The Pardoners and Puppeteers Sourcebook for Wraith. The Oblivion Guildbook Five

GUILDBOOK:



By Elizabeth Ditchburn and Heather Grove, and Jackie Cassada and Nicky Rea

Credits

Written by: Elizabeth Ditchburn and Heather Grove, and Jackie Cassada and Nicky Rea Development by: Richard E. Dansky Editing by: Ed Hall Art Direction by: Lawrence Snelly

Art by: Richard Clark, Fred Harper, Ron Spencer, Chuck Regan, Matt Mitchell, John Cobb, Fred Hooper, Christopher Shy, Anthony Hightower

Covers: Eric Lacombe and John Cobb

Cover Design: Lawrence Snelly

Layout and typesetting by: Richard Thomas



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Sister Acceptance created by Jackie Cassada. Yaeko created by Heather Grove. Lord Ember created by Richard Dansky.

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Where do they come from? The dust. Where do they go? The grave. Does blood stir in their veins? No: the night wind... What hears with their ear? The abyss between the stars. Ray Bradbury, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*



Ghost Story: Road of Steel and Souls

Part V: Waking Nightmares



lthough he wasn't really there, the undistinguished man sighed as he stared at the spectacle before him from his hiding place behind a tree. Wearily, his short fingers drummed against his thigh to a nonexistent beat as he waited for the play to unfold before him. Jericho had seen it a

dozen times already, and he had no desire to see it again. However, his superiors had told him to be thorough, so he resigned himself to another night of reruns and concentrated on the scenery.

It was a lovely dream. Brilliant, green grass grew kneehigh in the sunny meadow. Flowers of every imaginable hue waved gently in the breeze. The trees were tall, without scar or blemish, and their leaves were perfect. Sweet birdsong, pure and high, twittered on the warm summer air. By the edge of the meadow stood a woman with graying hair and a small nose. She wore a child's pale green dress covered in ribbons, lace and flounces. It was ridiculously tight on her, and her varicose-veined legs protruded comically from beneath her skirts. Childlike, she jumped up and down, clapping all the while, as her light laughter echoed among the trees. A shout carried to her on the breeze, and she cheered even harder. Jericho steeled himself for the inevitable. This scene was what he'd come to watch.

In the middle of the meadow, a pure white horse pranced and snorted. Its saddle and bridle were hammered gold and silver, and a rainbow of ribbons adorned its mane and tail. Astride it sat a man in impossibly shiny full plate armor — it looked as though the breastplate had been fashioned of aluminum foil. A white plume rose up a full two feet from a helmet that didn't allow its wearer more than the narrowest field of vision. The knight's vision didn't seem impaired in the slightest, however. He carried a long, wide sword that looked far too heavy for his slim arm, and he swung it wildly in the air at the monster before him.

The creature was perhaps the strangest part of the odd tableau. It was clearly meant to be a dragon, but what mad artist could have conceived of such a creature? Its skin looked like yellow-painted wood with dark-purple polka dots, and a navy-blue crest ran up its back to the top of its scalp. It had two green, intricately carved horns on its forehead, and wide, bulging, blue eyes. Jericho sighed when he saw it — he wasn't sure whether to grimace or chuckle.

Without warning, the dream changed. The meadow suddenly became a lake; the flowers melted into its waves. The flowers' color bled away, draining out of the petals, down

Ghost Story: A Road of Steel and Souls

through the stems and into the frothing water. The breeze turned into a wind of gale-force strength, whipping dirt and spraying water through the grimy air. The forest earth metamorphosed into a beach; the trees became pale and ghostly men carrying weapons. The green faded gradually into gray, with only the palest tinge of the original color remaining. Birdsong deepened to a roar, became the clamoring of a throng. Jericho raised his head, eyes narrowed, thin lips pressed together.

The woman's dress lost its color as well, and the fine lace and satins blackened with rot. The flounces sagged. A rickety dock stretched out from the shore; it looked as though it would barely support the woman's weight. Her face grew pale, and her eyes widened. She shrank back from the oily water. In the center of the lake, where the dragon had stood in all its ramshackle glory, a monster roared defiance. Gone were the childish colors. Gone was the knotted carving. They'd been replaced by unrelenting gray and black, a slick hide and a massive, stinging tail. The eyes still bulged, but they'd lost their oaken hardness and brilliant blue shade.

The horse became a flimsy reed boat, swaying dangerously in the waves. The knight's armor lost its shine, then elongated and softened into a robe and hood. The sword stretched and darkened, wailing as a sickle-shape devoured the elegant golden hilt and shimmering blade. Where flowers had waved in a summer breeze, water now swirled in an everdeepening whirlpool. A final, earth-shattering roar ruptured the air and threw the girl to the wooden planks of the dock. Locked in titanic conflict, the monster and the hooded figure sank beneath the surface of the lake.

Jericho shook his head and turned to go. Nothing but reruns, again.

The back room of the Fire and Angel stank of old beer and cigarettes. Flakes of ash stuck to the tabletop. "I hate this place," Katerina mumbled as she brushed at the dust on an orange, vinyl-covered chair and sat down heavily. Seeing the grime on her pudgy hands, she made a face and surreptitiously wiped them on the slightly cleaner formica of the table.

Yaeko smiled. "It's convenient and non-obvious. That counts for a lot these days." She sat across from Katerina, lifted a glass of whiskey in salute and downed half the contents in one shot. She coughed, brown eyes watering. "Hell. This body isn't used to whiskey."

Katerina laughed. "Choose a better one next time."

Yaeko stared suspiciously at the contents of her glass. "Damn straight I will. No point in doing this if I can't even enjoy a proper belt."

Wearing the body of a beat cop, Jericho stepped through the doorway and shut the heavy wooden door behind him. "Guards are in place on both sides of the Shroud. We'll be fine as long as I get this body back to the station by one o'clock. I'd rather not get it in trouble; having a cop is useful." "Useful to us, certainly," Katerina snorted. "I'm not sure how his sergeant would feel about it. Still, this shouldn't take long. What did you find out?"

Jericho shook his head as he picked up the glass of Sprite Yaeko had thought to order for him. "Same as the last 14 dreams I've dipped into. No words, no demand for sacrifice. Either I've been getting the edited versions, or someone's lying. Given the nature of Guild politics, I'm betting on the latter." ("Sucker bet," muttered Yaeko.) He tapped a finger on the wet glass. "Truth be told, though, I'm thinking that it doesn't matter. As long as the other Guilds think there's something interesting going on, we can use this to our advantage."

Yaeko struck a match and lit a Camel. Through the small cloud of smoke she asked, "How?"

Katerina was the one who replied, grinning as she ran her fingers through her bangs. "This Charon thing has stirred up the whole anthill back in Stygia. Now is the perfect time to make a few moves. While everyone else is focusing on that expedition into the Labyrinth and trying to figure out what's going on, our inside people step up their activities. We might even use the confusion to slip in a few extras."

Yaeko had yet to take a drag on the cigarette. Instead, she used it like a pointer and gestured with it. "Now might be the time to talk to the Monitors as well; while everyone else is busy with Stygian politics, we could sever a few Fetters. Getting rid of some key people at this point could throw certain other Guilds into chaos."

"Certain Guilds like the Haunters and Spooks? I like it." Katerina smiled nastily.

Jericho nodded. "Now we're talking. Yaeko, why don't you contact your Monitor friend — what was his name, Seth? — and have a little chat with him. This is one hell of an opportunity, and we can't afford to miss it."

Yaeko grinned. "Sure enough. What can I offer him, though?"

"The usual." Jericho's face was a mask of indifference. "Cheap thrills, time-share in bodies doin' the nasty, ice-cold Cokes — all that sort of thing. Our friends in the Co-dependent Mafia should go for that in a second." He slipped into a bad Brando accent and mumbled, "Nice Fetter you got here. Be a real shame if something happened to it."

Katerina laughed and nodded. "Right. I'll take care of contacting the spies. Jericho, you still have the strongest ties to Stygia. Keep us up to date on what's going on there, and don't forget those blasted Guildmaster meetings."

"You've got it," Jericho said in his own voice. He smiled fractionally and took a sip of soda. It went down cool and delicious — just the way he'd remembered it would.

"In three days, then. Same place, but let's make it for dinner." Yaeko's borrowed body made a face. "At least the food here is better than the drinks."

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Yaeko grimaced, glad to be free of the gangly body she'd used for the meeting. She would definitely have to find a better one for the next rendezvous; she'd grabbed this consort on short notice, and it had been a disaster. Maybe Katerina didn't care what she looked like when Skinriding, but there was a certain measure of comfort in using a body-type similar to what your own had been. What she really wanted was to have long black hair again, hair she could run her fingers through. Come to think of it, hair that someone else could run their fingers through wouldn't be too bad, either. She sighed. She desperately wanted the free time to go Skinriding for pleasure, but right now, things were too crazy. No sense getting hauled in on a Mortuum charge by some overeager beat Legionnaire; not when all the rest of this stuff was going on. Her fingers itched for a cigarette. There's always time for just one smoke, her Shadow whispered, but she ignored it. Seth was waiting, and he was a punctual sort. Anal-retentive, really, her Shadow said, and she didn't have the energy to disagree.

Across the table, his unblinking eyes shining like lanterns, Seth hovered menacingly as he considered Yaeko's offer. "You're asking a lot here, Yaeko."

"And offering just as much, Seth. You know me well enough to know that I wouldn't screw you on this," she responded.

"Wouldn't screw *me...*," his voice trailed off. "All right." Seth nodded slowly. Dark, curly hair fell into his eyes, and he pushed it back without even the slightest change of expression. "I'll take your proposal back to the Guild. I like it, and I think they will too." He pulled on a pair of black gloves. "Give me two days. I'll meet you at St. Ignatius' down on Munroe at seven; wear a nice body, and we'll talk."





Chapter One: No Strings Attached?

Down through the dark glen awaits the aggressor Shrouded in mist as the victims appear Watching the ghosts of the fathers of children Of mercy whose deeds in the nighttime draw near. — Wolfstone, "A Hard Heart"

24 October

John Miller, Overlord of the Emerald Legion Sir,

Enclosed are my notes concerning my investigation of the Puppeteers Guild and their violations of the Code of the Dead in the Boston area. I hope my report contains the information you are looking for. I can attest that it is as complete and as accurate as possible.

Susan Lawrence, Centurion

Background



s you know, the Puppeteers were never accepted in Stygia. Their presence was merely tolerated before the Breaking of the Guilds because of their affiliation with the other Guilds. They have always been the most flagrant violators of the *Dictum Mortuum*, and they continue to be a threat

to the Hierarchy and all that we stand for.

Currently, active Puppeteers keep a low profile throughout Stygia, but they can be found wherever there is Renegade activity. They never heeded the law before the Decree of the Breaking, and have shown no inclination to do so since. Instead of disbanding, all available information indicates that they simply went further underground than they already were.

There aren't many Puppeteers — sources indicate that there never were — but they seem to have a great many friends. There are also numerous people who owe them favors. I believe that this "network" is why we've had such a difficult time uncovering them — when we go looking for them, they always have people willing to hide them, either to return a favor or to cover up the fact the Puppeteers have, at some point, violated the *Dictum Mortuum* on the accomplice's behalf.

I didn't get close enough to the Guild to join, as I was forced to cut my mission short when one of my Fetters was destroyed as a warning. I did meet a number of Guild members, and I picked up some information from them and from affiliated Renegades. Those findings and my analysis are contained below.

Rank and File

From what I knew of the Puppeteers, I had expected them to be the stereotypical Renegades: radicals, hippies, dropouts, punks. What I found, though, was that, as a rule, they appeared very ordinary, even respectable. Many of the people they associated with were the punks and other troublemakers that you commonly find in Renegade gangs, but the actual Guild members keep a very low profile and blend in well with local scenery. They're a very quiet group, probably because, if you hear any one of them talk for any length of time, their randomized speech patterns (acquired through innumerable Skinrides) give them away.

Joining the Guild isn't easy. I tried to infiltrate them by posing as a potential recruit, Skinriding prolifically and using other Puppetry powers, all to no avail. You have to find them if you want to join, which involves getting the word that you're looking for them into the right circles — or Circles. From what I've learned, it's different if you start using Obliterate the Soul or meddling with mortals they've taken an interest in. In cases like that, I'm told, they descend on you as quickly as the Legions would, and not for the purpose of recruitment.

Since they do not recruit, I wondered how they manage to have a Guild at all. We know that the Artificers induct anyone they find promising, the Sandmen are motivated to work together to create Pageants, and that, indeed, most of the Guilds have *some* pressing issue that causes them to come together. Puppetry, however, is different. The possessing and controlling of a mortal is a solitary act and promotes working alone. There is some motivation for practitioners of these Arts to come together to share and trade techniques and new uses of the Arcanos, but that does not explain a Guild-strength level of solidarity. The answer turned out to be quite simple. One of the Renegades I met during my efforts to infiltrate the Guild took notice of my Skinriding habits and suggested that, if I persisted, I'd be safer from the Legions if I "found the right friends."

Self-protection. The school of fish theory. If the Puppeteers move in a group, then each individual is in less danger.

New Recruits

The newest members of the Guild are the most varied. At this level, you do get some of the troublemakers you would expect, people attracted to the thrill of Skinriding, but still, no one who doesn't know how to be discreet. Most of the new recruits, however, aren't in it for the thrills. There are many former community activists, social workers and overbearing mothers in the Guild's lower echelons — compulsive meddlers. There are even a few former religious leaders, but not as many as one might expect, as most of them seem to gravitate to the Purifiers' Order. Most Puppeteers have good connections in the Renegade community, but many of those connections seem to have developed after they joined the Guild.

Off the record, one thing I can say about the older Puppeteers with absolute assurance is that they are all manipulative elitists at heart. Some were just influential mortals who couldn't take not being influential ghosts, and so they turned to manipulating mortals. The rest hold near and dear to their hearts the belief that the Dead, or at least those wraiths they agree with, are better than the living. Death is supposed to have imparted to them some special wisdom that is lacking in the Quick. Guild elders go on at length about their responsibilities to the living, but at the heart of it is a belief that only wraiths really know what is best. They certainly don't hesitate to use Obliterate the Soul or other arts that adversely impact their hosts if it's necessary to achieve a purpose.

One trend I did notice among some of the Guild members was that many had held an interest in communicating with ghosts or spirits when they were alive. This tendency apparently first showed up after the Spiritualist movement of

Confirmation

It's not really that bad. I mean, it's mostly just Skinriding, and I've done that hundreds of times. It's not like it's something I can't handle. I've got dozens of consorts, and I've never had any one of them not move exactly as I wanted, or not say anything I wanted them to say. But why did they have to pick this for my initiation? It's a *church*, for chrissakes.

Still, I guess it could be a lot worse. I mean, they could have chosen the church my parents used to take me to. The church may have been feeding us all a load of bullshit, but there's no way I'd do this to Father Ron. Not during mass, anyway.

It's still sacrilege. You will surely be damned if you continue.

I didn't ask for comments from the peanut gallery, thank you very much. Anyway, it's not that bad, I used to be an altar boy back when I was alive. Speaking of which, let's just hope that this guy has been playing nice with his altar boys. Just because he's a priest doesn't mean he's perfect.

Okay, here he comes. I'd better make this good, because if there's any outward sign that something's wrong, I'll be as welcome in the Guild as an ATF agent at an NRA meeting. On three. One. Two. Three. Whew. Okay, I'm in.

God, this place looks better from this side. Old buildings always do. It could still use some renovating, but I appreciate not seeing every single crack in the stone, the leaks in the roof and all the termites in the pews. And the smell — I haven't smelled that church smell since I was 18. It's funny how you hardly notice smells when you're alive, and then you're dead and the only thing you ever smell is rot. You miss all those scents more than anything else.

Father Michael here seems to be doing okay on his own for now. Luckily, I can just hang on for the time being, I don't have to actually do anything until later.

You know you'll go to Hell for this. Stop now, and God may yet forgive you.

Will you give it a rest already? We're dead, remember, and still no Heaven, no Hell, no angels, no pearly gates, no St. Peter, and no guy who got nailed to a tree.

Ever heard of Purgatory?

Purgatory isn't supposed to be like this. I read my Dante. Look, if you don't cut it out with the nonsense, we're going to go and see Angie when this is all over with. She may not be an official Pardoner, but she'll do for you.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

Well, that's shut him up for now at least. Where are we? I *hate* it when he distracts me like that. Okay, not too much time left before I'm "on." It figures that my Shadow would take the opportunity to make the most of the situation, but as Guild initiations go, it really could be much worse. I hear that the Masquers have to literally put themselves back together, and God only knows what the Artificers do, but word is that it involves getting up close and personal with soulfire. It really could be a lot worse.

Oh, God, it's almost time.

All right, here come the communion wafers. Sorry, Father Michael. God, if you really do exist, forgive me, okay? Right. I'm in the drivers seat. With any luck Father Michael won't remember any of this. Luckily, I remember how its done. Just hand out the wafers, and as soon as Mitch shows, I can get this over with and let Father Michael take over again. Mitch said he'd be in a blond guy wearing a red-and-white carnation in his buttonhole. He said he'd be here. Where the hell is he? If I did this for nothing I'm gonna.... Oh, wait, there he is. Wouldn't it just figure he'd be almost all the way at the back. Bastard.

Mitch, if you weren't a Master I'd pound you into plasm. Why couldn't he have sat at the front? Here he is. Its really just bread after all, and not very good bread at that. Now for the sleight of hand. We wouldn't want anyone to notice anything strange. Yeah, strange like the priest getting struck down by lightning. Hand over the wafer, and let it fall while no one is looking....

I did it! It's over, and no thunderbolts from Heaven. It's just lying there on the floor where Mitch kicked it under the pew. Just a piece of bread, and you wouldn't recognize it unless you were looking for it. It's over with. I'll just let Father Mike here take over now, and I can take off with Mitch to the celebration. Maybe tomorrow I'll Skinride the governor and sign some laws or something.



the 19th century and redoubled when the current round of hippies and New Agers started to die. Now, demographics indicate that a sizeable minority of the Guild's members had a penchant for crystal-waving before they died.

The things that most, if not all, Guild-signatory Puppeteers have in common are:

• A deep and abiding mistrust of Charon and the Hierarchy

Contempt for the Dictum Mortuum

• A belief that the Proclamation of Reason was issued under false pretenses

Activities

By necessity, the Puppeteers hide their activities as well as they can, but Skinriding leaves certain telltale signs behind. Many of these signs concentrated in particular areas have formed a pattern indicating that Guild members are working in concert toward a goal.

Explanation of the Puppeteers' Initiation

The Guild initiation trial is as much a test of loyalty as it is of skall. Each initiation is tailored to the individual Apprentice, which is one of the reasons there are, perhaps, fewer Puppeteers than there are members of certain other Guilds. The only constant in the initiations is that each one involves a task performed via Rein in the Mind. The task is something the initiate would be hesitant or squeamish about performing without outside impetus, and by its execution, it proves the new Puppeteers unquestioning loyalty to the Guild.

To become an accepted member of the Guild, the initiate is required to perform the appointed task laid down by her sponsor without betraying to the Quick any sign that anything out of the ordinary is going on. If anything goes wrong, the test is considered a failure and more experienced Guildwraiths step in to clean up the mess. If the failed apprentice is lucky, she will be given a harder trial and another shot at initiation much later, after more and harsher training. If she's unlucky, the Guild turns its back on her' the former candidate is expected to keep silent about anything she might have learned.

It is more for an Apprentice to refuse outright to perform the task set for her. When such a refusal occurs, the wraith is instantly rejected from the rolls of the Guild Alas, many times, things don't end there. Individuals thus rejected seem always to have the worst luck, and "accidents" somehow manage to catch their Fetters until the inevitable conclusion.

Guildbook: Puppeteers

Among the more disturbing incidences I uncovered were ones showing that Puppeteers have been systematically using their arts on biologists and medical researchers. In the Boston area alone, I've found that a number of researchers at MIT, Tufts, Massachusetts General Hospital, and Harvard Medical School all show readily apparent signs of regular usage as hosts for Puppeteers. More prevalent, however, were signs that members of the boards of these institutions, as well as a number of individuals responsible for large grants to these same research centers, had clearly been Skinridden on multiple occasions. In at least one case, this Skinriding could be directly traced to a large grant that funded research into a new class of antibiotic drugs.

When I mentioned this anomaly to one of my Renegade sources, he made a cryptic remark about trying to even the score. When I tried to get him to elaborate, he said, "Well, a lot of us have been thinking how *lucky* it was for the Skeletal Lord that AIDS came along right when it looked like they'd licked just about every fatal disease a person could catch. And then there's all those bugs that suddenly can't be killed by medicines anymore. Funny how it all happened just when it looked like the living doctors had put the Gaunt Legion on a permanent diet. Of course, the Deathlords would *never* meddle, I mean, hey, it's against their precious *Dictum*, so it must have been luck — but luck like that changes." I found the allegations so disturbing that I transcribed the statement verbatim as soon as we finished speaking. I suggest that one of the Marshals look into this.

As you told me at the beginning of this mission, it's long been suspected that the Puppeteers have some connection to the wraiths known as the Risen. Before I was assigned to this mission, I thought that these Risen were just legends; the idea that any citizen would flout the *Dictum Mortuum* to the point of re-animating his body sounded ridiculous, not to mention impossible. The shocking fact is that, on this mission, I've seen evidence of more than one of these "Risen," and conclusive proof that high-ranking Puppeteers were involved in each *Dictum* violation, as well. I believe that the Guild must even be encouraging the practice of Rising, and that the practice is either picking up or is more widespread than was previously imagined.

In one instance (see Addendum #4: Evidence of Risen: Rindge Avenue Incident), I came across a grave from which a Risen had obviously just exhumed herself. It was in the cemetery on Rindge Avenue, which is surrounded by a fence with barbed wire on top, of the sort that is angled to prevent people from scaling the fence. As I was leaving the cemetery, after investigating the grave, I noted that the wire had not been set up to keep vandals from getting *out*. Admittedly, it could have just been installed that way by mistake, but, in that context, it did make me nervous — especially since a four-foot-long section of said fence had simply been torn down.



Chapter One: No Strings Attached?

What was even more disturbing was that there was no effort on the part of the Guild to cover up the incident. Also, one of those tabloid television crews showed up, with one member of its crew clearly manifesting the signs of being a host. After the reporters left, I made sure that an accident befell their videotape. Luckily, most of the local media simply reported the incident as vandalism.

The most frightening aspect of the graveyard incident is the blatant manipulation of the local media. Vampires have long been known to maintain ties to local media outlets for the precise reason of keeping that sort of news *out* of the public eye. As a result, I was curious about how the Guild might be sidestepping their control. The best explanation seems to be that, while vampiric controls on mortals work well for longterm behavioral patterns, they don't do much good to counteract direct possession. As the soul in charge of the body at that time isn't the one who has been conditioned to "behave," all of the vampire-induced controls are no good whatsoever.

On the other hand, vampires can't afford to ignore such incidents. The source who directed me to the site of the Rising told me that the local vampire powers that be were sending one of their ghouls to city hall to deal with the matter by getting the stations that "sensationalized" the incident in trouble with area government. I showed up in the office of the appropriate official and Enshrouded myself in a corner; I'm very glad I took the precaution, because, when the ghoul showed up, she obviously wasn't completely herself. Things went fairly well for the ghoul for the first 15 minutes, as the aide she was talking to spent that time assuring her that he'd give the matter top priority. Then the ghoul's passenger flexed his muscles, and things degenerated rapidly. With a little help from Master's Voice, she called the aide a "toadying lard-ass," and that was merely the beginning. Needless to say, her mission ended up a complete failure. My source later told me that the ghoul's master more than lost his temper when he found out what she'd done, and she ended up on the menu.

Oddly enough, apart from vampires (whom the Puppeteers seem to take a special delight in tweaking), the Guild frequently avoids contact with any other supernatural beings. Which is not to say that they are incapable of such contact — I've experimented with my own powers, at times, in this regard - rather, that any interaction with supernatural beings is frowned upon by Guild higher-ups. My best guess is that while vampiric nature is close enough to human norm for Puppeteers to fake it reasonably well, werewolves and mages are so wrapped up in their own esoteric existences that it's more effort than it's worth to try to pretend to be "one of the tribe." You can get by in a vampire on attitude; with mages and werewolves, you actually have to know what you're talking about — and the inability to use magick, shapeshift and so on immediately tags an overly cocky Puppeteer as an impostor. Skinriding these kinds of creatures isn't so bad and



Protecting Business

In Stygia, the Guilds are officially outlawed. Unfortunately for the Deathlords, making it so isn't as simple as just saying so. The Guilds have and maintain power because they control special commodities for which there is eternal demand and because certain professional friendships have grown up over the centuries.

centuries.

One example of how the Guilds function together within Stygia is the case of Ben Pollack, a slaver who finally stepped on too many toes in the Pittsburgh Necropolis. The local Anacreon of the Emerald Legion, frustrated with the slaver's excesses, took it upon himself to contact a Monitor he knew for help in dealing with the situation.

The Monitor quickly discovered that Ben's major Fetter was the small business he'd owned and operated when he was alive. It was not a Fetter that could be attacked directly from the Shadowlands, so the Monitors contacted the Puppeteers — as they often do in such situations. Linda Howe, a recent recruit with great promise, was assigned to the job. She attacked it with gusto.

After Howe had Skinridden a manger through a number of shouting tirades and the accountant through a number of addition errors, several key employees resigned in disgust, and the company made several serious financial blunders. A month later, the company filed for bankruptcy, its assets were liquidated and Ben had the worst Harrowing he'd ever known. When he emerged at one of his remaining Fetters, the Emerald Legion's welcome wagon was there for him. To the great satisfaction of all concerned, he is now contributing to the Stygian economy in a more concrete way, thanks to the services of a smith who is certainly a member of the Artificers Guild. can certainly be eye-opening, as werewolves are almost walking fonts of Pathos (if you're the sort who can feed on anger).

Changelings are a different case entirely. Guild policy forbids even Skinriding fae, except in the most dire emergencies. The prohibition is less a matter of policy and more in the nature of a public service announcement, as Skinriding a changeling produces adverse side effects up to and including strengthening the Puppeteer's Shadow. A Pardoner acquaintance of mine claims that this effect is just punishment for meddling with something truly innocent. My own take on the matter is that changelings are not *quite* human, and, as such, there's a fundamental incompatibility between our souls and theirs. Regardless, it's a matter for the folks in R&D to worry about.

The long and short of the matter is that direct Skinriding of most supernatural beings is more trouble than it's worth. What most Puppeteers prefer to do when circumstances necessitate involvement with such creatures is to possess normal mortals in the vicinity, thus facilitating communication and cooperation without risking disaster.

Contacts

Most of the contacts that the Puppeteers have are among Renegades, but access to the Guild is not available to any Enfant who's just joined a gang. Renegades who have been around and eluded the Legions for some time tend to have Puppeteer connections. Puppeteers also have very good relations with other illegal Guild organizations, in particular the Monitors, Haunters, Proctors and Spooks. Heretic Cults, including the Brothers of the Shroud and the Tempest Path, seem to be tight with the Puppeteers as well.

The Guild survives by making itself useful to (and doing favors for) every sizeable group of Renegades in the area, and it seems to be their modus operandi everywhere. It seemed, everywhere I went, there were people who were in debt to the Puppeteers. Often, Guildwraiths trade their services for oboli, but it is not unusual for them to perform favors for prominent Renegades in exchange for future considerations. In one recent incident of this sort, they performed certain services for the local Renegade, Erik (File #102470), after his Shadow had done something particularly nasty. I've been unable to garner exact details, but apparently, the situation had something to do with a former coworker, and the cleanup involved bodysnatching a couple of members of the police department. I'm not sure what the going rate for bailing out living friends is, but apparently his feeling is that it was worth whatever he paid. The general conclusion that can be drawn from this episode, however, is that the Guild continues to do a brisk trade in oboli and exchanged services with any wraith who can find the Puppeteers.

A number of Heretic Cults actively hide Puppeteers from potential enemies. These groups are often cults that advocate interaction with the living and other violations of the *Dictum Mortuum*. The Puppeteers, in turn, treat these cults much the same as the Renegades. Some Puppeteers are even actively involved in said cults and justify their activities in them as religiously mandated, even when such actions put their hosts in danger.

History tells us that the only reason Charon ever countenanced the existence of the Puppeteers Guild was its affiliation with the other Guilds at a time when he did not have the power to disband the various groups or to take any action that might have pitted them all against him. It is that affiliation, in part, that allows them to survive to this day.

The only Guild that Puppeteers do not have at least friendly relations with is the Pardoners, though the need each Guild has for the other's services mandates at least polite relations in public. Most Pardoners who have had their lantern hanging for more that a few years have gotten very tired of seeing clients who use Puppetry; I've had this problem myself, even though I'm a Centurion. There's something to it beyond the fact of Puppeteers darkening Pardoners' doorsteps too often, though. Skinriding is habit forming. When you Skinride, you literally become the person; it's like being alive again, and you never want to leave. A lot of young wraiths spend more time 'riding than they spend in the Shadowlands, and when you're inside bodies for that long, its very hard to resist the urge to take over, at least in the small ways. Before you know it, you can be walking around and talking instead of quietly 'riding, and then your Shadow sneaks up on you when you're too wrapped up in the world of the Quick to remember that you're not one of them.

Sorry. Personal reminiscence crept in there.

It is also the seduction of the body that leads some to use Obliterate the Soul. After a point, some Skinriders can't deal with the fact that they'll have to leave a body sooner or later, and that's when these Puppeteers take one for themselves. If killing the mortal in question weren't bad enough, it seems, from the figures I've gathered, that roughly a third of the wraiths who use this art on a regular basis become Spectres within a year. These facts aren't lost on the Pardoners, who have about as much tolerance for Puppeteers as workers in a rehab clinic have for the local crack dealers.

There is one Guild with whom the Puppeteers have a special relationship: the Monitors. From the number of unblinking eyes I saw in the vicinity when I spoke, I suspect the two groups are working closely together. Best guess from available evidence is that the Monitors use Puppeteer agents to alter Fetters directly, while the Puppeteers rely on Monitor assistance to aid in their subversive programs with Risen and such.



Here's Andrea now. She's my favorite host, a corporate lawyer with the career and the body I never had when I was alive. Her hair really is naturally blond, and she looks great with it up in a French twist. I still haven't figured out how she does it, and I've been inside her as she's been doing it six times now. Ah, well. I'll just slip inside while she's getting ready for her date.

Living Death to Its Fullest

I, umm, I mean, Andrea looks great. The little black dress, the stockings, the heels. If only I'd been a size six when I was alive! The expensive makeup certainly makes a difference too, not like she really needs it. Oh, there's the doorbell, that must be Conner. I can't wait to see this guy; its a blind date for me. She's opening the door now. Ooh! Not bad, and he brought us roses. Pink, so he's not being too pushy. We're doing well — he's got good hair, a cute face and it looks like a really promising body under those expensive clothes. Things are definitely looking good. Too bad you were too fat and ugly to get guy? like this. Conner would never look at you twice. Nobody asked your opinion.

His car is a BMW, and we take it downtown. It tooks like Conner is really going all the way, 'cause we're eating at the Julien. He's not doing things by halves. The best thing about being dead is getting to go to places like this. The problem with ordinary wraiths is they keep bitching about being dead, but I look at it this way: Before I died, it was a big treat to go to a restaurant where the waitresses spoke English. Now, I get to go to places where the waiters speak French. Oh, shit, she's looking at the salads. She's probably contemplating not getting a real entree. LOOK THERE. Good, she's ordering the swordfish. Are you going to get her drunk toot I know you want to make her order champagne. And what if I do? There's nothing wrong with a little alcohol. Well, at least she has the sense to get a Tide, not like some people Just shut up about that, okay? Just shut up.

This is the best date I've been on in a long time. I wonder why Andrea feels like she's lost interest. I guess she had a rough day at the office. Now for the best part, the dessert cart. I'd better get ready to take over here, or all we'll end up with is a cup of coffee. "I'LL HAVE THE CHEESE-CAKE, PLEASE." Do you have any idea how much time on the treadmill you just cost helt All I can say is thank goodness she had the willpower to stick to it, unlike certain people who never last more than three days on a diet, Miss Size II. Just. Shut. Up.

That was the best meal I've had in a while, and the night is young. We'll go back to Andrea's place, we'll put on some romantic music, have a drink or two and see where things lead. Conner is such a good looking guy. Hey, why does Andrea keep looking out the window. If she keeps this up he's going to think she's not interested or something. Andrea, get with the program, you're in a car with a rich, great-looking guy. Don't blow this! Are you playing hard to get? Don't tell me you're not interested in this guy, that would be crazy.

All right, Andrea, we're back at your place. Do us both a favor and invite Conner up for a drink. Don't be a moron, you have to want to see Conner without his shirt on as much as I do. Oh, shit, she's saying goodnight! "NO, WAIT. WON'T YOU COME IN?" So, you'te completely in charge of her now. Happy? What's she going to think in the motining when she wakes up and realizes that she slept with this guy whom she obviously can't stand — or weren't you paying attention to anything other than the food and his face? You're a fat, pathetic nympho, and what you're doing is as good as rape. You're blowing this completely out of proportion. She was just having an off night. She'd thank me in the morning, if she knew what was going on. It's not like I don't care what happens to her, I'll make him wear a condom:

Trends

The man in the television crew van was not the only member of the media I saw who was a host. In the attached, detailed reports, you will find that I observed three television reporters, five cameramen, twelve researchers and two members of the *Herald* staff who were all hosts at one time or another. Cross-referencing my findings with those of researchers in other Necropoli, I noted a disturbing trend. Puppeteer involvement in the media is not a localized phenomenon, but rather appears to be blossoming all across the country, and up into Canada as well. Furthermore, there are multiple reports of an intense Puppeteer involvement in the creation of new television shows and movies through strong Guild presence in Los Angeles and Hollywood.

I must state that I have not developed a hypothesis explaining the origin of this move toward media involvement, primarily because of the puzzling nature of the sorts of stories with which the Puppeteers were interfering. There was very little possession of reporters and crew during coverage of the upcoming election, or of financial or sports news. Most of the Skinriding seemed to be taking place in relation to human interest stories and local news items. The resulting reports sounded more like tabloid material than usual, and several made passing reference to supposed miracles or angels.

The media trend does, however, fit in with the increasing numbers of New Agers in the Guild. I doubt that this program is just a case of these crystal-wavers merely pursuing their mortal interests. The older Guild members have effectively killed any number of activities that would have drawn too much attention to the Guild, and yet, the program of media manipulation has not been challenged. This must mean that the program is condoned at the highest levels of the Guild. The implications are fascinating, but, unfortunately, ill-defined as of yet.

Heresies

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Every Puppeteer I managed to talk to claimed to be very concerned about the Quick, especially any of his consorts. While this expressed concern is admirable, meddling across the Shroud on behalf of any of the Quick is expressly forbidden by law, and for good reason. What benefits one mortal, after all, almost inevitably hurts another. Needless to say, the *Dictum* doesn't stop the Puppeteers from doing it on a regular basis, nor is their meddling always beneficial. Two hosts I came across died as a result of being Skinridden (though they did expire after the Puppeteers had left their bodies), and five more were either committed or voluntarily admitted to psychiatric facilities. Without exception, the Puppeteers I met said that it was their duty to help the Quick, even when confronted with these statistics. Such occurrences were dismissed as "unfortunate accidents," and the hoary cliché about omelets and eggs was brought up any number of times. Some even alluded to a large project the Puppeteers were working on that would benefit both the living and the Dead, but the details of this grand work were sadly lacking.

Heretical Puppeteers often take their common "responsibility" to the living to religious extremes. A few as much as told me that God had chosen them to remain behind to help the living, and one even hinted that he had been tapped to serve as divine retribution on evil mortals. These fanatics are in the minority, but a sizeable minority it is. It is only their awe of the Puppet Masters — higher-ups in the Guild with broad disciplinary powers — that keeps them in line. They speak of someone named Colin, who apparently runs not only the New England portion of the Guild, but Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritime Provinces of Canada, as well. The Heretics in the Guild seem to believe that the Guild's elites, who manage certain geographical areas, are akin to angels, and they speak of the High Masters, the three wraiths who run the Guild, as if they are saints.

On local levels, the Puppeteers seem to hew to the standard configuration of Apprentice-Journeyman-Master, at least in terms of quantifying their skills. Beyond that, Guild structure is quite loose in individual Necropoli, and each Puppeteer is free to cut her own deals, so long as they don't endanger the whole. It is only when danger threatens — say, a patrol gets too nosy or a favorite host is threatened — that one can observe concerted actions on the part of the Guild. Such actions are usually very brief and extremely efficient — and whatever combination of Puppeteers and their allies performs them fades back into the woodwork as soon as the job is finished.

Even the nonreligious members of the Guild are in awe of someone code-named Marionette, who apparently sits over the High Masters and the regional leaders alike. The more practical Puppeteers speak of the risks that the Masters take by virtue of their position, especially in light of Hierarchy "persecutions." This awe is apparently also reinforced by having all Puppeteers learn the most advanced arts of their Arcanos directly from one of the regional elites. This system gives each Puppeteer of a certain skill level a direct connection to someone in a position of real power.

The local Puppeteers all seem very attached to Colin. One young wraith whom I talked with was speculating about the possibility of New England becoming a separate region, and she wondered who could possibly be up to filling Colin's shoes. She was the least closed-mouthed of the Guildwraiths I spoke to, and she gave me the one hint to this Colin's identity that I could manage: Whoever this Colin is, he's based in Canada. Unfortunately, after that conversation, I was no longer able to use Marie as a source. She apparently had a nasty Harrowing shortly after we spoke and kept to herself from that point onward.

Methods

I firmly believe that Marie's Harrowing was no coincidence. The Puppeteers may present themselves as the protectors of the Quick and the friends of all Renegades, but they are not the Red Cross or even Greenpeace. They can be ruthless, especially when it comes to keeping their secrets.

The day after Marie dropped out of sight, I had a visit from a woman in a suit. From her accent, she lived and died in Southie. She "suggested" to me that I should stop looking into her friends' business. She went on to say that people who didn't know when to butt out and mind their own business might find themselves having long conversations with their Shadows. There were other threats too, but I found I was mesmerized watching this woman talk. There was something disturbing about it that I couldn't quite place. Her accent was strictly local and unremarkable, as was her choice of words, and she showed none of the strange mannerisms that would have marked her as a Puppeteer. Finally, I realized what it was about her that had been bothering me: She never blinked. I'd been visited by a Monitor.

The next day, I did some snooping around in some of the places in the Skinlands that Marie had mentioned in passing, because I wondered what had shaken up the Guild enough to send in the big guns. I don't know what to make of the things I found. There was a room in a storage warehouse that I discovered [See Attachment #36 for the address], filled with a strange collection of objects. There were purses, jewelry, toys, letters, bric-a-brac, sports equipment (baseball bats were common), and other miscellaneous objects. Everything was small enough to carry, and most of it was small enough to hide in a pocket. There were traces of dark-brownish aura around most of these objects, the same shade one often sees around particularly depraved vampires. Furthermore, while I'm no expert on Lifeweb, every last item felt like a Fetter - almost. The feeling was indescribably disturbing. I didn't stay long, as I found the place unnerving. The Shroud was nearly nonexistent in there, and I was getting a feeling similar to when I get too close to an incipient Nihil.

Three days after the visit from the Monitor, I was forced to terminate my investigation, as a result of my primary Fetter being destroyed in an extremely suspicious fire. Now that I have recovered from the subsequent Harrowing and completed my report, I hereby request a transfer to other duties, pending your receipt of this document. I respectfully request that you assign someone else to any further investigations.

Beyond Fetters

It would seem that a Puppeteer who had lost all of his Fetters would be out of luck. The Guild's Renegade leanings would make such a wraith unwelcome in Stygia, and Puppetry isn't much good when there's no one around but other wraiths. However, Puppeteers without Fetters aren't without resources.

