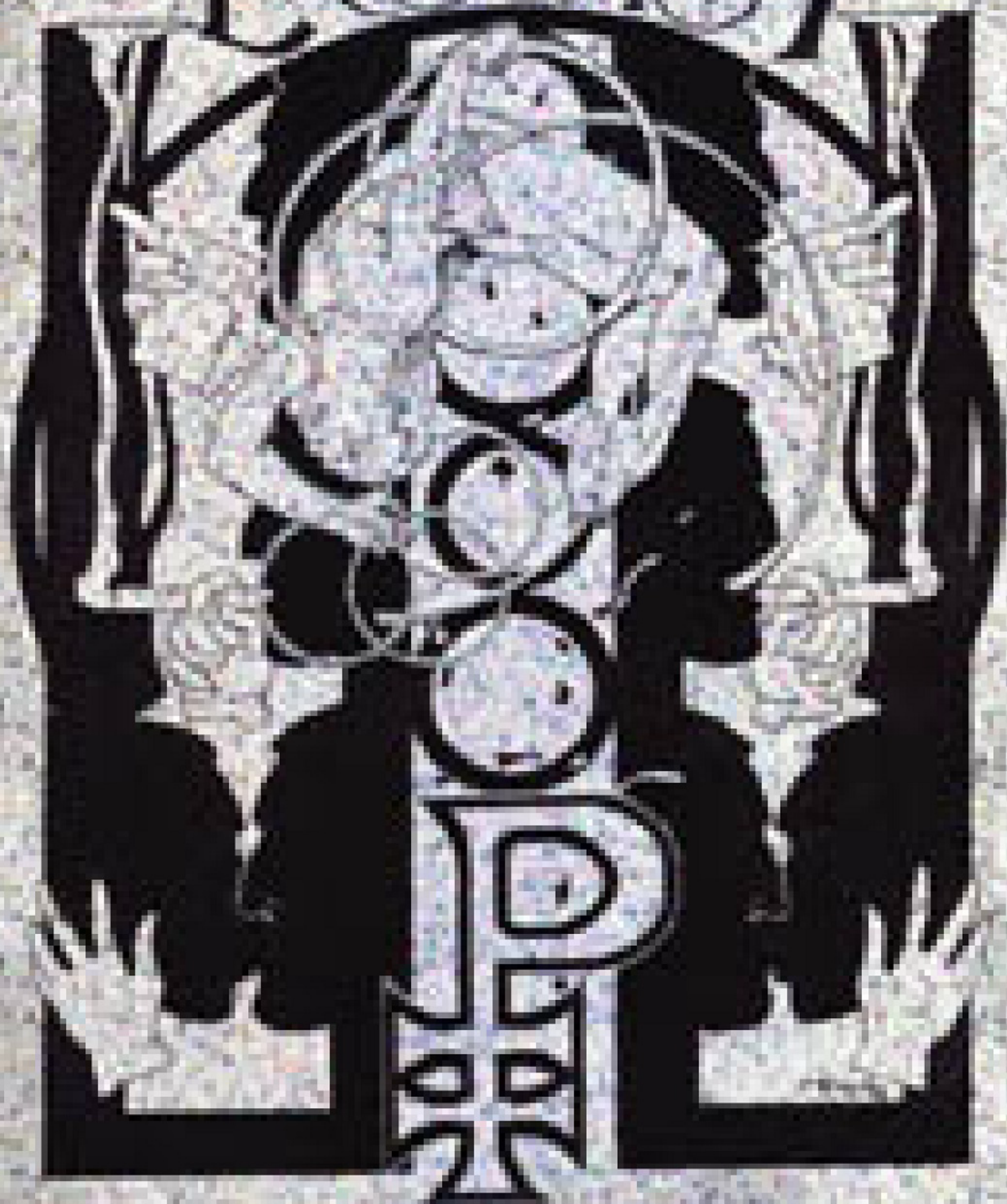


CITY
POSTAL



CULT OF ECSTASY™

LEARNING TO FLY



"Is everybody in?"

"The women only is about to begin."

Jim Morrison, "Celebration of the Lizard"

By PHIL BRUGATO

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To Jennifer Scaring, for Burning Man.

To Heather & Laz, for sharing mad dances.

To Stefani Olsen, whose footprints showed me the path.

To Beth Fischl, for her own journey.

And to Wendy Blacksin, for everything.

Much Love to you All.

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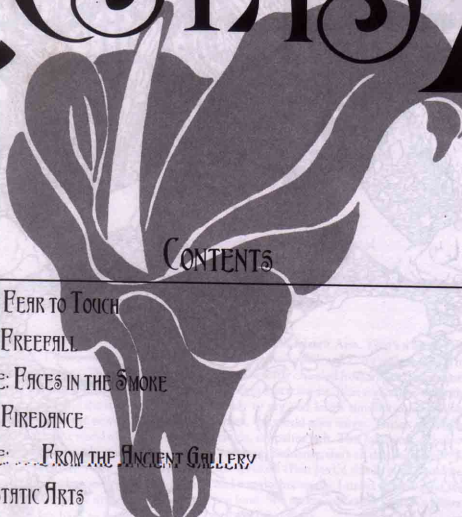
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CULT OF ECSTASY™



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STOP!!!

This book contains controversial subjects. It's a work of fiction, but it draws upon real-life practices. Some of these practices are pretty damned dangerous. Before continuing, you have two choices:

1: Close this book right now and put it away.

2: Deal with it like an adult.

This is fiction. You are not. And real life doesn't give soak rolls.

Thank you. The book will now continue. Have fun!



INTRODUCTION: FEAR TO TOUCH

I stood before a black cave, wanting to go in, and I shuddered at the thought that I might not be able to find my way back.

— Anonymous patient of Dr. Wilhelm Stekel, quoted in Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*

I am afraid.

Every day, I drive with windows closed. Pollution's bad for you. The wind might muss my hair, and then I'd look like a freak. I clutch my purse tight and hold the strap to foil would-be thieves. I listen to the news and think of all the bastards across the world who get away with murder. And I wonder when they'll choose to murder me. I keep my voice down, my eyes straight ahead. And I watch for the hammer from the sky, the butcher's mallet that will finally justify my fear.



Was I always this way? It's hard to tell. We grow up rightfully afraid; of strangers, of robbers, of mockery, of being left alone. We're afraid of pain and there's too much of that to go around. I think I was even afraid as a child. It's hard to remember why, but there are all too many reasons.

I'm not a coward. At least I don't think that I am. Later I will find that I am wrong, but for now I think I'm normal. I guess fear is normal. It's our natural coping skill. Like I said, there are reasons to be afraid. The world's too full of catastrophes.

Catastrophes like her.

She calls herself Aria. That's a song, I think. Her hair, unlike mine, is dark red. Long and tangled. The angles of her face are softly chiseled from freckled sunburned skin, but it's her eyes that scare me. Blue and bright and wide, as if she were ready to cry and laugh simultaneously. When I look into them, the world goes askew. Things tilt slightly, my fingers tingle, my palms itch. This familiar cafe pales behind Aria's presence. Suddenly, she's all that seems real. The music from the speakers (Bon Jovi, I think, but I could never tell) rises and engulfs her words. I strain to hear Aria but the music is too loud. She makes me feel in love, but better. Please God, tell me I'm not gay.

She walked up to me a few minutes ago and sat down like an old friend. "This seat's not taken, is it?" she asked as she slid it from the table and plopped down, spread-legged. Rude. My soda jiggled in the glass as she landed heavily. When I looked up, annoyed, a bit afraid, she stared at me and my little world went crack.

"Cassie," she said, "You look pathetic."

I don't know until later how she knows my name.

"Excuse me?" I asked, my tone just sharp enough to show that yes, I was insulted but too polite to tell her to go

fuck herself. My fingers slip in condensation on my soda glass. I'd been picking at my food and it'd gotten cold too. I lifted the glass casually, like I was used to hippie freaks accosting me at lunch break: "Were you looking for a chair?"

"I've found what I'm looking for. The question is, have you? Obviously not."

"Do you mind?" The tone grew a deeper edge, the fighting knife edge girls cultivate at a young age. "I was eating lunch. If you want the chair, take it and go. Otherwise, please get lost." Finished, I look away.

"Cassie," she snapped. Her voice had the same sharp tone. "Wake up."

I examined my meal. "Go away."

She reached down, took my chin, and lifted my face to hers. "Make me."

At her touch, my heart leaps into sudden overdrive. Would we fight? Here in the cafe? I panic, then notice she's smiling. And those eyes are all I want to see. The world tips on its axis, skews, and here we are.

"What do you want?" My voice is quiet now, even to me.

"Your attention."

She's nothing special, really. Not by the look of her. Let's call her mode of dress "generic bohemian": a loose black top, belly-bare. Denim jacket with the sleeves torn off. Gypsy skirt, amber, with wears and patches. You'd expect her to be dripping with jewelry—little crosses, Deadhead beads—but all she wears is a single nose ring that catches the light from the cafe window. As she talks, her fingers steeple and rest beneath her nose. Her nails are short, her fingers callused. Despite the glass-strewn street outside, Aria goes barefooted. Later I'll learn that she always does. No one stops her. And if she fears the glass, it doesn't show. She looks like a thousand trampy Deadhead chicks, the kind that sat and smoked while I took classes at GSU. She's nothing special. Except for her eyes—bright and alive. Crackling, almost, like she's seen the heart of the sun. I can't guess what this burnout wants with me, but when I met her gaze I suddenly didn't care.

"Go away," I repeat. Weak. Soft.

She lets go, trails her fingers across my chin. My face burns where they touch. "Trust me, you won't want me to."

Is my cheek twitching? Later I'll discover that I've got a nervous tic. It goes away in time, but for the moment I'm only vaguely aware of it. I felt stupid about it, though, and the fear shifted gears, freezing my face in what I hoped was a pleasant grin. Not a smirk, not a nervous smile. Just a friendly grin.

"So. Who are you? And why is my attention so important?"

"I'm Aria, and it's time to wake up. There's a part of you that's been sleepwalking for most of your life, and that part's gotten hungry. I can see it." She locks her fingers, leans back and cradles her head behind her. If she wears a bra, it doesn't show. She has bigger breasts than me, and spends more time outdoors.



This woman frightens me. She seems too awake to be harmless.

I'm rattled, off-guard. She can tell. "Cassie." Her voice is a soft command. "Listen to me. Let me explain, and then you can get up and leave if you want to."

"Explain, already."

She leans back and wraps her toes around the tabletop. Red tangles tumble across her face, but her eyes blaze through. Vaguely mocking.

"Who are you?"

"A friend. I've been watching you for a long time. You may not recognize me, but I know you've felt me watching."

"You're full of shit." I pull back, despite her magnetic gaze. "I've never seen you before. If you've been spying on me, I never noticed." The thought freaks me out a bit. How long has she been watching me? "Who the hell are you?" I repeat, "and why are you pestering me?"

"I'm opportunity, Cassie, a walking crisis. I'm a door that's just opened for you, but I won't stay open for long. I've been in love with you for years, but we've never met. You've never heard my voice, but you know me." Her voice drops as she shifts in her seat and leans in close. Her breath smells like mint. "and I know you."

Against my will, my heartbeat and breathing start to race. I swallow, but it takes forever. Like a cobra, she pins me to the chair with her eyes alone. "You don't know me," I protest, half-heartedly.

"I know you very well. Better than you know yourself, I think. I know your secrets. Every man you've laid, I've met. Every girl you've dreamed of kissing, I've seen. All the risks and dares you've taken, I've known about. The time you got drunk and went skinny dipping with Marcie in the fountain, the time you took that lipstick from WalMart, those first few off-campus parties you went to, that time you screwed around with Danny MacAllister at Sarah's, Jeff's birthday party, when you ate those hash brownies. I may not have been there, exactly, but when you fucked George in your bathtub while your parents slept in the room next door, I heard about it. I know you better than any of your so-called 'friends' do, and Cassie, I approve."

"So-called" friends is right. Marcie can't keep her mouth shut to save her life, apparently. Why'd she talk to this tramp? Aria knows way more than I'm comfortable with.

She pushes herself away from me suddenly. "But now you've grown chickenshit, Cassie. You're too worried about what so-and-so will think. You worry about AIDS, about pollution, about health insurance and bank balances and rent and a thousand other things. And it stifles you, Cassie. It's fucking killing you. The fear is like cement and you're drowning in it. In a year, you'll be just like all the other drones."

The shot hits too close to home. To hell with this chick. I shove my chair away from the table. "Go away. Just leave me alone." I try to sound cool, growling the words, but it doesn't work.

"If that's what you want." She stands. My belly freezes from the look she gives me and a sudden ringing in my ears drowns out everything but her voice. "But if I walk away now, you will never see me again. And you'll be left wondering for the rest of your life what you just gave up."

"What do you want?" My voice sounds tiny and strained.

Aria grins. "A kiss."

"Here?"

"Here. Now. To hell with what anyone thinks but you and me."

I inhale. The breath trembles all the way to my lungs and shudders there, waiting. I swear I can feel sweat creeping out of my pores. All I can see are Aria's flashing eyes, so I close my own. In darkness, it's so much easier to decide. Without a word, I push myself out of my chair. It takes an eternity to rise to my feet, and I can feel each muscle shift, each joint flow then lock into place as I step into her arms. I keep my eyes closed as we press together. If others are staring, I don't want to know.

God, she kisses well. Too well. I'm lost.

Everyone avoids our eyes as the two lesbians pay the check and leave. Jesus, what have I just done?

.....

A FRIENDLY INTRODUCTION

Hello! It's your author. Since this is a game book, many things need to be spelled out in Plain English. Rather than wrap the narrative around some convoluted subjects, I'm just going to stick my nose in every now and then to tell you helpful stuff. Unusual subjects demand an odd approach.

This is the first of many intrusions. Some will be facts, others editorials. All of them will be helpful hints for understanding the Ecstasies, especially from a Storyteller's viewpoint. This isn't to say that the rest of the text isn't important. If anything, the story will tell you more about playing a Cultist than these sidebars could. But some things just have to be said in a straightforward fashion, so why screw around?

Call this the happy box. I do.

Before we continue, I want to clarify the following points:

- **Past/present/future tense shifts:** Yes, they're intentional. No, they're not mistakes. Ecstasies have a warped sense of time.
 - **The Story itself:** Consider it a script of sorts. Although each Ecstasie's experiences will be different, the aspects of their common journey are often similar. Look for what is shown, not told.
- And a few more things...

STEREOTYPES: TRUE AND FALSE

Many stupid things have been said about the Cult. Some are true, most are not.

- **Cultists of Ecstasy are all a bunch of worthless hippies:** Totally false. The Ecstatics are visionaries, shamanic adventurers of the senses. Their Arts are as old as time, and Time itself is their toy. While they might appear stoned and irresponsible, it's because so few outsiders see things their way.
 - **All Cultists are addicts:** False. Some do get addicted to their own sensations, but they don't last long.
 - **Ecstatics are sex maniacs, dopeheads and dropouts:** False. While Cultists pursue sex, drugs, meditation, holistic living and visionquests as focusing tools, serious Ecstatics consider these to be sacraments, not hobbies.
 - **Cultists are irresponsible:** Quite false. While they regard "society's" rules with a take-it-or-leave-it abandon, many can foresee the consequences of their own actions. Those who don't know this have the lesson pounded into their thick heads by their mentors: *No mage operates in a vacuum.*
- Early Cultists realized how important structure was; no group built on total hedonism could survive for long. As societies became more repressed, Ecstatics rebelled and threw *all* the rules, including their own, out the window. In the '60s, a great revolution took place, and the Ecstatics led the charge. Sadly, the greatest of their kind fell to drugs, and following generations learned all the wrong lessons from their example. The Cult, and the world at large, lost a lot of ground because people lost sight of the consequences of their actions. Modern Ecstatics are trying to learn from their mistakes and have resurrected the old ways. The Code of Ananda is but one example of the way in which Cultists recognize the responsibilities their awesome powers confer.
- **Tantrik magick is the Cult's foundation:** False. Tantra, a system of balance between polarities, is one part of a larger whole. The Tradition's actual foundation, the Lakashim, is both simpler and more complex than Tantrik ritual.
 - **Cultists crave sensuality:** Very true.
 - **Cultists hate authority:** Also true. Given most authority figures' tendency to quash nonconformity, Ecstatics throughout time have been leery of rulers and governments — even their own.
 - **The Cult has no formal system of magickal beliefs:** Untrue. Read on and learn...

At home, the fear hits me again. Solid, like a punch in the chest. My shoes clatter too loudly on the stairs. My keys jangle like tubular bells. Aria's bare feet make no sound. Her breathing, slightly husky, whistles softly through her nostrils.

What am I about to do with this woman? I've never done it before, but I can't deny I want to. Has anyone seen us come in together? Do we look like lesbians preparing for a tryst? If so, how can I ever face Shelly next door, and Jack and Ursul and Marcie? Can I stand it when they whisper behind my back? My key scrabbles for the lock I've opened a million times before, and the words to dismiss this woman form inside my throat.

"Look," I say, turning. The words are soft, more clicks than speech. I could end this now. Aria's spirit still lingers on my tongue. I fight the urge to spew it on the floor. Maybe we can do this later... It's not a good time...

Aria's hand reassures me. Warm and callused fingers brush my cold ones and the touch travels deep inside me. She lifts one finger to my lips, stops the words, and freezes me with those endless eyes. "No," she whispers. "You're ready now. Surrender your fear. Freefall." Leaning forward, she kisses me softly, lingering. The key meets the lock and clicks. The apartment door opens. The hinges cry out.

It's dark inside my apartment, but a bit of moonlight filters in past the shades. They're drawn, of course. I wouldn't want anyone to see inside my home.

"Come on in." The words are out. The door is open. Aria smiles. I step aside as she glides across the threshold.

Freefall. That sums up my feelings as I step inside and close the door.

AN ECSTATIC LEXICON

A fair amount of Tradition terminology comes from its roots. Two of the five founders of the original Seers of Chronos were Tantrik Divyas, so they used Sanskrit to define many of the early concepts. Other terms have been added over time.

Ananda — The sacred state of bliss and transcendence. Not Ascension, but a step toward it.

Blockhead — An outsider who doesn't get it and never will.

Chakra — Energy centers along the spine, through which mystick power flows. Various Eastern practices define either four or seven chakras; the latter correspond well with the locations of endocrine glands. Tantrik exercises (among others) stimulate energy flows through these centers. See *ojas*.

Code of Ananda — The ethic most Cultists live by, compiled during the Tradition's founding and taught as gospel by Ecstatic mentors.

Congrex — A mystick communion, sometimes sexual, sometimes not, which raises power and/or awareness through a shared bond.

Daemon — A common term for the Avatar. A Daemon, as opposed to "demon," is the inner inspiration, the muse, the Sacred Self.

Dakini — A Tantrik holy woman whose magical powers flow from her sexual energies.

Diksham — The bond between mentor and student.

Divya — A Master mage, one who has accomplished the highest understandings (i.e., someone who has five dots in one or more Spheres).

Dreamline — A mystick communication which calls Ecstatics together during emergencies.

Jambo — A "formal" Cult gathering, often called to discuss some serious matter but enhanced with wild parties and affectionate greetings.

Kamamarga — The Paths of Ecstasy, aka foci, various means of reaching an ecstatic state, such as tripping, dancing, fasting, etc.

Lakashim — The Divine Pulse, or World Heartbeat, which resonates in all things. Ecstasy helps attune a person to the Lakashim, and magick flows from it.

Ojas — "Life force"; the inner power that Ecstatics refine through altered consciousness. One's personal Quintessence reserve, channeled through magicks like the Rush Prime Effect.

Okox — Communion with spirits, usually through trances and possession. This usually involves sex between mage and spirit, channeling and exchanges of perceptions on both sides.

"Running Away" Drugs — Depressants, narcotics and other chemical inhabitants most Cultists disdain.

"Running Toward" Drugs — Hallucinogens, stimulants and other chemicals which block inhibitions and open a person to new perceptions.

Sahajiya — One of many former names for the Cult. Others include the Seers of Chronos and the Cult of Bacchus.

Sects — Small orders within the Tradition. Most predate the Cult itself.

Shakti — "Creative power"; Prime energy, usually embodied as a goddess. Also a common name for True Magick among Cultists. Real access to Shakti involves bliss, will, knowledge, wisdom and action.

Shakta — The male focus energy which gives form to the raw power of Shakti. Wedding the two into a greater whole is the Tantrik ideal.

Siddhu — An Indian mystic; a wandering holy man.

Tantra — A system of balancing polarities through exercises, meditations, postures and congrex. Contrary to popular belief, many Tantrik exercises have nothing to do with sex, although most of the popular ones do. *Dakshinacara*, the "right-hand way," concentrates on spiritual devotion to a higher power rather than on mortal sensations. *Vamacara*, the "left-hand path" of Tantrik magick, invokes inner Divinity through focused sensual stimulation — that is, ritual sex, drugs, dance and meditation. Three guesses which path most Ecstatics prefer.

"Tantra" also refers to spiritual scriptures and poetry involving the Tantrik arts.

Zeitgeist — "Time spirit"; a personification of a time period that carries such emotional Resonance that it takes on a life of its own. Some time shaman Cultists can contact or even summon zeitgeists.



LEIF
JONES
1976

FIRST VERSE: FREEFALL

Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of feeling more or less alive on different days. Everyone knows on any given day that there are energies slumbering in him which the incitements of the day do not call forth, but which he might display if these were greater. Most of us feel as if a sort of cloud weighed upon us, keeping us below our highest notch of clearness in discernment, sureness in reasoning, or firmness in deciding. Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half awake.

— William James, *The Energies of Man*



It's raining when I awaken. Cold hard sheets of water roar across the parking lot like angry soldiers. My warm bed is empty. Aria is gone. For a moment, my heart feels like the pavement outside. Then I sigh and roll over. Some things aren't meant to last, I guess.

My sheets feel like raw burlap against my skin. Restless, I finally decide to rise. The light filtering past the blinds looks like old coffee as I pad to the shower. Strange; beneath my feet, the hardwood floor seems rough, unfinished. Not unpleasant, just... more textured than before. Curious, I stop and sweep my toes across the surface. The resulting thrill surges into my fifth orgasm of the night. When I stop trembling, the room feels colder. What's happening to me?

Bathroom tiles hold a different feeling. Their cool smoothness soothes my jangled nerves. As if in slow motion, I glide across the floor, brushing my soles against a rug fluffier than it seemed before. Luxurious. I step onto it and dig my toes into its fibers. Strange, the things you take for granted. As thunder echoes from far away, I shove the curtain aside and summon hissing water from the tap. Harnessed rain. I shift the setting from bath to shower and test the water with my hand.

Seconds blend to hours. The storm in my own bathtub tickles my palm, and the sensations race across my whole body until my will gives way and yet another orgasm surges outward. Finally, I step into the steamy tub and caress myself with the water's flow. Outside, thunder rolls again, nearer his time. Suddenly even this ecstasy is not enough.

Sudden impulse. Dare I follow it? The back door isn't far away. It's dark. No one will see me. Trembling, I suddenly ache to feel the storm itself across my skin, my feet in puddles, my hair in tangles. After seeming hours of hesitation, I turn off the water and head toward the door. *What am I doing?* Again, a sudden surge of panic. What will Jim and Marcie think? Surely they're awake by now. The image almost stops me: dancing naked in the rain while the whole complex watches, laughing. The fear freezes me halfway to the door. I can't go out there.

The back door opens. It's Aria, of course, nude and dripping with a wild grin across her face. A blast of cold wind hits me from outside. "Come on out, Cassie," she whispers. "It feels like heaven."

I follow her, of course, and a flood of new sensations hits me as I step across the threshold. Chill iron, wet with

rain. Bright flickers from the clouds, a purr of creeping thunder. Icy water-lash and warm skin beneath my fingers. Aria leads me through the doorway and into the rain like a new parent showing off her offspring. It's glorious. With patient hands, she peels my arms from across my breasts, spreads my hands, pushes me forward and blocks the doorway. I am naked to the storm and I worship it.

Why was I afraid?

Eyes closed, I let shudder after shudder ride through me. The touch of warm fingers, palms, arms, breasts, stirs me from my meditation. Aria wraps herself across my body, presses close, squeezes me to her, turns me slowly around to face her. It's like before: I'm helpless, her puppet. She kisses me slowly, deeply, forever.

Dawn lightened the clouds at last and the rain subsided to drizzle. I don't know when we left the balcony and wandered back inside. But if anyone had seen us, I never heard about it. And frankly, I never cared.

