



HE WHO LAUGHS LAST

a Cthulhu Dark Scenario

by Dave Sokolowski

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Introduction

Remember when your babysitter or big brother or bigger sister would sit on you and tickle you until you cried? Remember how horrible and violated you felt? Yes, you were laughing, but you weren't having fun.

What if you could make people laugh like that, but without touching them—just by telling a joke? Maybe you learned it from a book, or maybe someone taught you, but you could make people laugh simply by saying certain words. It would come with a price, of course, and wouldn't be fun for those suffering its effects. Just like when your brother tickled you until you cried.

That question crossed my mind back in 2010 and just stuck there. Such an interesting premise for a modern scenario—in this day of highly successful comedians such as Patton Oswalt and Louis CK, being able to just switch on the applause would be a temptation hard to resist.

And then, in the summer of 2011, on a long car ride to Oregon, my friends and I openly discussed the scenario and what it would need to be interesting. So it sat on the back burner for a while, and then I decided to write it up and play it a few times. After the first playtest at DunDraCon 2013, it was clear changes were needed. When the scenario was finished, one of the players nodded and said, "Ah, okay, so Nyarlathotep was behind it all." My stomach dropped. While the session had been near perfect, with great players and role-playing, the player correctly guessing the antagonist so easily forced me to entirely rethink of the third act. In his *Stealing Cthulhu*, Graham Walmsley points out that Nyarlathotep is regularly overused incorrectly as the man behind the scenes (instead of being a massively powerful god who doesn't need to involve himself directly in order to manipulate humanity). I had done exactly that.

I strive to write interesting and different scenarios. I didn't want this one to fall into the same old tropes that had been so overused that it had actually become a Mythos cliché. I related my fears to Jeff Campbell, and he agreed. "Why don't you make your bad guy an alien from the future, like in *Through the Gate of the Silver Key*?" he asked—brilliantly—and the scenario had its newer, non-Nyarlathotep ending that you will read shortly.

Yet it wasn't enough to just have a new antagonist. One significant difference between fiction and RPG is group collaboration. The best RPGs give all the players something to work out on their own, and what is a good horror game without hallucinations, paranoia and confusion? So I made the new antagonist a future version of one of the PCs, thus bringing the story inward for the players to understand: Why does one of our friends look like one of the bad guys?

So, thanks to Jeff for that conversation and general inspiration and mentorship. Monster thanks to Jake, who ended up being exactly the collaborator I needed—when he first showed me an early draft of the cover, I knew I had chosen well. Thanks to my long-time friend Cynthia for stepping in, once again, as my editor, and keeping me honest. Gregory's enthusiasm and talent, which he used to help with the Kickstarter video and social media, could not have appeared in my life at a better time. Mike Dubisch was an early, critical find, creating stark art to use in and around the book (very useful for the Kickstarter project, certainly). Jared's pictures of the locations helped once the Kickstarter was up and running and I had to come up with something new and fun to add to the project. Thanks to Graham for not only letting me use the *Cthulhu Dark* rules, but for writing *Stealing Cthulhu* and raising the bar for how scenarios are written—I hope this meets your criteria. Final thanks to the old man himself, H.P. Lovecraft, for writing such batshit crazy stories.





You saw it first yesterday on Facebook, of all places.

Becca was dead—she killed herself. No one knows why, but the funeral would be soon—in Los Angeles, of course.

And now it's that day. You've come from near and far to be here, but something seems wrong, out of place. It happened so fast and no one has any answers. Most people don't seem interested in finding out either, just want to get back to their dull existences.

Then Becca's father approaches you to ask for help...

Overview

He Who Laughs Last is a Cthulhu Dark scenario set in contemporary Los Angeles for three to six player characters (PCs). It was written as a one-shot that can be run in six to eight hours, although notes for including it as part of an ongoing campaign are included in the sidebar titled "Running a Cthulhu Dark Campaign."

The scenario centers around an up-and-coming comedian named Bryan Tobler, who has made a deal with the devil—a descendent of one of the PCs from the distant future who is known as Ralph Ares (pronounced "Rafe"). This deal has given Bryan access to a very powerful spell called the Laughing Hyena, which allows its caster to make people laugh. Bryan has used the spell over the past two years to become incredibly successful. Unfortunately, the Laughing Hyena requires its caster to regularly take energy from others to keep the spell powerful, so Bryan has begun killing people to maintain his success.

Nine months ago, a friend of the PCs', Rebecca "Becca" Kingsley, was hired as Tobler's personal assistant. She was dedicated and energetic in her work for Bryan despite his current and ex-girlfriends, both of whom made her life difficult. Then, just a few weeks ago, she found a mobile phone in Bryan's truck that didn't belong to anyone she knew or had ever heard Bryan mention. She was already suspicious of what Bryan was doing at his house in the hills (she was told to keep away unless Bryan invited her). So, wanting to know what he was really up to, she followed him and took pictures as he picked up a Hispanic worker from a local big-box home improvement/DIY store, Home Depot. Bryan then drove the worker out to his second home in the far east of Los Angeles, into the hills of the area known as the Inland Empire. There Bryan killed the worker (as he had done before), turning him into charred remains and dumping him into an empty underground tank, where Bryan had put his previous victims. Bryan then returned to his home in Beverly Hills with Becca still following him.

Scared for Bryan's reaction and not really certain what happened, Becca waited until Bryan had flown to New York before confronting him by text message about the missing Mexican. Bryan, fearful that his entire world was about to unravel, panicked and used a Gate spell to travel to Becca's home, where he killed her as well, turning her into charred remains like the rest. To cover his tracks, he spread gasoline around the burned spot and wrote

a suicide note saying that Becca was "tired of life." The scenario starts just after Becca's funeral two weeks later.

Ares, who is a time-traveling descendant of one of the PCs (more on this later), has been handing out the Laughing Hyena spell to comedians for decades. Occasionally they get so powerful through killing that they attract the attention of law enforcement, so to prevent this from becoming a problem, Ares has enchanted the LA County Coroner, David Lee. Ralph has also cast a broad spell across the police and their ability to interact with this case—any time a PC goes to the police (whether by calling 911 or actually going down to the station), they get no real help, only broken promises. The spell also allows

Running a Cthulhu Dark Campaign

While this scenario is designed to be run as a one-shot, it could certainly be extended to be part of a long-term campaign. He Who Laughs Last could be centered on the greater LA area or be a part of an extensive national or global story.

For a campaign centered in LA, overall themes could include shocking, immediate death and how the entertainment machine chews through its young (and not so young) stars. Perhaps Becca's death and the PCs' involvement is the starting point for more investigations, as their reputation for solving supernatural problems begins to grow.

If the PCs are part of a larger, broader campaign, they could be brought in from a friend of Becca's who might have tipped the team off that something strange and supernatural has happened. Having the police and coroner declare that Becca's self-immolation death was a suicide might be enough to bring in outside investigators. (For further ideas for bringing in investigators that are part of a government organization, see [Weird8.com](#).)