Many retreat to isolated communities on the River of Death, where they accept students and hide out from Hierarchy patrols. Others do make their way into the Imperial City and blend in with the innumerable wraiths who dwell there. Some cut deals with the Monitors, whom these Puppeteers pay in services for the maintenance of temporary Fetters until such time as new ones (such as an especially beloved consort) develop.

Those are the comforting facts. There are other, less comforting rumors. There are some stories that elder Puppeteers have developed Artifacts that allow them to reach across the Tempest as well, so that they can touch the mortal world from anywhere in the Underworld. Even more disturbing are the persistent tales that the elders of the Guild have discovered methods of modifying their arts to affect other wraiths. Both Hierarchy officials "in the know" and Guild representatives pooh-pooh these rumors, which is why the rest of the Underworld is so worried.





Chapter Two: Naiting for Fate

The History of the Puppeteers

"You're obviously suffering from a severe emotional disturbance. We must try to unravel this fantasy."

"It is **not** a fantasy."

"Of course it isn't."

"Do you believe me?"

"To you it isn't a fantasy."

- Terry Nation, Blake's Seven, "The Way Back"



octor Nina Peguero tossed the last of the tapes into a battered cardboard box. The plastic casings rattled as she picked up the box and pulled her black leather purse onto her shoulder. She hesitated, then slid the newspaper clipping on her desk into the box, on top of the tapes. The words

"Mental Patient Takes 10-Story Dive" stood out to her like

an accusation, and she looked away. Today, the familiar and comfortable bookshelves and chairs of her office seemed distant and cold.

Nina left her office and hoped her secretary had gone home already, but Maryel Hinman still sat at her cluttered metal desk. Maryel's Van Gogh print appeared to stare down at her as she typed up a reimbursement form.

"Good night, Maryel." Nina's voice was subdued and hoarse.

"Good night, Nina. Umm, do you want to go have a drink or something? Maybe talk about it?" Maryel's fingers hovered over her keyboard.

Nina smiled, somehow. "No, thanks. Yuji will be expecting me for dinner, and you know how worried he gets if I'm not home on time. I'll see you tomorrow." She turned her back to Maryel and closed her fingers on the cold metal of the door handle. It was stiff today, and she had trouble turning it.

Chapter Two: Waiting for Fate

Tape 2, Side 1, at 20 minutes, 48 seconds: Belief

[The man's voice begins soft, polite, hesitant. After several moments it changes abruptly, becoming harsh. The woman speaks only rarely, and her voice is cool and detached — clinical.]

[Note: Dr. Peguero also mentioned that the temperature in the room dropped markedly during the course of the conversation, though, obviously, there is no record of this on the tape. M.H.]

"Oh, my parents were Catholic. They raised me Catholic, too, although I was never as devout as they were. I've always believed in God, I just never really had the time for church. Besides, although I believe, I'm not sure I agree with all of the Church's practices-

"If it weren't for the Christians it would be a lot easier for me to talk to you. Christianity is a fine thing in general, but not for a Puppeteer. We had a perfectly nice deal going before they came along with their exorcisms. It was accepted that people would interact with the Dead. Ghosts were a fact of life, as it were, and most people respected us. [laughter] Just try getting that kind of respect now. Lately, people tell our, ah, friends, that they're nuts and need to be drugged. Do you have any idea how much haloperidol they put in this body when it first got to the hospital? Hallucinations and delusions, they told him! It's a crime! Not that you're likely to agree with me on this one, of course, Doc, but you did want me to tell you about everything.

"There's this thing called the Shroud, see.... Oh, Hell, I'll explain that one later. Anyway, the more the living believe in us and in our ability to interact with them, the easier it is to do so. Christianity turned away from that belief, and more than anyone else, my people suffered for it. It was quite a shock, let me tell you - we didn't pay much attention to this religion when it first popped up. We were fools, and we paid for that foolishness.

"First, Christians claimed we were demons when we took over people, and now, most of them say ghosts don't exist at all. They say we all go off to Heaven or Hell, or maybe purgatory, when we die. But it just ain't so, Doc. There's only the Shadowlands, and the Tempest and a few places like Stygia. I see I'm losing you again. [coughing] Christianity has caused us more problems than any other single thing - except Charon and his bloody Dictum. But I'll explain that later, too.

"Now, Eastern religions are often much friendlier toward us. Ancestor worship is the way to go, let me tell you. I've often wished that I'd died into the Jade Kingdom. Few people there are as closed to the idea of wraiths as people in the Western world are."

Tape 2, Side 2, at 38:16: Charon and the DictumMortuum

"Charon? I don't remember talking about anyone named Charon. Wasn't he a mythological figure who ferried souls across the River Styx? It's been a long time since I studied mythology, unfortunately. I used to love it. Buried myself in it, you might say. [chair scraping along floor] I was something of a loner when I was little that's a polite way of saying I was a nerd - and so I spent most of my time at the local-

"Charon. Mister I-was-chosen-by-the-Lady-of-Fate Ferryman himself. Bloody irritant. He and his Dictum Mortuum have made life very difficult for the Puppeteers; if I could find him, I'd Harrow him myself - assuming he hasn't already been destroyed, of course. Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say, though the Deathlords aren't much better. Sure, they're willing to use Puppetry for their own purposes when it suits them. But officially, we're still persona non grata in Stygia. Charon made interfering with the living in any way inherently a crime. I' ve never heard anything more ridiculous in my life! The Puppeteers Guild in Stygia under Charon was a joke; even Charon used us now and then, but he detested us.

"Have you ever heard of Richard McConnaughey? Ah, I see by your face that you have. Marvelous man, eh? My many-timesgreat grandchildren grew up watching his TV shows and movies. He put a smile on the faces of children the world 'round. Is it a crime for him to keep doing so after

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he's died? What's wrong with wanting to make people happy? But if they catch him, they'll turn him into a flagstone. Just for making your seven-year-old girl laugh.

"Don't look so surprised. I know a lot about you. Old Horne here may be locked up in a mental institution, but I still get out. You look skeptical, of course, but that will change. You're still recording these things, right? Good. If nothing else makes it, those tapes have to survive. The Hierarchy may silence me, but if they don't know about the tapes, then my words will go on. That's all that matters."

Tape 4, Side 2, at 32:02: Renegades and Heretics

"I just want this to stop, Doctor Peguero. Words start coming out of my mouth and I can't stop them, and it's frightening. It makes me feel helpless, and I hate feeling helpless. Reminds me of that time in third grade when the class bully, Chadoh, thank you Miss Hinman. I'd love some tea. Thank you. Yes, cream and sugar would be lovely. Anyway, as I was saying-

"Tea. I used to hate tea, you know, but now almost any sensation is wonderful. Earl Grey! You are indeed a gracious hostess. Where was I? It's so hard to remember with these once-a-day sessions. Renegades, you say? I was going to explain Renegades? Well, that's easy. They're the good guys.

"Okay, that's overly simplistic. Some Renegades are brutal, cruel. Some are pirates or highway robbers, and they're all criminals. But the worst of them is better than any Stygian Deathlord. Stygia is civilized, they say, organized. Organized what, I ask? Organized horror, maybe. Organized torture. Organized pain. Any civilization has to have rules, but theirs are insane. The Guilds have been outlawed, but most intelligent people know they still exist. Stygia needs them to survive, and yet belonging to them can get you forged into fenceposts. Does that make any sense? Of course not.

"Besides the Renegades, there are Heretics, who are just another breed of Renegade. Charon outlawed the Heretics because they were promising Heaven to the masses, then shipping them off and using them as slaves, or worse. Not all Heretics of course, just some. But, in his usual heavy-handed fashion, Charon outlawed them all. Some Heretics are nuts - fanatics who believe Heaven is somewhere along another Byway. Some are really great people, though. For all that I say about resenting Christianity, many Christians are really nice people; it's unfortunate to see them, as well as members of other religions, persecuted just because they want to believe in something. On the other hand, people of every religion have been persecuted for as long as there have been religions, in the land of the living almost as much as in the land of the Dead. So what else is new?"

Nina slogged through the early spring mud to her cobaltblue Cadillac and fished in her purse for her keys. A few drops of rain spattered her windshield as she slid into the driver's seat, and she started, hitting her head on the top of the car. Pain spiked briefly into her shoulders and then receded. She carefully placed the box on the passenger seat, then laid her head back, as she felt the tension that pulled her shoulders up toward her ears. Nothing had gone right this year.

A few more raindrops turned into a downpour, and the rain cascaded onto the windshield. One drop blurred into the next until it sounded like waves against stone. With her eyes closed, she could almost taste the salt, hear the sharp cries of gulls. Horne had liked the sea, hadn't he? Something about ships and naval warfare. Suddenly, the ocean was gone, and all she could see was his body, splayed and naked, blood sprayed in a carnal sunset on the pavement. She sighed and opened her eyes, pulled herself up and turned the key in the ignition.

Tape 5, Side 1, 16:00: The Guilds

"You told me these medications would get rid of the delusions, Doctor Peguero, but it keeps happening. You said you'd help me! Maybe I should get a second opinion. No, I don't want to calm down. I'm tired of sitting here and listening to myself tell you these strange fictions. I wish I could come up with this kind of material when I was feeling like myself; I could write all sorts of stories, maybe make some extra money to pay for these sessions"Guilds. I was going to tell you something about Guilds. Well, that's an interesting story. Most of the Guilds would tell you they formed of their own volition, that it was all their own idea. I'm going to tell you a different story.

"It was Charon who wanted us organized. He claimed he wanted us to be protected, to feel a part of Stygian society. That's bull. He wanted to watch us. He wanted to know who had which Arcanoi just by watching who met with whom and where they went. Official Guild history says we were formed in the early 11th century by a mysterious wraith who called himself 'The Puppet Master.' One Hell of an ego, if you ask me. Anyway, he was Charon's lackey; Charon tolerated us as long as he had enough information on us. I doubt he ever intended to keep his word in the long run. I expect he wanted to wait until he thought he could take us down without a fight.

"Puppet Master's origins were never clear, but there were several stories. There were whispers at first that he had ties to the Laughing Lady, but no one could prove it. It was clear that he had some involvement with the Hierarchy, but he claimed it to be an advantage, that he'd be able to accomplish more because they trusted him. There was a rumor that one of the Deathlords had killed Puppet Master's wife, but I suspect he spread that rumor himself to drum up more support. There's no one a Puppeteer trusts more than someone who has reason to hate the Hierarchy. I heard a new rumor a few decades back - that he was a descendent of Charon himself, and that he was the only one Charon would trust with a group as dangerous as our Guild but I have no idea how much credence to give it.

"Puppet Master is supposed to have been tall and handsome, strong, imposing. They say he was charming, that he believed his own lies so strongly you couldn't help but think he was telling the truth. They say if he told you the Tempest was a child's playground, you'd believe him. These days, they call people like that sociopaths. Then again, no one ever said the qualities that make a good leader make a good man. I have the impression he was always on the verge of losing control of the Guild. Given that he was trying to keep us out of conflict with Charon, the fact that his grip was shaky is no surprise. Also not surprising is the fact that it was during this time we got along best with the other Guilds. Despite all of my disgust for Puppet Master, even I have to give him credit for keeping the peace as long as he did. Even he, however, couldn't keep it forever.

"There was a Guild called the Artificers, who did the soulforging. They had a great deal of power, which almost everyone agreed was a bad thing. From 1096 to 1354, the Guilds fought, as many of them tried and failed to oust the Artificers from their virtual throne. This was the War of the Guilds. We took part in this struggle but not as violently as some of the other Guilds. There was a lot of backstabbing and treachery going on, and many of our people took refuge in more remote parts of the Shadowlands, away from Stygia. Like I said, our Guildmaster was a puppet for Charon, and Charon favored the Artificers. They were the ones who provided him with all the materials he needed to build up Stygia and extend the reach of his power. We were told it wasn't really our business, that we should concentrate on the Quick and leave the politicking to others. What a load of bull. Some of us were more active in the war than others, but anyone Puppet Master caught getting a little too active went to the Artificers as a neatly wrapped gift. Or so they say. Maybe if we'd had a leader who didn't work for Charon, we could have tipped the balance, and things would be a lot different today.

"Our alliance with the Monitors - ghosts who keep track of the things that tie us to the real world - cemented during the war. It was a natural pairing, when you think about it. They' re also intrinsically involved with the Skinlands - the real world to you - and with the Quick, and they too suffered Charon's persecution. A number of Puppeteers went over to the Monitors when they discovered that Puppet Master was going to make us sit out the war, and we lost some great talent. The Monitors quietly invited any Puppeteers who wanted to fight back to join in, in return for favors. They knew most of us didn't like Puppet Master's policies.

"We always had problems with the Pardoners, on the other hand. Dealing with the land of the living can be a dicey thing, and some people don't handle it very well. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time can send you screaming right over the edge. If you think it's bad being nearby when some whacko decides to off his family, it's even worse when you're Skinriding one of the relevant people. The Pardoners think the solution to this problem is not to Skinride anyone. That's like saying we shouldn't swim because there's a chance we might drown. They used the fact that Puppet Master wasn't letting us fight back to take out a few of our good people 'accidentally.' They weren't expecting the Monitors to help us do our fighting, and the Pardoners paid for their actions. Still, the Pardoners and the Artificers were always tight.

"The Artificers continued to grow in power. Guilds not allied with the soulforgers continued to suffer unfortunate 'accidents,' and so, in 1354, the Compact of the Guilds was ratified. It called for a Council of Guilds to be formed - led by the Artificers, Charon's pets, of course. Naturally, we signed it; Charon would have loved an excuse to exterminate us, and we weren't quite ready to give it to him. It wasn't long, however, before we thought we were.

"Eventually came the Breaking of the Guilds. The Compact had worked against Charon by unifying the Guilds, and we, along with the rest of the Guilds, decided we couldn't deal with him and his Dictum any more. Puppet Master was still extolling the Hierarchy's virtues, but there was enough dissent by then that even he had to give in - or so it seemed.

"We tried to oust Charon, but some of the Guilds were betrayed by other Guilds and the Puppeteers, I suspect, were undone by our beloved Puppet Master - so we failed. It was all the excuse Charon needed to hunt us down and forge us all. Of course, quite a few of us got away, and the real Puppeteers Guild was the result. We became, primarily, a Guild of Renegades,

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thanks to the nature of our Arcanos and the laws of Stygia, but a few remained in Stygia to keep an eye on things and look for likely recruits. And because the Puppet Master disappeared mysteriously during the revolt, we didn't have to worry about him any more. I personally suspect he ran home to Charon, who probably 'rewarded' him appropriately for failing his task.

"A woman - a Renegade - calling herself Marionette rose up from the ranks of our Guild to take his place. Since then, all our leaders have taken the name of Marionette to honor her wise leadership - or so they say. I think they're just cashing in on her reputation, myself, as well as the confusion it generates because none of the other Guilds can be entirely sure when we change leadership. Marionette was from Greece. She was a farmer's daughter who disguised herself as a man so she could become a soldier. She must have died in battle, because she had one Hell of a scar across her face. She certainly would have been wasted on a farm, but then again, she was wasted on the battlefield, too, in a manner of speaking. Her best field was politics. More on her later, though.

"The Decree of the Breaking made it illegal to be a member of a Guild, and yet it became obvious Stygia couldn't survive without the Guilds. So, the Hierarchy made it clear that allowing them to find out you were a Guild member was the illegal act; as long as they didn't know and we didn't do anything against them, they wouldn't look too hard. Believe it or not, most Stygians still think the Guilds don't exist. Have you ever heard of a more ridiculous arrangement? In my opinion, Charon was a loon. Certainly a class-A fanatic, at the least."

Nina shivered as she came to a stop at a light. She turned the heater up and glanced at the box. What was she going to do with the tapes? Adrian Horne had wanted her to publish them somehow, to let other people hear them. She knew there was no point to it, that they were just the deluded ramblings of a very sick man, but he'd been so certain of himself that even her faith had been shaken. For a moment she was tempted, but she was going to have enough trouble reestablishing her reputation after what had happened. She didn't need the kind of problems those tapes would give her.

A horn honked, startling her. Green light scattered through the drops on her windshield, then passed over and behind her as she pressed the ball of her foot against the accelerator. Perhaps she would keep the tapes in storage for a few months, then listen to them again. Surely then she'd realize how ridiculous it all was. Then she'd be able to throw them out. Then maybe the guilt would go away.

Tape 7, Side 1, 13:55: Maelstroms and Abominations

"Can I have access to a typewriter, Doctor Peguero? I want to start writing down some of this material. One of the people on my wing claims to be a publisher. If he's telling the truth, I may actually be able to sell this stuff. I'm bound and determined to get something out of this. So far, it's just gotten me stuck in this bloody - oh, heck, that's one of his words, isn't it? - in this hospital. He did everything he could to drive my friends and relatives away, and now, there's so little left. I won't let him leave me with nothing. I won't-

"In 1347, the Second Maelstrom hit the lands of the Dead; the Plague had fallen upon Europe. We did what we could, Skinriding doctors to help them fight it, Skinriding men on the street to make them kill the small animals we figured were carrying the disease, but it wasn't enough. And, of course, since it wasn't a huge, visible defense against the Spectres that came then, and since we couldn't exactly go to Charon and say, 'Look what we did!' without getting locked in chains, we were seen as The-Guild-That-Did-Nothing, which couldn't have been further from the truth.

"If anything, the Plague hurt us more than the others, and we had more incentive to help. The others concentrated on protecting Stygia; we were almost the only ones who bothered to help the Quick. Even the Monitors went into hiding. It hurt like Hell to watch the people we needed dying by the thousands and to be able to do so little to help.

"In the early 1500s came the First Abomination, in which Renegades stormed the walls of Stygia and seized, among other Arti-

facts, the Spear of Longinus. Some say our people took it and still keep it safe, but I won't say one way or the other. Some knowledge is meant to remain secret. We were certainly involved in the attack; who had more reason to hate Charon than us? I mean, we even worked with the Fishers on that one - we disliked the guy that much. I will tell you this for free, though - we took a few other things when we left, things most wraiths haven't heard about. We took a sword some have called Excalibur, a beautifully worked statue of Shiva, and a Grecian urn with a detailed painting of Artemis on a hunt. On the rare occasions when I had the honor of seeing one of these pieces, it gave me great pleasure to know that we have them, and the Hierarchy does not.

"The Second Abomination was the Breaking of the Guilds, and that I've already told you about. The Third Abomination was the destruction of the Kingdom of Obsidian by various Heretics and Renegades. Emotions and conflict had been running too high for too long, and it really wasn't surprising that it boiled over. It's too bad a whole Kingdom had to pay for Charon's pigheadedness. I had friends who went over to the Obsidian Kingdom in an attempt to get away from the Hierarchy, but things there went just as bad. Finding out they hadn't escaped after all was too much for them, and they lost control. Who could blame them?

"Next came the Third Great Maelstrom. It was entirely due to wraithly activities: the hatred and rage that built up during the Abominations brought it on. Again, it was a result of the Hierarchy's policies; Stygia brought it on themselves. If the bonds are tied too tight, then those who are bound must break free. Slaves shouldn't stay slaves simply because someone might be hurt by their attempt at freedom. Charon should have realized such a thing would happen when he first declared the Dictum Mortuum.

"The First World War brought on the Fourth Maelstrom. We didn't do as much to help that time — we were busy fleeing the grief, rage and hatred that were generated in previously unheard-of quantities in the Skinlands. We could hardly stand to be

near the Quick, let alone inside of their skins. And why should we help the Hierarchy, anyway? What had they done for us? We protected our own, and that was enough. The Fifth Maelstrom, brought on by the Second World War, was much the same. We thought ourselves better prepared that time, but it wasn't enough. Lance Salles, against everyone else's better judgment, led a small group to help, and almost all of them went Spectre. The last time I saw Lance, he was all teeth, and he tried his damnedest to rip my plasm to shreds. We didn't let anyone else go on rescue missions - when it came down to losing either a few of our own or large numbers of Hierarchy soldiers, the choice was easy."

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The car bounced and jolted through post-winter potholes, every bump aggravating the pain behind Nina's eyes. Little red spots formed around the edges of her vision. She pulled an orange-brown prescription bottle out of a coat pocket and, without looking, unscrewed the lid with one hand. She dropped one smooth, green capsule onto the back of her tongue. She swallowed, grimacing at the hard pressure in her throat.

Before she could put the lid back on, the car hit a deep pothole and pills scattered all over the front of the car — on the seat, on the floor, in her lap and in the box. She clenched her teeth, feeling the pain-pressure in her jawbone, and carefully put the opened bottle and its remaining contents back into her pocket. Her peripheral vision was going white now, and she fought it. She needed to get home, needed her soft leather chair and her warm blue afghan. She needed Yuji.

Tape 7, Side 2, 0:04: Guild Politics

"This is sick. Ghosts getting involved in our wars? Riding inside people's heads? I've never heard anything more ridiculous in my life. I'm a scientist! I don't believe in these things! Don't you believe me? Don't you understand me? There are no such things as ghosts. They don't exist! And even if they did, what the heck would one of them be doing in my head? No, no, I don't want any more pills. I'll take it easy, all right? I promise. Just don't give me any more pills. The little brown ones make my mouth dry out and make my head feel like it's full of cotton-

"Jeez. This guy has got to chill. What's the big deal? People have believed in ghosts for thousands of years. Why is it so hard now? Sometimes, I think someone's deliberately tried to make everyone stop believing. And who knows? Maybe someone has. Mister Horne here would rather believe he's having a nervous breakdown, that he's bugf-oh, sorry, I shouldn't use that word in front of you - nuts, than believe he's possessed by a ghost. What a strange set of priorities. I think it would be easier to believe in the ghost. At least then, you can believe it isn't your fault.

"But I was going to tell you about the post-Breaking purge, wasn't I? Ah yes, that was it. Things didn't go quite as smoothly after the Breaking as I originally implied. There was a period of time when the Guild was leaderless and homeless, fractured and close to destruction. Although, of course, if you asked anyone else in the Guild, they would deny this assessment all the way to Oblivion. I guess I'm just more open and honest than most of the others. [laughter]

"Anyway. We had to face the fact that someone - very few wanted to admit it could have been the Guildmaster - had betrayed us. There was a witch-hunt to match your era of McCarthyism. Anyone suspected of colluding with Charon and the Deathlords was rounded up and 'taken care of.' It's said they were fed to the forges of Renegade Artificers or Moliated into something more useful, like seat-cushions. A group of midlevel Guild members with the right reasons and a bit too much fanaticism went around throwing people into Nihils. Life in the land of the Dead will make you paranoid to begin with, but the Cleansing drove us beyond paranoia and into terror. Everyone was watching us, marking our every movement, and reporting on us to someone. It was chaos. If we didn't want to be thought traitors, we had to be in with the witch-hunters. I sent friends to the forges, even one of my granddaughters. You can bet I wasn't going to stand around to be pounded into steel on some coward's anvil.

"I don't think the Guild would have accepted any leader except a Renegade at



that point. Marionette was relatively young, but she swept through the ranks with a confidence that pulled everyone in behind her. She had a good head on her shoulders. She knew the persecution of Guild members had to stop and that the best way to stop it was to have someone in authority. She took it upon herself to become that authority. The Guild was in such a shambles - and so many of its best people had either been 'dealt with' or gone into hiding - that there really were no other candidates. At least, none who could stand up to her. While everyone else had been watching his own back and turning in loved ones, she'd been making contacts, gaining people's trust and quietly saving loyal souls from the forges, substituting non-Guild people instead. By the time she moved, she had a substantial following.

"It is said that Marionette was Guildmaster for more than 200 years, but no one is really sure. They say she personally trained her own replacement, and that when Marionette retired, her replacement took the name Marionette and the mask her predecessor had worn, so there was no way to be sure when the first Marionette ended and the next began. The ploy worked well.

"The Puppeteers Guild has both more and different problems than the other Guilds, as far as power struggles and politicking among Guild members goes. Marionette did a good job setting up a reasonably stable governmental structure, but as a group, the Puppeteers are a notoriously greedy lot. It often feels as though we're right on the verge of civil war, but so far, we've survived.

"The Guild Elders try to keep a firm grip on the Guild, but it doesn't always work smoothly. After all, our group possesses perhaps the most diverse worldviews of any group in all the lands of the Dead. We encompass Renegades and Heretics alike, and even, in rare and special instances, a few Hierarchy, or pseudo-Hierarchy, people. This combination is bound to create a few problems.

"In some ways, we act almost as a bridge of cooperation between various Renegades and Heretics. We may not see things the

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same way in most cases, but we have our key similarities — we all Skinride the Quick for our various reasons, and we all detest the rules of Stygia that tell us we aren't allowed to do so. We work together, and yet we disagree about many things. Add in the factor that many Renegades aren't shy about expressing and eliminating their disagreements, and you can see that the Guild is a volatile thing, at best."

Nina pulled into her driveway. Despite the medication, her headache was worse now. It speared into the muscles that wrapped around her head, and she felt disoriented, dizzy. The once-welcoming white house loomed over her now. She drove into the garage and saw that Yuji's Lincoln wasn't there. Maybe he was buying groceries; it was Wednesday, after all. Good; that would give her time to clean up the pills she'd spilled and maybe lie down for a little while. She watched herself open her door and step out; everything was distant and muffled. She heard the gravel of the driveway crunch beneath her boots, but she didn't feel it.

She went to the other side of the car and opened the door; the cold rainwater on the handle barely chilled her hand. She easily found the bright green pills against the gray upholstery, gathered them up and dropped them into her pocket. Her skin felt as if it were coated with plastic; there was a shell between her and the world. She reached for the box and saw, rather than felt, its rough surface against her fingertips. She pulled it toward her. Words ran through her mind almost at random: "senseless tragedy," "should have been on a secured ward," "a danger to himself and others," and most damning, "inexperienced doctor." As she began to curl in upon herself mentally, some part of her noticed with surprise that she had pushed the box back into the car, closed the door and returned to the driver's side.

Tape 9, Side 1, 17:40: Living History

"I'm sick of hearing about Renegades and Guilds and Heretics and Puppeteers. If this whatever-it-is is going to use me to tell you about history, it could at least tell you about something interesting, something I'd understand, for once. I just don't care about Maelstroms. If something is going to be inconsiderate enough to possess me - assuming for a very brief moment that I'm not actually insane - it could at least try to be a little more interesting. Do you find Renegades interesting, or have you been as bored as I ha-

"'It'? I'm an object now? I'm insulted. I'll see what I can do, though. You haven't been bored, now have you, Doc? [laughter] I didn't think so.

"Let's see. The history of the Quick. We haven't had as large an impact on it as you might think. When the worst things happen - like the World Wars, as I said before - the dark emotions generated tend to feed our bad sides. If we're at all smart, we stay away. We aren't super-heroes, saving the world from itself. Occasionally, we may make a small difference, but we don't make your history for you.

"What little we do is probably more like what you would call 'preventative maintenance.' We can't move mountains, but we can alter the course of a small stream. Of course, some make a difference in the wrong direction. Maybe it evens out over the long run. I know a woman who used to work on the design of nuclear weapons. She was killed in a lab accident. After a change of heart, she started recruiting Puppeteers to watch over missile silos in the hopes of intervening should something go wrong. On the other hand, what if one of the people she's recruited has a different agenda? Or what if there's a war, and she hasn't recruited enough wraiths to stop even a 50th of the missiles? She may make a difference, yes, but in what direction? And how much of one?

"Did you see in the paper last week that a boy was pulled from the path of a speeding car by a mild-mannered banker? All the man's friends said they never thought he had it in him. They were right. Then again, he'd never had one of us in him before, either. Of course, the whole thing's a crapshoot. There's no telling how this experience might change the banker's life, or who that boy might grow up to be. So, in that sense, we may have more of an impact than even we ever realize.

"My personal favorite period in history was the Seven Years' War - the first real World War, in a geographic sense. Naval strategy was all-important, and I' ve always loved the navy. Now, I'm sure that even after everything I've said, you're going to expect me to say that I manipu-

lated one of the higher-ups, like Pitt, or maybe the battleship designer, Sir Thomas Slade. But me, I liked accountants. I had a living friend who was a British accountant of sorts, and his name was Nigel. He and I manipulated numbers for the war. We worked on things like the Land Tax, the Customs Tax, the Excise Tax. We manipulated a system of funded debt that helped to see Britain through the war intact, while French finances reached a state of near-collapse. We weren't responsible for Britain's victory, but we had an effect on it. They would have won anyway; our help simply made it that much more decisive. While the Brits were buying government stock and short-term Exchequer Bills, the French were already inheriting a staggering public debt.

"Of course, I took a few side trips. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to sail with the Royal Navy. I even Skinrode Pitt himself a couple of times; it was an amazing feeling. No matter how many times I'm there, watching history happen, it always feels new. I didn't think of myself as a historian while I lived, but that's what I've become. Pitt was a genius; he knew better than any other how to use an army and a navy together effectively, and he was a joy to watch. It's a pity no one learned how to use his system after he died. There were those who tried, but none could match his brilliance. I only wish he'd joined us in the Shadowlands; I could have chatted with him for years.

"Do we ever 'arrange' deaths, so as to recruit promising new members? Of course not. We would never do such a thing. There are rumors, on the other hand, that certain Deathlords just might. Of course, they're only rumors, so who knows?"

Tape 9, Side 2, 0:04

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"Look, I come to you to get cured. I've come here every day for the past three weeks, not including weekends, and you haven't done anything for me. Sometimes, I think you're more interested in what I'm saying than in helping me at all! Hello! Is there anyone in there? No, don't shake your head at me. I'm sick and tired of this. I stay in the hospital, I get drugged to the gills, I spend my time trying to get some peace and quiet, while that nice old lady who thinks she's Mary, Mother of God, tries to teach me how to knit coathanger covers, and all you do is ask me what I meant when I talked about the Shroud, whatever that is! I'm sick of it! I'm tired of it! I want some answers! I want some peace! I want out of here! No, no, please don't do that. You know how much I hate needles. Please...oh, ouch.

"I hate that stuff. Makes me feel, umm, dizzy. Like there's blue cotton candy in my head." [giggles fading to silence]

Nina drove back down the driveway. The first stars of the night pierced the blue cloth of the evening sky, as the clouds parted. The rain had stopped, and as she watched herself lower the window, she heard the chirping of crickets. The stench of a neighbor's unattended garbage barely penetrated the haze in her head, and she wondered where she was going. She was on the road to town, headed back the way she'd come. Her grip on the wheel was firmer than before, and she reached speeds she hadn't driven since she'd gotten that ticket in college. She easily handled the hairpin turn, and she wondered at the sense of purpose that suddenly governed her actions.

Tape 9, Side 2, 11:11: Lowering the Shroud

"Wow. That's such a great shade of blue, that suit, I mean. Can you get them to paint my room that color? Would you? Wow. That's great, really. I wish I had a dog that color, you know, one of those great big ones, umm, Grape Dates, or whatever they call-

"Did you have to do that? It feels bloody awful. Nasty stuff. I'm glad they didn't have it when I was alive. No, I'm not going to tell you when I was born or when I died. I'll just say it was quite some time ago. Of course, the information I'm giving you is very one-sided. And not all of it is true, I'll tell you that, as well. I can also tell you that it has great, gaping holes in it, but you'll have to live with that.

"Perhaps it's time for me to explain why I'm here. There are two reasons I'll

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tell you about. Let me tell you, historically speaking, of the first of them.

"Very long ago - some say before time itself, though I'll wager that's quite an exaggeration - the barrier between the lands of the living and the lands of the Dead was much thinner. Not only did the Dead pass fairly freely into the lands of the living, but some among the living passed into the lands of the Dead, and back again. There are many legends about them. Orpheus springs to mind, as well as Hercules.

"At some point, there was an event we call only the Sundering. No one knows why it happened, or how. The lands of the living and Dead were split apart, and the barrier we call the Shroud was erected between them. The Shroud isn't uniform; it's thicker in some places and thinner in others. How much the living believe they can be affected by the power of the Dead can thin the Shroud in places, if such belief exists on a large enough scale.

"The Puppeteers have begun a crusade a crusade to convince the living that we do indeed exist, and that we have the power to interact with them. By doing so on a large enough scale, and over long enough a time, we hope to thin the Shroud. Of course, my conversation here with you now will have little direct effect. But who knows where the knowledge on those tapes will end up, eh? If enough hear them, perhaps it will have some small effect. We sometimes choose writers as our vehicles, so thousands will read their words, but this tactic has the disadvantage that people think their work is just fiction. Or politicians - when citizens hear that their leaders listen to the advice of dead people, some of them start believing as well. At least, their minds may open up to the possibility.

"The second reason? Well, that one is simple. To undermine the Hierarchy. People may not believe my words now, but when they die and see that everything is as I have said it to be, they will be forewarned about the Hierarchy. They will know which side they should be on. They will know to seek out the Renegades, rather than submit to the rule of the God-damned Deathlords."

Tape 12, Side 1, 39:59

"I can't deal with this any more. I won't deal with this any more! You haven't done a thing for me! Either I'm insane or there's a dead man in my head, and neither option is particularly acceptable right now. [fist hitting table] Either I get out of here, or the lawyer in the room next to mine is going to help me sue you for everything you're worth, and I won't stop until I have every last dime, nickel and penny you've ever touched-

"It's okay. I've got him. He's lucky I never told him about the vampires. Yes, there are vampires. There are a few other things, too, but I'm not always sure what to make of them.

"I was told last night that the Hierarchy has picked up my trail, but I wanted to come say goodbye. It's been a pleasure working with you, Doc, but now it's time to for me to move on. Just remember when you reach the other side that the Hierarchy are the bad guys.

"See you soon, Doc. Be seeing this gentleman even sooner."

The Cadillac screeched to a halt outside the city dump. Nina watched, confused, as she left the car, box in hand. She strode up to the blond man at the gate and held the sagging box out to him. "Can you take this?" she heard herself ask, and she felt herself smile. The grin felt foreign on her face, as though her mouth were part of a mask she'd put on for the evening.

"Of course, ma'am." He held out his callused hands, and she gave him the box.

"Thank you very much." She went back to her car, got in and turned the key. She drove back home, again at uncomfortable speeds. As she drove, she tuned the radio from her usual classical selection to a loud, alternative station and jacked up the volume. It wasn't until she pulled into her garage again that the strange layer of fuzziness between her and the world fell away, bit by bit. First, sounds sharpened, stabbing into the pain that reappeared behind her eyes. Then, the texture of the steering wheel pushed its bumps into her skin. As she stepped from the car, the alien smile fell from her face like rain.



Chapter Three: The Puppeteers and the Risen



he Puppeteers actively help wraiths who seek to become Risen, and in many cases even encourage interested — or gullible — Restless to undergo the process. While most wraiths believe the Risen to be a legend, all Puppeteers who pass their initiation know the truth. The Risen are quite

real and a very important part of the Guild's agenda.

The official Guild stance is that the key to resisting Oblivion is to make the world, specifically the Skinlands, a better place. The argument goes that if fewer people die in agony, despair or disappointment, fewer souls will go down to the Void immediately upon death to reinforce Oblivion (not to mention those pesky Mortwights). Guild policy also states that if the Skinlands and the Shadowlands were brought closer together, it seems likely that the pull of Oblivion on the Underworld's denizens would not be as strong; all of reality would then serve as a sort of Fetter, anchoring the Shadowlands against the pull of the Void. However, Guild officials are quick to point out that, unlike the Haunters, the Puppeteers do not want the Shroud to disappear altogether. After all, if the Shroud were to go away, then Puppetry would suddenly lose a great deal of its effectiveness.

The official Puppeteer mandate is to protect mortals and to help other wraiths resolve what they left undone in life. Off the record, the message is somewhat different. Few people die satisfied with their lives, and there has never been a force powerful enough to alter this truth. Privately, however, the Guild's leadership instructs new recruits that if a choice arises between a Puppeteer's quest for resolution and the safety of a host, the safety of the host is the less important concern. Nothing underscores this unofficial policy more than the Risen. The primary effects of the Risen's existence are death and destruction, and the Puppeteers, the self-appointed protectors of mortals, actively support the creation of the Risen, in the name of a slim chance at Transcendence.

Transcendence is the carrot that the Guild extends to all wraiths whom it guides through the process of Rising. The Guild's pitch is that only so much can be accomplished through Puppetry; some things simply must be done in person. Some things are also beyond the abilities of a normal mortal body. In such cases, someone has to Rise. Rising is a dangerous proposition; not only does it require the wraith to make a deal with her Shadow, it also strengthens the Shadow and risks drawing the attention of any Hierarchy official in a position to notice. Not surprisingly, though, the Puppeteers contend that becoming a Risen is worth the risks involved. So claims all the publicity, anyway.

The truth is a little different. Few Risen accomplish their goals and Transcend, and most are taken by Oblivion. Guild estimates are that the average Risen kills 14 mortals before it becomes "inoperative," and more than half of those deaths occur when the Shadow is in control of the body. Furthermore, the average Risen causes three to five "accidental" deaths — innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire. Obviously, these figures do not jibe with the official Guild line —
that Risen kill only mortals who truly deserve it — and thus, the information's suppressed. It should also be noted that the Guild has Reapers in its employ, and that every Guild-sponsored Risen is closely monitored.

Boot Camp



f a wraith wishing to Rise can find the Puppeteers and can prove that she is reasonably trustworthy, she is given assistance in her journey back across the Shroud. This policy does leave the Guild open to infiltration by Hierarchy spies. However, because involvement in anything having

to do with the Risen is as good as walking into the nearest soulforge, should the Hierarchy find out about it, the Guild imposes a careful screening process to prevent that sort of catastrophe.

The first thing that a would-be Risen gets is detailed information. She is told all the risks of Rising and warned about the additional strength her Shadow will have in the Skinlands. She is warned about the difficulty of digging out of the grave: in addition to six feet of packed earth, there is often a metal lined coffin and a slab of concrete between her and freedom. She is warned that, should she fail to make her way out, she could be trapped in her own rotting corpse until her Shadow devours her.

If the wraith is still interested, she is taught to Skinride, but she does not learn the more advanced arts. Becoming a Risen also requires that the wraith have some basic knowledge of Embody, Inhabit, or Lifeweb. Normally, it isn't necessary to teach any of these Arcanoi, as most modern wraiths are skilled in multiple Arcanoi, but if it's needed, the Guild arranges for the training.

Of course, candidates for Rising are also screened by members of the Guild who have received surreptitious training in Castigate. These wraiths, unbound by any Pardoners' Oath, freely make use of any information they discover during their intense interrogations of would-be Risen. It is at this stage of the process that Hierarchy spies are usually rooted out.

Finally, if the volunteer checks out and acquires the necessary skills, Guildwraiths escort him to the vicinity of his own body. The Puppeteers stand watch and offer technical assistance while the wraith attempts to Rise, even to the point of fighting delaying actions against interfering Hierarchy patrols. Often, Puppeteers follow fledgling Risen for a few hours or days to help the wraith with the adjustment to her new state. Many Risen are thankful for this assistance, and thus, don't worry too much when they see their progress being dogged by Puppeteer patrols. After all, those guys were helpful before, right?



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Conduits



nce a wraith has the knowledge and talents necessary to become a Risen, he needs a Conduit. A Conduit is a special type of Fetter. It holds the Shadow (or the Psyche, when the Shadow is in control) and also serves as the Risen's link to the Shadowlands. By necessity, the Conduit

needs to be some small item, for the Risen must always have it near him or risk destruction.

Finding a Shadow a Home

Not every wraith who wishes to become a Risen has a suitable Fetter available to use as a Conduit. For centuries, this situation posed a major obstacle to many who sought to Rise. Things changed when the noted Puppeteer known as Lady Joan learned how to use animals as Conduits.

