What *not* to do, if you can help it, is rush things. Don't push the players into chasing down these powerful mages, and don't dangle obvious hints in front of the players. The Ascendants

aren't obvious. They are subtle, influential and patient. If the characters make enemies of the Ascendants, the characters won't see fire and brimstone raining down. Instead, they are likely to be snubbed by Silver Ladder mages in the area. Any characters who actually belong to the Silver Ladder find that they lose easy access to rote and other order resources. Any Mentors, Allies or Contacts must choose between their loyalty to the character and to the order at large — a loyal supporting character might share the stigma of the cabal. Also, the characters begin to acquire unsavory reputations. If they pay attention to gossip among the local Awakened, the characters find that rumors circulate that they might allies of the Seers of the Throne. If this persists, the characters might find members of the Guardians of the Veil watching them (and any members of the cabal who belong to this order are brought in for intense questioning). Slowly but surely, the local Consilium rejects the characters.

This, of course, is in line with the Ascendants' plans. The Hungry Dragon, they realize now, was a mistake — too obvious and too grandiose, plus it relied upon a fundamentally unreliable mage. Anurati still wants the characters dead, and the Ascendants might have personal grudges against them, depending on the events of Scene Three. The plan now is to starve the characters out, depriving them of friends and support, and then kill them off one at a time. The Ascendants are quite capable of doing so, too, unless the characters stand up for themselves, digging deeper into the unknown.

If you are weaving the events of **Reign of the Exarchs** into a larger chronicle, this would be a good time to break from the events of "The Crown" and run a short story or two using antagonists apparently unconnected to the mages of this chapter. The characters might be involved in a car accident and discover their brakes were magically weakened — only to recognize that nimbus later when they see Melchior. Simple bad luck might ruin a character's bid for advancement within his order — and Balthasar of the Ascendants is a Master of Fate. The Ascendants never leave incontrovertible proof of their malevolent acts, but the characters should be able to figure out who has it in for them. If nothing else, the three Artifacts they already have in their possession or a cryptic visit from Remainder should point the characters in the right direction.

## *Knowing the Enemy*

Background information about the Ascendants can be found in the "Dramatis Personae" section. Their degree of involvement with the mages of the local Consilium is up to the Storyteller, but should be consistent with the Ascendants' personalities. It is important that the Ascendants' reach permeates the local Consilium, and probably extends to other Consilii as well through the Ascendants' influence in the Silver Ladder. As Storyteller, you need to decide how this influence manifests with regard to this chronicle, but as the Ascendants turn their attention to the cabal, their influences should begin to intersect.

Below are several ways in which the Ascendants can interact with mage and Sleeper society, and how the players' cabal could exploit them.

- **Apprentices:** Melchior is the most personable of the Ascendants, and thus the most likely to take an apprentice. This apprentice would most likely be another Necromancer, but this isn't necessary as long as the mage belongs to the Silver Ladder. If the characters could convince the apprentice of the true nature of Melchior and his cohorts, the characters might be able to use her to get close enough to the Ascendants to challenge them. Of course, turning the apprentice might not be necessary if the characters are powerful enough to impersonate her (using such spells as Mind 3 "Imposter" or Life 3 "Two Faces").

- **Appeals to Good Nature:** Balthasar and Melchior are old and set in their ways, and thoroughly convinced of their own superiority. Casper, on the other hand, isn't *quite* as egomaniacal as his cabal-mates and could conceivably respond to reason. If the characters find a way to connect with him (possibly through his church, his family or even through mutual sports fandom), they might be able to convince him that the Ascendants are committing crimes against the Awakened. Using the Robe to free Casper from the Exarchs' snares might help this process.

- **Destiny:** Balthasar, like Anurati, is a firm believer that one cannot change the course of Fate. He subscribes to a strict doctrine of predestination — even attempts to read and magically alter Fate are perfectly in line with what Fate had in store from the beginning. This rather nihilistic view wears on him, however, and makes him susceptible to depression. If the characters can engage him in a discussion on the matter, they might be able to talk him into giving something up about Anurati or about the Ascendants' plans. This requires convincing him that the characters are *destined* to confront her, of course, which is no easy feat considering that Balthasar is a Master of Fate. Again, the Artifacts can help, either by hiding someone from his magic (the Robe) or countering his ability to see the strands of Fate (the Scepter). The other notion to consider is that the characters actually are destined to confront Anurati.

- **The Duel Arcane:** While the Ascendants have a somewhat perverted understanding of their order and what its goals should be, they do understand many of the basic traditions of Atlantean magic. The Duel Arcane is one of these traditions, and the Ascendants feel bound to accept challenges of this sort. If a character wishes to challenge one of the Ascendants to the Duel Arcane, the character can name the terms, including disclosure of the Ascendants' motives (and to whom they answer; hopefully the characters have learned that no one is exempt from being a patsy). Of course, actually besting one of the Ascendants at the Duel Arcane isn't going to be easy.

Casper is probably the safest choice, as he is the least accomplished of the three in terms of raw power. He chooses Forces as his sword (four dots), calling down lightning to strike his foe, and Prime as his shield (three dots), surrounding himself with an impenetrable halo of red/yellow light. He has Gnosis 3. If beaten, he concedes without taking the Duel into the realm of physical injury.



Melchior won't accept the Duel if it's made in private, but if challenged in view of other mages, he accepts. He chooses Matter (five dots) as his sword, trapping his foe between immense gears and cogs. For his shield, he chooses Mind (four dots), making his enemy unable to concentrate through loud noise and distracting thoughts. He has Gnosis 4. He won't pummel a beaten foe, but if stripped of Willpower, Melchior forces himself to fight on for at least two more turns.

Balthasar is undoubtedly the most dangerous of the three in the Duel. Fate is his sword (five dots), and it is invisible. The character simply feels the weight of destiny crushing her soul and choking the life from her body. Balthasar uses the Time Arcanum as his shield (also five dots) — the opponent simply sees her attacks pass him by as he slowly steps aside. He has Gnosis 5 and fights to the death.

Of course, it is possible to cheat at the Duel Arcane. The Ascendants, for various reasons, don't, but if the characters choose to do so, they must find a way to avoid detection. The Robe would be ideal for this, and a character using the Robe in the Duel Arcane can apply the Robe's benefit to the contest. The Scepter can likewise be used to deter the Ascendants' attacks. Cheating in the Duel Arcane *might* be cause for degeneration roll, but given that the characters are probably aware of how dishonorable the Ascendants are, such a roll should only be applied to extremely moral mages (Wisdom 8 or higher).

- **Stealth and Guile:** Of course, the characters might simply decide to break into the Ascendants' sanctum and poke around for clues as to their true agendas and masters. In theory, this is a good plan — the Ascendants leave their sanctum often and they all maintain their own private residences. Unfortunately, similar to many mages, the Ascendants are protective of their sanctum (which also houses an extensive library and a Hallow), and it is well-secured, both in terms of mundane security and magical protections. Casper has bound Forces spells into many of the locks, and so picking them without first unweaving these spells can be fatal. Likewise, Balthasar routinely checks the future of the building and sets up triggered spells to trap, maim or kill intruders, so unless the characters make use of spells such as "Shield of Chronos," they can expect deadly magic to await them.

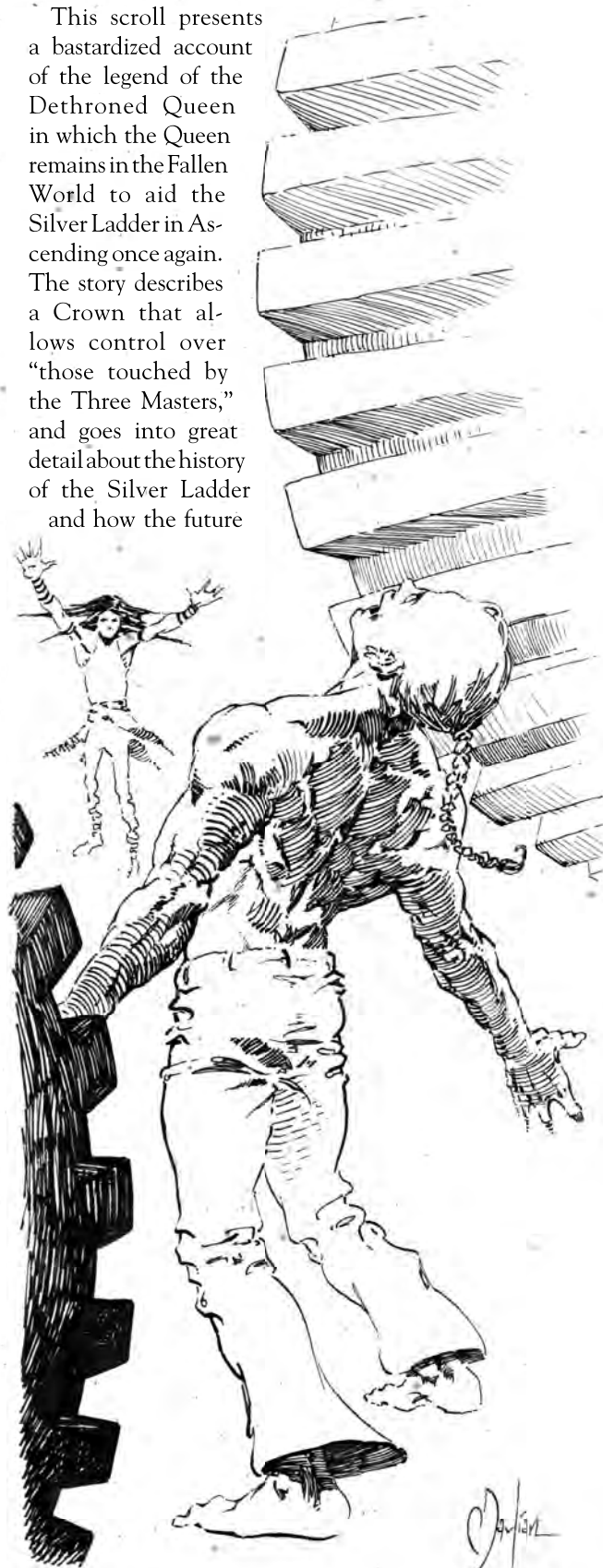
Once again, though, the Ring, Robe and Scepter can protect the characters — if they are willing to risk degeneration to use them. These Artifacts can help find the sanctum, bypass the protective spells and shut down any magical alarms that might be triggered. If the characters do not have access to these Artifacts, they would be well-advised to consider another avenue of approach.

## *The Prize*

Whatever method the characters use, they should wind up finding a scroll and its translation in the Ascendants' library. The characters might discover this scroll while infiltrating the Ascendants' sanctum, after a successful Duel Arcane or by turning an apprentice or Casper to the characters' cause.

However they come by this scroll, the information on it can lead them to Anurati.

This scroll presents a bastardized account of the legend of the Dethroned Queen in which the Queen remains in the Fallen World to aid the Silver Ladder in Ascending once again. The story describes a Crown that allows control over "those touched by the Three Masters," and goes into great detail about the history of the Silver Ladder and how the future



requires three leaders from that order to take the reins of the Awakened and raise them up. The margins of the scroll depict drawings of the Queen, who, the characters will soon discover, bears an uncanny resemblance to Anurati Sahley.

### *Analysis of the Scroll*

The characters probably subject the scroll to both magical and academic scrutiny. The information they can gain from both approaches is as follows:

- **Academic Study:** Researching the Awakened history and legendry presented on the scroll requires an extended Intelligence + Academics roll. If the researching character has the Order Status Merit (Silver Ladder), the player may add the Status rating to this dice pool. Each roll requires one hour of research time, and 10 successes are necessary. Once the player reaches 10 successes, the character learns that the history in the scroll is largely accurate *except* where the Dethroned Queen is concerned. She does not enter into the history of the Silver Ladder in any other source the characters can find (whether they can find other references to her is up to the Storyteller). Likewise, the “Three Masters” don’t correspond to any titles given to the Oracles, and the context of the story seems to more closely identify these “Three Masters” with the Exarchs.

The characters can also research the writing and lettering style of the scroll. This requires an Intelligence + Academics roll. Success indicates that the character discovers that the scroll is written in Hindi; judging from the wear and tear and the lettering, the scroll is well over 500 years old. (This is not, in fact, the case — Anurati wrote the scroll and compelled Melchior to artificially age it using the Death Arcanum.) Digging into Hindu legend and myth (which requires an extended Intelligence + Occult roll, each roll requires one hour, five successes needed) shows that the “Three Masters” in the scroll are described similarly to the Trimurti, the Hindu triad of the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

Once the characters have uncovered all of the above information, have the appropriate players roll Intelligence + Academics, Politics or Expression. If this roll succeeds, the character realizes that the scroll reads as though it was written specifically for the Ascendants. The “new leaders” described in the scroll match the Ascendants’ descriptions, both physically and magically, closely enough to feed into the Ascendants’ delusions of grandeur without being *too* obvious.

- **Magical Scrutiny:** The scroll registers to the Ring’s spell or to Remainder’s “Sense Them” rote, naturally. Anurati destroyed sympathetic threads connecting the scroll to her long ago, so the characters can’t simply use magic to trace the scroll back to her, but the Scepter can erode her “Destroy the Threads” spell. Other options exist, of course; the Scepter just provides a quick (and potentially costly) way of finding her.

Scrutinizing the scroll can be performed with any Arcanum. The scroll has three qualities (see p. 279 of **Mage: The Awakening**). The most prevalent is pride, bestowed

by long association with the egotistical Ascendants. The second, nearly as prominent, is doubt. This scroll throws everything the reader knows into question, whether he is willing to believe the scroll or not. The final quality, very subtle (–2 to scrutiny attempts) is helplessness, a remnant of Anurati’s nimbus. In addition to scrutinizing these qualities, if the characters analyze the scroll with the Death Arcanum, they can uncover the scroll’s artificial aging. Whether they recognize Melchior’s magical resonance depends on whether they have seen Melchior uncloak his nimbus. (If he were involved in the Duel Arcane, of course, they automatically recognize it.)

If the characters successfully scrutinize the scroll, they have a magical thumbprint for Anurati Sahley. Tracking her with only this to go on is difficult, if not impossible, but this thumbprint combined with everything else they have seen gives them enough information to finally put the puzzle together.

### *Scene Five: The Center of the Web*

In this scene, the characters track down Anurati Sahley and discover the face behind their trials and tribulations in this story. In the process, they can recover the Crown of the Dethroned Queen, but they also learn that the Exarchs’ influence extends well beyond the local area and independent agents such as Anurati.

### *Finding Anurati*

The characters have a good lead in the scroll obtained from the Ascendants, but by itself the scroll doesn’t provide a direct line to Anurati. The characters need to perform further research, magical or mundane (or both) before they can find her. If the methods listed below seem overly difficult or harsh, keep in mind that Anurati has honed her magic for years with the express goal of avoiding detection. She is subtle, patient and paranoid, and the fact that the characters know she exists at all is a minor victory.

Keep in mind, too, that Anurati has a high Destiny Merit rating, but her bane is the Crown. As the characters are searching for her after reading the legend of the Crown (and might even have the Crown as a direct goal if they have the other three Artifacts), they can trigger this bane. You can apply her “bane dice” as *positive* modifiers to their attempts to find her, or as negative modifiers to her attempts to stay hidden.

### *Talking to Other Mages*

The characters might wish to bring in other mages on this problem. If the characters involve the Consilium, their reception depends upon the events of the story so far, on how the Consilium normally operates and on the degree to which the Consilium has been compromised by Anurati and her

agents. The cabal might try to report its findings and discover that key members of the Consilium are now unconsciously working at cross purposes. Alternately, the characters might find that even with the Consilium's help, they can't simply track down Anurati and subdue her. Let the other mages in the city (including Contacts, Allies, Mentors and even Retainers of the characters) help to whatever degree you feel would be appropriate while still allowing the troupe's characters to be the stars of the show.

Mages whom the characters already know to have fallen under her influence, of course, represent the most obvious choice for finding hints. Unfortunately, those mages aren't necessarily predisposed (or in any condition) to help. Epimetheus, if he is still alive, might be more than willing to side with the characters or he might hate and distrust them, but in either case he has never seen Anurati. If the characters gain his trust, however (whether through genuine emotion or magical manipulation), he can tell them that he always received his orders from Melchior, but that Balthasar exerts the true influence among the Ascendants. Indeed, Epimetheus has seen Balthasar actually contradict Melchior, stating that a particular course of action "isn't what she wants." Epimetheus notes that Balthasar often refers to Fate as "she" or "the Lady," but if the characters show him the scroll, he suggests that the term might have another meaning.

If the characters have somehow won the trust of one of the Ascendants (probably Casper, though if they can show Melchior that he was manipulated into aging the scroll he becomes willing to help them), the Ascendant can confirm that Balthasar makes policy for the cabal based on his Arcane understanding of Fate. He often enters deep trances and emerges with plans and strategies based on projected futures and probabilities. This isn't uncommon for an Acanthus, of course, but Balthasar often speaks with a slight Indian accent for a few hours after such trances.

Getting useful information from Balthasar involves convincing him that a mage is behind the scroll. Whether this is remotely possible depends on the characters' relationships with the Ascendants so far. (If any of the characters belong to the Silver Ladder, they stand a much better chance.) This is probably a matter best left to pure roleplaying rather than dice, but you can certainly have a player make a Social roll (Manipulation + Persuasion, Presence + Empathy or whatever other combination feels appropriate based on the character's tactics). If the characters can convince Balthasar that the scroll was created for the express purpose of manipulating Melchior, Casper and him, he becomes first enraged and then morose. Even in this despondent state, however, he can tell the characters that when he enters trances he receives visits from "Lady Fate." He describes her (see Anurati's description) and describes the feeling of helplessness that accompanies her. The characters should recognize this feeling as one of the qualities on the scroll. Balthasar does not know where this woman might be, but a physical description brings the characters that much closer to her.

### *The Indian Community*

If this story takes place in a city with a large Indian population, the characters might search that area for mages unknown to the Consilium or ask around about mages with shadow names from Indian mythology. Whether this tactic succeeds depends on what you as Storyteller have decided about the other mages in the city, but if mages of Indian heritage exist in the area, it is possible that they have heard of the sect to which Anurati once belonged and even that they heard of her before she wiped those mages' memories clean of her. Indeed, if you wish to allow the characters to discover one of these mages (either in their area or after taking a trip — perhaps even to India, if you feel like running a short side story), the Scepter might undo the memory spells that Anurati used. If this case, the mage can remember Anurati's name, description and capabilities, and can tell the characters about the Crown.

### *Using the Artifact*

When the characters are searching for Anurati, the Ring, Robe and Scepter have various uses. Notably, the Scepter can be used to ward off the spells she has cast to rob others of their memories of her (but does nothing to counter her Occultation Merit, which is potent enough by itself). The Ring, in turn, can be used to find people whom she has touched — by combining this spell with Mage Sight from another Arcanum, the character can look for people touched by the Exarchs and bearing Anurati's magical signature.

Another possibility involves using the Robe. It supposedly angers the Exarchs and causes them to send minions after the wearer, so the characters, if they know this legend, might use it to "bait" Anurati. This is a dangerous gamble, of course, because Anurati might not be the one who takes the bait. Still, if the characters are losing ground, the Robe might lure Anurati back into action.

### *Magical Scrutiny*

If the characters discovered all three of the qualities on the scroll, they know Anurati's nimbus, although they probably don't recognize it as such yet. The characters can use the method described above to find people, objects and even places that bear her touch and that bear the mark of the Exarchs. This might require retracing their steps a bit, perhaps even tracking down the vandals from Scene One and subjecting them to intense magical scrutiny. If the characters do this, however, they might be able to uncover a kind of sympathetic thread (using the Ring or Remainder's spell) and track the thread back to Anurati's sanctum.

The glyphs that she used to spy on the Awakened of the area provide another possibility, of course. Anurati, just as any mage, can only have so many active spells at once, and she can't monitor them all. The characters might be able to find a glyph that bears an active connection to her, if they look hard enough (perhaps an extended Intelligence + Investigation roll).

