

Lords of Gossamer & Shadow

Lucien's Guide to the Grand Stair



by Rob Donoghue





Rite Publishing Presents:

Lucien's Guide to the Grand Stair

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Author's Dedication to the AmberMUSH family, the biggest, best play community I've ever been a part of.

Special Thanks: Jason Durall and Christopher "Kit" Kindred, as they were quite instrumental in helping Perry with the initial edit and to Rob Donoghue's son, for napping at just the right times.

Based on Lords of Gossamer & Shadow by Jason Durall

Luke,

With your father's passing, it's my responsibility to pass onto you what of his papers remain. Many of them were lost in the same blast that kept the academy's carta collection out of the great enemy's hands. He was never one for diligent backups, and I fear that most of what I could recover was the result of a bit of vanity duplication on my part, and as a result, the bulk of this is my old correspondences with him.

There was a temptation to account these as lost. You're old enough now to have memories of youthful foolishness that almost certainly inspire the odd wince. That does not stop as you get older, and these letters represent exactly such an experience for me. We were so young when I wrote these that I wish I could just reach back though time and slap myself upside the head.

Still, perhaps there is a young man's wisdom in an old man's folly (or vice versa), and perhaps you will find some use in these old letters and notes. If nothing else, I hope they give you reason to think fondly upon your father. He was as good a friend as a man might hope for, and I miss him to this day.

-Lucien

3/7, Year of the Dragon

Henry,

Your idea of gathering the finest minds of many worlds into an academy was, like so many of your ideas, well-conceived and steeped in good intent. Should the day ever come that you actually find these hypothetical finest minds, I'll be the first to buy you a drink. In the meantime, I can only assume you

surround yourself with the current crop of jackanapes and attercops so that when you find these men of great learning, you know what criteria to select against.

As I sort through these papers, it's clear that only a handful of them have spent any amount of real time traversing the Stair, to say nothing of domains beyond their circle of comfort. I see the wildest flights of fancy suggested as rigorous hypothesis, or worse, some manner of grand unification theorem. They're lovely papers, with excellent handwriting, and I have found use for all of them, usually in far corners of the Stair where more delicate means of self-maintenance are unavailable.

More than anything, I find myself frustrated by the amount of magical thinking surrounding the Grand Stair's purported sentience. The Stair is full of oddities and contradictions, and these soft-headed scholars of yours hold up every piece of rogue data as proof of some sort of godhead working behind the scenes. I can only presume that this appeals to their sense of drama, because drama is certainly a kinder mistress than rigor.

Listen to me; I sound bitter. Forgive me for venting my bile on you in this manner, my friend, but you and I have had these discussions many times in the past, and you know how seriously I take the question of a mind behind the Stair. To hear these blowhards invoke it like some sort of fairy tale is nigh maddening.

Still, it speaks to why I get worked into a lather over this. The more we know about the nature of the Stair, the closer we are to being able to ask intelligent questions about its deeper mysteries. And I think we're getting closer.

It's fairly obvious that your council of

geniuses needs some instruction in the very basics of the Stair, so I'll start from scratch. I know this is old hat to you, but I suppose you can just take whatever parts of this you need, put your name ahead of mine and get it published, just like always.

So, to begin with, it is important to understand that the Stair is no one thing. This is not a metaphor, but a very real and concrete thing. While there is always a Stair of some sort, its exact form and nature is as varied as you can imagine, and the transitions between them can be abrupt and jarring.

To understand what I mean, you must understand the idea of an expanse (also called a demesne, nexus, and many other names) – it is a length of stairway which is consistent in appearance and style. For example, Expanse 88 is a cramped, industrial-looking stairwell, of the sort that you might find in a tall office building. On every other landing, roughly corresponding to each floor, is a single Door. To my knowledge, each of those Doors goes to a different place of business in a different Gossamer world, but I have not explored them all. It's a long, painful walk up and down, and I am not quite *that* curious.

For occupants of these worlds who discover the Doors, this is a marvel. Whole new worlds for trade, study, war and theft. Vast sagas play out within that contained space. But even those among them who have some understanding of the Doors lack the understanding that this is only a link in a far greater chain. Those bold enough to exit to the top or bottom would find themselves in an entirely different expanse.

88 is a good example, for it is very tidily self-contained. In many ways it is like the Grey Tower that your scholars are familiar with, albeit on a smaller scale. Not every expanse has such a clear

border, and it is not always clear where one begins and one ends.

That fact lies at the heart of one of the great questions of the Stair – where does it exist? To use Expanse 88 as an example, does that stairwell exist in a Gossamer world somewhere or is it its own world, perhaps part of a larger world that makes up the whole of the Stair? I have no good answer for this... yet.

It is with this question, and several others in mind, that I have graciously accepted university funding and resources to better document the extent of the Stair.

-L

6/12, Year of the Dragon

Henry,

The inclusion of port in the last shipment of supplies is enough to make me forget who actually wrote that paper on the interaction of light on certain sidhe crystals. In fact, as I take another drink, I find that knowledge has slipped entirely from my mind.

Sadly, your taste in aides does not match your taste in cordials. Honestly, I have given up on you sending me any assistants blessed with intellect, so in the absence of that, I must request you focus on durability. So far, the lady with the armor is the only one to have lasted long enough to run any risk of me remembering her name.

But I get ahead of myself. We started out with the four known Doors from Arbanes in hopes of not overly startling the associates. The two exits that lead to the Grey Tower were first, and we traversed the distance from the upper to the lower Door. It's 2875 steps between them, by the way. The Grey Tower is a

wonderful introduction because it looks suitably fantastical. The Stair spirals around the inside of what appears to be a great stone tower, easily 200 yards across. The Stair's passages are wide enough for six men to walk abreast, and there is a broad landing every 70 degrees or so, which makes the landings and the Doors upon them appear to spiral up and down out of sight. It's at least three miles high and by my estimate there are a little over 500 Doors along its length. For most of your scholars, *this* is what the Stair looks like, as they've seen nothing else.

Because of that, I might suggest that many of them would benefit from a trip through the third Door from Arbanes. I know it is not as well-regarded by your tiding of magpies as it has the poor grace to appear in the docks district, but if they knew how much of the school's funding came from trade through the Merchant's Door, they might grow more interested.

Which is, as I think about it, a terrible reason to show it to them. Go ahead and let them keep turning up their noses.

As you know, the Merchant's Door leads to the Grand Plaza. Geographically it's interesting, of course, because it may be the single largest landing on the Stair, the size of a small town, reported to contain 1000 Doors within its boundaries. And as one might expect of such a place, it may also be the biggest cross-world marketplace out there.

I won't bore you with the travel pitch - anything you can imagine can be found for a price and similar storybook drivel. If you want those details, send an economist. For me, there are a few elements of note.

First, the sheer size of the Plaza makes it unobvious that it is even on the Stair. For most that traffic there, this is all there is (and all there needs to be). Yet



The Grey Tower

the Stair is there to be found if you know where to look - in fact, there are two different exits down.

Second, Morty says "hello". For your future readers, I explain - Mortimus Maximus is a man of no small cunning and magical talent who, most notably, has made his home in the market for as long as I (or anyone I've spoken to) can remember. Setting aside the obvious implications regarding what powers he may hold, this is noteworthy for reasons related to the very nature of the Stair. It is not a friendly environment for anything permanent, and the very nature of the market reflects this. It is composed of temporary structures, constantly shifting, and is never quite the same from trip to trip. To maintain a permanent presence takes a great deal of dedication, and to maintain it as long as Morty has, takes something else entirely.

A curious upshot of that fluidity is that I genuinely do not know if the Plaza is unique. Given time, everything about it changes, including its name. When someone tells a tale of “The Great Market”, or “The Plaza”, it’s very difficult to tell whether stories are talking about the same or different places. I know for a fact that there are other trading hubs up and down the Stair, but most are just agreed upon spots, with perhaps the occasional shanty or tent springing up during trade seasons. In fact, trade between Gossamer worlds can get very sophisticated in places, a topic which may merit further investment down the line. But importantly, so far as I know, there is no other hub of this scope at this time.