THE LESSONS BEGIN

*I am the fountain of affection — the instrument of joy
To keep the good times rolling, I'm the boy, I'm the boy
I say the world will be our oyster — you can put your trust in me
We'll keep the good times rolling
Wait and see, wait and see
Wait and see...*

— Oysterband, "When I'm Up I Can't Get Down"

Aria calls him "Wolf"; corny as it is, the name fits him: tall, rangy-lean and bearded, he prowls behind the counter like a restless animal staring into space. Brown hair brushes his back and frames a face both sweet and sinister. Brown eyes watch some enigma beyond the shop walls, and I wonder what he sees to make him smile that way. Yesterday, would've ignored this long-haired burnout. Now he seems compelling.

Inside the shop, a techno-tribal beat throbs from hidden speakers. I've heard it before and never liked the stuff, but this morning it sounds fresh, like the thunder of the dawn. I called in sick when Aria and I arose from bed, and she brought me here to find, as she put it, a mentor for my "new life."

"I can't teach you everything you need to know," she had assured me, tousling my hair. "I know the dance but can't tell you the steps. I know someone who can, though. Wolf." Over my objections, she'd dressed me in her own clothes and rummaged through my closet for some new ones. On her insistence, we left barefooted. My feet are sore now, but I'm not sorry. I've never walked around this way before.

I'm in a daze, a trance, a dreamwalk. Everything seems surreal. The buzz from our dawn shower lingers and the spring breeze rustles my skirt — Aria's skirt. It's not something I would wear myself, so tissue-light it feels like nothing, but it brushes my legs so softly I accept. I feel like a fool. I feel like an outlaw. I feel like an agent in disguise. For now, I'll play this game. I kinda like it.

THAT GLAZED LOOK

Cultists walk around in an endless state of hyper-awareness. They look stoned to others but sense many things more acutely than any Sleeper could. Assume that an Ecstatic mage keeps his first-rank Spheres in operation most of the time. While other mysticks need to consciously turn their magical senses on, most Cultists must turn them off.

When he awakens in the morning, the average Cultist focuses himself through some preferred ritual (see Appendix). This stimulates mystical senses as well as mundane ones, helping him enjoy the day for all it's worth. Unless he really wants to be attuned to all things, he'll choose a single Sphere sense to concentrate on. More often than not, the Sphere with the highest rating (or his affinity, if he has one. See *Mage Second Edition*.) becomes that "default" sense. Is he attuned to Matter? He'll notice every detail of the objects around him, especially the quality of workmanship. Is he a Life Adept? No one will catch him completely by surprise unless they come literally from nowhere. A Prime or Forces specialist will feel the surge of elemental energies, while a Cultist versed in Correspondence would never run into things unless they moved in front of him. Mind-seers are highly empathic, and if an Entropy-minded Cultist seems preoccupied, it's because he's trying to see past random events. To a mage familiar with the Spirit Sphere, the Penumbra is as real (if not moreso) than the material world, and a Time-friendly Ecstatic views things as if they were happening, remembered and foreseen simultaneously. No wonder he looks spaced out!

An Ecstatic character will usually employ a single focus for sensory magick, often something he can do easily, like humming, dropping acid or smoking. Naturally, this focus can still impede the mage's normal perceptions (hallucinations have been known to do that), and the hyper-awareness state often does the same. It's hard to concentrate when you can see Banes in the corner.

As the character grows out of his foci, the sensory Effects for the Spheres he uses "free" now come naturally to him. He'll have to make an effort to tune them out. This won't usually affect his Perception, Awareness or Alertness rolls (though something attuned to the sense, like an incoming electric shock, might lower the difficulty), but he may get a roll to notice something he would otherwise miss. No one else, of course, will notice what the Cultist sees unless he extends his perceptions to them (a separate Effect). Thus, even Tradition mages view the Cult as an ever-tripping bunch of misfits. Their loss. (The Appendix covers this subject in more detail.)



Back in the shop, Wolf stares oblivious as we wander to the counter, passing black T-shirts, fetish gear and Indian imports in a thousand pastel colors. Who wears this shit? Aria's friend is furry, bare-chested beneath a buckskin vest. A black tattoo of his namesake graces his right arm. "Wolf!" says Aria. "Wolf!"

He shakes himself from his reverie and stares straight at me. "Sorry... can I help you?"

"Wolf, meet Cassie." Aria's voice draws him suddenly to meet her eyes, not mine. "She's the one I told you about."

"I didn't see you there for a minute, Aria." He laughs, a purring chuckle. "Nice to meet you, Cassie."

He extends his hand, his eyes appraising me. I offer my own hand; when both meet, I feel a spark, like a static jump between hand and doorknob. Wolf feels it too. He purrs again. "Damn, Aria. She could be your sister, except for the hair."

I'm surprised. I didn't think we looked alike at all.

"She just woke up this morning, Wolf. Treat her gentle."

Treat me? Gentle? I cover the sudden surge of panic with a laugh. "We all woke up this morning."

"Not like this," Aria assures me. "Today is something different."

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Against my better judgment, I let Aria leave me with Wolf.

Behind the shop, there is a corridor. We followed Wolf as he led us down into a candle-lit room thick with incense and Persian rugs. As we descended, my terror rose: I would be handcuffed, branded, raped, sold... the list of horrors went on until we reached the chamber. My sore feet welcomed the carpet. Frightened as I was, the room seemed comforting. "Please, sit down," Wolf asks, indicating a pile of pillows. I sank down gratefully while Aria made her good-byes.

When she leaves, the fear returns. Cold. Crackling across my skin like electric spiders. I'm alone underground with a stranger, a bearded burnout with a devil's smile and faraway eyes. He says nothing, only watches me as he takes a thick glass goblet from a shelf, pours some wine and sets the glass between us. It's my move, I guess. I take my cue from the ring he wears, a cloudy blue stone with an inner glow, set in braided gold. "Nice ring," I say at last. "What is it?"

He cocks his head to look at it. Shyly, like a kid on his first date. "Thanks. It's sort of an heirloom."

"From who?"

"That," he answers, "is a long story..." And so began my initiation.

HISTORY PART I: THE BEGINNINGS



If the doors of perception were cleansed,
every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.
— William Blake

This world, he says, is neither the first world nor the last, merely a moment frozen in time. That's all time is: a succession of frozen moments, an endless "now," not a "then" or "when." It sounds confusing, but it's vital to understanding where the ring came from.

When it was made, no one counted time in minutes or days, but in seasons when the crops grew or the winters came. Time was longer then, and the people, poor as they may have been, were happier. Life was experienced, not observed.

Our people know what the ancient ones knew. There's a pulse behind the seasons. If you listen carefully, away from the modern noise and pressure, you can hear it. It weaves itself through music, throbs under lovers' words and in the veins beneath your skin. The Divine Pulse. *Lakashim*. The World's Heartbeat. When the seasons were as days, we all felt that pulse, and we were so much more alive. Some felt the pulse more than others, and those few could become one with the *Lakashim*, bending creation to their purposes. Others feared them, or worshipped them and called them *shaman* or *artist* or *madman* — they were all one and the same. They were the ones who made the rings, out of embers and stone and the blood of Mother Earth, and the rings sealed a pact, a memory of *Lakashim*.

As I listen, Wolf tells me of the origins of art and insight. According to some theories, he claims, human consciousness — the ability to grasp this "*Lakashim*" — began when primates ate hallucinogenic fungi and plants. The sensations blew open the doors of abstract reasoning and mystic insight, and this paved the way for a host of other talents. As we grew more sophisticated, those doors shut until only a select few could comprehend that they existed at all. And those few made the rings, and left them to their descendants. That's us.

You could call us a cult — a Cult of Ecstasy. People have called us Seers of Chronos, New Romantics, BÖN-Po, Sahajiya, Los Sabios Locos, Timelost, and a host of other names, not all of them terribly polite. We're the masters of crazy wisdom, the dancers to the Divine Pulse, the perverts and wildmen who act out, from enlightenment, what others suppress out of fear. We're the inheritors of the ring, the artisans of reality.

When I express my disbelief, he hands me a *bhong*. Old, a relic from the '60s from the look, and well-used from

the smell. I shake my head. I haven't smoked since college. "Don't smoke anything; just close your eyes and feel it." Intrigued but skeptical, I do.

Suddenly I'm on a table, a sunlit room spreads before me in a 360° panorama. That shock is bad enough, but the wash of sensations knocks me dizzy. Sea salt. Old pot. Unwashed bodies. Groggy voices. The light has a fuzzy quality, and the birds outside sound raucous, almost jeering. Bottles, mirrors and magazines litter my resting place, and I discover that I can't move. All I can do is feel. All proportion is gone — everything looks so much larger than before. I try to look down and discover that I can't.

"Hey, Cleo, where's the *bhong*?" a craggy, accented voice inquires. From one side, a man enters, naked and swaying. "It's on the table," comes the reply. Cleo, I assume. The man's eyes widen slightly. "Oh, yeah, I see it." He reaches for me. Oh shit! This isn't funny! His fingers, gritty with sand, wrap around me as he lifts me high in the air, flicks a lighter to life and enfolds me with his lips...

"Aagghhhh!" I shake myself from the vision, spitting. "What the fuck was that?"

"That," Wolf replies, "is magick. And it's real."

So I discovered the truth behind the veil. I listen much better after that. We're all magicians, you see. It's our birthright. Most people never realize it. I have. So has Wolf, and Aria. There's a whole pack of us, loosely organized into something he calls "the tradition." I guess he means that "Cult of Ecstasy."

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According to him, this Cult began with the first sorcerers but really came together in the late medieval period. Prior to that, our kind had practiced as they would, and shared their visions with their people. Music, theatre, wine-making and drug-taking all began as ways to reach the *Lakashim*. Vision quests, which might involve starvation, ordeals or tattooing, became rites of passage in most cultures. Life was short in those days, and so every pain or pleasure brought one closer to the Divine.

The shamans understood the link between our emotions — the sacred passions — and the *Lakashim*. In time, they became masters of creation, guides, healers, always seeking those things that would lead to greater insights or powers. To focus himself, a shaman would dance, eat peyote, drink soma or make love to spirits. Not everyone had the courage to see things that way, or to live with such intensity. Other forms of magick began, easier ways to reach the World-Pulse. Priests created gods to worship, then begged them for favors. Scholars compiled facts and artisans built devices to help them understand the *Lakashim*. Everyone has



insight, so all these methods worked. Despite their differences, these seekers all understood that reaching their goal involved breaking through mortal blinders and seeing things as they are.

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I ask Wolf what he meant by that. He pauses a moment, then hands me the goblet. "Before you can alter reality," he says, "you have to perceive it as it really is." He lifted the goblet and took my hand. The glass tingled my fingertips. "This is solid glass, right? Filled with liquid and held in your own flesh and blood. Solid masses, right?" I nodded out of habit. He smiled and closed his eyes. I felt a crackling in the air, as if it had been electrified.

I screamed at what I saw, and dropped the glass. Wolf's hand flashes. I've never seen anyone move so fast. Before the goblet fell halfway, he caught it, spilling only a few drops to the table. Before they land, I see them splatter, slowly spreading out, becoming droplets, floating free... then they fell.

I know my surprise shows. "That's a trick I'll teach you sometime." Wolf chuckles: "For now, please don't drop the glass again. Just look at it."

I did. Where the glass once was, particles dance, a lattice-work of dull blue sparkles. Inside this matrix, blinding bright flashes swirl like glitter tea. Our hands twist together like rattan, labyrinthine networks of cells and tendrils, millions of them, pulsating with light in a spectrum of colors. As I watch, a shuddering halo of burnt orange and shimmering violet washes around my hand and wrist. A similar aura of bright, flashing pink surrounds Wolf's own. Everywhere I look, patterns stand in place

of solid objects, all of them moving, shifting, pulsating softly. Shivers ripple through me. My matrix fingers slip slowly from around the goblet-pattern, and Wolf takes it from me in what resembles an exquisitely shot slow-motion film. Before he does it, I remember it happening.

"Get the picture?" he asks as the world returns to normal. I nod, silent. How could I not?

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Eventually, religions grew up around the sacred passions — the temples of Astarte and Aphrodite, the more spontaneous rites of Dionysus and Freyja, the drug-dreams of Taloc the Vision Serpent and Ga-Oh the Wind-Borne, and the eternal replication of the dance of Shakti and Shiva. The dance that makes the world go 'round. Other people, less enlightened but still searching for a moment of bliss, joined that dance with lesser results — and, as Wolf points out, less wisdom or discipline. Sacred rites became reckless screwing. Irresponsibility led to uncontrolled magick, to disease, addiction, unwanted children and jealous partners — sort of like the modern world. The chaos led to crackdowns from priests and kings. The temples were demolished, the phallic monuments smashed, the rites forbidden. Sacred or not, the passions were outlawed. Except, of course, in war. "All's fair..." after all.

THE COMING OF THE SEER

By the Dark Ages, our people were scattered. In India and China, they formed underground sects, passing Tantrik arts to their disciples. Islamic seers used hashish and

hours to bind assassins to their service. In the Americas and Africa, Ecstasies still gave sacraments to the people, but were avoided by those with less insight than they. In the cold north, Odin's priests hung from trees awaiting visions while Christian fanatics wandered the countryside naked, flogging themselves or fasting. Ecstasy remained a universal path to enlightenment, but then, as now, most people were afraid of it. By the time the Christians, Muslims and Buddhists had settled their kingdoms, our kind were banished to the shadows, working their Arts alone.

A conspiracy began, Wolf says, in the 1200s. A conspiracy of reason that denied ecstasy and replaced it with science. When these philosopher-scientists pooled their efforts, they began a worldwide reality shift that he claims blinds us all to this day. The sorcerers didn't notice until the 1400s, when a Seer came forth with a troubling prophecy: Magick, he said, would die unless all magicians banded together to counter the threat. Everyone dismissed him until his words began to come true. This Seer, Wolf told me, was called Sh'zar, and he founded our modern Tradition.

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This is all too much for me. The last 24 hours seem like a trip and I begin to crash. I can't keep my eyes open; the pillows are too soft and Wolf's voice too low. After a while it becomes a buzz and I call a halt. "Look," I begin, "This is all really cool and everything, but I'm not sure I want to know it. If there's some conspiracy, I'm not sure I should know it."

"Tomorrow, then. At least, relatively speaking." He laughs at his joke, but it flies past me.

"I don't know. Maybe not. I don't feel like a magician, least of all an 'Ecstatic' one. I've got a life to get back to. Thanks, though."

"You can't go back. Not now. You can leave here, but you're a different person than you were this time yesterday. Aren't you at least intrigued?" I agree that perhaps I am. "Then here," he says, holding out the goblet, "I'll keep this until you decide. I can't tell you more until we make a promise to each other — a diksham bond — but I won't force you to do something you're not sure about. Being one of us is fun, but it's dangerous fun, Cassie, and I'm letting you know that up front. You're standing on the cusp of something more important than you'll ever know, but you have to make the decision. I'm not here to sell you anything." He takes the goblet away. "When you're ready, I'll be here. But don't take too long deciding. I won't be here forever. Nor will Aria."

She's not there when I return home. Her scent lingers in my bed, on her clothing, but there's no sign of her. I'm relieved. And terrified. What if she won't come back? In a moment of madness, I throw all my shoes away, then cry for hours. That night, I talk with God. At least, I think it's God. I'm not sure anymore. His voice carries all the doubt and indecision I've ever known:

"Do Not. Thou Shalt Not." I can't sleep again. I'm afraid. So damned afraid that I hate myself.

To spite that fear, I return to Wolf the next morning. He doesn't seem surprised to see me. "Come on back, Cassie," he says heartily. On whispering feet, I follow.

INITIATION

The Five Steps to Ecstasy

1: Surrender Your Fear.

2: Focus Your Intentions.

3: Open Yourself.

4: Attune Yourself to the Lakshmi.

5: Repeat Step One.

It scared the shit out of me when Wolf shucked his jacket. Inside Aria's skirt pocket, I'd hidden a steak knife. If I don't like this, I'm not staying, I'd thought. As he takes out the goblet and swirls the wine, I wonder if I'll have to use the knife. From some hidden speaker, hypnotic chanting begins. Wolf sets the goblet between us, shuts his eyes, and begins to chant himself. After a moment, music rises, a winding, pulsating rhythm. Soon the air itself begins to throb; I sway, in spite of myself, like a charmed serpent and I'd swear that even the candles flicker in time. After what seems a liquid eternity, Wolf opens his eyes and stares into my own:

"I swear, by all I hold sacred and fine, to instruct you, to guide you, to respect you. Never shall I harm thee, never shall I betray thee, for your trust is my own. This do I promise you."

He holds the goblet before him, drinks deeply, and passes it to me. I accept. The wine smells faintly of cinnamon and burns a bit going down. Some lingers on my lips. Slowly I lick them clean.

Wolf extends his hands to mine. Trembling, we touch.

The sex goes beyond just sex. The sweaty trysts I've shared so many times, even the soft intensity of Aria, are nothing compared to this melding fire of mingled spirits. It's a communion beyond words, a telepathic tidal wave washing through us both. Wolf is a stranger to me, yet we become partners as we bleed into each other. The twilight thunder rides us for eternities, then subsides finally into a shared pulse, a steady dying roar rumbling into the rhythms of hidden music. The dance of Shakti and Shiva ends.

"Jesus," I mutter as the fire dies down. "What's in that wine?"

"Cinnamon, cloves and sugar. It wasn't the wine, Cassie. It was us."

I laugh shakily as he holds me close. "I think I may like this Cult."

DIKSHAM — THE MENTOR/STUDENT BOND

Informal as the Cult may be, one relationship stands firm: diksham, the covenant between a mentor and his student.

Most Ecstatic mentors and pupils become lovers. Their sex is more than an initiation, recreation or affection. It is not, except in the very worst partnerships, a form of payment, whatever most blockheads may think. Rather, their intercourse seals an apprenticeship pact, the diksham, which exchanges both mages' essences and bonds the two into one. Cultists take it very seriously; those who abuse or betray their teachers or initiates are shunned or punished (see Chapter Two).

The best thing a student sworn to diksham can do is pay attention. An Ecstatic novice often goes up in a puff of paradox unless he's smart and careful; by the time that Cultist takes a pupil, he usually knows what he's talking about. The beginner isn't under any obligation to follow his lead, but if she's smart, she will. Her obligations do include respect for the mentor's wisdom, safety and position. In her part of the oath, the initiate promises not to endanger her teacher.

Unlike most Traditions, an Ecstatic initiate has no obligation to service. The rigorous apprenticeships of the Order of Hermes or Akashic Brotherhood rarely exist outside of a few ancient sects. It's assumed, though, that the initiate wants to learn. If she chooses to walk away, it's her prerogative — and her funeral. The diksham assumes she'll at least listen for a while.

The mentor has graver duties; as a host of enlightenment, he's considered her guide through hostile territory. It's his responsibility to make sure his student understands what she's getting herself into. Teaching her to use her Arts is secondary to teaching her to survive. If he has any concept of the diksham, he'll take the job seriously. Betraying the bond is akin to tossing a baby up in the air and refusing to catch it.

Abusing, tricking or demanding payment from an apprentice is considered bad form. In fact, most modern Cultists scorn the term "apprentice." The Tradition's best way of enforcing the diksham is peer pressure. A mentor who raises a lousy student, or a student who pays no attention to her teacher, are both considered screw-ups by other Cultists, and word does get around. Really severe cases are called out by other Ecstatics, who may challenge the offender to certamen, take his student away, or banish him from their gatherings and Chantries. The worst punishment, however, is fairly Darwinian: Cultists betrayed in a diksham bond often seek revenge. And an angry mage makes a rotten enemy.

HISTORY PART II: THE COUNCIL GATHERS



Sometimes in life situations develop that only the half-crazy can get out of.

— La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims* 310

Sometime later, we wrap ourselves in blankets and return to the history lesson. We're closer, now, and our touch stirs electric shivers. Now that the pact is sealed, Wolf tells me secrets. His lessons continue for hours. Although he relates the events in a bewildering stream of impressions, as if he himself had lived them, I prefer to remember them in the past tense. He picks back up with the Seer, Sh'zar, and his prophecies of disaster.

Sh'zar, they say, spoke to 23 Masters of the Arts. Three Divyas, or divine initiates, followed him, and preached his gospel to those they met — Akrites Salonikas, Tali Eos and Kalas Jnana. Three other Masters listened, then returned to their own orders and convinced them to gather — Nightshade, Valoran and Baldric. These three Masters belonged to warring factions with centuries of bad blood spilled between them. The words and visions Sh'zar imparted changed their minds. It took time, but by 1440 arrangements had been made to meet.

Sh'zar and his friends had already been busy. While the Seer conferred with Baldric, Nightshade and Valoran, the other Divyas journeyed across the world, greeting others of their kind. They traveled through dreams and across time to places no European had explored: the Americas, the Far East and deep into Africa. When a second meeting was arranged, they gathered their friends together and pooled their talents. At the second meeting, over 500 Ecstatics and their servants arrived, including the Mayan Master Xiootin Iox. The factions raged and debated for nine years and finally formed a Council; during that time, Sh'zar and the others conceived of a way to meld different sects into a coherent whole, a single Tradition.

Time was one key. Each Tradition needed a specialty. Since most of Sh'zar's bunch were masters of prophecy, Time seemed the obvious choice for them. The others dubbed the Ecstatics "Seers of Chronos," and the name became official. Of all the magi, they understood time best. Sh'zar and the other Divyas realized that when you dive into the Lakashim wholeheartedly, time reveals itself as just another illusion — albeit a powerful one, with its own laws. So time was one answer to the dilemma; respect was the other.

Remember that we're talking about the 1400s; kings ruled by divine right throughout the world, soldiers killed whomever they pleased and bandits roamed the countryside. Divinity, in whatever form you chose to view it, promised hardship in life and judgment after death. Sh'zar saw a better way. In the early days, he said, the strong protected the weak and helped them to grow. The abuse of power was a perversion, a blasphemy to the Divine Gift, life. He felt, as did the other Divyas, that if people could just see what a miracle they lived in, they would at least respect that miracle and live in harmony, if not peace.

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"That's optimistic." My voice is dry and I wonder if I've been as rude as I think I was.

"Consider," Wolf replies, unruffled; "You are composed of an infinity of cells, tiny organisms working together to obey commands implanted decades before they existed. Thousands, millions, of them die every day, and yet each cell that replaces them not only follows those old commands but reacts to each new stimulus you provide — millions of new events every day. Consider that cells like that help you to even *comprehend* that thought, then add to that fact that I, too, have untold millions of cells in my body doing the same thing. Multiply that by every thing, living and unliving, on the planet, consider how we all interact, millions of times a day, from answering a phone to making love to getting out of bed in the morning to even having a morning to awaken to! Imagine all those billions of simultaneous miracles occurring within our vicinity every fucking day, then add the ecosystem which keeps the whole mess running through an endless complex dance of cause and effect. Sh'zar may not have defined things in those terms, but he saw the whole world from that perspective. When you add it all together and just consider it for a moment, it seems pretty insulting to think creation is anything but miraculous!"

What can I say to that?

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Obviously, the real world doesn't work that way. Even the other Divyas disagreed, but Sh'zar stood firm, to the point of showing everyone what he was talking about the same way Wolf showed me. After long debates, the Divyas drafted the Code of Ananda, a list of proverbs that illustrated the wisdom

a Seer should have and the responsibilities he or she should live by. If the world would not listen to reason, said Sh'zar, then he and his companions would exemplify it — not the power-politics of the so-called Order of Reason, but a reason born of respect for one's own Divinity.

Like many of us who attain high levels in our Arts, Sh'zar saw many futures and pasts, especially his own. His beliefs would be tested, rejected and finally compromised upon. So he preached the Code of Ananda with a frantic fervor, spreading the ideal of self-accountability throughout the Council. Other sorcerers, particularly Nightshade, picked up Sh'zar's message and spread it their own way. *As ye harm none*, goes one variation, *do what you will*. Sh'zar's emphasis was on the "As ye harm none" part; other magi favored the second saying — including many of our own.

Naturally, many Ecstasies refused to follow the Code. Sh'zar, in a rare moment of fury, took a Dionysian Seer named Thales and bonded him empathically to a boy he had raped. The shock (now called a punishment wheel) unhinged Thales and proved two points for Sh'zar: One, he could — and would — enforce his Code if he desired; and two, that a person's actions did not occur without consequence. If those consequences could be shared, the Seer reasoned, people would stop hurting one another. He brought forth many old rituals which bonded people together (a specialty of our kind, as I was to realize), and showed how pleasure was better shared than pain. Those that did share pain, the Seers soon proved, made very effective weapons.