## *Dream and Other Mystical Visions*

Anurati is powerful and her influence pervasive, but she can't control everything. The Dream Merit can lead the cabal to her, provided that the character using the Merit can correctly interpret what he sees. The nature of the vision should reflect where Anurati is — unique architectural features, nearby landmarks and so forth. Don't worry about presenting her as a manipulator, since the players are well aware of that already. Concentrate the hints in the vision on facts the characters can use.

The characters might search for ghosts or spirits that know something about Anurati or have seen her. Most ghosts don't know any more about mages than Sleepers do, but if the characters can find a ghost compelled into a deadly situation by Anurati's magic, that unfortunate shade might know who was responsible (and indeed, bringing Anurati to justice might help the ghost pass on).

Using "Augury," "Postcognition" or other Time spells to see Anurati is difficult at best, since doing so requires finding someplace she has actually been. The information the characters can discover through other means, though, might lead them to such a place. A spirit or ghost that knows something about Anurati (even a tiny amount of information will suffice) might be able to direct the characters to one of her former homes. Although she has destroyed the sympathetic threads connecting her to the hotel room, she has no facility with Time, and so the characters might be able to find a moment when she actually visited that room.

## *Confronting Anurati*

Once the characters finally get a bead on Anurati and are able to track her to her sanctum, their problems have just begun. This section discusses the magical and mundane protections that Anurati has placed upon her home and gives several possibilities for her style of confrontation.

The physical details of the house (what part of town the house is in, what it looks like, the nearest neighbors) are not provided, as these details will vary based on where this story is set. However, the following are some possibilities and their ramifications:

- **Apartment:** Anurati doesn't like large numbers of people, so if she lives in an apartment building, it's probably a small one with only a few tenants. She might have thoroughly subjugated the people dwelling there, conditioning them to her magic enough that she can possess or use the Crown to direct any of them easily. This means that if the characters interact with a tenant, that tenant might suddenly lash out and attack the mage. Anyone in the building could theoretically "be" Anurati.

- **Neighborhood:** If she lives in a small neighborhood, Anurati might actually be known to the locals. She probably doesn't attend religious services or block parties or the like, but the people living nearby might know "that lady who lives alone and never comes outside." Whether these people are willing to help the characters, though, is another matter.

Anurati is powerful enough to set up standing magical effects that cause xenophobia, meaning that the characters (and any other strangers) are downright unwelcome. The cabal might even suffer from spells that make the characters feel lost or keep bringing them back to the same intersection (leading out of the area, of course).

- **Rural:** Finally, Anurati might choose to live out of town, miles from any neighbor. This carries a decreased risk of Paradox, and so here she'll use vulgar spells to best advantage. She doesn't have human servants to call on, but any local wildlife obeys her whim.

## *The Sanctum and Hallow*

Anurati only uses a single room as her sanctum, the hub of her existence. She has the Sanctum Merit at five dots, but only a single dot is allocated to Size. That means that within her sanctum, she receives a +4 to Initiative and that the characters suffer a -4 modifier to break in. In addition, she has set up a ban involving Prime and Mind. This prevents mages with active spells from entering her home (not just her sanctum). The characters must either drop their spells before entering or dispel the ban (the Potency of which is 5).

No matter the structure of her home, her sanctum consists of a single room barely big enough to hold five people. The sanctum is sparsely furnished, containing only a wooden chair carved with representations of the Trimurti. The sanctum is located in the highest room of the house (or perhaps on a hill, if you decide Anurati lives in the country), and holds her Hallow. The Hallow's resonance is cold, biting like winter wind, and stepping into the area sends a chill up the characters' spines. Drawing Mana from her Hallow can chap a mage's lips or cause her to start shivering uncontrollably.

### **Anurati's Nimbus**

Several references have been made to Anurati's nimbus, but it is described here for easy reference. Anurati's nimbus is best described as "helplessness." When her nimbus is apparent, onlookers feel as though they are being swept along by a powerful current or tied down by unseen threads. When she uses powerful magic, the feeling becomes so intense that sensation decreases, as though onlookers' limbs move through wills not their own.

## *Strategy*

How does Anurati fight the characters? Remember that she believes that she has no free will, and that everything she does is at the behest of the Trimurti (that is, the Exarchs). As such, she might stand and fight even if she knows she will lose, simply because she has no say in the matter. Chillingly, even in the face of death or murder she doesn't exhibit fear, just a profound resignation.



The following are a few examples of the attitudes she might take toward the confrontation and the methods by which she might fight:

- **Bloodthirsty:** Anurati believes the characters have glimpsed too much of the Trimurti's plans and must die for their blasphemy. She makes use of spells such as Prime 2 "Unseen Spy," Mind 2 "Incognito Presence" (and possibly even Mind 3 "Imposter") to hide from the characters, Fate 3 "Lucky Coin" or "Superlative Luck" to make her knife strike more surely and of course Mind 3 "Psychic Assault" to simply pummel the characters into submission. She doesn't attack them all at once, but tries to use the Mind Arcanum to separate them. She attacks with her kukri knife, and takes called shots at the characters' throats. (See p. 165 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**; this attack imposes a -4 to her roll, but any damage inflicted is aggravated rather than lethal.)

- **Harbinger of the Exarchs:** Anurati believes that she is meant to convert these intrepid people to the Exarchs' service. To that end, she makes herself known to the characters, but imposes hideous visions of Pandemonium upon them. This is a Mind 5 spell that works similarly to the Mind 4 spell "Hallucination" (see p. 215 of **Mage: The Awakening**), but the spell affects two senses plus one for each success on the casting roll. Implausible actions on the part of the hallucinations do *not* give the targets a reflexive roll to end the affect. Anurati adds Target factors to the spell to affect all characters present. The visions are meant to break down the characters' wills and make them helpless before the might of the Exarchs. In this vision, the characters are tormented in the Realm of Pandemonium (as Anurati remembers it) and come face-to-face with their sins and fears. Mastigos characters might gain a positive modifier to resist this spell, but you might also forego the Resistance roll entirely and assume that Anurati successfully casts the spell, so as to give the characters the opportunity to con-

front the Exarchs, even in this metaphorical sense.

Another possibility here is that Anurati attempts to take control of the characters by using the Crown. After all, if they are interfering with the Exarchs' business and using the other Artifacts, the characters must be under the Exarchs' influence to some degree. The systems for the Crown can be found in the Introduction.

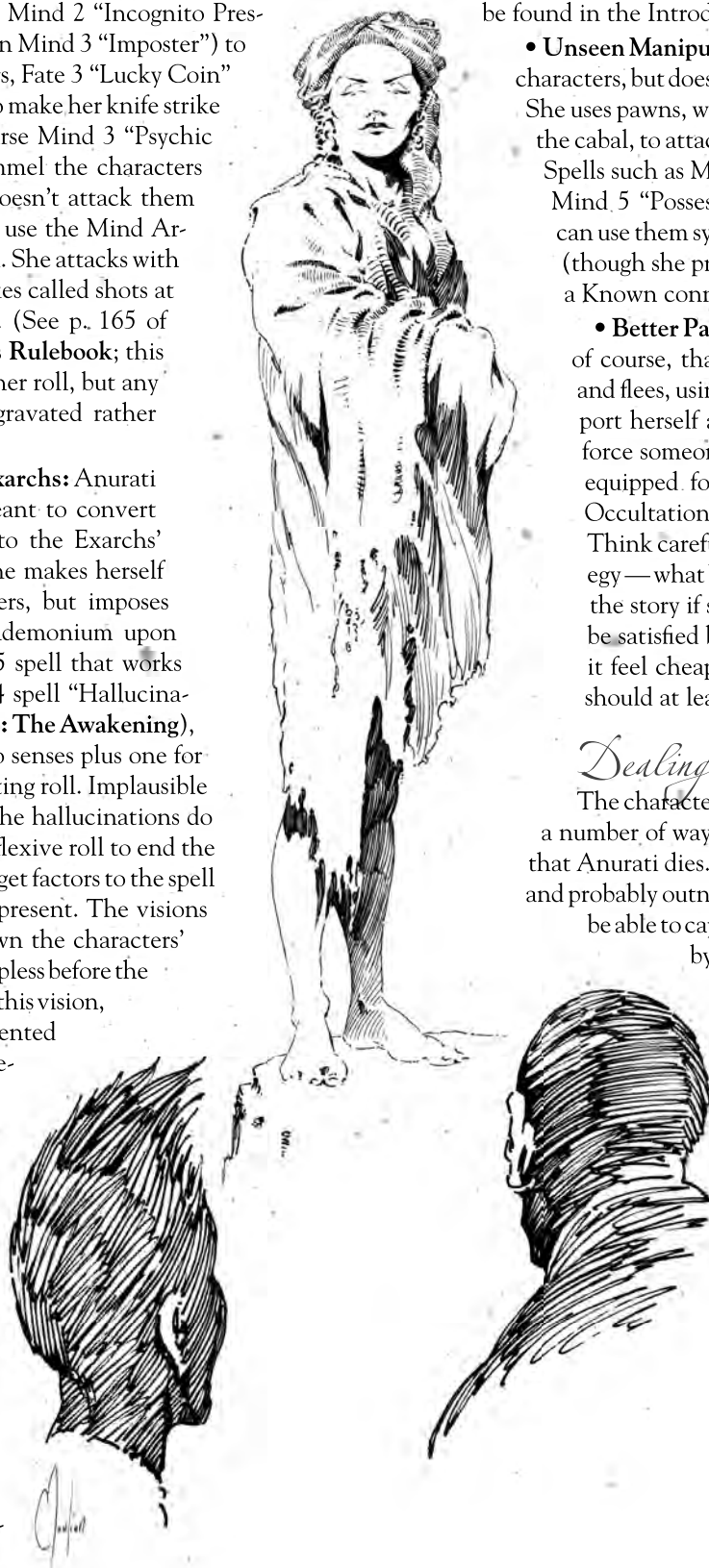
- **Unseen Manipulator:** Anurati wishes to kill the characters, but doesn't want to sully her own hands. She uses pawns, whether Storyteller characters or the cabal, to attack and hopefully slay the mages. Spells such as Mind 5 "Psychic Dominion" and Mind 5 "Possession" are useful here, and she can use them sympathetically within her home (though she probably doesn't have more than a Known connection to the characters).

- **Better Part of Valor:** It is always possible, of course, that Anurati gives up everything and flees, using the Space Arcanum to transport herself away or the Mind Arcanum to force someone into helping her. She is well equipped for this kind of thing, and her Occultation Merit makes her hard to track. Think carefully before employing this strategy — what kind of ending would it make for the story if she escaped? Would the players be satisfied by this turn of events, or would it feel cheap? In any event, the characters should at least obtain the Crown.

### *Dealing with Anurati*

The characters can end this confrontation in a number of ways. The most likely, of course, is that Anurati dies. For all her power, she is mortal and probably outnumbered. The characters might be able to capture her alive, though (possibly by drugging her — Epimetheus

would be happy to supply them with tranquilizers). What they do from there is up to them. Taking her before the Consilium to stand trial is possible, but extremely risky. How can the Consilium control such a manipulative and powerful mage? And what should they do with her? The Ascendants, if they have been made aware of her true role in their lives, argue for her immediate execution, but if they have not discovered how she has duped them, they probably work to free her.



Another possibility, of course, is that Remainder appears before the Consilium and tells what he knows about Them and how Anurati figures in. Somewhere in his paranoid ramblings lie clues to the truths of the Exarchs, perhaps, if the characters can corroborate what he says with what Anurati knows. Is this possible? Is it worth the effort?

## The Crown (Artifact .....)

Durability 4, Size 2, Structure 6

### Mana Capacity:

The Crown is a silk scarf worn over the head. The outside is an ash-gray color, but the inside depicts the Trimurti and the Dethroned Queen. Anurati usually wears the Crown, to keep it in her control, or hides it in her sanctum.

As contingent powers, the Crown can be used to cast the Mind 4 spell, "Telepathic Control," and the Mind 5 spell, "Possession." In addition, the wearer can use the Crown to cast a limited version of the Mind 5 spell, "Psychic Domination." This variation on the spell can only be used on subjects who have previously either served the Seers or the Exarchs willingly or who have been subject to potent spells (Mind 4+) by Seers or other followers of the Exarchs. That is, the Crown's "Psychic Domination" can make use of psychic trails blazed by the minions of the Exarchs, but it cannot create its own subjects.

Finally, the Crown can be used to usurp connections between characters who serve the Exarchs. While making Persuasion, Socialize, Subterfuge or Intimidate rolls against characters with Social Merits that tie them to the Seers of the Throne or other followers of the Exarchs, the wearer of the Crown gains bonus dice equal to the highest-rated Social Merit that ties the target to the hierarchy of the Exarchs. For example, a Pentacle mage wearing the Crown would gain a +3 bonus to an Intimidate dice pool made against a Storyteller character who was a three-dot Ally or Retainer of a Seer of the Throne.

The use of the Crown's powers (including learning spells from it) is an act of hubris demanding a degeneration roll for any mage of Wisdom 4 or higher.

Pentacle mages who have studied the myths of the Dethroned Queen question whether there is really any difference between a willworker who uses the powers of the Crown and a Seer

in service of the Exarchs. Is making use of the Seers' cold chains of control over its minions truly any less immoral than clamping on those Supernal shackles in the first place? Can't the Crown just be seen as a means of making any wearer into a slaver, just like the Exarchs and their cronies?

## *Dramatis Personae*

Below are the important characters that the cabal meet during this story. The characters likely to enter into combat with the players' cabal have full game traits, while the Ascendants do not. (The Storyteller can simply assume that they are considerably more powerful than the characters, enough so that direct violence isn't an option for dealing with the Ascendants.) Likewise, the mundane pawns encountered during the first part of this story don't merit traits; if need be, use the various characters described in the **World of Darkness Rulebook**. The characters are presented in the order in which they are encountered in the scenario as written.

### *Sasuha Usum, the Hungry Dragon*

This creature is a spirit summoned from an unknown part of the Shadow and bound into the Fallen World by the magic of Epimetheus. Normally, such creatures cannot remain Materialized for very long without a constant source of Essence, but this particular spirit's ban allows the spirit to interact with fleshy beings for extended periods of time.

*Sasuha Usum* is a spirit of hunger rather than a snake- or lizard-spirit. This spirit simply takes a reptilian form. The traits below reflect the spirit's Materialized body, but its spirit traits are listed in the sidebar.

**Description:** The Hungry Serpent measures nearly 20 feet in length. The spirit resembles a Komodo dragon in shape and mass, but is capable of absorbing its legs into its body and slithering along like a snake. The spirit's back is a deep indigo, while its underbelly fades to an ivory color with a faint blue sheen. Its eyes glitter like sapphires, and it regards everything it sees as possible food. It has long, black claws, which it can use as weapons or as climbing tools.

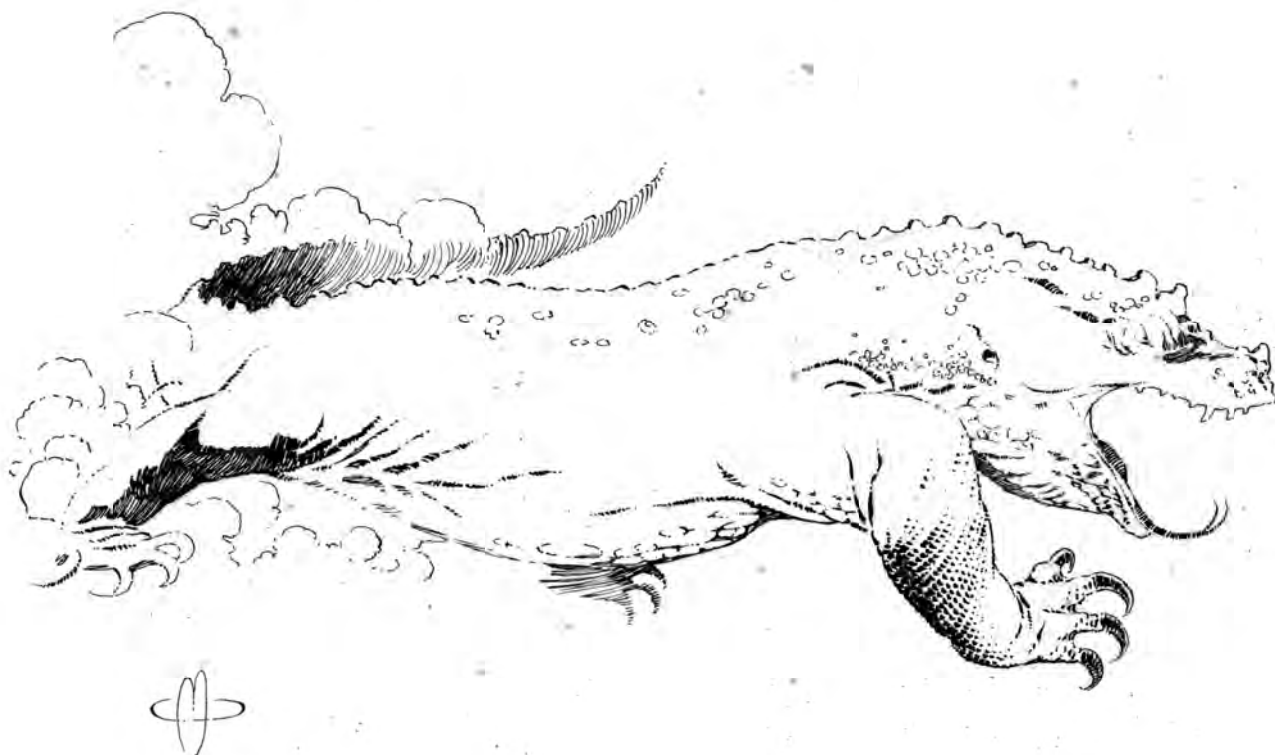
**Storytelling Hints:** This beast has been called to the Fallen World to hunt down the mages who interfered with Anurati Sahley's (and thus the Exarchs') plans. *Sasuha Usum* is under magical prohibition by Epimetheus to avoid eating people other than the mages, but struggles against this domination. If this mages don't destroy or banish this beast quickly, it abandons its hunt for them and starts feasting on Sleepers.

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 2

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 5, Dexterity 4, Stamina 4

**Social Attributes:** Presence 1, Manipulation 1, Composure 2

**Mental Skills:** None



**Physical Skills:** Athletics 3, Brawl 4, Stealth (Hiding in Shadows) 4, Survival (Hunting) 3

**Social Skills:** Intimidation 4

**Merits:** Fast Reflexes 2

**Willpower:** 4

**Health:** 10

**Initiative:** 8 (with Fast Reflexes)

**Defense:** 4

**Speed:** 15/17 (species factor 6 when running, 8 when slithering)

**Size:** 6

**Weapons/Attacks:**

Type	Damage	Dice Pool
Bite	2 (L)	10
Claw	3(L)	11

**Numina:** Harrow, Materialize, Material Vision, Wilds Sense

**Size:** 6

**Corpus:** 13

**Influence:** Hunger 3

**Numina:** Harrow, Materialize, Material Vision, Wilds Sense

**Ban:** If the Hungry Dragon Materializes and eats the flesh of an earthly being, the spirit cannot willingly enter Twilight again until the Hungry Dragon has digested this flesh. If the Hungry Dragon continues to eat flesh during this time (which, of course, is hard for this spirit to avoid, being a spirit of hunger), the duration of its earthly stay lengthens accordingly. While this might seem more advantage than ban, the creature is vulnerable to physical attack during this time, and many of its traits are slightly reduced (note the differences between its Materialized and spiritual form). If its earthly body dies, the spirit is destroyed.

## Sasuha Usum

Below are the Hungry Dragon's spirit traits, just in case they become relevant.

**Rank:** 3

**Attributes:** Power 7, Finesse 6, Resistance 7

**Willpower:** 14

**Essence:** 15 (max 20)

**Initiative:** 13

**Defense:** 7

**Speed:** 21

*Epimetheus*

**Quote:** Hmm. Didn't think of that.

**Background:** Delano Cade grew up fascinated by animals, reptiles in particular. He was expressing the desire to be a herpetologist before he reached middle school, and by the time he entered high school he had a small room in his basement filled with various specimens of snakes, lizards and turtles he'd found or rescued in the woods behind his house.