Needless to say, the children were quite impressed. But these wonders were a mere appetizer. Once the expedition had gotten its feet wet, we returned to Arbanes and set off overland to the fourth Door, in the ruins of Pasq. It’s a good three weeks overland through rough territory, and I’m going to leave anyone who I don’t think can cut it on the Arbanes side of the Door. I’ve included directions and supply requests in expectation that the school will keep this base camp supplied.

This fourth Door is not a popular destination; for it opens on an expanse I call the Rickety Stair for reasons that are obvious to any who have traversed it. It is all cramped spaces and old creaky wood which seems barely able to bear weight, interspersed with trap doors. The walls are decorated with windows into the void which, upon examination, appear to be disturbingly realistic art that shift just enough to be disconcerting. It is uncomfortable to transverse, and the way twists back upon itself in a great knot that renders

navigation greatly frustrating. For one who has an understanding of the Stair it is merely disconcerting, but for most that would pass through this expanse, it’s treacherous.

As an interesting aside, we ran a few simple tests of things like combustion temperatures throughout the Rickety Stair, and initial findings suggest that it’s either several expanses knotted together, or it’s moderately morphic in its properties. Not certain about the implications, one way or another.

In any case, tomorrow morning we press on further into the Stair. The next report will wait until we return.

-L.

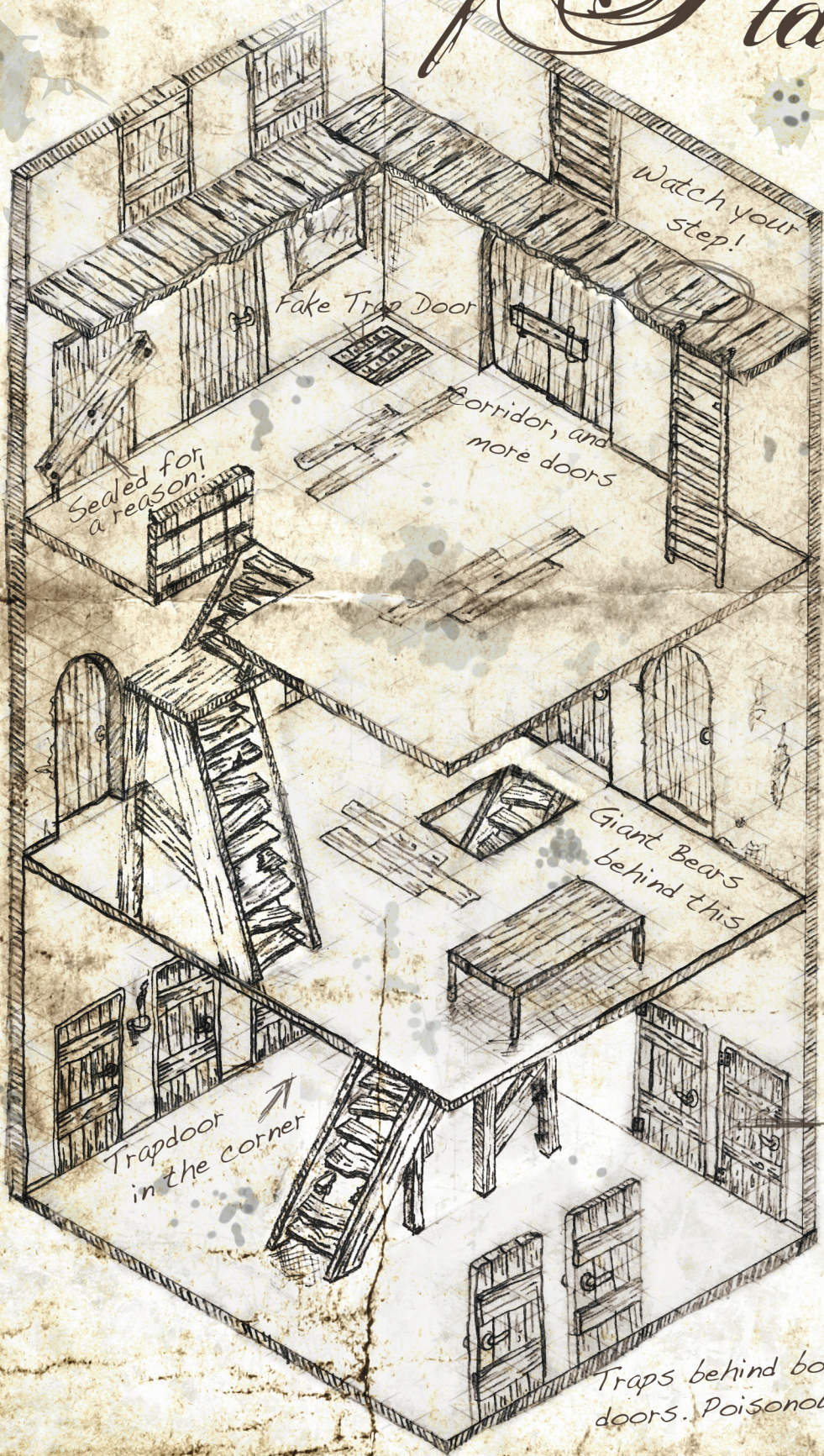
PS - If the next shipment of supplies should happen to contain some real beef, then I promise I shall also forget entirely the name of the blonde gentleman from Tau.

2/45 (I think), Year of the Carp

Henry,

My apologies for my long period of silence. Upon passing from the Rickety Stair into the Jeweled Chambers, our little group attracted attention from something unpleasant. Were I alone, I’d have engaged it, but I had to consider the safety of my equipment and notes (and, of course, the research assistants) so we took a long route back to circumvent it. Gretchen proved possessed of startling competence when another one of the assistants opened a Door in a panic, and worsened the situation to the tune of a half dozen clockwork lions. The expedition is, at this point, smaller by a number of heads. I’ve included their details and notes for their families separately.

the Rickety Stair



Watch your step!

Fake Trap Door

Corridor, and more doors

Sealed for a reason

Giant Bears behind this

Trapdoor in the corner

Traps behind both doors. Poisonous gas!

Seriously, Don't go there.

Three-Trunked Mammoths

Every Door in this floor seems to have Foul Monsters behind them?

Friendly place, but wouldn't eat anything here

If I could, I would send Gretchen back with this missive – she’s competent enough to deserve a better assignment than putting up with my shit, and if any of the crows back there cannot see that, then I am willing to write my letter of recommendation on something long and pointy. But as it turns out, she will not be needing it.

In our flight, we found our way onto the Star Lit Steps. I’m unsure if you’ve ever visited this expanse: as you enter, the walls around you appear to fall away as you progress, growing translucent and then transparent. Even the Stair largely fades from sight – barely visible – and the surrounding darkness fills with stars. It’s beautiful, but rarely visited, as there are apparently no Doors along its length. Or so I thought – it seems there are Doors to be found, but they are as invisible as the walls. I admit that I would have continued on, oblivious to this, but it seems that this obfuscation does not fool that instinctive sense of a Door leading home which some travelers have.

You are no doubt chewing on that, as you know perfectly well that Arbanes is not my home, yet I am the only Warden on this expedition and in fact, you and Professor Willey are the only Wardens I know of from Arbanes. Or knew.

Gretchen, it seems, has heard the call. Finding this hidden fifth Door into Arbanes was only the start, and were it not for my insistence that we stop long enough for me to send this, she would already be deep into the Stair, questing for the Labyrinth. As soon as I put this in the hands of a local lad, I shall join her back on the Stair.

Already, I can imagine that you are rubbing that spot on your brow that seems to pain you so when I vex you, but I ask: what would you do? The exact

nature of events whereby one becomes a Warden is still rich with questions. We all agree that it can’t be done without the Stair’s consent, but we don’t really know what that means. And, of course, it is the nature of your first exposure to the Heart of the Stair that you don’t really understand what you’re looking at. The opportunity to see that original attunement, knowing what I know now, is too tempting to ignore.