A century before the Third Great Maelstrom, Lady Joan began experimenting with animals. She had begun to Skinride animals as a way of spying on and harassing her murderer, a cousin who spent most of his time hunting and hawking. After her cousin's execution and subsequent transformation into a pomander, Joan continued to explore the Animal Arts and her newfound love of flying. By the time she had earned her place as one of the Guild's leaders, she knew more than any other wraith about the use of Puppetry on animals. It was shortly after the Decree of Breaking that she discovered the art that allowed animals to become Conduits for Risen. At that time, it was unusual for wraiths to be skilled in multiple Arcanoi, but Lady Joan knew a few of the Lifeweb Arts and was able to put that insight to good use. She discovered that if an animal is made a temporary Fetter of a wraith just prior to Rising, a Puppeteer can use the Shadow Possess Art that she developed to make that animal into a Conduit for the Risen.

In the early 17th century, when Lady Joan and her students first began the practice of using animals as Conduits, cats were the animals of choice. They were common in the rat-infested cities and towns of Europe, and their speed and agility made them ideally suited to keeping up with the undead. By mid-century the Guild sought alternatives, however. The overuse of cats as Conduits had reinforced certain unfavorable superstitions, partly because, for whatever reason, most wraiths preferred black animals for use as Conduits. Since those days, the Guild has branched out in the variety of animals it uses as Conduits, though almost all are small mammals or birds. Fish lack the sort of mobility that's desirable in a Conduit, and strange effects are said to occur when Risen experiment with insects or other invertebrates. To date,



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No Such Thing As a Free Lunch...

Although the Guild's actions in helping wraiths to Rise are suspect, they'd be even more so if the Guild performed them for free. One reason the Puppeteers charge a steep price for their help is to cloak their agenda involving the Risen. The other reason is to spare the Guild members from being inundated by wraiths who want to Rise. Even those wraiths who don't go for any of the Guild's special options (animal Conduits, for one) have to pay sometimes exorbitant fees.

The cost can lead to an interesting complication. Most wraiths who still have the key prerequisite for Rising (a reasonably intact body) are relatively young; as such, they haven't had time to acquire large stores of relics, Artifacts or oboli. How, then, do they pay for the Guild's assistance?

The answer is both elegantly simple and deeply disturbing: "future considerations." Observers note that certain Risen, often ones who come to the Guild in dire financial straits, seem to cause excessive property damage and loss of life. Others somehow find a way to smash Fetters of wraiths who, of late, have caused trouble for the Guild. The implications are obvious, but thus far no one has dared speak out about it.

After all, who wants to be the next target?

no one has successfully used a plant as a Conduit (and admitted it, that is).

Almost every city has a Puppeteer who, for a price, can make animal Conduits. The Guild charges a hefty premium for this service, and Lady Joan's contribution is almost as closely guarded as the secret of her whereabouts. If you ever meet Lady Joan, you should remember three things: Don't give her any compliments about the ornament hanging from her belt, don't ask her to make a bird into a Conduit and don't stare if she turns her head 180 degrees.

Conduit Properties

Many of the properties of Conduits are closely guarded secrets in the Guild, but a few things are known by all Guild members. First and foremost is the fact that the Shroud becomes slightly lower within proximity of a Conduit. A single Conduit won't put a dent in the Shroud of your average shopping mall, but under ideal circumstances it might take the Shroud of a nightclub down from a seven to a six. This effect becomes much more noticeable when there are multiple Conduits in an area. Additional Conduits have a cumulative effect on the weakness of the local Shroud. Three Conduits in

Man's Best Fiend

Animal Conduits with Spectres in them are the ASPCA's worst nightmare. Take the case of Dove, once a sweet-tempered German shepherd-Labrador retriever mix. Dove's owner, Jerry, was killed by a drunk driver, but he came back three months later as a Risen, with Dove as his Conduit. After two weeks of Jerry on the loose, damn near every substance abuser in his small town was either dead, in the hospital or in rehab. Jerry, meantime, had a serious problem with a hyperactive Society of Leopold operative who thought the vengeful Risen was a vampire.

Unfortunately for everyone concerned, the Inquisition hunter, Kirk Armstrong, pulled out all of the stops and managed to catch Jerry by surprise with an incendiary device to the face. Dove escaped the fire, but Jerry did not. Jerry's Shadow survived, however, and now Dove is the four-legged embodiment of all the frustration, selfloathing and anger of a yuppie who was always too busy working to meet the woman of his dreams and start a family.

Dove, her name tag still attached to her collar, has had many owners since Jerry's second demise. All have been single women around 30 who lived alone and worked long hours — the type of women Jerry used to date but with whom he never made time to share a serious relationship. Each one, out of kindness, has sheltered Dove, just until the dog's rightful owner turned up, and then kept her when no owner could be found. All these women thought that having a nice, friendly dog would provide them good company with a minimum of fuss.

Dove's first new owner died in a fall down some stairs, two weeks after the dog arrived. The second woman kept Dove outside overnight; she died in her sleep from carbon monoxide poisoning. The third was hit by a car while walking the dog.

Dove is on Owner Number 12, now.



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one place can cause the makeup counter at Macy's to feel like the Bates Motel at midnight.

The Lifeweb Arts Splice Strand and Sever Strand cannot be used on Conduits. An active Conduit is a link between the wraith and her Shadow, and thus contains an integral part of the wraith's soul. As such, it cannot be torn away as a Fetter. Similarly, a Conduit, whether active or not, cannot be used as a temporary Fetter for a wraith; even in an abandoned Conduit, the lingering taint of Oblivion makes this tactic impossible.

If a Risen returns to the Shadowlands, her Conduit remains as a Fetter, but from that point on, the item always has a rather strange aura about it — a hint at its previous strong connection with the wraith's dark side. If the Conduit is an animal, it reverts to its previous existence, but somewhat worse for the wear. Dogs, cats and other animals that have been Conduits are often nervous or vicious creatures afterward. It is not unusual for a former Conduit to run away and try to pursue the wraith whose Shadow it once housed. Abandoned animal Conduits also become more likely to attack humans and other animals, and often, they appear somehow sinister.

Risen often do not return to the Shadowlands. Some may Transcend, but even the most optimistic Puppeteer admits that far more Risen are destroyed. When a Risen fails to return to the Shadowlands, his Conduit is often left behind undamaged, which presents a unique problem for the Guild. As an empty link between the Shadowlands and the Skinlands, the Conduit of a destroyed Risen is a potent source of power that might do substantial damage, should it fall into the wrong hands.

An abandoned Conduit always retains something of the owner's personality and something of her energies, as well. Besides serving to lower the Shroud, Conduits can also be used to affect other former Fetters of the Risen. In the presence of a Conduit, all Arcanos Arts directed at another Fetter of a destroyed Risen are slightly easier (-1 difficulty) to perform. The Conduit and the other objects are not Fetters for the purposes of Lifeweb, nor can the Conduit ever become a Fetter for any other wraith.

From time to time, a Shadow remains in an abandoned Conduit. Such a Conduit, possessed by what is technically a Spectre, attempts to corrupt or kill any being who is unlucky enough to touch it. Conduit Spectres are behind many of the tales mortals tell about cursed items; think twice before accepting Great-aunt Martha's diamond necklace, which she was oh-so-careful to take off before she mysteriously drowned. The admonition that monkeys' paws should likewise be avoided goes without saying.

The Guild has very strict policies on Conduits. All abandoned Conduits are to be retrieved by consorts and brought to a place of safekeeping. The local Guildmaster is to be notified as soon as a Conduit is brought in, and she takes charge of it immediately. If a Conduit is found to house a Spectre, the Conduit is destroyed right away, at any cost. Unfortunately, a few Conduits sometimes slip through the cracks.



Vampires

The Guild often advises Risen to pass themselves off as Vampires. This masquerade serves several purposes. It helps to hide the Risen from both mortal hunters and the Hierarchy - after all, the Masquerade gives vampires plenty of experience at concealing their existence. Also, the sham gives the Risen contacts in the Skinlands who are likely to be helpful, once they believe that the Risen is one of their own. Stolid (or at least reasonably friendly) contacts are a must for a Risen; such contacts help the Risen with his driving Passion, and they also give the wraith someone to talk to besides his Shadow. The importance of the latter advantage cannot be overstated. Finally, this vampire-Risen connection illuminates one of the major flaws in the Dictum Mortuum and the Hierarchy's prohibition against Rising. The Hierarchy seems to forget that there are already undead in the Skinlands who do much more interfering and manipulating that the Puppeteers ever do. While Guildwraiths don't mention this final reason to their Risen protégés, it is often discussed behind closed doors at Guild gatherings.

Make no mistake, the Guild knows a great deal about the Kindred. This knowledge comes from extended observation and extensive Skinrides. Some of the information thus obtained is given to the Risen so they can pass themselves off as vampires with a minimal amount of difficulty. The first and foremost piece of advice that Risen receive is to avoid contact with the Giovanni, who might see them for what they really are. Risen are often told to pass themselves off as

Necromancy

Students of the vampiric Discipline of Necromancy are often avid seekers of abandoned Conduits, though not all of these Necromancers quite comprehend the objects of their pursuit. Giovanni vampires, in particular, chase after leftover Conduits and use them to reduce the difficulty of Necromantic rituals (-1 for each Conduit on site). However, Shadows left behind in Conduits do their best to influence such overeager vampires into disastrously self-destructive actions.

A Conduit containing an abandoned Shadow may attempt to whisper to its possessor. By making a Willpower roll (difficulty 6), the Spectre in the Conduit may make itself audible to its owner — and to no one else. Of course, the definition of "owner" is a loose one; while the master is away, the apprentice may play. Furthermore, the trapped Shadow can offer Shadow Dice and use all of its Thorns. (New Thorns can be purchased at Storyteller discretion.) If the Shadow acquires enough Angst through Shadow Dice, it can attempt a Catharsis on the Conduit's owner. Malkavians. As all Malkavians are insane, any erratic behavior (from a Kindred viewpoint) by the Risen can be attributed to dementia.

The Kindred, for their part, remain largely unaware of this hoax that the Guild regularly instigates upon the undead. Vampires' egocentrism makes them the perfect group for the Guild to exploit; these self-crowned "ultimate puppet masters" can't conceive of anyone pulling *their* strings.

Spectral Risen



ne of the few things more terrifying than a Risen whose Shadow has taken over is a Risen whose Shadow is usually in charge. Shadow-eaten Risen are rare but not unheard of. More's the pity, because when a Spectre clothes itself in a nigh-indestructible body, the consequences are usually

gruesome.

Spectral Risen are almost exclusively of the Doppelganger and Nephwrack Castes, though Mortwights and even Striplings do sometimes Rise. Such Risen usually don't go through the offices of the Puppeteers Guild. Instead, they pull the knowledge they need to Rise from the Spectral hive-mind. Such Spectres often have extremely weak or naive Psyches, for just as a wraith needs the cooperation of his Shadow to Rise, a Spectre needs the agreement of his Psyche.

However, the parallels between normal and Spectral Risen end there. Whereas everyday Spectres are relatively easily discorporated, Spectral Risen can stand up to as much punishment as a normal Risen. Risen Spectres do gain Angst at twice the normal rate, but their Psyches must plug along at normal rates of Pathos gain. And while the Psyche does get to take over the Corpus of a Spectral Risen if the Spectral consciousness is knocked out of the fight, odds are, in that case, the Risen's about to go down for the count anyway.

While loose in the Skinlands, Risen Spectres either seek and destroy the Fetters of wraiths they know, or they go on random killing sprees in hopes of creating Mortwights galore in the process. Oddly enough, in such cases, these Spectres are actually serving the Guild's purpose of forcing awareness of the supernatural onto the general public — but don't tell the Spectres that. As far as they're concerned, it's all just good, dirty fun.

Thankfully, there is a limiting factor on the genesis of Spectral Risen: the unavailability of bodies. Most wraiths don't become Spectres until some months or years have elapsed, which gives their bodies time to rot away to nothingness. Mortwights, while "fresher," often meet such violent deaths that their corpses are unsuitable for re-animation. It is this shortage of corpses, and nothing else, that saves the Skinlands from being overrun by inimical Risen.

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Chapter Four: Pulling Strings

More Uses of Puppetry



uppetry is similar to any other Arcanos, in that its commonly known arts are but a subset of the many types that exist. Over the ages, the Arcanos' practitioners expanded and enhanced it, so that today, Puppetry covers a wide range of arts unguessed at by wraiths outside the Guild.

Below are several arts commonly practiced by members of the Puppeteers Guild. This list is by no means comprehensive, and players and Storytellers should feel free to develop their own specialized uses of the Arcanos.

The Puppeteers Guild jealously protects knowledge of its specialized forms of Puppetry and does not teach these arts to outsiders. Doing so would not only break its monopoly on these powers but would also put the Puppeteers in further danger for spreading their forbidden knowledge (and thus helping more wraiths jump up and down on the shattered bits of the *Dictum*). Any wraith not a member of the Guild who is found to be practicing these arts is likely to have his Fetters destroyed one by one. Puppetry doesn't do you much good when entering the Skinlands makes you melt like a crayon in the sun.

Order of Operations

The Guild has developed these powers into highly specialized arts. Unlike the New or Ancient Arts of other Arcanoi, these unique Puppetry Arts cannot be learned interchangeably with the normal arts. They must be learned in order, not randomly. In other words, in order to learn Shadow Possess, a wraith must first learn Animal Possession, Creature Control, etc. The initial Experience point cost for each of these unique aspects of Puppetry is 4 Experience; otherwise, the cost for advancing in knowledge is the same as for any other Arcanos. A wraith must first know how to Skinride in order to learn these arts.

Animal Arts Skinride Animal also dictates the number of successes another wraith must produce in order to force the first wraith from the possessed animals' bodies. ·· Control Creature wraith who succeeds in Skinriding an animal may attempt to use this art to take control of the animal's actions. As their minds are less sophisticated than humans', animals do not need to be Attuned as consorts for this art to be used on them. As with humans, however, any pain that the host feels feeds back to the Puppeteer as Corpus damage. ficulty equals the local Shroud rating). The wraith's control of his host lasts for a number of scenes equal to the number of successes gained. This art does not bestow any knowledge of animal communication to the Puppeteer, so that a Puppeteer possessing a dolphin or a chimpanzee is not able to communicate with other members of the species. If the Puppeteer wishes to engage in any complex physical activity that's not natural to a human (flying, for example), the Storyteller can ask the player to make a Wits + Athletics roll in order to determine whether the Puppeteer succeeds in adjusting to the complex physical demands of the task. ··· Obliterate Animal

This art is equivalent to Obliterate the Soul for animal hosts. After successfully using Control Creature on several

This art is very similar to the one used to Skinride hu-

mans, as the only difference is that a wraith using Skinride

Animal can slip into the body of a nonsentient being. As with normal Skinriding, the wraith exerts no control over

the animal. However, the wraith can sense whatever the ani-

mal senses. For example, a wraith Skinriding a bloodhound

would be able to take advantage of the hound's keen sense of

smell. This art works only on warm-blooded animals; other

species are too radically different from the once-human wraith for an attempt to be made. Ghouled birds and mammals are

for this roll is normally equal to the local Shroud rating, but

the Storyteller may wish to raise the difficulty if the wraith is attempting to possess a large number of small animals (such

as a pack of rats). The number of successes on the initial roll

This art is the animal equivalent of Rein in the Mind. A

System: The player rolls Manipulation + Puppetry (dif-

System: In order to posses the body of an animal, a wraith's player must roll Dexterity + Empathy. The difficulty

susceptible to this art.

occasions, a Puppeteer can take permanent control of the animal by means of this art. If the wraith leaves the body, the animal lapses into a catatonic state, in which it responds to no stimuli and barely even breathes.

System: Once the wraith has used Control Creature on a particular animal at least five times, she may choose to use Obliterate Animal. The player makes an extended action roll of Strength + Puppetry (difficulty equal the local Shroud rating). If the player achieves a number of successes equal to the number of health levels possessed by the target animal, she succeeds in obliterating its spirit and taking over its body permanently. Two weeks after the wraith forces out the original owner of the animal's body, the host begins to decay. A wise Puppeteer leaves an animal host as soon as the first signs of rot begin to set in, as being nibbled on by carrion eaters is never fun.

This art cost 2 Pathos and 1 Willpower to use, and bestows 1 point of Temporary Angst.

···· Manipulate Herd

This art is poorly understood, even among Puppeteers who have been using it for years. Older Guild members tend to believe animals targeted with this art are somehow mesmerized into serving the wraith's will. Younger wraiths speculate that it has something to do with pheromones or other forms of nonverbal communication. The truth is unknown, but, whatever the case, Control Creature allows its user to call and manipulate other members of the species he is currently possessing. The level of control is minimal; a herd's direction and general demeanor (aggressive, passive, frightened, etc.) can be controlled, but nothing more. This art works best on naturally social animals.

System: In order to use this art, a Puppeteer must be in control of an animal that has been Attuned through at least 10 applications of Control Creature. The player rolls Manipulation + Empathy (difficulty equals the local Shroud rating). The number of successes indicates the number of animals successfully controlled. The Storyteller should make adjustments for numbers according to the particular species the wraith is targeting. For example, five successes might control five wolves, but the same number of successes would suffice for 50 rats.

This art costs 3 Pathos per use.

····· Shadow Possess

This art allows Puppeteers to turn animals into Conduits for Risen. Knowledge of the art is restricted to individuals who have been trusted members of the Guild for some time, and it is taught only by the regional Guildmasters.

System: In order to use Shadow Possess, the Puppeteer must have access to an animal that has been made a tempo-

This art costs 1 Pathos per scene used.

rary Fetter of the target wraith through the use of Lifeweb. In addition, the Shadow of the target wraith must be willing to allow that wraith to become a Risen. The Puppeteer then rolls Charisma + Puppetry (the difficulty is the local Shroud rating or the permanent Angst of the target Shadow, whichever is higher). The number of successes equals the number of turns during which the target wraith may attempt to Skinride the chosen body successfully, in order for the effect to be permanent.

The animal remains the Conduit of the Risen for as long as the Risen survives in the Skinlands. During this period, the Conduit is resistant to damage (it has 10 Health levels). Once the wraith is no longer a Risen, the animal reverts to its former existence. Typically, though, the trauma of serving as a Conduit often causes the animal to exhibit abnormal behavior, such as unexplainable aggression or fear.

This art costs 4 Pathos and bestows 3 points of temporary Angst on the Puppeteer.

Medicinal Arts

The Medicinal Arts are the most prized talents of the Puppeteers Guild, and one of its greatest secrets. If it were widely known that members of the Guild possess these abilities, the Puppeteers would know no peace. Other Guildwraiths undoubtedly would clamor for a share in the knowledge, while Hierarchy troops would see these arts as a total affront to the concept of the *Dictum Mortuum*. Neither prospect is terribly appealing to the Guild's members, so they keep their silence.

These arts also come at great personal cost to the user, and thus, the Guild wishes to keep their existence a secret, lest it be overwhelmed with requests for their use. After all, it's a lot easier being thought of as dilettantes than as essential members of a community. The Puppeteers want no part of what they see the Pardoners endure every day.

Analyze

This art allows the Puppeteer to assess her host's general health and diagnose any specific illnesses that the host might have.

System: The wraith may make a Perception + Medicine roll (difficulty equal to the local Shroud rating), once she succeeds in Skinriding a patient. The number of successes indicates the general level of detail available to the wraith. In order to diagnose illnesses, the wraith must have sufficient medical knowledge (at least •• Medicine)

This art costs 1 point of Pathos per use.

·· Alter Vital Signs

This art permits a Puppeteer to make moderate adjustments in the heart rate, respiration and blood pressure of a

consort. While this ability may seem minor, it can be a great help in critical situations such as stabilizing critically wounded patients or altering the effects of a polygraph test. This art can also be used to induce vomiting, coughing, sneezing and mucus production. Some Guildwraiths suspect Heretical Guild members of using a variation on this art to cause stigmata.

System: The Puppeteer rolls Manipulation + Medicine (difficulty is the target's Willpower). The number of successes indicates how successful the attempt is. For example, one success might be enough to cause the target to sneeze a few times or to cause a slight reduction in her pulse rate. Five successes might allow the wraith to place his target in a state near suspended animation, buying time for mortal medical crews to help a traumatically injured patient.

It is rare that this art can be used on an individual who is not a consort, and doing so costs 1 additional point of Willpower.

This art costs 2 Pathos per use and bestows 2 points of temporary Angst.

···· Healing

This art allows the Puppeteer to heal her host's lost Health levels. This art can be used only on a consort and does not heal aggravated damage.

System: The wraith must successfully Skinride the target and then make a Stamina + Medicine roll (difficulty is the local Shroud). The number of successes equals the number of Health levels that may be healed. A botch indicates that the Puppeteer loses a number of Health levels equal to the number of 1s he rolled in his unsuccessful attempt to heal his consort.

This art costs 2 points of Pathos per Health level healed. The Puppeteer also gains a number of Temporary Angst points equal to the total number of Health levels that the target had lost prior to the healing. Healing may not be used on a single consort more than once per week, and, as it takes a tremendous toll on the Puppeteer, most wraiths are loath to use it unless there is no other choice.

···· faint

Faint allows the Puppeteer to render his target briefly unconscious. In creative hands, this art can be very deadly, but it can also be a blessing to the target if he is in great pain when the art is used. This art does not require that the Puppeteer Skinride his target.

System: The wraith rolls Stamina + Puppetry. If the target is a conditioned consort, the difficulty is the target's Willpower. If the target has previously been Skinridden by the wraith, the difficulty is 9 or the target's Willpower, whichever is higher. If the target has never been Skinridden by the wraith, the difficulty is 10. The number of successes indicates the number of turns for which the target is unconscious. If the target's Health drops to Wounded or lower, she must either be healed or make a successful Stamina roll in order to regain consciousness when the art's normal duration ends.

This art costs 3 Pathos per use and bestows 3 points of Temporary Angst.

····· Marionette

This is another art reserved for the most trusted members of the Guild. No one is certain how Marionette came to be a grouped among the Medicinal Arts, for it has nothing to do with healing. However, some Puppeteers theorize that the finite control over consciousness and bodily functions that the Medicinal Arts teach is what allows Puppeteers to use this most potent art.

Marionette is exactly like Rein in the Mind, with one very important distinction: In this case, the target's own unique abilities can be used by the invading wraith. If the Puppeteer takes over a rocket scientist, rocket science is suddenly within his grasp. If he takes over an Olympic athlete, that body's finely honed athleticism is at his disposal. What makes this art truly devastating, however, is that it can also be used on all denizens of the World of Darkness. A Puppeteer could possess a vampire and use Disciplines such as Dominate and Celerity, or possess a mage and turn loose vulgar magick to the point where Paradox backlash is inevitable. A supernatural target is aware of what's going on, but the average mortal "drowses" during her possession and later rationalizes any abnormal behaviors. System: The wraith must Skinride her target over several weeks and become familiar with his abilities and his mind. The wraith then rolls Manipulation + Puppetry (difficulty equals the target's Willpower). The number of successes gained is equal to the number of scenes for which the wraith may fully possess the target. An Awakened target may resist by spending 1 Willpower point and succeeding on a Willpower roll (difficulty 7). Each success he gains negates one of the wraith's successes

This art costs 5 Pathos and 1 Willpower per use and bestows 2 points of Temporary Angst on the user.

Using Puppetry on Supernatural Creatures



o member of the World of Darkness is immune to Puppetry, though certain supernatural beings have distinct advantages when it comes to resisting a Puppeteer's influence. Any Awakened being who becomes aware that he is being meddled with can spend a Willpower point and make a

Willpower roll (difficulty 7) to resist the particular use of Puppetry that he senses. In most cases, arts like Skinride, Sudden Movement and Master's Voice can't be anticipated, and there-

Tactics

Wraiths — particularly Puppeteers — and vampires don't always get along too well. However, on the rare occasions when they do, a vampire/Puppeteer combo can be devastating. Should a vampire need to sneak a little extra firepower into a meeting, he can have his Puppeteer ally Skinride him into the situation. This gets the wraith past both ghostly and vampiric guards who are watching for funny business. Then, when things get serious, the wraith can climb out to do that voodoo that he does so well and provide an unexpected edge for his vampiric ally.

On the other hand, uses of Puppetry on someone who has committed Diablerie can produce dangerous effects. If a diabolist gets himself invaded by a Puppeteer, the Storyteller should roll the host's Willpower (difficulty 8). If he succeeds, the personality of the *Diablerized* vampire immediately rises to take control of the host (if the vampire has snacked on more than one Cainite, Storyteller discretion as to which soul comes forth). This new/old personality has access to all of the Disciplines and Abilities he possessed in "life," which can spell bad news for the Puppeteer if he wakes up the soul of a long-gone Cappadocian.



fore cannot be resisted. However, the Awakened being can be on the lookout for repeated attempts from that point on.

Vampires

Most vampires are little better than mortals at resisting the effects of Puppetry. Only those Kindred with level 4 Auspex or higher may sense the presence of a wraith hitching a Skinride and, thus, anticipate the actions of the unwanted passenger. To become aware of a potential Skinrider, the vampire rolls Perception + Empathy (difficulty equals the local Shroud rating); successes indicate that the vampire is aware of the presence of a potentially hostile being.

If a wraith tries to influence a Dominated individual, she must win a contested Willpower roll against the controlling vampire, if her goal is to counteract a direct order. Both the Blood Bond and Presence, on the other hand, are easily countermanded by the use of Puppetry — for a little while, at least. (Note: Any attempt to force a Blood Bound individual — or animal — to do something that directly countermands the Bond is at +3 difficulty.)

Some of the Puppeteers' reputation for weird mannerisms may come from failed attempts to Skinride Malkavians. A botch on a Puppetry roll involving a Malkavian indicates that the Puppeteer picks up part the vampire's Derangement (at Storyteller's discretion).

Werewolves

Garou aren't known for their subtlety, which is why a werewolf often won't detect a passenger Skinriding her until it's too late. On the other hand, if a Garou uses Sense Wyrm while a wraith is Skinriding her, she may notice the passenger, especially if the wraith has more than 4 points of temporary Angst. A Garou thus alerted has a much better chance of resisting arts such as Sudden Movement and Master's Voice. The Rite of Cleansing is effectively an exorcism ritual, and it expels a Skinriding wraith instantly.

Mages

Most mages don't have advantages beyond what any other Awakened creature has when it comes to dealing with Puppeteers. Like a Garou using Sense Wyrm, a Mage with knowledge of the Spirit Sphere may make an Arete roll to notice the presence of a wraith Skinriding him. If the mage has at least two levels in Spirit, she may also spend 1 Willpower point and make a contested Willpower roll in order to drive out the wraith.



Changelings

Hopping into Changelings is frowned upon by the Guild as a particularly unwise practice. Sluagh, in particular, are nearly impossible to possess; they can sense wraiths and are thus forewarned against them. Most fae *can* be easily possessed when they are in their mortal seemings, but are almost impossible (difficulty for all rolls is 9) to possess when in fae mien. It should be noted that the use of Marionette does not give the Puppeteer access to a fae's birthrights.

Possession of the fae in their faerie seemings tends to have nasty side effects. A wraith who Skinrides a fae will automatically suffer from severe nightmares the next time he attempts to Slumber, which robs him of any benefit he might have gained from the rest. If he persists in trying to Skinride the fae, the nightmares rapidly get worse and worse, bestowing 1 point of temporary Angst after the third attempt (and 1 additional for each attempt thereafter).

Merits and Flaws



here are certain advantages and disadvantages that are peculiar to the Puppeteers as a result of their extensive use of Puppetry or of the Guild activities in which they are involved. Some of these Merits and Flaws could conceivably be possessed by non-Guild members, but such quirks

rarely manifest outside the Guild.

These Merits and Flaws are intended to be used along with those in the **Wraith Players Guide**. Up to seven points each of Merits and Flaws may be assigned during character creation. Mutually exclusive Merits and Flaws should not be taken. For example, it is unlikely that a wraith possessing the Merit: **Discreet** would develop the Flaw: **Outrageous Accent**.

Outrageous Accent (I point Flaw)

Most Puppeteers have developed a few verbal tics and affected mannerisms as a result of frequent Skinriding. Many also find that it takes several hours to lose the accent of a consort whom they Skinride often, and that they can never manage to shake their hosts' mannerisms completely. Wraiths with this flaw, however, suffer speech problems in spades.

Perhaps you botched a Skinriding roll rather badly or went along for the trip with a host who was using "recreational pharmaceuticals." Whatever the cause, you are stuck with a leftover silly accent that refuses to go away. You may sound like Porky Pig, or perhaps you'd fit in well with the cast of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. The one constant is that the

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accent you must employ is emphatically *not* a naturally occurring one.

You may spend 1 Willpower point or succeed on a roll of Wits + Linguistics (difficulty 7) to overcome the effects of this Flaw and speak normally. The number of successes indicates the number of scenes you may spend free of the accent; spending 1 Willpower keeps you free of it for a single scene.

Enemy Consort (2 or 4 point Flaw)

One of your hosts is aware of the fact that you have been taking over her body, and she does not like it one bit. If this is a 2-point Flaw, the consort in question is a mortal who just happens to be particularly sensitive and astute. She knows what is going on, but there is not much she can do about it, other than try to report it to ghost-hunters or make talk show appearances (both of which might get you in trouble).

If this is a 4-point Flaw, the consort is some type of supernatural creature that you had the bad judgment to Skinride against her will. She has probably taken up ghost-hunting, at least as far as you are concerned, and may have contacted other supernaturals in the area concerning your activities.

Gender Bender (3 point Flaw)

You are uncomfortable Skinriding mortals who are not of the same gender as you. All difficulties on Puppetry arts are increased by two if you try to use them on members of the opposite sex. You also have certain...problems when you possess hosts of the "inappropriate" gender, such as going into the wrong restroom, engaging in "unmanly" or "unladylike" activities, and so forth. Observers who make a successful Wits + Alertness roll (difficulty 9) may notice that your mannerisms and movements are not gender-appropriate at all times when you are in full control of a gender-bent host's body.

Racism (3 point Flaw)

In life, you were something of a bigot, and this character trait has returned to haunt you in death. You find it very difficult to Skinride anyone who is not of the same race that you were, and you must make a Willpower roll (difficulty 7) before Skinriding anyone who is not of the same general racial type as you. All other Puppetry arts are +2 difficulty to perform on hosts who do not belong to your racial category.

Note: This sort of Flaw can be extended to religious affiliations, sexual orientations, or anything else the Storyteller deems appropriate.

Sticky Plasm (5 point Flaw)

You have a slight problem with Skinriding. You may be very good at it, but for some reason, you have trouble separating yourself from your host. When it's time for you to depart, you literally have to tear yourself away, and you lose 1 Temporary Corpus level each time you do. The effect can be overcome for well-Attuned consorts if you make a successful Stamina roll (difficulty 6) when you pull out, but, even in these cases, parting is always painful.

Friendly Consort (2 point Merit)

One of your consorts is aware of your activities and is open to your presence. He may be a New Ager who is interested in "channeling," a Yuppie who is just bored and welcomes the change of pace or perhaps even a normal human who's compassionate and eager to help you. Whatever the case, the difficulty for all Puppetry rolls affecting this person is equal to the local Shroud rating, rather than the target's Willpower. The one exception is Obliterate the Soul; if you attempt to use this art, the target realizes that something is amiss and resists to the best of his ability.

Risen Contact (2 point Merit)

You helped a wraith become a Risen, and now he roams the Skinlands. He has his own matters to attend to, of course, but he is grateful for the help you gave him and is willing to do you favors that he can handle more easily than you can. This connection can also be a liability, because aiding the Risen usually means you end up as bric-a-brac, should the Hierarchy catch you. However, a lot of wraiths think that having a nigh-indestructible killing machine on their side is worth the risk.

Discreet (3 point Merit)

For some reason, you've managed not to pick up any of those annoying vocal tics and mannerisms that normally mark your kind. You don't know why, but you've managed to resist the curse that makes many Puppeteers take virtual vows of silence. When the local Hierarchy troops come looking for Renegade Skinriders, nine times out of 10 they miss you, just because you don't fit the profile.

Confessor (3 point Merit)

Normally, Pardoners shun Puppeteers on the grounds that Puppetry flouts the *Dictum Mortuum* to a degree that practically invites Oblivion. You, however, have a friend in the

Friends in High Places (3 - 6 point Merit)

You have friends who know what you are and who have a vested interest in keeping you off the scrap heap. Maybe you did them some favors in the past, or possibly you rendered them a service that might seriously harm their reputations if it should come to light. Regardless of the cause, you have some protection from Hierarchy persecution. For 3 points, you might have a local gang of Renegades or a Heretic cult protecting you from Hierarchy patrols. Four points might mean that you did a favor for a Marshal or a high-ranking member of another Guild — and that he remembers what you did for him. Six points might indicate that an Anacreon owes you a favor and very much wants to keep the matter a secret.

New Archetypes



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oldly going places few wraiths have gone before, Puppeteers tend to attract some of the more...unusual personalities in the Shadowlands. Here are a few new character Archetypes that, while not unique to the Guild, certainly cluster there more often than they do elsewhere.

Addict

The Addict is always going overboard. One taste of a new drug and she's hooked. One sampling of a new pleasure and it's a habit. On the other hand, once she's gotten hooked, she's hell on wheels if she can't get a fix. Before long, feeding the cravings is more important than anything else, which can lead to catastrophe — or other interesting situations.

--- Regain Willpower whenever you temporarily sate your addictions and, by doing so, help to achieve your other goals.

Megalomaniac

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The Megalomaniac wants pure, unadulterated power. She wants to control her friends, her Circle, her fellow Legionnaires and her neighbors. Once she realizes what a big, wide world it is out there, she'll move on to larger goals. Perhaps she'll make a play for an Anacreon's post — or for a Deathlord's mask. Power is the only goal she has, however, and she'll move heaven and earth to get it.

 Regain Willpower when your actions result in your gaining control over a person, group or situation.

Dependent

The Dependent needs people. She feels worthless if others aren't showing her how much they care. A wraith with this Nature gets involved in activities (even dangerous ones) or learns new skills just to look good to her friends. She's afraid to disagree with the people she respects, and she alters her opinions to match theirs. The Dependent has a great deal of difficulty standing up to anyone, and she is often taken advantage of by people who pick up on this failing.

- Regain Willpower when you get someone to show approval of you or your accomplishments.

Artifacts

Hoodoo Doll (Level 2 Relic)



Hoodoo Doll isn't necessarily a doll. That name is simply the one some of the more flippant members of the Guild use for a particular type of relic often helpful in Skinriding. Technically, a Hoodoo Doll is any relic created by a still-living mortal. Possession of this relic gives the wraith a

-2 difficulty on all attempts to Skinride the relic's creator. Often, a Puppeteer does, in fact, try to alter such a relic into a likeness of the targeted mortal. In many cases, these modifications are disturbingly successful.



Marionette Strings (Level 5 Relic)

Only six of these items are known to exist, and every Skinlands resident on the planet should be thankful for that fact. By spending 1 point of Willpower and whispering the name of her target, a wraith can thereafter use the "tuned" Marionette Strings to affect her victim with any Puppetry art from anywhere, at any time. The effect of this relic even reaches through the Tempest or around the world.

Only one target can be selected at a time. This relic looks like an intricately worked puppeteer's crosspiece, with silver strings that dangle off into nowhere.

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bservant wraiths (those successful on a Perception + Awareness roll, difficulty 6) can easily spot Puppeteers' hosts in a crowd. The telltale signs are:

Odd blurring or tearing of the mortal's aura

• The mortal's seeming immu-

nity to both Deathsight and Lifesight

• A temporary reduction in the Shroud rating around the formerly possessed individual

• In cases of Attunement, the appearance of the Skinriding Puppeteer's deathmarks (visible only to wraith eyes) as faint traceries on the mortal's skin

While these effects have no real impact on the mortal thus affected, they do stand out to watchful wraiths. As such, the vigilant can use the knowledge that a particular mortal has been Skinridden to their own advantage — either by waiting for the Puppeteer to come back to a favorite consort and mounting an ambush, or perhaps by using this evidence to build a case against a particular wraith for Dictum Mortuum violations.

Consorts and Fetters

Certain Puppeteers do get extremely attached to their favorite consorts, enough that the consort becomes a 1point Fetter. Such cases often end in tragedy, particularly if the Puppeteer is forced by circumstances to use Obliterate the Soul on the Fettered consort. Nevertheless, wraiths sometimes can't help forming emotional bonds with the mortals they Skinride. After sharing so much of a host's life, many wraiths make the mistake of becoming emotionally involved with a specific host. While, in the short term, this arrangement can make the experience of Skinriding even more fulfilling than normal (particularly if a Passion involving the host develops as well) and can make Slumbering easier, in the long term, being metaphysically linked with someone who was once nothing more than a cheap thrill isn't always the best idea.



Chapter Five: Behind the Puppet Show Curtain

This is someone else's story Someone that I never knew This is someone else's body Am I getting through to you? — Oingo Boingo, "Skin"

The Puppeteers can be anyone they want, anyone at all. Their mutability makes them hard to pin down into something as static as a series of templates. Still, collected here for your amusement are five of the ones who were moving slowly enough for us to catch them. Use, abuse or refuse them as you see fit — they're likely enough to change who they are shortly, anyway.

Chapter Five: Behind the Puppet Show Curtain

Nightmare Author

Relics: Green pen, Red broomstick skirt, black silk shirt, silver jewelry

Quote: "I will show you the lines of Hell on an unmarked page." Pretty good, huh? Just came up with it myself, actually.

Prelude: You were a creator — your work was your life, not your hobby. Without it you were...undefined. You wrote dark things, things that made your friends turn pale, and it felt so good. You published poetry and stories in horror magazines, and you got occasional gigs singing with your metal band at a local club. You sent copies of the work you published to your parents — not to make them proud, but so you could watch them squirm as they tried to come up with something nice to say. You and your little sister always got a good laugh out of it later.

You were good, and you knew it. Someone was going to notice you soon. You'd be a famous singer, or maybe a novelist, and everyone would know your name. You'd give the whole world a nightmare to match the ones that devoured you at night. One day, you finally got your chance. An agent contacted you about your stories and offered to buy you lunch. You were flying high; adrenaline was burning a hole in your stomach. You were ready for fame. You swaggered into the subway station and shoved aside the homeless man who asked you for a dollar. You stood on the platform and tapped your foot until the train came. As it rushed toward you, you saw the homeless man from the corner of your eye. He grabbed your arm and shoved, and the train slammed into you.

A Reaper picked you up and handed you off to the Puppeteers Guild. They wanted to train you and to put your talent to good use undermining their government. You didn't care one way or another about their political problems, but, as a payoff, they were willing to teach you to use the hands of the living to do your writing. *That* interested you, and you agreed. You got to work again, but now your words spoke of the horrors of the Hierarchy. At first, you fed most of your work to your sister, hoping to experience fame vicariously through her, but, after a while, you realized that you didn't want to draw the Hierarchy's attention to her. So you spread out your affections and gradually collected a circle of talent in the living world.

Concept: You're a very dangerous thing — a writer with both a cause and a nightmare. Fame can't be far behind. Neither can martyrdom.

Roleplaying Notes: Be arrogant. Your talent makes you superior to others, whose imprecision with language drives you nuts. You're always tired, because you never Slumber well. You see the horror of the world in your dreams, and you're determined to show it to everyone else. Hurt people — terrify them if possible — when you can get away with it. You tell yourself it's for their own good, but you're a closet sadist and the door is opening.



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Heretic Legionnaire

Quote: I betrayed God. There's no worse crime than that, and I shall pay for all eternity.

Prelude: You taught religion classes at a small Catholic school and lived with your young wife. Life wasn't perfect — money was always short, and you and your wife had some bad fights at times — but it was good enough. Then the war came. You honestly believed it was your duty to serve your country, and so, you enlisted to fight. You were killed by a sniper's bullet less than six months later. You were given little time to contemplate the disparity between your teachings and the reality of death; you and a couple of soldiers from your unit barely escaped the Jade Emperor's Reapers on the other side. You fled and eventually reached Stygian territory, where you were drafted into the Grim Legion.