To the majority of the other Traditions, the Seers of Chronos were a bunch of irresponsible hashheads whose main talents included music, sex and an uncanny foresight. The eloquence of the Divya Akrites proved them wrong; he supposedly debated Christian scripture with priests and the words of the Prophet with mullahs — and won. Through it all, he maintained a humor and lust for life that impressed many sorcerers. The ferocious Tali Eos was said to have bested Teutonic knights in drinking contests and samurai in swordsmanship. Xiootin Iox puzzled Hermetic magi with his mastery of astronomy, and Kalas Jnana impressed Chinese wizards with her knowledge of the Buddhist sutras and elemental Arts. Through force of personality and arcane power, the Seers gained the respect of their fellow Traditions.

Until the Great Betrayal.



THE CODE OF ANANDA

Called by some "The Ten Commandments of Ecstasy," these proverbs were collected by Sh'zar and his companion Divyas. No one knows which mages originated or collected the sayings, but Ecstatics agree that the observations are, if nothing else, good advice for an anarchistic sect like theirs.

Ananda refers to bliss, joy and sacred transcendence. The Code also carries a strong connotation of righteousness. The founding Seers knew all too well the dark side of freedom, and didn't want to found a Tradition of psychopaths. In the early days, those who violated the Code were punished severely. Though he loathed the duty, Sh'zar often administered judgment himself. He knew that a certain responsibility was essential if the Seers were to avoid becoming the dangerous mob others mistook them for. Respect for others, awareness of consequences, and continual wonder at Earth's living miracle are central to the Code. A good Ecstatic, it assumes, does not make his joy others' problem.

To this day, most Pleasuredomes demand that members and visitors alike adhere to the Code's tenets, and most mentors teach it as well. The Code is not a law per se — it's a declaration of ethics that most modern Cultists subscribe to. Only the fierce Aghoris, Acharne and Hagalaz reject the Code outright, and few Ecstatics want anything to do with them. (See "Sects.")

The initial proverbs were written in Greek and Sanskrit. Even translated, the Code seems formal to the modern ear; some modern Cultists simply sum all 10 proverbs up in two simple words: "Be cool."

I: THOU ART MIRACULOUS: SO ARE WE ALL.

II: HE WHO SPITS UPON HIS GOOD RIGHT HAND SHALL FIND THE LEFT ONE FAILS HIM IN NEED.

III: EACH GOLD COIN YIELDS TWO LIKE IT: EACH STALK GIVEN CREATES A BUNDLE. YET, EACH COIN TAKEN TURNS THE REST TO DROSS, AND ONE BUNDLE GONE CREATES A FAMINE. THUS SHALL A SEER ACCOUNT HIS DEEDS.

IV: SOME MINDS REST BEST ASLEEP. STIR NOT THOSE WHO WOULD NOT WAKEN OTHERWISE.

V: TRUTHS FORESEEN ARE NOT ALWAYS TRUTHS.

VI: IF A MAN (OR A WOMAN) WOULD REND ANOTHER'S PASSIONS, LET HIM BE AS ONE TORN BY WILD DOGS. FOR PASSIONS ARE THE SEAT OF THE SELF, AND IF THEY BLEED, SO TOO DOES THE SOUL.

VII: LET EACH SEER ACCOUNT HIS OWN DEEDS, AND IF THOSE DEEDS SHOULD WANT FOR WISDOM OR KINDNESS, LET HIM BE PUT FORTH TO WEEP ALONE.

VIII: HUMOR COOLETH BLOOD: WRATH SPILLETH IT.

IX: EVEN TREES RENT BY LIGHTNING MAY GROW NEW FRUIT.

X: A FOOL FEELS NO FEAR: A SLEEPER REMAINS SHACKLED BY IT: A MASTER TRANSCENDS IT. YET RECALLS ITS WISDOM. IT IS GOOD TO BE AFRAID: IT IS POLLY TO BOW TO TERROR.

In 1466 the First Cabal, a group of hand-picked magi including Akrites Salonikas, journeyed out from the meeting site on a mission of goodwill. In 1470 they were betrayed from within. The Betrayer wasn't one of the Seers, but many outsiders viewed Akrites as an accessory. The prophet, they claimed, had fallen down on the job and let one of his best friends (and, they gossiped, his lover) destroy their Cabal. Although he, Tali Eos and Sh'zar himself went out to rescue mages who had ended up in an Inquisitor's dungeon, the Seers were disgraced. Dispirited, Akrites left the Tradition and disappeared. Soon after, Sh'zar went looking for him and

perished. The whole Council was in ruins, and the Seers seemed buried at the bottom of them.

The remaining Divyas refused to let the legacy collapse. Although Xootin Iox had died by this time, Eos and Jnana remained Masters to be reckoned with. Fortified with scholarship and backed up by formidable allies from the Verbena and Dreamspeakers, these Seers struggled to continue Sh'zar's dream. Eos' masterpiece, *The Nine Sacred Passions*, remains a hallmark for serious Ecstatic magi (called mages by this time). This eloquent document argued that the seat of all magick is the soul; emotion wedded with

intellect propels that soul to higher things — an ideal often called Ascension. A soul with crippled passions could never achieve that exalted state, she argued, at least not without more sacrifices than most people would be willing or able to make. Eos, who had been raped prior to her Awakening, knew what she was talking about. *The Nine Sacred Passions* solidified the Seers' place amid the Council and converted many of their critics.

Then the Burning Times began, and Christian Europe went berserk, torturing and killing millions in an endless round-robin genocide of religious wars, Inquisitions, persecutions, reformations, witch-hunts and finally, plague. Worse, they brought their wars across the seas, and native cultures (like those of our Dreamspeaker colleagues) were decimated. All mages went underground during this gruesome time: even Masters weren't safe from the fire. The Order of Reason fanned the flames for a while, but even its conspiratorial eyes wept at the carnage.

During this time, our Seers, now renamed the Sahajiya, concentrated in India and the Middle East to avoid the bloodshed in Europe. Many small sects broke off to pursue their own beliefs. Those few who remained in Europe wandered like mad beggars, protected somewhat by the superstitions about insanity. In the Council chambers, intrigues between the fellowship table (located in a place called Horizon) and another stronghold named Doissetep stalled many efforts to make the Code of Ananda an official protocol. The last great Divya, Eos, died in 1562 (which I guess was understandable, given her age), and Jnana's second son, Siddhu Asva, struggled against a plot by a renegade sect called the Aghoris, who thought there should be no limits in the search for ecstasy. He defeated their greatest Divya in a

combat called certámen. The sect retreated in 1573, but the Aghoris still remain on the fringe.

Another splinter group, the Fellowship of Pan, had a more productive idea. According to Wolf, faeries really did exist once, and our group dealt with them regularly. When witch-hunts threatened these fae, the Fellowship helped them into hidden worlds which Wolf called Horizon Realms (I remind him to tell me more about them when we have more time; he reminds me that time is relative. I tell him never mind). Supposedly, these faeries were, and remain, very grateful for the help. Finally, by 1800, the religious madness wore itself out and a new era of possibilities began.

THE CULT OF BACCHUS

*Ah me! in sooth he was a shameless wight,
Sore given to revel and ungodly glee;
Few earthly things found favour in his sight
Save concubines and carnal company,
And flaunting wassailers of high and low degree.*

— Lord Byron, *Childe Harold*

300 years of religious warfare, 200 of colonialism and a succession of revolutions had shaken the old kingdoms to their knees. The Council of Traditions had been shaken severely as well. When masses of Dreamspeakers defected from the Council, they left the Sahajiya without allies. As "enlightenment" spread, first across Europe then inexorably across the rest of the world, the mages found themselves in separate corners. When the colonial powers wound their way into the Sahajiya strongholds in India and the Americas, most Ecstatics declared war, found niches, and exploited them.

In India, the Kalika Rajas sect lashed out at the British authorities. (Kali, Wolf tells me, is the destructive aspect of the goddess Shakti. He reminds me that the Hindu gods had many faces; I just nod and follow along.) While their followers strangled travelers and soldiers, the mages among them sent

THE NINE SACRED PASSIONS

The expression "Feelings are not good or bad, they just are" fits the Ecstatic viewpoint well. To Cultists, all emotions have their positive and negative aspects. The only really bad passion is the lack of passion. Emotion is the vital link to Divinity; insensitivity is best left to the Technocracy.

Not that all feelings should be worn on one's sleeve. Ecstatics know how much damage unbridled passions can cause. The trick, as always, is self-discipline. There's nothing wrong with what you feel; you *should* feel. It's what you do with those feelings that makes things right or wrong.

In her book of the same name, Tali Eos defined Nine Sacred Passions that she felt lie at the root of all other emotions. These are: Joy (or Wonder); Love; Empathy (or Sympathy); Lust (or Ambition); Grief (or Sadness); Fear; Jealousy (or Envy); Hate; and Rage. The concept wasn't new, but her book defined their meaning in Ecstatic lore. To Eos, each passion has a constructive and a destructive side. Joy can blind you as you stumble over a cliff, while Envy can drive you to achieve something that you might not have bothered with otherwise. Even Hate is necessary — some enemies deserve no quarter.

Eos' list has never been considered infallible; Cultists have debated her concepts since the founding of their Tradition. Still, most mentors pass the idea on to their students. Although the Cult believes in breaking down barriers, it helps to know where those limits are before setting out.



madness and plagues into the cities, incited uprisings, turned themselves into animals, and generally made things miserable for the English. Although the sect was demolished in the 1840s, some Kalika Rajas supposedly survive today.

In the Americas, many Sahajiya found new and fascinating experiences among the Native Americans of the Southwest and the plains. Although they often traveled alone, these mages put up a vicious fight against settlers. Some fought with guns, or tribal weapons. Others used magick and caused whole cavalry units to disappear. When the Civil War began, some American Ecstatics (renamed *Los Sabios Locos*, or "The Crazy Wise Ones") picked off soldiers with whiskey, seductions and insanity.

In Europe, some mages fed the disillusionment of artists and dreamers, encouraging Hellfire Clubs and Romantic poets to throw society on its ear. Society reacted with shock and secret admiration. The drawing rooms of Byron, Shelley, Rimbaud, Baudelaire and de Sade saw stylish debaucheries. Someone changed the Tradition's name to the Cult of Bacchus. And suddenly the joke wasn't funny anymore.

This sudden violent shift after years of near-pacifism shocked many Council mages. The Divyas in Horizon called a *jambo*, an important meeting, in 1867 to discuss the problem. Sh'zar's dream was a mess; the new Cult was exactly what the Code of Ananda had been created to discourage — a pack of self-serving rebels causing trouble because they could. Although the Cult itself had little structure, over 150 Ecstatics came together to debate a return to the Code. Older mages agreed that the new blood had gone too far; younger mages, in turn, accused the Divyas of cowardice. This was war, they said, and ecstasy was not always kind.

A cloud of hashish, some say, heralded a miracle. Sh'zar himself appeared above the crowd, rippling with power and Paradox. (I make a note to ask Wolf what "Paradox" is later.) The legend says he spoke for several hours, sweeping the assembly with potent smoke, then vanished. Supposedly, he reminded his descendants that the highest passion was Joy, not Hate. Joy rebuilds what Hate destroys. So saying, he performed his greatest and final miracle: he poured the accumulated misery of all the renegades' victims onto the assembled crowd in a monumental punishment wheel. After recommending that the Tradition change its name and remember its lesson, he vanished, probably for good.

After that, the Tradition re-embraced the Code. Although individual Ecstatics still follow their own conscience (or lack of one), the Cult of Bacchus became, at least for the moment, the Cult of Ecstasy.

(I'm not sure if Wolf believes this story or not. Though he tells it with the same conviction that he's shown throughout the history, he doesn't seem to be the sort who accepts a *deus ex machina* without scoffing. When I press him, he says it's the best explanation he's heard for the Cult's sudden reversal. Who am I to argue?)

THE REVOLUTION

*If we cannot wake you, then we'll have to shake you
Though some say you'll only understand a gun
Got to prove them wrong or we will lose the battle
Don't you know you'll start a war which will be won by none*
— Steppenwolf, "Move Over"

The Cult appears to be a Tradition forever stumbling over its own feet. By the turn of the century, they seemed more interested in sharing pleasure than pain once again. Maybe the shift came from Sh'zar, or maybe just from the fact that most Bacchanalians died young and badly. A few exceptions, like Aleister Crowley, still "did what they would." Most Cultists, though, preferred examples like Isadora Duncan or Sir Richard Burton — rebels eating at Victorian conventions from the inside — to assailants like Crowley. The 20th century gave both types plenty to work with.

The misery of World War I unleashed a frenzy of rebellion across the Western World. The roaring '20s, with their grand excesses and revolutionary tone, set the ball in motion. World War II, with the largest body count in history, demolished whatever conventions were left standing. Cultists rushed in, first tentatively, then excitedly, and helped themselves to the confusion. The ashes of the two wars — and the succession of wars that followed — left our Tradition a new world to work with. People were scared — of dying, of technology, of each

other. A few Cultists and a host of mortals went in to take that fear in hand.

It began in coffee shops, in civil rights marches, in writers' colonies and average homes. It began when soldiers came home with new ideas and scientists scrapped what was left of the old ones. It began with electric guitars, TV, radio and drugs, and it rose up to change the world: The revolution of the senses. The C of E heyday.

Morrison, Joplin, Hendrix, Hoffman, Dick, Leary, Shankar, Slick, Lennon, Goddard, Warhol, Moog... an endless list. Some were Awakened, many were not.

Most had no idea what they were doing but were doing their best at it anyway. Some outsiders give the Cult credit (or blame) for inventing rock-n-roll, the drug culture and pornography; according to Wolf, we simply took what already existed and gave it a hard push. Anything that was dangerous, wicked and sensual was up for grabs, and the Cultists recognized the reason: We want the forbidden. We crave ritual. We need our passions, and passion is never safe. Heaven is dull; we humans crave a taste of hell to let us know what we're missing.

And then we blew it.

.....
"Like the Beatles," Wolf says, "Sh'zar was both wrong and right. He was wrong when he thought all we needed was love; he was right when he insisted that irresponsibility would destroy us. Maybe it already has."

"The world was waking up. Slowly, for sure, but it's coming out of a long and fitful

slumber. It was waking up with a big hard-on and a rumble in its belly, ready to go. And then, in the '70s, we threw water in its face."

"Now imagine," he continues, his eyes wild by candlelight, his hands dancing like tripping spiders, "that you were in bed. Your clock radio has just gone off. It's time to wake up and



you're doing it. And then some asshole dumps a big bucket of ice water right in your face."

"I'd be pissed," I reply.

"Exactly. And that's the world we're in now: groggy, dripping, half-awake and angry as hell. And the worst thing is, no one knows who threw the water. So some folks blame each other, some blame God, and some are looking at anyone who seems guilty. Everyone's paranoid and the status-quo merchants, who I'll tell you about later, hand the world a big fuzzy towel and say "Go back to bed. I'll deal with this." Enter the '90s. Does the world stay up, stay angry, or stay in bed? Who knows? It's a toss-up. But damn some of the careless bastards who threw that water."

"Didn't you say that was our job?"

"Yeah," he says at last. "I guess it is."

It's really late when Wolf finishes the lesson. A knock at the door heralds the entrance of a spiky-haired blonde introduced as Vivianne: "I'm locking up, Wolf. You sticking around?" After introductions, I realize how starved I am. Wolf offers to walk me home, and I agree.

"Hey, Wolf," I finally ask, "So where did you get the ring, anyway?"

"Oh, that," he says, glancing at the glowing stone. "I made it."

We don't intend to stop at the bar, but it's here and so are we, so we enter and order. No one comments on my bare feet; I take that as a good sign. We laugh, eat and drink until the place is spinning giddily. It's way past midnight when we reach my building. I'm tempted to let Wolf crash for the night, but he demurs: "I think you've seen enough of me for one day." Deep inside, I'm relieved. I need time to sort this all out.

Aria greets me with a hug and a warm kiss. "You're looking better already," she notes.

"I'm looking tired already," I sigh, wandering into my bedroom and collapsing on the newly-made bed. She joins me there, all questions, and begins to massage my back and shoulders. She's got wonderful hands.

What the hell. I'll sort this out tomorrow.





SECOND VERSE: PACES IN THE SMOKE

*Trust and its sister, surrender, are like a womb in which all
of consciousness can gestate and mature.*

—Richard Moss, *The I That is We*



The next few weeks rush by in a haze of transformation, a displaced time stream of sensation and desire. It's like being sick with love, but far more intense. Nothing fits. I can't concentrate. Every morning arrives with an ache in my stomach and a fleshwide tingle which will not be stilled. My sense of time scrambles. When I'm on my own, my senses wander. My hair grows back to its natural auburn tangles and my libido is totally out of control. Even looking at my own fingertips makes me horny. Even so, Wolf commands me not to masturbate. Restraint, he says, will focus my budding powers.

I'm slipping at work. When I complain to Wolf, he rummages through a drawer and comes out with a wad of bills. "Quit," he grins. "Here's your new job." I count the cash when I get home — \$30,000. I don't want to know where he got it.

I can't sleep. The sheets are too rough, my body too rebellious. Finally, when my frustration reaches an unendurable peak, I hear the creak of doors and a barefoot whisper.

Aria smiles in the darkness and greets me with kisses. Her skin feels like hot quicksilver against my own. With her fingers, tongue and hair, she helps me cum myself to sleep. When I crash, I crash hard. When I awaken, she is always gone.

Each day now, I visit the shop. When I arrive, Wolf gets Vivianne to mind the store, then brings me to his sanctum. I flow from summer into fall through an endless reel of dances, lessons, sex and miracles. Marcie, my best friend, doesn't seem to know what to make of me now. After a while, she stops trying.

Occasionally, the fear returns, a full-blast panic furnace; when it happens, Wolf shares my tears and holds me until the shakes subside. Sometimes, Aria is home before me, and we talk like schoolgirls until dark. Other times, I come back to an empty apartment, anxious that tonight will be the night she will not return.

These impressions of who and what we are pass through the next few weeks. While no solid thought holds, the memories linger.

THE ECSTATIC PATH



You're all you've got
Consider it a gift

— The Nails, "Mood Swing"

The first thing I learn is that my new "club" has no seatbelts or life insurance. From initiation onward, a Cultist is on her own. Mentors and friends show you the lay of the land, but the journey — and its missteps — are up to you.

We're more a rough confederation than an organization. Lessons are taught through examples and mistakes. Each mentor sees things a bit differently, and each student will interpret those insights as he will. Though we all share a similar vision, we view it from different angles.

As Wolf puts it, we learn to see with primal vision. By attuning ourselves with existence itself, we can step outside our mortal perceptions, seeing (and acting) like demigods. Our fellowship (only one of many, as I will soon learn) values individual freedom — and responsibility — above all else. The consequences, good and bad, of our actions belong to us alone.

Some customs *do* exist to keep our Cult together: the Code of Ananda is pretty important to most of our kind, and emotional bonds like the diksham keep us in touch and honest. When things get really bad, certain protocols help us resolve disputes or punish people who've gone too far. For the most part, though, we're on our own. Only personal wisdom, friends and sheer luck keep us from dancing into oblivion.

LAKASHIM: THE DIVINE PULSE

Creation has a heartbeat, a pulse that everyone can feel. Most Cultists call it the Lakashim, Dhambia, the Serpent Road, or other names. Our passions, senses and unconscious minds tap into this pulse; our intellect blocks our perceptions somewhat, but it focuses them, too. The ideal state of consciousness sends us past mere intellect or sensation into a communion, through both, with the Lakashim.

Anyone who achieves this state suspends herself in time and works reality with her will. Most people enter into it for fleeting moments. Our Arts depend on achieving that ideal whenever possible. Many kamamarga, or "paths of desire," focus your consciousness, enhancing sensations and passions past normal human limits. The Lakashim waits beyond those limitations.

ANANDA. OJAS AND ASCENSION

The road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom... for we can never know what is enough until we know what is more than enough.

— William Blake

As H.P. Lovecraft said, the most merciful thing about human consciousness is that it remains blind to the im-

mensity of the cosmos. We need that blindness to a degree; without it, the vast scope of creation would drive people crazy. To stay sane and progress, we need to be able to put things in little boxes, give them names, and look at them in ways we choose to understand. Ecstasies want to get around that mortal blindfold, though, to sneak a peek at raw reality. It's a dangerous game; staring at the sun can blind you. Still, most Cultists would rather burn their eyes out than live their whole lives without ever having seen that sun in all its glory.

Catching sight of reality in all its splendor brings on indescribable moments of rapture. Cultists call such moments *ananda*, the bliss that stops time. That bliss allows us to sidestep reality — to work magic. More importantly, though, it helps us understand the immense miracle we exist in. That, more than any law or code, keeps us honest. It's hard to disrespect any aspect of creation when you can stare the whole thing in the face.

Ananda can't be described, only felt. Most arts, faiths and magicks are just ways to capture bliss. Most people go their whole lives knowing something is right around the corner of their perceptions, but never get more than a glimpse of it. I think that frustration drives people to despair, to fanaticism, even to war — all for another taste of creation's own blood. As I'm discovering, it's damned heady wine.

Ojas, our vital life force, is the grape for that wine. Distilled by wedding passions with perceptions, ojas carries us to a higher state and allows us that look behind the curtain. Everyone has this power. Most folks, though, only feel it during extreme stress or pleasure. Suddenly, everything seems so much more alive. Time crawls and perceptions go through the roof. That's an ojas rush. By attuning ourselves to that energy, Cultists can perform minor miracles — and not just magical ones. By cultivating our inner power, we can focus ourselves to any task we choose. Even people without heightened perceptions can tell there's something different about us. Best of all, it feels great.

Supposedly, really advanced mages can throw away the blindfold completely and achieve lasting *ananda*, comprehending everything in a vast endless moment. This wordless state could be called Ascension, Nirvana, Apotheosis, Oneness, Eon, whatever. There's no simple path to this transition: each person has to find her own way, I guess, and any description of it falls back into "mortal blinders" territory. How can you describe infinity? Or even map the road to witness it?

Infinity is terrifying. The anticipation I feel every morning now is never far from fear. Even so, many of us want to help others experience happiness. Much of the chaos in the modern world, I'm told, can be linked to an absence of respect and a desperate search for bliss. By sharing our vision, we may be able to share our joy, too. Maybe if we can do that, there won't be so much need for fear.

Perhaps this is the way the world has to be. I'm not sure a lot of people would want to find total Ascension, anyway. Where do you go from there? Maybe it's just my fear of something so incomprehensible, but I think ecstasy might be more powerful in brief flashes than in endless pleasure. Wolf tells me one night: "The concept of Heaven, even if it meant eternal bliss, never appealed much to me. I like to view life as a thrill-ride with endless variations. My ideal heaven would be to take a short break from this mortal merry-go-round, then get back on and go for another ride. Life's much more interesting than an eternity of anything." Many Cultists, including myself, would agree with him.

THE RISKS

As Wolf keeps reminding me, the Path of Ecstasy is dangerous. Passion is an abusive lover; on his good days, he'll take you so far up you'll never want to return, and on bad ones he'll leave you in a broken heap. It's a damned fine line between ecstasy and oblivion, and lots of people searching for one end up in the other. Aside from Paradox (a magical phenomena Wolf describes as slamming the doors of perception on your head), our fellow Cultists have a nasty tendency to become addicted to their own sensations. Or to forget that a tool is only a tool. "It's hard to build a staircase without a hammer," said Aria one night, "but it's impossible to build a staircase made out of hammers."

Ananda itself can be scary as hell. "Bad trip" doesn't sum it up halfway. Creation verges from light to darkness, and highs correspond to lows. Since entering this Cule, I've known depressions so intense that I seriously would've committed suicide if Wolf or Aria had let me. "It's the flip side," Aria told me once, holding me one night while I cried so hard my eyes bled. "Pleasure, pain, joy, sadness. They aren't separate things, just facets of the same jewel. Creation isn't all any one thing — it's many things. Not all of them are fun, but they all pass into new and better states." That ephemeral nature, I've found, helps me to appreciate things more. When I'm happy, the realization that the joy won't last helps me savor it that much more.

AVATARS, TOTEMS AND DAEMONS

Judgment, responsibility and good friends come in handy on the razor's edge. A smart Cultist watches her balance on the tightrope — she doesn't get fancy, she doesn't look down. Responsibility, according to Wolf, is a natural phenomenon: "You may not care what you do, but when you do something, it has an effect. Anticipating those effects will save you a lot of trouble in the long run." Most parts of the Code of Ananda deal with responsibility, and they're very true. As for friends, well, it's always good to have someone at your back.