Unfortunately, he received some rude awakenings while pursuing his secondary education. He learned that herpetologists — scientists studying reptiles — needed a much more



solid base in the physical sciences than his aptitudes seemed to grant him. He also discovered that research was boring. Delano wanted to be working with the animals, preferably in their natural habitats, but his guidance counselors informed him that there was no future in it. So he dutifully went to college, majored in business and went about his life.

One night, while driving home from his job as a nameless office functionary, he saw what looked like an immense serpent slither off the road into an alleyway. Without thinking, he parked his car along the side of the street and followed the serpent. The snake led him on a harrowing chase through the city, which he realized had taken on the form of rocky foothills, steaming jungles and dense forests. When he finally caught the snake, it was coiled at the top of a rock formation. He climbed after the creature, only to realize he was staring down a creature that could easily swallow him. Delano fought off the creature and carved his name into the rock, and came to his senses standing near his car (which was in the process of being towed).

Now a Thyrsus mage, Delano took the name "Epimetheus" after the Greek Titan who fashioned all of the animals of the world, but lavished gifts upon them without sparing a thought to humanity. (His name means "afterthought.") Although tempted by the Mysterium, Delano found his calling in the Free Council, seeing the potential of humanity to find and catalog the magical creatures of the world.

**Description:** Epimetheus, now in his early 30s, wears a light beard and keeps his hair cut short. He has a tattoo of

the serpent from his Awakening across his chest and back, but when he wears a normal shirt, only the flicking tongue is visible above the neckline.

**Storytelling Hints:** Epimetheus is curious and impatient, which isn't an especially wise combination (as he is quick to admit). He tends to act first and consider later, and therefore has inadvertently allowed creatures into the material world from the Shadow in the past. The local Consilium granted him some status in part because his order doesn't have much of a presence in the area, but mostly because they feel Epimetheus should have some supervision. To his credit, Epimetheus is well aware of his shortcomings, not that this self-awareness seems to help.

**Dedicated Magical Tool:** A wooden wand with a fork at the end (used for catching small snakes)

**Real Name:** Delano Cade

**Path:** Thyrsus

**Order:** Free Council

**Legacy:** None

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 3

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3

**Social Attributes:** Presence 3, Manipulation 2, Composure 3

**Mental Skills:** Academics 2, Computer 1, Crafts 2, Investigation 2, Occult (Cryptozoology) 2

**Physical Skills:** Athletics 2, Drive 2, Firearms 2, Stealth 2, Survival (Tracking) 2, Weaponry 1

**Social Skills:** Animal Ken (Reptiles) 3, Empathy 1

**Merits:** Destiny (Shed Skin) 2, Hallow 4, High Speech, Occultation 1, Resources 1, Sanctum 4, Status (Consilium 1, Order 2)

**Willpower:** 6

**Wisdom:** 7

**Virtue:** Charity

**Vice:** Pride

**Initiative:** 5

**Defense:** 2

**Speed:** 9

**Health:** 8

**Gnosis:** 2

**Arcana:** Life 2, Prime 1, Spirit 3

**Rotes:** Life — Analyze Life (•); Prime — Dispel Magic (•), Supernal Vision (•); Spirit — Spirit Road (••)

**Mana/per turn:** 11/2

**Weapons/Attacks:**

Type	Dam.	Range	Clip	Special	Dice Pool
Rifle	N/A	200/ 400/ 800	1	Tranquilizer Darts (see p. 100)	4
Pistol	2	20/ 40/80	6	N/A	6

**Armor:** 3 ("Ephemeral Shield," Spirit ••)



## *The Ascendants*

The Silver Ladder mages calling themselves the Ascendants came together due to Anurati's influence. They fed into each other's egomania, each seeing omens in the others that "proved" that the three of them were meant to Ascend the Ladder, to direct the order as a whole and eventually to lead the Awakened. The Ascendants are vain and arrogant, but also powerful and extremely patient.

The three mages take their name from the descriptions Bede the Venerable gave for the three wise men who visited the baby Jesus. The Ascendants are rarely seen in the local Consilium, but everyone involved in the Consilium has heard of them (though not of their desires to usurp their order).

## *Melchior*

**Quote:** *The best companies, factories, even nations — they are not run by committee.*

**Background:** Born Wilhelm Goetz, Melchior was a "king," of sorts. The owner of a large German manufacturing company, he was responsible for great strides in metallurgy and efficiency in factories. His Awakening came when he was alone in his office one night, looking over his payroll. A former employee, one Melchior had fired in a round of cutbacks, snuck in and stabbed Melchior in the stomach. As he lay dying, his soul ventured to Stygia, and there, he said, he learned "the true value of gold."

He survived the encounter, but his assailant was never captured or punished (so far as the law knows). While still healing in the hospital, Wilhelm was approached by a member of the Silver Ladder, and invited to join the Vox Draconis. Wilhelm remained in Germany for a time, but found that the world of the Awakened held his imagination and attention now. He sold his business and left his country, immersing himself in his new life.

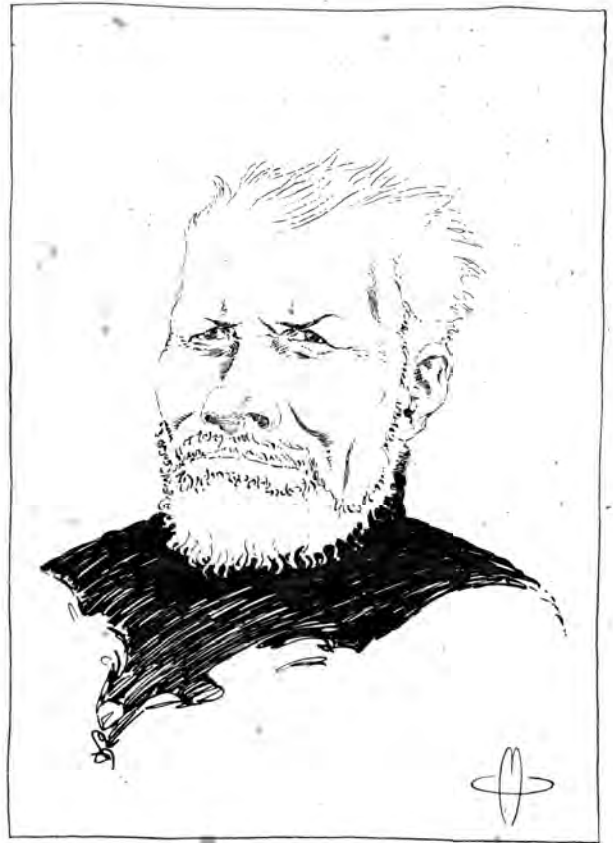
**Description:** Melchior is a stout man in his early 60s. He has a bushy white beard, though his hair still retains a few streaks of color. He has worked long and hard to lose his thick German accent, but it still comes through when he is agitated.

**Storytelling Hints:** Melchior likes to joke that he might be the Ascendant who looks most like a wizard, but he is a machinist and scientist first. He is a Master of Matter, but has relatively little expertise in the Arcanum of Death — he recognizes its importance, but often says that he'll learn all he needs to of death by and by. Melchior is, uncharacteristically of his Path, the most lighthearted and prone to humor of the Ascendants, but his humor has a morbid streak. He is quick to praise German engineering, especially in the automotive field, and considers bringing up the actions of his country during the Second World War to be highly crass.

**Path:** Moros

**Order:** Silver Ladder

**Abilities:**



**Mechanics (dice pool 8)** — Melchior might be getting on in years, but he has a savant-like understanding of machines, enhanced, of course, by his magic.

**Diplomacy (dice pool 7)** — Not as hot-headed as Casper or as dour as Balthasar, Melchior is the voice of the Ascendants.

## *Casper*

**Quote:** *It's important to remember your place. I've been reminded of mine forcibly in the past, and I'll have no problem reminding you of yours.*

**Background:** Barely 30 years old, Rick Lowery is a true product of elite society. He didn't have a job until he was out of college, and even then the job was just a post in his father's corporation. Rick had been bred for a life of unearned privilege, and had never been offered much option on the matter. His Awakening showed him the Aether, a realm where vice, indulgence and avarice were less than nothing and all that mattered was character and fortitude. Rick was found sorely lacking, and when he reappeared on Earth, he resolved to give everything up and earn his power.

Unfortunately, he had coasted through life for so long that he had little idea how to study, research and even learn. The Free Council, initially interested in his money and idealism, cooled when the order realized how much training he would require. The Guardians of the Veil assessed his high-society connections but discovered that he was thought of as a buffoon, if he was thought of at all. The Silver Ladder, however,

found someone willing to take him on, first teaching him basic cognition and learning skills and then the secrets of the Awakened. While Casper is by no means a Master mage, his understanding of Forces is impressive, and he shows great promise in learning rites.

His mentor, unfortunately, met with an unfortunate accident about a year back, and Casper met up with two other Ladder mages at the funeral. They agreed to teach the young man, and to introduce him to other important mages (but never to hold his hand — Casper insisted on making his own way).

**Description:** Casper is tall and athletic. He has ruddy skin, a smooth, young face and a shock of bright red hair. He seldom speaks, and listens raptly to anyone talking to him. The intensity of his gaze is off-putting to some. He favors tan or brown suits and wears a silver ring with an opal stone, his dedicated tool for the Forces Arcanum.

**Storytelling Hints:** Easily the weakest of the Ascendants in terms of magical power (though he is still an Adept of Forces and a Disciple of Prime), Casper knows a surprising number of rites and is an expert on the history of the Silver Ladder. He has a good memory for names and faces (a by-product of his long years observing high society drama), and though he wishes to make his way in the world on his strengths rather than others' weaknesses, Balthasar and Melchior are rapidly convincing him that the two notions often intersect. Casper is somewhat naïve, but is quite loyal to his cabal.

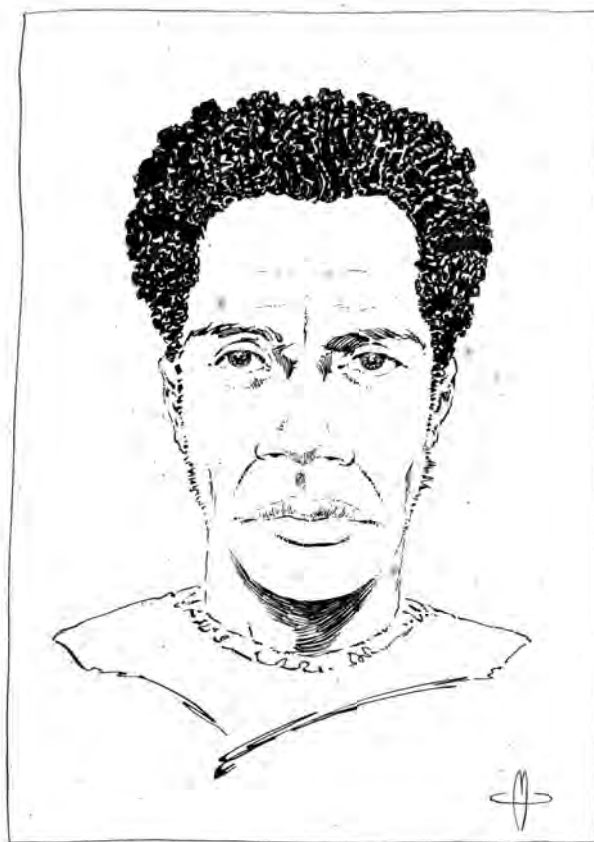
**Path:** Obrimos

**Order:** Silver Ladder

**Abilities:**

**Politics (dice pool 7)** — Casper can quickly size up who is in charge of an organization, who the movers-and-shakers are and whether the group is on the way up or on the way out.

**Sports (dice pool 6)** — Rick Lowery was never exactly an athlete, but he kept in shape, and since his Awakening has taken physical fitness much more seriously.



small to be human, but he saw that they carrying torches, and knew that they intended to burn his home. He followed them all night, never getting closer but never falling behind, until the sunlight struck them and turned them to stone. He arranged the stones into a pattern, one that resembled a Crown, and then started the long walk back to his farm, Awakened.

He left the farm shortly thereafter and let fate guide his wanderings. His travels showed him the gruesome side of both the World of Darkness and his home country. The racism his parents had battled was still very much alive, and when he saw it, he always felt a sickening chill down his spine, as though such hatred was counter to Fate's plans in some way. He stopped through several different cities, and during one of these stays he joined the Silver Ladder, reasoning that as a member of the Vox Draconis he could help the Awakened stay on fate's course. He wandered until he discovered Melchior. The two became fast friends, and they came to the conclusion that their order needed some fundamental changes. Martin, now called Balthasar, decided that he had finally found his destiny, and stayed with Melchior to form the Ascendants.

**Description:** Balthasar is tall and lean, with deep brown eyes and dark skin. Now in his 40s, his knees are slightly arthritic and his voice is gravelly from years of smoking, but his hands are as nimble as ever. He makes his own clothes and rolls his own cigarettes, saying that he likes to be as involved as possible in his own life (despite this, though, he isn't much of a cook).

## Balthasar

**Quote:** *When the thread snaps, son, we'll all take a tumble.*

**Background:** Martin King Todd was born in Mississippi, the son of civil rights activists. His life was fraught with tragedy from the very beginning. His mother died in a house fire when he was eight years old, and his father was sent to prison for chasing down and beating the arsonist who set the fire. Martin went to live with his cousins in the country, far from the noise and the chaos of the movement. (His extended family wasn't interested in "all that stuff about buses and drinking fountains," and they shushed him when he brought it up.)

Martin didn't attend college, but learned several different trades from his relatives. He was just as capable at sewing and stitching as he was at farming and gardening, and his nimble hands always had work to do. One night, the day before his 21st birthday, he was standing outside his barn having a cigarette when he saw three tiny creatures sneaking out into the fields. They looked too

**Storytelling Hints:** Balthasar is dour, stern and critical of everything. Similar to his younger cohort Casper, Balthasar is very interested in making sure everything and everyone are kept in their proper places, but while Casper feels this is part of a Divine order, Balthasar reckons it has more to do with fate. He sees the world hanging in a delicate balance, and believes that this balance can be upset by any of a number of improper actions. If the balance falls, the world descends farther into chaos. On particularly pessimistic days, Balthasar laments that the balance has *already* fallen and that nothing matters, but Melchior is usually able to cheer up his friend.

Balthasar's magic is subtle, but extremely potent. He is a Master of Fate and Time (though he specializes in the divinatory aspects of the Time Arcanum, rather than manipulating and dilating it) and has some knowledge of the Death and Life Arcana as well.

**Path:** Acanthus

**Order:** Silver Ladder

**Abilities:**

**Sewing (dice pool 8)** — While he doesn't weave the fabric, Balthasar can take a few yards of cloth and make a shirt in just over an hour (less if he uses magic).

**Firearms (dice pool 6)** — His eyes aren't what they used to be, but back on the farm, when the family wanted wild rabbit for dinner they'd always tell Balthasar to go hunting.

### *Anurati Sahley*

**Quote:** *There is nothing to say.*

**Background:** Born in India to a native woman and an American traveler, Anurati Sahley never knew her father. He was shot dead on the streets of Madras while on a trip, and the young girl never discovered why. Her mother, until then a vibrant and loving woman, withdrew from the world following her husband's death and imparted a grim fatalism to Anurati. This attitude became very much a part of her identity; she was not sullen or depressed, but simply acquiescent. She viewed misfortune, death and entropy as the natural state of things, and as she watched her village degrade over time, it seemed that she was right. When a hurricane tore her town to pieces, killing everyone she had ever known, including her mother, she stood stoically as the storm raged around her. In the eye of the hurricane, she found an iron tower, with steps and handholds already present. Dutifully, she climbed, and found her name already etched into the metal at the top. Anurati was a servant of a greater power, and she had no choice but to accept it.

Anurati eventually found membership in a small sect of mages in northern India who had long since broken with Atlantean tradition. They believed that the Trimurti, the triad of the Hindu gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, looked down from the Supernal Realms and occasionally chose mortals to do the gods' bidding in the Fallen World. These mages were the keepers of a sacred artifact — a Crown that allowed complete control of those mortals selected by the Trimurti. These mages were aware of the myth of Atlantis

and accepted it to a degree (the Churning of the Ocean of Hindu myth dovetailed nicely with the destruction of the Celestial Ladder in some respects), and viewed the Trimurti in the same roles that Atlantean mages viewed the Exarchs. These mages, however, venerated these celestial beings rather than (or in addition to) fearing them.

They taught Anurati to control her magic, and she found that she was adept at passing unnoticed, manipulating the minds of others so that they did not see her. All the while, though, she felt that something was watching her, something that her teachers could never understand. When the time was right, she left, taking the Crown with her, and the Indian mages retained no memory of her.

She came to America and briefly considered taking up with one of the five orders, but then decided she had no need of them. Likewise, she never bothered to seek out the Seers of the Throne. She answered only to the Trimurti.

Over time, Anurati came to believe that the world was ultimately doomed. She believed that Shiva the Destroyer would emerge from Pandemonium to destroy the Fallen World, and that all matters of true importance took place in the Supernal. That the Trimurti guided her, then, gave her a supreme sense of importance, but her fatalistic attitude toward the rest of the world made her dangerous and eventually cost her Wisdom and sanity. She now waits in the center of her web of intrigue, rarely leaving her sanctum, controlling her pawns with the Crown of the Dethroned Queen.



**Description:** Anurati is a sullen Indian woman in her late 40s. She is slightly overweight and keeps her black hair cut short, and dresses in faded saris. She never makes eye contact with people, and usually speaks in a surprisingly audible whisper.

**Storytelling Hints:** Anurati believes with all her heart that she is doing the will of the Trimurti, and, more importantly, that she is unable to do *anything else*. Mortals are expendable, useful tools but nothing more. Mages, however, have a role to play in the Trimurti's plans, and Anurati tries to see to it that mages act appropriately. She is contemptuous of mages who belong to the five orders, but has discovered that they can usually be manipulated given time and patience. She has never taken a shadow name, believing that the one she found etched into the iron tower (her birth name) is the only one the Trimurti wishes her to use.

**Dedicated Magical Tool:** A kukri knife

**Real Name:** Anurati Sahley

**Path:** Mastigos

**Order:** None

**Legacy:** None

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 4, Wits 3, Resolve 3

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

**Social Attributes:** Presence 1, Manipulation 5, Composure 3

**Mental Skills:** Academics (Hindu) 3, Crafts 2, Investigation 2, Occult 4, Politics 1

**Physical Skills:** Firearms 1, Stealth (Hiding in Plain Sight) 4, Weaponry (Kukri) 3

**Social Skills:** Intimidation (Creepy) 2, Persuasion 1, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 4

**Merits:** Destiny (Bane: The Crown) 4, Fast Reflexes 2, Hallow 2, Occultation 5, Sanctum 5

**Willpower:** 6

**Wisdom:** 3

**Virtue:** Faith

**Vice:** Pride

**Initiative:** 8 (with Fast Reflexes)

**Defense:** 3

**Speed:** 10

**Health:** 7

**Gnosis:** 4

**Arcana:** Fate 3, Forces 1, Mind 5, Prime 2, Space 3

**Notes:** *Fate* — Interconnections (•), Occlude Destiny (••); *Mind* — Third Eye (•), Incognito Presence (••), Mental Shield (••), Misperceptions (••), Voice From Afar (••), Universal Language (•••), Breach the Vault of Memory (••••), Telepathic Control (••••); *Prime* — Transform Aura (••), Unseen Spy (••); *Space* — Spatial Map (•), Scrying (••), Ward (••), Destroy Threads (••)

**Mana/per turn:** 13/4

**Weapons/Attacks:**

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Kukri	1L	1	N/A	7

**Armor:** 5 ("Misperceptions," Mind ••)

**Magic Shield:** 2 (Prime ••)

*Remainder*

**Quote:** *They're everywhere. They're inside us. It's our own fault for letting them in.*

**Background:** Remainder likes to say that he Awakened before he was born, but he's probably exaggerating. It is true, though, that he's only 16 and that he uses magic as though he's been a mage for a long time. He has never belonged to an order, and he doesn't have any interest in joining one. He stays on the run, forever looking over his shoulder for Them.