This may delay my subsequent correspondence, but the attached notes should be more than enough to keep you and the crows busy for some time.

-L

Honest to God, I’m not even sure what year this is.

Henry,

Well, that was interesting.

Gretchen is fine, or was the last time I saw her. She’s a Warden now, and she’s running amok on the Stair as we all did in our time. Do you remember those days, Henry? It makes me feel old to even think about it, but I can still recall the thrill. Strap on a sword and set out to see what wonders lie beyond the next Door. Perhaps that was part of why I joined Gretchen on her journey – I can tell myself that it was academic curiosity, but my sword arm knows I’m a liar.

Speaking of which, the trip to the Labyrinth was less problematic than expected, and a bit less informative. There was no great moment of insight or visitation which laid bare the secrets of the Stair in a thunderclap, which is kind of a shame, but when are we ever that

lucky?

Gretchen was navigating by instinct, and in retrospect I suspect she was in something of a fugue state. Based on her comments, I feel she was perceiving the Stair differently than I was, though not so differently that she seemed confused or lost. I have some thoughts on the significance of this that I'll get to later, but in her case it's clear that some of what we passed (art in particular) was of personal significance to her.

I actually missed our original transition to the Labyrinth, which is not surprising in retrospect. If it were an obvious transition, then it would be easy to find, rather at odds with the idea of the Labyrinth. Once we were in, I was grateful for Gretchen's instinct – I suspect that it would have been much slower going on my own – but it seemed to very much reinforce my sense that the Stair is its own space. I don't think something as sophisticated and multi-faceted as the Labyrinth could exist as borrowed space – it exists somewhere, albeit in a context we don't truly understand yet.

Thinking back now, I think it's possible that my perception was also altered. For all that I thought I was going in as an analytical observer, I don't think that's really possible. In seeking understanding, I wonder if some amount of understanding was shared with me.

Yes, I know, that sounds like mystic gibberish – I half sound like Stoddard with his theory of a “keeper” running the whole show. Still. I'm not sure I fully understand everything I saw.

In any case, I have a curious gift to pass along. I am, I was surprised to discover, something of a font of wisdom, or at least Gretchen seemed to think so. Shortly before we parted ways, she revealed that she had been capturing my

anecdotes and pieces of advice as we went, at least the ones which seemed useful. I borrowed the notebook long enough to transcribe it, and I pass this along to you. It might be something useful to pass out to new walkers, or perhaps to scatter about the Grand Stair like those horrible little key priests do with their holy writ.

In any case, I see that substantial correspondence has accumulated during my absence. I'll avail myself of it before I return to the Stair to continue my studies.

-L.

17/17, Year of the Fruitbat

Henry,

First, I must apologize. I knew that some time had passed during my absence, but I had not realized how much. I offer my belated congratulations on your marriage to Professor Willey – she has never been one of the stupid ones, and I hope you understand what high praise that is. You mention that a child is on the way, and I hope this gets to you in time to mention what a fantastic, all-purpose name Lucien is. Easily mutable. Rolls off the tongue.

I've had the opportunity to sort through the accrual of papers, and I wonder what cruelty I ever inflicted on you that you felt it necessary to share some of these academic monstrosities with me? Of particular note, Professor Taltos' observations about the subtleties of maintaining breathable atmosphere within the Stair would be exceedingly insightful, if it weren't a damned staircase lined with Doors. Attempting to infer meaning from subtleties of atmosphere while ignoring the obvious structure in front of one's face is the

work of a third-class mind.

To Professor's Stoddard's assertion that if the Stair does not have a directing intelligence, the Stair must orient towards the Eidolon because of its tendency towards structure, I have two answers.

First he is wrong and he knows it – he's just trying to get us to agree with his Keeper of the Stair theory.

Second, if the Stair had any such inclination, it would be fairly obvious. That it does not, forces us to consider other explanations, and my inclination is to suspect that the portion of the Stair we perceive is a subset of something greater. Perhaps there are other constructs in the universe that serve a similar purpose. We have heard tales of the World Tree, the Dragon Roads, and the Endless River – perhaps they are similar. Perhaps they are even the same underlying thing, simply expressed differently. That we see the Stair as the center of things does not automatically make it so.

Or, perhaps there's a magical man who just happens to like doors very much. That seems likely.

I jest at Professor Stoddard's expense, but I add on a more serious note that no prospect terrifies me more than the possibility that someone **built** the Stair. I have seen relics of some of the great peoples, but nothing comes close to the sheer scale of it. Such a prospect is daunting beyond all measure.

And out of a sense of academic fairness, I admit that it is also possible that I am engaging in extensive mental gymnastics to adhere to my assertion that there is no ghost in this particular machine. I must concede that a guiding power is also a reasonable explanation for the failure of the Dwimmerlaik. In truth, I have no evidence, one way or another.

It's a question that nags at me for reasons I cannot fully explain. And, hell, I'm not even entirely sure how I'll pursue it, but I'll think of something.

But it can wait a little while. I'll be coming to visit shortly after this missive finds you, if only to congratulate your wife and see your child before I disappear onto the Stair again. If you still have any of that Yrvalian red, this might be a good excuse to crack it open.

Until then.

-L

Lucien's Notes

I do not doubt you have read many books and papers about the Stair. Most of them are complete bullshit, and lest you think that hubris, I include mine in that reckoning. Time on the Stair has taught me much of how little I really knew. That is not to say you should not familiarize yourself with whatever material you can get your hands on. You never know when some tidbit is going to save your life. Just read skeptically.

If you're looking for deep cosmological explanations, you won't find them here. There are hundreds of theories regarding the nature of the Stair, and they're all equally specious. Find the one that works for you. But I hopefully can fill you in on a few practical tidbits on getting around the Stair.

I'm not going to touch on the Labyrinth here for a simple reason – if that's your destiny, then nothing I can say is going to change that much, and it's more likely I'd make things worse for you by making you overthink something that depends a lot on instinct. So, until you've become a Warden yourself, this

advice applies to any explorations using the sword just as much as it will after you've found your way.

The first thing you need to realize is that you don't understand the size of the Stair. Saying it's infinite is an easy sleight-of-hand to keep the brain from thinking about it, but let's stop and do the math. Think about a staircase that's a mile long. Imagine the tallest building you've ever been in, imagine taking the Stair all the way to the top, then stop and consider that that was merely a fraction of a mile.

Then consider how many Doors there are in that mile. Even if they aren't packed in tightly, let's say there's one every 30 feet or so, on each side. It can be more or less, but we'll go with it. Ballpark, that's 350 doors – 350 potential worlds in a single mile of Stair.

Now imagine it's 10 miles long. 3,500 Doors, and the kind of climb that they write epics about.

Now 100 miles. 35,000 Doors. A climb that kills.

Keep thinking. It usually sinks in at the thousand mile mark, but it can be very useful to keep thinking right up to the million mile mark – farther than anyone could possibly go in a lifetime and then realize that if the Stair is truly infinite, that doesn't even scratch the surface.

If that doesn't twist your brain a bit, you're not thinking hard enough. And if it makes you think "that's impossible, it can't possibly be infinite," then you're not alone, but good luck proving it.

Whatever its actual dimensions, it's big beyond comprehension, and the very scope makes it hard to ever know more than a small corner of it.

The Grand Stair does branch, and in my experience they almost always rejoin eventually. Usually this is a fairly benign

effect, but in some expanses, the splitting and rejoining is common enough to turn the whole of the expanse into a maze.

One of the real secrets of navigating the Stair lies in the Gossamer worlds. See, it's a rare world that has a single Door, and the other Doors may open anywhere on the Stair. And if you got your head wrapped around that previous exercise, then the significance of that has just smacked you in the face. Even if you need to go thousands of miles in a given world, it might allow you to traverse hundreds of thousands of miles (or more) upon the Stair. And as a bonus, long distance travel tends to be much easier on a given world than it is slogging up and down the Stair.