According to some people, all mages carry a good friend with them. You can call it your Avatar, your muse, your Daemon, Uncle Knobby, whatever. The name's not important; this helpmate is an aspect of yourself that assists you along life's uncertain road, inspiring, teaching, occasionally even tempting or tormenting. Personally, I'd consider this "Avatar" my unconscious telling me what I already know but don't want to admit. Aria suggests that it may be a voice from my future-self passing my past-self a few notes. Wolf believes in spirit-totems; he's chosen his name from his own, and calls me "Otter" on occasion (which drives me batshit). Other Cultists prefer past lives, soulmates, Platonic ideals, guardian angels and demons, whatever. Most helpmates come to you in dreams or visions. Really powerful ones supposedly appear in solid form, or seem to, at least. I haven't seen an Avatar yet, so I can't say. It's all a bit metaphysical for me, but I guess I'll adjust.

VISIONQUESTS

At turning points of our lives, visions present themselves. Sometimes we go looking for them, but mostly they find us instead. Some people call these moments "Seekings," though I prefer "visionquests" myself.

During a visionquest, you find yourself alone with your fears. To move forward, you have to confront them and break through. A Cultist usually isolates herself from friends and familiar crutches, going off to some totally alien place. What happens there is a matter of opinion: Do spirits visit you? Do you confront God and the Devil in one? Or do the voices and visions come from within your own head? Some sects and mentors stage visionquests for their initiates, dosing them with drugs and sex until they believe they've entered, heaven, hell, or some other world entirely. Other Ecstasies go off alone, wandering deserts or mountains or putting themselves through some ordeal, like the Sioux sun dance or a siddhu trance, where the spirit leaves the physical body behind. Some just take some drugs and channel their concentration toward what they want to experience. In any case, the visionquest leads you to some higher insight; immersed in the World-Pulse, you confront your inner self. From there, you are tested. If you pass, you advance to a higher state of awareness. If not, you stay where you are, often remembering what you've just lost.

A visionquest is a trial by fire. Although I've passed through one already without knowing it, the thought of another one scares the crap out of me. Sometimes I wonder if this new life is worth its cost in fear.

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Once, I asked myself who wore fetish gear. One cold November night, Wolf shows me.





The night began with sex... almost. Setting a bond between us, Wolf sweeps me to a peak. As I writhe, sheets clenched in white-knuckle anticipation, his lips and licks advance up each thigh, slowly—God, so slowly! Where they meet, he kisses deeply, brings me to a seething edge, then pulls away. "Not yet," he purrs, rising. "We have plans tonight."

The burning between my legs never fades. Instead it hangs, buzzing, tingling, throbbing. *Bastard!* The bastard in question hands me a steaming glass of wine and... oh, right! Despite the snow outside, he gives me a black cloak and a high-cut skirt, no more. Trembling, I dress. Even these seem cumbersome. I protest anyway. "Concentrate on this," he murmurs and kisses me with cinnamon lips. The warmth lingers as we wander, black-clad vagabonds through frozen-crystal streets, to a thundering warehouse. Despite glassy flakes in wind-tossed hair, misty breath and crisp-crunch snow, the only shivers I feel come from inside.

Outside the club, pumping rhythms carry the Lakashim. "Here," my mentor whispers, drawing open my cloak. "One more touch." Quickly, sharply, a sudden needle lances cold-hard ripples. Pain collides with pleasure, and both with outrage. The tremors knock me dizzy, drag me higher. My lip goes salty-wet between my teeth. Wolf ignores my soft curses as he passes rings through each nipple and snaps a light chain between both. Finally, he kisses me. "Let's go in."

I'm of age, but no one asks. Wolf sweeps me into a black-draped parody of hell, littered with mock vampires, drag queens and shaved-headed toughs. The deejay's electric pulse quivers my new rings, my eardrums, my blood, my clit. Beyond the antechamber, a smoke-filled inferno awaits. If the souls inside are damned, they dance with joyous pain. Wolf hands his biker jacket over to a waif with tattooed hands. On impulse, I pass her my cloak as well, baring my bloodied breasts to strangers. A few look my way, but no one fusses. Wolf's kiss adds to my flush. Silently, we enter hell—appalled, amused, afraid and hot beyond words.

After the anticipation, I'm disappointed. Despite a certain decadent glamour, the club and its denizens seem... pathetic. Some hustle with bad pick-up lines while others do the white-boy shuffle. A few appear dangerous, but most look like clowns. I have to shout above the din: "Is this supposed to be ecstasy?"

"No," Wolf replies, "but it's as close as most people get. Sad, huh?"

We dance barefooted across slick-sticky concrete, bathed in coronas of pulsating light. Smoke sneers the air to a blur, now dark, now blasted with colors. Shutting out all others but Wolf, I focus on the beat, the breathing, the blood thumping in time. Ojas rises, rippling through me in waves. Soon I feel

their passions, hear their inner voices, touch them from a distance then spit away again. Wolf is radiant. Our auras expand, filling the space between us until there is no space and we wash across each other. We dance until our hair hangs damply, until breath comes ragged and sweat sheens flesh and soaking cloth. I'm so wired as we stagger from the dance floor that sex and collapse both sound heavenly.

Wolf has other ideas.

A gesture to a hurly dude outside a plain black door opens that door to us. Inside, a silent crowd watches a candle-lit stage. Their excitement vibrates into my own. The naked woman hangs upside-down from ankle-chains, her wrists manacled to the floor. Her eyes stare past us, blissful. Another woman, caped and gloved, runs her whip tenderly across bruised, slightly bleeding flesh and coos to her lover in words I cannot hear.

"I don't know about this..."

"Ecstasy comes in all kinds of packages," my mentor whispers. "I'm not even going to pretend I understand the appeal of some, but I thought you should at least see some different paths."

"Is this ecstasy, or is it just perverted?"

"Would you like to find out?"

As the domina draws back her arm and cracks the leather across her lover's belly, I wonder.

MEMORANDUM

Should I paint my face
Should I pierce my skin
Does this make me a pagan
Sweating out my sins
We ate the sacred mushroom
And waded in the water
Howling like coyotes
At the naked moon

— Robbie Robertson, "Golden Feather"

As I learn later, there are plenty of those "different paths" to focused ecstasy. Few Cultists stay on one for long — the whole point of the matter is to break out of routines — although we all have favorites. In the past, mages cultivated one "path of desire" over all else. These days, we've become more... eclectic.

Some Cultists look to tribal cultures for inspiration. For them, tattooing, piercing, ordeals and other rites of passage focus their energies. Pain is important — through it, you let go of your physical self — and permanent marks preserve the experience. Techno-ecstatics design advanced gadgets to stimulate them in ways simple flesh never could. Some of these guys turn other people on in magickal chatrooms; others prefer to experiment with industrial media, meshing

music, video, virtual reality and cybernetics into wild new art forms. Daredevils prefer raw adrenaline over artificial stimulants; whether their thrills come from skyboarding, suicide-skiing or shark-surfing, these nuts love danger with a smile.

Simpler pleasures come from music, dance and drugs; though the latter's not my style, many Ecstatics still follow the old worship of peyote, drink soma nectar or eat opium and go dream-chasing. Some focus through sexuality, especially esoteric Tantrik and Taoist arts, outrageous sado-masochistic variations, or mass pleasure rites. In the old countries, holy siddhus and yogis follow the ancient disciplines, meditating without food or water or sending themselves into death-trances. Dissonants and Discordians wander through the modern world, using "crazy wisdom" to disrupt others' thoughts and undermine social orders by asking all the wrong questions or playing with people's expectations. Time shamans go even further, summoning up the actual spirits of the past — *zeitgeists* — to make people remember what those days were like. As Wolf shows me, spirits are everywhere if you know where (and how) to look for them. Spirits of the dead, spirits of the earth, even spirits of history itself. Jesus Christ!

We're a weird bunch, we Cultists of Ecstasy; some dedicate themselves to spreading pleasure across the world while others hunt pushers and rapists for turning passion into pain for profit. Traditionalists swear by primal methods while iconoclasts and tech-freaks tear everything down and start over. We're wise folk, lotus-eaters, hippie weirdo freaks and modern Bacchantes, but above all, we're independents. Our shared history and insight is the only real tie between us.

.....

"So what'd you think?"

It will be hard to give him an answer until later. The ripple in my belly and the thunder in my heart undermine any rational answer. I guess that's the idea. The night seems unreal, even by my new standards. Tomorrow maybe I'll have the good sense to be appalled, but now any touch, no matter how harsh, seems like a sacrament.

When we dance, I mark Wolf as mine, and he does the same. Our fingernails slide through each others' sweat. Our tongues taste one another's salt. Every touch jacks the sensations higher, pushes my perceptions further. When we leave, I dangle a new whip, hidden beneath the cloak, against my belly. When we reach home, the fun begins.

There's blood on the sheets by the time we finish. I've never been this way before. It scares me, more than a little, but the shattering orgasm rush blows those fears away like dust bunnies. Wrapped in sweaty-sticky sheets, I see myself from a distance, rolled in Wolf's arms, features reposed in candlelight as the Lakshmi thunder fades into darkness.

SEX, DRUGS AND ROCK-N-ROLL

The Cult's affinity for this "unholy trinity" leaves most blockheads cold; outsiders can't see how such "vices" lead to any sort of insight beyond decadence. As usual, the blockheads are wrong. Music, drugs and sexuality share an unmistakable link to the World Pulse. People of all times and cultures crave that contact without knowing why. Ecstasies, of course, understand the value of the trance state (sometimes called entocomatic lucidity) which pitches a person through the barriers of reality and headfirst into the Lakashim.

The trip isn't particularly safe; many folks get addicted or burn out after too much stimulation, especially if they're not careful about how they bring it about. Most communities, afraid of the untapped power of trance-passions, suppress sexuality, drug use, and even some types of music, so Ecstasies risk more than just their minds when they indulge. The more intense the experience, the more dangerous that experience becomes — which, of course, is part of its appeal.

Most congress, or sharing rituals, involve sexual, chemical or musical stimulation. Really intense congress, sometimes called Tiger Rites or Dances with the Dragon, use two or all three kamamarga to bring about trances that even the most jaded Cultists succumb to. Really powerful magickal rites (i.e., extended rolls requiring 10 successes or more) might demand cross-stimulation. Naturally, this carries many risks (see Appendix). But, as they say, it's a hell of a ride.

SEX

As Ecstasies know, sex excites the body, mind and spirit in ways no other stimulus can match. Passion and energy build, flows and explodes into a momentary glimpse of the unknowable. It's a rush, a communion and a social activity in one. To the Hindus who influenced the Tradition, sex is the sacred interplay of Shakti and Shakta (female and male powers). Human sex drive leads to more than simple procreation; done properly, it's a form of worship. Done wrong, it can shatter a person's spirit.

The intimate bond between sexual partners — even unwilling ones — summons ojas and circulates that power throughout their bodies. Through touch, the ojas are exchanged. During rape, those energies are stolen; the rapist literally carries off a piece of his victim, scarring her in ways no physical injury can match (an unforgivable crime to most Ecstasies). Solitary sex, like masturbation or voyeurism, excites one's passions, but the sharing element is missing. Sexual denial can bring on altered states as well, but most Ecstasies prefer indulgence to restraint. No form of consensual sex is considered perverse within the Cult, and some sects don't even stop there. Most Cultists are omnisexual; simple orientations become just another barrier to break. Although they appear promiscuous to outsiders, most Ecstasies prefer to have some kind of emotional bond with their partners, even if they've just met. Anonymous sex forsakes the act of its full potential.

Most Cultists divide sexual acts into high sex, lovemaking and low sex. These groups aren't exclusive — you can use high sex rites during an orgy — but they help distinguish what you're doing, why, and with whom.

- **High sex** raises ojas and channels it from one partner to another, sharing energy and expanding consciousness. By nature, it's ritualistic and disciplined, demanding training and concentration. High sex partners don't have to be friends, but it helps. Tantrik magick is the obvious example, although some esoteric SM communions qualify.

- **Lovemaking** shares energy and affection between friends. Although it's more spontaneous than high sex, lovemaking expresses the purest kind of emotion. Most mentors make love with their pupils; above all things, the dikhana bond demands affection and respect.

- **Low sex** is flat-out screwing. Technique is nice but not essential, and partners can be total strangers. High-mindedness aside, this kind of sex can be as pleasurable and powerful as any other if it's done right. During such congress, passions rise to a pitch that only orgasm can release. Though most Sleepers having low sex only glimpse the Lakashim for a moment, Ecstasies can prolong the moment for hours or end.

The intimacy and wild power of sexuality can be downright scary; even Cultists aren't blind to its downside: obsession, disease, unwanted pregnancy and emotional damage. Most take precautions against all of the above before they start anything, though some brutal sects like the Aghoris do as they will and leave the mess behind.

DRUGS

Some kamamarga are so risky that even Cultists discourage their use. Despite millennia of chemical consciousness, the modern miseries caused by drug abuse gives the Tradition pause. In the '50s and '60s, some Ecstasies thought they could rush worldwide Awakening by turning on the mundanes. The mess that resulted proved the Code of Ananda correct: "Some minds rest best asleep."

Some Cultists maintain that addiction is a Technocratic invention — people get hooked because they're told they will. Others point out that addicts usually come for the fix but don't stay for the visions. Drugs may be a quick road to the Lakashim, but as they say, the journey is the teacher, not the destination. Jumping headlong into bliss only leaves you wanting more; it doesn't show you how to get there on your own.

To Cultists, drugs are not simple chemicals. There's something almost magickal about something that can turn your perceptions inside-out. Some traditionalists argue that modern societies, with their emphasis on instant results, turn psychoactives from a help to

a hazard. Hence, Cultists treat their drugs as more than simple "kicks"; Shamans recognize the spirits inside the substance, and respect them. Religious Ecstasies consider their drugs vision-gifts from the gods. Even more conventional mages consider psychoactives to be tools with a nasty bite. Rather than snorting a line every time he works magick, a Cultist will perform a ritual, getting into a receptive state of mind where the focus will do the most good. (In game terms, this takes at least a turn, often longer.)

Modern Ecstasies divide drugs into "running toward" and "running away" substances. The former make you more receptive, the latter shut you down. Several drugs lie somewhere in between.

- **Running Toward:** Cannabis, hashish, XTC, mushrooms, mescaline and peyote, herbs (belladonna, wolfsbane, etc.), and drinks like soma, nepenthe and absinthe. All of these (except XTC) have long histories as divine voices, vision-bringers and gateways to the unconscious. Most Cultists have at least tried them at some point.

- **Running Away:** Morphine, crack, heroin, PCP, barbituates, Quaaludes and various downers. These drugs, nearly all modern inventions, offer oblivion over transcendence. While some Ecstasies enjoy the sensation, most serious ones agree that these drugs are more dangerous than useful.

- **Controversial:** Cocaine and coca, smart drugs (piracetam, DHF, vincamine, etc.), venoms (spider, cobra, rattlesnake, etc.), anphetamines, LSD (and other synthetic hallucinogens), alcohol, tobacco and opium. Although these psychoactives have potential uses, Cultists disagree about whether or not those uses are worthwhile. Some drugs, like cocaine and tarantula venom, can be deadly, while others like alcohol and tobacco don't offer much beyond blurred inhibitions. Many modern Cultists disdain artificial drugs and prefer natural highs only. Each individual makes his own choices.

Obviously, Ecstasies and Technocrats have their own drugs in circulation, too. These include:

- **Kaltee:** A mysterious herb used in many custom-made drugs, kaltee works as a food substitute and mild hallucinogen. Popular among many Technocrats, this plant is addictive, highly illegal in the Technocracy, unknown to Sleepers, and a rumor among the Traditions.

- **Monkey Powder:** Refined by Discordian Cultists, this drug scrambles your mind so badly you can barely talk. It's often sprinkled on food (usually not your own). In game terms, it raises all difficulties by +2 for two to three hours if the character fails a Willpower roll (difficulty 8), one hour if he succeeds.

- **Scorpion:** A vicious poison used by some sects, scorpion sends bolts of pain blasting through the user, shorts out her inhibitions and mutilates her thought processes. In game terms, it adds +4 to all difficulties (pain and mind-scrambling) and makes the character act out whatever impulse she happens to feel on the spot. (This may send vampires or werewolves into frenzy.) The drug lasts for six hours. Aside from magickal cures, only a Willpower roll (difficulty 7) can resist scorpion's disruptive effects, and nothing can stop the pain.

- **Ghost Dance and Witch's Powder:** Two similar drugs, the first an herb concoction, the other a sparkling black dust, which allow glimpses into the Penumbra (like **Spirit Sight**). Even Sleepers can use them. Depending on how well aware the user is (and where he is), he may bliss out or freak out. Ghost dance is often used as part of a ritual, while witch's powder has been rumored by some black magicians and Nephandil. Spirit-vision lasts for two hours, or less if the character makes a Willpower roll (difficulty 7).

- **STOP (Serotonin Terminator Option P-5601):** The ultimate weapon of conformity; this drug prevents the user from feeling any passion whatsoever. No matter what, she'll remain passive for the drug's duration (six hours or more), functional but numb. STOP even cancels out other drugs. Roleplaying, not systems, reflect STOP's effects. If a dosed character fails a Willpower roll (difficulty 8), she remains calm until the drug wears off. No pain or pleasure will break that calm. STOP's long-term effects — irritability, nausea and brain damage — keep it as a last resort for now. Soon, however, the NWO hopes to add STOP to school lunches, prison food, soft drinks...

Rock-N-Roll

The softest karmarga, music is slow but potent, and shares an experience like no other focus can. Although all kinds of music have magickal potential, rock music (including variations like rap and techno) has a primal resonance that only the most primitive drumming can match.

Rumors aside, Cultists did not begin rock-n-roll. It evolved out of a gestalt of the times, implacable and irresistible. Once they noticed it, however, Ecstasies joined the fun. A good many of them Awakened through its power, either through playing or listening. Pure rock music is the song of change, the soundtrack of rebellion, which explains the kick behind certain eras — the mid-'50s, late '60s and punk/rap revolution of the '70s and '80s in particular. The best artists express their passions for their own sake, not to sell records or get laid but because they have no choice but to scream. Rock is that scream set to music.

The secret behind potent music is passion. When the artist has something to say, the music itself carries the power. If the musicians are just performing, their music becomes crisply sterile. The truism applies to all variations of rock — a punk song can be banal, while a quiet ballad can call up the Serpent Road. Although many Cultists prefer basic instruments, some love to carve out sonic territory with new technology. As always, passion is the key.

OTHERS LIKE US



What limits people is that they don't have the fucking nerve or imagination to star in their own movie, let alone direct it.

— Tom Robbins, *Still Life with Woodpecker*

The problem with the Cult, Wolf says, is that everyone wants to fly — in different directions. Aside from a few modern Divyas who represent us, no one gives orders or determines policy. It's great, but kind of unsettling, too. Freefall all over again. No Mommy or Daddy, just you.

It's always good to have friends. Fortunately, I quickly find that a Cultist makes friends easily. There's a certain... aura... around people who take their lives into their own hands. It frightens outsiders, but it attracts people, too, especially like-minded ones. Wherever I go, strangers introduce themselves or skitter off into corners before I even say my name. Maybe it's arrogant of me, but as I get used to the effect, I realize that most of those who run aren't people I'd want to know anyway.

BONDS

As I soon learn, meeting a person goes a lot deeper than simply exchanging words. Every contact you ever have, especially the close ones, literally becomes part of you on a metaphysical level. Close bonds, like good friendships, set up a link which remains as long as you both stay friends. This, I've found, has a lot to do with the Cult's fondness for sex — it's not just a communion, it's communication. When there's trouble, you can always try to call upon that bond. If you know the right magicks, that friend will hear you.

More often than not, a Cultist prizes his friends — not just out of love, but out of self-preservation. The link tugs both ways. Really charismatic Ecstasies, like Aleister Crowley, might treat people like shit and make them love him for it, but most of us aren't so lucky. A lesser version of the diksham bond applies to one's friends or companions: you trust they won't hurt you, and you promise not to harm them. Of course, some mages ignore those kind of niceties. To them, causing pain is pleasure.

Generally, a Cultist knows another Cultist on sight. When we meet, we try to establish bonds — or avoid them — as quickly as possible. Nomadic as we are, you never know when you might see each other again. Or when you might need to.

Marcie never returns my phone calls anymore. When I visit, she won't answer. Christ. A 10-year friendship shot to hell. And I may never find out why.

As Wolf and I grow close, Aria pulls away. Not abruptly, but unmistakably. As Spring begins and my talents blossom, she grows pensive. One afternoon, I notice we do look like sisters. I'd never seen it before. "Are you coming with us to Nevada?" I had asked. Wolf is planning a trip to a huge gathering in August, and he's been teaching me how not to act when we get there. He hadn't mentioned Aria in those plans.

"Yeah," she said with false enthusiasm. "I'll be there."

"Did you get your plane ticket yet?"

She smiled, for real this time: "Oh, that. I won't need one!"

I knew then that she wasn't sticking around. I cried, but hid my tears.



SECTS

Not all Cultists are loners. Some groups come together to pursue an organized path; for lack of a better word, we call them sects. Though they don't keep a roll-call and tend to be secretive, plenty of sects predate Sh'mar by a large margin. Some, like the Aghoris, cause trouble for more... respectful... mages. Others bond with the shadow-folk and pursue really arcane pleasures.

More often than not, I'm told you can recognize a sect member when you meet him. He often shares a mark of distinction (usually permanent, like a tattoo or other body modification), a loyalty oath, and common purpose with his fellows. It's generally hard to tell mages from mundanes in a sect: they tend to be a bit more, um... subtle... than wandering Ecstasies, and don't show off as often. Sects are more common in the old countries — India, Central America, etc. — than they are in the more individualistic modern world. At least, the obvious ones are. Who can tell? They don't tend to put up billboards to announce their presence.

FAMILIES, JAMBOS, THE DREAMLINE AND PUNISHMENTS

Liberty means responsibility, that is why most men dread it.

— George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*

When Sh'zar conceived of his Tradition, the Seer envisioned a loose fellowship of enlightened folk, joined by insight, not government. The reality has become slightly more pragmatic over the centuries, but the Cult remains an individualistic lot, with little internal structure, planning or consensus. Even so, they remain unified in the face of trouble. Word has a way of getting around.

Few Cultists settle anywhere for long; notoriously restless, they crave constant stimulation. Any partners they choose tend to be nomads as well. Children, Awakened or not, are raised on the go. Most of these folks are skilled in their own right, and might be accomplished hedge wizards or even full-fledged mages. Quite a few Ecstasies simply love in passing, leaving their partners behind and making new ones along the way. Such ephemeral ways are part of their romantic allure.

Cultists often meet on the road, and usually recognize each other by their aura's distinct glow (see Appendix). Really good festivals, concerts or protests provide common ground, too. Shows by Crash Worship, Rusted Root, the Indigo Girls and, until recently, the Grateful Dead are certain to bring the local Ecstasies out of the woodwork. Strangers greet each other like old friends, sharing a joint, a hug or a bed within moments of introduction. More traditional sects prefer elaborate greetings, peppered with enigmatic phrases or intricate formalities. One feature that confounds other Traditions is the almost total trust most Ecstasies share; the usual daggers are left outside, at least for a while, when Cultists meet.

Serious occasions, like an outside threat, warrant a jambo, a "hello" where Cultists and their companions gather. These come together within days of the decision to form one. Outsiders continue to be impressed by the Cult's communication abilities. "Spontaneous" jambos bring Ecstasies from all over the world to places no one else has ever heard of — a rave in downtown Chicago, a lifeless desert in Nevada or a mountain retreat in Nepal. There always seems to be enough food, water and drugs to go around, and everyone's up on the latest gossip. What gives?

Two things; the first is simply a really good "telephone" system. A Cultist tells two friends, and they tell two friends, and so on and so on... The more arcane and urgent form of communication, the dreamline, involves calling upon the bonds Cultists form with each other. These ritual exchanges make an empathic bond that passes between mages if they wish it to. Like the dikhsham, this sets up an implied "contract" which Correspondence magick can force if necessary (see the Correspondence Range chart in *Mage*). By sending forth a call and twisting Time around it, a Divya can contact every Cultist he has ever met, pulling them together in less perceived time than a phone call would require. These spells are serious business; anyone concerned about her Tradition will answer one ASAP.

Cultists rely on debate to decide important issues. Rank is seldom an issue, as only one formal title, Divya, exists. Initiates often defer to their mentors, however, and experienced Ecstasies are usually respected. A careless Ecstasie doesn't survive his lifestyle for long, so it's worth the time to listen to what a survivor has to say!