The main consideration for bringing this scenario into a larger campaign is that you may want to actually not destroy the whole world if things don't work out at the end of the scenario. If the PCs are unable to stop Ares' machinations, the end result should be something massive—you can still do something horrible without ending the world. Even a large-scale earthquake would be a suitable event that might kick off another whole campaign where LA, having suffered the Not Quite Big One, is slowly being overrun by supernatural or Mythos events that draw the PCs in further.

Regardless of what draws them in, the key for making this scenario part of a larger campaign is to not kill everyone off. There are plenty of opportunities to send people to the madhouse and give them some permanent scars (physical or mental), so just be sure to tone down the overall ending if you want PCs to continue investigating afterwards.

the law enforcement and general population to disregard the fact that Lee has held his position for more than 40 years without aging notably.

There is one person who can help, though: a retired police detective named Ben Wrigley, who worked the cases the last time Ralph Ares (who used the pseudonym Barry Maines for the first three decades of his time in LA) helped a young comedian named Sam Kinison become famous. Wrigley is able to give the PCs context to the challenge they're facing, as well as directions on how to stop Bryan and a medallion that will help them. But he will not join them.

Wrigley will help the PCs because he understands what is happening—before the PCs get involved, Bryan is on a course to commit mass murder. He is planning one large, final show at the Hollywood Bowl where he can use his powers to drain the audience and gain immortality for himself.

Ares, however, has a bigger plot, which is dependent on the PCs foiling Bryan's plan. The PCs killing Bryan fulfills an ancient prophecy that Ares is unable to complete on his own. By killing Bryan, the PCs themselves (including, as Ares has seen, his ancestor) unleash the Apocalypse. Upon Bryan's death, the power he generated passes to Ares, allowing Ares to bring on the Big One—the Californian earthquake that will send Los Angeles into the ocean and change the course of history. Then, Ares will use the power gained from all the death to transport himself 100,000 years into the future, where he can use his magics and knowledge to rule with absolute power.

The Clue Trail

Los Angeles is a large, sprawling metropolis, covering vast socio-economic and demographic regions. This scenario covers many areas around Los Angeles and lets the PCs explore the various elements.

The scenario starts right after Becca's funeral with the PCs receiving Becca's iPhone, which holds multiple clues. Most of these clues include the phone numbers and addresses of all the possible people to interview, such as Bryan, Ralph, Bryan's ex-girlfriend, Susan Ortega, and his current girlfriend, Janey Lassiter. The phone also contains a picture of Bryan's house in the Inland Empire hills, although the players won't know where it is until they interview Susan.

They will probably start with breaking into Becca's apartment, which also holds a handful of important clues. Then, as the PCs begin interviewing NPCs, they will find out that one member of their group looks a lot like Ralph Ares, which kicks off a growing level of paranoia and suspicion among the party.

Once the group has investigated all the core clues, the path will clearly lead to Bryan's Inland Empire house, where they will uncover Bryan's magics as well as meet him and face these magics first hand. Sanity will most certainly be lost.

Having barely survived their encounter with Bryan, the PCs will return to their hotel to find a bundle of evidence detailing the cover-up of other crimes similar to Bryan's, reaching back nearly 50 years and leading them to Detective Wrigley. The visit to Wrigley, who has little sanity and is hiding from civilization in a run-down home, will give the party all of the clues and magics they need to defeat Bryan and Ares.

Well, sort of. By now the group will know how and why they need to stop Bryan, but things won't be so clear when it comes to stopping Ares. The PCs should suspect that it's not Ralph Ares who needs to be stopped, but rather that, in order to avert the Apocalypse, they must kill the PC who is the past version of Ralph Ares.

The game's ending will come in two parts. The first will be the PCs directly addressing Bryan, probably by scheming to kill him in some manner before he completes his big show at the Hollywood Bowl. This scene should be big and dramatic and end with a tidal wave of blood exploding forth from Bryan.

The second part can (but doesn't need to) serve as the scenario finale, and should come together in a massive standoff with Ares and the PC who is his ancestor (referred to within this scenario as the "Ralph-PC"), who could be convinced that the PCs are trying to kill him to bring on the Apocalypse themselves. One big bang of space and time.

The Back Story

Future/Time-Traveling Ralph Ares (Theral Mann IX)

In the far future, perhaps 10,000 years or so, a man named Theral Mann IX was researching mystical events in Earth's history when he discovered evidence of some sort of cosmic rift opening in the Los Angeles area around the year 2000—a cataclysm that irreparably changed the course of Earth, allowing Mythos magics to increase their presence hundredfold. This man, who will soon be known as Ralph Ares, is a scientist and mystic from a future where the two occupations have come together to explain the remaining mysteries of the universe.

In his research, he saw what appeared to be two versions of himself. He deduced that, based on the magics he observed, one is, in fact, Theral Mann IX himself, and the other is an uncannily identical ancestor. He found evidence that both were intrinsically involved in a key point of change in the evolution of mankind, somewhere around the year 2000.

Wanting desperately to be a part of a critical event in Earth's history and thus prove his skills as both a mystic and a scientist, he found a spell that would bring him back in time. Much like Charles Dexter Ward in Lovecraft's *Through the Gate of the Silver Key*, Mann used Mythos-based rituals to cast himself into the universe, passing



tests of soul-wrenching difficulty guarded by the Most Ancient One. By merging himself with the Great Old Ones, Mann became a powerful sorcerer welding ancient magics that he did not truly comprehend.

Using powers far beyond our current capabilities or perspectives, he traveled back through time and space to Los Angeles in the year 1962, where he set himself up in the role he observed—a position that will grant him (and his magics) unique access to the industry he knows will be essential to triggering one of humankind's most critical moments.

Once he arrived in 1962 LA, he established an identity as Barry Maines (eventually Ralph Ares, as he is currently known) and began looking for the person responsible for the rift. He wanted to see the event first hand and maybe even help his ancestor trigger the event, thereby gaining the power necessary to travel 100,000 years into the future where he can rule as a powerful magician. While traveling across dimensions, Mann had a vision of a man in front of a crowd that was laughing itself to death. With that knowledge, he began working with stand-up comedians and giving them the Laughing Hyena spell, believing he would be merely providing a catalyst to something that was already destined to happen.

Since then, he has been working as a Los Angeles-based talent agent, luring comedians with fabulous and horrible powers to make people laugh, knowing that eventually his distant, doppelganger ancestor will become involved with killing Bryan Tobler, the catalyzing comedian.

Now, in 2013, the stars are finally aligning for this event, and Ares' plan to be involved in the massive change (which he is clearly contributing to) will net him massive powers to move through the universe.

To gain these powers, he needs to have the PCs kill Bryan, which will channel all of Bryan's energy into Ares, rupturing space and time and causing a massive earthquake, killing thousands and sending Los Angeles into the ocean.

Of course, by traveling into the past and seeking to be a part of this change, Ralph has kicked off the "butterfly effect," whereby Ralph's participation in the event is actually the trigger of the event. Thus a future version of one of the PCs is actually the key antagonist of the scenario, which promises to create tension in a number of ways.

Time-Traveler (Ralph Ares) vs. Player Character

NOTE: To avoid confusion in the scenario, the main villain, Ralph Ares, will be referred to as "Ralph Ares" or "Ares," while his PC counterpart will be "Ralph-PC." For simplicity and clarity, we will use male pronouns in this scenario; however, as discussed later, the Ralph-PC could easily be female.