What They are, he says, is too terrible to name. Remainder says that as a child, he could see Them in churches, schools, offices and other such halls of power, but also in unlikely places such as packs of stray dogs, street gangs and even marching bands. Organization, structure and leadership were Their hiding places and faith was Their food and drink. Remainder always managed to stay one step ahead, but he admits to doing some awful things in order to keep his freedom. (Exactly what, he won't say, but when asked about his past, his right eye twitches uncontrollably and he compulsively wipes his hands on his shirt.)

Remainder refuses to let any other mage cast a spell on him, protective or otherwise. Although he is young, he has honed his magical prowess to a fine point, specializing in protecting himself and escaping from pursuers (real or imagined). No one who has met him, however, has ever seen any trace of Them, which Remainder says only makes sense. "If you see Them," he mutters, "it's because you're about to join them or about to die."

**Description:** Remainder is a skinny 16-year-old boy. He has brown hair down to his shoulders and, despite living on the road, stays quite clean. He wears tattered jeans, faded T-shirts and a denim jacket with an impossible number of pockets.

**Storytelling Hints:** Remainder is fanatical about keeping his mundane identity a secret. His shadow name, he says, is "Remainder" because he is the last surviving member of his family — They killed all of his relatives. Being so young, he has almost no paper trail and so is much harder to track through normal means than adult mages, and he goes to great lengths to avoid standing out. He distrusts other mages, but at the same time he wants to make sure that They don't get Their hooks into the Awakened. (Remainder doesn't trust the orders or Consilii as a whole, but he sometimes works with individual cabals.)

**Dedicated Magical Tool:** A pocket knife with a silver casing (stolen from a pawn shop; the engraving reads "To Mike, We Are So Proud")

**Real Name:** William Vane

**Path:** Acanthus

**Order:** None

**Legacy:** None

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 4, Resolve 3





**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 1

**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

**Mental Skills:** Academics 1, Computer 2, Crafts (Whittling) 2, Occult 2

**Physical Skills:** Athletics (Sprinting) 2, Brawl 1, Firearms 1, Larceny 3, Stealth 3, Survival (City) 1, Weaponry 1

**Social Skills:** Persuasion 1, Streetwise 3

**Merits:** Destiny (Bane: Badges) 1, Fast Reflexes 2, Fleet of Foot 2, Fresh Start

**Willpower:** 5

**Wisdom:** 6

**Virtue:** Hope

**Vice:** Greed

**Initiative:** 8 (with Fast Reflexes)

**Defense:** 3

**Speed:** 12 (with Fleet of Foot)

**Health:** 6

**Gnosis:** 3

**Arcana:** Fate 2, Mind 2, Prime 2, Time 2

**Rotes:** Fate – Sense "Them" (see sidebar) (•)

**Mana/per turn:** 12/3

**Weapons/Attacks:**

Type	Damage	Size	Special	Dice Pool
Knife	1L	1	N/A	4

**Armor:** 2 ("Temporal Dodge," Time ••)

**Magic Shield:** 2 (Prime ••)

### Sense Them

Remainder's one and only rote, which he created himself using the Fate Arcana through long hours of intense work and obsession, allows him to sense the machinations of the beings he refers to simply as "Them." This spell allows him to see pawns and works of the Exarchs, exactly as described for the Ring (see p. 23).

Using this rote requires a roll of Wits + Streetwise + Fate. Casting the spell is an act of Hubris just as using the Ring is, but since Remainder's Wisdom is below 7, he does not risk degeneration for it.



# CHAPTER FIVE: THE THRONE

*Gods work within the Fallen World we see,  
Our sharper eyes can see behind their lies.*

*Soulless slaves protect them ceaselessly.  
The virtuous oppose them in disguise.*

*Though higher powers enslave a world asleep,  
We shatter chains that fallen gods have wrought.*

*Awakening lost souls trapped in the deep  
We reign despite the misery they've brought.*

*Arise to Heaven! We have eyes to see  
Beyond the threshold of eternity.*

*GODS SOULLESS THOUGH  
AWAKENING ARISE*



**Courage, the highest gift, that scorns to bend, To mean devices for a sordid end. Courage, an independent spark from Heaven's bright throne, By which the soul stands raised, triumphant high, alone. Great in itself, not praises of the crowd, Above all vice, it stoops not to be proud. Courage, the mighty attribute of powers above, By which those great in war, are great in love. The spring of all brave acts is seated here, As falsehoods draw their sordid birth from fear.**

**— George Farquhar**

This story, "The Throne," begins when all four Artifacts from the previous adventures — the regalia of the Dethroned Queen — have been discovered. The story that follows introduces the fifth and final Artifact, one that is more closely guarded than any of the others. The characters' cabal has dealt with many adversaries — including acolytes, cultists and slaves of the Exarchs — but the characters' final adversaries are Seers of the Throne. In fact, they're more than just a single pylon or cabal of mages. They're part of a Seer Ministry, an alliance of pylons that oversees the coastline of a continent.

The mastermind who rules this vast conspiracy is reverently addressed as a Minister of Mind, but only on the rare occasions when a subservient Seer dares enter the Minister's domain. Hidden within an elaborate labyrinth of modern security, he watches over a power base that spans several cities. Insouciantly, he watches the world as he sits upon the very Throne of the Dethroned Queen. Perhaps it's only a matter of time before he's dethroned as well. Events have been set in motion, and if someone else cannot usurp his power and take his place upon the Throne, he will do everything he can to seize the revealed Artifacts so that he can become powerful enough to assault the Heavens.

His chances of success depend on how well the characters have hunted down the remaining regalia. Although his sanctum lies at the heart of the action, the characters are the center of the story.

### *Destiny and Eternity*

Forces are conspiring to draw the first four relics together — not merely by design, but by Destiny itself. The Dethroned Queen aspires to do more than ascend to the Heavens. As a visionary, she wanted to blaze a trail that others could follow. Armed with magical weapons and defenses against the Exarchs, she plotted to rage against the Heavens, opposing the influence of ancient mages in the Fallen World. Before she passed on to a higher state of being, however, she took steps to ensure that others would take up the weapons she set aside — and join her in her crusade. She fervently believes that the Exarchs are real, and she's ready to go to war against the gods.

Similar to many other mages, this Atlantean Queen held to the belief that this world was only the first step of a soul's larger journey. According to her philosophy, anyone who followed her example would "Ascend" and stand upon the threshold of eternity. The "Ascended mage" would then face a choice:

she could either use this higher state of being to direct the affairs of lesser mages or she could eventually merge with the infinite, communing with a cosmos far beyond the world we know. Not everyone shares her belief, however. Even within her own court, dispute over the fate of Ascended mages led to a bitter argument — a debate that lives on today.

The Dethroned Queen did more than oversee the creation of her regalia. Using Atlantean magics, she ensured that her vision would live beyond her death. As many dying priests during the last days of Atlantis did, she summoned an Ananke — a spirit of destiny — to ensure others would follow her path. Even after the events of the last four chapters, it is only a matter of time before one mage possesses all five Artifacts. The cabal members of your chronicle should do everything they can to make sure they influence that outcome, making sure they the regalia ends up in the right hands — even if that means using the Artifacts' power for the sake of their own cabal.

Ultimately, the events of this book cannot conclude until all of the Artifacts are present in the same place. Individually, they are weapons and defenses against the Exarchs, but collectively, the Artifacts are more than the sum of their parts. With all five Artifacts — the complete set of regalia — a wise or ambitious mage can recreate the final ritual of the Dethroned Queen. It is an elaborate High Ritual, an ultimate act of Hubris, an act considered by many to be a path to the loftiest of goals. A lost soul who could gather the Artifacts together would be prepared for Ascension, ready to rise to the Heavens. The story below, as told by you and your troupe, determines who that lucky mage is, and what happens when then aspirant succeeds — or fails.

### *Theme*

In any **Mage** adventure, power can corrupt the unwary. Although one recurring theme in this game is "power corrupts," there's more to its meaning than that venerable saying. The heroes of this chronicle have overcome supernatural forces to hunt down the Artifacts, but along the way, the characters have been tempted with opportunities to actually use the objects. Because of this, the characters have risked becoming the very evils they would seek to oppose or destroy. The theme is really this, then: *anyone who opposes monsters may eventually become monstrous*. Fear of the Exarchs motivates many rivals who seek the Artifacts, but any who would use their power runs the risk of becoming as corrupt as the legendary Exarchs.



Throughout this story, the characters have had to deal with a great deal of ambiguity regarding the unseen masters of the Cosmos. Each story in this book has been written to accommodate two disparate points of view. In some chronicles based on this book, it is entirely possible that the Exarchs are mythical, and that there are no ultimate forces dominating reality as we know it. In other interpretations, cosmic forces beyond our ken use lesser creatures and thralls in their unending conflicts — for them, the world as a chessboard for their master strategies. For the sake of the story, *you*, as the Storyteller, must decide which is correct in your chronicle.

Whether the Exarchs are real or not, by the time *someone* gathers the regalia together and prepares the “ritual of Ascension,” that brave soul is ready to rise to the Heavens. If the stories of the Exarchs really are myths and legends, the possessor of the Queen’s regalia may become powerful enough to watch over reality, or at least understand the forces that ultimately guide it. That aspirant would become a god (or at least a prophet), making the myths true. If Oracles and Exarchs are real, on the other hand, that lost soul may face the challenge of encountering them firsthand.

All magic carries risk. If this ritualist has risen to power through treacherous and devious tactics, he can become as corrupt, as inhuman, as soulless as the very forces he would seek to oppose or destroy. Power certainly does corrupt, and in this final chapter, does so on a scale that would torment the gods — if they even exist.

### *Mood*

Two moods should resonate throughout this final chapter. The first is *menace*. The Throne of the Exarchs is hidden within a Seer Minister’s sanctum. Getting to the heart of it is the hardest part of this adventure. Considering the path the characters have blazed through Creation, their list of enemies is no doubt extensive. Yet the characters’ ultimate adversary wields considerably more power — perhaps even enough to destroy these other rivals to the Throne.

If the characters haven’t seized or can’t guard the first four relics, the Ministry can hunt down and destroy the forces that have the Artifact — which makes the Ministry more menacing each time it exerts this power. The characters cannot hide from the Ministry’s minions forever, and this very sense of menace should compel the characters to act.

Lest their courage falter, another force is working to resolve these events. The final chapter is influenced by *destiny*, acting in accordance with the legend of the Dethroned Queen. During the adventure’s penultimate events, an Ananke — a spirit of destiny detailed in the **Mage: The Awakening** — sets events in motion that will ensure the fulfillment of the Queen’s wishes. Even master mages describe the workings of the goddess Ananke and her avatars with a sense of grandeur, hinting at forces that are beyond even the powers of mages to master. If the characters haven’t seized the first four Artifacts, and they aren’t ready for this adventure, the Ananke could conceivably guide the cabal to recover the Artifacts. Once the first four have been discovered, she could even aid them

when they make the final assault on the Minister’s sanctum. With this device, you can balance the difficulty of the story for the abilities of your characters.

These two forces — the menacing Ministry and the Ananke’s destiny — collide before the story is over. The cabal is caught in the middle. Within the sanctum, the Ministry is conditioning and directing its minions, aiding one leader in his ascent to even greater power. Outside the sanctum, the Ananke works to recreate the events needed to gather the Dethroned Queen’s regalia. The story that results could serve as the end of a dramatic chronicle — or the birth of a new one. There is no one official “canonical” outcome dictated by this book. Your players’ decisions and actions tip the balance of this conflict, for better or worse.

### *A Chronicle of Ascension*

Any of the previous four adventures can be played independently — the reward for doing so is a powerful Artifact that can defend a cabal against the Exarchs (or at the very least, forces believed to be the Exarchs). Anyone ambitious enough to run all four stories can simply run them in sequence, bolting for the final adventure as the characters rack up experience. An alternative is running these stories in the background of a much more elaborate chronicle. The events of the last four chapters may resolve in a very direct fashion, or they may unfold over many months of intrigue, investigation and conflict.

Either approach is perfectly valid, of course. You might choose to rush through all four stories in quick succession, as the players’ cabal sequesters the regalia of the Dethroned Queen in secure locations. If you’re willing to invest the time, you could instead play out conflicts in the story to the fullest, as rival factions from previous chapters return to seize unguarded relics, former allies steal Artifacts in carefully timed acts of betrayal and the elders of the characters’ Consilium debate the morality of the characters’ actions.

Unlike the last four chapters, this adventure is dependent on the previous four. It cannot begin until the characters have at least discovered all of the regalia, but you can lay the foundation for this story during the events of previous chapters. By the time this part of the chronicle concludes, destiny — as the Ananke defines it — ensures that *someone* will perform the Queen’s High Ritual.

If the cabal members are ambitious, they can seize all five Artifacts and perform the ritual themselves — but the risk is great enough that they may want to wait until their Gnosis and Wisdom are up to the task. If the cabal members are industrious, they may instead find a more powerful mage to perform the ritual, assisting in the resolution of the ritual and the fulfillment of destiny.

Keep in mind that there is a third option: their adversary may find a way to gather all five Artifacts together and perform the ritual himself. This is not an option to be taken lightly. The Minister should not merely succeed through convenient plot devices. As part of the menacing mood, the Minister

should succeed when the characters have failed or had lapses in judgment. If they do not work to defend the Artifacts, the Minister should exploit their oversight. If they use all four of their Artifacts to assault the Minister's stronghold, they should realize the risk in using them. The story is much easier to resolve if the characters use the regalia to assault this pawn of the Exarchs — especially since he prefers that they bring the regalia to him.

This last option, in which the Minister is scheming to perform the final ritual — becomes somewhat more feasible if the characters have failed in any of the previous stories. If you run the type of story in which different factions fight over these treasures, you should still work toward a resolution in which all five Artifacts are in the same place. The Ministry is powerful enough that it could crush a minor cabal that's taken an Artifact away from the characters. If you run with this contingency, the characters should be able to discover that the Minister has recovered their lost Artifact.

With any option you take, the Ministry is here to compel the characters to act. If they do not actively work to assemble the fragments of the puzzle, the story can be altered so that they're racing against time to stop the Minister from solving the puzzle first. Much of this adventure describes conflicts and resources around and inside the sanctum, but how you use them is ultimately up to you.

## *Prelude: On the Street Where You Live*

In the first scene of this adventure, a lone thrall learns enough about the characters to confirm that they have at least one of the Artifacts. Once alerted to the truth, the Ministry that controls him sends other thralls into the surrounding neighborhood. Just as several of the other adversaries in this book, the Minister covets the regalia of the Dethroned Queen, and he works to seize all the Artifacts for his own ends.

No matter where the characters have hidden, the minions of the Ministry can eventually find the cabal. After the cabal has found the first four Artifacts, you'll need to decide when you're ready to introduce this final adversary. The entry of the Ministry's minions into the story should be subtle, since their actions do not directly threaten the characters (at least, not at first). Instead, the Minister's minions begin by infiltrating the neighborhood around the characters — one thrall at a time.

By the time you're ready for the final chapter, the characters have probably decided where they're keeping the Artifacts they've recovered. An obvious location would be their sanctum, but it's just as possible that they've found a more powerful ally they can trust to guard the items, such as a mentor, a sympathetic ally on the Consilium or soldiers from the Adamantine Arrow trained in protecting such treasures. Brave or mistrustful characters could decide to always keep the Artifacts on hand, in case they're needed. Once the Minister learns the locations of the Artifacts, he sends thralls to observe allies guarding the regalia — and

uses the same tactics against the characters, since their fate is tied to their use of the Artifacts.

Simple events can inspire paranoia, if they're timed correctly. Before you lead into Scene One, spend a little time detailing the characters' mundane surroundings. A very direct way would be the same kind of Prelude technique gamers should be used to by now: ask each player a question about the neighborhood surrounding the characters' sanctum or where the Artifacts are kept. Where do they buy their groceries? Does anyone go to a video store? Do they have social contact with people who are oblivious to the supernatural? The characters can't spend all their time hiding inside the sanctum, so where do they go when they're outside it? If you have more time, you can actually seed bystanders and innocents who frequent these places during the course of the previous adventure. The more time you take to sow this sense of security, the more you'll reap in Scene One.

Next, choose a seemingly innocent Sleeper in the nearby neighborhood, someone struggling who appears somewhat virtuous. This could be a friendly neighbor who's willing to engage a mage in casual conversation, despite the strange events that take place around her. Perhaps it's a figure in a minor position of authority, such as a policeman who makes a patrol down the nearest street from time to time. It may even be a sympathetic soul who's been part of the chronicle for a while, such as the bartender at the bar where one of the character drinks or a young kid who looks up to the suspiciously heroic cabal. This works even better if you choose someone your characters (and players) like and trust. We'll call this tool of your story "the Innocent." Choose carefully, since that thrall features prominently in Scene One. Once you've found this pawn of the Exarchs, you're ready to begin.

## *Scene One: Feint and Invitation*

The adventure begins with a bit of misdirection. A trusted associate from the local Consilium approaches the characters about a spirit at work in their neighborhood. The problem seems almost trivial compared to the events of the last few adventures: an animal-spirit has stolen an enchanted dagger from the home of a would-be witch. The woman is a Sleeper who firmly believes that she can practice magic, but she's as oblivious to the true sorcery mages practice as any other ordinary person. This kind of minor task is certainly beneath the powers of a Master mage, so anyone with a minor amount of political insight (or even a successful Wits + Politics roll) should see this as an easy way to gain favor.

Any experienced group of mages should be ready for this sort of dilemma. After examining the area where the item was stolen, Time magic can observe when the theft happened, Spirit magic can track the mischievous ephemera's footprints, Fate magic can predict where it might have gone and so on. Any contact with evidence can lead to an extended Wits + Occult roll to observe the spirit's resonance and track it. (Each roll requires 10 minutes, and 10 successes are required, but concluding these rolls isn't crucial to the story.) If the mages

are familiar with the events of *Gloria Mundi*, they should have this routine down by now, since that adventure involved tracking down seven Vice-spirits from a ritual gone awry. For a supernatural investigation, this is routine practice.

The particulars of the investigation are peripheral to this adventure — any animal-spirit will do, since it seized the “magic item” out of curiosity. By running this scene, you’re reminding the characters of the tactics they use to track down their enemies. And there’s something more important here: someone is spying on the mages throughout this investigation. That someone is the Innocent — an unwitting pawn of a more powerful adversary. He has an ordinary job, but no skills for being stealthy or discreet. Any set of stats from **Mage: The Awakening** should do.

At first, any sightings of this Innocent appear to be coincidence, but he has an uncanny ability to appear when he might witness a suspicious event or act of magic. If the characters confront the witness, his demeanor should be different from what they’re used to seeing. As established in the prelude, he’s normally friendly, but now he seems different. He seems to lack his usual energy, and his emotions are subdued. Despite this, he seems motivated, even fearful, in the face of the unknown. Even a Sleeper investigator of the supernatural would suspect that something is amiss. A Wits + Empathy roll confirms that this bystander “doesn’t seem like himself.” A Wits + Subterfuge roll reveals that some of his mannerisms are slightly . . . different, almost as though he’s behaving as a stranger.

Again, the cabal’s tactics for dealing with such events should be routine by now. Mage Sight reveals mental domination, as though someone is using Mind and Space to manipulate the puppet from afar. From there, the characters can track the mage who’s controlling the Innocent much as they would track the animal-spirit. The rites used to compel the Innocent aren’t terribly subtle; in fact, the controller has done nothing to hide his presence. Presumably, this is because he lacks skill, but in actuality, it’s because this invitation is a trap.

By studying the subject more closely to gain a feeling for the magic’s resonance, even a novice mage should be able to deduce that the Innocent’s controller is a wealthy individual well schooled in Mind magic: An extended use of Wits + Occult can track down the controller, leading to the location detailed in Scene Two. This otherwise routine investigation should take on a more sinister aspect if one of the characters uses the Ring from Chapter One. This puppet is being controlled by an agent of the Exarchs (or if you prefer, the agency this Artifact is designed to measure).