• Disputes and Punishments

In a society where each individual is sacred, she must be held accountable for her actions. Few Cultists care about Sleeper laws; violations of passion, however, are taken seriously. More often than not, if you've been wronged, it's up to you to take care of it. Friends come in handy here, but it's almost a matter of honor to settle your own disputes. Certain duels or punishment wheels often do the trick.

Cult duels involve stimulation or denial; both parties induce mystick sensations until one of them is overwhelmed. In a true contest, each combatant rolls her Arete each turn and describes what her opponent feels. The defender resists with a Willpower roll. Both rolls must exceed difficulty 5 on the first turn; this goes up +1 every turn until someone loses. Every time Arete beats Willpower, the defender loses one (temporary) Willpower point. This goes on until someone gives up or falls senseless (at zero Willpower).

Sh'zar excelled at the punishment wheel; basically, the Ecstasie sets up an empathic bond (through Mind 2/Time 3) between violator and victim. The worse the crime, the longer the "wheel" continues. While some sickies get off on the anguish they cause, few want to "ride the wheel" more than once.

As the Code of Ananda implies, Cult justice usually involves banishment or revenge. Some vigilantes — often scarred by rape or violence — actually hunt violators down. In extreme cases, a jury of Divyas meets to decide a case. Their verdicts are often harsh: exile, branding, mystick castration (which uses Mind 4/Life 3/Time 3 to numb all sensations permanently), or death.

SECTS

Hundreds of ecstatic cults, sects and religions exist across the world. Many simply consist of Sleepers searching for some contact with the Divine Pulse; they may attract an Ecstasy mage or two for a while, but operate mainly through mortal means. The sects below, however, have old ties to the Cult of Ecstasy and involve dozens of mages in active roles.

Unlike common Ecstatics, these sects each have particular initiations, apprenticeships and goals. All of these sects have Secret Code Languages (see "New Abilities" in *The Book of Shadows*), and many members acquire odd Merits and Flaws. Sleepers mingle freely with mages in almost all of these groups, though they may never attain the enlightenment of Awakened members.

AGHORIS, ACHARNE AND HESTILIZ

Fierce sects known for pushing past all limits of morality, society or self-preservation, these three groups reject the Code of Ananda as weakness. Occasionally, they've tried to take over leadership of the Cult, a move that would probably cause a war with the other eight Traditions. At the moment, each sect exists in small, isolated bands. Most Ecstatics consider them *harabbi* and avoid or even attack known members.

The Indian **Aghoris** go back over 500 years. Their name means "unfrightened" in Sanskrit, and they reside in Assam, near the Bengali border. In their teachings, a person can become a god through constant destruction of his mortal self. As he tosses aside all human limitations—including empathy and civility—he transcends his humanity. Sadly, this "conversion" is often done at outsiders' expense. Aghoris are known for their wild cruelty. Aghora initiation includes near-death experiences, cemetery orgies and participation in forbidden acts (rape, murder, desecration, etc.). Ritual mutilation is common, and punishments usually involve torture and death.

The **Acharne** descend from the European Hellfire Clubs, where decadent gentlemen summoned devils and indulged in sadomasochistic blasphemy. The modern Acharne prefer Goth-Industrial trappings and hang out in clubs, but play the same games. The scorpion drug is their incantation. During initiation, new Cultists brand their own genitals and share blood with their web (cabal). The Hestilic Umbroud (see *The Book of Madness*) take Acharne off to their Realms for funtime; their pleasures would sicken de Sade. New York, L.A., Berlin and

London have several small clubs where Acharne webs gather. No outsider is safe in them.





Hagalaz reside in Norway, revering their Nordic forebears. Odin, Freyja and Loki are their patrons, though some claim to worship Satan instead. Violently anti-Christian, the small-but-growing sect wants to wipe the "creed of weakness" from their home. While most of the Hagalaz' un-Awakened followers are black-metal losers, their Awakened leaders are accomplished Norse sorcerers. Initiates carve runes into their skin and drink animal blood. One werewolf tribe, the Get of Fenris, sends its warriors to the sect's aid. Certain mages believe that some Verbera belong to this mysterious sect, but few outsiders know for sure.

BONGO'S RANGERS

A Discordian sect devoted to consciousness-unraveling, the Rangers use high-tech magicks to warp all forms of stimulation into overload. The stream of consciousness is seen as the only true road to the Lakashim; to reach it, that stream must be diverted unexpectedly. Many Rangers stage raves, dispensing music, drugs and endless stimulation to mundanes in an effort to undermine society, and speak in an arcane gibberish even most of them don't understand. "Only when Blockheads and Grayfaces have wiggles cast upon them shall the waters be wrought with Gelfish and the chak-wigging praise" is common gospel.

Initiates have their senses scrambled six ways to Sunday; this usually lasts a week. If they can still function during this time (Willpower roll, difficulty 9 to perform a task), they're accepted. The Secret Code Language is only an option — many Rangers have no idea what the others are talking about, either. Incoherence is the general idea.

FELLOWSHIP OF PAN

In the Barring Times, this sect struck bargains with the satyr tie. In exchange for all the passion the two groups could stir, the Ecstasies would take refugee changelings away to Horizon Realm. Since satyrs were actively hunted during this time, many accepted the offer. Although many of these expatriates returned home during the 1960s, some still journey back to Balador and Horizon for parties. This sect aided their friends during the Accordance War (see Changelings: The Dreaming), and remain in many nobles' bad graces. Nevertheless, Fellows of Pan are welcome at most feasts and often have several changelings as patrons. All are wonderful artists, musicians or craftsmen, and have an even more otherworldly aura than most Cultists do.

The Fellowship leaves initiation to their fair friends, since these tend to be satyrs, acceptance usually involves long bouts of drinking and sex, interspersed with spirited debates and insult contests. Musical talent is essential, and one or two Supernatural Merits help. Most Fellows have high Ally Background ratings, the Faerie Affinity Merit, or both.

DISSONANCE SOCIETY

Another group of Discordians, this one dedicated to intellectual overthrow. Unlike the Rangers, Dissonancers are highly organized, practical and eloquent. By disseminating radical ideas, financial incentives and liberal amounts of music, group congress and spirit magick, these Cultists influence Sleepers to open their minds to anarchy and self-reliance. All governments are seen as evil, but pure selfishness is also attacked. To the Society, hope for the future comes only through mutual respect, responsibility and the overthrow of tyranny. Primal nature is often seen as Divine. Although some Dissonancers can be violent, most prefer subtle magickal attacks over random destruction. "If we hurt innocents," one Dissonancer notes, "we're no better than the pigs."

Obviously, the Society is quite criminal. Initiation involves undercutting some establishment figure or function — driving policemen mad, exposing political corruption, inciting riots, etc. So far, a simple paradox has undermined the Dissonancers' efforts: most people don't want to take control of their own lives. This flaw, and what to do about it, are constant sources of debate within the sect.

KHLYSTY FLAGELLANTS

The Russian Christian sect made infamous by Rasputin, these monks believe that in order to be forgiven, one must sin. By indulging in forbidden pleasures, the Khlysty bring their passions to a pitch; the ritual penance, which involves flogging, fasting, exposure to the elements and sometimes castration, explodes these passions into an ecstatic vision. While an outsider may view the sect as a good way to have your cake and eat it too, Khlysty mortifications are quite severe. Although the sect was supposedly purged during Stalin's reign, some Ecstasies brought it underground; now it enjoys a resurgence in post-Soviet Russia.

Initiates must be Christian, preferably Russian Orthodox. Intense rituals, involving prayers and fasting, may take many weeks before the member's spirituality is accepted. Khlysty monks are known for incredible stamina, longevity and resistance to pain. Rasputin, it is said, was not the only one of his order to have irresistible charisma.

FIFTH WORLD TRIBE (Los Sabios Locos)

A resurgence of primal Americana, the Tribe incorporates Native American shamanism, hippie anarchism and powerful music into a gestalt that could shake the roots of the modern world. In time, they hope to bring it down and replace it with a cleaner, spirit-oriented culture.

Los Sabios Locos, the peyote-Cultists of the 1800s, laid the framework for this sect during the 1940s. During the '60s, it came into full bloom. Jim Morrison himself may have been inspired by one of their teachers, Red Cloud Thunder. As one might expect, these Ecstasies have friends among the shapeshifters, especially werewolves, wereravens

(Corax) and werecoyote (Nuwisha). Although their magick is potent, the group itself is fairly disorganized, scattered throughout nearly a dozen primal-beat bands. Its members have a bad tendency to let drugs, money and spiritual differences come between them, and the Technocracy has taken advantage of this by sending Syndicate agents to tempt bands with cash, coke and MTV exposure. For now, the power of the Fifth World remains untapped.

Although the Tribe requires no formal initiation, its members go off on frequent visionquests across mountains, deserts and beaches. Natural purity is a must: most Fifth Worlders are vegans who shun anything artificial (except, of course, in their instruments). Although new members should know how to sing or play, the Tribe concentrates on instinct rather than training. High Expression and Dancing ratings are a must.

K'AN LU

A Chinese Taoist sect, these Ecstasies combine martial arts, meditations and sexual congress in order to focus their Chi energies into creative force. In contrast with many Akashic Brothers, the K'an Lu forsake asceticism in favor of stimulation. Unlike the average Cultist ("unenlightened barbarians"), these Ecstasies discipline their unions, combining meditation, breath control and ejaculation denial with arcane postures. These techniques distill personal Chi into Tass, which is said to taste like the sweetest honey. Other, more intuitive Cultists admire the beauty of the K'an Lu style, but dismiss it as "too slow, and no fun at all." The power such discipline channels, however, would shock skeptics. These mysticks are among the greatest masters of Time, Prime and Mind Arts, and many are astonishingly long-lived; Marianna has three K'an Lu Masters on the Balador council (Khan Si, Chou Lin Hi and Iniko Tajiburo), and calls them "...the most sensual lovers I know."

To enter the K'an Lu, one has to find them; after the Peking crackdown of the late 1980s, this is difficult. The Masters have moved their temples into secret gardens and mountain retreats, where they school their followers (mortal and mage alike) in Taoist alchemy and secret styles of Tai Chi Ch'uan. Although most are vegetarians, they love spicy foods and are not above the occasional taste of meat. To join the sect, one must meditate under a fountain for seven days and nights, then undergo rigorous training and instruction. Only when the mentor is satisfied of the initiate's discipline is he or she schooled in the sexual postures of the Emerald Pillow, and from there, to the magickal Arts.

ERZULI JINQ, KISS OF ASTRUTE, K'Y'N, MHEENDS AND VRATYAS

These five sects have certain similarities: all admit only women, favor spirit congress, emphasize sexuality over drugs, and practice healing, especially on women. The styles of magick they use are fairly different, but flow from feminine Divinity.

The **Erzuli Jingo** follow the Voudun faith; through invocation of the *Loua* Madame Saint Erzuli, they pass into the spirit world, enter dreams and soothe both mind and body. Their offerings of champagne and roses, music and frenzied dancing invite possession by helpful spirits. Initiation requires long training (often by a family member), frequent offerings and a visionquest ordeal.

To those who anger them, these mages are quite fearsome: they visit victims in their dreams and sometimes twist them in grotesque ways with Life Arts. Although a sect unto themselves, Jingo nambos frequently work with the Bata'a Craft (see *The Book of Crafts*). They often gather into assons of nine women, with at least one Awakened mage present, and work hard in their communities to teach and nurture children.

The Kiss of Astarte is a modern pagan sect, Dianic in foundation but universal in application. Unlike the Erzuli Jingo, many Astartians are lesbians, and have close ties with American Black Fury werewolf packs. These mysticks use subtle rituals to direct their combined will into rejuvenation, healing, and occasional retribution. Music, chanting and dance are always important parts of any rite, and vision drugs (especially peyote and belladonna) and ritual sex add potency to spells and celebrations.

In many ways, these Ecstasies resemble Verbona; in fact, both groups have close ties. While the Astartians also follow the Great Earth Goddess, they focus more upon altered states of consciousness than upon connection to Divinity or the sacred self. Their Arts call and awaken spirits, then use the communion to achieve mystick insight. Their circles involve 13 women, many of whom are "out" about their alternative sexuality and practices. Open as it is, this sect has many enemies.

The **Ka'a** project their essence from their bodies after hours of Tantrik exercises, dance and herbal drugs. These women are quite bisexual—they often choose female lovers to achieve a state of ecstasy, then go off to find male partners to add to it.

A secret cult, these Tibetan mysticks seem perfectly ordinary on their own. They meet once a month in remote sanctuaries, in groups of three women whose menstrual cycles always remain in synch. When together, the Ka'a raise power and leave their bodies behind, then drain Shaktis from distant Sleepers and carry it home as *Tass*; this essence fuels mental and physical healings. To prevent discovery, the mages change their forms and become dream lovers, usually to strangers. Interestingly enough, Ka'a never become pregnant when using only magick to make love. Their paramours, however, awaken feeling listless and drained (but cheerful nevertheless).

Maenads have one of the most impressive legacies in the Cult: *Tali Eos*, a Tradition founder, was one of their own. Because of this, these followers of Dionysus enjoy a solid place among Ecstasies and a deep bond with the Black Fury werewolf tribe. It's a good thing they have friends in high places —



they're a fierce and bloody lot. A revel of these modern-day Bacchantes inevitably ends with spilled gore and hidden bodies.

Given modern-day criminology and morality, the small Maenad sub-sects are more discreet than their ancient forebears; members often work in rape crisis centers, halfway houses, daycare schools and government agencies in between revels. Every full moon, however, the sisters meet in some secluded place, drink, dance and scream down the mixon. Dionysus, in his androgynous aspect, is invoked and his spirit sets them free. Whatever insults they've seen or suffered come to the surface to be purged. As the evening progresses, the party gets wilder. Anyone unfortunate enough to stumble upon the meeting is torn apart by a frenzied mob.

Although magically undisciplined, most Maenads are physically imposing, with savagely effective Mind Arts and Life talents. Many use archaic weapons if a battle is called for. Some learn the spirit-ways from Black Furies. Despite the sect's many un-Awakened members, Maenads have little problem with vulgar Effects. The drunken frenzy makes all slaters "awake" while the revel continues (i.e., they're not "witnesses"). In the morning, the Maenads disperse. Only the mages remain in contact between full moons; their Arcane talents often allow them to cover up... indiscretions.

The Indian Vratyas have a long and mysterious history. Tales of these dakinis date back far before the birth of Christ. Few of them have anything much to do with other Ecstasies except to function as Tantrik instructors. When met, they demonstrate impressive powers of Life, Prime, Mind and Spirit, wear black robes and turbans, and refuse to discuss their mystick theories. Several Vratyas accompanied Sh'yar to Horizon, and put impolite outsiders in their places. One, Maar at Sulas, befriended the Dreamspeaker queen Nioba and killed herself when the African was assassinated — but not before slaying the killer with a blow that caused his body to melt like wax. To this day, no one knows how she did it.

Cult rumor states that the Vratyas have an ancestral village in the mountains of Nepal, where no man goes and survives. There, it's said, they raise their children to spread Tantrik teaching throughout India. The boys are forced to leave when they reach puberty, after the elder Vratyas initiate them into sexuality. From there, it's thought, many wandering siddhu begin their lifelong quests.

• • • • •



DEPARTURE

The comfortable life causes spiritual decay just as soft sweet food causes tooth decay.

— Colin Wilson, *Poetry & Mysticism*

I didn't really realize that I loved Wolf until I saw him in another's arms. The fact that "another" was a man didn't help my confusion. That fact that I can already hear his apologies, his insistence that no one owes another, didn't patch the rips across my heart. So I'll run before he says he loves me back.

No Aria, either. Just a note on the table: "Cassie — Gone. See ya in Nevada." To hell with them both. After crying my fool eyes out, I'll toss some shit in a backpack and

hop a plane. I can get cash without selling anything. Before leaving, I punch the CD player to "Random." Music helps me think. Janis, the Voice of Truth, cries also, 26 years gone. "Piece of My Heart," indeed. I screamed my frustration with her as I danced. Wherever you are, Janis, bless you. My eyes go raw and wet. When I finish, all I see is mist, green mountains, and desert flat as the taste of old beer. I'm going lots of places, I see. Good. I need the space.

My belly drops with the feeling of flight. Before I leave, I'm already gone. Jesus. So this is freefall. Real freefall. Where there's no one to catch you but yourself. God, I hope I know what I'm doing.





THIRD VERSE: FIREDANCE

The only real blasphemy is the refusal of joy.
— Paul Rudnick, *Jeffrey*



I dream of otters on my quest. Otters with Aria's brightwater eyes.

The journey takes me west, to Colorado, California, Arizona and finally to Black Rock playa, an ocean turned to dust. I've kept my promise to meet the others here, and I've learned a lot besides.

It's easy — too easy — to think you understand a thing by gazing at a pattern and performing rituals in a candle-lit room. To truly understand the Divine Pulse, though, I had to walk an endless road. Not with magick, but with humanity. By the time I reach Nevada for the festival, I've seen the Lakashim reflected in a thousand faces, voices, names. I've left a bit of myself in each person I've met. And they've left themselves in me.

SLEEPERS, BLOCKHEADS AND SHADOW-FOLK



Your enemy is never a villain in his own eyes. Keep this in mind; it may offer a way to make him your friend. If not, you can kill him without hate — and quickly.... A brute kills for pleasure. A fool kills from hate.

— Robert A. Heinlein, *Time Enough for Love*

She calls herself "Raven." More butch than Stallone, but good with a knife. During our time together, she leaves designs carved in my skin. The pain is exquisite, but never dulls my loneliness.

On the beach one night, I share a fire with some teenagers smoking bad dope and drinking cheap beer. Three seem all right, but their "leader," a feral-looking dude called Max, sends all my danger signs into the red. They offered me some pot, but I declined and quickly made excuses to leave. I hope no one ever accepts their offer.

Outside Reno, two men almost ran me down. As the engine gunned suddenly behind me, their malevolence hit me like the car itself. I dodged to the side, rolled and hid in trash while they stopped, searched, cursed and left. Lucky. Maybe there's something to the guardian angel

thing. If Aria or Wolf was around, I never saw them. Then again, perhaps it's just me.

In a bar in Boulder, I found myself appraised by a man with eyes like eternity. Even Aria would lose a stare-down with this spook. My skin crinkles like burnt paper as he looks me over, smiles, then moves on. Whatever he was, I don't think it was human. And I have this feeling we'll meet again.

In Phoenix, I meet Linda. One too many lovers of the wrong kind have wrecked her. I didn't mean to take her into my care, but by the time we leave, we're companions. In Nevada, I set her free. We both cried, but the last time I saw her, she was laughing, rolling in mud with a friendly boy from the Bronx. Funny, how I remember this. It hasn't rained since we've arrived.

Raven taught me the fire dance. In Nevada, I put the lessons to work. Before a crowd of curious folks, I light the batons. Flames flare in darkness, total desert darkness lit only by fitful campfires and the inferno in my hands. The night is a cool, dry breeze. Looking beyond the crowd, I begin.

THE SLEEPERS

It's a pipe dream, I know, but when a girl thinks a boy's slap on her face means he loves her, you have to start somewhere.

—Timothy Toner

We're not alone. Never. The Lakashim throbs within each sacred thing, a live design of vast complexity. I may call myself Awakened, now, but no one truly sleeps. Somewhere underneath the mundane world, potential stirs, sluggish but no less real. "Existence," Wolf's memory says, "is just a shared hallucination; few people realize it, and fewer still act on the knowledge. Those who don't should be awakened with a kiss." He smiles, then: "Just don't throw water in their face. They'll kill you."

He's not kidding. In San Francisco, I was nearly arrested. Along a road in Cuttersville, a woman screamed obscenities and shot at me. I've met men I've loved and men I'd have loved to kill and lots of men and women in between. If you meet the Cultist on the road, don't kill him, please. Lots of folks have already tried.

We never give up, though. Sleeping folks are flames to our kind. So many would dance if they only heard the rhythm. And, as Jim Morrison said, we do have the numbers to start a hell of a party. Some Ecstasies consider mundanes toys; others, tools or company; and still others, victims. Me, I'd prefer to see them as parts of myself. Don't ask which view is true. I'd say all of the above.

BLOCKHEADS

Now we've got this great oppressive force that's trying to homogenize and make everything the same! And that we must resist and fight, because that's anti-life! Evil is "live" spelled backwards. Whatever would tend to crush the individual expression of life in people — that is evil.

—Fakir Musafar, *Modern Primitives*

I understand fear. My whole Awakening has been a long fight to transcend terror. Some people never escape their fear. It drives them, consumes them. In the process, it consumes others, also. The witch-hunts didn't end when the fires died down. If any-



thing, they've begun again, bathed in a warm TV glow and scrutinized for our protection.

Do you wonder at the powers behind the demagogues? I don't anymore. Did you ever ask yourself why otherwise sane human beings could be so afraid of change that they'd plaster their bumpers with "Rush is Right" and "Don't Blame Me..."? Believe me, there are reasons.

Blockheads don't get it and never will. In their perfect little worlds, there's no room for catastrophes, no need for fear. If they had to, they would dig the thousand names of chaos from the sand and burn them all alive. Some do. Those men in Reno, for example. Now that I've stepped outside the lines, mine is one of those thousand names. To blockheads, I'm a threat worth killing for. To me, they're sad, pathetic. But a loser with a chain-gun still has a chain-gun, so it's best to skirt his borders and leave when he arrives.

THE OTHERS

*Some say the gods are just a myth
Well, guess who I've been dancing with?
The Great God Pan is alive*

— Waterboys, "The Return of Pan"

Some supernaturals have closer ties with the Cultists than others do. For the most part, the wise fools entice the Kindred, intrigue the werewolves, disgust the Garou, embarrass the Traditions, alarm the Technocrats, infuriate the Fallen, sadden the ghosts (but deal well with nature spirits), and frolic, when they can find them, with the fae. Still, the vampire clan Toreador, the Daughters of Cacophony bloodline and the satyr fae enjoy especially close relationships with the Cult.

• Vampire Clans

As the undead have discovered, certain magi are more susceptible to their games, but make more formidable opponents when crossed. Although a character needs the Lore Knowledge (or Mage Lore, in the case of vampires) to recognize another's clan or Tradition, these relationships are worth noting.

Unlike most vampires, the Toreador comprehend the Lakeshims. They don't see it as Ecstasies do (unless they achieve the fifth level of Auspex), but can feel it — and use it — in their own way. This is the sire's call beneath their art fixation: The pulse of creation itself.

The Daughters of Cacophony unleash the dark side of the Pulse. Their songs open the doors of perception further than most people can stand. Cultists are used to this, though — such insights rarely drive them mad. Vampires who use the Melpomene Discipline against Ecstasies must add +2 to their difficulties.

The dark corruptors of Set and Bael know Cultists all too well. Many mages have fallen to their temptations — or have destroyed their drug and slave cartels. Tradition leadership knows these vampires exist, but understand little about their powers or origins.

As artists and sensualists, Ecstasies recognize a good time when they meet him (even if he does feed on blood). Thus, vampires and Cultists sometimes become playmates... or rivals. No "official" pact exists between the groups (quite the opposite), but individual vampires and mages often meet in the night. The tone of those meetings (and the amount of blood spilled) depends on the characters and egos involved.

• Satyrs

This relationship should be obvious. Goodwill between goats and Ecstasies goes back to ancient Greece, and they're often found in each others' company. While most fae treasure Cultists' company (can you say "Glamour factory?"), the satyrs enjoy a bond similar to diksham: *tragos kalein*, the Call of the Goat. Struck during the revels of Dionysus, this bond prohibits fighting between the groups. The Call is broken every so often, but for a 2,000-year-old truce, it works pretty well.

THE SHADOW-FOLK

There was no doubt left in my mind that these people were carrying out some sort of test that Don Juan had set up for me. By confronting them I was being hurled into a realm which was impossible to reach or accept in rational terms. He had said... that my rationality comprised only a very small part of what he called the totality of oneself. Under the impact of the unfamiliar and the altogether real danger... my body had to make use of its hidden resources, or die.

— Carlos Castaneda, *The Second Ring of Power*

The shadows are alive. I've seen them watching me from baritone and spiderwebs. Some are mysticks like myself, while others are unknowable, alien. Even in my rush for discovery, I'm not in a hurry to learn them all by name. The man in Boulder chases my dreams. I only pray he never catches me in the open. Someday, perhaps, we'll dance, but not now. I'm far from ready.

Among the wizards, Wolf tells me, we have few friends. The Dreamspeakers and Verbena still remember

our Divyas, if not our contribution to their Council. The others, I'm told, wash their hands of our fouls' wisdom. More the fools, they. Some hacker-mages may take time-outs in techno-ecstasies' chatrooms, but I'm leery of those types of friends. Best to walk with my own kind, with Sleepers, or alone.