After you settled into the Legion routine, you finally had time to think. You decided you must be in Purgatory, where you clearly needed to work off your sin of putting patriotism before God. Obviously, fighting for the Legions was not the right way to do so, and you told your superiors you couldn't serve in the ranks anymore. They transferred you to a desk job, but it wasn't good enough. You wanted to be able to practice your religion openly, and the Hierarchy wasn't going to go for that.

Eventually, you found your wife. She was alive and well, but you discovered that she had birthed your son while you were away at war. When she'd learned you were dead, she'd given him up for adoption; she'd decided she didn't want to care for him on her own. Rage consumed you, and you vowed to find your son. While you were still looking, your wife remarried. Love and anger still warred

within you, and she then became the focus of your attention more than ever before. You were so determined to be with her again that you learned how to Skinride her new husband. You had thought her lost to you forever, and the pleasure of being with her again was staggering. You had to find someone to teach you more, and eventually, through friends of friends of friends, you found your way to the Puppeteers Guild.

You recently made contact with a Heretic who shares your views on religion and the Hierarchy. He promised to get you safely out of Stygia, but he wants you to stay where you are a little longer, so you can feed information to him and his people. You're glad to finally be able to help a fellow servant of God, but you don't know how much longer you can stay where you are without snapping.

Concept: You gave up your love and your life fighting in a war that didn't belong to you. It's time to pay for that, and everything you do is penance for your sins. You need to get away from the Hierarchy before it pushes you over the edge; before long, either you or your Shadow will betray you to the Unlidded Eye.

Roleplaying Notes: Play the good soldier for now, but you'll become increasingly upset and reluctant to carry out your orders if you don't get out soon. Spend any free time looking for your son and keeping an eye on your wife. Struggle between love for your wife and rage at her for giving up your son. See any bad things that happen to you as your just due — you're a martyr suffering in the name of religion.

Relics: A small gold cross you keep hidden under your uniform, sidearm, Legion identification and clearance papers

Name: Heretic Legionna	aire	Nature: Fanatic		life: Teacher	
layer:		Demeanor: Follower		Death: War	
hronicle:		Shadow: Martyr		Regret: Put country b	efore God
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Quote: Life is a network, and I have the root password.

Prelude: Your father wanted you to be a doctor, but you loved computers. Nobody on the reservation thought you could do it, but you picked up some scholarships and went to Cal Tech. You majored in computer science and graduated with an almost-perfect GPA; you made it by keeping out of trouble. Your father wanted you to use your education to help your people, but you wanted to do something for yourself. You got a job as a system administrator for a large financial company — and found out what you'd been missing.

Power.

You liked power. You had only a corner of one company under your control, but you milked it for all it was worth. No one else understood the computer system, so you got away with a lot. You ordered what equipment you wanted, rushed accounts for people you liked, delayed them for people you didn't, and even changed a couple of files when that bastard Greeley complained about you. He was gone within the week. You had a wonderful secretary in your group, Warren. He taught you a lot about dealing with bureaucracy, and, in return, you slipped him some extra storage space and equipment that just got "lost." You kept an autographed poster of Gillian Anderson on your door and a copy of Women in Technology prominently displayed on your shelf, and everything was coming up roses.

You were walking home from the office late one night when you heard a scraping sound behind you, and then, everything went dark. You never knew what happened. You were Reaped by a slaver and sold to a group of Renegades looking for reinforcements.

The thing was, you couldn't stay away from the Quick. With the backing of your new bosses, you easily manipulated the employees of your old company, especially with Warren's unwitting help. However, you got distracted one time too often and your Renegades eventually traded you off to the Puppeteers Guild. One day, one of the higher-ups said there was a desk position open under a Deathlord, and they needed someone to go in undercover. You volunteered. You wanted to climb higher in the Guild, and the best way you could think of to get there quickly was to prove yourself invaluable through assignments like this one.

While working for the Beggar Lord, you discovered that the Deathlords have been influencing deaths in the Skinlands

in order to gain more souls. You even came to suspect that the Beggar Lord may have had something to do with your own death, and now, you're debating what to do about it. Maybe the Guild will help you; maybe you'll have to force the Guild's hand. Time will tell.

> Concept: You're a budding megalomaniac, whose mission is more about leverage than about helping your friends. You collect as much information as you can and pass it back to the Guild, but it's much more satisfying to get involved yourself. Manipulating one company doesn't take that much skill, but manipulat-

> > ing the Deathlords....

Roleplaying Notes: You're a charming, if occasionally haughty bureaucrat. It's worth sitting at a desk if that's what's required to ascend the next few rungs on the Guild ladder, but you itch to get back under the skin of the living. Nothing beats the feeling of watching the lives of the Quick fall into the patterns you've created.

> Relics: Eyeglasses, pepper spray, Programmer Barbie™

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Puppetry Junkie

Quote: I swear, this is the last Skinride, then I'm off it. Just wanna feel the rush one more time, that's all. I swear it....

Prelude: You were a prostitute and small-time thief. All that mattered was making enough money to support your heroin addiction and your baby girl. The life didn't bother you that much; you did what you had to do in order to get by. You'd never done anything big — no grand theft, no murder – but you knew you could do anything you had to do. God knows, there were people you'd seen who deserved killing.

It seemed particularly ironic when you were arrested, tried and convicted for a brutal murder that you honestly hadn't committed. The old "thoughts are a sin too" catechism came back to haunt you. You laughed all the way to death row, and even the priest couldn't figure out why. You weren't laughing when they gave you the lethal injection, though, or when your eyes closed for the last time and your heart stopped.

A Reaper brought you to the Citadel and left you there in the Silent Legion's tender care. You tried to fit in for a while, but all you could think about was heroin. You knew you shouldn't need it, but that didn't matter. You didn't just need it, you *wanted* it. You were in love with it. When you were alive, there was no other feeling as good — not sex, not money, not sunshine, not music. Now that you were dead, it was more true than ever. Everything in the Shadowlands was dull, muted, damped, muffled. You wanted to feel again! You'd rather fall to Oblivion than live in this half-world.

After a little experimentation, your daughter's fosterparents were easy enough to control. Once again, you felt the wind on your face. You even deliberately burned the wife's hand in a candle flame, just to feel the sensation. It was wonderful — but it wasn't enough. You started seeking out junkies and addicts and riding them. It was glorious; you were home again.

Concept: You're a junkie through and through. In life, you cared only about heroin and your daughter. Not much has changed, except that Skinriding itself has become your new addiction.

Roleplaying Notes: You want your fix. You want to wear a new body and feel a new drug in its veins. Care for your daughter when possible, but sensations distract you. Pay lip service to your Legion and, if they find you, to the Guild, but you don't give a damn about the details.

Relics: Needle, length of rubber hose, blackened spoon



Name: Puppetry Junkie		Nature: Addk	-+		Life: Junkie	
Player:		Demeanor: Bo			Death: Erecution	
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Flimflam Artist

Quote: Come on, where else are you gonna find soulforged stuff like this so cheap? Hey, I'm cool with the Anacreon — no way do you get in trouble for toting this.

Prelude: You hated the idea of getting a job just like everyone else's. You weren't cut out to be a desk jockey. You didn't want to punch a time clock or keep regular hours. You didn't want to pay taxes. Instead, you moved from place to place and conned people out of their money. You sold nonexistent real estate. You convinced investors to back your café, your retail computer store, your gaming company and your cookbook club, and you ran out with the money every time. Keeping one step ahead of the law was a game you played with skill and precision.

It was a woman who tripped you up, in the end: You slept with the wrong man's wife and earned yourself a faceful of buckshot for your efforts. The sucker didn't even give you a chance to buy him off!

Your introduction to the Shadowlands was quick and messy. The Hierarchy picked you up. At first, you were sure you'd ended up on the wrong side of the law at long last: They just gave you a job and forgot about you. It was a desk job, and it was utterly frustrating. To keep yourself occupied, you spent more and more time watching the Quick, and you found a new pleasure in Skinriding them and touching the world with their fingers.

Your Marshal found out about your extracurricular activities, somehow. Instead of throwing you to the forges, however, she offered you a new job. She needed people to track down the Puppeteers and fight them with their own weapons. She needed someone who could correct the damage the Guild did in the living world.

You jumped at the chance. You'd be able to keep your own hours, work in the field, and continue some of your Skinriding, all with the blessing of the government. You wouldn't have to worry anymore about the law. You were more than happy to turn in a few worthless Renegades for such privilege.

Concept: You're a Hierarchy Puppeteer. You use your skills to catch Puppeteers and turn them over to the forges. Conning Renegades is generally more dangerous than conning little old ladies out of their life savings, but that just makes existence a touch more interesting.

Roleplaying Notes: You hate regular schedules and routines. Everything should be new and interesting, fresh and constantly exciting. The best thing about your job is that it takes you to places you'd never see otherwise. You feel little or no guilt about betraying the confidence of the Renegades you befriend; it's their own fault for believing you.

Relics: Three-piece suit, soulforged stiletto, notepad, pen

Guildbook: Puppeteers

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Name: Flim-flam Arti	st	Nature: Conniver		life: Con Artist	
Player:		Demeanor: Mediato		Death: Murder	
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Punches and Judys

And if those who think you are worthless contradict you, and if those whom you call your friends abandon you, and if they want to destroy you because of your precious ideas: what is this obvious danger, which concentrates you inside yourself, compared with the cunning enmity of fame, which makes you innocuous by scattering you all around? — Rainer Maria Rilke, "[Ibsen]" (Stephen Mitchell, translator)

Richard McConnaughey

I wanted to do good for people. I knew I couldn't fix all of the world's ills, but at the same time, I knew that I could at least make a dent in them.

It started when I was young; television was just becoming popular — going from a luxury to the beginning of a commonality — and I was fascinated by this new medium's possibilities.

I began with puppets. At first, they were a means to an end (that end being "getting on the air somehow"), but they quickly became a passion overriding everything else. I had a tiny show, twice a day on a local station. People noticed, and before long, I graduated to commercials. I created some of the first entertaining advertisements. People noticed me, but it wasn't enough. I wanted to put a smile on everyone's face. There were things I was willing to do for my art that I'd never have done otherwise. I did everything I could for my little shows and commercials: writing the skits, directing, painting the backgrounds. I wanted to do things no one else had ever done. To me, it wasn't work — it was beauty. My wife and I eventually had several wonderful children. Observing them, finding out what they liked and how they learned, was what convinced me to work on a true children's show.

Some of my friends in the Guild tell me I reached children all over the world, that my work made a difference. I only hope they're right. With the talents I collected, I made a movie with both puppets and real actors, and I made them do things no one had ever dreamed of before. More movies and shows followed, and I managed to put smiles on the faces of millions of children (not to mention a few grownups, as well). I even dared to hope that, when I died, the world would be a little better than I had found it.

One day, I checked myself into a hospital. I felt a little ill, but I didn't expect anything serious; Lord knew I'd fought off bugs before. This time was a little different, though — hours later, I was dead, and a slaver Reaped me. He didn't get far with me, though, as he was attacked almost immediately by a Puppeteer who took me with her instead. Along the way, she told me what a difference my work had made to her as she was growing up. It was humbling, somehow.

So many years of manipulating puppets, cameras, and people's emotions paid off on this side of the Shroud, I found Puppetry to be a natural extension of my life's work; people were my new medium. I didn't care about Guild politics, at first; I just wanted to do my work. I watched over my company from the Shadowlands and helped out my children an d

old friends when I thought they might need a hand. Then, someone in the Guild decided I could be doing something more useful, more productive. Around the same time, my company hired someone new who used a few too many words like "profit" and "marketability." It became obvious he didn't care about the vision that had made my work great. I couldn't leave my company then.

I was going to make a simple protest. I was just going to refuse to leave what was important to me. Somehow, it nearly turned into a civil war, with factions forming; people who'd grown up to my work backed me, and some others backed the Guild official. In the end, the official was ousted, and I got stuck in his place mostly due to apathy on the part of his supporters, I suspect, rather than the number of mine. It wasn't what I wanted, but it did get me the results I'd wished for. I was more or less in charge of my own actions, and I even had some influence over other people's work. The first thing I did was to have someone in the company manipulated into firing the new marketing man. I have more responsibilities now, but more control as well, and it's worth it.

I don't care what the Hierarchy says; you can't tell me making people happy is a crime or that making the world a better place is wrong. I've ignored the rules all my life, doing things they said couldn't be done. I don't intend to stop now. Some in the Guild tell me I'm a fool, that what I'm doing can only lead to my own destruction, but what else can I do? I have an obligation to do what I can for the children.

Brigitte Gebauer

Spensett 9

Let me ride on the Wall of Death one more time You can take your chances on the other rides But this is the nearest to being alive Oh, let me take my chances on the Wall of Death

- Richard Thompson, "Wall of Death"

In my living days, I was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud. I even studied under him, for a year; the man was a genius (even if he did have an obsession with sex). As part of my student work, I experimented with the process of psychoanalysis and discovered that I *liked* it. I *liked* listening to people's innermost thoughts. I *liked* knowing what they did when no one else was looking. I *liked* hearing about their perversions and their sicknesses. I would listen to their accounts and dream that I was the one doing the things they spoke of. It was the next best thing to being there.

It all came crashing down far too soon, of course. I died of pneumonia, an inglorious death. A patrol from the Skeletal Legion reaped me, and I was taken back to Vienna's Necropolis for processing. I worked at a Hierarchy desk job,

Punches and Judys

but I couldn't stay away from the Quick. I loved being able to watch them when they were alone; it was better than listening to it. Then, I met someone who said he could teach me how to get even closer. He said I could watch from the inside, and even feel what the Quick were experiencing. I thought I'd found Heaven; I'd be able to live other people's perversities. The only catch was that I'd have to turn on the Hierarchy and give the Puppeteers Guild any information I could on the bureaucrats. Well, *that* was an easy choice to make.

Joining the Puppeteers Guild was like going home. It was a whole organization of deviants and voyeurs. I understood these people — they were a lot like me, and I'd been trained to study and treat them. Even better, they were fairly easy to manipulate. I rose through the ranks with ease, while spending my spare time Skinriding serial killers, rapists, child molesters, junkies and every brand of pervert I could find. I spent my time in the Guild learning what made the members tick and what their buttons were. My experience with psychoanalysis had made me a good listener, and what people wouldn't tell me themselves, I could find out through observation and listening to others.

The Guild political structure is a tough one to figure out; it resembles disorganization, but that's mostly a ruse. I've convinced, helped, blackmailed and fought my way up it over the past several decades, but the view is no less confusing from where I sit now. It's hard to tell, but I don't think I'm all that far from the top anymore. I'm maybe one or two levels below that group of counselors who serve Marionette herself, and I plan to be a member of that group by the end of the next decade. I'm sure I could do it sooner, but that would mean curtailing my explorations among the Quick, which I have no desire to do.

Speaking of joyriding the Quick, I've found that Skinriding the dregs of humanity isn't enough anymore. My tastes have—ahem—degraded, and the small perversities don't quite cut it. It can be hard to find a rapist or murderer on short notice. I don't have the time, these days, to follow likely prospects around. I have a few helpers who find people for me, but even that takes me only so far — and I'm not sure how much I can trust my helpers. My Shadow's made a few good points about that, you know.

These days, I help things along: I find people who've slid a bit down the path to corruption and give them a helping shove the rest of the way. I've broken a few people this way, but as far as I can tell, I'm just speeding up a natural process. It goes against what I was taught, but I long ago gave up heeding my upbringing in favor of satisfying my tastes.

the ponet 97

Rah! Rah! Rasputin! Lover of the Russian Queen! There was a cat who really was gone! Rah! Rah! Rasputin! Russia's greatest love machine! It was so bad how he carried on!

— Boney M., "Rasputin"

Good day. I am Rasputin. Of course, you have heard others make that claim. You may have laughed and said, "No, Rasputin is dead," as if that would stop me. You may have said, "No, I've met Rasputin, and you are not he." You may have been right, but you were probably wrong, because I have been many people. I am everywhere!

What, you find that hard to believe? You laugh like that bunch of stupid Cossacks who strutted and pranced in Tsar Nicky's court. They thought poison would stop me. When that didn't work, they thought bullets would stop me. When that didn't work, they thought hitting me over the head and dumping me in a frozen river would stop me. Hah! That only made it easier. No one can stop Rasputin now, because Rasputin can be anyone! Not just mortals either, no! In my travels. I have been half-adozen different vampires, three mages, four ghouls, seven gypsies, and more mortals than I can count. It is most amusing to get two clans of vampires convinced that the infamous Rasputin is one of them. You should see the arguments!

So, where to begin? My life as a mortal is written about in all the history books. Such scandalous things they write there! They say I was mad, insane, fanatical. It just goes to show that you cannot trust scholars; they never know a true genius when they see one. If only I could have continued to advise the Tsarina Alexandra, my beloved Russia would never have fallen, and those Godless Bolsheviks would never have come to power. Alas, thanks to those fools at court, so pathetic they could not even get an assassination straight, I was taken from the Romanov family when they needed my advice the most.

Once I was finally dead, I realized that God must have a higher purpose for me. It is up to us, those whom God decides must linger after death, to save all men from damnation and Oblivion. People these days, they have no fear of death or God or Hell anymore. It is all this science nonsense, filling their heads with silly stories about apes and atoms...but I digress.

> Once I knew what had happened and that I was chosen, I met other wraiths. Some of them were as bad as the courtiers in the palace. All of St. Petersburg seemed to be in the hands of fools who were as stuffy and blind as the mortal ministers. They had obviously lost their way, and many seemed glad that I was among them, instead of living any longer.

Then, finally, I met a man who made sense. Misha, he was called. Here was a man who truly knew God's will, and to prove it, he could place his very soul in the bodies of the living. He showed me how I could see through the bodies of mortals, but, more importantly, he told me of the fight we must make against those who would keep separate from the living those Dead whom God has chosen. It was Misha who told me how the men of science were leading mankind astray, away from God and faith, and that this folly was damning men's souls to Oblivion when they died. It was then that I began to understand God's plan for us more fully. I had been chosen to make sure that man did not forget about demons and devils and follow the men of science to Hell. Within months, I joined with those others who were given the power to move the bodies of the living, and we began our great work together. Alas, I was not in time to stop those foul murderers from killing the Tsar, but some things

Punches and Judys

are more important even than kings. Much as it pains me, I can no lor

Much as it pains me, I can no longer pay attention to my beloved Russia alone. Everywhere, the living people must stop listening to the nonsense of the politicians and scientists, and remember their fear. They cannot be saved if they think there is nothing after death to be saved *from*. Even the vampires and the mages need to be convinced, for they do not see the truth. *This* is the purpose that I was chosen for, and *this* is the crusade I have dedicated myself to. They must know that Rasputin is still here, and he will not be silenced, not even by death, for he speaks the truth.

Colin Grant

A window on the stars The journey of the few Watching it all survive It's all I can do — Runrig, "Canada"

Do you know what it is to be homesick for a home that no longer exists? It is the bitterest thing I have known in my two-and-a-half centuries.

In 1745, our bonny prince returned to Scotland to claim the throne that had been stolen from the Stuarts. In that same year, I was born in a small village on the banks of the river Dee. By the time I learned to walk, the rebellion was over, the prince was fled and my father was dead. With such auspicious beginnings, I should have known better what my existence was to be.

You must understand that, though my life was hard in those early years, it was happy. I loved my mother and my brothers and sister, and together, we managed to get through the hard times. I still remember what our house looked like, where the hearth, the door and the table were. I still remember how it smelled in summer, when my mother hung herbs up to dry, and I remember the face of Mrs. Rennie in the next house, as she and mother gossiped while they hung the washing out to dry. Most of all, I remember the countryside, with its gorse-covered fields by the side of the river.

I was 17 when I took my first steps down that final road, though I didn't know it at the time. Work was scarce, and my family needed money. There was war in Europe and a need for soldiers both there and in the American colonies. I was young and foolish, and I believed it would be a good thing to be a soldier having great adventures while I also earned money for my family. For the first three years, I was lucky and didn't see much action, and I wasn't away from home for more than a few months. Then, they sent us to the New World, and my luck changed.

The French and the Indians were making trouble in the colonies, and, as a result, our orders were to protect settlements in Ontario. The small towns and villages made me miss home, for the people were so like those I'd left behind, and it was as if I'd found home again in this harsh, untamed place. Things went well enough for several months, then the worst happened.

It wasn't much of a battle, mind you. There were barely a dozen of us, just doing a bit of scouting at one of the smaller settlements. I think it was the Huron in the pay of the French who attacked us, but it hardly matters now. Whoever they were, they knew the land, and they knew how to fight men with muskets. They took us by surprise and slaughtered us. We tried to fight them off, but there were too many of them, and they had muskets as well. The best we could do was buy time for the settlers to make a run for it down to the creek.

After the initial volley, all we could do was bayonets, which wasn't good enough. John fell first, with a musket ball in his belly. I saw Jimmy go down as well, and Andrew; both bloody ends, but mercifully quick. I think I was the last standing, though I can't be sure. Suddenly, it was quiet, and there were three of them in front of me. I knew that the most I could do was to make this more costly for them. I brought another one down, but at the same time, one of their knives sprouted from my chest. The last thing I saw was the cabins burning, William and Jean's house, and Donald's home beyond. I thought, what a horrible waste it all was, all their work gone in the space of an hour. We'd put up such a pitiful show of defense, and in half a year, no one would remember this battle or this place, too small even to have a name yet.

I stayed, and I remembered. There weren't many other ghosts in the area back then. The colonies were small still, and, even in death, we stayed clear of the natives. They had their ghosts as well, but we kept a respectful distance from one another. They stayed away from the burned-out cabins, I stayed away from their burial ground, and we got along just fine.

Eventually, new settlers came along. I learned to Skinride on my own; I seemed to have a natural talent for it. At first, I just watched, but I didn't have the patience to keep to watching long. Even though these people were not my kin, and this place was not my home, it was still my duty to protect them. I may have been given that duty by a government that I never liked or trusted, but I'd be damned if I was going to have died in vain. By the time the Guilds, the Hierarchy and all that went with them showed up in any force, I was well accustomed to my new existence.

I found the others, the Puppeteers, when they arrived. If you know what to look for, you can tell when other people have been Skinriding, and so I found them. It turned out that the Guildsmen and I were like-minded enough, so I joined up. What's the point of sitting idly by and watching, when, with a little help from you, others can avoid the pain you've been through? The devil take Charon, if he hasn't already, and his blasted Code of the Dead! If it's such a good thing, then why is every great house or castle in Scotland said to be haunted? No harm has come of that, nor shall any come from what we do for the living ones we love.

I went home once. Travel is difficult for the Dead, but I had to see my home again. It was a disappointment. When I finally got there, there was no home to see - just a few foundation stones and a new paved road heading west. It seems that sheep were more important than people to those who owned the land, and the people had been moved out to make room for the animals. I don't know

why, but I was angrier than I'd ever been. I wanted to tear up the paving stones

SHOULD HILL

on the road. I wanted to go to the nearby rail line and tie the rails in knots. I wanted to

take the soft, fat men in suits and make them understand what really mattered. I didn't. There is a limit to what you can do through a borrowed body, especially if you care what condition you leave the body in, and no matter what they say, it's still not as satisfying as doing it yourself. I did what I could through the best hosts I could find, then I left.

It was that trip that made me think of the Risen. We Puppeteers have always made it a policy to help them, and help

wraiths who wish to Rise. It brings the living and the Dead closer, as they should be, and it gives people a second chance. It's a second chance I could never have, for my body had long since rotted to naught, but it's a chance I vowed to make certain was available to whomever I met who needed it. If the Legionnaires don't like it, that's what the soulforged bayonet is for, and if anybody who wants to stop me died anywhere in Canada, then he'd best pay close attention to his Fetters.

I've probably pulled a few dozen out of the grave. I can't tell you exactly how many, but it's been enough to make a difference. More than that, for a century I've been teaching others in the Guild how to use the Ancient Arts. My students and I make sure that the Guild Reaps our consorts; we owe it to the Ouick

for their help, and we know them well enough to trust them. Some say I take too many risks, but the fact is that the Guild is stronger in my part of the world than anywhere else, and

we have made a difference in the Skinlands. The Deathlords can put that in their pipe and smoke it, and they can stay the Hell out of my work while they're at it.

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Yet, though I am guilty of that sin myself, I can still make other folk turn away from it and bitterly

repent.

- Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Tale"



Ghost Story: Road of Steel and

Part VI: Chasing Shadows



rom her window in the tiny peak-roof chamber that served as her living quarters, Sister Acceptance gazed out at the cityscape of Stygia. The gothic spires of the cathedral-like building that served as the main Chapter House of the Society of Pardoners rose high into what constituted

the sky above the Underworld's greatest city. Sister Acceptance smiled as her keen hearing caught the sound of murmured voices carrying upward from the ground-floor audience hall, which occupied what would have been the nave of a true cathedral.

Brother Tenacious' latest retreat was in full swing, as curious wraiths intermingled with would-be Pardoners and oathbound Guild members. The series of meditations, seminars, readings and exercises would continue for at least three more days. The merely curious would depart after the first day, their fears about the secret doings of their confessors at least somewhat alleviated. From the wraiths who stayed to complete the rigorous regimen of doled information and private introspection, the Pardoners would choose their next batch of recruits.

In a little while, this will no longer concern me. Sister Acceptance repeated the phrase over and over again to herself to let its implications take hold. For the last half-century, she had served as Supreme Master of the Society of Pardoners. Before that time, she had served as Charon's confessor and confidante. Assuming the leadership of the Pardoners Guild was a step down from that august and honored position.

Her eyes focused inadvertently on the view beyond the ranks of buildings that made up the Eternal City of Death. Stretching outward until they disappeared in an opaque, gray mist, the waters of the Sunless Sea compelled her attention.

That was where it happened, where my world ended in shame and horror. In her mind, Sister Acceptance saw again the cloaked figure sail resolutely from the harbor in his fragile reed boat, as he took the part of a simple Ferryman for one last time. Before him, the waters roiled, malicious and foreboding.

No! Her blackened fingers dug into her palms as tears of hot plasm blurred her vision and turned the whole of Stygia into a watery landscape. I will not think of this — not just yet.

A soft knock on her door interrupted her reverie. Without waiting for a reply, Sister Rapture entered the room quietly. "I hope I'm not disturbing you, but you did send for me." The Grand Master of Scourges crossed the room to embrace her superior, a gesture which contained both genuine warmth and sisterly respect.

Sister Rapture had served as Acceptance's confessor for nearly as long as Acceptance herself had ministered to Charon. The women had few secrets between them. But, as always, there were some things that even a confidante could not know. The Supreme Master extricated herself gently from Sister Rapture's greeting. Still holding on to her fellow Pardoner's elbow, she steered the dark-haired, olive-skinned wraith to-

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ward one of the two chairs in the room. Seating herself in the other one, Sister Acceptance concentrated on her friend's presence.

"Have you learned anything else since you last reported to me?"

Sister Rapture arched an eyebrow. Even without her raptor mask, her face resembled a bird's, with its sharp nose and shining, dark eyes.

"I have learned that there has been a constant flurry of secret meetings between the Guildmasters, or at least their proxies, since Lord Ember's announcement of the impending search for Charon."

"That doesn't surprise me," Sister Acceptance said. "Have any decisions been made that I should know about?"

Sister Rapture's face wrinkled in an amused grimace. "Well, judging by the fact that suddenly some very high-ranking members of just about all of the other Guilds are making appointments for purification rites, I would say yes."

The Supreme Master's expression grew thoughtful. "So they are really planning to look for Charon in the Labyrinth...."

Sister Rapture nodded. "So it seems."

"And did the Guildmaster of Pardoners vote for the journey?" Sister Acceptance's voice took on a rare playful tone.

"Thank Nhudri for his magnificent masks!" Sister Rapture replied, joining in the precious moment of lighthearted conspiracy. "They hide a multitude of sins. At least we aren't the only Guild to send an impostor."

"I understand that Lord Ember attends in person," Sister Acceptance interjected.

"Usually," Sister Rapture agreed. "Only, the last time we met with him, I thought I detected someone else wearing his visage. That disturbed me a little."

Sister Acceptance shrugged. "Perhaps he is beginning to doubt himself. You said there was some disagreement as to the veracity of his evidence that Charon survived the encounter with Gorool."

"Most of the Guildmasters believe him," Sister Rapture said. "A few, however, seem to want to pursue a different line of action. Those who trust Lord Ember suspect the Sandmen of conjuring up some grand drama of misdirection. They feel that a search should be mounted, but not in the Labyrinth." The Scourge Master stopped herself, as if reluctant to say more.

"Where else would they search for him?" Sister Acceptance asked, her breast pounding as if a heart fluttered wildly within it. "Do they think he hides somewhere in the Shadowlands or in the Tempest? Is that where some of them plan to search?"

Sister Rapture gave a quick nod of agreement. "And elsewhere," she replied, her voice suddenly tight.

"Where else?" Sister Acceptance asked. Then it came to her. "The Skinlands?" Sister Rapture stared intently at the floor, saying nothing. Finally, withering under Sister Acceptance's implacable stare, she raised her eyes.

"I'd rather not — no, I cannot — say," she whispered.

For a reckless moment, Sister Acceptance felt the urge to dismiss Sister Rapture immediately, gather her cache of lanterns and her traveling cloak and head for the edges of the Shadowlands. I can visit every Necropolis, every outpost, and search from there for signs that Charon walks in the Sunlit world. As quickly as the thought came to her, it crumbled into nothing. Her lack of Fetters, a symptom of her great age, precluded such a journey, and she knew this. No, I must hold to my original intent. The honor and delight of finding Charon belongs to worthier souls. I have my own duty to discharge.

Sister Acceptance leaned toward her friend and confessor and placed a hand on her cheek. "Forgive me for my rashness," she said. "I did not mean to cause you any distress."

Sister Rapture lifted her own hand and clasped her superior's fingers tightly for a moment. "There are some things I am bound by our oath not to reveal," she began.

Sister Acceptance raised her already outstretched hand in a gesture of silence. "I understand," she said. "It matters little, anyway. We are not suited to travel beyond the Shroud. Our work lies here, among the Dead who need us. Let the ones most familiar with the forbidden realms worry about searching for Charon on the other side."

"Does this mean that you want me to cast my vote in favor of the journey to the Labyrinth?" Sister Rapture's voice sounded relieved to return to their original topic of conversation.

"This is what I want you to do," Sister Acceptance said. "Claim that you need to give the matter more consideration. Indicate that you are leaning toward agreeing to search the Labyrinth, but delay as long as possible."

"You don't believe they — we — will find Charon in the Labyrinth, do you?" Sister Rapture asked.

"You know what I think they will find, what I know they will find in the Labyrinth," Sister Acceptance answered, her voice flat and cold.

"Not Charon, but his Shadow," Sister Rapture said. She looked around her nervously, as if afraid of being overheard.

"Gorool," Sister Acceptance replied, her voice breaking with an unaccustomed bitterness.

"You still blame yourself," Sister Rapture said. "Don't. No one could have foreseen the results of our last attempts to purify him. No one. Not even the Lady of Fate herself."

"There is a difference between blame and responsibility," Sister Acceptance said, her words coming in a flood. "No, I am not to blame for the fact that Charon's Shadow slipped out of our control and fled into the Labyrinth to emerge as the creature called Gorool. But I am responsible for it. I let certain feelings — blind me to the strength of Charon's Shadow. I failed."

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"You did not fail!" Sister Rapture's voice cracked like the whip that hung at her belt. "Charon failed. He took too many worries upon himself. They grew until they conceived a way to break free of him."

"That's enough!" Sister Acceptance stood up, her body rigid as she struggled to control her anger. When she began to speak again, her voice was softer, though it still held overtones of suppressed sharpness. "I have heard that argument given again and again, and each time it sounds as empty and spurious as when I first invented it to keep our Guild from buckling under the shame of what we had done." I must keep my mind on what I have to do. I cannot risk endangering the only opportunity I may ever have to undo our Guild's greatest crime.

"Should I leave you now?" Sister Rapture asked, not unkindly. Once again, Sister Acceptance marveled at how easily the Master of Scourges shunted aside feelings she considered unworthy.

"Not just yet," Sister Acceptance said. "There is one more thing I would ask of you before you go. I would like for you to purify me." Abruptly, she dropped to her knees in front of Sister Rapture and let her robe slip away from her Corpus, exposing herself to her Confessor.

"Bless me Pardoner, for I have sinned," she began, intoning the Rites of Purification made popular with the coming of Brother Tenacious.

With a grim look on her face, Sister Rapture unhooked the whip from her belt and stepped behind her friend, now her Supplicant.

Purified, Sister Acceptance struggled to her feet, her Corpus weak and burning from the ministrations of the Master of Scourges. Sister Rapture helped her pull her robes about her once more and tried to guide her to her chair.

The Supreme Pardoner waved her away shakily. "I will heal," she said. "Thank you for all you have done."

"I'll stay, if you want me to," Sister Rapture said.

"No, there are some things I must do here, and I would prefer to be alone to do them."

"You intend to go into the Labyrinth by yourself, don't you?" Sister Rapture asked. "That's why you want me to delay my decision, isn't it?"

Sister Acceptance smiled faintly. "I suppose I should have known that you would discover my purpose in asking for Castigation. My Shadow always was a snitch."

"And you know that my oath prevents me from revealing what I know to anyone else," Sister Rapture said. "This is madness, you know. No one goes there alone."

"Charon did, when he brought Lord Nhudri to Stygia." Resigned to Sister Rapture's continued presence, Sister Acceptance worked as she talked. From a small chest in one corner of the room, she extracted a half-dozen iron lanterns and hooked them onto her belt.

"Those are Soul Lanterns," Sister Rapture said.

"Yes, they are. I had them specially made for me by an Artificer who owed me a very large favor."

"Are they filled, or empty?"

"Three are filled. The other three are waiting to store the Angst I hope to collect.

"You're going into the Labyrinth by yourself to find and Castigate Gorool?" Sister Rapture's voice betrayed her incredulity.

Sister Acceptance nodded. "I intend to redeem Gorool. When the others — the ones who are going to search the Skinlands — return with Charon, I will have his purified Shadow waiting for him."

"Then why are you taking Soul Lanterns that are already filled with Angst..." Sister Rapture's voice trailed off, as the expression on her face changed from one of disbelief and sorrow to one of barely contained hope. "Have you finally succeeded in discovering a way?"

Sister Acceptance smiled. "I believe that I have," she said quietly. "I have left behind a book of notes concerning my studies and experiments. I think that they will help you codify a workable method for converting Angst to Pathos."

"Have you actually tested it?" Sister Rapture asked.

"This will be my test," the Supreme Master replied. She pulled a long cloak over her robes. The cowl concealed her face in shadows, while the cloak itself hid the bulky mass of the Soul Lanterns. "Keep up your impersonation of me until I return, if you can. If it looks like I won't be coming back, then get together with Brother Tenacious and decide which of you is better able to take my place."

"I thought you had always considered Brother Tenacious your successor," Sister Rapture said.

"I had," Sister Acceptance admitted. "But you have managed to acquire some useful experience."

"Enough to know that I agree with your preference," Sister Rapture replied. "Besides, if I take over the Guild, who will come looking for you?"

Sister Acceptance opened her arms and gathered Sister Rapture into a fierce embrace.

"Now I will insist that you go," she said.

After Sister Rapture had gone, Sister Acceptance stood in the room she had occupied for over fifty years, for perhaps the last time.

Am I doing the right thing?

From within her, she received an answer, one she hoped came from her higher self, her Eidolon. You're doing the only thing you can do. Charon's Shadow waits for you, and you alone, to finish the job you started so long ago.

She sighed. There was only one way to discover the truth.

The door slammed behind her as she left. The echoes stayed with her, however, for a very long time.

Ghost Story: A Road of Steel and Souls



Chapter One: Spiritual Exercises

Welcome to the camp, I guess we all know why we're here. My name is Tommy, and I became aware this year... — The Who, "Welcome"

Welcome, friends, to our final retreat before the millennium. As some of you know, we hold a gathering every five years to introduce our association to others among the Restless and to welcome new postulants to our group. I am Brother Tenacious, of the order known to most as Pardoners. We accept the duty of helping our fellow wraiths cleanse their souls and find surcease from guilt, anger, hatred and all such negative Passions that invite our Shadows' influence or control. It is not an easy task, nor, may I add gratefully, a thankless one. Our special skills make us welcome everywhere and assure us of some small measure of protection from all, for there is none among us without a Shadow. None among us is without sin.

Many of you are here merely to satisfy your curiosity about what we do, or in hopes of learning our Arcanos or secrets. Rest assured, we have no quarrel with your presence. One of the purposes for our retreats is to educate others of our kind about our activities, beliefs and code of ethics. We welcome the chance to let you explore what it means to be a Pardoner. We have no fear that you will steal our Arcanos, for we freely teach it to anyone willing to undergo our oath and pledge not to misuse the knowledge. As for secrets, we are sorry to disappoint you, but we have none. If this ruins the retreat for you, we apologize. Should any of you wish to withdraw at this time, you are free to go, with our blessing.

Our postulants are here to cleanse and purge themselves of impure impulses in order to learn our ways and be initiated into the ranks of Pardoners. Theirs is a most rigorous task, for they will begin a serious and sober journey to full understanding of themselves and those around them. We ask that you show them the respect they have earned while you are here. Please, leave them to their meditations when seminars are not in session, for they have much to consider before avowing themselves to our order. If any others among you feel the call while on this retreat, please do not hesitate to speak with one of our elders, who can help you begin the process of becoming a postulant. That road is not to be traveled lightly, however. Many pledge themselves, but few are capable of fulfilling the role of Pardoner.

We will begin by having you retire to your rooms to read through the first meditation in the *Book of Pardons*. It will best explain who we are and why we do what we do. Practice the exercises found at the end of the meditation. We will meet again this afternoon for a discussion led by Sister Hope on Pardoner-Supplicant etiquette.

Meditations from the Inner Lantern:

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No secrets? Who's he think he's kidding? I wasn't Beaped yesterday, you know. Sounds pretty sure of himself, don't he? Just wait'll I get started. Here's a riddle for you: What's the one Shadow a Pardoner can't see? Give up? Yeah, his own. Thought you was pretty smart. Stick with me, and I'll give you the real lowdown on the Pardoners. Oh, and take this with you. It's called *The Inner Lantern*. It's got stuff about that "meditation" crap they just handed you. And it's free — what could be cheaper than that?

First Meditation: Our Nature

Between the Shadow and the Psyche stands the Pardoner. In this realm of spirit made flesh, we strive against the destructive urges within all of us. We hold the line against the inner enemy. Surrounded by Oblivion, we cry out against the darkness of destruction, and interpose our knowledge and skills to avert the triumph of the Shadow. We prevent the unraveling of the fabric of the Underworld.

When you look at a Pardoner, you should see a warrior. Whether we appear as confessors, counselors, purifiers or combatants, our purpose remains constant: to purge the taint of Oblivion from the wraiths in our care. In short, we are the good guys.

Like members of—ahem—other affiliated groupings, we Pardoners often cloak ourselves in anonymity when acting in an official capacity. We do so not as Haunters do, to hide a hideous or twisted form, but to emphasize our function, rather than our individual identities. Likewise, once we take the lantern we all assume new names. When speaking to us as friends and companions, you may know and address us as who we were before we took the lantern. When we come to you as Pardoners, however, we present ourselves as Brother Angyr, Sister Pride, Father Contrition or Mother Pain. In this way, we stress the compassionate impersonality of our sometimes harsh Castigations.

While we use cloaks and masks to limit our individuality, other marks attest openly to our calling as Pardoners and serve to announce our presence wherever we go. You can recognize a Pardoner "on duty" by the iron lantern he carries, either slung at his waist or hung outside his place of business. Our Corpora, too, bear the stigma of our profession, as our blackened fingertips testify to our brushes with the Shadow. We do not come away from our struggles untouched by darkness.