The Innocent is oblivious to any higher or sinister powers controlling him. He claims that he’s just curious about what his neighbors are doing, and it’s entirely by accident that he keeps running into them. More direct confrontation of this puppet reveals that it isn’t just his mind that’s been affected — his life has also gone through a few changes. A casual observation roll (most likely Wits + Composure) tips off an investigator that the puppet has a valuable item he

didn’t before, such as a new watch, a PDA, an MP3 player or a piece of jewelry.

Even more aggressive investigation could reveal that the puppet has a large sum of money in his wallet, or that the car he was driving a week ago has been repaired, detailed and improved with a better sound system and interior. A Sleeper observer would deduce that the person has just come into some money, or perhaps a new job. A mage, on the other hand, can tell that every one of these new items is “flavored” by the same resonance. Through a little Fate magic, the puppet’s lifestyle has improved — but at the cost of his emotion, his vibrancy and a little bit of his identity. He’s been sold out to unseen masters.

The Innocent witness persists in watching the characters from afar, even if the characters insist that he should stop. Nothing short of a restraining order or violence (perhaps the type that would affect Morality or Wisdom) can dissuade this thrall from following them. Even then, direct confrontation only stalls this puppet until Scene Two. While the characters watch this puppet dance at the behest of his masters, you should already be familiar with the mastermind pulling the strings.

### *The Ministry of Mammon*

The Ministry that has dispatched this thrall — and others similar to him later in the story — has a well-known hunger for material wealth. While the highest echelons of the order deal with more spiritual concerns, the minions who serve it are distracted by material desires. Ministries exist for each of the major Arcana, and this one excels at manipulating and preying upon lesser creatures by using Mind magic. To the outside world, the fronts that hide their sanctums are part of a tangled network of successful businesses. Secretly, Mind magic augments their ability to exploit, accumulate and suborn. Within their own ranks, and among the greater conspiracies of Seers, this Ministry is known as Mammon.

The Ministry of Mammon has recruited many powerful Mind mages, but also includes several mages well versed in the Space Arcanum. Throughout the events of the previous chapters, we can assume these insightful mages have been doing their own research into the legend of the Dethroned Queen. In theory, the more they learn about the Queen’s regalia, the greater their sympathy is to those unique Artifacts — and the greater the chance that they can scry the location of each one with the Space Arcanum.

If the characters have been less than discreet in their pursuit of the first four Artifacts, Mammon might have already learned of their activities, which means its minions may decide to scry the location of the characters instead. A magical investigator could then track down the Artifacts by watching your players’ cabal. Even if a mage using Space has a slim chance of finding a unique Artifact (such as when he’s reduced to a single chance die on his casting roll), he can continue to rework the same rituals until he learns the locations of the regalia.

As usual, you should give the characters a chance to notice when they're being observed with Space magic, particularly when they're using rites such as "Third Eye." Whether you want to roll dice or just assume that this surveillance succeeds, you should give the cabal members a chance to notice that they're being watched. If they manage to complete their busy work tracking down the spirit and enchanted dagger, you may want to throw in a complication from a previous adventure, but, eventually, you should tip them off to this violation of their privacy. The Mammon mages scrying the characters can afford to take the risk of discovery, since the Ministry's goal is to lure the characters — and the Artifacts they possess — to the Minister's sanctum.

### *Scene Two: A Little B & E*

If the Artifacts are being kept somewhere away from the cabal's sanctum, a similar encounter occurs near each location where an Artifact is kept. Innocents become watchdogs. The characters shouldn't know that these other locations are being harassed unless they contact a mage near each of the Artifacts. For instance, a cabal that has asked some mages of the Adamantine Arrow to guard the Crown of the Exarchs might decide to check in with their associates — only to find that someone nondescript (such as the guy who delivers Chinese food to them or the mail carrier who drops off their deliveries) has been snooping around where they work. Mammon's minions controlling these puppets have taken a few precautions against being traced, such as casting obfuscative spells and relying on subtle mages (such as those with the Occultation Merit). However, Mammon's minions don't use those same precautions when spying on the characters. The minions don't want to draw in all of the characters' allies — just the characters themselves.

The next step is to send those thralls inside the watched location, including wherever the characters are staying. Each thrall is being observed from afar, so a thrall who can actually get inside a room with an Artifact or the home of a mage is at least *familiar* with that location. That increases the degree of sympathy. The thrall might even try to steal a personal item, such as some hair from a shower drain, a favorite article of clothing or a piece of jewelry. With this minor violation, the Seers' sympathy to their targets increases. These thralls aren't terribly good at breaking and entering, but they don't have to be. Mages experienced in Space magic working for the Ministry are trying to ascertain the location of people and places related to the Queen's regalia. Confronting these thralls should have the same complications as confronting the first Innocent.

The thralls stalking the characters are the easiest to track, creating a trail that leads to the Minister's sanctum in Scene Three. If no one takes this bait, the next step is for thralls to actually try to take any Artifact they can find. These Innocents are expendable, so a minor mage controlling one has no qualms about letting his puppet get hurt — or even killed — trying to lay his hands on an item. Conversely, anyone who hurts or kills an Innocent may need to make a Wisdom

or Morality check, depending on the circumstances. A moral mage should feel outrage that innocents are being exploited, but even a ruthless mage should feel the need for revenge.

Thralls don't need to wander into a sanctum like zombies, of course. Since thralls look like ordinary people, they invent ordinary excuses for why they are at these locations: delivering mail, checking a cable connection, selling items door-to-door, selling candy bars and magazines for fundraisers and so on. Unless a mage is caught inside someone's home, mundane authorities should find most of these stories perfectly plausible. This type of harassment can go on for a while during Scene Two, but becomes more dangerous in Scene Three if the characters haven't yet caught the puppet masters.

### *Rex Mundi*

Should you need to stray a bit from this story, it would help to know a little more about this adversary. To the outside world, Mammon appears as a conglomerate of businesses. They've got an edge in financial dealings. People make stupid decisions with money all the time, but Mind magic helps "push" them a little into making these mistakes. Brokering a deal or negotiating a contract, after all, is easier if you can use a little "Emotional Urging" or "Domination" to seal the deal. Some investigators believe the Ministry's minions use a little bit of Fate magic as well to play the stock market. ("Will this stock go up or down today? Should I buy or sell?") Wise mages counter that such widespread abuses of magic have dire consequences, financial and otherwise. The stock market is already unpredictable, and magic makes it more chaotic — but who cares when you're making a ridiculous profit?

Seer pylons that work as part of Mammon have a wide array of outside interests and individual goals, but Seers who use the Ministry's methods tend to have access to a respectable amount of money. They're professionals — dressing well, living well and receiving the benefits of wealth. All of their crusades, power struggles and investigations are well funded — after all, that's one of the reasons the Seer who founded the first Mammon pylon has risen to the rank of Minister so quickly. This same theme of materialism is pervasive through many of the Ministry's rites. While the higher echelon of the order is concerned with spiritual matters — such how and when to Ascend to the Heavens — the bottom line keeps lesser Seers and thralls grounded.

Similar to most Seer pylons, Mammon mages use thralls and slaves, but most of these tools fall into one of two categories. Disposable thralls are cast aside after they've been soaked dry of their financial resources, largely through extravagant loans, foreclosures, repossessions — or if they fail to be useful, insurance money and wills. Chosen thralls are the sell-outs of society, doing just about anything for their secret masters while gaining profits along the way. Just as the slaves they exploit, most Mammon mages have Greed as a Vice, but a few suffer from Pride instead. Fewer still suffer from Sloth, content to let slaves do their work for them.

A business that's part of Mammon's network can be as small as a local store or as extensive as a corporation. Some



businesses are united through financial ties, acting overtly as subsidiaries and holding companies, but others are allied in the same methods one would suspect in a secret society. A few investigators claim that the pylon is actually a large pyramid scheme, passing up a percentage of profits to the higher ranking mages in the society. The Minister of Mammon always has a share of the profits.

While the wisdom of that business plan is questionable, one of the Ministry's ultimate goals is raising the Minister to the Heavens. The most loyal minions of Mammon believe that once that happens, the Fallen World will be enslaved by greed and distracted by materialism — but Mammon's Minister will become one of the *rex mundi*: a king of the world. The greedy are manipulated by the promise of a select few having vast wealth while the majority of humanity toils for meaningless rewards, but this is just a lie to prop up those in power. Lesser Mammon mages merely have wealth, but the Masters of their society dream of Ascending to the Heavens, where they will watch over rich and poor alike.

### *Scene Three: One World Center*

For all these inner workings and machinations, the sanctum of Mammon's Minister appears mundane, sur-

rounded by glass and steel. His sanctum a five-story building in a downtown area, surrounded by a "campus" with carefully manicured grass. One World Center has some slick marketing to advertise the offices the building developer has for sale, priding itself on its eclectic selection of profitable businesses, global awareness, cultural diversity and a few more of this week's buzzwords. Such claims are no more deceptive than the usual blather of corporate marketing. The building developer rents office space to some rather bland and profitable tenants — but there are a few sections of the building that have a higher standard of security than the others.

"One World" is also the name of the sanctum hidden in the heart of the building, and is a model example of Mammon's sanctums. Just as the Fallen World itself, One World's surroundings appear mundane, ordinary and even somewhat sterile, but behind the facade, powerful mages secretly work their magic. This Mammon sanctum is profitable enough that they've built similar "corporate business parks" in other cities. For a Ministry, Mammon is relatively small, but the Ministry's businesses are profitable and prolific, like chain stores forged from one end of a continent to another.

The sanctum does more than attract profitable businesses to the area surrounding the Ministry's sanctum. Through Mind magic, the mages slowly suborn the businesses, buying controlling shares of them piece by piece until the time for an aggressive takeover — as foretold through Fate magic — is at hand. The pyramidal building detailed below is only about five stories high, gleaming like a ziggurat in the heart of a larger city. This extensive front has been built to conceal a very small and heavily guarded location: the inner sanctum of Mammon's Minister. He directs the mages in his employ, but all of the schemes that follow lead to him. He is the eye at the top of the pyramid, and sitting upon the Throne of the Atlantean Queen, he dreams of seeing all.

### *Climbing the Corporate Ladder*

The more the characters realize they are being shadowed, investigated and even confronted by thralls from the same location, the more tempted the characters will be to investigate the source of these disturbances. A wise cabal will at least try to penetrate the outer layers of the sanctum that controls these thralls, gathering information on who is there and (perhaps more importantly) using "Mage Sense" to identify the resonance of the magic involved.

Identifying the methods used by Seers of the Throne shouldn't be especially hard. Figuring out what the Minister of Mammon is doing in the heart of the sanctum takes a bit more work — but the process is easier if the cabal is using the Artifacts of the Dethroned Queen. After we take a brief tour of the building, we'll detail some methods for infiltrating it. At some point, the cabal should realize how extensive and



powerful the pylon controlling this sanctum really is. That's the point when you should move to Scene Four, when the mages receive help from an unexpected — but not entirely unfamiliar — ally.

The players might expect resistance from the pylon as soon as their characters enter the grounds, but the exterior security is only slightly better than what one would expect from a well-run and profitable office building. While some investigators will want to bolt straight for a penthouse — or the apex of the pyramid — right away, this is further misdirection. The sanctum itself actually takes up all of the third floor. Technically, the Seer's sanctum includes the surveillance room on the ground floor and the elevator. Figuring this out requires some investigation of the building, but a few spells and thralls around the periphery makes even a routine investigation slightly more difficult.

### *The Security Cabal*

Most of the guards who patrol the outermost areas of the building — such as the campus grounds, the lobby and the areas around elevators — are ordinary Sleepers. One World's hiring requirements are tougher than most security outfits, so the Abilities (and statistics) of the average guard are only slightly higher than the average security guard. They're loyal, they receive a comfortable (if slightly generous) salary and they count as Sleeper witnesses whenever magic is performed near them. Despite this, a few of them have . . . hidden talents.

One World's Director of Security secretly describes these special few employees as "soulless." Through repeated training sessions (and a few unobtrusive Mind rituals), the security slaves have been made unusually susceptible to mental domination and manipulation, but only from the "managers" who have trained them. In other words, they're highly skilled meat puppets for the higher-ups in the sanctum's security cabal.

For most of their time on the clock, security slaves faithfully do their jobs, keeping the building secure and an eye out for anything suspicious. From time to time — such as when a guard reports suspicious activity — one of the Seers in the cabal takes over this soulless thrall. Space and Mind rites developed by the Seers of the Throne make such feats possible. Profane Urims owned by a select few Seers enhance these powers.

One World's security cabal includes mages proficient in Space who can take over these thralls at any time. For minor disturbances, the mages will see through the eyes of their watchful guards, "jumping" from the point of view of one to another, if need be. For major disturbances, the security cabal can actually cast magic through these thralls, manipulating them like armed and dangerous toy soldiers.

When a security guard isn't possessed by one of these mages, he (or she) has a personality, distinctive mannerisms and emotions. When possessed, they appear to be all business — moving with the soulless efficiency of a ruthlessly trained warrior — and even casual observation (such as

Wits + Empathy) reveals the puppet to be devoid of emotion. Rotes such as "Emotional Urging" have no effect on a possessed guard, for instance, and Mage Sight reveals the guards as manipulated from afar.

For the sake of rules, consider each mage in the security cabal to have a sympathetic connection to a soulless security guard. The Director of Security is a 39-year-old woman who has supervised many training sessions. She has an Intimate-quality connection with all of the guards, which means she can "jump into" anyone of them, cast magic from her meat shield and jump back out. Rumors persist that she's abused her authority to do more than just "train" these athletic young men and women in private sessions in her office, but none of her employees have memories of these events. The sanctum's Human Resources department does not care.

Each mage in the security cabal does his or her duty for the sake of the Minister, and, by extension, by the higher powers the mage perceives as Exarchs. That means that anyone using the Ring of the Exarchs can see the instant a security guard is possessed. With a bit of work, the character can identify which security guards are routinely used as thralls. If the characters feel outclassed, they can use the Crown of the Exarchs to seize control of a puppet — but it's a risky proposition, since doing so places the mage one step toward becoming as exploitative as the Seers the characters oppose.

### *Vigilance*

One of Mammon's staunchest rivals is the Panopticon, a Ministry that has developed an impressive arsenal of rites based around sympathetic magic and surveillance. Through Astral projection and Space magic, its loyal Seers strive for a world where they can be everywhere and see everything — a fanaticism that has led many other ministries to be paranoid about setting up wards against scrying and sympathetic magic. One World Center is no exception.

Anyone attempting to scry the inside of the lobby faces relatively little resistance from wards. It's unlikely that the mage is more than passingly familiar with the place, but Space Arcanum rolls to look in here require at least three successes (since the wards have Potency of 3). The sanctum itself has probably no better than a Described-quality sympathetic connection (–10 penalty) for someone who hasn't physically walked inside, and even wards against scrying require at least 10 successes for anyone to look inside. Casting rolls have an additional penalty equal to the level of the sanctum, as detailed below. Wards against teleportation are even stronger, permanently set so the caster requires 20 successes. Consider the Minister's sanctum to be warded well enough that no one beneath the rank of archmage can teleport or scry inside.

Each scene the mages are inside the building, there's a chance they'll be watched. In any part of the building where intruders don't need to make rolls for Skills such as Stealth, Subterfuge or Larceny, make a surveillance roll to see if they've been detected. Outside the sanctum, this should probably be a Wits + Composure roll for a security guard watching the

area through a camera. Inside the sanctum, mages keep to a schedule of random scrying as an extra line of defense. They're intimately familiar with their work environment, so if no other action is involved, give one of the mages in the office a Gnosis + Space roll to see if he can detect the intruders.

The room where surveillance is conducted and the third floor are all part of the sanctum, so any Security dots that apply to the sanctum also apply to those areas.

The Robe can be used to counteract the sanctum's magical surveillance. Once activated, the Robe's user cannot be seen by the Seer's Space effects for one full scene. Just as the other Artifacts, the Robe offers a quick-and-dirty way up through the ziggurat, but such ambition carries a price through failed Wisdom rolls. Hopefully, your characters are more virtuous and less prone to temptation than the Seers of the Throne.

### *Using the Regalia*

Some areas of the sanctum specifically mention ways the regalia can be used to circumvent the pylon's defenses. Your players will no doubt imagine and want to experiment with other ways of using the Artifacts. You may want to treat these similar to improvised effects. In general, activating one of the Artifacts requires a Gnosis roll, and the effect that results is either instantaneous or lasts for one scene.

*The Ring* reveals the influence of the Exarchs in the Fallen World. That means anyone who is controlled by this pylon is revealed by the Artifact. Identifying someone who is especially susceptible to the Seers' manipulation may take a little more work. The Ring can also enhance a mage's ability to spot Seer wards or identify surveillance the Seers are using.

*The Robe* hides the wearer from the Exarchs. That means anyone who is trying to hide from or evade scrying or surveillance magic (using Space) or wards (using Fate) can avoid them for one scene. Note that this Artifact is far more effective once a mage finds these magical defenses, particularly with the Ring.

*The Scepter* counters the influence of the Exarchs. This grants a limited ability to work countermagic against the Seer's spells and enhances the mage's countermagic in other Arcanum as well.

*The Crown* manipulates those controlled by the Exarchs. That means many of the characters inside the building are susceptible to its considerable powers and may become precious resources when seized from the Seers who control them. Doing so arguably makes the mage no better than her enemies, however.

#### Exterior Defenses

Once the characters set foot on the grounds of Mammon's corporate campus, they must devise a discreet strategy for working their way inside. As they pass through each area of the building — such as the lobby, elevator, first floor and so on — each scene should probably involve at least one contested roll involving Stealth, Subterfuge, Larceny or evading magical surveillance. No matter how good

they might be at stealth and deceit, they're just delaying when they'll be questioned by security guards or observed through surveillance, magical or otherwise. Expect a few game sessions in which the characters attempt to infiltrate further and learn more. They'll probably need to overcome encounters, locations and defenses such as the ones detailed below.

Note that these are merely outer defenses; internal security is more difficult to circumvent, even with magic. For all intents and purposes, the mages need to overcome



these defenses before they can actually reach the outer walls of the Minister's sanctum.

*The Grounds:* The campus surrounding the building features lots of stark concrete, a few strips of well-manicured grass, some trees and shrubs to give the illusion of a natural space and a secure parking lot. The area is surrounded by a low wall. Any cars that come in or out of the lock must pass by a checkpoint. Describe the entrance to a typical paid parking lot: there's a booth with a security stooge inside, who has the power to raise and lower a simple barrier to the lot. He only does this after a guest presents identification (and probably cash to pay for outrageous parking fees). A few video cameras scan the area, and the resolution is good enough to pick up license plate numbers.

Anyone who has business in the complex pays a little more than humans really should at a tollbooth, and visitors should keep the receipts they get after they drive inside. Two guards trade off working in the booth each shift; the one who isn't busy raising and lowering the parking lot barricade saunters around the building every few minutes. Anyone who doesn't want to pay to park can walk across the campus, but it's an open area easily seen from the guard posts within. They've got a fairly clear line of sight leading out to about 200 feet from the outer wall. A narrow strip of concrete stretches across the parking lot, flanked by manicured shrubs and grass. The short walk down this path leads to a revolving door — and the ordinary security camera watching it.

Anyone who strolls into the lobby without using magic has his face recorded by a camera, and anyone who actually parks here first (if he's, say, pretending to have business here) has his license number recorded on the same digital recording. These aren't magical cameras, so they're vulnerable to Forces rites, invisibility spells and so on. Avoiding cameras and casual detection should be easy for a mage, but the parking lot and lobby also have wards on them to detect when magic is used. Think of this as an ongoing "Supernal Vision" spell (Prime 1) with a minimal Potency of 1. Thanks to a little conjunctural use of Fate and Space, anyone who "trips" this magical alarm alerts one of the mages in the security cabal. The cabal responds by watching the visitor — or intruder — more closely.

*The Lobby:* Two security guards sit behind a desk in the front lobby. Two or three more are within running distance, either patrolling the ground floor or standing watchfully outside. Once again, cameras scan the area. At any given time, two guards watch all the footage from the parking lot and lobby from a small room on the first floor. That room has a feed to the security cabal on the third floor.

Since the era of videotape is receding into the past, and computer memory is relatively cheap, the digital footage is backed up onto a secure server, on which images of visitors are stored for up to a year. Most of the tenants are aware of this, and they're willing to accept this level of scrutiny for the sake of security. The complex had decent security before September 11th (back in 2001). In the years that followed,

any initiative to add additional, or even excessive, security has been welcomed by the tenants.