If you find a Door that goes from one stretch of the Stair to another, then treasure it. Such things are gold.

Time and distance are going to get weird on you sometimes. In some places, these disconnects are as predictable as clockwork. In others, they're just going to make no sense. There's no good way to deal with it, except to be ready.

Walkers rely on carta of the Doors and worlds they know, both for navigation and to ease the sharing of knowledge.

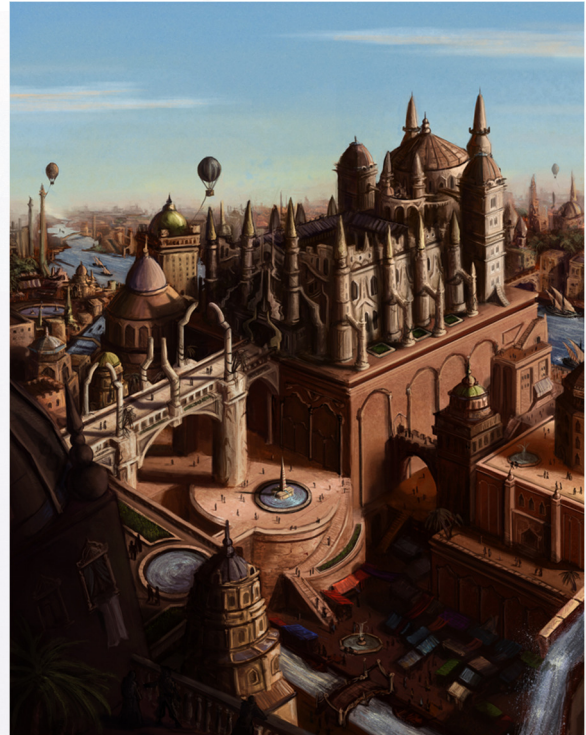
If you become a Warden, you benefit from a certain amount of instinctive navigation. This is incredibly useful when you need to find things, and it's possible that it breaks a few of the rules I've suggested here. The geography of the Stair serves you (at least to an extent) as a Warden, but the Warden's gifts are all about the destination, not the route. If the route matters (and you'd be surprised how often it does), you don't want to rely on your memory. To address this, keep a carta, which is a fancy term for a map of worlds. Many Wardens get by entirely on instinct, and

that works fine, but a carta allows you to do better than fine. When you encounter something you don't understand, it can help you build a context. Be warned, you're mapping a network of steadily increasing complexity – when you start, it's easy to imagine that a simple diagram will suffice for a carta, but once you've traveled through a few dozen Doors, that lovely diagram turns into a knotty mess. Like a lot of information problems, there's no good answer to it, so you find the one that works for you. The original term came from the practice of using stacks of stiff cards, each with a piece of the greater map, but a carta may be a book, a scroll, a database or anything else that might be useful for tracking Doors and their connections.

Arbanes has the finest collection of carta I know of, but don't trust them entirely. Many walkers and Wardens construct their own carta over time to keep track of these routes, and they tend to leave unpleasant surprises in them for the unwary. Don't ask how I know, but it's entirely possible for a world to be completely covered in magma and still have fully functional Doors, depending what those Doors are made out of.

While the Stair may be contiguous it is likely that your experience of it will not be. Certainly you can stick to one expanse of Stair for your whole life and not lack for adventure, but after you've explored a certain amount of it, the fact that it's a three-day walk up the Stair to get from one world to another leaves one eager to find a shortcut. To say nothing of what happens when you come from a Gossamer world with multiple Doors (as you do).

Don't make assumptions about what a world looks like. Yes, a lot of Gossamer worlds follow familiar patterns – spherical bodies with recognizable



Arbanes

geography, atmosphere and so on – but there are exceptions. I have seen worlds no larger than a single room, worlds that appear to be inside larger beings, worlds composed of ideas and light that freeze in place only for the moment that you look upon them and more besides. All of which is to say, the Stair may be strange, but there are stranger things beyond it.

Noteworthy Things Which Have Emerged From Open Doors Include:

- Clockwork lions
- A flock of migratory animated pants
- A caravan of half-sized men riding oversized ants
- A procession of cultists handing out fliers
- A newspaper
- Very confused tax inspectors
- Half a couch

Watch your manners. It's exciting to have the universe laid out before you, and it's easy to develop a bit of a swagger. When you're out in the Gossamer worlds, that's all well and good, but when you're on the Stair, remember that every person or thing you run into might be just as special. Where they come from they may be gods or kings, and while they won't be looking for a fight (usually) they're not going to back down if you give them lip.

Just assume anyone you meet on the Stair is a dangerous liar. The great enemy may be gone, but their passing left a vacuum that some will always seek to fill.

If you're going down and the other guy is going up, then you yield right of way. It's not universal, but it's a good rule of thumb. If you carry a sword on your hip, be mindful of which side you pass another traveler on. Passing with the sword towards them is a signal of peace, since it's harder to draw and strike, passing with the sword away from them is a sign of wariness or hostility. Left-handers, polearms, and such render this a very soft rule, but it's worth keeping in mind.

Before you try a Door, look around for Rhen codes on or nearby. They're very rare, as they'd be a poor secret if they weren't, but they can be very useful. They'll be simple marks, usually in chalk or charcoal, and they can sometimes tell you a great deal about what's on the other side. Learning the ins and outs of these symbols is a language in its own right, but these are a few of the basics. I honestly have no idea how widespread this secret is – the Stair does not take well to marking, and the very presence of these symbols indicates that either there is some trick for making them more permanent or that their use is more ubiquitous than I realize.



Rhen Code: Safe

Alternately, whatever force maintains the Stair is a lot less worked up by chalk and charcoal than it is by people really dirtying up the place.

(And before you ask, I don't know who the Rhen are. The story goes that they were nomads who wandered the stair long ago, but the great enemy's purge has removed any ability to find out the truth of it. Still, something about the poetry of a simple, secret language surviving when whole worlds did not appeals to me.)

Spend some time in a world where they take math really, really seriously. It's eye-opening.

At some point, every single person who has fought on the Stair realizes that they can just roll something big and heavy downhill. If you're fighting someone who's never considered it, you can devastate entire troops, but most experienced travelers are ready for it, usually with spells or cantrips, and the smart ones may have some way to turn things around. Which is to say, only try this if you're sure your enemy is an idiot.

The fact that I think the Stair is the center of the universe doesn't automatically make it so. As you travel, you're going to meet people who see things differently, often thinking that a world or handful of worlds are the real heart of reality, and that the Stair is just an interstitial curiosity. These people are generally very stupid, but take poorly to being educated. Better to just nod and smile unless you're someplace with a strict no-weapons policy. You wouldn't believe how upset some people get when you suggest their home might not be the

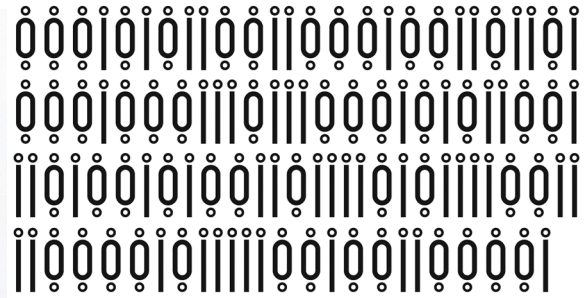
center of the universe.

I might grudgingly concede those people may also be better adjusted. The Stair is not a place where one can put down roots, and it can be harder to find a place for oneself in a universe so large.

There are places where the Stair gets strange, places where it's just a narrow stone staircase obscured by darkness which nothing can penetrate. Places where it seems like you can see yourself walking in the other direction on the ceiling. Places where unmarked, unbroken white stone extends for so many miles that you have no evidence you are moving at all. Whatever the case, just stay on the steps and keep moving. This is especially true on your journey to the Heart of the Labyrinth.