Ideally, you can initiate the PCs' suspicion that something is weird about the Ralph-PC when the PCs first investigate

Ralph Ares, probably by looking him up online. When this happens, point out to the other players the resemblance between Ares and Ralph-PC—that they look nearly identical. (Remember, as discussed in the next section, the Ralph-PC's player can be either male or female.)

Over the course of the scenario, highlight this similarity regularly, whenever Ralph Ares appears in the narrative—whether when the PCs meet Ares, see pictures of him, or talk to NPCs who might know him.

Meanwhile, the Ralph-PC could have visions and dreams soon after the other PCs recognize the similarity. At the beginning of the scenario, neither Ralph-PC nor the rest of the party will have any idea of the relation, which is a great way to slowly build the understanding that some greater power is at play beyond just Bryan. Play with the similarity during the scenario, sowing confusion among the players. Perhaps, as Ralph-PC gets closer to Ares, the stronger and more direct the weirdness becomes. Maybe the Ralph-PC has strange visions when he touches the gates at Becca's and Bryan's homes. Some NPCs, though not all, may mistake the Ralph-PC for the actual Ralph Ares, though only briefly, changing their minds without recognizing it. Again, the goal is to sow confusion.

Additionally, the NPCs will react to the Ralph-PC, including, most importantly, Bryan. While each NPC's reaction is listed in their section of the scenario, the overarching goal should be to build suspicion and paranoia within the party that something is very wrong with Ralph-PC, and that he may even be part of the problem. This will help build tension toward the climax, as well as between the party.

Lastly, the other PCs should begin to suspect something is wrong with this particular PC, eventually coming to believe that he is somehow related to Ralph Ares and is at least partly responsible for the predicament the party finds themselves in. This can be done with just a few key scenes and clues—no need to make it totally obvious.

How to Pick the Right Ralph-PC

One of the key considerations when preparing this scenario for play will be choosing a good player to be Ralph Ares' ancestor. Keep these factors in mind when making this decision.

- **Player maturity:** The PC who is Ralph's ancestor will spend the first half of the scenario having dark visions and becoming more and more suspicious, and the second half probably under heavy scrutiny from the other players. This player should be a strong role-player who can handle both his own and others' paranoia and accusations. While the PC will not be having a good time, the player should be able to keep a positive attitude while navigating both the story and the other players.
- **Player imagination:** If possible, you should pick a player who enjoys these sorts of challenges and can confidently add to the story. Some players just

want to play a straightforward role, while others like a good, interesting challenge to sink their teeth into—if possible, choose the latter. If you are playing with a new group (at a con, for example), you can flat-out ask your players which of them would like a really meaty role-playing challenge. When one or more volunteers, pick one in your mind but do not write anything down—simply move on into the game, leaving your players guessing what your question is about. See the section below about building suspicion and how to talk to your players.

- **Sex of the PC:** One might think the PC needs to be male, like Ralph, but that doesn't need to be the case. To keep things interesting and inclusive to all potential players, give the role to a player of any gender. You can leave the physical similarities between the NPC and PC a remarkable facial resemblance or make the NPC Ralph sexually ambiguous, further confounding the party. See the movie *Orlando* for inspiration on sexually ambiguous immortals.
- **Group dynamic:** The final factor before picking a player is how the overall group plays together. One might assume that running a Cthulhu Dark (or any Lovecraft mythos RPG) requires a mature group, but the author has played at enough conventions to know that a mature group is not always available. That said, this is a game of existential horror and not for the faint of heart. If you find yourself in a situation where you

are unsure whether the group can handle the deep suspicion and dark player interactions this scenario demands, your best bet is just to scale back the tension to where it fits your players. You can still have a PC who is the ancestor of the antagonist, still have paranoia within the team, but pull back a bit from the various clues and visions the PCs find. Instead, present the revelation at the end as a twist that most didn't see coming, lightening the mood and reducing the tense player-versus-player interactions. The key is to find the balance that is right for your party.

How to Build Suspicion and Weirdness

There are multiple ways to build suspicion in your group that the Ralph-PC is not who he seems to be. Although the first time everyone recognizes that the PC and Ares look alike will come as a shock, keep the tension building slowly until the PCs meet Bryan at his house in the hills (where Bryan should recognize Ralph-PC as resembling Ares). Once there, drive home the idea that the Ralph-PC is probably going to be part of the scenario's resolution, which will definitely require a confrontation between the two versions.

You should have plenty of room to ramp up weirdness and paranoia as the scenario heads toward that conclusion. The following things can happen to Ralph-PC and the party to add confusion, but this list is by no means exhaustive or required—use your own imagination to torture the party:

- **Visions of Ares:** Ralph-PC can dream of himself as Ares, driving an amazing car to work, entering the office, saying hello to his receptionist, Vanessa, standing in front of the strange clock behind his desk, perhaps reaching out to touch it before waking up. Another vision could be of floating through time and space until he comes out of the clock in Ares' office. Any time Ralph-PC loses Sanity, give him a vision of his future self—you could even have this happen when other PCs lose Sanity.
- **"Mistaken" identity:** Each section describing the NPCs includes suggestions for possible reactions to Ralph-PC, with some making a connection and others not. However, there isn't any cut-and-dried manner for these reactions. Be inconsistent, vague and confusing as possible. Time travel and ancient magics are at work here, which can influence the scenario in any way you see fit.
- **Secrets man was not meant to know:** Another method of building a connection between Ares and Ralph-PC would be to give Ralph-PC a taste of the powers that Ares himself wields. Teleportation, communication with Azathoth, mind control and the ability to see beyond the stars are all possibilities you can drop right in the

The Industry

One of the key elements that can tie together both PCs and NPCs is the movie and TV industry based in Los Angeles. Despite outward appearances, most people who work in the industry are not in front of the camera. Every component of film and TV production requires someone's expertise, from lighting and makeup to location scouts and pyrotechnics and, of course, bodyguards.

Use the industry as a method for moving your story forward. Have your PCs know the NPCs from a TV or movie shoot, or at least play off people's basic vanity, allowing recognition and adoration to provide the PCs access to NPCs that would otherwise be unavailable. Even if someone doesn't directly work in the industry, everyone has friends and knows people who do. Use these contacts to grease the connections between people and add verisimilitude to your scenario.

If needed, research various jobs in the industry by Googling "movie industry jobs" or "tv industry jobs," which will provide a whole host of possible jobs for PCs and NPCs that you probably didn't realize were needed to keep the industry moving.

hands of Ralph-PC to help drive the story. Don't be shy.

Bryan Tobler

The Past

Bryan Tobler will tell you he just wants to make people laugh, but deep inside he continually craves the attention and approval that would come with being a successful comedian. Growing up in the 1970s in Detroit, Michigan as the middle of seven children, no one really cared what he did so he was left to fend for himself and was usually ignored. While his Catholic parents wouldn't divorce, they also couldn't stand each other, and each progressed further into alcoholism to deal with their dead-end lives.

To cope with a messy home life, Bryan became the quintessential class clown. While his grades were never very good, they were never really bad, either. He skated by, doing the minimum to pass his classes, all the while dreaming of escaping everything and heading west. Bryan was 16 when his father died of liver failure, and Bryan promised himself he would do whatever it took to leave his life behind and make it big. He knew he was bigger than all of it.