A directory in the lobby lists all the tenants. Save for the third floor, all of the companies here are dull, profitable and ordinary. The middle of the building allegedly houses four businesses, all of which are fronts. (Their details are in a later scene.) Their profitable business is conducted in buildings off-site. Anyone working in the sanctum has enough paperwork, email and cell phone chatter to keep up the illusion of professionalism. The employees of these four departments are all on payrolls, and they can justify their activities.

Basically, each of these four businesses is paying rent for a large area used by Seer pylons and the Minister himself. The entire third floor is sealed off from the rest of the building, serving as a common area for the sanctum. All the paperwork for these businesses is a front for what happens behind the scenes. Anyone who claims to have an appointment with one of these four businesses without actually being a Seer from this Ministry is therefore lying, and automatically suspicious. Fortunately, any mage who lies like this should be able to tell fairly easily (Wits + Subterfuge) that the lie is met with skepticism.

The well-kept lobby features an expensive array of polished tiles, waxed surfaces and lots of marble. Tasteful artwork can be found in various niches, alternating between abstract art featuring blue and gold and, strangely enough, several seascapes. A chi-chi establishment in the lobby called the Atlantis Cafe sells expensive liquid caffeine. Baristas with chiseled features sell everything from single short half-caff ristretto macchiatos to quad venti mint mocha frappachinos. They do not, however, sell drip coffee. Several of the Seers who stop here in the morning perform their morning coffee ritual with the same reverence they use for meditation and oblations.

*Local Authorities:* Keep in mind that the building surrounding the sanctum functions as an ordinary business complex. People walk through such places in the real world every day. This means that when anyone acts particularly suspicious or dangerous, some minor nuisances can be resolved simply by calling the police. The Seers in this sanctum don't need to hide behind the Lex Magica. Instead, if some would-be Neo walks through the front door with a shotgun and starts waving it around, or if anyone crazy enough to babble about magic breaks into the building in the middle of the night, the guards at the front desk call 911. You'll find statistics for the average police officer in **Mage: The Awakening**, so don't be afraid to use them.

*Electronic Locks:* Secure areas on the perimeter are kept that way through sturdy doors and electronic locks. Shorting out a lock with Forces 2 is child's play, but this leaves behind magical "fingerprints" that the security cabal can examine. Once the security cabal finds out about a lock that seems to have coincidentally malfunctioned, the guards try to figure out the resonance of the mage who cast broke the spell. Critically important locks also get a daily casting of security wards (layers of "Mage Sight" and other sensory spells) so



that the security cabal can be alerted to any clumsy attempt to circumvent the ward.

*The Elevator and Staircase:* Both the staircase and elevator are watched through video cameras. Random spots are laced with security wards. The elevator stops by the second, fourth and fifth floor, but the button for the third floor is broken. There's a keycard slot right below the panel of buttons by which the building's most important tenants can gain access to this part of the building. That lock and the elevator are both considered part of the sanctum, so the sanctum's dots in Security subtract dice from any attempt to circumvent it.

*Ventilation Shafts:* Any smart-ass who's seen *Die Hard* might ask about crawlspaces and vents, so be prepared. Outside of action films, there's no reason why those tunnels would need to be big enough for a person to crawl through, and even a child couldn't fit inside one of them. If anyone wants to send a familiar or spirit through one of these tunnels, the spirit will encounter a series of metal grills (if it aren't stopped by the first one) that let air pass through, but stop anything bigger than dust particles. If you want to run a session based on ventilation shafts, you should know they lead to each of the four businesses on the third floor, but not to the Minister's sanctum. Thanks to Life magic, his refuge is magically and hermetically sealed.

*The Delivery Entrance:* Most of the building accepts deliveries and messengers who have an appointment and valid identification. This does not apply to the third floor. Anyone who fabricates a reason for visiting this floor can leave her parcels or letters at the front desk. Someone from the security cabal then examines the materials before taking them into the sanctum. Insisting that a delivery must be made in person automatically raises suspicion, unless Mind magic is used to press the point. At the very least, it should get someone with sufficient credentials into the elevator — but fooling the mages who watch that elevator takes a bit more work.

*The Computer Network:* Four of the floors in this building are part of the same computer network. Hacking it is a waste of time, since those businesses are merely a source of income for the Seers. The sanctum does have computers in a few areas of the building, but the network does not have any access to the outside world. There's no Wi-Fi, no Web browsers and no server full of internal email. The computer network is largely for show. The front of the building is in the modern world, but the sanctum is archaic in many ways, some of which we'll soon see. Anyone who manages to connect to this network is therefore using magic, and is therefore suspicious.

*Questioning Tenants:* Anyone who does not work on the third floor is oblivious to what happens there. The other tenants and their employees know the names of the businesses that pay rent there, and have rough ideas of what those businesses are supposed to do, but other employees

have no reason to go there or even interact with the people who "work" there in any meaningful way.

Seers who enter the building do so in modern business clothes. They carry all the trappings of the modern world — including cell phones, PDAs, MP3 players and so on — but they "extinguish" them when they enter the elevator, and they leave them with the security cabal when they enter the third floor. When a Seer has a sufficient command of magic, technology becomes superfluous.

### *Three Floors*

Floors above the lobby that are not part of the sanctum are perfectly mundane — for the most part. Occasionally, a Seer in the sanctum chooses an upwardly mobile professional working on another floor to use as a thrall or plaything. Such relations may take the form of interoffice romance, "career management" (thanks to Mind rites) or even victimization that leeches life (and therefore Mana) from the dominated slave.

Successful business people tend to have disposable wealth, connections, minor influence and property, so they're very tempting as slaves for the Seers of the Throne. "Mage Sight" can reveal a handful of broken victims who work in this building, most of whom not only serve as diversions for the Seers, but also as digressions from the story as well. If you're ambitious, you could actually develop an entire investigation around one of these cast-offs that would also lead to the sanctum, but the story of the Dethroned Queen continues on the third floor. Investigating elsewhere takes up time and increases the chance of raising suspicion.

In a major city, you can walk up to the business directory of any office building downtown, and you'll have plenty of ideas to steal for these mundane businesses. Whether you want to include lawyers, land developers, real estate agencies, advertising agencies, stockbrokers or what have you is cosmetic — run with a business you know well.

The sanctum's upper echelons have dabbled a little bit in stock from these companies, so they're actually a little more profitable than they should be, thanks to the occasional magical "nudge" in the right direction. Psychic dominance over the occasional plaything also gives access to lists of business clients — enough to not only allow the Ministry to search for potential (and disposable) thralls, but also enough information to increase the amount of sympathy with the Space rites that control them.

### *Complications: Aggressive Meddling*

If the first four Artifacts are outside the One World sanctum, more encounters can occur outside it. Outside the sanctum, the Ministry of Mammon continues to search for the Queen's regalia. The characters will encounter this "aggressive meddling" if they continue to hide the regalia outside the Minister's sanctum. If the Artifacts are elsewhere, the characters will only know of this activity if they ask (or investigate) the individuals who are guarding them. Charac-

ters who are brave enough to bring all the regalia with them won't encounter the complications that follow.

The Ministry has pylons in several cities, so their thralls have had time to infiltrate societies far and wide. Ordinary, everyday people are easy to mislead for a day or two, but enslaving them for a lifetime is questionable. Thoroughly dominated thralls are "groomed for success," recruited in a devil's deal that trades the patronage of unseen masters for up-and-coming businessmen's immortal souls.

Similar to other Ministries, the Ministry of Mammon has as thralls a few specialists for tasks requiring particular skills. Ordinary Sleeper investigators (such as the kind you might generate with the **World of Darkness Rulebook**) are sometimes suborned when they trip over the plans of this hidden conspiracy. These rare few are well suited to times such as the end of Scene Three.

Again, the Seers use the same tactics against the characters that the Seers use against locations where the Artifacts are kept — whether those Artifacts are held by allies, rivals, enemies or even adversaries from previous chapters. If the Artifacts aren't with the characters, Sleeper investigators begin to act against anyone guarding the remaining Artifacts. Some of these "investigator thralls" possess talents such as Unseen Sight and the Medium Merit for sensing magic in the world, and they've been paid and convinced that these unseen enemies will be weakened if the ancient Artifacts they hold are taken from them. Finding out about hidden gods controlling the world we know motivates many of these investigators, as they hold on to the illusion of independence.

If these items aren't with the characters, this gives you a rationale to explain how they're been seized. Any incidental characters the cabal contacts can alert them of this development — and as the chronicle proceeds, this resistance grows stronger.

Note that the characters might have a way to rush back to the Artifacts and retrieve them in an emergency. If a guard at the characters' sanctum alerts them to a break-in, for instance, a mage with the Space Arcanum could teleport back to a familiar location and fight off the intruders. This could extend the story quite a bit, but characters who have to repeatedly leap between the Minister's sanctum and their own should eventually realize the Artifacts are safer with them — as they bring them to the Minister's sanctum. If the Minister cannot seize the remaining regalia in this act, another faction in the story can do so in Scene Four.

### *Dreaming of Destiny*

Whenever dramatically appropriate during the story — or perhaps merely when a visionary mage is sleeping — one of the mages in your characters' cabal should become more aware of the Dethroned Queen's fate. To instill some foreshadowing for the last half of the story, decide which mage or mages are most likely to have such revelations. The mage with the highest Dream or Destiny rating is an excellent choice; failing

that, an Acanthus would be a naturally choice, or any mage with more than two dots of Fate.

Once you begin to use this type of foreshadowing, you don't need to actually describe these visions as detailed narratives. The first visions should just be images. For the sake of the story, they can show glimpses of the court of the Dethroned Queen. Even a quick vision of an Atlantean court can be powerful, since Atlantean society is not widely known or understood, even by the experts of the Mysterium.

The Atlantean surroundings of the Queen's court look similar, in some ways, to ancient Greece. Her court shouldn't be taken as representative of *all* of Atlantean society, however, since she rebelled in many ways that more obedient mages shunned after legendary Fall of Atlantis. Only a few details are important, since this should only be a quick glimpse into her world.

The buildings where she held her audiences were temples, erected from marble, chalcedony and obsidian. Her innermost sanctum was decorated in shades of marble white, ocean blue and light gold (very much like the colors that dominate **Mage: The Awakening**). She held her audiences in a round, dome-covered chamber, where light danced on the walls as though refracted through ocean waters. In its center, the Queen sat upon the Throne of the Exarchs — at least, until she performed the ritual that took her from this world.

The courtiers who surrounded her were divided into a few distinct roles. All of them were obviously identifiable by the clothes they wore. Most of her attendants dressed in flowing robes. Her guards wore metal breastplates and helms, armed with spears and tridents. Her priests wore cloaks, and, in some cases, hats called *pshents* to denote their status.

Within her court, two courtiers vied for her attentions. One was a mage, a tall, thin visionary woman with red hair, aquiline features and graceful movements. The other was a priest, a dark-haired, athletic man with a strong jaw and fearful countenance. In visions, they often argue, although their conversations are largely unintelligible, containing fragments of what is now known as High Speech.

According to legend, many of their arguments were philosophical debates concerning the purpose of power. Aldones, the woman who acted as the Queen's mage advisor, believed that a sorcerer should strive for the Heavens so that he could eventually commune with forces beyond it, gaining perfect knowledge of the cosmos. In dream-like visions, Fate mages sometimes hear her speeches on this subject — and sometimes, they understand them.

The Queen's high priest, a stern man named Neotalba, believed that such power was meant to be used on the Fallen World beneath the Heavens. A virtuous soul could then ensure that the world of humans would conform to the ethical beliefs of the Ascended mage. Mages well-versed in Atlantean legend — such as Mysterium researchers who specialize in such lore, owning a Library with Atlantis as its Specialty or possessing a high Occult skill Specializing in Mage Lore — should be able to research these legends.



Visions from this court should become more detailed if you want to increase this foreshadowing, showing confrontations in the same inscrutable language. You could even include a few scenes from the short story at the start of this book, if you feel it would be suitably dramatic. Such revelations should make the events that follow somewhat more menacing.

The Minister has gathered fragments of Atlantean architecture in the innermost hallways and rooms of the

sanctum, creating spaces that look vaguely similar to areas of the Queen's court. The Ananke introduced in the next scene bears a striking resemblance to the mage who aided the Dethroned Queen. As the Ananke works her influence in the world, the mages then notice that some of the people around them have traits and mannerisms similar to the lackeys and attendants who served her as courtiers. By the end of the adventure, the characters should recognize that the high priest who challenged Neotalba's ideas also looks familiar. He bears a striking resemblance to the Minister of Mammon hidden in the heart of the sanctum. After the Ananke appears, Destiny repeats itself.

### *Scene Four: The Ananke Awakens*

Within the Minister's sanctum, two destinies collide. The characters stand in the center of the conflict, armed with weapons that can tip the balance of this conflict one way or the other.

Sometime after the characters have found the fourth Artifact — when Scene Four begins — an Ananke manifests before them. It exists to resolve a destined event: all five of the regalia must be gathered within the same place, so that a “lost soul” can cast the High Ritual that allowed the Dethroned Queen to Ascend to the Heavens.

At first, the Ananke does not actually care *who* performs the ritual. The characters seem like the best choice to her, particularly if they possess four of the relics, but if they seem weak, she does not care if the Minister performs the ritual instead. The Queen wanted to empower someone strong enough to (as she thought of it) challenge the power of the Exarchs. Any mage who can gather all five of the regalia from such disparate places as the ones in this book is worthy of the task.

You'll need to decide when you want to start Scene Four and have her approach the characters. It could be after they actually get to the third floor of the building, or it could be after they've investigated the building, but failed to actually get inside the sanctum on the third floor. It definitely should occur after someone has had some of the revelations from the end of Scene Three, since someone should recognize her similarity to the Queen's mage advisor, Aldones.

She can then relay that the Throne of the Exarchs is inside the sanctum, and that someone is destined to rule from that throne wearing the full regalia of the Dethroned Queen. The Ananke should never say that the *characters* are destined to do this, since (as we've noted before) they may choose someone more powerful than themselves with this privilege — or she may decide that the characters are too weak and help the Minister instead. She truly has allegiance to no one, save for Destiny itself.

The Ananke resembles the Queen's most trusted mage advisor, Aldones. The Ananke does not answer to that name, however — she refers to herself simply as *Ananke*. Mages who have seen the face of Aldones in dreams and revelations can confirm that the Ananke's clothing matches that worn in the court of the Queen.

Setting aside a player's possibility knowledge of **Mage: The Awakening**, a mage should have a chance of figuring out that the name refers to a Greek goddess of destiny; this requires a Wits or Intelligence roll coupled with Academics or Occult. Any Library of spirit lore or mage lore should contain more information. More precisely, some loremasters and Master mages would argue that this very powerful spirit is an avatar, aspect or "face" of the goddess, reflecting her true power. Any mage examining her with Fate and "Mage Sight" can confirm that she is a Fate spirit, and that she can influence (or even rewrite) reality to fulfill her chosen task.

If the characters have found some clever way of keeping the Artifacts safe and distant from the Minister's sanctum — such as keeping someone powerful or one of their characters nearby — the Ananke now sets events in motion to gather the remaining regalia together. She is capable of using Fate to make absolutely certain that the Artifacts arrive one by one. It is inevitable that they should be brought to the sanctum, one way or another. If the Minister or characters don't have the Artifacts, her courtiers will. Whether they were brought by the characters themselves, stolen from weak guardians by the Seers' thralls or gathered by the equivalent of Fate spells by the Ananke is something to consider carefully in the events that follow.

### Introducing the Ananke Earlier

If you're planning out an extensive **Mage** chronicle, you might want to consider shifting some events involving the Ananke to previous stories. You can foreshadow her appearance (and that of the Queen's courtiers) earlier in the campaign by teasing your players with visions earlier. If you do, you could even decide to have the Ananke appear and help the characters gather Artifacts earlier in one of the previous adventures.

This plot device (almost literally *deus ex machina*) should only be used if your players are having trouble gathering all four Artifacts. As we'll soon see, the Ananke can use her Influence to recruit otherwise ordinary people into the intrigues of the Dethroned Queen's court. Doing this once or twice can catch your players off guard (at the very least) and possibly scare the hell out of them. By the time their characters are approaching the Minister's sanctum, they should then be prepared for the conflict that results. Once the first four Artifacts are found, this story is pretty much self-contained, but with a little work, it could easily make your chronicle more epic.

### *The Gathering Storm*

If the characters don't have all five Artifacts, the Ananke can seize her own equivalent of "thralls" to gather the Artifacts within the sanctum. As described in **Mage: The Awakening**, she can rework reality and fate around her to realize her destiny. One effect of this influence (or as a spirit, Influence) is changing ordinary people into characters from her drama — a re-enactment of the court of the Dethroned Queen. The Ananke does not have a limitless ability to do this (since each change costs her Essence), but she has the power at her command should it be necessary.

Any mage who witnessed the visions and revelations from previous scenes may recognize someone who has been touched by this "destiny." Once-ordinary people — the sort who would live and work in a mundane business complex — take on the mien and manner of this long-lost time. When chosen by the Ananke, they can take the role of commoners, guards, priests, advisors and so forth. Although they still speak in their native languages, they forget all memories of their modern lives, becoming familiar with the intricacies of a long-lost Atlantean court.

Granted, this was a court that was in exile, and so in many ways the court deviated from the height of Atlantean civilization, so you should feel free to use some dramatic license here. Note that you should use this device sparingly, slowly adding one or two converts each scene as you proceed through the rest of the story.

For inspiration for ways of handling this, consider some of the stories based on Robert W. Chamber's *The King in Yellow*. In some of them, ordinary people lose their identities and sanity as they recreate the events of an allegedly fictional reality. As an alternative, rewrite reality around these converts such as the minor characters of a typical Philip K. Dick story, for example, *Ubik*. In many PKD stories, supporting characters (and even the narrator) may realize that their lives were lies, reinterpreting everything to fit a new psychosis or delusion.

These converts regard most of the cabal as mage advisors to the Queen. The converts do not understand why the advisors are not present with their monarch, but the converts suspect that one of the machinations of Neotalba — her scheming priest — has given him access to the Queen's throne. None of them are conscious of the words "Minister of Mammon"; instead, they believe that Neotalba now sits on the throne. Isolated in the Queen's court, they are only vaguely aware of the Fall of Atlantis. They consider the Fall a recent event, but the change is not drastic enough to give them further details of this legendary time.

Converts are immediately aware of two very important delusions. First, they believe that the Queen has mysteriously disappeared. All of these converts become visibly nervous when asked about the Queen's identity, status or location. Phrases such as "she has lost her throne," or "she has lost her power" or "she has gone away" can recur. They believe



the time will come when they are called to her side, when her power is fully restored.

They also believe that one of the mages in your characters' cabal is actually a consort of the Queen. The servants are willing to sacrifice themselves so that her consort can reclaim the Throne in her place. (Note that the gender of the consort is not important — she had both male and female lovers during her lifetime.) If you go this route, phrases such as “I will die for my Queen and her love” or “your high priest sits upon your throne, your highness,” should recur.

Either way, converts instinctively know that the throne room is on the third floor of the building. They also weep as they mourn the fact that Neotalba, the High Priest, has cast them out from the court. All of this is in their imagination, a recreation of events from thousands of years ago (some of which are depicted in the short story at the start of this book). All of them also act as living anachronisms, reinterpreting the devices and habits of the modern world to fit their illusions about the court of the Dethroned Queen.

These “courtiers” will readily perform minor and harmless tasks on behalf of the cabal. If asked to do anything dangerous, they will lose courage — unless they are commanded by a mage using the Crown of the Exarchs. The converts react to it as though it were the crown of the Queen herself. If this Artifact is activated, the convert then becomes a willing slave, exhibiting the same obedience one would see in a thrall commanded by a Seer. The mage then faces the temptation of exploiting this power, becoming as the legendary Exarchs who allegedly Ascended to the Heavens.