We call ourselves the Order of Purifiers of the Shadow or the Fellowship of Bestowers of Pardon. Most of you know us simply as Pardoners. We have borne the labels of mystery cult, priesthood, Guild and army. All of these labels are accurate. None depict our true nature.

Like mystery cults, we emphasize rituals in the performance of our sacred duties; like priests, we take vows to demonstrate our seriousness and commitment. We retain some of the organizational trappings of our brief stint as a Guild, primarily in our requirements of membership fees and payment for services. As an army, we structure ourselves in ranks, rising upward as we demonstrate our ability to wage war successfully against our common foe.

We bring together wraiths from all walks of "life," united only by their desire to work some tangible good in this vale of suffering and struggle. We accept anyone who demonstrates a sincere willingness to undertake a dangerous and difficult course of self-knowledge. Once you become a Pardoner, all else assumes secondary importance. When you join us, you are on the front lines in the war against Oblivion.

Exercises

FIRST EXERCISE: Imagine that you have entered our Fellowship. What name will you choose to identify yourself in the course of your duties?

Think of a virtue to which you aspire or a weakness against which you struggle. Consider your choice carefully, for it will become your signature.

SECOND EXERCISE: Spread your hands before you. Regard your fingertips, as yet unstained by the Shadow's taint. Now, imagine plunging those unsoiled fingers into the putrid negation of light that constitutes the Shadow's form. Feel corruption oozing into your Corpus.

The act of cleansing inevitably dirties the cleanser. Forever.

THIRD EXERCISE: Look at the faces of the Restless around you (if you can see their faces), or call to mind the images of your friends and fellow wraiths. Now, imagine that you can see through the façades of their Corpora, into the black morass of ugliness that forms the cores of their Shadows. With your Pardoner's insight, you can discern hidden motivations behind the most benign action. One who is a lover secretly desires to see you cast into Oblivion; another, your best friend, perhaps, seeks to cause pain and suffering to those closest to her. Knowing this, can you face these wraiths as petitioners without prejudice or partiality?

The cloak of anonymity conceals your identity from wraiths who seek you out; it does not conceal them from you. Can you love the sinner and hate the sin?

Meditations from the Inner Lantern:

You schmucks need to watch your rear ends around these guys. They talk a good game, sayin' that they're the saviors of the Underworld. They even fancy it up with religious mumbo jumbo about their "calling." Yes indeedy. I sure wanna give up all my secrets to a bunch of Heretic wannabees who're "bound by an oath." An oath?! Gimme a break.

Oh, and exercises, huh? Yeah, well, try this one on for size. Bend over and touch your toes. Now grab your ankles and hold on. How's that make ya leel?

Second Meditation: Our Attraction

Not everyone possesses the unique combination of desire and conviction required to join our ranks. Being a Pardoner means keeping a constant vigil on the inroads made by Oblivion's most insidious agents, the Shadows that seek to subvert the denizens of the Underworld. In order to fight the darkness, Pardoners must gain an intimate knowledge of their enemy.

Because of this mission, we often attract individuals whose callings in life predisposed them to the ongoing struggle they face in the Underworld. In ancient times, we counted druids, lawgivers, philosophers and healers among our numbers. The sons and daughters of Levi found a welcome place with us, after their wanderings in the Skinlands. During the Middle Ages, Inquisitors swelled our ranks, along with the pardoners from whom we took our name during the Age of the Guilds. Later periods of history added more categories to our ranks: hanging judges, executioners, confessors and teachers. Recent times have seen new kinds of counselors petition us for membership: analysts, social workers, psychology professors, existential philosophers and evangelists. Many wraiths belonging to the Penitent Legion find that membership in our organization answers their need to fight against the madness and destructive impulses that led to their deaths.

The common strand that binds us all together as Pardoners is our refusal to give up the struggle to overcome the darkness. Those of us who have spent our lives seeking to define "good" and "evil," or to nurture the light and eradicate the darkness, now find, in death, the opportunity to understand why Oblivion exercises such an insidious hold over us. Many also relish the opportunity to strike a blow that will weaken that hold. To act, instead of merely to observe — that is one of the rewards of our company.

Occasionally, we accept a few individuals who, in life, embodied the darkness we oppose. Death's aftermath sometimes works a mysterious change that causes those students of evil to reevaluate their wasted lives. Those whom Oblivion does not immediately claim sometimes seek to atone for the...excesses of their earthly existence. Given the proper training and counsel, these contrite souls can become some of our most astute and zealous warriors. The intimate knowledge they have of the Shadow's machinations comes from their close association with their base impulses during life.

Do not think, however, that you cannot find a place with us because you do not fall into any of the above classifications. All of us have encountered the wiles of the Shadow; all of us feel the weight of Oblivion upon our souls. Many of us wish to learn how to remove that taint from ourselves and from others; some of us have the strength of purpose to do so. That is, in essence, the core of what it means to be a Pardoner.

Exercises

FIRST EXERCISE: Think about your life before you arrived in the Underworld. Try to remember who you were and what you did. Make a mental list of all the good and bad acts you committed.

Which list is longer? Which list contains your most important actions? Judging yourself by these two lists, would you classify yourself as a good person? Can you even make that sort of decision? As a Pardoner, you might be called upon to do just that.

SECOND EXERCISE: Picture a time in your past, "living or unliving," when you were punished for something you did wrong. Relive that punishment. Did it undo what you did? Did it relieve you of your guilt? Did it strengthen your resolve to avoid repeating your transgression? Or did it just make you more determined to avoid being caught the next time?

THIRD EXERCISE: Imagine yourself as a Pardoner using the name you chose as part of the exercises that followed the First Meditation. A wraith comes to you and asks you to purify her Shadow.

How will you go about this task? Will you offer counsel and advice? Will you exact some punishment or penance? Inject as much detail into this scenario as possible. If you decide to join our ranks, this scene will become very familiar to you.



Meditations from the Inner Lantern

These guys just kill me! "We're so special! We used to be priests and lawyers and doctors and psychiatrists." What did these guys not do as high muckety mucks? Yo! They forgot dentists! You'd think that those guys would get in under "torturers." but no.

And more exercises too! Hey, let's all remember our pasts! Yeah, right, like most of us've got even half our marbles. Better still, let's play dress up in black leather and "cleanse" each other. Buncha weird ass perverts.

Third Meditation: Our Purpose

Our goal as Pardoners encompasses two primary objectives. The first and most immediate concern lies in the continual process of cleansing the Shadows of wraiths who come to us. The second — and long-term — purpose of our existence as a unified and identifiable group consists of nothing less than the purification of the Underworld itself. We cannot accomplish these goals by acting alone, for the Castigation of individuals and the redemption of the Underworld require the support and aid of other wraiths. Which, of course, leads directly to our third reason for perpetuating ourselves as an organized society: We exist to help one another, to monitor our progress as individuals and to keep us from falling prey to the temptations of the Shadows we fight so ardently.

As a group, we have studied and perfected the various forms of Castigation. Through our mastery of this Arcanos, we are able to identify and purge the growing taint of Oblivion from the souls of individuals. Our constant attention to this one aspect of our calling occupies most of our "working" hours. After all, every wraith has need of a Pardoner sometime. Furthermore, we clean the soul's slate only to see the Shadow begin once more to scrawl its obscenities upon that pristine surface. Unlike Artificers, who forge lasting creations, we labor under the certainty that wraiths who pass through our purifying flames (metaphorically speaking) must do so over and over again.

No doubt, some of you question our ability to achieve our ultimate goal, the cleansing of the Underworld of every vestige of Oblivion. Many Pardoners find it difficult to believe that we can succeed in such a bold and ambitious enterprise. To our doubters, both within and without, we can offer only this: Consider the alternative. Oblivion assaults us from both sides of the Shroud. The Tempest reverberates with its tumult; the Skinlands grow darker with each nightfall. As Pardoners, we, and we alone, have experience dealing directly with the building blocks of Oblivion. We cannot fight it head on, but we can eliminate that substance on which it feeds. If we can do so in a concerted fashion, without faltering in our duty to our fellow wraiths and to ourselves, we can eventually deprive Oblivion of its lifeblood. Once we have done that, we can contemplate what steps we must take to attack our foe in its stronghold.

To accomplish these ends, we Pardoners must strive toward self-perfection. Who pardons the Pardoner? Like our fellow wraiths, we suffer the ravages of temptation and fall prey to the lures of our own Shadows. We, too, must undergo the rites of cleansing. We cannot afford to allow the knowledge we possess to exist without some monitoring body. In fact, we match our vigilance over the souls of others with an equal attention paid to ourselves. As Pardoners, we help one another remain steadfast in our duty. We guard against abuses of the trust placed in us by our petitioners. We study together and share our insights with one another. In this way, we grow more attuned to our calling and better able to perform our vital task.

For those of you who demonstrate a sincere desire to join our fellowship, elaborations on these purposes will come later in the retreat. For now, we have outlined our major tasks and given you a glimpse into the heart of our organization.

Exercises

FIRST EXERCISE: Picture a blank sheet of paper. Imagine someone writing a series of obscene comments on it. Erase those words. See the same person scrawling new marks on the paper you have just cleaned. Erase the new obscenities. Continue this process for the next thirty minutes or until you grow weary of the repetition.

This exercise simulates the work of a Pardoner.

SECOND EXERCISE: Imagine yourself standing on an island surrounded by a dark abyss. The ground beneath your feet is solid, but everything else, everywhere you look, roils with formless, lightless chaos. As you stand transfixed by the pregnant emptiness around you, the abyss widens by a tiny fraction. Your island shrinks by a corresponding degree. You somehow know that you possess the means to restore the lost ground, and you do so, thus forcing the abyss to retract its hold on your small sanctuary. You relax your vigilance for a second, and the abyss reasserts its claim. Once more, you draw upon your resources and your will to push it backward. You realize that you can never fully relinguish your effort, or else your island will disappear and plunge into the yawning pit, and it will carry you with it.

Can you afford to give up the fight simply because it seems to be hopeless? This battle is the one all Pardoners face.

THIRD EXERCISE: This exercise requires a partner. Seek out another wraith making the retreat, preferably someone you did not know before coming here. Make a brief confession to your partner by telling her the details of some small transgression. Ask her to assign you a penance in order to cleanse that fault from your soul. Do the same for her. Carry out the penance given to you. (Your partner is, likewise, to perform the duty you assigned her.)

Afterward, compare your approaches with each other. Was one of you more severe than the other? Did the penance fit the transgression? This exchange happens frequently among the members of our society.

Note that this exercise is not a true Castigation; these mock penances do not affect the state of your

Shadow. Nevertheless, please make certain one of the retreat monitors is nearby in case this exercise inadvertently awakens either your own Shadow or that of your partner.



Chapter One: Spiritual Exercises

Meditations from the Inner Lantern

Get outta here! Half the time, these guys can't find their own backsides, much less save the Underworld. Hey, here's another riddle for you. Whadda you give a Pardoner for Christmas? A mop and broom, so he can clean up the *whole* Underworld!

Humble, ain't they?

Fourth Meditation: Our Dealings

Consider the services we Pardoners perform for Stygia and the Shadowlands. Now, think of Restless who have need of our ministrations. We do not exaggerate when we say that the demand for our talents necessitates our maintaining a presence throughout the Underworld.

The Hierarchy of Stygia acknowledges our right to exist as a group and accords us a place within its ranks. The Legions who battle Spectres and other Tempest-spawned creatures have desperate need of us. Indeed, most patrols have their own Pardoner or Pardoner-trained confessor. As active members of the Legions, not only do we see to the well-being of our comrades, but we engage the Spectral armies directly. Our participation in the affairs of Stygia pervades every level of society. Even Deathlords and Anacreons seek Castigation from us to subdue their Shadows. Those who act as Pardoners to the rulers of the Underworld carry a great burden and an even greater responsibility.

We cannot point to one place as central to our society. We try to go wherever we are needed. In Stygia, for example, we have several Chapter Houses, where we gather for retreats such as this one and share our skills and insights with one another. We also have a strong presence in most major Necropoli. From those bases in the Shadowlands, we branch outward to cover as much of the Underworld as possible. Wherever there are wraiths, there are Pardoners.

As a group, we have few friends, but we have fewer enemies. We do not boast when we emphasize that no wraiths, however self-sufficient they may be, can do without the attentions of a Pardoner, from time to time. Even Renegades and Heretics need someone to cleanse their Shadows — and we do not think the Deathlords would thank us were we to allow those souls to drift down to Oblivion.

In brief, we stand at the crossroads of wraithly society. Most who know us only as Pardoners fear and respect us, for they know their souls' well-being depends on our care. Some actually enjoy our company, for we share a common hope for the future. However, no one can afford to oppose us. They realize what awaits the soul whose Shadow remains too long unshriven.

Exercises

FIRST EXERCISE: Think of as many different groups of wraiths as you can. Go over each group in your mind, and examine your attitude toward those wraiths. Arrange them in your mind according to your feelings about them, from the ones you feel most positive toward, to the ones who instinctively arouse your dislike or even your hatred.

As a Pardoner, you must be prepared to minister to all wraiths, regardless of your personal feelings. First, however, you must know what those feelings are. Meditate for at least thirty minutes upon your prejudices.

SECOND EXERCISE: Imagine that a wraith from the group you most dislike approaches you and asks you to Castigate her Shadow. Can you separate your personal feelings from your duty toward this petitioner?

If you cannot do so, you should think long and hard about whether you are truly suited for a Pardoner's vocation. Go over, in detail, how you would answer the needs of your imaginary Supplicant. Spend at least thirty minutes on this problem.

THIRD EXERCISE: Imagine that a powerful wraith comes to you and asks for assistance in your role as a Pardoner. How will you react to an important Legionnaire? To a member of a Deathlord's personal staff? To a leader of a Heretic Cult? How does this reaction differ from the one in the previous exercise?

Here's a hint: It shouldn't.

Meditations from the Inner Lantern

Whoa. Bust my butt! Ya know what these guys are really sayin', doncha? They got the real power, and we're just supposed to get over it. 'Scuse me a minute. Gotta roll over and play dead.

Fifth Meditation: Our Future

If you have paid close attention to the previous meditations, the information presented in this final passage should contain few surprises. Our goals remain constant, though each individual's methods of achieving them may differ. As Pardoners, we act as agents of light in a realm of shadows. What, then, do we hope to achieve, ultimately? We have already made our goals clear to you. If we seek anything, it is the ability to achieve those ends with certainty, so that we might strengthen our ability to stem the growth of Oblivion in Stygia and in the Shadowlands. We foresee an expanding role for our society's services in answer to an increasing demand for the works we provide. Our lanterns shine throughout the Underworld, but we cannot afford to relax our guard or become complacent. To keep up with our great enemy, we must grow in numbers. We must continue to work with all elements of wraith society, even those who do not believe they need our cleansing or our counsel.

If you are not already one of us, your attendance at this retreat indicates that you have at least a passing interest in our work and that you recognize its importance. Those of you who decide to join the Society of Pardoners will shape our future. Your goals and aspirations will leave their marks on us, just as surely as your encounters with darkness will leave their mark on you.

To understand fully where we are going, you must first look backward at where we have been. Only then do the future plans and aims of our society become clear.

Class dismissed.

Exercises

FINAL EXERCISE: Reflect carefully upon what you have learned about yourself and about our society. Have you achieved your purpose in coming here, or do you wish to acquire a more intimate understanding of what it means to be a Pardoner? Imagine that you stand before a door. Opening that door will change you forever, but once you have passed its threshold, you cannot retrace your steps and go back the way you came. You can turn away and return to your old life, or you can step into the life of a Pardoner, but you must choose one or the other. There is no middle path.

If you choose to remain on the outside, your time at this retreat has come to an end. If you

elect to enter the doorway, your journey has just begun.



Meditations from the Inner Lantern

Yeah, think real hard about all this. And don't forget to buy my book, **Guildwraiths Among Us: True Secrets of the Pardoners**. It's real cheap. Hey, would / steer you wrong?

Chapter One: Spiritual Exercises



Chapter Two: The Pardoner's Tale (History)

Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life; but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons.

- Deuteronomy 4:9

"Postulants, this seminar is open to attendance only by candidates such as yourselves: ones who have pledged their intent to join our order. Wraiths who have only a cursory interest in our association have no need to know all of our history. You are offered this glimpse into our past, a glimpse that, of necessity, pulls no punches, for you must understand who we truly are. To do that, you must first learn who we once were."

Sister Rapture smiled upon hearing the familiar start to the lecture Brother Tenacious had given to so many new groups of Apprentices. She could picture him, his eyes bright with enthusiasm, as he strutted back and forth behind his lectern and tried to give the Postulants a sense of the Guild's history. *Perhaps this will give him some new insights*, she thought, as she placed the transcript she carried onto his meditation mat. She sat nearby, waiting for the former priest to finish his precious seminar. However Sister Acceptance fared, Sister Rapture and Brother Tenacious would be responsible for leading the Guild during the foreseeable future. Acceptance had thought it only proper that the wraith who might become the next Guildmaster read the last confession of his predecessor. Acceptance herself had asked Rapture to show Tenacious the transcript so he could familiarize himself with events he was too young to remember. If he became Guildmaster, he would need to know some of the legacy she left behind.

Sister Rapture sighed, finally letting her exhaustion emerge. Slowly, she rose and left the chamber. Brother Tenacious was the only member of the Guild who ever came to this chamber. He would find the transcript when he finished his seminar. I, Sister Rapture, do hereby swear that this is my transcription of the final confession of Inachus of Mycenae. As Sister Acceptance, Inachus was here at the inception of the Pardoners, and she has led our Guild for the past half century. Here follows her freely given statement.

Sometimes, it seems to me as if my mortal life was only a dream, a momentary adventure that preceded my true existence. I can barely recall that time, now. My father's face has faded from my memory, and even the language I spoke has long since given way to more modern tongues. The beginning of my time as one of the Restless is far more clear to me, and that, after all, is what concerns us.

I hope that my recollections of the many centuries which followed my death will serve the Guild, and I hereby freely tell them to you, my Purifier as my last confession. You know what it is that I must do. If I do not return from that journey, you shall have to decide who among you is to be leader now. As always, my thoughts will be with you, and my blessings are given to whatever decisions you make in my absence. We have changed so through the years that I sometimes wonder if even I, who was here when we began, recall us correctly. I fear that I may paint too glowing a picture of our accomplish ments and fail to mention enough of our foibles. Nonetheless, I hope what follows is as accur rate a portrayal as I am capable of giving.

Hear, now, my last confession.

When I was very young, I once asked my father why we needed priests and priestesses. He told me that they were gifted with acute insights and that people therefore sought them to act as go betweens, to shield ordinary folk from the raw terror of dealing with the gods. Priestly men and women showed their people the right paths by revealing the ones pleasing to the gods. They also helped people atone for wrongful acts, pardoning their transgressions and often assigning them tasks or penalties to put things right again. Such cleansings were un dertaken because they pleased the gods and returned the wrongdoer to the good graces of the community.

Although I admired anyone who would stand and ask for the gods divine aid to bring others into the gods good graces, I realized with regret that I was fated for a different role. As an only child, I would be married into a good family to bind a treaty or gain a higher position for my dan. I wonder, even now, if the gods heard my prayers and let me die so that I could serve as a priestess after all.

I believe that we who became Purifiers were among those spirits who brought with them into the Deadlands knowledge of the right path Some among us spoke with still living shamans, to guide them through their near-deaths and return them, cleansed of impurities, to the world of the Quick. Many claim that such was the true beginning of our order. As for myself I know only what I have witnessed.

The Origins of the Purifiers

My first memory of the Underworld is of wardering aimlessly through a gray landscape, devoid of all features save for myself and other suffering souls, who moaned in despair. I sought desperately for some evidence that this misery would not constitute my existence until the end of time. I did not want to number among the dim shapes who fed on the blood Odysseus had offered at the edge of the world. Others joined me, and we took comfort from one another.

When Charon emerged from Mycenae and made his way down the River of Death, we joyfully followed. We were among the first to set foot on the Isle of Sorrows, and we saw the building of Stygia from its humblest beginnings.

Soon thereafter, I saw what my work would be. I embraced Charon's great effort to assist the Restless in crossing over the Sunless Sea to the Far Shores and finding peace. Most of all, I took to heart the Cady of Fate's words to Charon." Help others to find their true light within." Wraiths among us who shared similar views banded together to speak of our hopes and the work we were doing. We had no official name, nor were we a society. We were merely friends who came together out of a common interest.

With the unleashing of Oblivion during the Sundering, many of the Restless were marked by great darkness. Our Shadows had been within us all along, but now they spoke with stronger voices. Wraiths who succumbed to their

Shadows' blandishments fell from grace and could not make the journey across the Sunless Sea. They needed someone to act as an intercessor for them, cleansing them and soothing their Shadows enough to enable these Restless to seek the Far Shores.

I discovered within myself las did many others/ the ability to see the stain of impurity within such wraiths. Concerned for their well being, I tried instinctively to reach out and help rid them of the darkness within. No one was more surprised than I when I succeeded. Hurrying to the others with whom I had shared visions and questions, I revealed what I had done. Some among them had also helped others quiet or overcome the Shadow within.

We realized what a great gift we had been given. We could look within the souls of other wraiths and see the lurking darkness that festered there. From that awareness, it was but a small step to confronting the Shadow and stripping away as much of its power as we could. We perfected our techniques and cleansed wraiths sent to us by the ones we had already helped. We called ourselves Purifiers, and slowly our fame spread throughout the Underworld.

Once we were certain that our deansings worked, I went to Charon and told him of our powers, knowing it was the answer to dealing with individuals too tainted to make the crossing. For long decades, he had sought some way to help wraiths who were incapable of reaching Transcendence. We had given him a new weapon in the battle against Oblivion. When I explained to him that my friends and I had taken the name Purifiers, he asked me to become his personal confessor.

We joined the Shining Ones, working alongside them to identify those Restless too troubled to pass onward. Wraiths we deansed took their places among the ones who journeyed over the Sunless Sea. The Shining Ones wetcomed us among them, granting us chambers within their temples where we could work with those in need of our services. Some of the newly Dead petitioned us to let them join and learn our rites of purification.

Centuries passed as we dedicated our selves to our work, while Stygia grew up around us. Our numbers grew, and were needed, for many more Restless began to arrive. Among them was one who, in life, was known as



Chapter Two: The Pardoner's Tale (History)

Hippocrates. We took him into our company and taught him what we knew.

The Oath

We had long since found that our calling allowed us to peer within other wraiths and ferret out their deepest secrets. Thus far, we had relied upon one another's honesty and willing ness to help others to keep our members from using what they learned against wraiths they deansed. Some, however, were not worthy of such trust. In a few cases, we had to oust a member who tried to profit from others' secrets. Now, knowing too well that such powers as we possessed led to hubris, we took counsel to gether From our meeting came a decision, codified by Hippocrates, to band together in a sworn society to teach each other to pass our knowledge on to worthy candidates and to swear an oath that we would use our art only to help never to harm.

The Golden Age

During this time, which was a golden age for Stygia, our society grew and prospered. Charon granted us our own house, a dwelling where we could go to rest from our labors or to take troubled wraiths for counseling. Grateful Restless filled our coffers with their offerings, and our fame spread throughout Stygia. Some of my fellows asked me to become the leader of our society, but I refused. After all, my time was almost wholly taken up in advising Charon. Now, I wish that I had never agreed to take on that burden. Though I sought only to help him, I was the agent of our Guilds greatest arime. But I must wait to tell that story in its own time.

As the world across the Shroud changed, so, too, did the Restless who came among us. Of particular interest to us were the Fishers, a new sect whose members began arriving in the Underworld with some frequency. Their understanding of the eternal conflict between light and darkness increased our knowledge of the relationship between the warring parts of the Restless soul. The Fishers' doctrine of redemption through sacrifice, while not a new one, gave strength to our endeavors. Many Fishers embraced our society, joining us as fellow seekers. Others went their own way, but sought our help and friendship. The Fishers soon became the largest sect in the Underworld.

The First Great Maelstrom

The First Great Maelstrom erupted from the Cabyrinth, sparked by Rome's collapse. As Purifiers, we joined Stygia's defenders and quelled their Shadows. Some among us instinctively utilized our skills to ward off the Spectres inumdating the city, much to the amazement of the warriors who stood with us. Thus, we fended off the onrush of the Maelstrom.

Although we were not acknowledged to have turned the tide, we certainly did our part to keep the Spectres from awakening the Shadows of Stygia's armies. Had we not done so I fear that our haven in the Underworld would have fallen under the first combined assault of Shadows and Spectres. Many Restless would argue that it constitutes overweening pride to attach such importance to our ministrations on the field of combat, but I believe those wraiths fail to note our effectiveness against the worst that the Maelstrom could throw at us. It is not pride to acknowledge that one has a useful talent - or that the talented are capable of great feats.

In the aftermath of this first storm, Stygian society was reshaped, and our society adapted to meet those changes. When Charon became emperor and his chosen became Deathlords, they placed wraiths under the dominion of different Deathlords according to the manner of each soul's demise. Some among us, including the Purifiers, Nhudris Artificers, the Mnemoi, with whom we worked to heal the memories of Restless we deansed, and many more, were not required to rearrange ourselves in that manner. Our skills were more useful and easily accessed when we stayed apart from the crush of souls, separate from (but allied with) Stygia's rulers. These groups took the title of Freewraiths. To spread our knowledge more effectively, we created collegia with which we could teach wraiths our skills and oversee their use. Such societies quickly became self-perpetuating, and allegiance to these groups quickly became more im-

portant, for some, than allegiance to anything else.

The Age of Guilds

We existed as a teaching order long before the advent of Guilds in the Middle Ages. Always dedicated to disseminating knowledge about our Arcanos and the responsibilities such knowledge entails, we simply formalized that teaching when the Guilds began coalescing. To be honest, our internal structure remained much the same, though we accepted the political power Guild status gave us. As Purifiers, we had practiced Castigation like a religious calling. Once we became a professional organization, set apart from other Restless by our special knowledge, we took a new name to acknowledge that change.

Our Name

In the Skinlands, the Middle Ages heralded great changes, which were mirrored in the Underworld. Towns grew' craftsmeris guilds flourished. The church from which the Fishers sprang gained such prominence that their priests were constantly busy. Few had time to hear confession from the laity. nor could the people of the time make weekly trips into town to visit the nearest church or cathedral. Many villages had no church and were too far away from the nearest one to receive any ongoing spiritual guidance.

Fearful that they would lose believers, the church created a group of travelers who journeyed from town to town to hear confessions and grant absolution. These wandering ministers were known as pardoners.

When the practice first began, the people hailed these pardoners as saviors. As some among these spiritual journeyers reached the Underworld, we accepted them into our ranks. We recognized the similarity between their work and ours. By adopting the name "Pardoners," in honor of their labors in the flesh and our ongoing quest after death, we showed that we still considered ourselves a spiritual brotherhood rather than a Guild.



Chapter Two: The Pardoner's Tale (History)

It was only later that the word "pardone" became synonymous with greed and corruption. This change occurred because of nobles who originally showed contrition for sins by doing good works (paying to build new churches, funding Gods work, etc.). Soon, wealthy merchants and craft guilds found it easier to pay for indulgences sold to them by venal pardoners, rather than to make honest confession and expiate their sins through true contrition, hard labor, flagellation or good works.

We despised the later earthly practitioners of this once noble calling. Many of us read the estimable Geoffrey Chauce's Canterbury Tales and noted that the "Pardoner's Tale is hardly flattering. By then, of course, it was too late for us. We had already taken that name, and the rest of the Underworld knew us as Pardoners. In these latter days, when we are beset by corrupted Pardoners and even Spectres hiding within our ranks, I wonder if the name was not prophetic. Were some of us doomed from the outset to fall to darkness?

The War of the Guilds

The Artificers were the first to restructure themselves as an actual Guild, whereafter they daimed leadership and special rights for them selves. Many other Guilds became incensed at the anrogance of the soulforgers, but we Pardoners understood their commitment to holding Oblivion at bay and creating lasting goods for all of us. We felt that their leadership would simply mean that we could rely on them to argue as fiercely for all our rights as they did for their own.

Though we could claim a past even longer than that of the Artificers, we had no desire to play power games with them. We were more interested in working alongside many of the other Guilds and improving our ability to serve petitioners who came to us for help. Despite our reticence, we were drawn into the inevitable squabbling through our ties with the Monitors. They offered to protect our Fetters from being de-



stroyed, and to warn us if any of the other Guilds meant to harm us. It seemed the other Guilds were bent on striking at the Artificers (and anyone who sided with them, but under the cover of united opposition to the soulforgers, old rivalries flared. Various Arcanoi manifested in their most harmful forms, as more zealous Guilds sought to coerce less enthusiastic ones to adopt a stance against the Artificers, or as ancient enmities found new expression. Ostensibly, we "joined" our fellow Guilds in opposing the soulforgers, but our real cause lay in bringing an end to the conflict. We could only do so by working within the ranks of the malcontents.

One of my chief duties at this time was to dissuade Charon from stepping in and putting an end to the quarrel himself. The continual fighting stalled production of goods, disturbed ongoing work when key Guildwraiths were quietly ambushed and dragged off and even interrupted our ability to perform Castigations without the constant threat of sabotage from one side or the other. Further, many talented wraiths disappeared into the soulforges as the Artificers handled their end of the war with typical directness.

We attempted to act as peacemakers. Several times during the two and a half centuries of war, we tried to call together all the Guildmasters to discuss the situation, but trust was in short supply. One Guildmaster would come, but four others would refuse, daiming they scented an Artificer trap. Attacks and threats continued to escalate; many prominent Guildwraiths vanished or were destroyed. Noting that our unwilling assistance usually amounted to very little gain for the trouble, most of the other Guilds ceased trying to involve us, but we could not ignore the damor around us. Ominously, I was warned that Charon's patience with the situation had reached its limits. With interference from the Deathlords imminent and the Guilds locked in a stalemate, the Pardoners once again stepped forward with a peace initiative

This time, however, we did not come as supplicants, but as commanders. We asked that the Guildmasters meet together on neutral ground. We also declared anathema any Guild who refused to send a representative. Issuing the threat that we Pardoners would cease to minister to every wraith in any Guild that would not sign a peace treaty, we brought the war to a close. The other Guilds acknowledged that we could not get along without the goods made by the Artificers. The soulsmiths got what they had sought all along. leadership of the Guilds and the privileges that entailed. The 13 Greater Guilds signed the Compact that ended all conflict and created a Council to hear any subsequent disputes.

Initially, many of the other Guilds resented our high-handed treatment of the crisis. Many probably still hate us for our role in elevating the Artificers to primacy among the Guilds. Others, who had before seen us merely as useful tools, now got a glimpse of our true power. After all, no one can long exist without the services of a Pardoner:

We argued long and hard among ourselves before undertaking this course of action, for it ran contrary to our avowed oath in the end, it was the only way open to us. The only saving grace was that we used our ultimate threat to end a stupid and costly war. May we never find it necessary to do so again.

One result of the Compact was to ban the Mnemoi from association with the Greater Guilds. We had long worked with the Mnemoi and admired their expertise, through the Arcanos of Mnemosynis, at calling forth pain ful memories in order to heal them. Little did we realize that they had become corrupted, chang ing and stealing memories at the behest of who ever paid them best. When the Guilds signed our Compact, we did not include the Minemoi, who had become the most hated land feared! Guildwraiths in Stygia. We applauded Charon's decision to disband and exile all members of the Guild. One of our continuing duties is to hunt for the few Mnemoi who remain, to make certain they never again betray the trust placed in them

Despite the other Guilds' reluctance to accept Artificer leadership, the signing of the Compact in 1354 signified a return to peaceful cooperation among the keepers of the Arcanoi. For us, this period of relative political stasis was all too brief. Although we succeeded in bringing the Guilds together, the centuries of inter-Guild turmoil prevented us from noticing the growing discontent within the Knighthood of the Fishers.



Betrayal by the Shining Ones

The Fishers became the largest religious faction in Stygia. Feeling strong in their num bers, they made demands upon Charon which he, justifiably, refused. Defiant, Fisher Crusaders attacked Charon's Onyx Tower, but were easily defeated by the force of the Legions. Charon was quick to respond, and crushed the Fishers handily. After taking the Fisher Temple, Charon's forces found stores of relics and treasures which, by treaty, belonged to the Empire. It seemed dean' the Fishers had broken their word and their treaty. In response to this violation of trust, Charon sent his own Knights to speak with the Shining Ones on the Far Shores, and banished from the Isle of Sorrows those who remained

We were greatly troubled by his actions. We Pardoners associated dosely with the Shining Ones and helped them make souls ready to reach the Far Shores, and we knew that few of these seekers were guilty. I sought to calm Charon's anger by pointing out that many of the Shining Ones were innocent. His rage was such that he would not listen, even to me. I was barred from his presence for weeks.

Then, catastrophe struck. Charon's Knights returned from the Far Shores with news that these isles were not the places of rest and peace we had thought them to be. Instead, the rulers of the various Far Shores were binding souls to themselves, greedily feasting on the power of having so many souls at their command. Some used the souls as slaves or playthings to provide amusement for more powerful, more cor rupted Restless. Others increased their prestige with each new soul's arrival, yet had no sys~ tem for processing the wraiths who came to them. Suffering souls were kept waiting, hoping in vain to be allowed entry to their chosen paradise. Their new masters, however, would neither let them in, nor release them to go elsewhere.

This news was the most crushing and souldeadening revelation our order could imagine. We had given our all to the cleansing of souls, making them ready for Transcendence. Suddenly, we learned, to our horror, that the myth of achieving Transcendence through traveling to the Far Shores was exactly that: a fantasy. Our very reason for being was in jeopardy' many of us stood paralyzed with shock. Good Pardoners left the Guild, convinced that we had betrayed and lied to wraiths who depended on us. A few despaired and gave in to Oblivion, further weakening our ranks.

Just as we felt lost, so did myriad others, including Charon. Betrayed by Restless he had trusted. Charon retired to his rooms for several weeks. Some believed that his grief was such that he was lost to Oblivion. What few know is that such a thing almost came to pass. He still refused to see me, though, even in the depths of his torment. Perhaps he thought we, too, had betrayed him' perhaps he merely wished to be alone to contemplate his response to the Shiming Ones' perfidy.

Knowing him as well as I did, though, I could not leave him to fall into despair. I defied his decree, which forbade me to see him, and butlied my way past his guards. Once inside his chambers, I convinced him that he was under the control of his Shadow when he made the proclamation banishing the Shining Ones, though even to this day. I do not know whether that was true. Somehow, I found the words that helped calm the storm within his heart.

We spoke at length regarding what to do about the Shining Ones, now that his reason had returned. He initially wished to consign them all to the soulforges for their crimes. I believe that he adopted a less punitive stance out of respect for my arguments.

And so, Charon emerged from his Tower and branded the Shining Ones and their followers Heretics, for they had betrayed their duties and led souls astray. Following the practices of the Fishers' own church, he instituted an Inquisition to find and destroy all Heretics. All who forswore allegiance to their Heretical beliefs found demency, as well as a place within the Legions. Any who would not were fed to the soulfires. lonically, such was the tide of suspicion and distrust that even we came under scruting for many saw us as little different from the betrayers with whom we had once worked. Only the fact that our ministrations were so necessary to every wraith linduding the Inquisitors/ saved us from outright censure.

Revolt of the Guilds

The omnipresent threat of Charon's Inquisition brought the Guilds into direct conflict with Stygian authority. Already disturbed by the Dictum Mortuum's limitations on traffic with mortals, many Guilds saw their power to affect the course of events in the Underworld curtailed by the fear of official investigation. Guilds whose chief dealings lay with the living world (such as Puppeteers, Monitors, Haunters, Proctors and Spooks/ faced grave punishments if they were caught using their skills. All of them were prepared to overthrow what they saw as Charon's despotic rule.

Although we were not privy to each Guilds reasons for advocating that we should collectively assume control of the Underworld, we know that many felt real concern for Stygia and her citizens. Some, no doubt, felt only lust for power and others, mere greed? we cast no aspersions and name no names. Many simply wished to stop the Inquisitors. We certainly could not blame those Guildwraiths numbered among the latter, as we, too, suffered the Inquisitors' harsh treatment in spite of our loyalty. Thus, despite the Guilds' diverse reasons for joining in revolt, we all agreed that such a step was necessary.

I was personally responsible for convincing our Guildmaster, Brother Reliant, that Charon was losing control. In spite of my almost comstant attendance on Charon, his Shadow tormented him continually. With our imperator slipping ever doser to madness and Oblivion, we thought it best that Stygia be ruled by those wraiths whose skills kept the city intact. We could not trust such a matter to the Deathlords, for they had become entrenched in their own petty struggles. They cared little what happened to Stygia, so long as each kept his or her power.

Granted, the Guilds were already angry. I acknowledge freely that my words and those of Brother Reliant were like matches set to dry tinder. It might well have exploded into flame on its own, but I must accept the responsibility for having sparked the fire by urging the Guilds to an action that cost us all dearly in its aftermath. In 1598, the Guilds rose in revolt. Led by the Artificers, we attempted nothing less than a complete overthrow of Stygia's government. Believing that our hard-won Compact had forged us into a strong and unassailable union, we underestimated the might of the Legions and our own inadequacy to withstand the pressures of open war. Almost immediately, our ranks began to disintegrate, torn apart by inner strife, as some Guilds began to regret their decision to participate in the coup.

Though the Usurers had been among the loudest to cry for rebellion, they abandoned our cause almost before we had begun. Seeing their allies leave, the Masquers deserted as well. Panicking, the Artificers attempted to bludgeon their way to victory, using raw power to make up for their lack of tactical expertise. It was not enough. Divided by internal dissension and riddled with the loss of many ancient and powerful Guildwraiths, the revolt crumbled.

The Breaking

As retaliation for our disloyalty. Charon decreed the dissolution of the Guilds. Any organization which called itself a Guild would henceforth be considered outlaw land its members fodder for the soulforges! The decree further stated that Legionnaires would take our place and perform our jobs. The Guilds were to vanish from the face of the Underworld.

Naturally, it became clear that the Legions could not adequately replace us. Work was left undone or botched, and projects which the Legionnaires started were soon sabotaged. Charon stormed and raged, I was told, even as the works of his empire fell into ruin around him.

For once, I hesitated to approach Charon, out of fear that his wrath might lead him to forget our long friendship for worse, to see my years with him as an attempt to influence him unduly! I struggled with my conscience, for I knew that Charon needed a Pardoner after the events of the coup but I was afraid he might consign me to the soulforges. In my mind, I was clearly guilty and deserved whatever punishment he decreed Equally strong, my pride made me determined not to abase myself before Charon. To my shame, it took a visit from other Guild members to convince me to go to Charon, to beg him for dem ency and reinstatement of the many Guildwraiths forbidden to practice their Arcanoi.



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Marshaling my courage and my arguments, I went to him, reasoning that Charon couldn't comsign all of us to the forges, lest he risk a general uprising or strengthen Oblivion. My chief fears were that I would arrive at Charon's quarters either to be turned away or to be met by Charon's Shadow. To prevent the former, I brazenly approached Charon's guards and demanded entry as Charon's confessor; implying that he had sent for me. My second fear evaporated when he bade me enter his chambers.

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He was not so much angry as hurt, and he let me know that he had needed my services during the time I had avoided him. Now I asked for him to forgive the transgressors, but first I performed the rites of purification for him. It seemed as though we had never been at odds. I resumed my regular visits with him and attempted each time to reinforce my pleas that he soften his position on the Guilds. Though he refused to permit the Guilds to return as such las he was fearful of another coup attempt! he allowed former Guild members to practice their callings as individuals under the aegis of the Legions.

Survival of the Pardoners

Despite the Breaking of the Guilds, we have continued to perform our vital services? we maintain our connections with one another and with other custodians of the Arcanoi. Stygian law forbids us to refer to ourselves as a Guild, but even the most stringent enforcers of that law recognize our usefulness as Castigators. We function as Pardoners, with individuals hanging out our lanterns wherever there is need. While we no longer have "Guild houses," we do maintain Chapter Houses, where instruction takes place, and where we can share our knowledge with one another.