The Stair is largely scaled to human-size, a fact which has inspired no shortage of questions. However, there are exceptions. I have seen Doors as large as 50 feet high and as small as a finger (though I have passed through neither, because I am not a fool). Similarly, the Stair can be larger and smaller – I have navigated one stretch where each step is easily 10 feet high – it's an absolute bear. None of these are common, but they underscore the scope of the stair. If a hundredth of one percent of the expanses on the stair are bizarre in one way or another, that's still an unfathomable number of bizarre places.

If you are outnumbered on the Stair, run. Preferably down, but if you must run up, take some comfort in the fact that your pursuers also need to run up. Your instinct may be to dive for the nearest Door, but that is exactly what a smart adversary is counting on. It is hard to bring overwhelming force to bear on the Stair, so most ambushes are mere subterfuge to get the target through a particular Door where no such



*Rhen Code:
Powerful Inhabitant*

limitations are in play.

Do not forget that the Stair is not the only way between worlds, even if it is the greatest of them. The great enemy had some capabilities in this area, but the purge was thorough enough to leave little enough record of this. Despite this, legends persist. Explorers still seek the final resting place of the last Worldship. There's said to be a diamond statue that walks to a new world every hundred years. The Goddess Yssharra claims to be able to touch every world her followers walk upon. Wardens are often quick to dismiss such claims as nonsense, but I attribute that to a blindness born of their focus on the Stair.

The Stair is proximate enough to the Gossamer worlds that the world's penumbra of magic can extend onto the Stair, at least a little ways (usually measured in feet). The net result of this is that the rules of magic on the Stair can be inconsistent, especially when a given stretch of the Stair may actually contain multiple overlapping penumbras. This means that spells and powers from a given world may continue onto the Stair, but it's an unreliable effect which fades capriciously with any sort of distance. Bear it in mind for two reasons: first, don't rely on such things any more than you must and, second, if you find yourself up against an angry godling, do

what you can to move the fight away.

That said; do not underestimate the use of the Gossamer worlds upon the Stair. This has been the deciding point in many battles, and should you ever (all the gods forbid) find yourself fighting a war upon the Stair, these penumbras could decide where and how many battles are fought.

The Stair itself is highly resistant to any sorceries you may deploy, which makes creating any kind of permanent barrier problematic (not that that keeps people from trying). However, ambient effects – light, darkness, temperature and (most notably) gravity are somewhat more subject to manipulation, though the effects will be less persistent than you may be used to.

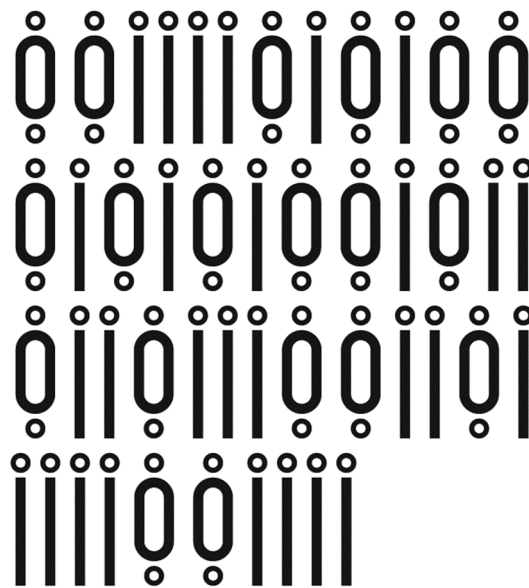
There is no technical reason why a teleportation wouldn't work on the Stair, but to my knowledge, none ever have beyond a few line of sight tricks. There have always been those willing to try – being able to teleport within the Grand Stair would be immensely potent, but the variables are... problematic. I advise against trying.

The Magic of the Grand Stair

Transcript from a Lecture on Sorcery and the Grand Stair

This is going to be terribly boring for anyone not already versed in the magical arts. This is not my problem – if you do not know what a lynchpin is, or are looking for 17 ways to improve your incantations and potions, then I suggest you get out of my sight before I lay my hands upon you.

Ok, have they cleared out? Fantastic.



Rhen Code: Cul-De-Sac

All right, for the rest of us, here's what you need to know about sorcery on the Stair.

Spells will find little purchase on the Grand Stair itself, meaning that spells depending on changing the environment (raising walls or opening fissures, for example) will fail in a fairly unimpressive fashion. Ambient changes (light, heat, etc.) are possible, but fade quickly in direct proportion to their effect. A magical lantern may last for hours, but a wall of fire would last no more than a minute. The precise rate of decay is entirely subject to the magical specifics of the location. Novices attribute this to the Stair's resistance to magic, but there is more at work here. There is no shortage of power in the Stair, but precious little of it is available to be drawn upon directly. Most of the available magic seems to be the scraps of ambient power that leaks from the Doors. The net result is that the Stair is, despite its obvious supernatural nature, an area of very low magic. Thus, a sorcerer upon the stairs must contend

with limited resources and an environment antithetical to most of his workings – such a sorcerer would be well served to limit his efforts to the subtle variety.

A Warden of the Grand Stair (put your hand down Charles, that's not what we're here to talk about), is limited by the rules of the Grand Stair. This means that teleportation effects, and effects that depend on summoning matter from somewhere else, will fail. This could theoretically be overcome with sufficient knowledge and power, but I know of no being with the correct proportions of both to accomplish this.

I've put a few formulas on the board which may be of some use to the brighter among you. If these are confusing, I suggest you ask a classmate. If you are still confused, I remind you that I am not your mommy, and I am not obliged to care.

Cantrips

Trip (“Clopyt”) – The target's footing becomes uncertain, causing them to either need to catch themselves or (ideally) go down ass over teakettle, something quite problematic on a stairway.

Lucien's Notes – *Grasp* can be used to similar effect, but a trip on the Stair can be critical enough to merit a specialized tool.

Footing (“Opora”) – The inverse of *Trip*, this cantrip affects the caster, causing his feet (or hands, if they are touching a surface) to be firmly fixed in place for a moment, just long enough to catch oneself from taking a nasty fall.

Lucien's Notes – Worked this one out the first time someone used *Grasp* on me on the Stair. Situation also gave me the idea for *Trip* as well as a handful of broken ribs.

Peace (“Klid”) – This cantrip



Rhen Code: Native Ignorant

expresses peaceful intent to any who hear it, conveying the sentiment magically. It has no persuasive or manipulative element; it merely communicates intent. Subjects are no more likely to believe this than they normally would – but it can be a handy way to overcome a violent cultural barrier or reassure a startled animal.

Lucien's Notes – The Stair's translation capability solves many communication problems, but sometimes there is not time enough for it to kick in, especially when swords are drawn. And you'd be amazed how many places take raising your hands to be a sign of aggression.

Sorcery Spells

Lucien's Most Expeditious Overhead Retreat - For the duration of the spell, the subject experiences subjective gravity. That is, wherever they plant their feet is down, allowing the subject to run up walls, along ceilings and so on.

Lucien's Notes – I tried the Flight spell for this, but as it turns out, managing the vectors complicates things. The launch is easy. The landing is hard. In every sense. This approach brought about fewer broken bones. I almost always have this hung with the lynchpins already set to myself as subject, so casting is quick, and I can beat a hasty retreat unimpeded.

Casting Time – 30 minutes plus five

minutes per lynchpin

Lynchpins – Subject, Gossamer world,
Duration, Dispel

Lucien’s Magnificent Thundering Lockdown - Every Door within the area of effect slams shut as if a strong man had just done so and, if possible, locks. This is a purely physical effect, so Doors which are forcibly held open may resist this effect, but not trivially.

Lucien’s Notes – I actually learned this spell when I was “working” security for a Djinn Pasha, as its use was part of the alarm system. Its application to the Stair seemed self-evident. Though I have found it is of little use against a dedicated Warden, it can still be of great use against lesser enemies, or to bring a bad situation under control.