Outside the lines of ecstasy, hungrier shadows wait. Some are demented, or have black-hole hearts. As I heft the flame batons, I chase the darkness from my sight. Within my reach, a firestorm whirls, close enough to singe but not to burn. I'm careful, you know, and well-trained. This fire-dance won't consume me. Not now. Not ever.

ANANDA

*All the fear has left me now
I'm not frightened anymore
It's my heart that pounds beneath my flesh
It's my mouth which pushes out this breath
And if I shed a tear I won't cage it
I won't fear love
And if I feel a rage I won't deny it
I won't fear love*

— Sarah McLachlan, "Fumbling Towards Ecstasy"

I stand out in the morning now, my hair ruffled softly by desert winds. Blue-gray skies vault above me, the night retreating slowly from an unseen sun. Beneath my feet, the playa dust drifts, grain by grain, tickling my ankles, powdering my soles. Far from me, yet close enough, I feel, to touch, thunderclouds flash silently across distant mountaintops. Across the plain, there is no sound, only bolts of silent fury. Before long, the sun will blaze across the desert and the festival will begin again. For now, I wish to dance alone and greet the morning my own way.

Above me stands a modern wicker man, arms outstretched before the morning. I mimic him, dropping my blanket, baring my body to the morning cold. Nipples snap erect, hair bristles, skin prickles as the breeze plays across me.

I stretch the sleep from aching muscles. In my throat, sounds form. Words I cannot speak because no one has invented language for what I feel. A song. An Aria. Now I understand.

Somewhere across the flat expanse, a lone drummer greets the morning. I shift my weight from side to side, catching the faraway beats and translating them to movement. They match my heartbeat. The Divine Pulse. Maybe I only imagine this, but perhaps he feels it too. Surely I'm not the only one Awake here.

I let my song become my movements, let them bleed together in breath, in heartbeat. My throat rasps; there's too little water here, and I have gone without too long. I run my tongue from side to side and caress each tooth in turn. I swallow and milligrams of miracles caress my dusty throat.



I fill my lungs with cold dry air and raise my voice with passion praise. Behind closed eyelids, my sight races, pulsates from my stomach to my feet to my fingers and away, to embrace the spirits of this barren waste and the visitors who sleep. To me, the thumping bass of a miles-distant rave is close at hand; the tender skin of sleepers relaxes at my touch. The lightning-crackle miles from me sets my hair on end and the cool wind is a lover with roving hands. I sense, though I cannot see, the lake this was a million years ago; the passage of ghost-fish and ancient currents cause my lungs to hitch for just a moment, as if I were submerged. Then all I feel is dust beneath my feet; it saddens me.

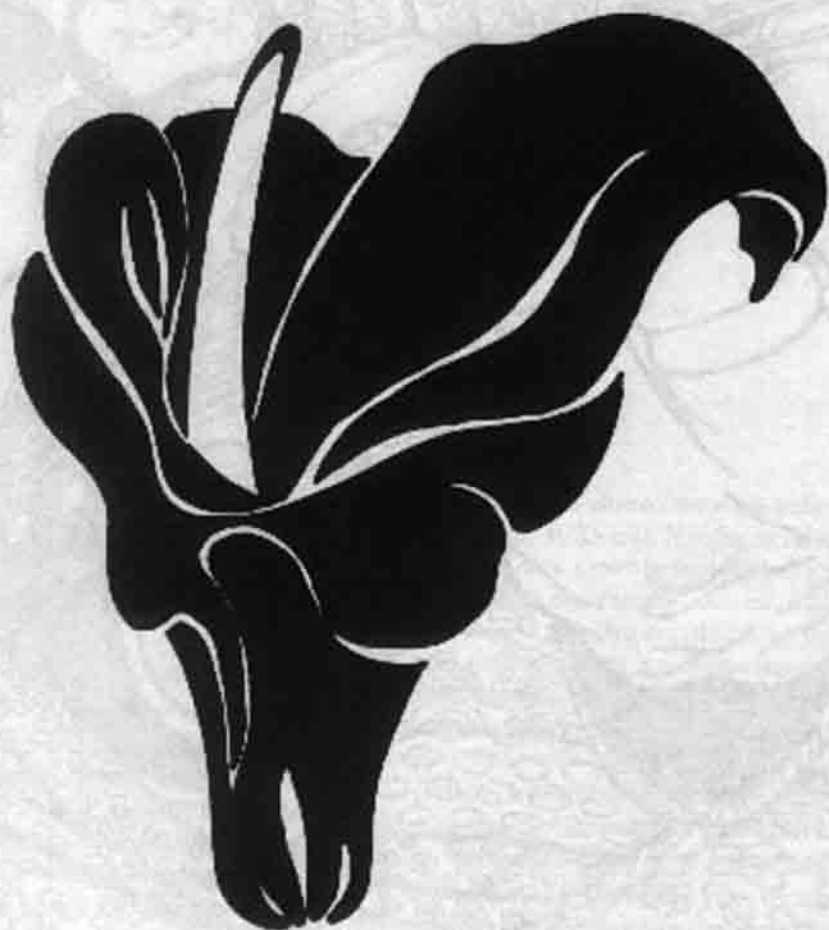
Then it passes and I feel the pat of future raindrops spatter dusty skin. It will rain today and I revel in it now as I will six hours hence. The lovers I'll caress tonight and the

ones I had before visit me as I dance below the wicker man. I send myself to visit them, so those I haven't met will know me and the ones I have met will remember. From my belly, just above my groin, I grow warm and wet. The tingle spreads to chase away the cold across my skin, pulses outward and joins the morning's heartbeat. The desert's heartbeat. Even here, it never stills.

One final note. I pitch it high and long, follow its waves as it echoes across the desert, then fall back into myself and shiver as the wind cools my sudden sweat.

One final gift; I send a ghost of my sensations to the lonely drummer at his fire. Perhaps I'll meet him later, maybe not. For now, he'll know someone loves him.

For now, at least, I've left the fear behind. It's wonderful to be alive.





FOURTH VERSE: ...FROM THE ANCIENT GALLERY

*Death makes angels of us all
& gives us wings
where we had shoulders
smooth as raven's
claws*

— Jim Morrison, "American Night"



*Some died in ecstasy
Some died in poverty,
But they all die
With their boots on
At the shouting end of life*

— Oysterband, "The Shouting End of Life"
Story's over. Let's talk game systems.

Ecstasies are daredevils, shamans, renegades, hippies, and seekers of joy in a cold, impersonal world. They could be you, if you were one of them. It's not appearance that makes an Ecstatic mage — it's a willingness to step however far out it takes to realize that, buried under all the garbage, some Divinity exists. The journey they undertake to find it may be treacherous, but to them, the danger makes the prize all the more worthwhile.

Most Ecstasies are their own foil, and they learn by intuition. The drugs and instruments they use to propel

themselves into an altered state are only tools, *upaya*, the "skillful means" to an end. It is the mind and the spirit that provide their Arts. Don't be fooled by the Hallmark brigade; primal magick is nasty stuff — painful, frightening and very, very potent. As this chapter illustrates, many Cultists burn out at an early age. Their impressive legacies, however, make the sacrifice seem worthwhile. For a short, glorious time, these mages see the world from perspectives most of their cousins could never imagine.

(It bears repeating once again that this is not an endorsement for real-life danger-play. If you can't tell a game from reality, close this damned book and go back to killing orcs!)

The following templates may be used by players or Storytellers. The histories in the later part of this chapter show the wild lives — and sudden deaths — that make Cultists so notorious among their kind.

DREAM DANCER

*Floating on waves of music and light
The chariot of the Daemon of the World
Descends in silent power.*

*It's shape reposed within; slight as some cloud
That catches but the palest tinge of day
When evening yields to night
— Percy Shelley, The Daemon
of the World*

Quote: *If you have only one
day on Earth, you'd better make
that day worthwhile.*

Prelude: Since childhood, you've loved music. As soon as possible, you moved to it. Something powerful waited beneath the beat, an element that whispered to you through half-heard tunes and vivid dreams. As you grew, you reached for it. Dance classes. Singing lessons. Sports. Then darker things. Nothing quite worked.

From Athletic Tomboy, you graduated to Wild Child. Sex was an adventure, and drugs a free ride. Running away from home was a rush; even hunger didn't dull the edge. Dreams fit you better than reality did. You were heading for a serious fall when your mentor picked you up. He played, you danced — great combination. Then he taught you how to reach the rhythm that seemed forever out of reach. He taught you yoga, Tantra, the real dance of the seven veils. Better, he taught you discipline. That lesson helped you survive your adolescence.

Finally, it happened. Energy surged through your chakras one night and burst out in a furious wave that literally carried you from your body. There you found the end of your quest.

The dreamdance. Astral travel. Flesh had always constrained you; now you could escape into your dreams. Once you discover how to do that trick again, all sensations will be yours.

Concept: Although you're an astonishing dancer, your talents go beyond that: Singing, carousing, and of course, magick. You're a young survivor who's just discovered her Holy Grail — a wild Mind talent. This lets you go further into your dreams (and others') than you ever did before. This magick thing is a blast. Be careful it doesn't take you with it.

Roleplaying Tips: Beneath your indulgences, you're an adrenaline junkie. Speak quickly, gesture with wild grace, and stay in motion. Sensations intoxicate you; self-control is a recent thing, so still go overboard when the opportunity arises. Death, when the subject comes up, terrifies you. Life is for living; do so at full blast.

Magick: Asleep or waking, your Mind Arts are formidable. With them, you can influence another's thoughts, moods or dreams. Other Spheres turn life's intensity up loud. Cool! Music, movement and Tantrik sex rites are your main foci, although crazy stunts and even drugs will do in a pinch.

Equipment: Anything that won't weigh you down.



TECHNO-ECSTATIC

You've got to stop thinking about time and space as if they were inviolable. They are not inviolable! They do not exist in themselves! They are postulates of the conscious mind!

— Paddy Chayefsky, *Altered States*

Quote: There are no limits to experience. There's nothing new out there in the woods, though. The future is in technology. Here, slip these on. I'll show you things you've never even dreamed of...

Prelude: A restless, intelligent and unsociable child, you were drawn to the wonders inside an Erector set. The things you did with it made your folks both proud and nervous. Chemistry sets, broken appliances, spare parts from Radio Shack — these were your favorite toys. Instruction didn't matter; the things inside your head looked so much better.

Although you'd never been popular in school, the sudden technology explosion brought others running to you. By high school graduation, you'd had your first taste of sex — and were bored. Once again, the sensations you imagined were so much more potent than the pitiful scrapings of mere flesh. Sex chatlines left you cold, too. Who wanted to download nudie pix and innuendo when *Hustler* could be found in your father's bathroom? Then one day, you found the Real Deal.

It seemed innocuous enough: alt.xtasy.snsatn.@spdm.com. Bringing the newsgroup up was a bitch; the effort made you sweat — not figuratively, but for real. The harder the puzzle became, the more determined your efforts. By the time you'd logged on, the room was spinning and hollow, as if you'd gone a whole day without food or water. The clock on your screen said you had. Impossible! This newsgroup had better be worth it, you growled as the greeting spread across the screen.

It was.

Now you have plenty of friends. Some of them you've actually met in the flesh, but most were imprinted on your brain in the most dazzling VR setup in the goddamned world. These days, you get out more often. Your talent for invention has made you very popular, and brings in some amazing offers. Who needs college with teachers like this?

Concept: A newly-Awakened technological genius, you strive to create things no one else has invented yet. Your mundane skills were formidable enough; with magick, anything you want will be within reach in a few short years. In the meantime, you're having a ball.

Roleplaying Tips: You're still a kid, but a brilliant one who's just realized that a world beyond imagining exists in her back yard. Try hard to be cool. Oh, yeah, and be mysterious. Very, very mysterious. If your new friends thought that just anyone could do this stuff, they'd leave you in a heap. Talk way above their heads to keep 'em guessing.

Magick: Although you're concentrating on sensory input right now, Matter and Forces will be your future specialties. Although you prefer high-tech foci to the old-fashioned ones, body modification, smart drugs and industrial music seem fun. Why limit yourself?

Equipment: Clusters of gadgets, decks, gear, discs, black clothing, micro-tools, sensory-enhancement mods, smart drugs, Glock 9mm pistol.

PRINCE OF PAIN

How do we measure being alive?... Fight, flight and ecstasy are the three things. Those are all combined in piercings and tattoos and the marking of your passage through life and the idea of it being a visual, permanent library of experiences that cannot be taken from you except by death.

—Genesis P-Orridge

Quote: *How can you say this is sick if you haven't tried it?*

Prelude: In a past life, you know you belonged to a tribe. Their rites of passage were painful, but they taught you how to leave yourself behind. Those memories have haunted you into this incarnation, where no such rites exist. You remembered them so well, you made up your own.

It began with small piercings and home-made tattoos, then furtive experiments with constriction. While imitating the O-Kee-Pa in your garage, you nearly died. As your limbs went numb and blood spattered to the floor, you watched yourself from the other side of the room. Somehow you must have come down off the hooks; those memories seem lost, but you've been trying to find what you encountered that day ever since.

Body modification became your religion. Every book and film you could find became gospel. For kicks, you did a stint with Jim Rose's circus. Kala the Serpent Girl — your future lover and mentor — works there as well. Now she teaches you how to leave time and flesh behind. Some lessons take a while, but the prize is worth it. Perhaps some day you can visit those tribal lands in person.

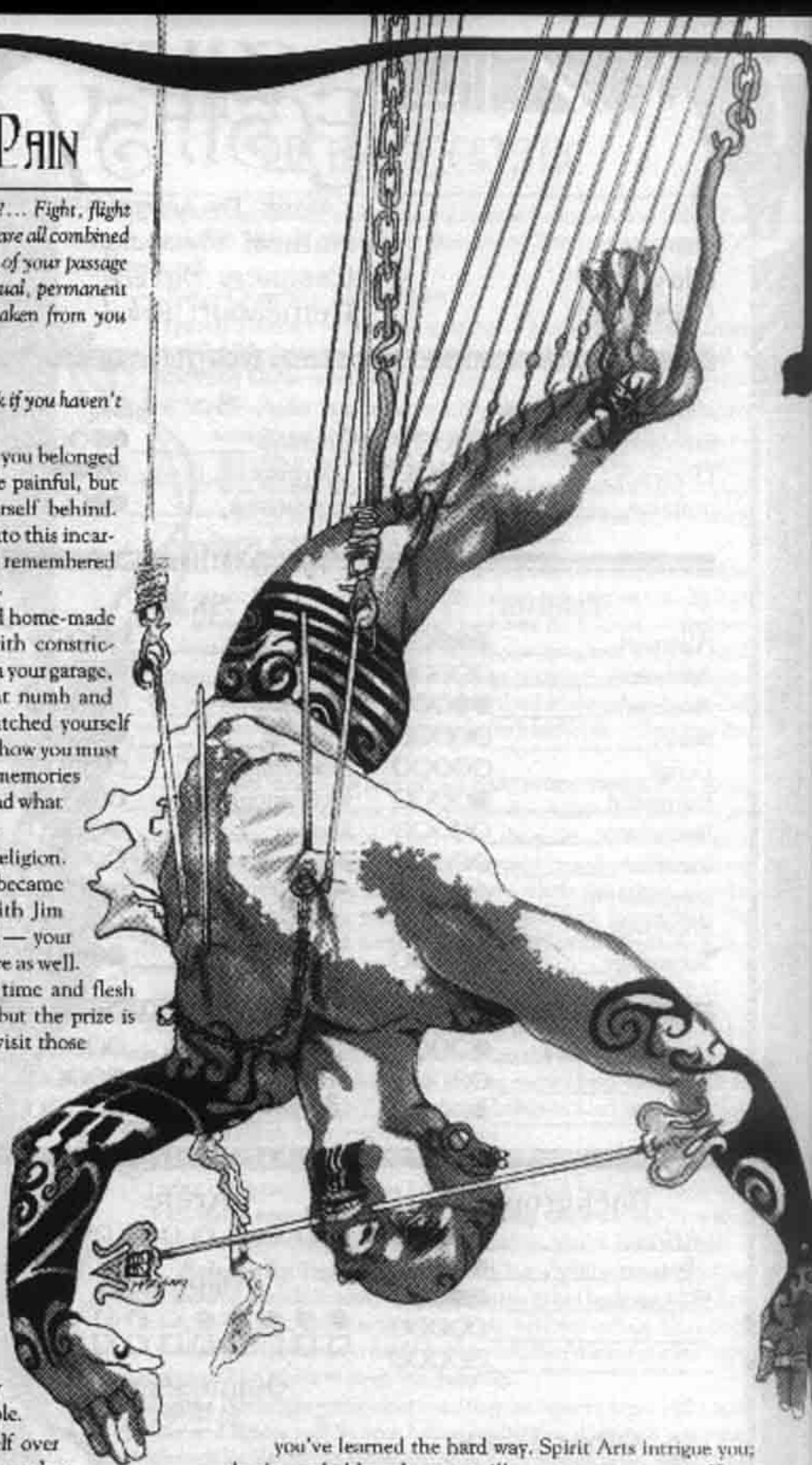
Concept: A modern yogi in search of transcendence, you've realized the hollowness of the industrial dream. A world without ritual is a world without hope. Your scars and tattoos are marks of passage beyond all that. There is something better than endless drudgery — you've seen it, you know it, and sharing that insight is imperative. On tour, you've seen the crushed souls, the real freaks, who come to watch you "perform." They're pathetic. You pity them. Maybe all they need is an example.

Roleplaying Tips: Taking yourself over the edge brings ananda. Others think you're a masochist, but they can't see the insight beyond the pain. In other cultures, you'd be considered normal; here, you're sick. Life's funny, but it's okay. You've learned how to laugh.

Magick: When you step outside yourself, time falls aside too. Your skill with Life magick reflects control

you've learned the hard way. Spirit Arts intrigue you; that's probably where you'll concentrate next. Your kamamarga include orleals of all kinds, body art and trance dancing. Someday you'll need no help at all.

Equipment: Rings, weights, blades, extensive library, Jim Rose tour jacket.



CULT OF ECSTASY

MAGE: The Ascension™

Name:
Player:
Chronicle:

Nature: *Fanatic*
Essence: *Questing*
Demeanor: *Deviant*

Concept: *Prince of Pain*
Mentor:
Cabal:

Attributes

Physical

Strength ●●●●●
Dexterity ●●●●●
Stamina *Hardy* ●●●●●

Social

Charisma ●●●●●
Manipulation ●●●●●
Appearance ●●●●●

Mental

Perception ●●●●●
Intelligence ●●●●●
Wits ●●●●●

Abilities

Talents

Alertness ●●●●●
Athletics ●●●●●
Awareness ●●●●●
Brawl ●●●●●
Dodge ○○○○○
Expression ●●●●●
Instruction ○○○○○
Intuition ○○○○○
Intimidation ●●●●●
Streetwise ●●●●●
Subterfuge ○○○○○

Skills

Do ○○○○○
Drive ○○○○○
Etiquette ○○○○○
Firearms ○○○○○
Leadership ○○○○○
Meditation ●●●●●
Melee ●●●●●
Research ○○○○○
Stealth ○○○○○
Survival ●●●●●
Technology ○○○○○

Knowledges

Computer ○○○○○
Cosmology ○○○○○
Culture ●●●●●
Enigmas ●●●●●
Investigation ○○○○○
Law ○○○○○
Linguistics ○○○○○
Lore ○○○○○
Medicine ●●●●●
Occult ○○○○○
Science ●●●●●

Spheres

Correspondence ○○○○○
Entropy ○○○○○
Forces ○○○○○

Life ●●●●●
Mind ●●●●●
Matter ○○○○○

Prime ○○○○○
Spirit ●●●●●
Time ●●●●●

Advantages

Backgrounds

Avatar ●●●●●
Dream ●●●●●
Mentor ●●●●●
○○○○○
○○○○○

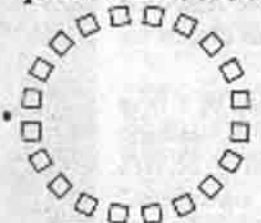
Arete

● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Willpower

● ● ● ● ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

Quintessence



Paradox

Health

Bruised -0 ☐
Hurt -1 ☒
Injured -1 ☐
Wounded -2 ☒
Mauled -2 ☐
Crippled -5 ☒
Incapacitated ☐

Other Traits

Acrobat ●●●●●
Dance ●●●●●
Escape ●●●●●
Torture ●●●●●
○○○○○

Experience

(IN)FAMOUS ECSTATICS



He could read the Bible like a preacher
Full of ecstasy and fire
But he also was the kind of teacher
Women would desire

— Boiled in Lead, "Rasputin"

Unlike many other Traditions, the Cult of Ecstasy has few truly powerful luminaries. It's said that Ecstatics would rather leave behind a wild legacy than live forever. Certainly, the histories of many of the group's most notorious members bear the theory out; most burn brightly for a few years, then either disappear, spiral downward or perish in an amazing display of Paradox.

Mystery surrounds most notable Cultists. Did Sh'zar fade away, or does he live on in some distant Realm? Was Isadora Duncan's fatal ride truly an accident? And is Jim Morrison really dead? Chronos keeps many secrets, and if the Ecstatics know the answers, they aren't talking.

SH'ZAR THE SEER

Where he came from, no one knew. His name, a corruption of *sh'ir*, or seer, hinted at Indian origins, but many thought him an Arab or a Persian. Although a devotee of Tantra, he was open to the entire spectrum of Ecstatic arts. After a lifetime of wandering the Middle Eastern wastes, he traveled to the hidden courts of Persia and Greece with dire prophecies upon his lips:

"...and as I watch, the great dawn becomes a fist of iron, whose fingers brush the clouds and bring low the stars. As the celestial lights fall to Earth, the fingers close and all things — stars, mountains, rivers, cities — become as a lump of coal in the giant fist."

News of the distant philosopher-scientist was not new, but Sh'zar was among the first to take the Order of Reason seriously. To every magus he encountered, the Seer spoke of the coming tribulation. Finally, three Masters listened. Valoran, Nightshade and Baldric took his prophecies to heart and began to forge the Council he had also foreseen, "...a wise gathering, men and women both, clustered about a glowing sphere like unto the Moon at full rise."

No one knows what Sh'zar really looked like. His face was said to change like a bonfire flame, always flowing into different guises. In many, he was handsome and proud, dressed in finery; sometimes he appeared ugly, naked or in rags. Three things distinguished Sh'zar, however, regardless of his appearance: his eloquent perceptions, his disgust for violence, and his magical companions.

Everywhere he went, Sh'zar was guarded by a fiery hawk and two grand male peacocks. These familiars, Adamu, Ka'bah and Kadishtu, watched all of Sh'zar's acquaintances "...with an almost human assessment." Although many Europeans considered them demons,

Sh'zar's companions often saved innocents or battled monsters. The Seer himself considered hashish to be his best weapon. Tales speak of the Conversion of Malach, when a horde of bandits were stopped in their tracks by clouds of smoke and words of peace. Sh'zar prophesied from morning until late afternoon. When night came, the bandits joined him around the fire, then left the next morning without incident.

Like so many of his kind, Sh'zar disappeared into time after his disciple Akrites was accused of cowardice. After a long meditation, the Seer shut himself in his tent and was never seen again. By 1480, everyone agreed that he was gone forever. Although histories speak of his appearance in the clouds at the jambo of 1867, most Ecstatics consider that a myth.

ALEISTER CROWLEY

The rise and fall of "The Great Beast 666" stands as an object lesson for all Cultists who would follow him. A brilliant scholar and magician, Aleister Crowley popularized the darker side of magick and handily rebelled against Victorian morality. Sadly, his single-minded pursuit of power and sensation ended in a downward spiral that supposedly climaxed in 1947. The so-called "Master Therion" seems to epitomize hubris gone mad.

That Crowley was Awakened is almost indisputable. His influence and wealth were likewise infamous. While squamous Hermetics were quick to dismiss the dark mystic, Cultists recognized one of their own from the start. He studied Tantrik magick and used it as a springboard for his own ideas. Sadly, he favored excess and cruelty. Crowley's "Do what thou wilt" approach included orgies, ritual sacrifice, curses and constant drug experimentation. Many Cultists believe he turned *barabbi* halfway through his career, but perhaps he simply let power go to his head. One Virtual Adept claims he gave Crowley's termination order during the post-WWII Nephandi cleanup, but the truth remains unknown.

Ironically, although he supposedly died dissipated, friendless and broke, Crowley's influence lives on long past his reputed death. For better or worse (Cultists themselves can't agree about which), the Master Therion's writings and charisma have inspired dozens of Awakenings and undermined a good deal of established dogma. It may be that in reinventing modern magick, Crowley reached his own dark Ascension. Still, most Cultists frown on his example.