Other Guilds lost more than either the Pardoners or the Artificers did, and when we can, we aid them. Still, it is meet that we suffered the least from the Breaking, for our society cannot survive without us. In my opinion, should we all give up our concern for material things, we could even get along without the Artificers la view not shared by most other Restless, in duding my dear friend Emberl, though, perhaps, we would still need their help in forging weak souls to stand against Oblivion. It is a certainty, however, that Stygia could not stand for long without our abilities. Take away the material goods, Artifacts and all, strip away all else from the majesty of the Isle of Sorrows, and you are left with a Psyche and her Shadow. Everything else is commentary' go and study it.

Had we been more willing to use that leverage in the coup, of course, things would have been different.

We could not do so, however. Although the Guilds had many members, when we used the threat of refusing to Castigate them, we were talking about letting a number of individual wraiths fall to their Shadows - and even then, we used our power to force a peace among us, rather than to wage war. Had we contemplated the same tactic in our attempted coup, we would have been pronouncing an interdict, an excommunication on all the Underworld. The idea of the battle for supreme power in Stygia being fought by Legions of Shadow eaten Restless was too horrible to contemplate. It betrayed everything we have always stood for do you blame us for not pushing Stygia to this pass? Some of the other Guilds blamed us for our retrcence in this matter and hinted that our reluctance to hold the ultimate threat over the heads of our foes led to the coup's failure. They might be right, but if we were to remain true to ourselves, we had no choice.

Despite what we suffered in the aftermath of this political catastrophe, we were able to utilize the Breaking of the Guilds to our advantage. Disguised as refugees fleeing from Stygia, many of our members succeeded in infiltrating Renegade and Heretic groups. In the past, we had ministered to individuals from these bands only when they came to usi they would not suffer us to join them. The fall of the Guilds, however enabled us to place Pardoners directly within the ranks of the Underworld's dissenters. Likewise, we have agents and Chapter Houses in most Necropoli. Most Pardoners serve their cohorts within their own Legions, forming bonds of affection and trust with those they help

Aftermath

In the following centuries, the Third and Fourth Maelstroms assaulted the Underworld Once again, Pardoners fought alongside the Legions. Even between Maelstroms, savagery and violence in the Skinlands found mirrors within the Tempest. Spectres became stronger and more numerous.

Seeing the devastation these Spectres wrought, Charon created a new group of Restless dedicated to pursuing and destroying Spectres in return for bounty. Some Pardoners joined that group which became known as the Doomslayers. Even today, though we now repudiate their methods, some among the Doomslayers claim Pardoner affiliation. We, for our part, tend to these souls as best we can, for surely the peril they face at the hands of their Shadows is terrible.

The Second World War saw massive casualties among the soldiers and millions of murdered victims - among them, Europe's Jews, Gypsies and homosexuals. The Shadowlands filled to bursting with these shattered souls. Again, we strove mightily to save as many as we could. We did not do enough For what it is worth, though, our emissaries have spread knowledge of our arts inside the wire, though we ourselves cannot journey there.

As battle raged in the Pacific, Stygia and the Jade Empire locked together in a war for the Stygian souls who died thousands of miles from home. Pardoners traveled with our troops, seeing to their spiritual needs and shielding them from Spectres who sought to capitalize on the conflict. I like to believe that, through our efforts, many souls were saved who might otherwise have been lost to Oblivion or its servants.

Then the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki roared through the Underworld, and all such petty concerns were swept aside. It is strange, to me, to call the salvation of souls "petty" but compared to the fury those blasts unleashed, the fate of a single soul was as a drop of rain in the ocean. The Fifth Great Maetstrom raged, and with it, from the depths of the Labyrinth, there rose a great Malfean known as Gorool. None could stand against the threat it posed, though many were lost to its hungers. Finally, armed with the strongest blessings we could give, Charon put aside his mask and sailed alone to meet the monster. Drawing the beast away from Stygia, Charon called forth a whitpool and flung himself into it, as he dragged Gorool along with him. Neither was seen again. Though most of Stygia knows this story, few know of our Guilds culpability in Charon's disappearance; fewer still know of my particular shame.

Charon

Charon was a man of many talents and great passions. I knew him as well as lif not better than/ anyone. Because I had existed alongside Charon since the earliest days, he entrusted the well-being of his soul to me. Most Restless know of Charon only as our greatest leader and the founder of Stygia. Few understand that he could feel betrayed and hurt by those he trusted when they failed him. Few understand that he was a man.

Often, he would brood as he considered the problems facing Stygia, as he made plans to ensure its survival. He agonized over how best to fulfill the Lady of Fate's original commands – especially once the Far Shores stood unveiled as a fool's dream. Charon often cried for the wraiths he was supposed to lead' he could also let loose a berserk rage when he felt he had been let down. Several times, he retreated from the Underworld to the maze of passageways inside the Onyx Tower, while he nursed his hurt and anger.

Throughout it all, I remained by his side, offering counsel and using our art to erase the stains upon his soul. I failed him only once, during the Revolt of the Guilds. Seeing his descent into madness and instability in his later years. I feared for Stygia and her Restless Dead. In the end, my abilities proved unequal to the task of saving Charon. I had hoped our final cleansing would be enough to restore our great leader to what – and who – he once was. It was not to be. If there is blame to assign for Charon's loss, that blame is mine.

Soon after Charon's descent, the Guild called upon me to become Guildmaster I know many felt that I needed the challenge to keep

me occupied. My first reaction was to refuse. I needed no such coddling to save me from Oblivion's lure. Then, I reconsidered. It seemed only just that I should have to deal with the many problems of our Guild as it faced a future with out Charon's tacit protection. I took the title, though I felt keenly the irony of having wraiths whom I had failed petition me to lead them. My hope in doing so was to undo some of the mistakes I had made and to keep other Pardoners, some as arrogant as I once had been, from repeating my errors. You must judge for yourselves whether I have succeeded in those aims during my tenure.

Present Day Pardoners

Since Charon's disappearance, the Deathlords have ruled in Stygia. Pointlessly, they quarrel among themselves and fight for control of the most souls, while they forget why those souls are needed. Stygia's pride of place, it seems, has been usurped by the Necropoli, where Anacreons plot their own ascendancy, to the detriment of the Underworld. We, who know these petty tyrants' souls and innermost secrets, see that they are unfit to rule. But who then, shall lead? We have seen the downfall of the Guilds before, when we rose in revolt. The Council of Guilds remains divided, and we Pardoners cannot ever trust the Usurers or their allies again.

Yet now paradoxically, the Pardoners might be stronger than many believe, for we harbor a great machine in the heart of our Guildhouse. Its use may allow us to assume the leadership of the Underworld – if we use it at the right time and can control the forces it shall inevitably unleash. And we hear that Charon is returning. I pray that he remembers us only with fondness. Should he remember else, I hope that he will grant us what we have given unto countless others throughout the centuries – pardon.



Chapter Two: The Pardoner's Tale (History)



Chapter Three: True Confessions

While we stand within the lantern's glow, Around us, others gather — illumined by Our light of clarity and contrition.
Outside the lantern's radius, The living and near-living hover.
Beyond it all, the darkness rules...
— Brother Tenacious, "Circles"

Now that you have heard our beginnings and have walked with us through the years to the present time, you are ready for the next step in your education as a Pardoner. The following brochures describe our structure as a Guild, the various groups our membership comprises, and our relations with the Underworld's assorted factions and the creatures beyond the Shroud.

First Brochure: Within the Lantern's Glow

Viewed from the inside, the Pardoners Guild loses some of its mystique. While our public image may be an intimidating one, and our methods of Castigation might seem arcane or terrifying, our internal affairs revolve around less esoteric aspects of existence. Policing ourselves, regulating the instruction of Apprentices and keeping track of Guild matters these things occupy a great deal of time.

The Structure of the Guild

In the days before the Guilds, our skill in Castigation and successes in overcoming Shadows and Oblivion determined our place within the order. There was no need for rank in those times, for we each knew the level of our skills and called upon others as needed. Decisions that concerned all of us were settled by reaching a mutually agreeable accord.

Although we had always known we were not equal to one another in our gifts for Castigation and our accomplishments, we were a true society. We all had a say in governing ourselves. If more weight were given to a particular Purifier's words than to another's, it was out of respect for that person's wisdom and experience, not merely because she had achieved a certain level of mastery in Castigation.

With the coming of the Guilds, we lost our easy camaraderie to artificial stratification. Some members, by virtue of having learned the deeper secrets of Castigation, became the *de facto* rulers of the Guild. Other equally worthy (though less schooled) Pardoners had little voice, regardless of their personal wisdom or insight into a particular situation.

In becoming a Guild, we adopted the practice of ranking members according to their relative skills. We assigned Apprentice, Journeyman, Master or Grand Master status to our members, although we also kept the old titles of Postulants, Pledges, Pardoners and Master Pardoners for internal use. At the top of our Guild, the Supreme Master (or Most Reverend Pardoner) acts as a spokesperson to the Hierarchy and the other Guilds. Decades past, he also served as a spokesman to Charon himself, but that role is sadly unnecessary these days.

The breakup of the Guilds has done little to change our basic structure. We maintain well-protected and inconspicuous Guildhouses, now called Chapter Houses, in Stygia and throughout the Shadowlands. Most Necropoli host at least one Chapter House; larger cities may have several smaller houses to serve outlying areas.

Most often, the Chapter Houses resemble churches, temples, convents or monasteries. Regardless of its architectural niceties, however, each Chapter House prominently displays the Pardoners' iron lantern, so that all who need our services can find us.

Our Chapter Houses serve primarily as centers for fellowship and instruction. Postulants spend their initial training period in residence, while ranking Pardoners use local Chapter Houses as their headquarters. While many Pardoners prefer to conduct their business in their own Haunts, the Chapter Houses offer private rooms for use during Castigations. They also provide venues for retreats and haunts-awayfrom-home for visiting Pardoners.

Training

Before we reinvented ourselves as a Guild, we trained many wraiths who stood outside our association. As Purifiers, all that we had insisted on from these students was that anyone learning Castigation under our tutelage must also take and abide by — our oath. Now we limit our teachings to wraiths who actually begin an Apprenticeship.

Apprentices/Postulants

Apprentices, or Postulants, come to us through attendance of our retreats or else through referral by a Guild member (usually the aspirant's regular Pardoner). These potential Guild members undergo an intensive period of training dur-



Illumination

When the great city of Stygia arose, Charon took the lantern he had used in his descent into the Labyrinth and placed it in a lighthouse to serve as a beacon shining over the whole city. We appreciated its symbolic importance and its unspoken echo of the tale of Diogenes, who carried a lit lantern through the brightest part of the day as he searched for one honest man. Accordingly, we petitioned the great lord, so that the lantern would become the symbol of our order. Just as it shed light against the darkness and kept it at bay, so we pledged to drive out the darkness within and replace it with an inner light that would serve each wraith as a beacon, illuminating her way to the Far Shores. Charon agreed. The iron lantern has been our symbol ever since.

ing which they study our history and become familiar with the various styles of Castigation, as well as the basic abilities associated with our particular Arcanos. Although they do not yet practice the rites of purification, Apprentices accompany Journeymen on their rounds to learn by observation. The final phase of a Postulant's training involves a rigorous Castigation by her primary trainer, the Journeyman who has supervised most of her studies. During this harsh and sometimes debilitating experience, the Postulant gains valuable insights that inform her later progress through the Pardoners' ranks. Once this step has been taken, a Postulant takes the Pardoners' Oath and joins our ranks as a working member of the Guild.

journeymen/Pledges

The Journeymen, or Pledges, form the core membership of our Guild. Bound by their sacred oath, they embark on the study of Castigation and practice their skills as Pardoners. Some of our most talented Journeymen serve as teachers, which enables them to build close relationships with the Guild's newest members. Journeymen make regular rounds and report the results of their efforts at Castigation to their Masters or mentors. During this time of intensive fieldwork, most Journeymen develop their own unique styles of Castigation and enjoy the fraternity of others who share their methods.

When a Journeyman has accumulated enough experience, she receives a summons from her mentor. In order to demonstrate her worthiness to attain the rank of Pardoner (or Master), she must perform a rite of purification upon the one who has overseen her Journeyman training. After successfully demonstrating her grasp of both the style and substance of Castigation, the Journeyman receives admission into the company of Masters and can now call herself a true Pardoner.

Masters/Pardoners

At this rank, Pardoners turn their attention toward more sophisticated and specific studies and learn lesser-known uses of Castigation. Using what they have learned as Journeymen about the Shadow and its ruses, they begin the dangerous task of applying their knowledge to the study of Spectres. Most Chapter Houses (and some individual Pardoners) possess a copy of Sister Fidelity's seminal work, *De Natura Spectrorum*, an exhaustive compilation of Spectre lore. Along with other works describing encounters with Oblivion's minions, this book forms the core of the Master-level Pardoner's reading list.

Masters also apply themselves to a rigorous schedule of regular Castigations, acknowledging that their close attention to the source of darkness places them in constant peril from their own Shadows. Most Masters work in tandem, with each member of a Master Pair acting as confessor to the other and monitoring her partner for signs of the Shadow's encroachment. This custom, initiated in the 16th century by Brother Loyalty, has proven successful in minimizing the risk involved in knowing the enemy too well.

Within the Guild, Masters act as teachers and mentors for Journeymen and Apprentices. Also, the security and safety of the Chapter Houses lies in their capable hands. As if these duties did not occupy enough time, Masters also practice their trade in the field. Many important wraiths in both Stygia and the Shadowlands insist on receiving Castigation from Pardoners of Master level or higher, as they fear to entrust their cleansing to mere Journeymen.

Grand Masters/Master Pardoners

Few Pardoners progress beyond the rank of Master. Some, however, demonstrate such skill in their work or such a keen understanding of Castigation and its applications that they merit the status of Grand Master (or Master Pardoner). We look to these superior Pardoners for leadership within the Guild, new advances in Castigation techniques and guidance in our dealings with other groups in the Underworld.

The few Grand Masters make up the Curia, which oversees Guild policy and supervises the distribution of members throughout the Underworld. Answerable only to the Supreme Master, members of this elite corps of experienced Pardoners also serve as confessors and confidantes to the Deathlords, Grand Masters of other Guilds, Anacreons of the Shadowlands' Necropoli and other powerful Restless. They



are the Pardoners who hold in confidence some of the most sensitive secrets of the Underworld.

The Supreme Master

The head of the Pardoners Guild is known within the ranks as the Supreme Master. Responsible for overseeing the Guild as a whole, she approves postings, acts as mistress of ceremonies when initiating Journeymen into Master status and conducts extensive research into new uses of the arts of Castigation before she approves them for general use. Many of her duties are political in nature. As Guildmaster of the Pardoners, much of her time is spent meeting with the heads of other Guilds and important members of the Hierarchy to arrange the exchange of knowledge and favors. The current Guildmaster is Sister Acceptance, once confessor to Charon himself.

Protecting Secrets



n earlier times, the Mnemoi and the Pardoners worked together closely. Whenever a Pardoner Castigated an important wraith, whether Centurion or Deathlord, the Pardoner then submitted himself to the ministrations of a trusted Mnemos. The Mnemos would, in turn, use upon the

Pardoner a proprietary art of Mnemosynis to remove from the Pardoner's mind whatever knowledge had been learned during the Castigation. In effect, this process rendered the Pardoner incapable of betraying the secrets told to him in confidence, since he no longer possessed them. Because of the Pardoners' dedication and the Mnemoi's reputation for integrity, no one questioned the system or worried that his secrets might be made known. Unfortunately, such naiveté made the inevitable fall all the more painful.

When it became known that the Mnemoi were selling secrets, the truth concerning their "removal" of knowledge from Pardoners also emerged. Rather than simply excising secrets from important wraiths' confessors, Mnemoi stole the information for later sale or use in blackmail schemes. Indicted along with the Mnemoi traitors, many Pardoners suffered under the questioning of Inquisitors determined to root out anyone disloyal to Stygia and all who had betrayed trusts. Very few Pardoners were judged guilty, yet it was one of the Guild's darkest hours.

Since that time, we Pardoners have had to rely on other means to reassure clients of our good intentions, and to protect from being disseminated the secrets we learn. Some of the older Pardoners had learned aspects of Mnemosynis from Mnemoi with whom they had served, and they utilized the Arcanos on themselves and their students. Understandably,

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many wraiths distrusted this method, having seen it misused already, and the practice gradually petered out.

Because the Mnemoi had proved themselves to be untrustworthy, many important Restless began exacting terrible oaths from those Pardoners who Castigated them. These Supplicants promised eternal agony to any who betrayed their secrets. Although most Pardoners had no intention of betraying their clients, many worried that they might unintentionally let something slip (or that their Shadows might delight in deliberately giving away what their Psyches learned).

Obviously, another method of protecting our clients and ourselves was needed. As always, the burden of this crisis fell to Father Compassionate. He, in conjunction with several other elder Pardoners, developed a new Castigation Art — Shadow Screen, a way of fencing off things the Pardoner doesn't want her Shadow to know. Incidentally, this art also screens the information from the conscious mind of the Psyche as well. It isn't perfect, but it's certainly better than nothing — or the Mnemoi.

It goes without saying that Pardoners generally take their oath seriously; it is considered a betrayal worthy of serious censure from the Guild for a Pardoner to intentionally reveal anything told to her in confidence by a client. We ostracize and refuse to teach any wraith, regardless of his rank within the Guild, who does break the seal of the confessional. This measure serves to keep most Pardoners honest and to reassure all who turn to the Guild that their secrets will be kept safe. Finally, some of the more important officials of Stygia simply refuse to see anyone but the regular Pardoner with whom they have built up a relationship. Fewer people hearing their confessions means fewer chances those secrets will be spread around.

If a secret does come out, the Pardoner invariably takes the blame, and Deathlords have such *imaginative* ways of punishing traitors. Still, many Pardoners get away more lightly than they otherwise might in such situations, as even the Deathlords fear alienating us unnecessarily. In the end, the simple truth is this: Everyone needs a Pardoner, and all simply have to take it on faith that we who battle Shadows won't give those dark alter egos any more ammunition than we must.

Status Within the Guild

Despite the official stratification of the Guild and bestowal of various ranks according to expertise, we also acknowledge what each Pardoner does with her skill. Within the Guild, a lower-ranked Pardoner who has "confessed" important people and gained knowledge of a number of secrets is often shown more respect than a ranking member who does little other than dabble among the rabble. We Pardoners look inside other people's souls and discover their fears, their weaknesses and sometimes their crimes. Although we are bound by our oath not to betray secrets to others, the mere fact that we possess such secrets gives us the potential for control, and that is what gives us status - knowing secrets that we are disciplined enough not to reveal. It is considered a mark of honor. We also award status to Pardoners who invent new twists on our Arcanos or who utilize existing arts in particularly creative ways.



Chapter Three: True Confessions
The Pardoners' Oath

The following constitutes the oath as written by Hippocrates, known to his fellow Pardoners as Father Compassionate. Sworn by all members of the Pardoners Guild, the oath is also required of anyone who is taught any of the arts of Castigation. Although altered slightly over time to reflect changes in the Underworld (such as the substitution of God or the Saints for Apollo, when it was sworn by adherents of the Fishers heresy), this version of the oath covers all the major provisions of the original.

The Oath

I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepios and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will fulfill according to my best ability and judgment this oath and this covenant:

I shall look upon those who have taught me this art as equal to my parents, and share all I have with them if they are in need. I shall regard their brethren as my brethren and teach them this art if they desire to learn it. I agree that I shall teach no one who has not taken this oath and signed our covenant, and that our art shall not be used for personal aggrandizement,

profit or other dishonorable purpose.

I will use my knowledge for the benefit of Supplicants, according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from all harm except that necessary to cleanse the darkness within them. I agree to take all precautions that my treatment be successful and offer no lasting harm; I shall not pursue the Shadow to such lengths that the destruction of the Psyche might

result.

Whatever place I may visit to offer my Castigation, there I will go for the benefit of the sufferer, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief, or other intentional damage or harm to those there, be they thrall, Legionnaire, Freewraith or

Lord.

What I may hear or see in the course of my ministrations in regard to private matters, personal weaknesses or hidden matters which should not be spread abroad, I shall keep to myself and hold such things shameful to be spoken about. If I fulfill this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted me to enjoy fame and honor among all Restless for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may my fellow Pardoners repudiate me and bring me to justice in whatever fashion they deem consistent with my crimes. To these restrictions and to this covenant I do swear

Practices in the Guild Why We Accept Fees For Our Work

Although we spoke long concerning this practice and the fear that we might be tempted to corruption through it, in the end, we decided it was better to set Guild-regulated rates for our services. Doing so kept individuals from abusing their necessary office by gouging petitioners, and also served as a deterrent to any who would abuse the good nature of our brethren.

Fees are not always in oboli. Sometimes Pardoners accept information or an exchange of knowledge (a Castigation in return for teaching the Castigator a needed Arcanos such as Argos, for example). Although the other Guilds look askance at giving away Guild Arcanoi, there is generally little resistance to teaching Pardoners basic skills they might need.

Why We Exact Payment for Training

Along with charging fees for our work, we also choose to collect payment for training and upkeep from wraiths who join the Guild. This practice stems from the feeling that wraiths unwilling to pay lack the necessary commitment to their calling.

If talented wraiths cannot afford to pay immediately, our policy allows us to accept them with the understanding that all initial fees they collect revert to the Guild until their debt is paid. In some cases, we allow members of Master rank within the Guild to sponsor individuals, in essence agreeing to teach them without payment. Once such postulants reach Journeyman status, they are expected to teach newer members. In effect, they receive their education for free, in return for tutoring others.

Pardoner Groups/Factions



ardoners tend to group themselves by styles of Castigation. Each method of subduing the Shadow and ridding a wraith of the inner darkness evolves from a particular philosophy of enacting the rites of Purification. While most of these groups cooperate with one another, and member-

ship in one group does not necessarily preclude a Pardoner's joining a second or even a third group, occasionally arguments between factions do erupt. These disputes rarely signify true divisiveness. Instead, they serve as forums for debate about the best approach to the act of Castigation.

Confessors

The largest faction of Pardoners, the Confessors, draws upon the ancient method of discourse and dialogue to cajole, convince or coerce the Shadow into a state of remorse. While some refer to this method as Socratic, others see a greater resonance with the Catholic Church's sacrament of confession, in which the supplicant recites a litany of his sins, discusses them with his confessor and receives a penance in return for forgiveness. Despite its emphasis on verbal exchange, this method of Castigation can be just as harsh and painful as ones practiced by more physical Castigators. Most Confessors come from the ranks of the clergy, although guidance and marriage counselors, advice columnists and bartenders also find this style compatible with their concept of Castigation.

Inquisitors

The harshest style of Castigation involves practices best described as torture. Although this group of Pardoners takes its name from the medieval institution to which the bulk of its members belonged in life, many Inquisitors hail from both earlier and later eras. Modern Inquisitors include police investigators, detectives, surgeons, drill instructors and government intelligence specialists.

Psychists

While the idea of purification through self-knowledge has existed for millennia, the advent of modern psychology and the analytic method of achieving personal clarity swelled the ranks of this group of Pardoners. More formal in approach than a Confessor, a Psychist attempts to understand and assist their petitioners' Shadows to work through the motivations for their wrongdoing. In addition to old-style philosophers, these Pardoners include Freudian psychoanalysts, New Age counselors, complexity theorists, research scientists and motivational seminar leaders.

Scourges

The earliest forms of purification or chastisement usually involved some kind of physical punishment or suffering. Indeed, public flogging still exists in some parts of the Skinlands. It is not surprising, therefore, that some Pardoners follow the practice of literally beating the Shadow into submission. These Pardoners usually carry specially made whips, flails, or other, similar punitive devices to announce their proclivity for this form of Castigation. In life, many of the oldest Scourges belonged to medieval religious communities that practiced self-flagellation or other forms of physical penance. Some Scourges prefer direct physical contact with the Shadow, and they literally pummel it into repentance as they rip away the stains of darkness. Modern proponents of this form of

The inquisition and the Unlidded Eye

The Inquisitors became the premiere faction of Pardoners during the medieval period, when numerous practitioners of our Arcanos spread throughout Europe in an attempt to root out heresy.

In the Skinlands, the Church's Inquisitors were concerned primarily with the soul, rather than the physical body. They performed the most gruesome and hideous tortures. in the certainty that such methods surely drove the devil out of their victims. These measures presumably brought the soul into a state of grace once again. It mattered little that many who came under their ministrations died (or were burned at the stake). Bodies and Earthly existence were transitory; the soul endured forever.

When these inquisitors reached the Underworld, they found that their jobs were not over. Once again, they took up the whip and the thumbscrew and rejoiced that, even after death, their vigilance against evil could continue. Though many have since mellowed, others remain as adamantly determined as ever. Among these staunch advocates of purity, there is a great deal of crossover with the Order of the Unlidded Eye. Most Pardoners were shocked by the revelation of the Shining Ones' betrayals, of their failure to help the Restless entrusted to their care find Transcendence. The Inquisitors merely nodded, as if they had always known there was corruption within the ranks; and, just as they had scoured the living once before, the Inquisitors volunteered to cleanse this new group of Heretics, too.



purification come from a varied mix that includes military personnel, heavy metal aficionados, boxers, wrestlers, martial arts instructors and boarding school disciplinarians.

Special Interest Societies

In addition to these factions, a few other groups unite around special interests or functions. Members of these societies share a common vision of what they hope to achieve as Pardoners or else provide necessary services to the Guild as a whole.

Missionaries

Some Pardoners dedicate themselves to ministering to the Shadows of wraiths who stand outside the Hierarchy. Traveling in pairs or small groups, these Missionaries seek Renegade and Heretic strongholds, outlaw camps and remote pockets of wraith society. In those places, they offer their services (frequently without compensation) to Restless in desperate need of Castigation. Although they usually remain away from their Chapter Houses for long periods of time, Missionaries return to us whenever they can to share what they have learned and, occasionally, to bring back recruits.

Of late, a few Missionaries talk of going to the Far Shores to cleanse the leaders of these false paradises. They believe that if they can succeed in their mission, the ancient myth of the Far Shores could yet become a reality.

Darksiders

Made up exclusively of Masters, this highly specialized society focuses on applying our knowledge of Spectres (including our speculative theories on their redemption) "in the field." Darksiders walk a dangerous path along the fringes of the Tempest, where they seek confrontations with Spectres. During some periods of our history, membership in the Darksiders was forbidden, due to the belief that courting Spectres inevitably ended in wedding Oblivion. Not surprisingly, the Darksiders survived these difficult periods, and since the Fifth Maelstrom, the spread of Oblivion has made their existence a necessity.

Darksiders use their name to remind themselves of the potentially damning consequences of their activities. These Pardoners most often attach themselves to groups of Doomslayers. They minister to the needs of these frontline warriors and simultaneously seek to further their knowledge of Oblivion's armies.

Voluntary submission to the most rigorous forms of Castigation helps protect Darksiders from succumbing to the advances of Spectres, but an aura of mistrust surrounds them, despite their precautions. Many among us fear that constant contact with the minions of Oblivion can result only in their

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eventual absorption into the ranks of Spectres. The persistence of rumors that the Darksiders harbor Doppelgangers in their midst has launched more than one official investigation of the society.

The Beacon

Perhaps more than any other Guild, we need to keep ourselves honest. We do so through the auspices of the Beacon, a group of carefully selected Pardoners dedicated to watching other Pardoners and making certain that their colleagues don't misuse the information they obtain under the seal of Castigation. Referred to by many within the Guild as the Pardoners' Pardoners, members of the Beacon occupy a unique position. While they enjoy tremendous respect from their fellow Guild members, their presence usually evokes feelings of fear and wariness.

Most Pardoners regularly offer Castigation to Guild members. The Beacon steps in whenever charges of corruption arise or when a member exhibits behavior that indicates unwonted growth of her Shadow. Members of this society practice a form of Team Castigation that nearly always ferrets out even the most deeply hidden secrets, and unearths the truth in any given situation. While they do not completely eradicate corruption, members of the Beacon do succeed in keeping it to a minimum. They also serve as a visible sign to other wraiths of our good intentions.

Philosophical Divisions



he importance of our goals overrides most political and philosophical divisions and allows us to interact with one another freely and without the internal rancor that threatens the integrity of many other Guilds. There do exist some major philosophical differences, however, which

could cause serious internal dissension if left unresolved.

The main philosophical conflict concerns the disposition of the Shadow. Most Pardoners want to cleanse the shadow entirely. Others want to bring it into balance with the Psyche. For them, the obliteration of the Shadow is not the goal. Another viewpoint has recently gained adherents, that of Transcendence through Oblivion.

The Ablutionists

In general, most Western Pardoners adhere to the ideal of cleansing. Some in this camp, however, are beginning to wonder what the point is. If there are no Far Shores, there is

little reason to cleanse a wraith's soul, except to keep her from Oblivion. Many of these practitioners now strive to eradicate wraiths' Shadows, rather than simply to cleanse them over and over, in hopes that these return customers will someday Transcend.

The Reclamationists

From contact with their counterparts in the East, a tiny number of Pardoners have conceived the idea that the Shadow is an integral part of the wraith, indivisible from him and unable ever to be truly cleansed or purged. They believe that the Shadow must become fully integrated with the Psyche, each acknowledging the need for the other and working in partnership. As there is light, so must there be darkness to balance it. The Reclamationists see their job as leading the Shadow back into cooperation with the Psyche; their goal is to make every wraith a bulwark against Oblivion by giving the Shadow equal importance, thereby cutting off the Spectres' main argument in recruiting Shadows to serve the great Void. As things currently stand, the Reclamationists have not vet broken with the Ablutionists. For now, the two groups form the vanguard of the Darksider movement, through which they test their various theories.

The Cult of Inner Flame and Darkness

Some of our number have become outright Heretics. Disillusioned with the Far Shores and angered by Stygia's decline and the continual influx of tortured wraiths, they have become believers in the cleansing power of Oblivion itself. They propose that a Pardoner use Castigate only to guide other wraiths into an acceptance of Oblivion as the means of Transcendence. Adherents of this heresy maintain that it is only the struggle against Oblivion that brings forth the Shadow and Spectres.

Thus, by their reckoning, if a wraith simply accepts the erasure of the self, of her particular consciousness, she will Transcend her own unruly will. Letting go and facing obliteration will then allow the wraith to leave behind her Restless existence and move onward — either to a higher plane or to reincarnation. Needless to say, nobody likes the members of this cult. They are banned within the Pardoner's Guild itself, and anyone known to be a member is captured by her fellow Pardoners and sent to the main Guildhouse for as strenuous and prolonged a re-education as is needed. Should the Cultist not respond to these rehabilitation efforts, she is reluctantly (and sorrowfully) given to the Artificers, so that their soulforges may purify her and burnish her soul to eternal brilliance. The Guild officially refuses to discuss the Fallen, and Pardoners turn away when the name is mentioned. Indeed, the Guild resists even acknowledging that the Fallen were once Pardoners. These beings are grouped together only for convenience when whispering of them, for they have failed in their missions and gone over to the other side. As has been noted elsewhere, some Shadows become so acclimated to Castigation that greater and more prolonged effort must be exerted to affect them at all. The Fallen are those Pardoners whose Shadows eventually triumphed by leading their Psyches further along Oblivion's path until, eventually, they succumbed to the lure of the darkness and became Spectres.

The Fallen are exceptionally dangerous. These dark entities are well aware of every trick in the Pardoners book, having used those same stratagems themselves for untold years. Furthermore, they often know Guild secrets, which the Fallen can turn to their advantage. Many of them have begun working on ways to get around Castigation's power to cleanse Spectres from an area or to do battle with the Shadow-eaten. Finally, although the Guild shudders even to think it might be true, rumor has it that some of the Fallen currently reside within Chapter Houses, where they pretend they are still normal Pardoners and lead all whom they "Castigate" to Oblivion. This rumor is, not surprisingly, strenuously denied by the Guild leadership.

Second Brochure: Illumined by Our Light – Pardoners in the Underworld



ardoners, like all wraiths, exist within a larger society. We recognize the importance of maintaining amicable ties with as many groups in the Underworld as possible, while we cultivate the measured neutrality so vital to our calling. Nevertheless, we do hold opinions about the

wraiths we serve. We emphasize, again, the uniqueness of our position in wraith society: Sooner or later, everyone comes to us. We try to administer our skills without prejudice. Even so, the following passages describe the feelings of most Pardoners toward various groups in Stygia and the Shadowlands.

The Big Three The Hierarchy

From the Deathlords who rule the Empire of Stygia to the lowliest thrall in the remotest outpost, everyone within the Hierarchy depends on Pardoners to do battle with his Shadow. The Hierarchy officially acknowledges our existence as a "society," although it is quick to deny that we exist as a Guild. That suits us as well, as we became a Guild in response to the demands of the era that gave birth to the Guild system.

No Pardoner has, to our knowledge, ever been arrested for practicing her vocation, nor has any of the Legions ever interfered with a Castigation in progress. To say that members of Stygia's ruling Council consult with us would constitute an exaggeration. To deny that we have some influence in the highest circles of Stygia and the Shadowlands would be a lie.

Renegades

Because we exist by the largesse of the powers that be, we have no official dealings with the groups of disaffected and rebellious wraiths known as Renegades. Nevertheless, Renegades — perhaps more than most other wraiths — need our services, since they tend to accumulate anger and negative emotions more rapidly than do members of the Hierarchy.

We refrain from questioning wraiths who come to us about their political affiliations, so we have no real way of knowing whether a wraith we Castigate belongs to a Renegade group. Our Missionaries *do* travel to areas where known Renegades gather. Some of our members sojourn for long periods of time with a particular group and try to keep these angry young wraiths on the right side of Oblivion.

Heretics

We do recall that Pardoners once bore the label of Heretic, due to the religious overtones that color our duties. Even today, some wraiths consider us only an obol's throw away from the Restless who believe they have found the Far Shores. Like Renegades, they are anathema to official wraith society. To us, however, they constitute only another populace in need of Castigation.

Missionaries from our Guild attach themselves to known Heretic groups, become part of their communities and gain their trust in order to minister to them. We neither condone nor condemn Heretics for their eccentricities; theirs are souls like any others'.

The Other Guilds

Even though Guilds officially ceased to exist after the time of the Breaking, we still keep contact with the various societies, fellowships, alliances and unions that arose to take their places. As with other groups, we attempt to foster cordial relations with all of our former Guild associates. However, history has a habit of imprinting its memories upon us and we can neither forget groups that helped us in the past, nor forgive ones that betrayed us when the Guilds had the potential to change the Underworld.

Friends

We maintain strong ties with the Monitors, although the links between our two groups may not be immediately apparent. They serve as our connection to the Skinlands and provide us with vital information about the Fetters of our clients. Just as we vigilantly watch over the wraiths in our care, the Monitors exercise a similar guardianship over the people and things that bind wraiths to the world of the living.

Our relations with the Artificers consist of mutual respect, in recognition of the fact that we are two sides of the same obol. The Artificers purify and remake Corpus; we purge and refresh "souls." Although they classify us among the "younger Guilds," we allow them this fiction because we understand their need to maintain their place as first among the Guilds. We take pride in our association with these honorable and — like us — oath-bound wraiths.

We endeavor to maintain good relations with the Harbingers, since we often need speedy travel through the Tempest, in response to pleas for emergency Castigations. We have recently begun an experiment in conjunction with the Sandmen, who have discovered a method of cleansing souls through the use of dreams. Their Fortifiers study with us to learn how to combine what they do with compatible applications of Castigation.

Enemies

Although we do attempt to remain above petty bickering and hatreds, we have trouble dealing with certain Guilds (or pseudo-Guilds) as groups. The rabble who call themselves Spooks seem dedicated to spreading Oblivion through ran-



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dom acts of violence in the Skinlands and in the Underworld. Their mentor Guild, the Haunters, is little better. Although we do not refuse to minister to individuals from these groups, we refuse to have any official dealings with them. To do so would be to give tacit sanction to their aims and practices.

Were it not for their shameless betrayal of the Guilds, we would have no real problem with the Usurers — apart from the fact that their Arcanos gives them the potential to shift the balance between light and darkness within others. We know our self-imposed limits with regard to this ability; we do not know theirs. What we do know is that any group which has once betrayed a trust will likely do so again.

The Greatest Foe

Despite our distaste for the Haunters and Spooks, our Guildmaster sits with their Guild heads in council. We save our hatred for the Mnemoi. As we were closely affiliated with the Mnemoi, we saw them betray their oaths and fall to corruption. Because of their excesses, our own name was besmirched. Their ability to shape and recast memories makes them dangerous to every wraith. Can you imagine the abuses they have committed? Memories of Fetters and Passions wiped from wraith's minds. Secrets stolen and sold to Spectres for mere oboli. Good wraiths condemned to the forges when their "own" false memories betray them. Such crimes are insupportable.

Though their Guild was broken by Charon, individual Mnemoi still exist. We refuse to Castigate them, never allow one inside our heads, and never, ever trust one. To our way of thinking, it would be a far, far better thing that they might do if they all fell into Oblivion's maw, than if they were to drag hundreds of others into it with their lies.

The Third Brochure: Outside the Lantern's Radius – Creatures of the Skinlands

Most of us take seriously Charon's laws regarding congress with the living world and its inhabitants. We have less temptation to stretch the interpretations of the *Dictum Mortuum* than do other Guilds, such as the Puppeteers, Haunters and Monitors. Nevertheless, we, too, have Fetters and connections to the Skinlands. Like others, we fall prey to temptation from time to time. This short pamphlet explains our

limited interactions with creatures who dwell across the Shroud.

The Quick

Aside from keeping track of our loved ones on the other side of the Shroud, our contact with the Quick is minimal. Occasionally, some ambitious Psychists attempt to communicate with a living individual whose knowledge might shed some light upon the motivations of a particularly troublesome Shadow, but that is all. While the Guild officially discourages this practice, we do not go out of our way to prosecute or punish this degree of commitment to a client.

Occasionally, we receive information from the Monitors about certain individuals who, to prevent their subsumption into the ranks of Spectres, will need immediate Castigation upon their arrival in the Shadowlands. We keep track of these living, and of potential recruits. Our primary concern, however, remains with the Restless.

The Risen

Like wraiths, these unfortunate creatures possess Shadows. Therefore, they need our help. Sometimes, only a Master Pardoner can quell the darkness that drives a wraith to reclaim her body; to be honest, we rarely are able to prevent Restless from Rising. Still, whenever we can, we respond to their cries of anguish and desperation. Since we believe that the Risen do not truly belong in the Skinlands, we feel that contacting them there and attempting to assist them in acceptance of their fate violates none of Charon's dictates.

Because of these special cases, we had to seek instruction from certain Puppeteers in order to master the necessary power to cross the Shroud through Skinriding. Oddly enough, wraiths affiliated with the Puppeteers Guild often refuse to help us in this worthy endeavor, and we find ourselves working with wraiths that the Guild has cast off or abandoned. This uncooperativeness is odd, considering how desperately most Risen need our help, but the Puppeteers' unfortunate, unthinking dislike for us (for which we can find no basis) colors all of their dealings.

Fortunately, friendly Monitors, despite their Guild's association with the recalcitrant Puppeteers, also showed us how to use their Lifeweb Arcanos in locating the Conduits of these unfortunate, driven individuals. However, finding a Risen is only half the battle. The increased power of the Shadows of the Walking Dead makes ministering to them among the most dangerous ventures a Pardoner can undertake, second only to the work of the Darksiders.

Ironically, Pardoners who interact with the Risen find themselves in the awkward position of having to deal with more than just an unruly Shadow. In many cases, the Psyches of these revenants actively attempt to undermine our Casti-



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gations by refusing help to curb their potent urges. Often, we must use trickery and duplicity for them to submit to our purifications. While many of us seek some way to reconcile Shadow and Psyche, to heal the division between the two "selves," the state of cooperation manifested by the Risen is decidedly not what we had in mind.