Casting Time – 30 minutes plus five minutes per lynchpin

Lynchpins – Gossamer World, Area of Effect

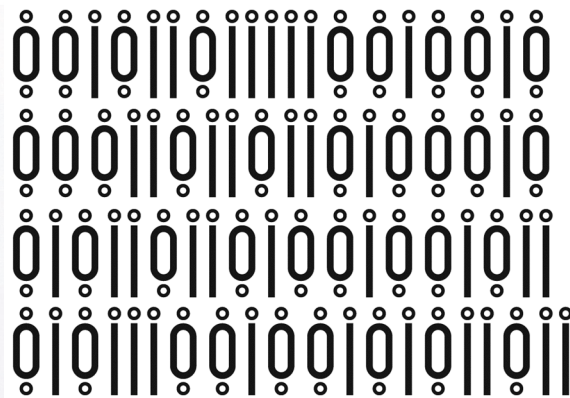
Lucien’s Transcendent Inclined Plane – The spell creates an invisible ramp of force that lasts about a minute. It’s finger-thin, transparent, and hard as foot-thick stone.

Lucien’s Notes – It’s good to be prepared when someone rolls a boulder down the Stair at you. I’ve tried gravity reversal spells, but it’s hard to make the inertia go away quickly enough for them to abruptly roll uphill, so I settled on a simpler defense.

Casting Time – 30 minutes plus five minutes per lynchpin

Lynchpins – Gossamer World, Angle of Incline, Size of Plane, *Duration, Dispel*

Lucien’s Subtle and Encompassing Implication of Propriety – When cast, this draws a veil across the target which renders their appearance



Rhen Code: Danger Do Not Use

unexceptional to viewers within the Gossamer world. It does not obscure details – uniforms are not replicated, armed characters still appear armed, faces are still recognizable and so on – but it keeps anomalies from drawing attention for the duration unless the target draws attention to them

Lucien’s Notes – It’s true that a good sword can serve you well almost anywhere, but there are places where it’s severely frowned upon. The effect of the Stair will obscure your comings and goings to some extent, but a fellow in plate armor in the middle of an office building is going to draw some stares. The goal of this spell is to smooth these things over whenever possible.

Casting Time – 30 minutes plus five minutes per lynchpin

Lynchpins – Gossamer World, Target, *Duration, Dispel*

Lucien’s Efficacious Invisible Scribe – Cast on a writing implement and a stack of paper, this spell will transcribe a copy of a targeted text or the spoken words of the target for as long as there are supplies to do so. It can literally transcribe anything, or it can translate, provided the caster knows both languages or benefits from Exegesis.

Lucien's Notes – I originally had a much faster spell which simply created a duplicate of the papers in question, but the magical creation or summoning of matter introduces numerous unpleasant variables and attracts certain sorts of unpleasant parasites if left in a library. After losing my collection of Shi's notes on optics to maglouses, I opted for a slower approach, which has the advantage of producing an entirely mundane result.

Casting Time – 30 minutes plus five minutes per lynchpin

Lynchpins – Gossamer World, Target, *Dispel, Language*

Lucien's Reassuring Phantasmical Rail – This spell creates a railing that can extend as far as the caster can see. It's composed of force, and crafted to resemble the local material. It's strong as metal, and provides a solid grip.

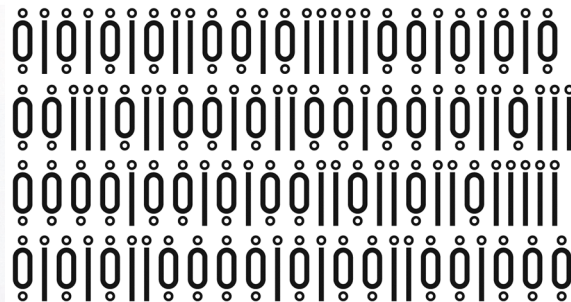
Lucien's Notes – This is not a strictly necessary spell, but I keep it on hand all the same. There are parts of the Stair where a misstep can spell your doom, and I just feel better with something solid to hold onto.

Casting Time – 30 minutes plus 5 minutes per lynchpin

Lynchpins – Gossamer World, Size, *Dispel, Duration*

Lesser Powers

Lucien's Notes – Not everyone who travels the Stair is a Warden. Some are lead there by a Warden, some find their way by chance, some may even be destined to become Wardens in time. These guys can be hilarious. A lot of them don't really grasp the whole of the Stair, and think of whatever antechamber or stretch they can get to as a nexus of worlds. And if their world doesn't have many visitors, this can



Rhen Code: Local Food

actually be a big deal – secret trading, technology and magic smuggling... the whole nine yards. You don't want to discount these guys entirely, since they have local firepower, but they are the definition of a small fish in a big pond.

Walker of the Grand Stair [5 Points]

However it happened, this character has been shown the Grand Stair and understands that it leads to other worlds, though the understanding of the significance of this may be largely lost on them. Many Walkers know only of their world and a second world whose Door is close to their own. A Walker has no ability to find Doors on his own, and can only use Doors that he explicitly knows (usually only one or two of them). Any other Door will refuse his touch.

Lucien's Notes - Walkers go by a number of names – Worldwalkers and Doorkeepers being two of the most common. Most Wardens spent time as Walkers before achieving understanding, though the majority of Walkers will never become Wardens. It's very easy to write these guys off as chumps – they have none of the gifts of the Wardens – but don't be hasty. Becoming a Walker requires time, dedication and wits, and folks who find the Stair are often quite gifted in other ways.

Lesser Abilities

Lucien's Notes – The abilities of Wardens and Masters are potent, and as a whole the mantle of each office is truly something rare and marvelous in the universe, but the actual powers themselves are not all so unique. There are beings whose abilities can be very similar, even identical, to those of the Wardens or Masters. For example, on the Gossamer world of Turr, the Keystone family has the power to connect any two Doors within their world. The power is common in their bloodline and I have seen that it works on other Gossamer worlds. Yet with a single exception, the family is entirely ignorant of the Stair, content to use their abilities to rule a galactic empire.

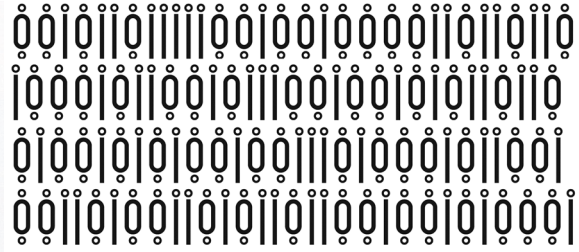
Another example: Khalder nomads are intimately familiar with the Stair, enough so that they consider it their home, and even claim descent from the long-vanished Rhen. They have few Walkers and even fewer Wardens among their numbers, but their Guides seem to have the ability of Exegesis as well as the ability to read the destination of a Door, allowing their clans to travel in relative safety.

Lastly, we cannot forget the great enemy's Doorbreaker priests. Many worlds were lost before we realized what they were capable of.

Buying Lesser Abilities

When a character buys a lesser ability, it may represent a partial understanding of a greater power (such as being a Warden or Master of the Grand Stair) or it may be something considered a power in its own right – the description is part of the character's background.

These are considered partial powers, so if the character later buys the full power, then the points spent so far



Rhen Code:

Dangerous Environment

count as a discount on the purchase of the power. That is, if a character with Exegesis (5 points) becomes a Warden of the Grand Stair (10 Points) they're refunded the 5 points and Exegesis is removed from their sheet (effectively allowing the character to buy Warden of the Grand Stair for 5 points).

While this might technically be seen as a way to super-optimize a character by choosing power a la carte, the reality is that the actual Warden and Master powers are so much more cost effective that it's not really much of an advantage.

Available Lesser Abilities

Exegesis [5 Points] – As Warden ability of the same name.

Opening and Closing Doors [5 Points] – As Warden ability of the same name.

Piercing the Veil [5 Points] – As Warden ability of the same name.

Polestar [5 Points] – The character has the Warden's ability to find Doors that return to their home world.