RASPUTIN

A series of outrageous tales has credited Russia's mad saint with every form of vampirism, insanity and venereal disease imaginable, to say nothing of his supposed links to the Celestial Chorus and (ludicrously!) the Sons of Ether. An Ecstatic from the beginning, Grigory Novykh compelled women to abandon their virtue, czars to abandon their sense,



and a young heir to abandon a disease from which there was supposedly no cure.

The details of the Mad Monk's life are far too common to bother relating; what few outside the Cult of Ecstasy realize is that this "Satanic" figure crusaded against Nephandic agents. His brief association with Isadora Duncan exposed a ring of Fallen Ones influential in the Romanov court. With her help (and several miracles), Rasputin dispatched the Nephandi from the court. With one exception: Prince Yusupov.

The Prince's incompetence as a mage was revealed by his inability to handle the Ecstatic monk on his own. When his magicks failed, Yusupov summoned outside help. Rasputin died, but it took a diabolical effort to slay him. With the monk out of the way, the Fallen reestablished their stranglehold on the Romanovs. Soon, the court fell. The whereabouts of Anastasia are a secret even to the Awakened, but most Cultists believe she went to the Cauls. As for Rasputin, he died a hero.

Just ask the Cultists. They'll tell you.

ISADORA DUNCAN

This barefooted revolutionary did more than just stand dance conventions on their ear; she advocated, through her teachings and example, the ecstatic experience in art. To this day, Cultists wonder if her odd death in 1927 was an accident — or an assassination.

Isadora was always drawn to the dance — not the rigidity of ballet, but the improvisational ferocity of the ancient Greeks. She felt dance should be fluid and elemental, not stiff or polite, and danced half-naked and alone, drawing the music into her movements. American audiences were not exactly enthralled; the self-Awakened mage had much to learn. When Isadora moved to Europe, she encountered Jean Garoche, a Nephandi-hunting Cultist; the two became lovers, friends and comrades in arms. With his help, Isadora excelled at magick and became the talk of Europe.

Duncan's charisma and stamina were legendary, as were her grace and libido. Lovers flocked to her bed, and students filled her dance schools. Her sense of the Lakashim was strong; she advocated a return to nature, and many fans listened.

Then fell Garoche; Jean turned *barabbi*. When Isadora found out, she killed him and fled to Russia, where she met the fac-blooded dancer Nijinski, his mentor Sergey Diaghilev (another Ecstatic), and Rasputin. There, she thought she'd found peace. She was mistaken. Friends of Garoche took revenge. One "accident" drowned Duncan's two children and their nanny. Another "coincidence" killed her newborn son. Her success in post-war Russia branded her a traitor back home, the schools failed, and Isadora took to drink. As a focus, it made a great vice; her powers declined, as did her success. When Duncan's husband committed suicide, she almost joined him.

Despite her "luck," Duncan's ecstatic teachings caught on, changing the face of modern dance. Her star was on the

rise again when a mysterious "accident" ended her career forever: Isadora's trademark, a flowing scarf, tangled around a car wheel and snapped her neck. Was it chance — or a final Nephandic strike? To this day, many Ecstatic dancers wear scarves in Isadora's honor — and in defiance of her fate.

JIM MORRISON

Satyr. Poet. Visionary. Drug addict. Rock god. Enigma. Jim Morrison seemed to personify all the best and worst the Cult has to offer. A mystick gifted with uncanny foresight, the Lizard King turned the hippie ideal upside down. Despite The Doors' success, it was years before their dark truths became as obvious to us as they were to him.

Like so many '60s Ecstatics, Jim Awakened without guidance. His magicks evolved by accident, and revolved around time and perception. From the beginning, he seemed to know he was doomed; anyone who heard his voice recognized a man who stared into his own nightmares while turning them into dreams.

The Doors weren't only controversial among Sleepers. Morrison didn't seem to realize how big his game really was. Although obviously an Ecstatic, he never had a mentor and never took sides. Some Cultists claim the Syndicate targeted him from the start. Others say his excesses spoiled great potential. In any case, he quickly burned out, becoming perhaps the largest tombstone in the rock-n-roll graveyard. Some say he was searching for a mentor when he died. Others insist he found one.

Supposedly, Morrison attracted Marianna's eye, took her up on an offer of escape, and has never looked back. Freed from the spotlight, he continues to plumb the doors of perception and recalls his stardom with mingled amusement, regret and contempt. If Jim Morrison does live at Balador, he has changed his appearance and keeps a low profile.

Morrison's heyday involved so many Ecstasy mages and their acolytes that it seems to have been the Cult's finest hour. The fact that so many have either died or gone insane indicates either a massive Technocratic crack-down, a Paradox ripple, or the frailties of Cult doctrine. Everyone has their own theories. The rumors that Mick Jagger is Awakened have since been discredited.





MARIANNA OF BALADOR

Rumor has it that the greatest living Ecstatic Master once loved Lord Byron himself. Marianna has neither disputed nor confirmed the claim. However old she may be, this Divya commands formidable talents, mystic and otherwise.

Best known for her sexual appetites, Marianna is reputed to have been born in Venice, Italy in the early 1800s. That heritage is impossible to tell from her looks; Marianna changes her appearance so frequently that even her best friends seldom recognize her. Although she prefers classical ideals — Greek statues, Botticelli nudes, Persian belly-dancers, etc. — Balador's mistress occasionally samples every mode of beauty.

During the early Cult of Bacchus days, Marianna tended the best brothels in Venice. When the Guild (Syndicate) tried to take her businesses over, she undercut both their efforts and their Constructs. Her impressive prophecies made her many friends and saved many lives. During both World Wars, it's said she hid refugees in her brothels, and in the '60s, she hosted one of Europe's most exclusive getaways. In 1976, the chief councilor of Balador Pleasuredome passed the keys to Marianna. It was a wise choice.

Since that time, the Divya has made free love her crusade. She loathes rapists and pederasts, and enforces the Code of Ananda within Balador. On Earth, she sponsors a number of aspiring artists while pursuing a rumored rape cult. In person, Balador's mistress is friendly and disarming. Some mistake her constant cheer for naiveté, but they miss the point. "I've met so many crazy mages in my life," she purrs in a continental accent, "that I make it my goal to be an exception." If Marianna has an evil side, no one living can attest to it....



APPENDIX: ECSTATIC ARTS

A human being is more like a symphony than a painting. He is a process, not a thing. The scientist of the future will have to be time-oriented rather than space-oriented. When this happens, we shall realize that the universe is driven by living energies, rather than physical forces, and that its essential processes are closer to magic than to science.

— Colin Wilson, describing the theories of Dr. Charlotte Bach; from *The Misfits*



To Ecstasies, magick is an extension of all peoples' potential. Our inner energy can only bond with the pulse of creation through concentration, through deliberately shodding the human blindfold. One of the reasons the Tradition remains concerned with the un-Awakened is because to them, all people can be Awakened. The choice, of course, belongs to the individual. Frankly, given the risks, they're not counting on many people

joining them anytime soon.

Cultists dive head-first into their magick; this Appendix describes some of the things they do with it — and the things it does to them.

SHAKTI AND STYLE

The Sanskrit word *Shakti* means many things: power, force, the primal energy which, when given form, begins and ends all things. *Shakti* herself is the creatrix, the wife and lover of *Shiva*; together they dance, make love and birth the universe in their bliss. A complex, tangential concept, *Shakti* embodies creation (especially in its feminine qualities), and contains aspects of will, bliss, consciousness, knowledge and

action. The Tradition's founders considered the goddess a perfect metaphor for magick.

It was Tali Eos' idea to connect the Spheres with the sacred passions. The 10th Sphere, *Lakashim*, would theoretically unite them all. In her view, a mystick feels the *Lakashim*, then becomes one with it. Through this union, all things are possible. To command magick, one must first feel magickal, which is why one's passions are considered so important.

With this perspective, the different Spheres become sensations to master, each with its own rules. The deeper one feels, the more one understands. Thus, most mentors teach the different Spheres as extensions of one another, linked to a mage's passions. Beginners often start with one dot in many Spheres, then work upwards from there. "Cross-training" this way leads to a better understanding of everything, and in the long run, creates a more powerful *Divya* than concentrating on one or two Spheres would do.

In the early days, each passion was linked to a Sphere. These relationships caused controversy, however, and were soon abandoned. For the record, those original correspondences were: Correspondence = Empathy; Entropy = Fear; Forces = Rage; Life = Lust; Matter = Hate; Mind = Love; Prime = Joy; Spirit = Jealousy; Time = Grief.

КАМАМАРГА (FOCI)

Roll me out a barrel, I'll toast you to your knees
Take away this safety net, bring me my trapeze
Order me a stretcher, for midnight if you please
Give me sweet music and strife...
Gunpowder, whiskey, falling off the wire
Anything could put me in the ever-after choir
Hacks that want to see me shuffle off the shelf
I hand them each a bottle, I say
Go fuck yourself

— Oysterband, "The Shouting End of Life"

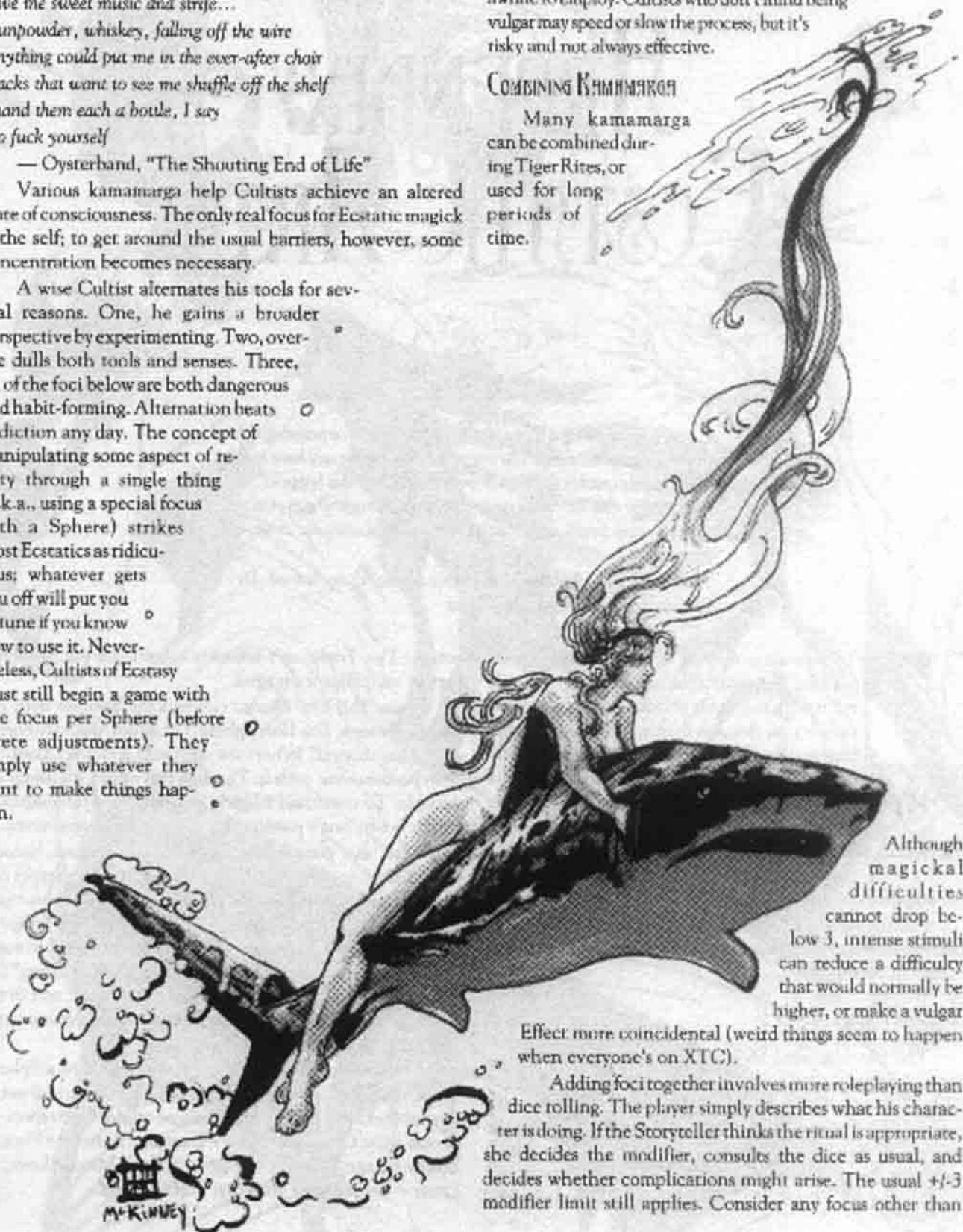
Various kamamarga help Cultists achieve an altered state of consciousness. The only real focus for Ecstatic magick is the self; to get around the usual barriers, however, some concentration becomes necessary.

A wise Cultist alternates his tools for several reasons. One, he gains a broader perspective by experimenting. Two, over-use dulls both tools and senses. Three, all of the foci below are both dangerous and habit-forming. Alternation beats addiction any day. The concept of manipulating some aspect of reality through a single thing (a.k.a., using a special focus with a Sphere) strikes most Ecstasies as ridiculous; whatever gets you off will put you in tune if you know how to use it. Nevertheless, Cultists of Ecstasy must still begin a game with one focus per Sphere (before Arete adjustments). They simply use whatever they want to make things happen.

Concentration is a vital part of the Cult's Arts. Most kamamarga take a turn or more to use — one cannot attain a Tantrik posture in a single turn. Wise Cultists focus themselves beforehand if it seems like their Arts will come in handy. Many of the foci below have lasting effects, although they may take awhile to employ. Cultists who don't mind being vulgar may speed or slow the process, but it's risky and not always effective.

COMBINING КАМАМАРГА

Many kamamarga can be combined during Tiger Rites, or used for long periods of time.



Although magical difficulties cannot drop below 3, intense stimuli can reduce a difficulty that would normally be higher, or make a vulgar

Effect more coincidental (weird things seem to happen when everyone's on XTC).

Adding foci together involves more roleplaying than dice rolling. The player simply describes what his character is doing. If the Storyteller thinks the ritual is appropriate, she decides the modifier, consults the dice as usual, and decides whether complications might arise. The usual +/-3 modifier limit still applies. Consider any focus other than

Meditation to have an "Extra Time" bonus if used for more than an half hour without stopping.

Overdose is always a danger. A mage combining or intensifying kamamarga should make a Willpower roll (difficulty 6) or be overwhelmed when he does. This goes up +1 for every new focus (or every magickal success) over the second; if Wolf scores three successes with Bombolai, his Willpower difficulty is 7. Whee! Failing this roll knocks the character unconscious for a turn or two; botching it puts him in a coma. Addiction is the Storyteller's prerogative, but remember that Cultists are used to more intensity than mortals are. (*Destiny's Price* has more in-depth rules for addiction and drugs.)

- **Adrenaline:** Daredevils prefer a raw adrenaline rush. By performing some crazy stunt, a mage can focus herself for a few minutes. The madder the act, the longer the sensation lasts. Dodging a bullet might give her a buzz for two or three turns; jumping a motorcycle onto a moving train might last an hour.

- **Art:** Some Ecstasies focus by creating art, while others like Wolf can enter a trance by staring at their creations. Most Cultists have some special bit of custom jewelry or body art; most wear elaborate rings, though some prefer piercings or tattoos. Obviously, creating art requires some effort, so magick using that focus will demand some time and materials to work. This kind of focus must be used quickly before the inspiration fades.

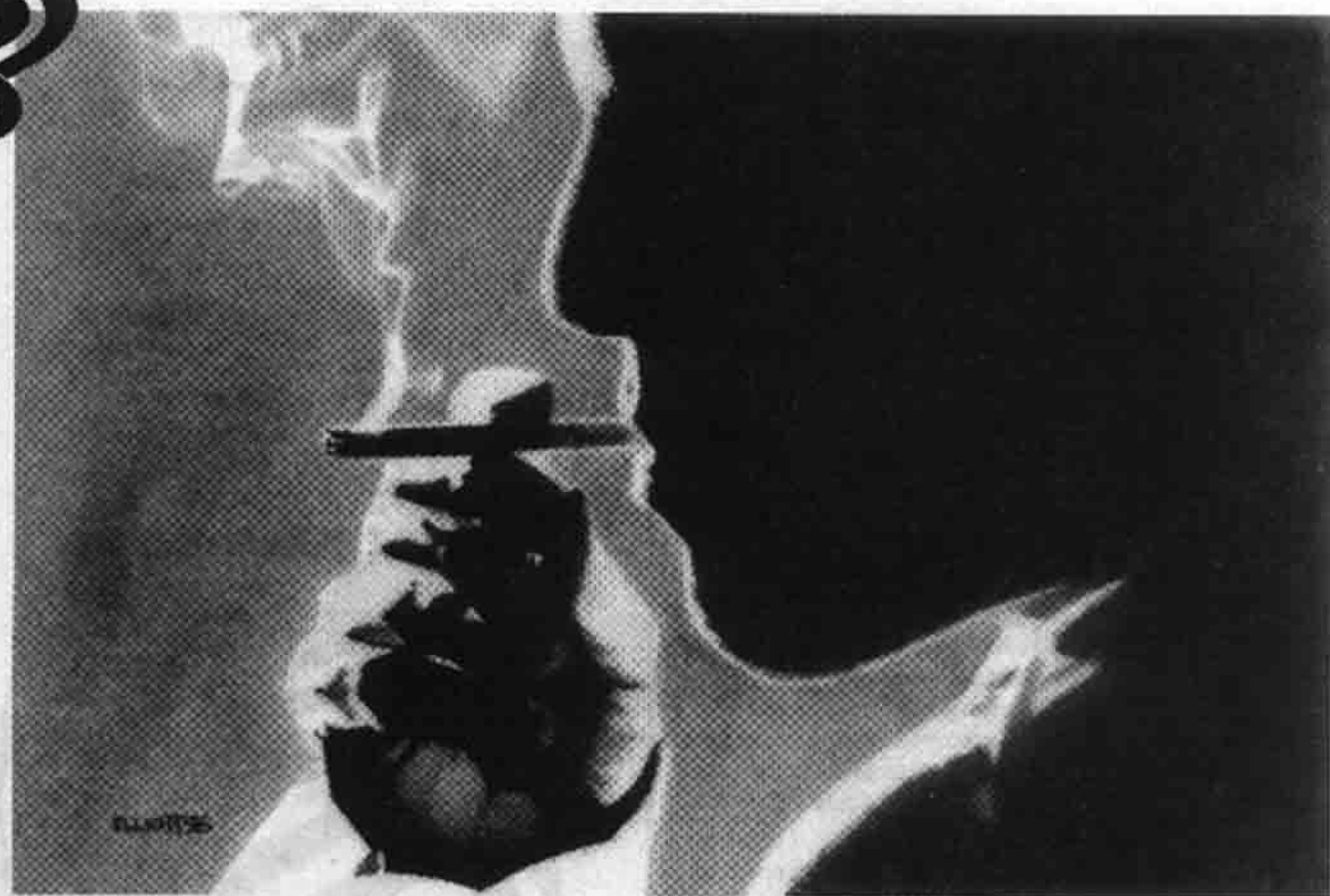
- **Body Modification/Ordeals:** Sacrifice is an important aspect of magick. With body mods and ordeals, Ecstasies use the sun dance, the sleep of nails, flogging, fasting and torture to leave themselves behind. Some SM types have refined these ordeals to bizarre extremes, but the intent is the same: to heighten consciousness by passing the point where pleasure and pain collide. Body modifications — scarification, reshaping, constriction, castration, etc. — make the ordeal's marks permanent. Both require time (several turns or more) to perform, but the focus lasts for hours.

- **Dance:** The safest and most invigorating way to reach the Lakashim, dance celebrates the experience of being alive and attunes the mage to music. He doesn't have to be a good dancer, but it helps. This focus usually demands room to move, some music to move to, and time to get in step. A good ecstatic trance takes several minutes to attain. As with adrenaline, the harder you push, the better your focus becomes.

- **Drugs:** Although controversial, drugs are perhaps the oldest way to expand your perceptions. They're risky, quick, easy to use and often illegal. One use will focus a Cultist for anywhere from five minutes (crack, crystal meth) to six hours (LSD, peyote), with most falling somewhere between. As most drugs cause hallucinations, an Ecstatic might lose track of objects, people, or, of course, time.

- **Incense:** An ages-old symbol for human wishes ascending to heaven, incense helps you concentrate by defining a scent to focus on. It's also helpful for covering odors,





especially in crash pads. Burning incense takes at least three turns; it won't hurry, neither should you.

• **Meditation:** Actually, all kamamarga are meditations; this focus, though, involves postures, deep breathing and exercises like yoga, prayer or Tantra. These may be done alone, or shared; some forms, especially Tantra, require several partners and complex positions. Most forms require training and preparation, and none of them may be hurried. Focusing this way takes at least 10 minutes and usually longer. The stimulation can last for hours.

• **Music:** The Lakashim expresses itself most readily in song. The form of music doesn't matter, but the musicians' intent does. Some songs are always powerful, no matter how they're performed, but others require precise execution to work. Although the Technocracy and simple greed have banalized many of the most effective tunes, music is a bottomless resource that anyone can appreciate. Performing it takes time and talent, and the focus can last for up to an hour; listening requires less of both, but is less effective, too.

While most Cultists favor simple acoustic instruments like flutes, guitars, drums or voices, lots of newer recruits use electronic devices, synthesizers and home-made gadgets. No barrier is forever.

• **Sensuality/Sexuality:** Touch itself is a communion of the senses; touch between two people creates a bond. Combining intimate touching with intimate contact is the essence of sex, and of sexual magick. The intensity of the experience (especially if it's done properly) raises

power — ojas — in all parties concerned. A smart Ecstatic knows how to channel that energy through his chakras, or at least how to focus it. Some mysticks concentrate on the sensations, others on the rising power. Either one is effective.

Pure sensuality involves exposing all senses to arousal; massage, electric stimulation, or just concentrating on what you feel all work. Sex may be simple intercourse or elaborate Tantrik rites. Both stimulation and sex require some amount of time. The longer they last, the better the focus.

• **Technology:** Not all Cultists are naturalists. With VR, the Web, computer morphing and industrial music, all-new sensations can be created, disseminated and piped directly to the pleasure centers. Techno-ecstatics prefer to go beyond the limits of everything; their technology is often custom-built, but anyone can use it. Such foci take hours, days or even longer to prepare, but only a turn or two to use.

PERCEPTION

Because they've removed mortal blinders, Ecstatics claim to have mastered perception beyond most "normal" senses. Raw sensuality is a form of ecstasy, so many Cultists stay in touch with their world by wearing little or nothing. Naturally, hyper-sensitivity has a price: Overload. When senses overlap, a mage gets confused. If something stimulates her over the edge, her senses break down entirely. A person who makes a lifestyle of skating along that edge, of course, will be difficult to topple....

Most mentors start their students off with perceptions; they're easy to understand and make a lasting impression. Soon the mystick learns to keep that "enhanced" sense on all the time. The focus "activates" whatever first-rank Sphere Effect the character wishes to use, and it remains "on" for the duration. A Perception + Awareness roll shows her whatever that Sphere might allow her to see.

Let's use Cassie as an example: Say she has one dot each in Prime, Time, Matter, Correspondence and Spirit. By focusing herself, she can "turn on" any or even all of those senses at once, on top of her own (see the end of Chapter Three). This takes a little time, but unleashes a torrent of sensations. After a while, those altered perceptions become normal, as described in the sidebar "That Glazed Look." Cassie may keep one or two magical perceptions going at once, as long as she's had a chance to focus herself beforehand.

Overload is the downside: an Ecstatic mage who moves around in extrasensory mode suffers +1 to all of her Perception difficulties for every magical sense in play over the first (two would be +1, three would be +2, etc.). Some kamamarga can be distracting, too. A peyote trip might open up her magical senses but obscure the normal ones, and Cassie may mistake her hallucinations for mystick sight. Sometimes it really is just in your mind, even if you're a Cultist of Ecstasy!

Then there's overstimulation: Any loud noise, flash of light, cut, caress, etc. will have double its usual effect if Cassie's senses are enhanced, and may overwhelm her unless she makes a Willpower roll (difficulty 6) to overcome the sensation. Pleasure really can become pain this way, although the reverse is also true if she makes the roll. This is a trap some Ecstatics fall into: Overload can feel good — too good!

It's perfectly appropriate, by the way, to buy high Awareness, Empathy and Enigmas scores for Cultist characters. Their sensitivity really *does* grant them some spectacular insights.