Flash-forward to 2011, just before Bryan has met Ares. At 48 years old, Bryan is a comedian in Los Angeles with his name on marquees, national tours and a decent agent—everything he wanted. Well, sort of.

Since moving to LA in 1987, Bryan had worked at becoming a famous comedian and done... okay. Yes, he had a small following, and he didn't lose money when he went on tour, but in the time that he's been trying to climb the ladder, all of his contemporaries (Patton Oswalt, Louis CK, Brian Regan) have gone onto much greater success. Meanwhile, it had been seven years since he did any TV work (appearing briefly on the last two seasons of *Everybody Loves Raymond*), no one really bought his last two comedy albums, and the jokes seemed harder and harder to come by.

That's when Ralph Ares appeared in Bryan's life—when everything changed. Bryan had been around the block long enough to know when someone is blowing smoke, and there was definitely something shifty in Ares' demeanor when he first approached Bryan after a local gig. But Ares said all the right things, seemed to know Bryan's work and talked about helping Bryan find that special formula that would unlock the success Bryan had been seeking.

Still, Bryan wasn't sure. He discussed the new deal, which seemed too good to be true, with his girlfriend, Susan Ortega, who was uncertain what her role would be in the new life Ares promised Bryan. Susan had always supported Bryan through thick and thin, and their research into Ares turned up nothing but a string of highly successful clients, so she put her fears aside and once again supported Bryan's choice.

And then, from the moment Bryan came down to Ralph's office to sign papers—just as Ralph promised—everything changed. Ralph had Bryan read and memorize a poem on old piece of paper. "Think of it as the funniest joke ever," Ralph said with a smile. "So funny it will kill people?" joked Bryan, referring to an old Monty Python skit. Ralph just smiled.

Outside, a car waited to take Bryan across town to an open mic night, where anyone can get on stage and tell jokes for ten minutes. Bryan took the stage to slight applause, but instead of his normal routine about California vanity plates, he recited the poem, just as Ralph instructed. It was the most amazing and horrifying thing he had ever seen. Everyone doubled over, literally rolling on the floor laughing out loud. When it was over, the tip jar was full, and the club owner was talking about weekly gigs. But more importantly, Bryan felt good—really good. Like a new man. Like he wanted more.

Returning home, Bryan didn't tell Susan about the gig, instead spending the evening thinking long and hard about what this new power meant and how it would change things. From Bryan's perspective, it was the last night of his previous life. He decided he would accept Ralph's offer and everything that came with it. Yes, if he needed, he would sell his soul for his comedy.

From there, things changed fast. First came a string of headlining club appearances up and down the West Coast, from Seattle to San Diego, where Bryan killed night after night. Soon word on the street said that Bryan had new material and was onto something funnier than anything anyone had seen.

When Bryan returned home from the tour, it was as if someone had turned on the light in his life. Suddenly he was invited to the coolest parties in town, his Facebook page increased its audience tenfold, and everywhere he went, people laughed. Ralph took him out to get new clothes to help with the new look, and soon after Bryan met actress Janey Lassiter at a party. The two hit it off instantly, and though Bryan was still involved with Susan, Ralph made it clear that a new girlfriend (younger and blond) was a change in the right direction. And so Susan was out and Janey was in.

The next year was a blur. More clubs, but headlining instead of opening. Appearances on *The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show*, and even *The Daily Show* bolstered his growing confidence that he had finally made it. Finally came the big one: his first HBO special, less than a year after signing with Ralph.

Sure, Bryan realized that it wasn't his material winning over the masses, but the adoration and attention was too good, too much after a life of wanting—no, needing—the approval of his audience. He couldn't turn back. Things were too good to be true.

Then it happened. The night before performing at the king of comedy festivals, Just for Laughs Montreal, Bryan collapsed in his hotel room, unable to talk or make a

sound. Paralyzed on the floor, Bryan spent hours praying for someone, something to rescue him. And, once again, Ralph was there.

Coming through what Bryan was sure was a locked door, Ralph brought along a pretty twenty-something fan, as well as another “joke” for Bryan to read. As the girl helped Bryan up, Ralph explained that Bryan had new material to try out on the girl and handed Bryan the new joke. Bryan held the girl’s hand as Ralph instructed, while reading the joke and looking into the girl’s eyes, which burned bright with anticipation of something amazing.

And something amazing did happen, but instead of laughing, the girl turned bright red, before spontaneously combusting into a darkened, burnt husk. And it made Bryan feel better—a lot better.

It only got worse from there.

Bryan Now

Since killing Becca two weeks ago, Bryan has been in a bit of a state. On one hand, things are going incredibly well for him—Ralph has booked the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles for Bryan, which will be his biggest show yet. But killing Becca really wasn’t something Bryan wanted to do—he really liked her—and the guilt over all of the killings is finally starting to wear on him.

What’s more, Bryan knows now that he is just a puppet to Ralph. There was a moment about a year ago, when Bryan thought that Ralph was in this whole mess with him, that Ralph had just as much to lose as Bryan. But Bryan’s eyes are now open.

Now Bryan knows he’s part of a scheme, that he’s heading down a track that he can’t get off, and that Ralph controls his every move. But Bryan also believes this track leads to immortality, and being controlled by his agent is a small price to pay for living forever.

Really, though, Bryan has nearly lost his mind and could fall apart at any minute. When the PCs meet him at his house in the hills, he is angry, confused and trying very hard to keep his shit together. All he has to do is make it through this week and everything will work out.

The Stakes

As this scenario unfolds, it should present the players with an interesting challenge: how to defeat Bryan without ending the world. For while all early clues point to defeating Bryan as the goal, later clues show that stopping Bryan may be exactly what Ralph Ares wants (which it is).

Ralph has traveled through distant space and time to come back to our time so he can witness and hopefully be a part of a singularity. In Ralph’s time, it is known that an event involving some sort of jester took place around the year 2000 changed the course of history forever. Ralph wants to be a part of that, to witness the death

and destruction and use the power it generates to travel 100,000 years into the future.

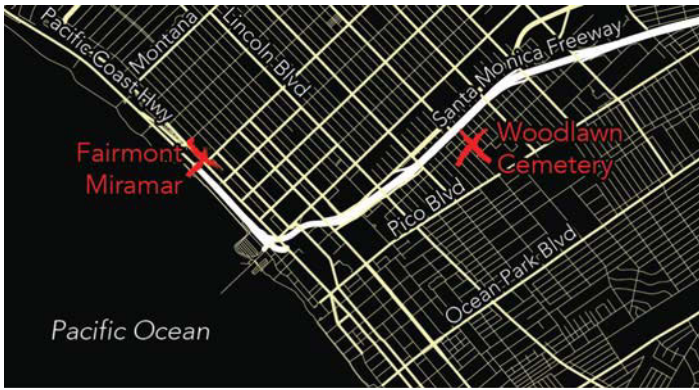
If Bryan succeeds in casting the spell and killing everyone at the Hollywood Bowl, he will burst into a billion points of Mythos-tinged light, spread across the universe now and forever, thus becoming immortal.