Waysense [5 Points] – With a few minutes study, the character can get a rough sense of the kind of place a Door opens onto. If they are familiar with the Gossamer world in question, they will recognize it.

Bridging Doors [10 Points] – As Master ability of the same name. Requires Opening and Closing Doors or Warden of the Grand Stair.

Severing Doors [10 Points] – As

Master ability of the same name. Requires Waysense or Warden of the Grand Stair.

Expanses

Lucien's Notes – An Expanse is a given stretch of the Grand Stair where the appearance and behavior of the Stair is reasonably consistent. Because it is bounded by the Stair, Expanses have much less variety than Domains, and their size is usually very limited, but their unique properties offer tradeoffs for this.

While it is rare for Walkers of the Stair, or some other power from an adjacent Gossamer world, to become keepers of an Expanse, it is more common for a Warden to hold an

Expanse. To a Warden, a given Expanse might be interesting and valuable, but for many keepers, it is the very literal center of their universe.

How exactly one becomes the keeper of an Expanse depends on the specific details of that Expanse.

Additional rules note: It is uncommon for an Expanse to have other attributes (like those of Artifacts & Creatures), and those that do often reflect its local nature. Ability to affect the Grand Stair is limited to affecting its natural process, and cannot change its physical laws or time flow. The possibility of additional attributes would be subject to gamemaster approval.

Expanse

Quality	Cost	Description
Attunement	1	The character is aware of this Expanse and can find Doors to it in the same way a Warden can find Doors home. For a Warden, this would represent a second "home."
Awareness	2	The character is cognizant of events within the Expanse in an abstract way. They know when Doors open and close, how many people use them, and when large events (such as battles) happen.
Mastery	4	The character can use the Warden's <i>Opening and Closing Doors</i> effects on any or all Doors within their expanse. Only the route to the rest of the Stair remains unaffected. There is no additional affect for those who are already Wardens.

Carta

Lucien's Notes – The exact form that a carta takes depends upon the talent and inclination of its creator. They can range from simply sketched maps to comprehensive guidebooks. It might encompass a dozen worlds, or it might encompass thousands. The most

sophisticated cartas are technological or magical marvels, though most are a bit more old-fashioned, as durability is also a factor in their utility.

While some Wardens scoff at carta as unnecessary, they have one unique advantage over Warden's (or even Master's) natural abilities – they are a reliable route to things that you don't

know. Looking for something specific on the Stair is a tricky proposition, and there's no guarantee that you won't find something close enough if you rely on powers (especially if information is sketchy). Finding a carta can be roughly akin to finding a treasure map, or even a collection of treasure maps.

Costs of Carta

Carta are notoriously hard to parse. Simply owning a carta does not guarantee its utility (though you could run a very interesting game around the

adventures of a group of characters following the trail of a poorly-understood carta). Undeciphered carta can still be useful, but usually only for piecemeal data (which is to say, they make great McGuffins). Personal carta offer some advantages, and can be Artifacts in their own right. If a player purchases a quantity of carta, each copy will hold different information (so, purchasing a 2 point carta and then purchasing *Named & Numbered* for it will yield a dozen different carta).

Carta

Quality	Cost	Description
Lesser Carta	1	This carta maps a single Door connecting a single Gossamer world to the Stair.
Carta	2	This carta maps a dozen Doors, and gives an advantage to finding fast routes through or around sections of the Stair. The player may name three Domains and/or Expanses (subject to GM veto) which are encompassed by this carta. It may not reveal all doors within its sphere, but it does allow faster-than-normal travel between them.
Great Carta	4	These are rare artifacts, offering an encyclopedic range of information on Doors, worlds and other secrets. It maps a dozen different Gossamer worlds and/or Expanses (subject to GM veto), and reveals all Doors (which could be hundreds), shortcuts and fast routes between them, allowing the owner to travel faster than normal. Additionally, a Great Carta contains one secret, somewhere in it. That secret and its significance is not obvious at the outset, but it will at some point become significant.

Lucien's Annotations on the Capabilities of Wardens of the Stair

Henry, I don't think I need to explain to you that this should not go into general circulation, but in case it's not perfectly clear, let me summarize. If I ever find these notes anywhere

they should not be, I will guarantee that Luke is the last child you ever have.

So far we've documented a handful of capabilities that seem part of the office of Warden of the Grand Stair. These include:

- The ability to find a specific destination via the Grand Stair
- A facility with Doors and locks of

all kinds

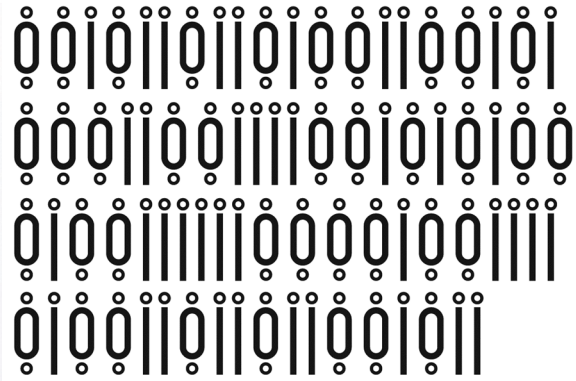
- A sense of the destination of a Door
- An intuition regarding Doors to their home
- A certain leeway with the powers of the Grand Stair
- The ability to see Doors, despite concealment or deception
- The ability to communicate in virtually any language, commonly referred to as Exegesis.

The first ability, Wayfinding, is what most would consider the defining characteristic of a Warden. It is certainly what most who enter the Stair desire, but there is no shortage of misconceptions surrounding it. For those familiar with the Stair, it is hard to visualize what Wayfinding looks and feels like. For most who navigate the Stair, it is a matter of long journeys up and down its length, passing through carefully selected Doors. For a Warden, the experience is quite different.

The key to understanding this is to know that the shortest path between two points is almost never entirely through the Grand Stair. Rather, the Warden will walk the Stair for a time, step through a Door, walk a little ways within that Gossamer world, step back onto a different length of Stair and repeat the process, possibly several times. The exact tempo of a journey will vary – it may be a quick succession of small rooms or a long, slow slog depending.

It can be quite disorienting, especially at first. The dramatic shift of passing through a Door is one thing, but passing through a dozen of them in a handful of minutes makes the universe feel a lot less concrete than usual, even if the places you pass through are entirely mundane.

I admit, I boggle at how this is possible. The sheer scope of the Stair makes *finding* something a mind-



Rhen Code: Door Is Watched

boggling task, to say nothing of finding the shortest possible route. The math is impossible, and while a duffer might wave it off as magic, that merely displays a profound lack of understanding of either magic or mathematics.

My suspicion is that there is more going on in this process than we're aware of. Consider how many of the abilities related to Doors could be described as some manner of intuition or sense. That speaks to me of the mind attempting to translate something it has no context for. We are not born with a Door sense, and so the body and mind must make do with the tools at its disposal. I wonder if Wayfinding is similar – perhaps a Warden genuinely has a full understanding of the Stair, but cannot access it all, save as an intuition. Sadly, it is not really a provable hypothesis and in its own way as fanciful as the idea that the Stair is alive or has a hidden Keeper pulling the strings.

It also doesn't encompass the full range of Warden abilities, some of which are much more concrete. The ability to lock, unlock or seal Doors is, for example, easily tested and far from mysterious, though its connection to the Stair makes it curious. There are Wardens who have made successful careers in crime using these abilities in

ways that have had nothing to do with traversing the Stair. How does the one work upon the other?

My suspicion is that *every* Door is tied to the Stair, at least loosely, and as such every Door is a conduit to the Stair's power. This idea is supported by the specificity of these abilities – the ability to affect Doors in this manner does not universally apply to locks. There is something specific about Doors. Professor Taltos has suggested that it might be a form of sympathetic magic, with the Doors and the Stair being connected in that fashion, which is not a terrible idea, but given that Professor Taltos does not need a Warden's abilities to deal with locks, I am skeptical of the source of his insight.