If any of these converts remain with the characters until they reach the Minister's Demesne in Scene Six, they automatically exhibit fanatic loyalty for the story. (“I will die for you, as I would die for my Queen.”) These displays occur even if no one is using the Crown. Destiny must run its course, as the events of the Dethroned Queen's Ascension are recreated.

*The Last of the Regalia:* If for some reason there's still an Artifact that isn't possessed by the characters or a Seer within the Ministry, the Ananke can disappear long enough to exploit her Influence. Destiny should now circumvent any defenses used to protect the remaining regalia.

The Ananke can suborn servants within the sanctum, trusted associates and so forth, changing them into courtiers of the Dethroned Queen. Such converts can then proceed to take the Artifacts to One World Center — where the Artifacts will be handed over to the Seers, since the characters are not actively using the items. One way or another, the drama resolves within the Labyrinth. Hopefully, you won't have to resort to such brute force tactics. In an ideal telling of this story, the mages bring the Artifacts themselves.

### *Scene Five: Within the Labyrinth*

Once the characters are aware of the Throne's existence, they are faced with the challenge of recovering it. Doing so requires heroism and ingenuity, but presumably, any cabal that

has survived the struggles leading to the first four Artifacts should be strong enough to seize the fifth.

A handful of methods of entering the sanctum are fairly obvious, although your players may devise more ingenious methods, possibly involving improvisational magic. The keycard lock on the elevator can be cracked, but only if the infiltrator can overcome the sanctum's Security rating. Teleporting within the sanctum (with Space) is theoretically possible, but the sanctum has all the wards and counterspells against apparition and teleportation an experienced mage would expect. Ventilation shafts run throughout the building, but they have barriers preventing easy entry. And finally, it is possible to enter by traversing the spiritual landscape, but this entails spiritual hazards even more dangerous than the sanctum itself.

### *The Simplified Sanctum*

If you're just using **Mage: The Awakening**, the third floor of One World Center counts as a sanctum with three dots in Security and three dots in Size. If you're using additional rules from **Sanctum & Sigil**, you'll find the full stats for this area in the “Expanded Sanctum” sidebar. For the simplified rules, you'll just need to keep in mind that any die roll that involves breaching security has a three-dot penalty.

Four pylons take care of business here: the security cabal that watches the grounds, a management cabal that coordinates the actions of allied Seer sanctums, a recruitment cabal that directs the actions of disposable thralls and the masters of the sanctum. This last group oversees the first three groups and reports directly to the Minister, who is kept in isolation. Informally (and with a certain degree of sarcasm), they refer to each other as Operations, Middle Management, Human Resources and the Board of Directors.

### *Scaling the Story*

The pylon depicted here has only risen to power within the last five years. The pylon is small, by global standards, particularly for the headquarters of a Ministry. If you've run a chronicle in which an ambitious cabal of mages has overcome the last four chapters in fairly rapid succession, they should be able to find their way to the heart of the building without major difficulty, particularly if they're reckless enough to sacrifice some of their Morality to do so.

With a little bit of work, the statistics in this section can be increased to present a more formidable challenge to more experienced mages. After all, it's possible that you may want to run the stories in this book as part of a more elaborate chronicle; for example, you might alternate the search for the Queen's regalia as an overarching plot with several smaller limited adventures with lesser adversaries. If you're willing to place “Ascension to the Heavens” (such as it is, and at any price) as a long-term goal in your chronicle, you may decide that it's the sort of goal best reserved for Master mages with a Gnosis of 5, 6 or higher.

The Minister of Mammon depicted here has Gnosis 4, but if your cabal has mages with a higher Gnosis — such

as those powerful enough to forge Legacies — you should begin by increasing his Gnosis as well. If you've kept an approximate tally of the experience points you've awarded, you should know whether the mages you accommodate are experienced as defined in the character creation rules in **Mage: The Awakening**. The Minister should at least be equivalent, unless you want the resolution of the story to be relatively easy.

In the same manner, it's fairly easy to increase the difficulty of the simplified sanctum. For mages with Gnosis 4, increase the Security to 4; increase it to 5 for mages with Gnosis 5. Consider adding 15 points to the ordinary adversaries in Scene Three, and then add 30 points to the adversaries in Scene Five. If you're using **Sanctum & Sigil**, there are plenty of rules in that book for making a sanctum more dangerous by spending experience points. Add the same number of experience points you would add for an experienced mage to increase the difficulty of the sanctum.

The playtest of the adventure used the statistics presented here, but if you've run a chronicle in which players can handle (and earn over time) such powerful mages, increasing statistics is left as an exercise for a clever Storyteller.

### *Look Around*

As soon as the elevator doors to the sanctum open, anyone who has had visions of the Queen's court should notice a few familiar similarities. The walls of the third floor are shades of blue and white, augmented by reproductions of classical Greek and Roman art, seascapes and even borderline occult artwork in some security areas.

This classical theme has been tainted by the modern world. Mammon's Seers also have a healthy supply of motivational posters with slogans for concepts such as *Teamwork*, *Ambition*, *Loyalty* and so forth. The Seers' slaves are conditioned to believe in such things.

Many corridors include pillars as white as the ones in a Classical Greek temple. Plaster and marble cornices and statuary add a touch of Atlantean grandeur to the interior, as though this area were somewhere between a sterile office park of the 21st century and an archaeological recreation of a Greek or Atlantean temple — which, as we'll soon see, is strangely appropriate.

### *Entering the Third Floor*

**Third Floor, Seer Sanctum:** The elevator is normally used as the entrance to the sanctum. The third button of the control panel does not work unless a mage uses a keycard (a minor Artifact, actually) to access a lock under the panel. The room is small enough to hold about eight people and 1,500 pounds. Circumventing the lock is possible with Forces 2, but the casting roll for that spell has a three-dice Security penalty.

Without magic, circumventing the lock requires skill with electronic lockpicking (Intelligence + Larceny), but not without proper electronic tools. Unless someone has nullified

security cameras and scrying spells in this tiny room, setting up such equipment looks suspicious, to say the least. None of the regalia can circumvent the lock, although the Robe could conceal a lone intruder.

When the lock is activated — or circumvented — an alarm alerts both the security team in the surveillance room and the security cabal. Even in a more traditional mage sanctum, it's hardly surprising for a lone mage to walk up to the front door entrance and welcome someone inside. If the people inside the elevator are unfamiliar or not visible, that welcoming committee should be slightly larger, preferably with weapons.

**"I Suggest You Take the Stairs":** The door to the stairwell, by the way, does not normally open. It's welded shut. Security rotates lace the area around it, so the security cabal is usually alerted if any investigators, infiltrators or strike team is clever enough to take the stairs.

Sealing off the exit to the stairs is a fire code violation, but, strangely enough, most investigators who have arrived to check it out have entirely forgotten about this little breach of the law (thanks to a few Mind 2 spells). One of the Seers inside knows a rote that can change to an actual door (with Matter 2), which he can cast without penalties from the sanctum's Security rating. In the case of an actual emergency, he can actually open an exit — but in most cases, such crises can be averted by a sanctum with more than 15 Seers of the Throne.

### *The Seer Cabals*

Depending on where the characters enter the building, they'll encounter one of the four cabals in the sanctum. Operations (the "security cabal") is the most confrontational team. Within each of the areas of this sanctum, the Scepter can be used to counter the Seers' magic, while the Throne can command a Seer for one scene (most likely, long enough to resolve one problem); either use requires a Wisdom check. Without the regalia, getting to the heart of the sanctum in the center of the third floor requires a bit more ingenuity.

The third floor has a hallway that circles its perimeter. A circular area inside that has been divided into four sections, each with its own fake "company." HR works within a temp agency called Mind & Muscle. Operations masquerades as a security firm called Aegis. Middle Management pretends to be a real estate firm called Higher Ground. The Board of Directors have formed a false front for an investment banking company called Myrmydon. All four businesses surround and protect an inner sanctum, where the Minister is sealed off from the outside world. Each one has its own methods for protecting their superior.

**Human Resources** coordinates the activities of soulless thralls outside the sanctum, as well as a few slaves within it. Dull jobs such as typing, data entry and janitorial work don't require Seer puppets; instead, these slaves of the Seers have been thoroughly and psychically forced into submission.

The department lackeys are absolute obedient, but also lack initiative beyond doing their jobs and getting paid. A Human Resources manager typically has a Gnosis of 3, excelling at learning ways to get the most from people with minimized expense and effort.

Right past the elevator's security checkpoint, there's a set of offices for the temp agency. Sleepers desperately in need of work sign up for contract and temporary work in other, off-site branches of the company, and presumably, all their paperwork is "processed" here. Beyond the front reception area, this part of the building includes a maze of cubicle walls, providing cover if events escalate to violence.

If intruders are detected in this part of the building, HR sends a few thralls to take care of the problem, delaying the unwanted guests until someone can notify Management. Three mages work on this team, and all of them are proficient in Mind magic. When directly confronted, they respond using "Misperception" (Mind 2) and "Psychic Assault" (Mind 3). "Emotional Urging" can motivate a slave into attacking an intruder, but further Urging can send the same slave back against its master.

A swift assault or ambush can take out HR quickly enough for an intruder to find the center of the building. Without stealth or secrecy, the intruders will have to deal with the security team shortly thereafter.

Middle Management is in communication with pylons in distant cities, reporting their progress to the Directors and Minister. To be honest, Middle Management's most sincere motivation in life is taking credit for what these agencies do, so that they can one day become powerful enough to rise to a position on the Board of Directors. A Middle Manager has a Gnosis of 3, along with useful communication skills for micro-managing from afar, shifting blame onto others and surviving the worst catastrophes in the sanctum. The offices for their front, Higher Ground, are in one of the corners furthest from the elevator.

If the characters enter this part of the building, the Managers will not (and probably cannot) coordinate their efforts to defend the sanctum. Instead, confronting one of them sends the others scurrying to the Board of Directors or security while the intruders are delayed. Each Manager places his or her own survival and promotion above that of others. Each one has a cell phone, PDA and handgun (in his desk), all of which are mundane enough to shut down when hit with the proper rites.

After casting a "Misperception" spell (Mind 2), a lone Manager uses formidable psychic attacks. A showdown in a hallway should give someone enough time to summon security. Sneaking through this part of the building merely requires some clever uses of Stealth.

*Board of Directors:* The mages in the fourth office, an investment banking firm, do not act hastily. They trust management and security to deal with intruders. If someone is detected, the Board of Directors will be notified, and they will take the time to come up with a plan. Each one

has his own office with a sturdy wooden door. In the case of emergency, a Director retreats to the corporate equivalent of his ivory tower, and he immediately begins making plans to save his own ass.

Each Director has authority to contact the Minister, but not until the Director can give a decent report on who the intruders are. Disturbing the boss with speculation or wrong information is the sort of recklessness that must be punished. Each Director has a Gnosis of 3, along with strategies for sacrificing lesser employees for the good of the company (that is, the sanctum), as long as the Directors can survive long enough to rebuild.

Each Director can fortify himself in a spacious office. From there, he will use Space to act outside that fortress. (Each one is Intimately familiar with the interior of the building.) Each Director has a favorite slave or two working on the third floor, ready to act his factotum, representative or puppet in the hallways. These slaves act as spies, watching intruders as the Directors cast rites. In this way, they evaluate their rivals and sense the resonance of their magic. The only way to really stop a Director is to trace this magic back to his office, break inside and silence him. Each Director has a portfolio of spells for attacking and defending intruders through the puppet; statistics are detailed at the end of this chapter.

### *The Path Within*

All of these employees do not suffer Security penalties for casting spells, but intruders do. That means mundane, non-magical tactics are best for confronting Seers. If the intruders were organized enough to attack all at once, they would be outnumbered, but, as with many corporations, the left hand doesn't really understand what the right hand is doing. The intruders may need to deal with a series of thralls, mage security guards, managerial puppets and Middle Managers one at a time unless the intruders can stealthily and swiftly find the heart of the sanctum. Each business has an entry to the Minister's inner sanctum, but opening the entry requires a contested Gnosis roll (opposed by the Minister), and intruders suffer a Security penalty. If the Minister does not want to oppose an intruder, someone in the cabal just needs to succeed at an unopposed Gnosis roll.

Once a cabal finds this sanctum sanctorum, the protected innermost chamber, the Seers leave this interior undisturbed. If they have met an impressive amount of force, a hit to company morale causes their tactics to unravel even further. Some disgruntled employees insist on taking valuables from their desks and moving toward one of the exits. Others lock themselves away with thralls, exacting their urges out one last time before they flee. Tempers flair, people shout at each other, sympathetic thralls cry and grudges in the office may erupt into violence. Perhaps the Seers should have been more thorough in their hiring process.

### *Security*

Mages who insist on using violence or failing at stealth must deal with the security cabal. Employ a number of security

mages equal to the number of mages in your characters' cabal. The security guards here have a Gnosis of 2, but you may decide to give each one a Gnosis one less than the average Gnosis of a mage in your cabal. Each security guard uses a cosmetic variation on the "Unseen Shield" (Forces 2) rote (Stamina + Occult).

The Seer security team uses Forces rotes to attack. Each security guard also has a Taser and a handgun. Security doesn't start firing shots until the characters are reckless enough to go on a killing spree in a corporate office. The sound of gunshots should be shortly followed by someone on the second or fourth floor calling the police. The Seers have nothing to hide (except for the contents of the sealed, secret chamber in the center of the sanctum), so they'd welcome armed officers showing up to arrest armed and dangerous intruders.

### *Making an Appointment with the Minister*

The center of the third floor is sealed. Each of the four fronts has a door leading in, and it has been magically locked from the inside. Life spells keep the mage inside this area alive. Casting such a spell is difficult with a Security penalty to the roll. Again, the Ring does not suffer from this penalty, so if the Ring is here, using it is the fastest way to get inside.

Rotes for tracking the entrance to the center of the Labyrinth typically take a scene to cast, which probably means one mage is busy casting while the others are dealing with the latest wave of security or Management. Once the door is found, opening it requires a straight Gnosis roll, obviously with the Security penalty. If the Minister does not want that door open, he can oppose that roll with a Gnosis roll of his own (without the penalty). Any one of the Artifacts can be used for this purpose without a Security penalty.

### *Complications: The Courtiers*

Ruthless or inventive mages may want to use converted courtiers to aid the mages' entry. As soon as a courtier enters the third floor, he acts as though he's in the corridors surrounding the Queen's chambers thousands of years ago. Any Seer who's here is obviously allied with Neotalba, the High Priest. Courtiers consider the word "cultist" appropriate for describing Neotalba's allies. People from the modern world babbling about Atlantean cultists sacrificed for the Dethroned Queen would normally seem troubling. However, Sleepers unaffected by the Ananke actively ignore such converts — unless the Sleepers absolutely have to recognize the converts.

Converted courtiers can help the mages work their way to the Queen's throne room. In fact, any one of the courtiers knows where the door is, as long as he is directly asked. Asking a courtier to go in harm's way, however, or actually risking one's life

in a violent assault, is a far less attractive idea. Directing a courtier to fight or die requires a use of the Crown of the Exarchs. At that point, a courtier becomes almost suicidal in his defense of the mages. If any one of them dies as a result, add an additional Morality or Wisdom check to the mage who commanded the courtier.

### *Scene Six: The Sanctum's Heart*

In the center of the sanctum, the Lie of the modern world has been cast aside. Guarded as carefully as the Throne, a fragment of the Minister's soul has been ritually bound to this location. As any scholar of mage lore knows, binding a fragment of a sorcerer's soul to the heart of a sanctum creates a Demesne.

Isolation from the outside world has slowly driven this Minister to the brink of insanity — an unfortunate affliction that plagues weaker Seers who rise to power too quickly. The Minister's soul stone has been bound to a crown he wears as he sits upon the throne. When he is holding audience, he also wears his Urim: the cloth garment he wears when commanding his thralls. The Throne has augmented his command of Space, giving him glimpses of realms outside





the world we know — higher realms that he regards as the Heavens of legend.

The Minister of Mammon has used his vast wealth to recreate a priceless archaeological treasure in the heart of a modern corporate building. This round room is surrounded by a series of marble columns around its periphery. The roof is domed, arching overhead like the ceiling of a temple or cathedral. Archaeological artifacts surround the central area, creating the ethos of a Classical Greek temple. To the trained eye, one might see influence from the lost and mythical civilization of Atlantis. The floor consists of marble tiles worn smooth, save for a raised dais in the center of the room. The center of the chamber holds its most valuable artifact: the Throne of the Exarchs. (For another interpretation of an ancient temple in a modern office building, check out the Korean horror film *Double Vision*.)

Upon entering the room, the characters see the Minister of Mind — a tall man standing before the Throne. His voice is defiant, alternating between modern English and a few emphatic phrases that sound like High Speech. He addresses a transparent apparition that looks like a woman standing in front of him, with her back to the characters. Raven hair cascades down her back, as she stands nude, save for a short skirt that hangs off her curvaceous hips. The characters cannot hear her replies, but they can hear her laughter as she fades away — leaving the Minister face-to-face with whomever has entered the room.

The Directors are the only other mages who dare enter this room, and never without a good reason. Converted courtiers can enter if escorted by the characters, but the courtiers kneel and prostrate themselves as soon as they see the apparition. Anyone who has had revelations and insights into the Queen's court recognizes this room as a reconstruction — and the apparition as the form of the Dethroned Queen. An expert in Seer lore would know that she is an avatar addressing him from the Heavens, speaking in a voice only he — as a chosen servant — can hear or understand.

This innermost sanctum has a Security one higher than the rating of the surrounding sanctum. The Minister suffers no penalties for casting magic, but anyone else using magic in here does. As many Ministers do, he has established this innermost sanctum as a Demesne: he can cast vulgar magic in here without risking Paradox. The soul stone is set in his crown, which is a crude mockery compared to the Crown of the Exarchs. (If he actually has the Crown, he has set his soul stone in it, placing it just above his forehead.)

Courtiers have no magic, of course, so they are oblivious to Security penalties once inside. While here, they are absolutely obedient to whoever is wearing the Crown of the Exarchs, even if the item has not been activated. Although the mages have penalties to dice rolls, they do not receive penalties when using the regalia of the Dethroned Queen: they belong here as much as the Throne.

The Minister has a Gnosis of 5, and he is quite skilled in magical violence. His Wisdom has fallen so far that he has no qualms about using it to harm others. A persuasive cabal could convince him to face a single champion in a Duel Arcane, but if the cabal attacks him outright, he will fight without any restraint or hesitation. Violence is one obvious way to resolve this scene; overpowering him with the Artifact is another. There are less ruthless methods, of course, ones that do not force Wisdom or Morality checks, but these require more work.

If violence ensues and the Minister has the upper hand, the Ananke appears in the room to stop the altercation. The Minister recoils, reacting as though he has seen her in his visions. He addresses her as Aldones, just as she addresses him as Neotalba. You can then proceed to have them debate whether the Throne should be used to seize power over the Fallen World or Ascend to realms beyond it, as described at the beginning of the chapter. This should serve to give the characters a brief respite as they make a plan.

The Minister does have a significant weakness: he is a pawn of the Exarchs, and thus all of the regalia can be used against him. He cannot detect a mage wearing the Robe. The Minister's spells can be countered by a mage with the Scepter. A mage with the Ring can learn more about the Minister's Arcana, and with sufficient insight, his most common spells. And, finally, the Crown can force him to submit to its wearer — or as part of the delusion shared by the converted courtiers, the consort to the Dethroned Queen. The Artifacts are potent weapons, since they do not suffer from the sanctum's Security penalties. Defeating him should require a balance of the mages' own skills and careful use of the regalia.

Without the regalia, the characters might lose to the Minister — but in the next scene, that may prove to be a hollow, disappointing, Pyrrhic victory.

### *Complications: Lost Regalia*

It's possible that the cabal stormed into the Demesne without bringing all five Artifacts, just as it's possible that the characters failed to get all five before entering the building. If the Minister has had an opportunity to track down and retrieve a "lost Artifact" from a previous adventure, assume that he has it here now. In fact, you can assume that he will use it without regret or fear of losing Wisdom. For example, if the cabal never got the Crown of the Exarchs, he has it here now (with his soul stone forged to part of it) and any courtiers present now slavishly obey his every whim.