Supernaturals

Other supernatural creatures, both mortal and immortal, dwell in the Skinlands. Most of them know of our existence, but few of them care to use what they know. In most cases, the feeling is mutual.

Vampires

Although we sense the imminent presence of the Shadow in the vicinity of vampires, we hesitate to involve ourselves with these unliving creatures. Unlike the Risen, vampires are immune to Castigation. The best we can do is find a vampire when death finally claims her, before her inner corruption propels her into the ranks of Spectres. A few attempt to control us with their powers. Those vampires we avoid; their powers cannot reach us beyond the Shadowlands.

Werewolves

A few of these shapeshifters, ones who call themselves Silent Striders, have traveled in the Shadowlands. So long as

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they intend no harm, we leave them alone to wander their own paths. On rare occasions, a Pardoner strikes up an acquaintance with a Strider; the fruits of such partnerships can be interesting. These "Garou" seem interested in our ability to cleanse Shadows. If we can share knowledge that helps their struggles against whatever great enemy threatens them, we should feel obligated to do so.

Mages

Although technically mortal, these changers of reality occasionally visit the Shadowlands. Mages who practice shamanic rites have long looked to us for guidance during their rites of passage, and, when it is feasible, we oblige. They respect us as spirit guides, and, through them, we have managed to pass along some of our learning about the healing of souls. If we can use these postulants to lessen the Shadow's power in the Skinlands, we will do so at every opportunity. In general, however, we stay clear of other mages — particularly those who seem interested in gaining power over us.

Changelings

Long ago, the faeries came to us along a dreampath they called the Bright Road. As it was part of our duty to do so, we assisted these travelers in preparing for their next life. Sometime during the Middle Ages, however, they stopped coming. We thought they had left the Skinlands forever, and wept at the loss. In their place, creatures called changelings — pseudofaeries, if you will — have proliferated. Some of them have an affinity with the Shadowlands; others radiate a palpable aura of darkness that begs for intervention. We leave them and their devices to the Sandmen, who seem to have more in common with them than we do.

The Fourth Brochure: Where the Darkness Rules— Spectres

As students of the Shadow's wiles, Pardoners have closer contact with Oblivion and its agents than members of any other Guild. Our knowledge gives us power, but it also leaves us vulnerable, unless we take great care in how we use what we learn. This short treatise covers one of the most sensitive topics within the Guild — Spectres and their potential for redemption.

Spectres

To most residents of the Underworld, Spectres represent the epitome of foulness. These soldiers in Oblivion's army pose the single greatest threat any wraith is likely to face in the Underworld. To Pardoners, however, Spectres symbolize something else. They are our failures. If our goal is to conquer the forces of Oblivion, both within and without, our battle cannot end with the war against the Shadow.

Ultimately, most of us simply battle Spectres when we find them. Central to the Darksiders' campaign against Oblivion is a belief in the eventual redemption of all Spectres. They claim that, if we can find the shred of Psyche that still remains within each and every one of these Oblivionwracked creatures, we can work at nurturing it and giving it the strength to reclaim its Corpus. If this technique succeeds, we can weaken Oblivion by convincing its soldiers to desert, and also learn even more about the tricks and tactics of our supreme enemy.

Darksiders often assist certain groups of Doomslayers, called Martyr Knights, in their attempts to redeem captured Spectres. We applaud these wraiths' noble and selfless efforts, even as we watch them closely, lest their own Shadows betray them.





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Chapter Four: Secrets

The following pamphlet was found near the Guild's printing press in the main Chapter A Note to the Council of Masters: House. At first, I assumed that it was more material for Brother Tenacious' lectures. Upon closer inspection, however, it proved to be the ramblings of a Shadow (presumably that of Brother Tenacious), whose words had been transcribed as it spoke. I have sent it for your perusal for several reasons. First, the manuscript provides a unique glimpse into the Shadow itself; second, it reveals a plethora of highly confidential information we may not want disseminated among our younger members. Further, if Brother Tenacious' Shadow has been able to retain its memories, that could bode ill for our vaunted powers to screen such knowledge from our own Shadows. Finally, there is some indication in the manuscript itself that others were involved in the transcription process. While I would be alarmed enough to discover that some of our Shadows are now cooperating to undermine us, I am even more fearful that it goes beyond that. I hesitate to raise the suspicion that Spectres could have infiltrated the Guild House itself, but such a possibility must be considered,

and soon.

Mother Faith, editor

Guildwraiths Among Us: True Secrets of the Pardoners

I figured you'd get it sooner or later. Yeah, so I'm an alternative personality. That's a term we Shadows like to use, so we don't run into so much prejudice. Hey, you think it's easy being the Shadow of a Pardoner? We gotta be strong just to get a word in edgewise. So, I got some buddies together (yeah, that's you guys) and we're using the Guild's printing press while my so-called Psyche is out to lunch. We're gonna tell you a few of the juicier secrets these guys hide from the rest of the Underworld. So, sit back. Relax. Get into "meditation mode" and get ready to laugh your ass off at the mess these idiots have made. They got four big secrets they don't want nobody to find out about. Here's the first one:

Big Fat Lie Number One

Pardoners have more control over their Shadows than other wraiths.

Not!

Jeez, you'd think these guys would figure things out better. Even when they're just Apprentices they know how to make us behave and do what they want. When we act like good guys and offer to help them out of a bad situation, whadda they do? They use Coax to make us behave ourselves and give them just as much help as they need and not an eensy bit more. They think that means we can't fool them into "harming themselves" while they use our power. Not only do they not even say thanks, they're a real buncha suckers!

They forgot something. We get a free lunch, an Angst appetizer, so to speak, every time they use this trick. And if they screw up, we get to chow down all over again. The bottom line: we get 'em coming and going. Whee!

Wanna know why they fall for this one every time? 'Cause they aren't the ones who're in control a lot of the time. We got whatcha might call a unique relationship with our Psyches. The deal goes like this: We let them get to know us real well; once they do, we use that against 'em. Then they have a lot of trouble fighting off what we think they should do because...you guessed it! We know them real well too!

Ever played Pardoner? You got any idea what they really do? They snoop out all your deepest secrets and biggest weaknesses. Yo, genius, you think they aren't gonna use that stuff? Why do you think using Castigate to find out secrets (or even to "cleanse" you of our influence) fills them with Angst? You don't believe it? Just ask one. Walk right up and say, "Hey, Mr. Pardoner, why would you help me out when it gains you Angst?" Don't expect an answer, though. That's Secret Number Four. No skipping down ahead of time, bozos. Wait for it.

Now, think about it for a minute. Does Angst help out the Psyche? No? Well, who is it good for then? (Let's have a little Final Jeopardy music while you think about that one.) Bing! Time's up. You got it! Its our bread and butter. Now why would the so-called "good guys" want to fatten us up? Maybe they've made some deals with us. Ever think about that one? What if that guy who's flaying your Corpus is actually some dude whose Shadow's in control of the show? Puts a whole new light on Castigation, don't it? Oh yeah, and remember, it ain't the Shadow taking all that damage and pain during a session with a Pardoner; it's you!

Psst. Got it yet? Why would I tell you this? And why would we let our Psyches do this to other wraiths? What better way to bring out your Shadow than by torture? Pardoners. Ya gotta love 'em.



The Pardoner Speaks

I have added commentary to this book in order to refute the material contained within it. While some may argue that we should destroy these works, I feel that there may be some value to our postulants in seeing the sorts of lengths to which Shadows will go to discredit our calling. Obviously, they fear us.

here is the truth of the situation: These allegations are outright lies. Remember who is speaking. No one can trust a Shadow. While it is true that we intently study our Shadows (and those of other wraiths), we do it to understand better how to help our fellow Restless. The trick is to know your enemy, but not too well. Yes, we acquire Angst during the execution of our duties, but we willingly accept this burden in order to help wraiths in our care. Our clients don't gain Angst; they lose some. This procedure weakens their Shadows, helping them to carry on with a lightened soul, one that can withstand the blandishments of their Shadows with greater fortitude. Where did this abominable document come from, anyway?



Comments from the Peanut Gallery

Well, if you can add stuff to the main deal, so can I. So, boys and girls, it looks like my socalled better half wants to play rough. Okay, tough guy. Take your best shot. But first, shaddup and sit down. It's my turn.



The Pardoners are apolitical. They don't have any ties beyond their Hierarchy clients.

Like we're supposed to believe this?

Let me get this straight. The Pardoners ain't got any ties to the Heretics, even though they worked with these folks for centuries? The Pardoners have been whining about "cleaning up souls so they could travel on to the Far Shores" for longer than most people have been dead, and the Far Shores belong to the Heretics (who used to be called the Shining Ones, back when they kissed Charon's ass).

Now, correct me if I'm wrong here, but the way to power in the Underworld is to control a buttload of souls. That's why the Deathlords grab every one they can get their hands on. Keep following. This all comes together in a minute.

The Pardoners helped the Heretics grab whole boatloads of souls, and nobody thinks they got paid for it? How 'bout all those "future considerations" everybody always talks about? Bet they've really got the Heretics by the halo. They must think we're really stupid if they think we believe they have no contact with the God squad.

Speaking of the Renegades, which we weren't, but who cares? Guess who hangs with the outlaw brigade? Bingo! Oh, they say they're sendin' missionaries just to perform Castigations for them, but is that all they're up to?

Ready for the final quiz? Otay, Buckwheat, listen up. If you were gonna overthrow Stygia (see Secret Number Four, but not yet) and needed a buncha cannon fodder, who would you get to do your dirty work? Just how many Heretics and Renegades have these guys hypnotized using Castigate, anyway? Spooky, ain't it?



Oh, first our Shadows were the ones in control, and now, we're the great conspirators of the Underworld? This is extremely exasperating! Of course we don't cut our ties with these troubled wraiths! We minister to all who need us, and they need us more than most. Would anyone really want to face either the heretics or the Renegades if they were allowed to become Shadow-eaten?

Some of our members fled to these groups after the breaking of the Guilds. Though the groups in question may believe that our brethren's first loyalties now lie with them, most of these Pardoners have retained their loyalty to the Guild. Such Pardoners can often do far more as trusted members of the heretic or Renegade faction they espouse than all our Missionaries combined. Why should we disavow our own people? Even the most fanatical Legionnaire knows that what we do is for the good of Stygia. By interacting with Stygia's enemies, we learn more about them and have the chance to bring them around to our point of view. That doesn't mean we control them — or plan to use them to take over the Underworld. What rubbish!

Comments from the Peanut Gallery

Nyak! What's the matter? You're the nosy ones who're always making everyone else tell you their dirty secrets. Now the plasm-shoe's on the other foot. Nanna nanna boo boo! Everybody's looking at you! Hey, Pardoner, if ya didn't like that one, you're gonna hate what's comin' up!



Unbelievably Fat Lie Number Three

The Pardoners say they always supported Charon, helping him through "numerous depressions." They claim it



was their help that allowed Charon to defeat Gorool by "cleansing" him before he went out to fight.

What a crock! Yeah, they "helped" him all right. Get this. The Pardoners are the ones who flushed Charon straight down the cosmic Tidy-bowl. Yep. You got the straight dope. See, this one Pardoner named Sister Excessive or something, who was probably senile, decided she could rip Charon's Shadow right out of him and kick it in the nuts. I think it was some crap about women's rights. Anyhow, the damned thing zoomed out the window, jumped into the Labyrinth and learned a few new tricks. Then it spewed itself back up and started eating Stygia.

Well, the best the Pardoners could suggest was for Charon to go sew it back on (kinda like Wendy does with Peter Pan's shadow), only Charon got the needle instead. Boom. One emperor, down the hole. Oops. Guess that Ancient Arcanos sorta backfired on the old soul-shrifters. So, what did they do next? Elected the crazy broad who caused the whole thing as their next Guildmaster! Whadda crew! And they say *we're* dangerous.



The Pardoner Speaks

I begin to regret my decision to let this cretin rave in such a fashion. Nonetheless, I suppose I should thank him for introducing this controversial subject. Sooner or later, you were bound to encounter this vicious lie. It falls to me to recount the true story.

It is true that, in his final days, Charon grew increasingly unstable. Sister Acceptance had to attend to him almost constantly, and she worked desperately to bring Charon's Shadow under control. his long existence had become wearisome to him, and the demands placed on him as leader of the hierarchy were more than any single soul should have been asked to bear. he had seen the defection of his closest friends, raised a city only to have it destroyed, labored to rebuild that city and had his greatest hopes crushed by the betrayal of the Shining Ones. Charon had used every means to hold back the tide of Oblivion, even when the cries of enthralled Restless tore at his very essence, and, still, everywhere around him was evidence of his failures. Though Charon ruled a vast empire, he was unable even to travel the Shadowlands. Little wonder, then, that he had become embittered.

While any wraith's fall to his Shadow is a terrible thing, imagine the effect upon the Underworld should our greatest leader, the most powerful wraith in the Western world, succumb to the darkness within. Charon lost to Oblivion was unthinkable; Charon as a Spectre was a terror too horrible to contemplate.

Despite the crisis, the Deathlords were too busy tending to their own fortunes, and both the war and the newly created Shoah Necropoli distracted the Legions. We were the only ones available to help Charon. however, our straits were dire. Normal Castigation would no longer work to quell Charon's Shadow; it had grown strong over the millennia. Desperate measures needed to be invoked.

One of our closely held Guild secrets was our ability to call out a Shadow from within a wraith, in order to purify it more completely. The process was fraught with peril, though. Bitter experience had shown that extracting the entire Shadow caused the wraith to vanish, most likely sent screaming to a fatal harrowing. On the other hand, in cases where too little of the Shadow had been extracted, the treated wraith had suffered accelerated Shadow growth in later days. On that fateful night, we had successfully treated an extracted Shadow only three times, and in all of those cases, we had been dealing with new Lemures and not with a Shadow as potent as Charon's. The risk was tremendous, and, although Sister Acceptance hated to utilize that power on Charon, both she and Charon felt she had no choice.

Usually, in such a delicate Castigation, the wraith whose Shadow is extracted falls into a sort of reverie. Were he alive, it would be likened to a coma. But Charon was different, as he had always been different from the rest of us. he remained awake and apparently aware. The circle of Pardoners began their Castigation of Charon's Shadow, as strong in its darkness as Charon himself was in the light. Suddenly, the Shadow turned upon Charon as if it were truly a separate being. A great struggle ensued in which the Pardoners fought for control. Three of the four Pardoners present were destroyed as Charon battled his darker self, which called forth powers born in the Labyrinth.

In desperation, Sister Acceptance called upon her ability to banish Spectres. She hoped, thereby, to separate the Shadow from Charon long enough to gain control over it. To the horror of both, Charon felt a blind-

ing pain as his Bhadow ripped itself free of his Corpus and fled. Burprisingly, Charon was not destroyed, but he could only watch, dazed, as his rampant Bhadow flung itself over the sill and off the side of the Onyx Tower. Sister Acceptance chased the fugitive Bhadow, but it had too much of a lead. In failure, she returned to Charon.

he seemed fine. Better, in fact, than he had been in several centuries. Weaker, of course, as all wraiths are after a particularly strenuous Castigation, but more in control, calmer and almost mystically focused, as he had been in the beginning times. Sister Acceptance looked for the stains of the Shadow upon him and saw only the smallest dusting of gray. her impression was that Charon was ready to Transcend. She stayed with him to observe his reactions and to be with him at the end, if he was indeed ready to go on to his final reward. But his great love for Stygia bound him to this place too tightly; he could not Transcend and abandon those souls who had placed their trust in him.

It wasn't something we planned. It wasn't something we botched. If you knew Gister Acceptance, you would understand that she would never have intentionally hurt Charon. It was simply an accident, nothing more. We had no choice. had we done nothing, Charon might well have been reborn as a Spectre of unbelievable strength. We took the only course open to us, and it was not enough. None of us could have foreseen that our attempts to heal him would result in his lighter and darker halves separating. Given had we consulted the Oracles and learned we would fail, we would have had to attempt the Castigation anyway, in hopes that the Lady of Fate might intervene to save her chosen one.

And so, we stood by Charon, as we ever had. Without his Shadow's return, he seemed to weaken as time passed. Once, he cried out as if in great pain, but we could see no cause for it.

Gorool rose from the depths of the Labyrinth. Both Charon and Sister Acceptance recognized Charon's Shadow as the animating force within the monstrosity. here was the true reason for Charon's decision to sail forth alone. Though Sister Acceptance offered to go with Charon, in the end he chose to face his Shadow as he had through the centuries, in order to save his beloved city. he laid aside his mask that all might see his true face one last time and sailed out to his final battle.

We pray that, when Charon dragged Gorool down into the depths with him and saved Stygia through his last act of selflessness, he Transcended. Indeed, such a hope has sustained Sister Acceptance ever since. Now, we hear that Charon has been seen in the Labyrinth. We do not know whether this story is truth or some Spectral trick, yet we cannot dismiss it outright. If Charon still exists, we must find him. Only then can we know whether we stand condemned for his near-destruction or hailed as the heroes who saved Charon (and Stygia) from the great lord's darkest impulses. May he remember us with kindness.

Blah, blah, blah. What a bore. Does this guy think anyone is interested? Zzzzz.



Amazingly Humongous Lie Number Four

The Pardoners support the Hierarchy; they want only what is best for Stygia and the Underworld. They have no "political agenda." (see also Enormously Fat Lie Number Two)

Ha! And I have this bridge to the Iron Hills that's for sale

Hey, you didn't think they'd stop with causing most of Stygia's current problems by killing Charon, did ya? Nooo.... Now, they plan to take over. How, you ask? Well, they've got this secret machine hidden away under the Guildhouse, way down in the deep, spooky part, where most people don't go. This thing (Nhudri alone knows where they got it from; they must have bribed the Artificers big time) is an Angst Battery. Hey, don't blame me; I didn't name it.

Don't ask me how it works, either; I ain't no engineer. But what I heard is, they plan to flood whole nests of Spectres with Angst, overloading them like they're month-to-month tenants in a roach motel. They say that'll destroy the Spectres and send 'em all screaming down into Oblivion where they belong. Once the Spectres are all gone, there won't be any more agents of Oblivion running around. No more riding

Maelstroms into town, whooping it up like crazy cowboys after six months on the trail. No more crunching up innocent wraiths in Harrowings. No more Skinriding mortals and causing trouble that'll screw up the Underworld ("Oops, sorry, Mr. President, I just pushed that big red button marked 'world annihilation.' Guess this is goodbye.") Sounds kinda cool, huh? (Oh, sorry, you guys, nothin' personal.)

Maybe. But what happens when they turn their machine on anybody they don't like? What about wraiths with strong Shadows; are they gonna fry those guys, too? What's to keep them from wipin' us all out in the name of "cleansing?" Or do you think they might just waste the guys they don't like and make slaves outta the rest of us? Who could stand against 'em? If we didn't just bow down to their demands, FFFZZZAAAAPPP! Yeah, I definitely wanna haveta depend on the nutso bunch that gave Charon a terminal swirlie.

And come to think of it, wasn't it pretty convenient that he popped off like that? I mean, they've had just enough time to polish up their machine while everybody got sick and tired of the Deathlords and just might support the Pardoners in a takeover. Gotta give 'em credit. They're either the sneakiest bastards in the history of Stygia or the luckiest bunch of screwups I've ever seen. You still wanna know how the damn thing works, huh? Okay. I'll take a shot at it, but remember I ain't no expert. Just your friendly neighborhood "alternate personality" tryin' to get along as best I can.

Guess they haven't told ya the difference between Guild and non-Guild Pardoners, huh? You know how the Guild teaches Castigation to folks who aren't gonna join? And sheesh, ain't that smart if they wanna recruit new members ("Let's teach 'em our secret Arcanos, honey, then we can offer them so much more to join - a lantern and a name change, and these neat black robes...").

Well, the deal is this: They teach a different form of Castigate to non-Guilders. It's the type they first teach you, too. You know how you get that tiny little bit of Angst from using some of your arts? Well, if you get to Journeyman level, they teach you a new kind of Castigate. It's just like the first kind, only you get a lot more Angst using it. You not only get your own, but you also leech the Angst out of whoever you're working on. It's kinda like you steal it from 'em. (Way to go!)

Now, here's the weird part. You get your own Angst and theirs as well, but it doesn't go where your own Angst goes. Instead, you sorta hold it to one side (kinda like birds hold food in their stomachs 'til they can throw it up to feed their babies). When you get back to the Chapter House, you heave up the extra Angst (and as much of your own as you can get out) into some kind of bucket. It sounds to me sorta like those containment units in Ghostbusters, but whadda I know? That's what they call irony, huh?

Anyway, about once a month, some poor schmuck gets stuck on garbage detail. That means, he bags up the Angst,

takes it down to Stygia and shoves it into the main machine, the Angst Battery. Naturally, traveling through the Tempest with all that Angst smelling up the joint gets every Spectre there all hot to trot for our errand boy. So, whoever transports the barf-bag has to run for his life. Unlife. Whatever. I ain't heard that any of the couriers have been caught yet, but just think about the yummy feast Oblivion's Funboys would have if they did catch him. Not dangerous to any of the rest of you, no....

And if that don't make you nervous, think about this one. How long have these whackos been storing up Angst in this battery thing without ever bleeding off any of the juice? Forget about what happens if it ever springs a leak; whadda ya do if it ever explodes? Fer-BLOOOEEEYYY! Angst barf all over Stygia! Bet the whole damn city explodes. Cool! Maybe even the whole Underworld, if we're lucky,

And let's not even talk about the Angst junkies in the Guild. They gobble up all that Angst, but somehow, they don't make it back to the Chapter House with it. Instead, they go nuts, lettin' their Shadows go bonkers. Call me crazy, but I really like those guys! At least they're honest about what they want. A few destroy their Fetters or let their Dark Passions take over. Then they get to go be Harrowed, where they can really load up on Angst.

Spectre nests are just bursting with former Pardoners. They're some of the best agents of the Big O, since they know what scares everybody. Some folks even claim there are Spectres in the Guild itself. Well, duh!

1. They dig out everyone's secrets.

2. They're hoarding Angst.

3. They destroyed Charon.

4. What are they planning to do tonight, Brain? I dunno. Sound like Spectres to you?

The Pardoner Speaks

This has gone far enough! You will be informed when you need to know such things. For now, simply accept that what is written here is a lie. As for you, my Shadow, I cast you out, foulness. I forbid you to speak. By all that is of the light, I condemn you to the outer darkness. My strength compels you. My mind commands you. Get thee hence or I shall

The document ends abruptly at this point. We do not yet know what this portends. I hope you find this manuscript illuminating. If there is any more service I can render regarding it, please do not hesitate to ask. Mother Faith, editor





Chapter Five: The Art of Castigation

'Tis an easier matter to raise the devil than to lay him to rest

again. — Erasmus

A Question of Ethics



Ithough most Pardoners seem unaware of it, their calling makes many Restless nervous. Naturally, no wraith likes to be reminded how fragile her hold on herself might be. Pardoners, by the very nature of what they do, elicit thoughts about Shadow takeovers, Spectral temptations,

Harrowings and Oblivion. Ironically, no wraith in her right mind dares speak her true feelings concerning the Pardoners' vocation to the Pardoners she meets. She needs them too badly, for those Restless who call out her greatest fears are also the only ones capable of cleansing her soul of her Shadow's taint, thus holding Oblivion at bay.

Eventually, most Restless manage to overcome their fears enough to allow themselves to be Castigated, and they form bonds of trust with one or two Castigators. Other Pardoners, though seen as necessary (and sometimes even as saviors) are, paradoxically, still regarded with some suspicion — though this suspicion is never even whispered where a Pardoner might hear.

The most common fears expressed by other wraiths are given below:

Training

While it is general knowledge that Master-level Pardoners Castigate the Deathlords and other high ranking officials of the Hierarchy, many wraiths fear that their own Castigations are being handled by half-trained, fumble-fingered neophytes. Just as some Skinlanders refuse to entrust their health to young doctors, some of the Restless Dead will not patronize a Pardoner unless she appears to be old and speaks at least one dead language. Such trepidatious wraiths have no understanding of the fact that all Pardoners undergo rigorous training before being allowed to practice. Even Journeyman-level Pardoners are usually more than capable of handling most Shadows.

Revelations and Blackmail

One of the most frightening and potentially humiliating acts a person ever performs is to trust someone else with her innermost secrets. Fears, weaknesses, dark desires — all are made known to any Pardoner worth the title during a Castigation. In effect, the wraith strips naked, then waits to see if she is contacted by a blackmailer using the secret photographs taken by the Pardoner.

All Guild Pardoners let each client know that they have taken an oath not to reveal to anyone else anything they learn during a Castigation session. The Guild thus tries to ensure that a wraith undergoing Castigation receives treatment from practitioners whom the Guild has trained, rather than ones who have no controls or sanctions held over them. Memories of the broken trust of the Mnemoi remain strong among the Pardoners.

Despite self-policing and constant reassurances, however, the Pardoners are always vulnerable to these suspicions. Perhaps they always will be.

Blacklisting

Every wraith needs a Pardoner, at least once in a while. After all, who doesn't need help fighting off their own Shadow? However, the sheer indispensability of the Pardoners leaves certain paranoid wraiths wondering: What happens if you annoy a Pardoner? Are you subsequently blacklisted? How long will the soul-shrivers allow you to twist in the wind?

Understandably, many Pardoners are insulted by the notion that they would be so petty as to withhold Castigation for personal reasons. Every soul is important, they say, and besides, Pardoner training teaches new Freewraiths how to separate their personal feelings for their clients from their professional duties.

Does that fact stop any of the whispers? Of course not.

Ancient Castigation Arts

· Mask Castigation

One of the Pardoners' best kept secrets, this art allows the Castigator to look behind a wraith's mask or Moliated form to discern who or what is really before her. Many wraiths prefer to keep their true identities cloaked when they seek Castigation. The Pardoner who uses this art can bypass most attempts at disguise. The Guild sanctions its use in the belief that knowing more about the client's Psyche allows members a greater chance of successfully cleansing his Shadow. System: The wraith rolls Perception + Castigate (difficulty varies according to the expertise of the disguise, as determined by the Storyteller). One or two successes allow the Pardoner to discern whether or not a wraith is Moliated or wearing a false face. Three or four successes enable the Pardoner to see the target's true visage. Five successes let the Pardoner establish a wraith's identity, as well as some hint of her profession (e.g., Legionnaire, Artificer, Puppeteer). A botch indicates that the Pardoner telegraphs her intent to her target, and thus, suffers whatever consequences follow. Spectacular botches result in 1 point of temporary Angst for every 1 rolled above the first, because the Pardoner has looked too deeply into her target's Psyche. This art costs 1 Pathos to use, and gives the user 1 point of temporary Angst.

··· Transfer Angst

This art is available only to oath-bound members of the Pardoners Guild. It allows the Pardoner to take the Angst she removes from a Supplicant and transfer it to herself, temporarily holding it in check (unavailable to her Shadow) until she can deposit it into an appropriate storage unit. The same art enables the Pardoner to effect a second transfer of the stored Angst, from herself into the intended storage receptacle.

System: After using Purify to cleanse a wraith's Shadow, the Pardoner rolls Wits + Castigate (difficulty 8). For each success, the Pardoner may hold in reserve 1 point of Angst removed from her original target. This effect lasts for up to 12 hours; otherwise, the Angst is absorbed by the Pardoner's own Shadow. Once she reaches a site where she can unload the Angst, the Pardoner must again use Transfer Angst to rid herself of the excess baggage by dumping it into a storage unit. A botch on this roll immediately gifts the Shadow with the Angst intended for transfer.

Use of this art to store collected Angst gives the user 1 point of temporary Angst, which cannot be stored. Transferring Angst from the user to the storage unit costs nothing.

···· Mass Chastisement

Pardoners with the Legions have long used this art to "bless" and absolve troops before battle, as a way of making it more difficult for Legionnaires' Shadows to gain the upper hand during critical combat situations. Although the Pardoners Guild still teaches it to their members, only those Darksiders and Pardoners intent on working with the combat troops of the Legions take the time to learn it, due to the excessive toll it takes on the user.

System: The Pardoner must invoke this art before using Purify on a group of wraiths. Each success on a Charisma + Castigate roll (difficulty 7) allows the Pardoner to include one additional wraith in her attempt to Purify. (For example, two successes enables a Pardoner to Purify three wraiths with a single attempt). A simple failure indicates that the Pardoner is unable to effect a Mass Chastisement at the current time. A botch prevents her from further attempts at simple Castigation (Purify) for the remainder of the scene. If the roll succeeds, the Storyteller proceeds according to the guidelines for Purify given in Wraith: the Oblivion.

Use of this art costs 1 Pathos per wraith affected, as well as 2 points of Temporary Willpower. It also gives the user 1 Temporary Angst for each wraith involved.

···· Shadow Screen

This odd use of Castigate enables a Pardoner to hide certain thoughts and memories from her own Shadow (and, to some extent, from Spectres during Harrowings). When Shadow Screen is utilized, certain thoughts and memories (which must be determined before the art is used) are no longer accessible to the wraith's Shadow. The Shadow knows that *something's* being kept from it, but it has no idea what that something might be.

This art has the side effect of making Screened memories and thoughts hazy to the Psyche as well. Memories targeted by this art become dim and half-recalled. Because neither the Psyche nor the Shadow consciously thinks about these memories, they are very difficult for the Shadow to access during Harrowings, as well.

System: The Pardoner must utilize this art immediately after Castigating someone, in order for it to be effective in blocking specific memories acquired during the Castigation. Any success on a Manipulation + Meditation roll (difficulty 6) allows the Pardoner to screen her thoughts. Extra successes make it harder for the Shadow to break through and notice these thoughts.

A failed attempt merely means that the Pardoner has not succeeded in hiding those particular thoughts; a botch makes the ideas the Pardoner is trying to keep secret blazingly obvious to her Shadow, who may immediately attempt to initiate Catharsis — even if the Shadow's Angst does not exceed the Psyche's Willpower. Use of this art costs 2 Pathos, whether it is successful or not, and also gives the Shadow 2 Temporary Angst. A botch results in the Pardoner's gaining 1 additional temporary Angst for each 1 rolled.

If there is great need for the Pardoner to remember these hidden details, this art can be reversed for double its normal cost. However, this action is likely to let the Shadow in on those messy details as well.

····· Shadow Summons

This use of Castigate enables a Pardoner to call forth another wraith's Shadow for a brief time. While the Shadow remains out of Corpus, the wraith falls into a state that resembles Slumber. The summoned Shadow appears as a negative image of the wraith, connected to the Psyche's Corpus by a thin thread of darkness. The marks of Oblivion show up in greater detail on this Shadow-form, which makes it much easier for a Pardoner to "read" the Shadow's strength. In the past, this art made it possible for a Pardoner to examine the Shadow more closely and also to achieve a greater effect in attempts to Castigate it. Since the disappearance of Charon, both the use and the teaching of this art have fallen out of favor.

System: The Storyteller secretly rolls the Pardoner's Charisma + Castigate (difficulty equal to the Shadow's Permanent Angst rating). A single success is enough to wrench the target's Shadow out of her Corpus for one turn. Each additional success adds another turn to the length of time the Shadow remains separated from its Psyche. The target must be willing to have her Shadow drawn forth from her, since any conscious resistance to Shadow Summons will only increase the Shadow's Angst rating.

A botch on Shadow Summons severs the connection between Psyche and Shadow, which has an extremely deleterious effect on a wraith. Should this catastrophe occur, the targeted wraith must roll against each of her Passions (difficulty 6) every hour. If she should ever roll against all of her Passions and not achieve a single success, she immediately vanishes from the Shadowlands, with none of the display usually observable during Transcendence. The wraith's Psyche and Shadow can be recombined by being brought into physical contact with each other. At this point, the Shadow rolls Permanent Angst against the Psyche's Permanent Willpower (difficulty 6); if the Psyche gets more successes, the two are reintegrated. If not, the two remain separated.

Use of this art costs 5 Pathos and 2 Willpower, and it gives the Pardoner 2 points of Temporary Angst.

····· Shadow Wrack

Developed by the Darksiders and used by the most skilled and trustworthy Pardoners only, this art allows direct Castigation of Spectres. It reduces their Angst and strengthens the sliver of Psyche that still remains within them. Shadow Wrack forms the basis for the theory of Spectre redemption, and constant research is done to "improve" this power, in hopes of producing a safe, practical method of redemption.

The actual procedure is an exhausting one and requires a Pardoner to maintain absolute control over her own Shadow during the entirety of the process. In addition, the Spectre must be subdued or restrained in some fashion to ensure that it does not attack the user of the art during the process. The danger is, in fact, so great that Shadow Wrack remains a seldom-practiced form of Castigation. Not only is it difficult to capture and hold Spectres long enough for a Pardoner to attempt Shadow Wrack properly (most Spectres prefer suicide), but the risks of failure simply are not worth it.

System: An advanced form of Purify, Shadow Wrack requires that the Pardoner engage in an extended struggle with the target Spectre. The Pardoner rolls Charisma + Castigate (difficulty equals the Spectre's Being). Each success reduces the Spectre's Angst by 1 and provides the target's Psyche with 1 point of Composure. Complete redemption of the Spectre can be reached only when the Spectre's Psyche gains a Permanent Composure of 10, thus allowing the Psyche to take control once more. Needless to say, this result requires an exceptional number of rolls, and dictates that multiple sessions be spent in attempts to redeem the Spectre. Few wraiths have the Pathos resources to carry a redemption through from beginning to end without resting and recharging, as the Art costs 4 Pathos and 1 Willpower per attempt, and gives the Pardoner 1 Angst per attempt, as well.

During the period in which the Pardoner battles the Spectre, the Pardoner must remain totally focused on her target and, thus, is vulnerable to attacks from her own Shadow or from any Spectres who may be lurking nearby. A botch during any one of the extended rolls immediately throws the Pardoner into a Harrowing, with the Pardoner's highest-rated Passion as the quarry.

New Castigation Arts

Attunement

This new art allows a Pardoner to "tag" certain Shadows and make them more receptive to future Castigation attempts. Made popular by the advent of behavioral modification therapy, Attunement works best with wraiths who visit the same Pardoner regularly. Once a Pardoner attunes herself to a particular Shadow, her attempts to Castigate that Shadow are more likely to succeed. The Attunement eventually wears off, unless it is renewed periodically, and it does not affect Castigation attempts by a Pardoner other than the one responsible for the Attunement.

System: The Pardoner rolls Perception + Castigate (difficulty equals the target's Willpower). A success reduces the difficulty of Castigating the affected Shadow by 1 until the Attunement wears off; the number of successes dictates the length (in weeks) of the effect. A botch means that the Pardoner cannot identify the Shadow well enough to place a tag on it, and that he must study it further before attempting another Attunement roll.

This art costs 1 point of Pathos. Botching an Attunement roll feeds the targeted Shadow 2 Angst.

··· Storm Quell

This art lets a Pardoner call upon his own Shadow to help him oppose the Spectres ravening within a Maelstrom. Unlike Coax, in which a Pardoner responds to his Shadow's initiative, a Pardoner using Storm Quell may compel his Shadow to assist him with whatever powers it possesses.

System: The Pardoner rolls Charisma + Castigate (difficulty 7). One success enables the Pardoner to force his Shadow to provide him with Shadow Dice or any of its Thorns, which can then be used against the armies of the Maelstrom, but only once. Additional successes increase the number of times the Pardoner may so compel his Shadow. The Pardoner may use this art as many times in succession as he has Pathos to spend. Use of this art costs 2 Pathos, and gives the coerced Shadow 1 point of Temporary Angst.

Botching a Storm Quell roll attracts the attention of all the Spectres in the vicinity, who swoop to attack the Pardoner. These attacks will not be broken off until either the Pardoner is destroyed or the attacking Spectres are.

Merits and Flaws



he Pardoners' special knowledge of the Shadow's wiles and ruses and their understanding of each wraith's inner darkness give many of them an edge in their battle against Oblivion. Unfortunately, there are also potential drawbacks in knowing the enemy too well. While other wraiths may,

with the Storyteller's permission, benefit or suffer from these special characteristics, they work best with Pardoner characters or in conjunction with the Castigation Arcanos.

Beginning characters may take up to 7 points of Flaws to increase their freebie points. Alternatively, up to 7 points of Merits may be purchased with freebie points. The guidelines in the Wraith Players Guide provide additional information on the choice and use of Merits and Flaws.

Storm Warning (I point Merit)

You have an early warning system that alerts you to the imminent presence of either Spectres or Maelstroms. Storm Warning is similar to the Merit: Danger Sense, but is specific to creatures of the Labyrinth. It does not alert you to attacks by Legionnaires, Renegades or other wraiths - even ones under the influence of their Shadows.

You must state that you are activating this "sixth sense" in order to use it. Storm Warning doesn't pinpoint the location or nearness of the danger from Oblivion, but it does give



you an approximation of how soon the attack will come and the relative strength of the attackers. Once activated, the effects of this Merit last for approximately thirty minutes. Overuse of Storm Warning (such as utilizing it more than once or twice per session) can lead to its malfunctioning at a critical moment. ("Uh, no Bob, I don't sense any Spectres around here. Bob? Bob?")

Purity (4 point Merit)

You have great spiritual purity, which allows you to utilize your higher consciousness to fight off the ravages of Oblivion. With this merit, you begin the game with 2 points in Eidolon. Furthermore, this Merit reduces the difficulty of all Purify (Castigate •••) rolls by 1.

Prejudicial Castigation (2 point Flaw)

There is a particular group of wraiths you will not Castigate. Perhaps you dislike their politics, or their looks, or maybe they just plain scare you. Whatever the reason, you never accept jobs cleansing their Shadows. If forced to do so, the difficulty of all Castigation rolls goes up by 2. Possible targets for this sort of bias include: Members of certain Guilds, Members of specific Legions, Heretics, Renegades, Legionnaires, men, women, etc.

Repulsive Technique (2 point Flaw)

The method you use in your Castigations is truly beyond the pale. Worse than mere torture, what you inflict upon the wraiths who come to you for Castigation makes even other Pardoners sick. Other Guild members tend to watch out when you are Castigating folks (just to make sure things don't get out of hand, you see), and they may even attempt to intervene if you go too far. Social interaction rolls with any Restless who knows of your reputation are at a +2 difficulty.

Sympathizer (3 point Flaw)

You sympathize with the Shadow-eaten and understand that you are as potentially corruptible as they. Try to protect Spectres from being destroyed, for you believe they can be redeemed, given enough time and attention. This attitude doesn't make you popular with most of Stygian society (including a few people within your own Guild). Your social rolls for interaction in Guild affairs are at a +2 difficulty.

Artifacts: The Pardoner's Arsenal Instruments of Chastisement (Common, Level Two)

A long-standing arrangement with the Artificers Guild supplies Scourges with these implements used in Castigation. Whips, flails and truncheons are the most popular Instruments, but other types are available.

System: Use of these weapons lowers by 1 the difficulty of any roll for the arts related to Castigation.

Iron Lantern (Rare, Level Three)

This lidded lantern, which looks very similar to the trademark lantern of every Pardoner recognized by the Guild, creates a 20-foot circle of light in which the Pardoner may work with reasonable assurance of safety. Although the Iron Lantern is always carried on the Pardoner's person or hung outside her place of work, it is typically activated only when a Pardoner has reason to believe that she needs additional protection during a Castigation.

System: Opening the lid of the Iron Lantern exposes the light inside. The circle of light emanating from the open lantern duplicates the effect of Housecleaning (Castigation ••••). The lantern's light is powered by the Pardoner's Pathos. Each point of Pathos the Pardoner spends provides one half-hour's worth of illumination. The Pardoner must spend a permanent point of Willpower to attune the lantern to herself. Until the lantern is attuned, it may not be used.