There is no such easy explanation for Exegesis. Doors do not connect to our ears or tongues, and there is no reason why a facility with the Grand Stair would allow for communication with all the worlds along its path. This is the recurring argument in favor of some manner of intent and design behind the Stair – it is simply so useful that it must have been intentional, and the fact that it is only granted by passage through a Door seems to reinforce that idea.

I find that reasoning a stretch, but I do not yet have a concrete counterargument. For now, I continue to study the extent of this ability (and now you know why I keep bringing along research aides – they provide a control group). I've found it's not entirely limitless in its capabilities – there are people and places where the means of communication simply differ too much from our own to be addressed. Sometimes this is a physical limitation, such as dealing with a species which communicates primarily through smells, but it can even be cultural. The spoken language of the Kharse is very

straightforward and easily encompassed by Exegesis, but there is an entire sub-language of nuance in hand and foot placement which is not so easily addressed. It took a number of serious misunderstandings before I realized what was happening.

For all that the abilities of the Wardens are well understood, there is another category of travelers on the stairs who are to Wardens as Wardens are to Walkers. They possess a much deeper range of abilities, and many of the oddities of the Stair can be attributed to the actions of these beings. The preferred term is Master of the Grand Stair, and while that may be a touch theatrical, it is difficult to argue with their power.

I'll not be citing any sources, and will instead simply be asking you to trust me in this.

Other less common, but documented abilities include:

- The ability to set mystical alarms on Doors
- The ability to connect mundane doors to the Stair, or an unused Door to a Gossamer world
- Connect two Doors within a Gossamer world
- Severing a Door's connection
- Sensing severed Doors
- Shrouding, redirecting or trapping Doors
- A general awareness of the Grand Stair
- The ability to read a Door's recent history
- Pass safely into unsafe worlds
- Alter the Grand Stair
- Establish a Domain

As with Wardens, the totality of these abilities raises a number of fascinating questions regarding how the powers connect and what it suggests about the nature of the Stair. Yet of greater

importance are the practical concerns – the fact that the Masters are out there is the basis for many of the reasons to be cautious. I have no reason to think that traps and shrouds would occur naturally along the Stair, so we have the Masters to thank for the necessity of keeping an eye open for such things.

Lucien, the Young Turk

*‘Probably the most brilliant mind I’ve encountered, his arrogance is such that not only won’t he allow you to forget that, but he must pretend that he is no academic at all, and that we are all some sort of collective of ineffective theorists. It’s **maddening**. But if you ignore what he says and watch what he does, then it becomes pretty clear that the students are not the only people he’s blustering at – there’s more to him than meets the eye, but damned if he’ll let you see it.’*

– Henry Piper, describing Lucien to his wife.

Lucien was already a Warden before he came to Arbanes. He makes occasional reference to adventures about the Grand Stair with the Grand Master of the Arbanes academy, Henry Piper, but there’s precious little evidence to back up some of the more outrageous claims. What is evident is that Piper is one of the only minds who Lucien extends any respect to in the entire academy, a position which has earned him a bad reputation which he absolutely wallows in.

Notably, he has weathered only one assassination attempt since gaining tenure, a startlingly low number. This is attributed to the amount of time he spends in the field as well as the spectacular example he made of the assassin who tried.



Attributes

PSYCHE – 35 Points
STRENGTH - Paragon
ENDURANCE – 10 Points
WARFARE – 5 Points

Powers

Warden of the Grand Stair [10 points]
Sorcery [15 Points]
Cantrips [15 Points] – Dampen, Dim, Flare, Focus, Footing, Glitch, Grasp, Mana, Nullify, Numb, Peace, Quicken, Reveal, Surge, Trip

Artifacts

Lucien’s Vambrace [7 points] – Lucien’s elaborate shoulder-and-arm heavy plate armor is not only for defense, it allows him to mold Gossamer reality and serves as a hanger for his arsenal of spells.

- Hardened [1 Point]
- Resistant to Firearms [2 Points]
- Capable of Hanging Named and

Numbered Spells [2 Points]

- Mold Gossamer Matter [2 Points]

Domain

Arbanes [2 Points] – Arbanes is the home of the Academy which, despite Lucien’s complaints, is a great repository of arcane knowledge, not limited to the largest known library of carta.

- Common Ground [2 Points]

Allies

Gossamer World Devotee [3 Points] – Henry Piper, Master of the Arbanes Academy, is a Warden and sorcerer in his own right, and is an old, dear friend of Lucien’s, enough so to name his only son after him.

Stuff

Bad [+2 points]

Young Lucien in Play

Young Lucien is a solid model for a starting character, and may be directly useful in campaigns that take place before the return of the Dwimmerlaik.

Long before becoming Master and then Lord of the Grand Stair, Lucien was a smartass who was pretty sure he had it all figured out. His relationship with Arbanes and the Academy lasted for centuries between its beginning and destruction. In that time, he saw more of the Grand Stair than anyone, fueled by an insatiable curiosity and a dogged determination that he **was** smart enough to figure this puzzle out, dammit. This attitude made him few friends, but those few were treasured and protected.

Gretchen Shadrach, the Unshaken Shield

‘My armor would have stopped the blow (I think), but she didn’t know that. All she saw was the stinger descend, and she placed herself in its path. She seems like a sleight woman with a serious expression and wild red hair that will never have a place in court, but at that moment, she was a wall of iron. The stinger bit hard into her shield, but rather than stagger under the blow, she used it to pin the beast in place while she delivered a series of precise, thoughtful blows to its weak spots.

‘Gretchen, I recalled. That was her name.’

-Lucien

Gretchen comes from a family of academic guards, as it’s a well-respected position in Arbanes, where matters of tenure can take a somewhat violent edge. She had the wits to enter the academy as a student, but not the means, so after she fell into the family business, she pursued interesting assignments, one of which lead to her fighting a giant scorpion on the Grand Stair while standing over the prone body of one of the senior academics, a caustic man named Lucien.

She found herself promoted to his Second, and she followed him on numerous adventures across the Stair before he, in turn, followed her to the Labyrinth as she became a Warden. In the wake of this, she was offered academic honors at the Academy, which she accepted for a time (her family was delighted) before discovering exactly how maddening and stifling it was, and she set out on the Stair again.

Without Lucien, her wanderlust was a

bit more curtailed – she spent more time in fewer places, but always kept moving, gravitating towards places that saw a lot of traffic. Without intending it, she found herself falling into the role of protector for other travellers, acting as a caravan guard or escort, usually for people with no idea that the dour looking guard they'd hired knew far more about the Stair than they ever would.

Over time, she's come to be recognized by more savvy travellers as someone reliable but uninteresting – a good sword arm who won't ask too many questions. In this capacity, she has met or served many prominent figures.

And that's fine with her. To her mind, if you pay enough attention, there's no **need** to ask a lot of questions to understand what's going on.

Attributes

- PSYCHE – 5 Points
- STRENGTH – 10 Points
- ENDURANCE – 15 Points
- WARFARE – 50 Points

Powers

Warden of the Grand Stair [10 points]

Artifacts

Gretchen's Shield [5 Points] – Still carrying a mark where the stinger pierced it, this shield carries no permanent heraldry, and has the weathered, beaten look of a utilitarian object.

- Hardened [1 Point]
- Invulnerable to Conventional Weapons [4 points]

Allies

Mentor [2 Points] – Gretchen learned a lot from Lucien, and they are still in touch.



Partisan Support [3 Points] – While it's not an organization per se, Gretchen has an extensive network of contacts up and down the Stair from past jobs.

Stuff

Zero

Using Gretchen

Gretchen is a great example that not every mover and shaker **looks** like a mover and shaker. She has spent her life surrounded by people convinced of their own superiority, and she's very skilled at not challenging those assumptions until it serves her purposes. No one would accuse her of being a fainting flower (such accusations would likely be met with a sharp blow). Rather, they know that she is almost impossibly patient.