If the mages left the Artifacts elsewhere for safe keeping, we've established that the Minister has also had plenty of opportunities to take them back. You may decide that the cabal did such an excellent job of protecting or guarding the Artifacts that the Minister's minions have failed; in this case, the Ananke sends for the remaining Artifacts, and with destiny on her side, she has her way. At some point during

the confrontation with the Minister, one or more courtiers arrive in the room bearing the regalia.

If the Minister has any of the regalia, he tries to communicate with the cabal instead assaulting the characters right away. He thanks them for bringing the Queen's regalia to the temple, so that destiny can be fulfilled. He then demands that they present the regalia to him, so he can fulfill the Ananke's prophecy and Ascend to the Heavens. Should your characters (for whatever reason) decide to give him the regalia — or even more surprising, aid him in the ritual — you can use the rules from the next scene, allowing the Minister to make the final casting roll for the Throne of the Exarchs. Otherwise, the triumphant characters have all the tools they need, along with the Ananke's guidance, to claim their destiny.

### *Scene Seven: The High Ritual*

The characters now stand before the Throne. Moving it would require some fairly potent magic, so the characters may very well prefer to use the Artifacts once the other Artifacts have been brought to it. Once the triumphant heroes have seized control of the sanctum, the corporate bureaucracy that surrounds it begins to unravel. In fact, the survivors who don't flee the building are transformed to recreate the court of the Queen.

Once loyal and soulless guardians of the Minister are no longer puppets controlled by powerful Seers; instead, the guardians become courtiers from the age of the Dethroned Queen. The characters have considerable power if they choose to remain in this sanctum — and they must face the temptation of using it.

The Ananke then offers them the Queen's High Ritual, the culmination of the Ananke's research into the Exarchs. With the High Ritual, a "lost soul" can Ascend to the Heavens. Neotalba and Aldones had their own beliefs about what will follow, but the only way to fulfill destiny is for someone to find out. If the characters refuse, events take a darker turn; otherwise, the ritual is detailed below.

The final ritual requires all five Artifacts. Each Artifact, in addition to its power useable against the Exarchs and their minions, has one spell that serves as a component in this High Ritual. Performing the ritual requires one activation roll for each Artifact, in sequence. Each roll must succeed in order for the greater High Ritual to succeed; if any one of the five rolls fails, the whole ritual fails. Anyone who wants to try again must then restart the process from the beginning. The entire ritual works as an extended roll: successes add up from each activation roll, and if the ritualist has accumulated 10 successes by the final roll, the ritual succeeds.

A powerful mage can perform the ritual alone, but, as an easier alternative, a cabal of mages can perform this ritual collectively. In a cabal of five mages, each one could perform one "step" of the ritual, adding his successes to the total. In this variant approach, only the final caster — in this

case, the one sitting on the Throne — gains the benefits of the spell.

As soon as all five Artifacts are in the same room and a mage can use them without interruption, the Ananke appears to guide that ritualist through these five spells. She explains that she was present when the Dethroned Queen first performed this ritual, and it was destiny that the regalia of the Dethroned Queen would be performed again. The Ananke says again that the Queen wanted to ensure that other "lost souls" could follow in her path. This announcement makes any courtiers present visibly nervous, and may even warn the mages against attempting such folly. If the mages reject this opportunity, jump down to "Rejecting the Heavens" in the next section.

Each Artifact used in this ritual has a Gnosis of 5, so the caster can roll five dice (unless she has a Gnosis above 5). The mage casting that portion of the ritual can add one of her Arcana, depending on the Artifact she is using. If the mage using that Artifact has no dots in the spell, she can still roll Gnosis, but she doesn't get to roll additional dice for Arcana. There's no way of knowing which Arcanum relates to which Artifact until the time comes to cast the spell, although a cabal that has failed the casting once will know after the first casting.

Here are the Arcana that can be added to each of the five spells that compose the ritual.

- The mage using the Ring can add *Spirit* to his casting roll, since the Ring senses the influence of extra-dimensional forces at work.
- The mage using the Scepter can add *Prime* to his casting roll, since the Scepter uses countermagic as part of its powers against the power of the Exarchs.
- The mage using the Robe can add *Fate* to his casting roll, since the Robe obscures the workings of the destined from the eyes of Sleepers.
- The mage using the Crown can add *Mind* to his casting roll, since the Crown overpowers the weak-willed with the demands of its wearer.
- The mage using (and sitting on) the Throne can add *Space* to his casting roll, since the Throne allows its user to see remotely throughout the Fallen World and dimly into a higher realm.

When the Minister dreamed of performing this ritual, he knew he could do so without risk of Paradox, since this chamber is his Demesne. The first four spells are coincidental. The final spell is vulgar: it challenges the very limitations of the Fallen World. The Throne subtracts one die from the Paradox roll that results. If the mage using the Throne (that is, sitting on it as he casts the final spell) has performed previous steps in the ritual using the regalia, each regalia he has used subtracts an additional die of Paradox. This means a lone mage who can perform all five steps on his own does not need to roll for Paradox on the final roll. A mage who had others in his cabal perform the first four steps, on the other hand, must deal with four dots of Paradox on the final roll.

This makes it possible for a paragon of magic to perform the ritual alone, or a cabal of mages can share the risk. If one mage is casting all five spells alone, he would have to have Spirit, Prime, Fate, Mind and Space to add Arcana dice to each of the five spells. The ideal candidate for this spell would be a mage with a Gnosis over 5 who knows all these Arcana. Such a paragon would not suffer Paradox on the final roll. Conceivably, the characters might know a Master mage (such as an ally on the Consilium) who has a chance of succeeding, but this path is not an easy one. Note that as soon as the characters involve Master mages in this intrigue, politics could make the resolution of this story more difficult.

A mage might be ambitious enough to move the Throne, but removing it from this chamber is not easy. Even if the Minister has been defeated, the sanctum's Security rating affects any spell directed against the Throne; this is followed by subtracting five dice from that casting for the Artifact's Gnosis. That means anyone with less than nine dice on a spell affecting the Throne must roll a chance die. In addition, even someone who has spoken to the Ananke and researched the Throne of the Exarchs is only vaguely acquainted with it, so Space spells directed at the Throne have formidable sympathy penalties as well.

### *Rejecting the Heavens*

Once the Ananke has offered to lead this ritual, the characters might decide that they are not ready or unworthy of the ritual. They may decide to walk away, for instance, realizing that the price of this path to "Ascension" is not worth it. If your story diverts along this path, the events that follow take a darker turn. As stated elsewhere, the Ananke is a force of destiny, fated to resolve her given prophecy — one way or another.

The Ananke herself can offer to perform the ritual and resolve the prophecy. This might not be a bad idea, since it means that she will stop seizing innocent people from the world of Sleepers and turning them against Arcane forces. She can only perform the final roll for the Throne, however — other mages must activate the first four Artifacts.

If the cabal rejects the opportunity to perform or assist with the ritual, and the Minister has been defeated, the Ananke is no longer on the characters' side. She immediately seeks out someone else to take the role of the Dethroned Queen. The moment she makes this decision, any converts and courtiers present also shift their allegiance away from the cabal.

The most likely candidate to Ascend then becomes one of the mages from the Board of Directors — courtiers rush to his office to act as his humble and fanatically loyal servants. The Ananke is not invulnerable, however. She is a spirit, and after she's used much of her Essence to create converts, the resolution of the story becomes a race to stop her. If the characters have chosen a Master mage or Consilium mage to help them, he could conceivably betray them to follow this path to Heaven.

## The Words of Ananke

For each stage of the ritual, the Ananke recites a line of prophecy, and the caster repeats it while casting one of the five stages of the spell. Each line of the prophecy takes one turn to recite, and each spell involves two lines of poetry. This means the High Ritual takes 10 rounds to cast, two for each stage of the spell (in case anyone is prepared to interrupt it). The original Atlantean version has been lost, but the Ananke has recreated it in the form of iambic pentameter.

### The Ring:

*Gods work within the Fallen World we see,  
Our sharper eyes can see behind their lies.*

### The Robe:

*Soulless slaves protect them ceaselessly.  
The virtuous oppose them in disguise.*

### The Scepter:

*Though higher powers enslave a world asleep,  
We shatter chains that fallen gods have wrought.*

### The Crown:

*Awakening lost souls trapped in the deep  
We reign despite the misery they've brought.*

### The Throne:

*Arise to Heaven! We have eyes to see  
Beyond the threshold of eternity.*

### *Accepting the Heavens*

Characters who decide to proceed with the ritual are attended by any courtiers present, but they fearfully caution the mages against proceeding. The courtiers, loyal to their Queen, believe that this is the very sort of recklessness that took her away from them. They fervently believe that she was Dethroned because she challenged powers far beyond her. With insights bestowed by destiny, they're actually correct.

Should the ritual succeed, the "lost soul" sitting on the Throne does Ascend to the Heavens — but only in spirit. It is the "lost soul" that is transported — but the ritualist's body and mind remain in the Fallen World. This means that a mage who successfully performs the ritual becomes a conduit for messages from the Heavens — but the price is severe: he loses the ability to perform magic. He has been "dethroned," losing his birthright of magic.

If this lost soul is the Ananke, she is freed of her debt to destiny. She becomes an ordinary woman, and all of the courtiers are freed of their debt as well. They slowly file out of the building, walking back to their previous lives and forgetting all that transpired.

If the Minister succeeds at the ritual, he no longer has power as a Seer, instead becoming one of the most useful pawns the Seers of the Throne could have. The gods (as he sees them) still speak through him. The same condition applies to the Board of Directors. The transformed individual will be guarded within a Seer sanctum for life, unless the characters want to risk their Morality by killing him outright. If he lives, he serves the Board of Directors elsewhere.

If a powerful mage allied with the characters succeeds, he is no longer a powerful mage. The cabal should protect him as the characters lead him from the building—but from that moment on, he receives visions and portents from the Heavens. This may give insights into what Seers are doing, foretell calamities and so forth.

If it's any consolation, the ritualist is also assured a place in the Heavens when he dies. Once the body and mind has been destroyed, the soul remains unfettered at the moment of his death, sitting at the left hand of a god. This could make for an interesting plot twist later in a chronicle. Conceivably, when the Throne returns to this world, the "lost soul" will appear as the Queen did early in the story, manifesting as a transparent apparition before the Throne.

Once the ritual is complete, a Consilium's collective influence could eventually move the Throne from this building, but this would take time. The mages are sealed from the outside world within the sanctum, since magic is required to enter through the elevator.

The Throne still functions as an Artifact, by the way. After activating it with a Gnosis roll, a mage using the Throne cannot only use a "Multispatial Perception" (Space 3) rote (Wits + Investigation + Space), but gains an extra five dice to the roll for using the Throne. A mage who already has Space can attempt to use the Throne to see into the Heavens, gaining visions of the future as a Seer would see them. All five Artifacts remain powerful, which means other mages could try to seize them—but those are complications best left for future adventures, should you decide to continue the story.

### *Conclusion*

The Ananke's destiny has been resolved, for better or worse, and a lost soul now serves as a conduit between Heaven and Earth. Such an individual can become a powerful agent of prophecy, speaking words that guide legions—but the price is the mage's Awakened soul. Whether these revelations are insights into cosmic forces or whispers from higher powers, anyone who can channel these forces is a valuable ally, both for the Seers of the Throne and the mages who oppose them.

As for the Dethroned Queen, she perished when her ritual was finished. In death, she attained Ascension, choosing to guide others to follow her. She then faced the choice of directing events in the world below or Ascend-



ing to communion with the cosmos in the world above. Out of pride, she summoned the Ananke to lead others along her path before casting the final High Ritual—but her path to Heaven exacted a terribly price. Those who follow her path must be tested, both for their Wisdom and their knowledge of magic. The few who can survive such a path can follow it to its conclusion. Heaven waits for the virtuous.

## *Antagonists*

### *Security Mage*

**Path:** Obrimos

**Order:** Seers of the Throne

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 4

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 2, Composure 2

**Mental Skills:** Computer 2, Investigation 2

**Physical Skills:** Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Firearms 3, Larceny 1, Stealth 2



**Social Skills:** Intimidation 2, Streetwise 2, Subterfuge 3  
**Merits:** Danger Sense 2, Fighting Style: Boxing 3, Sanctum 1  
**Willpower:** 6  
**Wisdom:** 7  
**Virtue:** Fortitude  
**Vice:** Greed  
**Initiative:** 5  
**Defense:** 2  
**Speed:** 11  
**Health:** 7  
**Gnosis:** 2  
**Arcana:** Forces 2, Prime 2, Space 2  
**Roles:** *Forces* — Nightsight (•), Unseen Shield (•); *Prime* — Supernal Vision (•), Counterspell Prime (••); *Space* — Correspondence (•), Finder (•), Apportation (••), Srying (••), Ward (••)  
**Mana/per turn:** 11/2  
**Armor:** 2 ("Unseen Shield," Forces ••)

### *Investigator Infiltrator*

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 3, Wits 3, Resolve 3

**Physical Attributes:** Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2  
**Social Attributes:** Presence 3, Charisma 2, Composure 3  
**Mental Skills:** Computer 1, Investigation 3, Occult 3  
**Physical Skills:** Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Firearms or Weaponry 2, Larceny 2, Stealth 3  
**Social Skills:** Streetwise 2, Subterfuge 2  
**Merits:** Brawling Dodge 1, Meditative Mind 1, Resources 2, Unseen Sight  
**Willpower:** 6  
**Morality:** 7  
**Health:** 7  
**Initiative:** 6  
**Defense:** 3  
**Speed:** 11

### *Converted Courtier*

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 3  
**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2  
**Social Attributes:** Presence 3, Charisma 3, Composure 2  
**Mental Skills:** Craft 2, Investigation 2, Politics 3  
**Physical Skills:** Athletics 1, Stealth 1, Weaponry 2  
**Social Skills:** Animal Ken 1, Empathy 3, Expression 1, Intimidation 2, Persuasion 3, Socialize 3, Streetwise 1, Subterfuge 3

**Merits:** Danger Sense 2, Direction Sense 1, Unseen Sense 3, Weaponry Dodge 1

**Willpower:** 5  
**Morality:** 7  
**Health:** 7  
**Initiative:** 4  
**Defense:** 2  
**Speed:** 9

### *Avatar of Ananke*

**Rank:** 3  
**Attributes:** Power 6, Finesse 5, Resistance 5  
**Willpower:** 11  
**Essence:** 20 (max 20)  
**Initiative:** 11  
**Defense:** 5  
**Speed:** 16  
**Size:** 5  
**Corpus:** 10  
**Influences:** Obedience 5

### *Corporate Drone*

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 3  
**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2



**Social Attributes:** Presence 3, Charisma 3, Composure 2  
**Mental Skills:** Computer 2, Investigation 2, Politics 3  
**Physical Skills:** Athletics 1, Drive 1, Firearms 1, Stealth 1  
**Social Skills:** Empathy 1, Expression 2, Intimidation 3, Socialize 2, Subterfuge 3  
**Merits:** Language 1, Contacts 3, Resources 3  
**Willpower:** 5  
**Morality:** 7  
**Health:** 7  
**Initiative:** 4  
**Defense:** 2  
**Speed:** 9

### *Human Resources Seer*

**Path:** Thyrsus  
**Order:** Seers of the Throne  
**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 3  
**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2  
**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 4  
**Mental Skills:** Computer 2, Investigation 2, Politics 3  
**Physical Skills:** Athletics 2, Brawl 1, Stealth 1  
**Social Skills:** Empathy 1, Expression 1, Intimidation 1, Persuasion 2, Socialize 2, Subterfuge 4  
**Merits:** Contacts 3, Resources 3, Sanctum 1  
**Willpower:** 7  
**Wisdom:** 7  
**Virtue:** Charity  
**Vice:** Greed  
**Initiative:** 6  
**Defense:** 2  
**Speed:** 9  
**Health:** 7  
**Gnosis:** Gnosis 3  
**Arcana:** Life 3, Mind 2, Spirit 1  
**Rotes:** *Life* — Sense Life (•), Organic Resilience (••), Self-Healing (••), Healing Heart (•••); *Mind* — Emotional Urging (••), First Impressions (••), Voice from Afar (••), Psychic Assault (•••); *Spirit* — Exorcist Eye (•)  
**Mana/per turn:** 12/3  
**Armor:** 2 ("Organic Resilience," Life ••)

### *Middle Manager*

**Path:** Moros  
**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 3  
**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2  
**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 4  
**Mental Skills:** Computer 2, Investigation 2, Politics 3  
**Physical Skills:** Athletics 2, Brawl 1, Stealth 1  
**Social Skills:** Empathy 1, Expression 1, Intimidation 1,

Persuasion 2, Socialize 2, Subterfuge 4  
**Merits:** Contacts 3, Resources 3, Sanctum 1  
**Willpower:** 7  
**Wisdom:** 7  
**Virtue:** Envy  
**Vice:** Greed  
**Initiative:** 6  
**Defense:** 2  
**Speed:** 9  
**Health:** 7  
**Gnosis:** 3  
**Arcana:** Death 1, Matter 3, Mind 2  
**Rotes:** *Matter* — Unseen Aegis (••), Alter Integrity (•••), Repair Object (•••); *Mind* — Emotional Urging (••), Voice from Afar (••)  
**Mana/per turn:** 12/3  
**Armor:** 3 ("Unseen Aegis," Matter •••)

### *Company Director*

**Path:** Mastigos  
**Order:** Seers of the Throne  
**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 4  
**Physical Attributes:** Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2  
**Social Attributes:** Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 3  
**Mental Skills:** Computer 2, Investigation 2, Politics 3  
**Physical Skills:** Athletics 2, Brawl 1, Stealth 1  
**Social Skills:** Empathy 1, Expression 1, Intimidation 1, Persuasion 2, Socialize 2, Subterfuge 4  
**Merits:** Contacts 2, Resources 4, Sanctum 1  
**Willpower:** 7  
**Wisdom:** 7  
**Virtue:** Prudence  
**Vice:** Greed  
**Initiative:** 5  
**Defense:** 2  
**Speed:** 9  
**Health:** 7  
**Gnosis:** 3  
**Arcana:** Fate 2, Mind 3, Space 2  
**Rotes:** *Fate* — Interconnections (•), Reading the Outmost Eddies (•), Exceptional Luck (••), Evil Eye (••), Perfect Moment (••); *Mind* — Emotional Urging (••), Voice from Afar (••), Psychic Assault (•••), Telepathy (•••); *Space* — Apportation (••), Scrying (••)  
**Mana/per turn:** 12/3  
**Armor:** 2 ("Fortune's Protection," Fate ••)

### *The Minister of Mammon*

**Path:** Mastigos  
**Order:** Seers of the Throne

**Mental Attributes:** Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 3  
**Physical Attributes:** Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2  
**Social Attributes:** Presence 3, Manipulation 3, Composure 4

**Mental Skills:** Academics 3, Computer 2, Crafts 1, Investigation 3, Occult 4, Politics 4, Science 1

**Physical Skills:** Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Drive 2, Larceny 2, Stealth 1, Weaponry 3

**Social Skills:** Empathy 2, Expression 3, Intimidation 4, Persuasion 4, Socialize 3, Subterfuge 4

**Willpower:** 7

**Wisdom:** 4

**Virtue:** Faith

**Vice:** Greed

**Initiative:** 7

**Defense:** 2

**Speed:** 11

**Health:** 7

**Gnosis:** 4

**Arcana:** Fate 2, Mind 3, Space 4

**Rotes:** *Fate* — Interconnections (•), Quantum Flux (•), The Perfect Moment (••); *Mind* — Sense Consciousness (•), Third Eye (•), Emotional Urging (••), Mental Shield (••), Misperception (••), Voice from Afar (••), Psychic Assault (•••), Telepathy (•••); *Space* — Omnivision (•), (••) Apportation (••), Scrying (••), Untouchable (••), Ward (••), Ban (•••), Ranged Blow (•••), Co-Location (••••)

**Mana/per turn:** 13/4

**Armor:** 4 ("Untouchable," Space ••)



Who shall  
conceive the  
**HORRORS**  
of my secret toil as I  
dabbled among the  
unhallowed damp of  
the grave or tortured  
the living animal  
to animate the  
lifeless clay?

# PROMETHEAN

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