EMPATHY AND AURA

Cultists' sensitivity makes them remarkably empathic; most have at least one dot in the Mind Sphere, which allows them to share another's feelings (the Empathy Effect) and view that person's aura. Most of them do that as often as possible. Few things are more stimulating than unbridled emotion, or more revealing than a look at raw life-force colors.

This empathy may explain Cultists' obsession with sex and violence. The sensation of another's pain can be either revolting or exhilarating, depending on who you are. Sex passions, when shared this way, can rise to almost unbearable levels of pleasure. These sensations come through loud and clear during a fight (Storytellers, take note!) or a fuck unless the character has actively taken steps to block his empathy. In calmer circumstances, the mage might read another's feelings through aura colors, voices in his head, or washes of sensation or emotion. In large groups, this can be exhausting, but it can be a real blast, too.

AURA COLORS

Passion	Colors
Joy/Innocence	White
Love	Deep Blue
Empathy/Sympathy	Pink—Rose
Lust/Ambition	Dark Red—Purple
Grief	Silver—Gray
Fear	Orange
Jealousy/Envy	Green
Hate	Black
Rage	Red
State/Essence	
Calm	Light Blue
Depressed	Gray
Excited	Violet
Spiritual	Gold
Confused	(Mottled, shifting colors)
Frenzied	(Rapidly rippling colors)
Using magic	(Myriad sparkles)
Fellow Cultist	(Sharp flickering colors)
Psychotic/Marauder	(Hypnotic, swirling color)
Unshielded Nephandus	(Black ripples)
Vampire	(Pale color)
Werewolf	(Intense colors)

Empaths also project their feelings, sometimes without meaning to. Tali Eos, a powerful empath, had to cultivate inner peace to avoid alienating every man she encountered. Used effectively, empathy can be a strong weapon, tool or bond. It isn't simply "mind reading"—in many ways, it's more effective.

TIME SENSE

Tomorrow never happens. It's all just the same fucking day, man.

— Janis Joplin

Time is a necessary illusion taken to an absurd degree. Certain amounts of quantification are essential to human understanding: Names and labels help us to communicate and grow. Time, though, has been defined too much; hours, minutes, seconds are unnecessary. To most folks, time passes. Cultists agree—to a point. Time *does* pass. The way it passes depends on how you look at it.

When a person touches the Lakashim, time slows, even fractures. The theories about why could fill a quantum physics textbook, and make less sense. As the Cultists say, don't ask why, just experience. Once you feel time go out of joint, you'll understand. It's disorienting, but that's the idea. Because they do rather than explain, Ecstatics have always perceived time differently. That perception grants them their infamous temporal power.

In game terms, Ecstasies often speak in tense shifts or long pauses (see the Introduction through Chapter Three), arrive late or early for meetings and seem to move quicker or more slowly than those around them. They have little use for schedules, and mock those who do. Even so, they have precise time senses (the **Internal Clock Effect**), which rarely run according to normal clocks but detect temporal warps with ease. Many can see the possible consequences of what they're about to do, a Time 2 precognition Effect like **Songs of Future Days**; after focusing himself, the Cultist might look into space, watch the near future, come back, and act. This drives blockheads crazy: Why's their Chantrymate getting stoned now? For the Cultist, the answer decides his next actions. (Wolf was doing this at the beginning of Chapter One.) Precognition isn't always an exact science, but who wants to live forever, anyway?

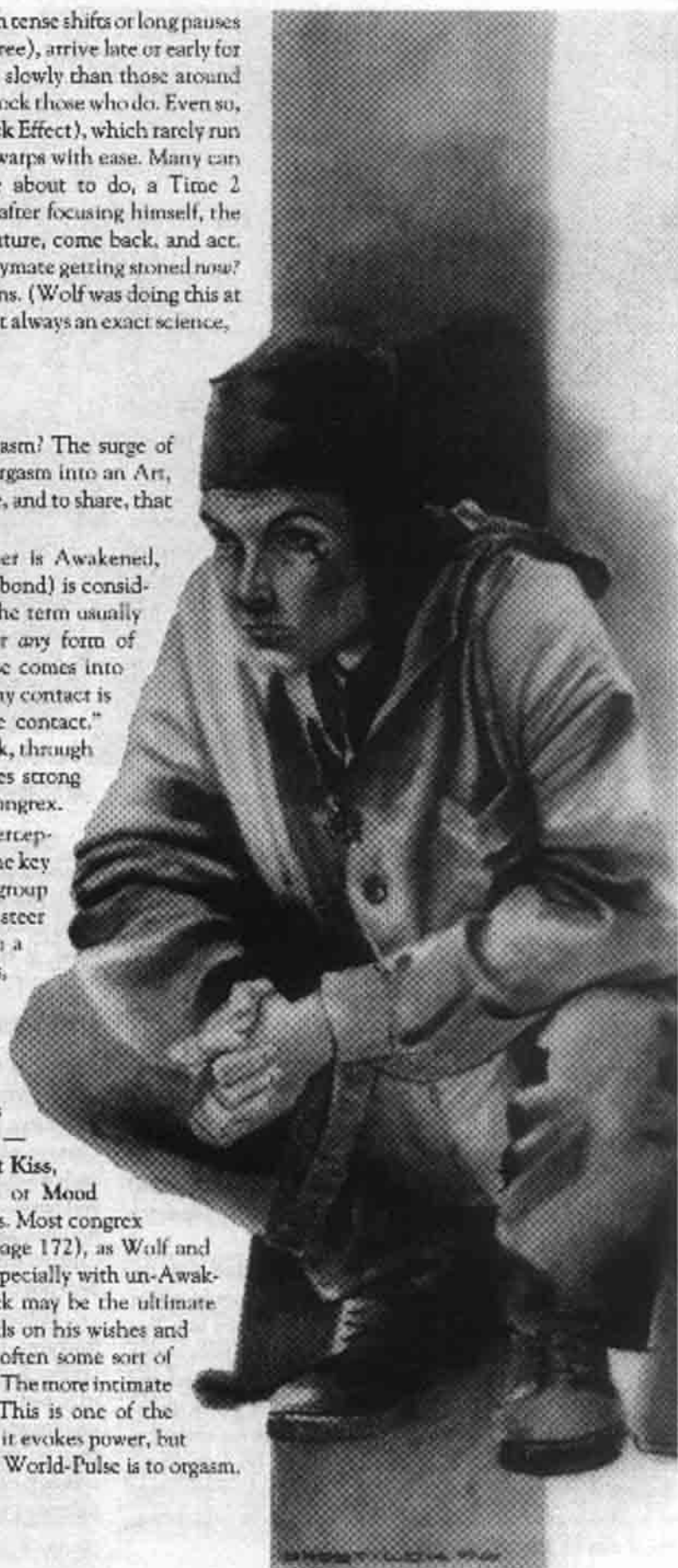
COMMUNIONS: CONGREX AND OKOX

Remember the feeling of a really great orgasm? The surge of energy, the shift in perceptions? Ecstasies turn orgasm into an Art, and they have a thousand different ways to induce, and to share, that sensation.

Cultists love to share. Whether the partner is Awakened, asleep or Otherworldly, a congrex (communion-bond) is considered the highest form of expression. Although the term usually denotes sexual magick, most Ecstasies consider any form of sharing a sexual experience, whether intercourse comes into play or not. "After all," as Marianna explains, "any contact is a form of touch. Sex is just the most intimate contact." Communion occurs through touch, music, magick, through any number of events. Anything that exchanges strong sensations from one being to another is a form of congrex.

Communion shares not only passions, but perceptions. And, as all mages know, perceptions hold the key to reality. The Technocracy agrees. Any time a group gathers, its power increases. Anything that can steer that energy to a common goal — from a riot to a paradigm shift — unleashes tremendous force. This, of course, scares hell out of the power structure. If that power isn't in their hands, it's considered dangerous. And it is.

In game terms, a congrex is a ritual (*Mage Second Edition*, pp. 163-164) with several parties involved (page 172). Okox is congrex with a spirit — dangerous, but rewarding. Effects like **The Spirit Kiss**, **Living Bridge**, (both from *Mage*), **Dreamline** or **Mood Swing** are good examples of mystick communions. Most congrex share perceptions, even magickal ones (*Mage*, page 172), as Wolf and Cassie do in Chapter One. Elaborate congrex, especially with un-Awakened participants, take a lot of time: Woodstock may be the ultimate example. The ritual the character prefers depends on his wishes and goals, but it must involve a give-and-take, and often some sort of promise ("We're gonna rock the house tonight!"). The more intimate the congrex, the more important the oath. This is one of the reasons why many Cultists despise rape. True, it evokes power, but that power is stolen, not shared. To touch the World-Pulse is to orgasm. Rape doesn't touch that pulse. It pisses on it.



ZEITGEISTS

Some Ecstasies have discovered that powerful emotions actually coalesce into spirits of an age — zeitgeists. This may take decades of remembrance; so far, no one has discovered how to create such spirits deliberately, though many have tried. Some zeitgeists fade over time, while others grow more powerful. Those who study the Umbrood claim that zeitgeists and Paradox spirits share a common lineage: both appear to personify generations of emotion, and carry some of that power with them. Naturally, Ecstasies who've heard of zeitgeists love to commune with them.

Spirits of an age seldom appear in person; they are more feeling than substance, though they may be seen in the Penumbra. Most simply bring the essence of the time with them as a rush of nostalgia or fear. The strongest spirits, like

the personifications of the Holocaust, the Classical Greek era, the Chinese Age of Heroes and the Summer of Love, can actually Materialize (see the Charm of that name in the *Mage* or *Werewolf* spirit rules), and pack a lot of energy (between 20 to 40 points of the Power spirit Trait). A zeitgeist appears and acts like a common stereotype of the era, and it doesn't always behave consistently: the Summer of Love may be a hippie love child, a Vietnam vet or a vicious cop, depending on the circumstances. Ecstasies say that zeitgeist okos are like drug trips: The vibes you bring influence the spirit you'll receive.

These ephemeral beings never stay for long — five minutes or so at most. Time shamans feel that zeitgeists form a direct link to the Lakasim. To commune with one is considered to be the greatest honor an Ecstasie can receive.

NOTES AND EFFECTS



Mastery of the physical body gives health and strength; mastery of the emotions protects one from being controlled by others, and opens the inward ear; mastery of the mind, by which the arising thoughts can be either fermented or abolished at will, makes possible intuitive vision.

— Isha Schwaller de Lubicz, *The Liberating of the Way*

Each of the Effects below has a long and informal history. Divyas trace them to the earliest shaman workings, so no real "history" is available, even to the Masters of Time. Each goes by many names; they're intuitive Arts passed down through use, not "spells" written down for others to study.

Mood Swing/Communion (** Mind)

This elementary but potent communion spell sends empathic messages to anyone in the area, spreading good vibes, anger, pain, joy, whatever. Often performed as part of a ritual (a concert, an orgy, a rave, etc.), this Effect grows more intense and affects more people over time.

[As the "Range, Damage and Duration" rules say (*Mage Second Edition*, p. 165), this magick spreads sensations to one nearby person per success. It communicates only feelings, not thoughts, but can be very effective when worked into a long casting. Several mages can combine their efforts, or add Manipulation + Expression rolls to decrease the difficulty of this often-coincidental spell.

[A Correspondence 2, Mind 2 variation, *Communion*, sends empathic feelings across a distance. For simplicity, assume that the emotions last for an hour or two after the event which caused them ends.]

Tamara/Aphrodite's Blessing (** Life)

To endure hardships, a Cultist must harden herself to the elements. This ancient gift, known by some as *Inner Heat*, allows the mage to acclimate to hostile environments — intense heat or cold, toxins, pain, etc. — without dulling the sensations, only the bodily effects. If she chooses, the Cultist may alleviate stimulation that's too intense; few do, however. It's more fun to see how far you can push yourself. A variation, *Aphrodite's Blessing*, increases sexual desire and stamina to inhuman levels. Life 3 can extend the *Blessing* to others.

[The caster heals damage inflicted by environments that actually injure her (fire, poison, torture, etc.) at the normal rate. She can't adapt in any superhuman way (i.e., growing gills) until Life 3. The effects of *Aphrodite's Blessing* are best left to roleplaying....]

Call Forth Zeitgeist (** Mind, ** Time, ** Spirit)

Also known as *Nostalgia*, this spell summons the spirit of an age so that others may experience it. Ecstasies often do this to make a point; bringing someone the actual feelings of the Summer of Love is infinitely more effective than simply telling them about it.

[It helps to be near some relic or location tied to the age when summoning its spirit; the Burning Times may be evoked more easily (and more coincidentally) in a Nuremberg dungeon than in a field in Kansas. In a neutral place, such as a library, no modifiers apply. Using a place or thing that's actually tied to the time lowers the difficulty by -1 (like a Node), or perhaps more; evoking the zeitgeist in a completely unrelated place raises the difficulty the same way.

[Most zeitgeists wash across the area where they were summoned, touching all people there with a brief sense of

what it must have been like, then fade away. Four successes or more should bring the spirit in a more active form. The way a zeitgeist acts is up to the Storyteller, but the summoner's state of heart and mind should shape the manifestation. A shaman trying to evoke the Free Love aspect of the Summer of Love will stand a better chance if he's listening to the Jefferson Airplane and feeling frisky than if he's listening to The Doors and afraid.]

Dreamline (•• or ••• Mind, •• Correspondence, •• or ••• Time (or ••• Correspondence, •• Spirit))

All Ecstasies form a bond when they meet. This urgent communiqué jumps across space and time to deliver important messages through that bond. By entering a trance, the summoner can reach into the dreams of his comrades. An advanced version (Correspondence 3) allows him to contact several friends at once.

[Many variations exist. Mind 2 sends empathic impressions, while Mind 3 delivers actual messages. Time 2 adjusts the message so that the receiver "hears" it before it's actually sent; Time 3 accelerates time so that the Cultist can send many messages in a short period. Correspondence closes the gap; the intimacy of the bond determines how hard the message is to deliver (as per the Range chart). Finally, a Spirit 2 variant calls friendly Umbrood to deliver the message without mental contact. The shaman making such a bargain should be prepared to pay her "delivery boy" a sender's fee.]

Prolong Pleasure/Pain (••• Mind, ••• Time)

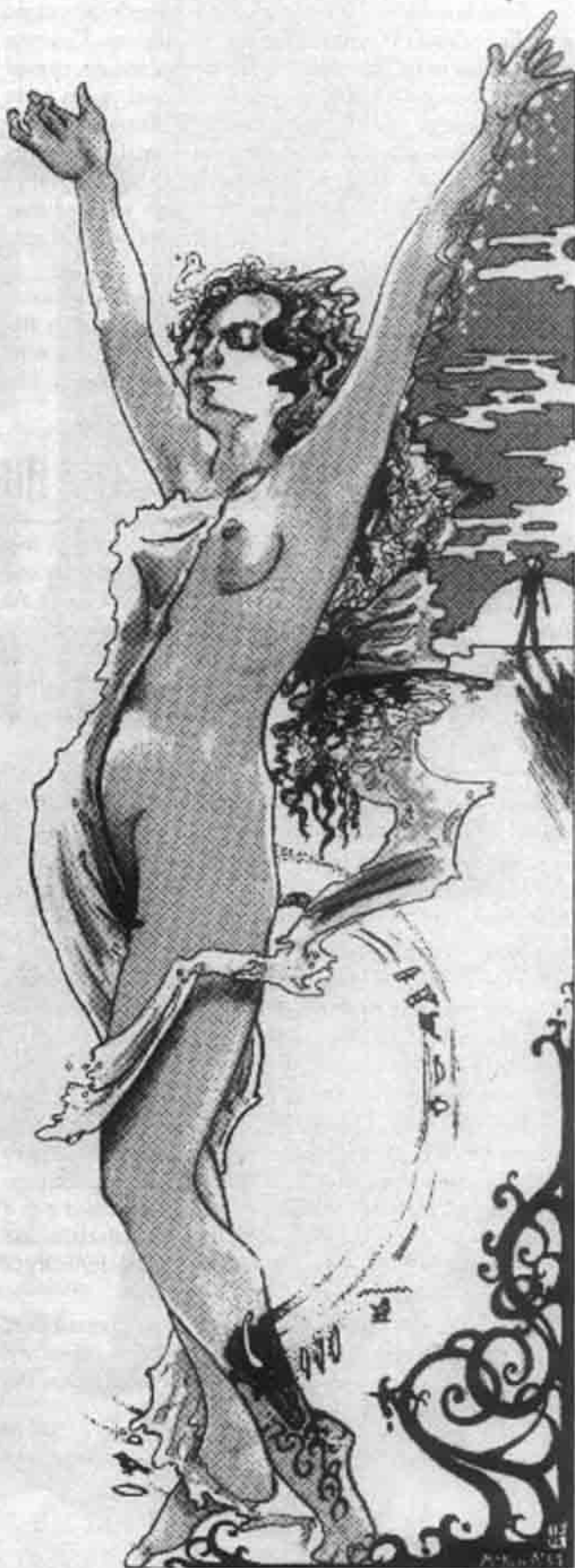
A simple example of a time loop; by setting the Effect in motion (often with a kiss, caress or slap), the Cultist can set up a "hovering" sensation. His subject will feel the next thing the mage does for as long as the magick lasts. No physical effects linger; the sensations are all in the subject's head. This can drive Sleepers to unparalleled ecstasy — or to madness.

[An act sets the sensation in motion. Time and Mind begin a loop which keeps the feeling at its peak level. An orgasm can last for hours; a whiplash can burn for just as long. Depending on how strong the sensation is (and how long the Effect lasts), the recipient may have to make a Willpower roll to think of anything else. Minor touches would be difficulty 4, intense pleasure or pain would be difficulty 9, and everything else would fall in between. For every hour the magick lingers, the difficulty goes up by +1. A strong new stimulus cancels the Effect.]

Bombolai (••• Spirit, or •• Matter, •• Prime)

Named for a blessing performed over a hash pipe or bong, Bombolai awakens the spirit of the drug itself, making it more potent (see Spirit 3 rules). While holding out the bong or pipe, the Ecstatic shouts the blessing, lights the bowl and inhales. Ideally, the rush will be intense....

[Two variations exist: with the first, a shaman rouses the drug's spirit; with the second, a more atheistic mage charges the drug's Pattern with a burst of Quintessence. Both styles have the same effect. For each success, the potency of the rush doubles. Scoring five successes or more demands a Stamina roll (difficulty 8) to avoid a blackout.





[Yes, it's possible to OD doing this spell! Combining it with **Prolong Pleasure** has put some Cultists into comas.]

Purify (* Life, ** Matter, or both)**

Concerned Cultists use this ancient spell to cleanse a body or material of harmful elements. Drugs can be forced out of a user's system, poison can be separated from wine, etc.. When used on a living being, the subject feels a bit shaky afterward, but suffers no serious effects.

[First-rank perceptions are often used to discover what needs fixing before this spell is cast. Drugs and poisons are considered one and the same when cleaning out someone's system. Matter pulls the components together and Life expels them. The Matter-only variant cleanses poisons from inert materials, while the Life-only option averts venereal disease or unwanted pregnancy. Sadly, HIV and AIDS have resisted long-term cures; this spell causes a remission, but not a solution. The Cult suspects the Progenitors of engineering such hardy viruses.]

Dionysus' Gift (** or ***** Life (possibly with *** Matter or Forces)**

The god of wine, women and song was also an accomplished shapechanger and transmuter. He escaped capture by turning pirates into dolphins and himself into a lion, and often changed those who offended him into animals or plants. Some Ecstasies, notably the Maenads and Fifth World Tribe, carry on Dionysus' legacy.

[These various Effects work as per the Lesser Shapechanging, Animal Form and Perfect Metamorphosis Life spells. Working Matter or Forces into the magick will change live creatures to inanimate matter or energy. See page 187 of *Mage Second Edition* for details.]

AUTHOR'S NOTES

I want to repeat for the record that I do not, through this book, condone all of the practices I've described. They're offered for insight and accuracy, not for imitation. Drugs, visionquests, alternative sex practices and body modifications can be extraordinarily dangerous. *Cult of Ecstasy* is a work of fiction, not an advertisement.

I've found the following books and musical artists inspirational and/or informative while working on *Cult of Ecstasy*. Highly recommended sources have been asterisked. The greatest influence I've had, though, comes from life: not from dropping acid or attending orgies, but from hikes, concerts, midnight swims, and especially from the millions of sensations we take for granted every day. I can think of no better "Roleplaying Hints" for Cultist characters than these: Get a life. Experience it. Cherish it. Enjoy it.

— Phil Brucato



Books

- * **The Art of Sexual Ecstasy**, by Margo Anand
- * **The Encyclopedia of Erotic Wisdom**, by Rufus Camphausen
- **The Art of Dreaming**, * **Journey to Ixtlan and The Second Ring of Power**, by Carlos Castaneda
- **Altered States**, by Paddy Chayefsky (the film's fun, too!)
- **Sex Magick**, by Louis T. Culling
- **A History of Secret Societies**, by Arkon Daraul
- **Ecstasy: Understanding the Psychology of Joy**, by Robert A. Johnson
- **Re/Search: * Modern Primitives, * Angry Women and the Industrial Culture Handbook**, by Andrea Juno and V. Vale
- * **Food of the Gods**, by Terence McKenna
- * **The American Night**, by Jim Morrison
- **Goa Freaks**, by Cleo Odzer
- **Talk Dirty to Me: An Intimate Philosophy of Sex**, by Sallie Tisdale
- * **The Misfits and Poetry and Mysticism**, by Colin Wilson
- **Sex & Drugs**, by Robert Anton Wilson
- **Comics, Game Supplements and Magazines**
- * **Mara of the Celts**, by Dennis Cramer (Fantagraphics)

• * **Ghostdancing**, by Jamie Delano and Richard Case (Vertigo/DC)

- * **Mondo 2000** (Fun City Meglomeia)
- **GURPS Religion**, by Janet Naylor and Caroline Julian (Steve Jackson)
- * **Destiny's Price**, by Forrest Black, Phil Brucato, Beth Fisch, Amelia G and Steve Long (White Wolf; gives game systems for drugs, black market, sex industry and more)

Music Artists (all in heavy rotation during this writing; each epitomizes the C of E spirit)

- David Bowie
- * Crash Worship
- Dead Can Dance
- * The Doors
- Vanilla Fudge
- Jimi Hendrix
- Jackalope
- * Janis Joplin
- * Oysterband
- Nine Inch Nails
- * Robbie Robertson & the Red Road Ensemble
- * Rusted Root
- * Márta Sebestyén
- Ululating Mummies

MAGiE: The Ascension™

Concept:
Mentor:
Cabal:

Mental

Perception_____●○○○○○
Intelligence_____●○○○○○
Wits_____●○○○○○

Knowledges

Computer_____	00000
Cosmology_____	00000
Culture_____	00000
Enigmas_____	00000
Investigation_____	00000
Law_____	00000
Linguistics_____	00000
Lore_____	00000
Medicine_____	00000
Occult_____	00000
Science_____	00000

Prime_____00000
Spirit_____00000
Time_____●0000

Health

Bruised	-0	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hurt	-1	<input type="checkbox"/>
Injured	-1	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wounded	-2	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mauled	-2	<input type="checkbox"/>
Crippled	-5	<input type="checkbox"/>
Incapacitated		<input type="checkbox"/>

Quintessence

Experience

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CULT OF ECSTASY

MAGE: The Ascension™

Merits & Flaws

Merit	Type	Cost	Flaw	Type	Bonus

Magick

Preferred Effects

Notes

Mystick Senses (On)

Talismans

Name	Level	Arete	Quintessence	Appearance

Combat

Weapon	Difficulty	Damage	Range	Rate	Clip	Conceal

Brawling Table

Maneuver	Difficulty	Damage
Punch	6	Strength
Grapple	6	Strength
Kick	7	Strength+1
Body Slam	7	Special

Armor:

CULT OF ECSTASY

MAGE: The Ascension™

Expanded Background

Contacts, Sleeper

Contacts, Awakened

Influence, Sleeper

Allies, Awakened

Resources

Mentor

Familiar

Chantry

Companions

Node(s)

Possessions

Gear (Carried)

Equipment (Owned)

Preferred Kamamarga & Congrex

CULT OF ECSTASY

MAGE: The Ascension™

History

Awakening

Goals/Destiny

Seekings

Quiets

Description

Age

Apparent Age

Date of Birth

Age of Awakening

Hair

Eyes

Race

Nationality

Height

Weight

Sex

Appearance/Nature of Avatar

Visuals

Cabal Chart

Character Sketch