But if the PCs kill Bryan before he completes the spell, all of the power he has stored in himself will be unleashed, flooding into our world and causing a massive earthquake. That is, unless the PCs take care of Ralph Ares first.

One half of the resolution will be the PCs probably killing Bryan. This scene should be dramatic and bloody, as the PCs will likely stab Bryan in the chest with a glass dagger. This event will stop Bryan from killing everyone at the Hollywood Bowl, and is described later.

The second half of the resolution should involve the PCs confronting Ralph, probably in his office, about who he is and what he is trying to accomplish. This scene, also detailed later, can go many shades of weird (Ralph’s time-travel clock helps), and should provide an opportunity for the PCs and Keeper to tie the scenario and all its time travel implications into a single, final conclusion.

Enter the PCs



Woodlawn Cemetery, Santa Monica
Saturday, May 18, 2013

The scenario opens at the cemetery in Santa Monica, where Rebecca “Becca” Kingsley was raised, where her friends and family have come to pay their final respects. The day is clear and warm—typical LA. Everyone is solemn and still in shock: Becca’s suicide came as a surprise to everyone, including the PCs, who have come from all over to be here.

No one knows much about her supposed suicide—she was found burnt to death in her apartment two weeks ago, she left a very brief note that said she was “tired of life,” and none of her friends and family had seen it coming. Her parents were so distraught that it took them two weeks to organize the funeral.

At the funeral, everyone has come to pay their respects, including Becca’s former boss, comedian Bryan Tobler. Tobler was known to be on tour in New York when Becca killed herself, but has taken time off to fly out here today, bringing his girlfriend, local actress Janey Lassiter. They pay their respects after the service, then quickly get in a black Town Car and drive away.

After the funeral, as everyone leaves, Becca’s father, Dale Kingsley, approaches the PCs. It’s clear that he is still very upset—the deep, dark circles under his eyes are one indication, his chain smoking cigarette after cigarette is another—but he is very intense as he asks the PCs for their help.

What you know about Becca

The PCs know at least the following about Becca:

- 28 years old, born and raised in Santa Monica, CA
- Studied Design and Media Arts at UCLA, graduated with honors
- Ran her own online t-shirt design store in college
- Really fun, caring woman who couldn’t sit still—always wanted something new and interesting but could never do one thing or stay in one place for long

He doesn’t believe Becca killed herself—in fact, he’s convinced this whole thing is a cover up. But he has no proof or evidence of foul play, “Just a feeling in my gut—you know what that’s like.” The police were extremely unhelpful, which has made things much worse—they quickly declared it an open-and-shut case and gave Becca’s family nothing to go on or help them heal. “He told me things like this just happen! Things like this do *not* just happen!”

Dale wants the PCs to figure out what really happened, because he can’t leave his wife right now. But he knows they are clever and smart and can dig into this—prove that she didn’t kill herself. “Becca always respected you; always spoke very highly of you. This would be her final wish.”

At this point he hands over Becca’s iPhone, giving the PCs the passcode 1203. “December third—my birthday” he says with a forced smile. He can also provide the keys to Becca’s apartment if asked. He then clumsily offers a wad of \$20 bills from his wallet, saying that he wants to cover any expenses.

Back at the Hotel

Fairmont Miramar Hotel & Bungalows
101 Wilshire Boulevard
Santa Monica, CA 90401

Once the funeral is over, move the players back to their hotel for the evening to review clues and next steps. The hotel bar is full of beautiful, young people, and the music is almost too loud as the PCs sit down to examine the phone and review what they know about Becca and her recent activities.

First, have each player pick a skill to **roll** against that can help them learn something about Becca and her death (**law, pop culture, etc.**). Depending on how well they roll, they will learn more details about the clue (1-2 gives just the basic information, 3-4 gives the meat of the clue, and 5-6 provides all details).

- The sheriff’s office, which investigated the murder, said that the body was burnt so badly that they would not provide it to the family—as such, the casket was empty.
- Becca had been happy working for Bryan, which she’d been doing for about nine months. But she had hinted that she knew something scandalous about him—plagiarism would be the first guess, as that’s what usually gets comedians in trouble.
- Bryan’s only relative is a freaky aunt from Oregon who claims to be a witch. Becca met her once and thought the aunt literally gave her the evil eye.
- Bryan’s current girlfriend, Janey, was horribly jealous of Becca, and dealing with her was the worst part of Becca’s job. Janey was always incredibly rude to Becca, and Becca thought that Janey was even secretly creating messes for Becca

Texts from Becca's Phone

Becca's texts on left,

Let it go Becca

Bryan's on right

Can you pick up my shirts?

Home Depot

I'm warning you AGAIN

Already done

Bryan?

Thanks!

Yt?

We need 2 talk

Bryan!

Why? What's up?

Callme bck

U should call me

BRYAN call me

I'm prepping for Letterman,
you know that, can it wait

I went to the house

I followed u

In the hills

So?

We should talk

Prepping for lettermen, talk soon

Where did the mexican go?

Bullshit, that's not for 5 hrs CALL ME

Who? What mexican?

Where are you?

Home Depot

Home but going to the police

We already talked about
this, just let it go

Home Depot

Home Depot

Home Depot is a very large chain of home improvement (Do It Yourself) warehouse stores in the United States. The large orange and white signs are found in nearly every city across the country, and are the center of commerce for most home and business contractors—it's where people get help building stuff.

Migrant day workers waiting outside the local Home Depot is a large part of Californian culture that may not be readily understandable to people from other parts of the world.

If you want to cheap day labor in California, you drive down to the local Home Depot, where many men (mostly Hispanic, usually illegal immigrants) hang out around the outside of the parking lot (never on the business premises) and wait for work. If you want help, you only need to approach a group of men, quickly state the type of work and wage you will pay, and you will have whatever labor you need for the day.

For those who live in California, Home Depot day laborers are a part of day-to-day life, and are always there. For Bryan Tobler, they were easy and cheap energy.

If the PCs go to Home Depot to try to dig up any information on Bryan (after seeing the texts on Becca's phone), have them **check Languages** to be able to talk to workers and begin to put together a story. The line of questioning will probably revolve around Bryan's truck, Bryan himself, and missing workers. Depending on how quickly the story is moving (and whether you want to drag it out or keep it snappy), you can give the specific location of the Home Depot in the pictures via Becca's phone GPS, or you can make them work for it by forcing them to spend hours asking questions as they wander between any number of the greater LA area's dozens of Home Depot stores.

Once they find the correct store (or they may start to hear rumors as they near the correct store), depending on their **Languages check** (maybe with a **Persuasion** or **Reassurance** follow-up) they can determine that there have, in fact, been reports and warnings put out to stay away from a man in a blue pickup truck. For a particularly good roll, they might even hear about reports of disappearances, but never first or even second hand—always a friend of a cousin, or a cousin of a friend. With plenty of blue pickup trucks in LA, the rumors will be inconclusive and vague, so don't let your players dawdle on this. They just need to know that, yes, there seems to be something fishy going on.

to clean up. But Janey never did anything violent or truly bad; she was just annoying and childish.