Soul Lantern (Luxury, Level Three)

Called a "lantern" to disguise its true purpose, this artifact resembles its namesake in size and shape only. Soul Lanterns reside in secure rooms within each Chapter House of the Pardoners Guild. Usually, as a safety precaution, no more than one of these objects can be found in any single location. Soul Lanterns act as containment units for Angst collected by Pardoners during their Castigations. Periodically, a trusted Pardoner bears a Soul Lantern to the main Chapter House in Stygia, where its contents are emptied into the Angst Battery (see below). System: Each Soul Lantern can hold up to 100 points of Temporary Angst. Once it has reached this limit, any attempts to use Transfer Angst to pour more Angst into the Lantern simply result in the expulsion of Angst into the surrounding vicinity. A Pardoner must place her fingers on the Soul Lantern while she transfers her collected Angst into another vessel. Otherwise, the transfer fails.

Breaking the Lantern releases all of its contained Angst into the immediate vicinity, and the Shadows of wraiths caught in the blast will absorb as much of the floating Angst as they can. So, if a full Lantern explodes when there are two wraiths nearby, each wraith's Shadow sucks down 50 points of Temporary Angst (which then gets converted into 5 points of Permanent Angst, which makes things very interesting).

Angst Battery (Singular, Level Five)

This massive containment vessel resides in the lowest chamber of the Pardoners' main Chapter House in Stygia. Observers have commented that it resembles nothing so much as an enormous iron lung. The purpose of the battery is simple: It stores Angst transferred to it from Soul Lanterns. Lord Nhudri himself created the Angst Battery for the Pardoners before the breaking of the Guilds (though it is doubtful that even he guessed its true purpose). Conceived by a brilliant Pardoner called Brother Generous, the great storage vessel was intended to remove excess Angst from the Underworld and eventually reshape the stuff, through the art of Castigate, into Pathos. In essence, his plan was to take "pollution" and recycle it as abundant energy. Unfortunately, Spectres took Generous before he discovered the exact art that would effect that change.

His successors in the Guild have posited that the battery might be usable as a weapon. Their theory is that even Spectres might find an abrupt overload of Angst deadly. Told that the device possesses "almost infinite" capacity to store Angst, the Guild has brought Soul Lanterns to the Angst Battery and emptied them into it for centuries.

Nobody's fools, the Pardoners realize that they are potentially sitting on enough Angst to blast apart most of Stygia should the battery ever overload or rupture. This possibility is why they struck an extremely expensive bargain to acquire an unusually large portable Nihil, which they stored under their main Chapter House, right next to the battery. A cadre of specially trained Pardoners watches the battery. Guard duty lasts only a few hours for each group, so they will remain vigilant. If the battery shows signs of weakness or disruption, these Guildwraiths are charged with sounding an alarm, unleashing the Nihil and dropping the battery into the Tempest.

Despite these precautions, there is a serious problem with the battery. The "almost infinite" containment unit recently



began showing signs of reaching its storage capacity. Leaders of the Guild are concerned, for an examination of the battery also revealed clear evidence that someone had tampered with it. The battery had not reached its natural capacity. Rather, its storage space had been sharply reduced by sabotage.

No one is quite sure of what may happen when the battery finally breaks down, but there are plenty of theories. Whether it might simply expel its excess Angst in the same fashion as the Soul Lanterns or explode catastrophically is anybody's guess. In the meantime, the teams on watch have been doubled, while Pardoner researchers have dedicated themselves to discovering a method of either successfully bleeding off some of the Angst from the battery or of finally discovering how to convert the Angst into usable Pathos.

The Pardoners' upper echelon tries to keep this problem very quiet, to avoid a panic and to keep the Guild's secret. To help them deal with the battery, the Pardoners now enlist scientists and nuclear engineers into their ranks, in hopes that these highly trained experts can repair the damaged machine or purge it. They are also focusing their scrutiny upon their own Guild members and wondering who the traitor is.

Some of the more pessimistic Masters now whisper that the battery was not invented by Generous, but by his Shadow. Others claim that a Doppelganger took the brilliant Pardoner's place and fooled the Guild into accepting the means of its ultimate destruction into their midst. Some of these Restless point to the fallacy in the initial design and ask the question no one thought to ask before: How can a machine made from soulforged wraiths and metal from the Labyrinth not react, somehow, to the pressure of holding so much Angst within itself? The answer, as much as anyone in the Guild hates to admit it, is "No one knows."

System: Bringing a Soul Lantern into contact with the Angst Battery drains all of the Angst in that Lantern at a rate of 1 point per turn.



Chapter Six: Templates

The Pardoners Guild is a true cross-section of wraith society. It contains everyone from the prototypical medieval seller of indulgences to the latest proponents of self-analysis and holistic healing. The keepers of the secrets of Castigation embrace psychoanalysts, advice columnists, private eyes, Inquisitors and good-old-fashioned medieval torturers. While the method of Castigation chosen by a Pardoner sometimes reflects her calling in life, this correlation isn't always the case. Many Pardoners' preferred style of purification derives from their changes in perspective since coming to the Underworld. Each Pardoner is a unique combination of personal background, Castigation style and belief in the necessity of waging an intimate war against Oblivion.

The following templates illustrate some of the myriad possibilities for customizing Pardoner characters. Use them as written, tailor them to your own needs or find in them the inspiration you need to create your own.

Evangelist

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Quote: I have come to cast away the darkness. The light of my lantern shines for you and you alone.

Prelude: You grew up in a "sanctified" household nestled in the mountains of eastern Tennessee. Your daddy was the pastor and your momma the choir director of the New Revelation Independent Gospel Tabernacle. Your parents raised you by the Bible and the switch (they called it a "rod"), but they also gave you a lot of love.

When you were 12, it happened. During one of your daddy's impassioned sermons, you felt something stir within you. Folks later told you that you started speaking in tongues and weeping tears of blood. From that day on, you were a preacher, just like your daddy.

Your daddy gave up his church when you turned 16. He bought a used RV, packed you and your momma into it and started touring the revival circuit. That's where you met Eddie. Your parents took one look at him, there in the audience during one of your tentshow sermons, and labeled him an irredeemable son of the Devil. That only made you more determined to find some good in him and save his soul. For the first — and last — time in your life, you disobeyed your parents' orders after they told you to leave him alone. The night before you were to leave for the next stop along your revival route, you let Eddie take you for a ride.

Unfortunately, it started raining that night, and Eddie's truck wasn't up to the curves on the treacherous mountain roads. He survived the crash; you didn't.

You were surprised when, instead of meeting the Lord, you met a kindly-faced, white-haired woman who informed you that, no, she wasn't an angel, she was a Reaper. You had a million questions, but before you could ask the first one, you took a good look at her. What you saw stunned you into silence. It seemed that you could see right through her, and inside her was something ugly and evil. Brokenly, you told her that she had a devil within her and that she needed to get rid of it. She gave you a strange look and took you to the Pardoners' Chapter House.

At first, you were afraid that you had ended up in the place where Daddy said Catholics go, but you soon learned you were in the Shadowlands, where all souls wind up, if they haven't finished their work on Earth yet. This revelation suited you just fine. You settled down to the serious business of learning how to heal the darkness inside the souls around you.

Concept: Your desire to save souls endures even in the Underworld. You like to emphasize love and forgiveness, though you can conjure up images of fiery pits and hideous tortures when you must. Even better, it seems your gift of tongues was nothing less than a message from your Eidolon your higher self. As you are now one of the Scourges, all those painful switchings your momma and daddy gave you make sense.

Roleplaying Notes: Flavor your conversation with Bible quotes and hymns. Ask your friends questions such as, "Are you washed in the blood?" or "Have you looked into yourself today, and do you like what you see?" You care about others and work hard to save them from the dark ugliness inside them, but that doesn't mean you're going to let them slack off when it comes to taking care of their souls.

Relics: King James version of the Bible, choir robe, Scourge's whip



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Drill Instructor

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Quote: Think you're tougher than me, huh? We'll see.

Prelude: You were all that you could be — and it wasn't enough. Your parents fought all the time, and your father beat your mother for reasons you never could understand. When you finally tried to stand up to him — at about age eight or nine — he expanded his range of targets and beat you up, too.

School wasn't much better. You hid your bruises under long sleeves and long pants and your pain under a surly attitude. You addressed the fact that no one liked you much by beating the crap out of anyone who looked at you the wrong way.

When you were 14, your father left town. Neither you nor your mom was sorry to see him go. Unfortunately, things didn't get much better when he went. You spent more and more time on the street.

Then your mom screwed things up by killing herself, leaving behind even more debts than your father had. You had no job, no family and no way in hell of keeping up the rent on the apartment. So, you did the only thing you could think of: You joined the Army.

You hardly noticed basic training. While the others who enlisted when you did started dropping like flies, you just buried your hatred for the drill sergeant, dug in and showed him that his methods didn't measure up to a lifetime of blows and curses.

When it became clear that you were there for the duration, the promotions started coming. You made drill sergeant, and then it was your turn to bully and beat some backbone into the who wussies thought they could be part of the nation's defense team. When the Gulf War started, you stayed behind, but the boys you trained went to the desert. Most of them survived. Maybe you took one blow too many to the head. Maybe all of the bottled-up anger finally screamed its way loose in your brain. One day, something went "pffft" inside your head during morning drill. The next thing you knew, you were in the Shadowlands.

You beat the crap out of the guy who Reaped you, until a bunch of his buddies slapped chains on you and dragged you away. You tried to fight, but the chains did weird things to your muscles and coordination. It looked hopeless.

Your Reaper hauled you, kicking and cursing, to the soulforges and turned you over to the hammer-and-apron crew. Luckily for you, the Artificer slated to smelt you down to soulslag saw something in you. He said something about your joining the war against Oblivion, and he ended up shoving you into the hands of the Pardoners. They helped you "enlist" in the Emerald Legion, right after they inducted you into their Guild.

Concept: You are the good guy who's tougher and nastier than most of the bad guys. As a Scourge, you specialize in getting down and dirty with the Shadow and beating it to a pulp with your bare hands. You don't spend much time worrying about motivations, you just kick ass and take names. Once you make Master in the Guild, you plan to apply for membership in the Darksiders. Who knows, you might even find your father somewhere in the Tempest. You look forward to showing him what you've learned.

> Roleplaying Notes: You judge people by how tough they are. If they can't take your constant insults and verbal abuse, then they certainly can't stand up to what their Shadows give them. SHOUT A LOT! Never admit to feeling pain, but never let an insult go unanswered. Because you (and your Shadow) respond instantly to any offense, you have surprisingly little accumulated Angst. You intend to keep it that way.

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Relics: Boxing championship medal, pair of worn boxing gloves, sergeant's stripes, Army dog tags

		(k)			
Name: Drill hatructor		Nature: Bravo		Life: Soldier	
Player:		Demeanor: Bravo		Death: Brain Aneurism	n (Disease)
Chronicle:		Shadow: Rbuser		Regret: Not making Mas	
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Physical		Socia		Menta	
Strength	00000	Charisma		Perception	
Dexterity		Manipulation		Intelligence	
Stamina		Appearance		Wits	
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Talents		Skills		knowled	ges
Alertness		Crafts	00000	Bureaucracy	
Athletics	0000	Drive		Computer	
Awareness	00000	Etiquette		Enigmas	
Brawl	00000	Firearms		Investigation	
Dodge	0000	Leadership		Law	0000
Empathy	00000	Meditation		Linguistics	0000
Expression	00000	Melee		Medicine	0000
Intimidation	00000	Performance		Occult	
Streetwise	00000	Repair		Politics	
Subterfuge	_00000	Stealth		Science	0000
00000000	0-0-0-0-0	Advanta	ges	0000000000	000000
Backgrounds		Passion	S	Arcano	i
Allies (Pardoners)	_00000	Watch trainees at old base	(Love)	Castigate	
Notoriety	00000	Show everyone what you'		Outrage	
Relic		of (Pride)			00000
Haunt	00000	Find your father & pummel him			00000
	_00000	Teach others what you		· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·	00000
	_00000	(Generostty)			00000
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Darksider

Quote: No fear. Absolutely!

Prelude: You spent your life defying death, making your living as a professional thrill seeker. Your parents had money — enough to send you to the best schools, give you a generous allowance (so you never had to hold down a real job) and provide you with the finest counselors when you began exhibiting signs of self-destructive behavior. Whoop-de-do. They loved you, but they never understood what drove you to take risks. They never realized that you were begging for the one thing they didn't give you — their attention.

As a child, you pushed the limits by attempting all those things labeled "do not try this at home." You wanted to see how high you could climb, how far you could fall, how fast your bike would go. But when you told your folks about your adventures, they always said, "That's nice, dear." It wasn't until you jumped from the garage roof and broke your leg that you finally got a little attention. Unfortunately, it was medical attention. Your parents had the best doctors fix you up, and then things went back to normal.

In college, your horizons broadened. Your early exposure to therapy awakened in you an interest in abnormal psychology, and you spent your term breaks gaining "experience in the field" — bungee jumping, mountain climbing, skydiving, motorcycle racing and freeform skiing. Your parents died in a plane crash before your graduation, and they left you with a trust fund and an annual income that assured your financial independence; after that, there was no stopping you.

You embraced danger with a vengeance. Your money bought media connections, and you began to advertise your "stunts" to gain publicity and notoriety. (After all, if your parents weren't around to notice you, you had to get attention from someplace....)

Finally, your luck ran out. While trying for a free-fall record, you waited a *little* too long to pull the ripcord on your parachute. You hit the ground before it opened fully. Thankfully, you never felt the impact; from what others have told you since, it must have hurt a *lot*. In the Shadowlands, your Reaper saw deathmarks on you that caused him to deliver you to the Legion of Fate, no questions asked. Your knowledge of psychology led you to study Castigation and brought you into contact with the Pardoners, who recruited you into their Guild. Eventually, you heard of a special cadre of wraiths called Doomslayers, which did battle with Spectres on their home ground — in the Tempest itself. It seemed "fated" for you to hook up with this group of danger-freaks. The Guild agreed with you, and trained you as a Darksider.

Concept: A consummate daredevil, you finally have a way to combine your craving for danger with a sense of purpose. While your comrades take the war to the Tempest, you watch their backs and protect them from their Shadows. In some ways, you fight battles that are even riskier than the

ones your Doomslayer companions wage; they fight the enemy, while you struggle with your own allies.

> Roleplaying Notes: Show

no fear. The risks you take as a Darksider reflect the attitude you have held on both sides of the Shroud. Your Castigation style consists of goading the Shadow into betraying itself. You're not afraid of putting your own existence on the line to shame a Shadow into some action that weakens it. Unfor-Pol tunately, your recklessness also carries over into your normal activities with your Doomslayer companions. Goad them, as well. Push them to achieve things they never thought possible. Risk can only make them stronger.

Relics: Ripcord, basic psychology textbook

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Name: Darksider	Nature: Gambler	Life: Thrillseeker
Player:	Demeanor: Etplorer	Death: Skydiving accident
Chronicle:	Shadow: Perfectionist	Regret: No real attention from parents
	Attributes	
Physical	Social	Mental
Strength0000	Charisma0000	
DexterityOOO	ManipulationOOO AppearanceOOOO	IntelligenceOOOO
Culture		
	Abilities	000000000000000000000000000000000000000
Talents	Skills	knowledges
Alertness 000	Crafts00000	Bureaucracy00000
AthleticsOOO	Drive	Computer00000
Awareness00000	Etiquette00000	Enigmas0000
BrawlOOOO	Firearms 00000	Investigation000000
DodgeOOO	Leadership00000	Law00000
Empathy00000	Meditation00000	Linguistics00000
Expression000000	Melee0000	Medicine00000
Intimidation00000	Performance000000	Occult00000
Streetwise000000	Repair00000	Politics00000
Subterfuge00000	Stealth0000	Science0000
	Advantages	
West Control of Contro	_	
Backgrounds	Passions	Arcanoi
Alles (Doomslayers) 00000		<u>Castigate</u>
<u>Rek</u>		
<u>Status (Guild)</u>		
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etters	Corpus Dococo	: 200000 Angst 200000
Childhood home 0000		
Parachute worn at death 0000		nnnnnnnnn
Skilodge in Rockies 0000	the set we had he had he had he had he	200000 (homs 20000000
Parents graves 0000	Willnower	Devil's Dare
Your grave 0000		Bad Luck
00000		1. 无相关的现象分词
00000		Destroy Doomsbyers (Hate)
Guild Marks -		Seek out no-win situations 00000
		(Self-Destruction)
Shadowy Taint		(Self-Destruction)••••000Get attention (Greed)•00000

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Angst Junkie

Quote: Hey, man, you look like you could use some Castigation. Lemme do you. No, man, it's free. I swear it.

Prelude: It started with the ritalin in grade school. Your parents thought you were too fat and lethargic, and they wanted to pep you up a little. By the time you were 16, you were into crystal meth. You just couldn't get through the day without that pick-me-up. On the plus side, you were no longer fat, and you had enough energy to light up the science lab, basketball court and cafeteria. Your parents were thrilled with your new, slender form and cheery, talkative persona. On the downside, your 78 RPM ways gained you many friends, but . no one really special who cared just for you. Nobody seemed to notice how nervous and shaky you always were.

As you were someone "cool" and in the know about the drug scene, the other kids looked to you for advice. Somehow, they just didn't understand that you were as hooked as they were. You needed more and more speed, just to keep going. Nobody really cared about you anyway, so you decided to end the pain. Injecting yourself with a massive overdose, you waited for the final rush. And when it hit, you found yourself in the Underworld.

Instead of ending your pain, you just made it permanent. Still, not everything was bleak. The woman who Reaped you took you under her wing, as if she were the big sister you never had. Hoping you could find something to stop the need inside, you went with her to the Pardoners Guild. They taught you Castigation and how to give other wraiths peace. That was how you found out that doing so filled you with as big a rush as any you ever got in the Skinlands. Angst felt just like old times.

Concept: You're the little girl lost, who always looked for love. Because you got approval only when you transformed yourself through drugs, they became your sole source of joy. Now, it's Angst that gets you high and eases all the pain. You crave it like nothing else before, except maybe love and attention. Because you are so desperately in need, you make an excellent Pardoner. You search out anyone who requires your services, and you even offer free Castigations. Angst is the only payment you truly want, anyway.

Roleplaying Notes: Stay on the lookout for anyone whose Shadow seems the least bit in evidence. Set up shop anywhere, anytime. Never turn down a chance for that rush Angst gives you. Be crafty enough to take back a little bit of Angst to the Chapter House for deposit into the holding unit. After all, it would never do for the others to know your secret. Never let your Shadow out where another Pardoner might see it. He might Castigate you then, and take all that lovely Angst away.

Relics: Needle, high school yearbook



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Namo A La La		Nature: Gambler		life: Junkie/Student	
Name: Angst Junkie				1	、 、
Player:		Demeanor: Gambler		Death: Overdose (Suicide)
Chronicle:		Shadow: Pusher		Regret: Never found love	
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Dexterity		Manipulation		Intelligence	0
Stamina		Appearance	_00000	Wits	
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Talents		Skills		knowledges	
Alertness	0000	Crafts	00000	Bureaucracy	_00000
Athletics		Drive		Computer	0000
Awareness		Etiquette		Enigmas	0000
Brawl	The second second second	Firearms		Investigation	
Dodge		Leadership		Law	
		Meditation		Linguistics	
Empathy		X-X-COLOURS			0000
Empathy		Melee	00000	Medicine	
Expression	_00000	Melee Performance		Medicine Occult	
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Quote: We are all sinners. There is not one among us who is truly pure. Who eats the sins of the sin-eater? Who pardons the Pardoner?

Prelude: You were born in a small village whose name you no longer remember. You grew up ostracized by the other townsfolk. Your house lay outside the boundaries of the town, and you were never allowed to play with the other children. Unlike the other men of the town, your father did not go out to plow the fields or chop wood. He never hunted. Much of the time, he simply carved toys for you or utensils for your mother. When he wasn't carving, he spent his time on his knees in prayer. Most of your needs were met by the townsfolk. Food, clothing, and whatever else your family lacked was brought in the dark of the night and left on the doorstep.

When you were 10, you discovered why. You had known that your father was always called to any house where someone had died. Taking up his hooded cloak, he would go from your house like some black-winged scavenger bird and return with the dawn, wearied and desperate. Eventually, he explained that he was a sin-eater: one who consumes a feast laid out upon a corpse. With that feast, the sin-eater took upon himself all the transgressions of the deceased, which allowed the dead person's soul to go, unburdened by its trespasses, to Heaven.

When you turned 19, your parents died from plague. A neighbor called for the sineater to come unburden her husband, who had also died. Although you were his daughter, and not expected to follow his calling, you could not simply abandon his responsibilities. More importantly, you could not let your father face judgment for all the sins he had consumed, not when you could take those sins upon yourself and gain him entrance to Heaven. Taking up his cloak, you went to the neighbor's house. When finished there, you returned home and fulfilled your duty toward your mother and father. The next week, the plague claimed you as well. The Pardoners Guild, which was apparently waiting for you, Reaped you, and you became a member of the Beacon.

Concept: Knowing your duty to the others of your Guild, you have become a Pardoner's Pardoner. As you once cleansed the sins from your loved ones, so you now remove the taint from your fellows. That they are honorable people who help others makes you proud to help them. Into your capable hands is entrusted the very soul of the Pardoners Guild, its many sin-eaters. You feel privileged to be where you are.

Roleplaying Notes: You are the elite, yet you remain humble, for you intuitively understand others' burdens. Offer counseling and Castigation to your fellow Pardoners whenever possible. Root out any who show signs of betraying secrets learned from their clients. Such sins need eradication, which you are determined to make happen.

Still, at times you long for something more. You enjoy your work, yet it's all you've ever known. First, you took on your parents' burdens. Now, you shoulder myriad responsibilities as a Pardoner. Sometimes, you feel trapped, and you wonder when you will ever have the chance to do what you want to do, rather than always fulfill what others expect of you.

Relics: Long black cloak, wooden toy

010	2 ANTONNA	SIAN S	WERE CONTRACT	C	
Name: Sin-Eater		Nature: Martyr		life: Sh-Eater	
Player:		Demeanor: Leader		Death: Plague (Dised	ase)
Chronicle:		Shadow: Martyr		Regret: Never marry	
				1	
00000000		ooooc Attribu	tes >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>		
Physical		Soc		Menta	
Strength				Perception	
Dexterity		Manipulation	00000	Intelligence Wits	
Stamina		Appearance			
		oocoo Abiliti	es occoo	000000000	0000000
Talents		Skills		knowled	dges
Alertness	●●000	Crafts	00000	Bureaucracy	
Athletics		Drive		Computer	
Awareness		Etiquette	•••00	Enigmas	
Brawl	00000	Firearms	00000	Investigation	
Dodge		Leadership		Law	
Empathy		Meditation		Linguistics	
Expression	0000	Melee		Medicine	
Intimidation		Performance		Occult	
Streetwise	00000	Repair		Politics	
Subterfuge	00000	Stealth	00000	Science	00000
	0-0-0-0-0-0	Advanta	ages	0-0-0-0-0-0-0	0000000
Background	5	Passio	ons	Arcano	Di
Allies	00000	Help others overcome s	h (Duty)	Castigate	00000
Eldolon	0000	Protect orphaned children	(Regret) ••000	Fatalism	
Relic	0000	Comfort survivors whose	e loved 00000		00000
Status	0000	ones have passed on (Con	0000 (noleenqui		00000
	_00000	Root out those who be	etray_00000		00000
	_00000	their calling (Hate)			00000
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Eather's carving tools (h museum) Never-worn wedding	00000 00000 00000				
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Father's carving tools (h museum) Never-worn wedding dress (h museum) Ruins of house				Devil's Dare (7)	
Father's carving tools (h museum) Never-worn wedding dress (h museum)				Devil's Dare (7)	
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Appendix: Who Was Who

Angyr

Although he remembers little of his life before coming to the Shadowlands, Brother Angyr, a Master Pardoner who dwells in the Necropolis of San Francisco, feels such a strong attachment to that city that he seldom leaves its confines. Trained by the local Chapter House, Angyr demonstrated a streak of independence that made many of his fellows believe he had more in common with certain bands of Renegades than with his Guild. His investigation by a team from the Beacon, however, turned up no sign of divided loyalties.

Angyr progressed quickly within the Guild. He joined the Scourges as a Journeyman and attained Master status in record time. Once he completed his training in advanced Castigation, he worked the streets of the Necropolis. His nimble mind — uncluttered by memories of his skin-clad life — and his experimental approaches to Castigation made him popular with the innovative wraiths of San Francisco. While his methods of Castigation were harsh, they usually resulted in extremely successful cleansings.

A few years ago, an earthquake rocked parts of the city. The tremor coincided with a fierce storm in the Skinlands and an equally intense Maelstrom in the Shadowlands. Caught up in the fury of the unleashed Tempest, Angyr aided a few of his acquaintances by raising a bulwark of protection against Oblivion's onslaught. Not content simply to weather the attack, the young Pardoner lit his lantern, uncoiled his bullwhip and began to Castigate the Spectres within the Maelstrom. In order to strengthen himself, he enlisted his own Shadow to fortify his power. Angyr's ferocity and single-minded determination bolstered his reputation among the Renegade and Heretic groups that proliferate in San Francisco's Necropolis, and he soon became the hip Pardoner of choice.

Since then, Angyr has voiced his support for Renegades and other dissenting wraiths, and he has sought Guild support for the agendas of various opponents of the Hierarchy. Wraiths at the main Chapter House in Stygia worry that this talented but brash Pardoner has overstepped his bounds. They fear he may draw the Hierarchy's wrath for his breach of the tacit agreement between the Pardoners and the powers-thatbe. Recently, the bureaucracy summoned Angyr to Stygia and required him to submit to a second panel of inquiry - this one comprising members of the Beacon, as well as a visiting Darksider. Although the investigators could find no disloyalty in Angyr, they were reluctant to turn him loose without a severe warning. Secretly, the representative of the Darksiders tried to enlist Angyr as a Doomslayer. He promised the Pardoner immunity from further investigations. Angyr declined the invitation and expressed his desire to return to San Francisco, where, he said, he had someone waiting for him on the "other side."

Angyr's appearance gives substance to his name. He stands over 6 feet tall, and has long, straight, black hair, an arrogantly handsome face and a lean, hard body. He stalks the streets of his home city with the predatory grace of a feral cat.





Reaped in the early 70s, Angyr does not recall his birth name. His memory still has huge gaps in the details of his mortal life, though he retains a strong attachment to the Haight-Ashbury district and Golden Gate Park. His affinity for music connects him to the psychedelic rock scene of the 1960s, while his penchant for black leather, bullwhips and chains hints at time spent with an interesting crowd.

Many traditional Pardoners complain that Brother Angyr is a loose cannon who needs to be brought under tighter control. A few of his supporters — some of them influential Darksiders — insist that Angyr and others like him hold, in their ability to act spontaneously and unpredictably, the keys to ultimate victory over Oblivion. Recommendations for Angyr's promotion, as well as requests for his censure, have reached the Council of Pardoners; all are being weighed. Whether he ultimately embodies the Guild's future or represents its inability to exercise control over its radical elements remains to be seen. It is questionable whether Angyr himself gives either possibility any thought.

Brother Tenacious

Juan de Manresa, an early follower of St. Ignatius of Loyola, followed his mentor throughout his travels. He remembers many details of his life as a member of the Society of Jesus, but his fondest memories are of Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises and his enjoyment acting as leader of the Society's retreats. Though he lived his life as well as he knew how, when he died of pneumonia at age 40, his soul did not go on to the reward he expected.

Juan's Reaper jerked the Caul from his quarry's face, then manacled him to a long line of other suffering souls. He dragged the coffle away for processing and indoctrination into the Skeletal Legion. When Juan passed the soulforges, he thought he was in hell. The flames, screams and torments all convinced him that he had fallen into the Pit. Although he had no idea how he had transgressed so gravely, Juan refused to give in to the inevitable. A soldier of Christ he had been in life; a soldier of Christ he would be in death. He knew he would refuse to serve the Devil, no matter what torments lay in store.

Who knows what trouble Juan might have caused had a passing Centurion not recognized him. The Centurion had also been a priest, before a bout with plague took his life, and he quickly explained to Father Juan what was really going on; then, he personally oversaw his fellow priest's induction into the Skeletal Legion.

Father Juan rapidly learned what he needed to know about Stygia and the Restless. His main regret, that he could not carry on the work he had loved in life, lasted until he met the Pardoner who worked with his cohort. That wise woman (known in the Guild as Mother Joyous) spoke with him at length about Castigation and other matters. When, shortly



thereafter, she asked if he would like to assist in her work, he jumped at the chance. Once it was clear to her that his true calling was with the Pardoners, she presented him to the Guild. Juan recognized in them the kindred spirits he sought, and he begged admittance to the order. Granted Apprentice status in the Pardoners Guild, he took the name Brother Tenacious.

Tenacious took to his existence as a Pardoner with the same fervor he had once exhibited as a priest. Eagerly recalling St. Ignatius' methods and works, he was almost solely responsible for instituting the idea of retreats and meditations into the Pardoners' practices. For centuries, he has written numerous histories, tracts, treatises and manuals for the Guild, and he has served enthusiastically and tirelessly in his capacity as retreat leader to recruit new wraiths into the Pardoners Guild. He considers the Guild to be much like a religious society, and he takes very seriously both his own vows and others'.

Wraiths who have read his works but have never met Brother Tenacious are surprised to learn that he isn't tall, stern and ascetic-looking. He is a short, blocky man with a fringe of graying brown hair and a congenial, if sometimes formal, manner. His most notable features are his overlong nose and the piercing intelligence of his eyes. Tenacious usually prefers to appear in garb like that of his breathing days; most often, he is the very image of a blackrobed Jesuit.

Tenacious' deepest embarrassment is the strength and wiliness of his Shadow. While he finds it both easy and natural to confess his shortcomings to another Pardoner. he often feels the stirring of the Shadow within himself - stirring he ruthlessly represses. Or so he believes. Unknown to the good Pardoner, his Shadow can take over whenever Tenacious sleeps. Once free of the Pardoner's interference, it performs actions calculated to damage the Guild and undermine Tenacious' recruitment efforts. Its latest escapade is a collaboration with Spectres on the writing of an irreverent book that spills many of the Pardoners' most closely guarded secrets. Known as Guildwraiths Among Us: True Secrets of the Pardoners, the ongoing work has been produced on the Guild's own printing press. Brother Tenacious, to his chagrin, has only recently discovered who is behind the odious book.

A large number of Pardoners both like and respect Brother Tenacious, and they freely acknowledge his contributions as a recruiter and leader of retreats. He has risen within the Guild to the status of Master Pardoner, and he moves easily through the corridors of power in Stygia. Few doubt that Tenacious would be chosen as the next Guildmaster, were Sister Acceptance to step down. Although flattered by his fellows' love and trust, Tenacious would rather continue doing what he

enjoys most — introducing the ways and philosophy of the Guild to new Pardoners.

Father Compassionate

Born on the island of Kös in the fifth century before Christ, the man who would become known as Father Compassionate spent his early life as a teacher. Schooled in the philosophies and learning of his Greek forefathers and contemporaries, Hippocrates gravitated toward the practice of medicine because of his interest in gymnastics. As an itinerant practitioner of medicine, he had to treat everything from injuries to war wounds to potentially fatal diseases.

Working alongside other medical mendicants, he developed a whole new method of treatment. It emphasized rational observations and healing based on herbal knowledge and the radical theory of treating not just the body, but the mind and emotions, as well. Maintaining that treatment should focus on the patient rather than the injury or disease, the young physician and his fellows used long discussions, pleasant surroundings and music to put their patients at ease.

Hippocrates advocated extended observation, which entailed the noting and reporting every symptom (no matter how seemingly inconsequential). His treatment then proceeded from the theory that nature would work to cure the patient, if given the chance to do so. He even understood that some illnesses originated from mental or emotional causes, and he treated them as well. Despite his mistaken understanding of an imbalance among the four humors as the cause of illness, Hippocrates' otherwise sophisticated techniques made him highly successful and respected. By adding ethical considerations to the methods he and his fellows had originated, Hippocrates created an oath that is still taken by doctors today.

When he died at age 90 or so, Hippocrates traveled to the Underworld. There, he met likeminded wraiths, philosophers, priests and physicians. They cleansed the soul, as he had treated and strengthened the body. Hippocrates learned the art of Castigation and, in turn, taught his fellow Restless all he knew of medicine. Because it seemed to be the aspect of his knowledge with the most practical application to wraiths, his teaching focused especially on that part



of his methods dealing with the mind and emotions.

Realizing the power he and the others who called themselves Purifiers held, he determined that they should not be feared by other wraiths. He wrote the Oath of the Purifiers, based upon his own Hippocratic Oath. That oath (with some modifications) is still sworn today by all Pardoners, as part of their stated practice.

Hippocrates has always commanded a great deal of respect from his fellow Purifiers. Although he is of short stature, his dignified posture, his short, curly white hair and welltrimmed, elaborately curled beard and his modest garments all distinguish him as a man of means and high standing. His speech is always measured and thoughtful. He is not without humor, but he always maintains a serious demeanor whenever he is with a patient. Age has lent him a great deal of his dignity, while his accomplishments in both life and death are enough to shame the least respectful wraith into behaving. Because he believes so much in the rational approach, Hippocrates is not always as gentle in his Castigations as he might be. His focus on rooting out the sickness he sees within all Shadows sometimes leaves his clients shaken. Because he recognized an innate streak of sadism in his own makeup, the great physician took the name Father Compassionate, to remind himself always to consider his patients' pain first.

Father Compassionate disappeared several months ago, after long service to the Guild. Some wraiths still claim to see him from time to time, his bearded face and white robes making him stand out among a crowd of Renegades or a host of Heretics. Such witnesses believe he has become a Missionary to Restless in need of his services. Others say he has long since either Transcended or gone down to Oblivion. Most do not believe that this vital Pardoner could leave the Underworld without there being some sign that he had gone.

The truth is far more disturbing. Just before Father Compassionate disappeared, his Shadow seized him in a bout of Catharsis. While under its influence, he distracted the Angst Battery's guardian and sabotaged the machine. When he regained control of himself, he was so ashamed by his loss of control that he fled into the Tempest. Now, he wanders from Renegade camp to refugee settlement and helps all who ask. He spends most of his time, however, trying to think of some way to undo the terrible act he has committed.

Sister Acceptance

As the only child of a well-connected Mycenaean family, Inachus received training in all the proper arts for a woman whose marriage into a good house was assured. Because he valued her keen mind, clever wit and fearlessness, her father also introduced her to knowledge usually reserved for men. He taught her to read, write and speak several languages. Inachus also learned philosophy, rudimentary medical skills and the art of warfare. Unable to bear the thought of her absence, her father refused to consider a marriage for her until she was nearly 22. Most other women her age had long since married and borne children, and many believed her parents had condemned her to a life alone or as a boarder in their home. Finally, however, when a marriage was arranged, Inachus set out for another city, where she was to meet her intended husband.

On the road, bandits set upon Inachus and her traveling companions. Her servants were carried off screaming, but she refused to be taken. Drawing the dagger that was the only weapon she carried, she fought so fiercely that the bandits had to kill her in self-defense.

She awakened from the blackness of death as one of the many milling souls lost in the gray Underworld. She wandered for an untold time before she found the man who led her to the Isle of Sorrows and gave her new existence meaning. Awed by his strength, power and goodness, Inachus loved Charon from the first time they met. Denied the chance to share eternity with Charon in matrimony, however, she searched for some way she could aid his cause.

While pondering this dilemma, Inachus discovered that her insights into the souls of others were particularly keen. She realized that they suffered from the same despair and rage that she often felt, so she began to talk with these other wraiths. She attempted to ease their distress by sharing their woes. It worked. As she spoke, she felt the lightening of their hearts.

One day, while performing this counseling, Inachus instinctively reached out and twined the imaginary dark yarn of a fellow wraith's anxiety around her fingers, just as she had often done with wool when she wove in her father's house. Tugging at the shadowy stuff, she felt the strand break away from the other wraith, as she relieved him of part of his Angst. It also wounded his Corpus, but he smiled at her. She blanched as she saw the yarn dissipate, leaving black stains upon her fingers, stains she could not wash away. Balanced between horror at her contamination and joy at what she had accomplished for her fellow wraith, Inachus found herself performing this ritual again and again.

Word of Inachus' doings spread, and soon, other Restless who could perform the same service contacted her. They called themselves Purifiers. Joyful that she and her fellows could offer something valuable to the Underworld, she rushed to tell Charon of her discovery. She saw, to her horror, that he, too, was stained by his Shadow. Reaching out, she sought to cleanse him, as she felt that the darkness within his soul must be eliminated. He cried out as she plunged her fingers into the blackest portion of his being, drawing it forth and banishing it. Then he saw the caring that lay behind her rash action.

Taking Inachus aside, Charon questioned her about her ability and smiled as he realized its meaning. What else they said to one another is unknown, but when their conversation ended, Inachus was Charon's personal Purifier. After that exchange, the two came to trust one another implicitly, and they worked together to help other Restless overcome the ravages of the Shadow. To signify her acceptance of her role as Charon's counselor, rather than that of his companion, Inachus changed her name to Acceptance. From that time until Charon vanished into the Sunless Sea, she counseled him and Castigated him whenever he needed her (and sometimes when he refused her attentions). Often, she disagreed with his decisions, but she never betrayed him. When the Guilds rose in revolt, Sister Acceptance briefly abandoned him, out of fear that he would consign her to the soulforges for her part in the rebellion. She reconciled with him to beg clemency for her fellow Guildwraiths, however. Many believe that the Pardoners Guild suffered so little for its part in the attempted coup because Charon was loath to sentence Acceptance to discorporation or the soulforge.

With the coming of the Fifth Great Maelstrom, Charon entered a madness more severe than any he had ever before suffered. With his consent (given during one of his few lucid moments), Sister Acceptance tried a desperate group Castigation on the imperator, in hopes of restoring him to lucidity. It failed. Charon's unchained Shadow slipped free and fled into the Labyrinth, only to be heard from again howling through the mouth of the Malfean Gorool. Although Sister Acceptance begged him to let her fight at his side against the creature, Charon refused. Alone, he met Gorool, created a whirlpool and disappeared with the monster into the spiral.

The Pardoners, knowing Sister Acceptance might give in to despair without something to occupy her, elected her Guildmaster by unanimous accord. She has fulfilled that role for almost 50 years. Of late, news came to her that Charon has been seen in the Labyrinth. Sister Acceptance, her eyes brightened by hope for the first time in a half-century, plans to be the first to enter that dread place in search of her lost emperor.



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LDBOOK

Your sins cry to me from the depths of your Shadow. Yield to me, and I will grant you absolution and healing. If you resist, I will still aid you. It's just going to hurt a lot more.

Puppeteers Hiya, bunky. Guess what? You're a passenger in your own body right now, so sit back and enjoy the ride. I've been watching you for a while, and it's pathetic. So I think it's time that this dead man showed you how to live. Hope your credit cards aren't maxed out, 'cause we're gonna need 'em.

It's Getting Crowded in Here!

The Puppeteers: renegades who challenge Charon's Law every time they practice, their powers of possession. The Pardoners: confessors and healers of the Dead, but they harbor a terrible secret. Both groups work toward what they see as the ultimate good for the Underworld — but would any other wraith agree if he knew what these Guilds are hiding?

Guildbook: Puppeteers and Pardoners is the fifth in the continuing, series of Guildbooks for Wraith: The Oblivion. The first Guildbook to contain two Guilds under one cover, Puppeteers and Pardoners includes everything - new Arcanos Arts, Merits, Flaws, Artifacts, Histories and more — that you need to play a fully realized member of either of these Guilds.

Guildbook: Puppeteers and Pardoners contains:

- The real reason the Puppeteers turn the Risen loose upon the world
 - The hidden link between the Pardoners and Charon's destruction
 - New uses for Puppetry and Castigation, and much more!