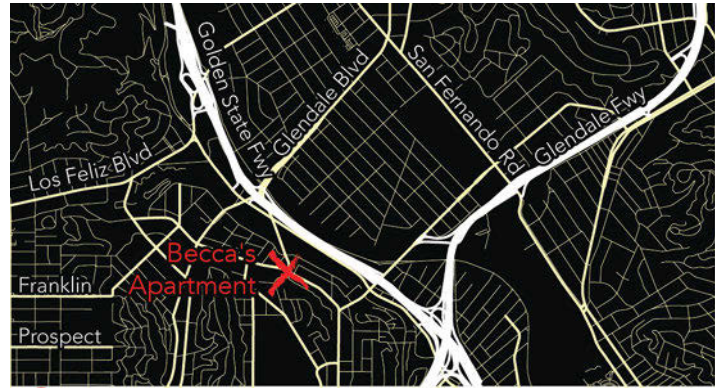
- Bryan's ex-girlfriend, Susan, was also very jealous, but more of Janey than Becca. Apparently Susan still called Bryan all the time, which made Janey very angry—she and Bryan regularly fought about Susan. Becca thought Susan continued to call Bryan because she knew how jealous Janey was.

The players may also learn something about Bryan Tobler, having seen him on YouTube or TV. Even if they don't already know him, they can just as easily find information about him on the web. Everyone who sees Bryan perform agrees that he's funny—very funny, but no one can remember why he's so damn funny. In fact, watching Bryan perform is not something anyone remembers with any detail. The first time anyone during the game (not in the past) watches Bryan perform, have them roll an **Insanity check**. Because while Bryan is certainly funny, and everyone knows they laughed, they leave the experience drained and feeling a bit sad. Failing the **Insanity check** is even worse, leaving the PC feeling dirty and violated. Crying and vomiting may follow.

Next, have the player examining the phone roll a relative **skill check** (electronics, evidence collection, or something similar) to discover the following clues.

- **Contact list:** This includes addresses and phone numbers of Bryan Tobler, Janey Lassiter (Bryan's current girlfriend), Susan Ortega (Bryan's ex-girlfriend), and Ralph Ares (Bryan's agent).
- **Photos:** The phone includes hundreds of photos, mostly from recent social events (which may include the PCs). However, out of place amongst the hundreds of party shots, is a photo of a framed picture of a house—a photo of a photo. The photo within the photo was taken from a distance at dusk, so that the large ranch-style house, which is perched on a hilltop, looks as if it is glowing or on fire. Viewing it gives the person the chills. The photo was taken three months before Becca's death, and is tagged as taken at Bryan's Beverly Hills house (if PCs check).
- **Call log:** The last call was from Bryan on the day of her death. If the person examining the phone rolled a 5/6, they can infer that the call was made very close to the time that Becca supposedly killed herself.
- **Text messages:** The most recent text thread is between Becca and Bryan and, again, seems to have taken place very near to the time of Becca's death. See the nearby sidebar for the details of the text thread.

Becca's Apartment



Silver Lake District

Becca lived in a new, one-bedroom apartment in trendy Silver Lake. The building is made from glass and brushed steel and has eight apartments total. Her apartment has been sealed off with police tape, but can easily be broken into through the front door.

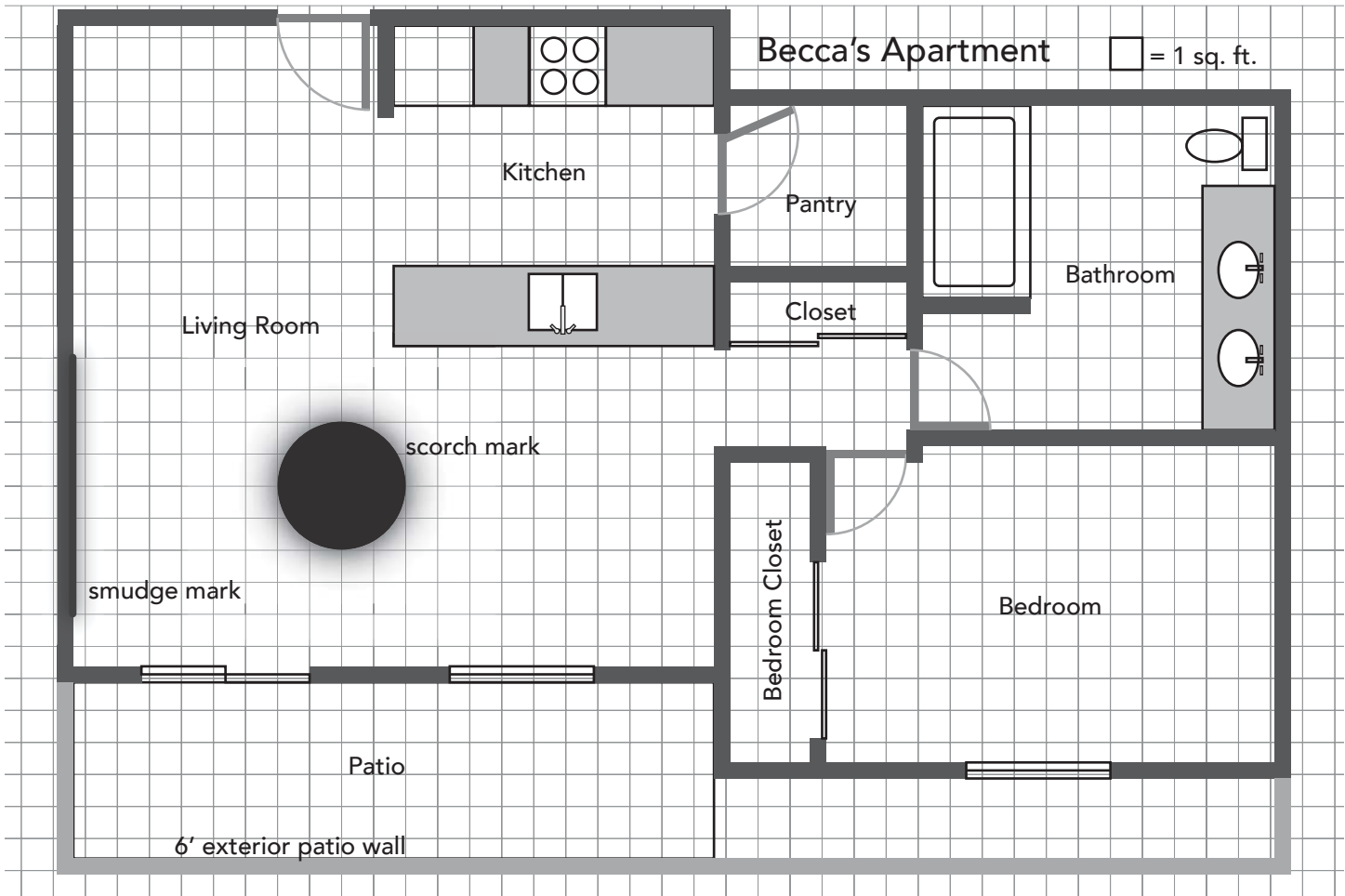
Through the door comes the smell of burnt death. Everyone entering the room should **check Insanity** for seeing the place where their friend died a clearly gruesome death.

Inside, it is clear that a fire has been ignited and then put out in the middle of the living room. The center of the carpet has a large (4-foot diameter) black scorch mark with carpet fibers melted all the way to the wood in the center, gradually dissipating at the edge of the circle. Strangely, the carpet smells of gasoline, which any **Chemistry skill check** will identify as having been applied after the fire (because all of the gas would have burnt in the fire).

The ceiling above the mark is also smudged with dark soot, indicating the fire neared the ceiling. The carpet is damp from the fire sprinklers.

Several other clues can be found in and around her apartment. Anyone looking for anything unusual will notice a large (8-foot diameter) smudge mark on the living room wall adjacent the burn marks. This smudge mark initially looks similar to the other fire marks, but upon close examination seems to be some sort of drawing that has been smudged past the point of detail. Another **Chemistry check** indicates the material is some sort of graphite composite.

This is, of course, where Bryan's gate spell appeared when he transported here to kill Becca, then redrew the spell and transported back to NYC. If examined closely, the marks seem to have some sort of elaborate pattern to them, but the detail is too far smudged to understand at all. With an **Occult check**, a PC can recognize the pattern and materials as something used in some sort of incantation or spell, but there is not enough detail remaining to know what the markings mean or the spell accomplishes.

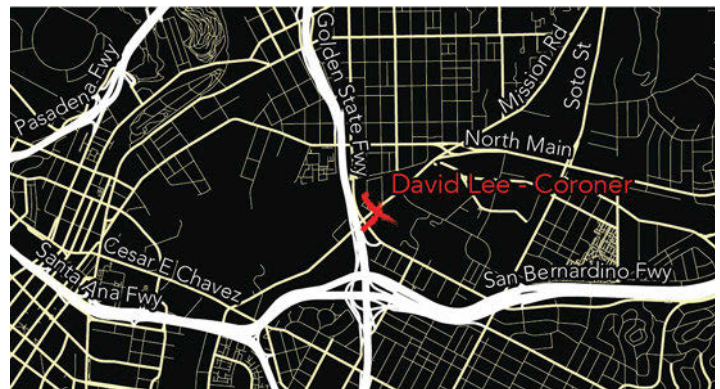


Another clue is that Becca's laptop computer is obviously gone. The blank spot in the middle of the kitchen table is framed by the power cord and mouse.

The final clues are in her car (the keys are on the kitchen counter), which is parked in the numbered parking spot behind the apartment building. The car has nothing unusual about it, except two things of interest:

- A *Thomas Guide* (detailed map book) of the Inland Empire, which Becca was using to figure out where Bryan's house was. Unfortunately, there are no specific marking on the map to indicate to the PCs what Becca was seeking.
- An expensive film camera stashed under the seat. The developed film reveals 12 pictures, including shots of a blue Ford F-150 at a Home Depot late in the afternoon, Bryan picking up a day laborer, the truck on its way to Bryan's remote house at dusk. With a **Navigation** or **Local History check**, the PCs can figure out the location of the Home Depot. However, it is difficult to follow the trail once the truck leaves LA because the signs in the pictures are hard to read in the twilight. Finally, there are photos of Bryan driving away from his remote house first thing in the morning—alone. The final pictures indicate that Becca followed the truck back to Beverly Hills.

David Lee—Coroner



Los Angeles County Department of Coroner
1104 N Mission Rd, Los Angeles, CA

David Lee is sad and desperate, in a cycle he can't escape. He is 86 years old but appears to be only 40 and he doesn't know why. But he does know that if he doesn't do what he's told, he'll get in trouble and... well, he only knows things will get very dark and very lonely when he's in trouble.

The LA County Coroner who signed off on Becca's death certificate is David Lee, who can be easily identified as the key person in charge of Becca's case and any details around it with a **Law check**.

Any inquiry into the law enforcement side of Becca's death will inevitably come back to Lee—it seems that Lee quickly took over the case and used his leverage as the final word on deaths in the county as reason to create an “open-and-shut case.” Anyone familiar with local law enforcement (either a PC or a friendly NPC) will note this as strange, but not illegal. It is within the Coroner's office jurisdiction to declare this case a suicide and close the books on it—there are so many other cases that are obviously homicides that no one suspects anything. Besides, young people with dashed dreams kill themselves all the time in Hollywood – nothing unusual here. Again, any inquiries will result in a shrug and direction to Lee, including any public records relating to the case.

Behind the scenes, Lee is being blackmailed by Ralph Ares, due to some improprieties and experiments with corpses that Lee performed in the 1960s. He literally made a deal with the devil to get elected as Coroner, a position he has held for more than 50 years now, and is at Ares' will and command. When Ares wanted Lee to tag this case as a suicide, that's what Lee did (as he has done before).

Over the past few years, however, Lee's conscience has begun to get the better of him. He knew when he began burying cases for Ares, his career would be over in a heartbeat if he came forward. But over the years he has also put together a picture – a mosaic of scorched corpses—that told a chilling tale. He knows he has been protecting something horrible and evil; all he needs is a push in the right direction for him to realize that he would rather lose his job and go to jail for the rest of his magically-lengthened life than enable that evil any further.

When the players actually approach Lee, they will find him at the LA County Coroner's office, buried in paperwork and unwilling to talk. An **Intimidation, Reassurance** or **Fast Talk check** is required to get past the front desk to see Lee, and this requires a couple hours wait first (until the PCs are just about to leave).

Going to the Police or Media

If the PCs decide to go to the police with any sort of evidence on Bryan Tobler or Ralph Ares, they will be asked to wait while someone finds a detective to talk to them. However, no one will ever come, leaving them sitting on a bench in the station, waiting for as long as they will wait.

The PCs can wait as long as they want—no one will come. If they become belligerent or even annoying, they will be escorted out.

The PCs will find similar stonewalling if they go to the media: promises to investigate, missed appointments, and overall disengagement. It's like no one cares.

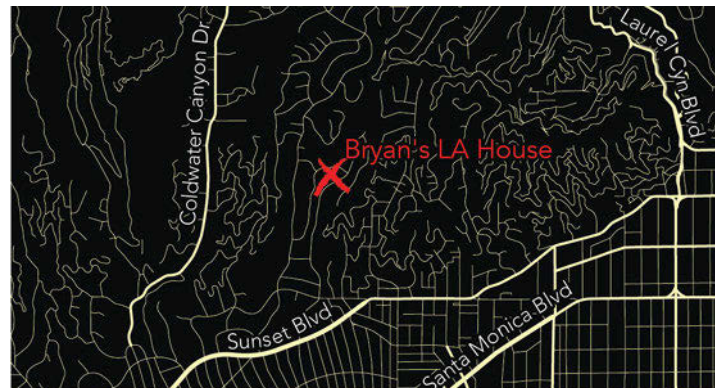
Once they meet him, he acts suspicious and defensive, almost confrontational—as if the PCs are actively offending him by asking questions. Though he will not say so, he believes he is being watched all the time, and this attitude is a front to make sure Ares is happy with his work. He will respond to force (**check Athletics, Intimidation** or other violent gestures), reduced to tears and panic, giving up Ares' name as the man who is pulling the strings. Rolling particularly well allows the PC to see that Lee is actually very old, and that some sort of magics are holding him in control.

If the PCs don't resort to violence, Lee will still be cold, but will take their contact information and tell them he'll call them if he thinks of anything helpful.

Reaction to Ralph-PC: Regardless of whether the PCs have discovered the relation between Ares and Ralph-PC, Lee will continue giving Ralph-PC odd glances and may even shy away from him. Lee's mind is clouded by magic, so does not make the connection easily, but he will know something is wrong with the Ralph-PC.

A few days after the PCs question Lee, he will send them his files on the scorched bodies (discussed later). He will then wait for Ares to turn him in, which will take only a few hours.

Bryan's LA House



1083 N. Hillcrest Rd. Beverly Hills
(Former house of Groucho Marx)

Bryan Tobler lives in Beverly Hills, in a very nice but relatively modest ranch-style house that he currently shares with his Aunt Sissy. His aunt, whose real name is Sheri Lyn Carlton, originates from Eugene, Oregon and is a practitioner of Wiccan magic. She is also, as the sister of Bryan's deceased mother, the only family Bryan has left.

When the PCs first investigate Bryan's house, Sissy is house-sitting while Bryan is touring. Her car is parked in front of the house and is covered with bumper stickers displaying her affection for and involvement in the Wiccan movement. While Sissy is very much involved in the Wiccan movement, she has no knowledge of and is not in any way involved in Bryan's agreement with Ares. However, she loves Bryan very much and will do just about anything to protect him.



If observed from outside the house, she can be seen walking through the house, picking up items and seeming to cast spells on them.

She leaves the house (whatever night is convenient) from 11:45 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. for her regular Wiccan ceremonies. Although the house does have a security system, Sissy does not turn it on when she leaves.

Inside, there are very few clues for the PCs. However, three items will be of interest:

- A large, opened box sits just inside the door and is filled with posters for Bryan's big HBO-sponsored homecoming show in LA. cursory investigation of this will reveal that it is Bryan's biggest show yet, and is scheduled for the end of the week that the PCs' investigation begins.
- Four life-sized statues of hyenas sit in various corners of the house (Bryan's room, the living room, etc.). The statues are made from a dark black and green stone and are incredibly heavy (at least 200 pounds). There is nothing inherently magical about the statues, but the Keeper can move them around the house if it makes things creepy (in one room one minute, across the house a minute later).
- There are number of photos around the house, most of them showing Bryan with movie and TV stars, as well as other comedians. Bryan has pictures with many well-known celebrities including famous comedians and late-night talk show hosts. One photo seems out of place, hanging by itself in the short hallway before the bathroom: a photo of a large, modern house (lots of glass, steel and concrete) surrounded by trees in a seemingly remote location. It is the same photo found in Becca's iPhone and hinted at on the roll of film. No other information is available on the photo, such as a date or location.

If the PCs are able to talk to Aunt Sissy, they will find her friendly and open, especially if they are pleasant. Politely mentioning Becca's death will get the PCs in the house, where Sissy will offer them lemonade and explain that Bryan is gigging back east. She actually has no clues to offer because she knows nothing about Bryan's situation other than he has been working very hard for such a long time.

If the PCs decide to follow Sissy to her meeting, she will lead them to an expensive house on Mulholland Drive, where she pulls into a private, gated driveway to spend the next two hours with her coven. Nothing can be learned from this red herring, so don't let the players dwell long here.

Reaction to Ralph-PC: Aunt Sissy has only met Ares once, so her reaction to the Ralph-PC will be relatively mild. She may just give him a funny look or comment, "My, you look awfully familiar..."

If the PCs actually try to track Bryan down on the East Coast, they can find him performing at an upstate New York college campus. He will be hard to reach in person, with a large entourage to keep outsiders away. If a PC makes a point of confronting Bryan, let him catch up to him in his hotel. Bryan will just tell him a joke with his spell and leave the PC laughing silently on the floor, where housekeeping will wake him the next morning.

Janey Lassiter



Bungalow in Venice Beach

Janey Lassiter is a TV and movie actress currently dating Bryan. She lives in a small two-bedroom bungalow near the shores of Venice Beach, where the cool people lived back in the 1990s.

Janey met Bryan at a party last year, when Bryan's success was getting him more and more attention, and they have been dating since. She has acted on the TV shows *The X-Files* and *King of Queens*, and now has a minor recurring role on the original, Vegas-set *CSI*.

Janey is a jealous and bitter woman, who, at age 37, understands that she has pretty much missed her chance to make it big. Although she has had a number of good acting gigs over the years, she knows that her star is slowly fading and that she is far too old to achieve her dreams of super-stardom. This slow decline has built up jealousy and resentment inside her, which she displays to anyone who does not openly fawn over her (as Bryan does) with a cutting wit and a sarcastic and often rude tone.

Janey was extremely jealous of Becca when Bryan hired her, and openly let Becca and Bryan know this. Janey has been tremendously envious of Bryan's success and the perks (such as having a personal assistant) that his success affords. In addition to the status Becca's presence in Bryan's life represented, Janey also resented Becca being nearly a decade younger.

Unless the PCs know Janey, she won't answer if they call. If they do know her, one possible way to meet Janey is for one of the PCs to invite her out to coffee, which can work for a PC who spins up a good story about how they already know Janey and have her phone number. The Keeper can engineer this type of meeting in whatever way that makes it work in the particular game.

For those who don't know her, visiting her bungalow is the most likely approach. Regardless of the time of day, when the PCs come to her house, Janey is working out on an elliptical machine and answers the door in workout gear, her blond hair in a ponytail and a scowl on her face. Regardless of her stature in the industry, Janey is very attractive and vain, and flattery is the only thing that works on her (**Reassurance** or **Fast Talk check**). Recognizing her from TV or movies or commenting on her physical fitness and beauty is the only way to get her to relax her defenses.

Even if the PCs are able to get her to lighten up, Janey has little to reveal. If they let her know that they're investigating Becca's death, she will instantly act suspicious, undoing any goodwill built up with flattery—unless the PCs side with Janey. She calls Becca a "conniving little bitch who only made Bryan miserable with her incessant neediness. A very unhappy girl. It's no surprise she killed herself—she seemed tired of life. She's in a better place now for sure." Her disdain and anger are palpable.

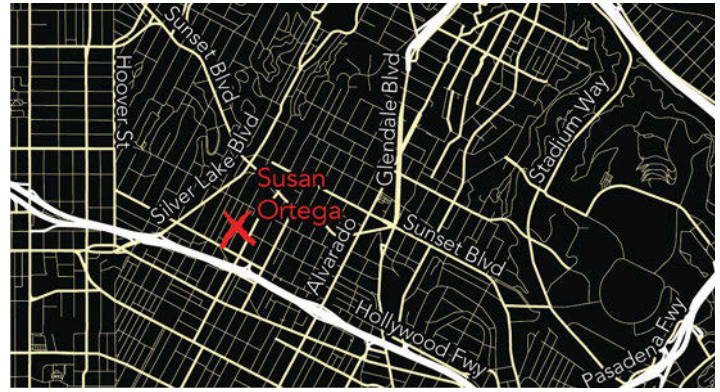
Asking about Bryan's ex-girlfriend, Susan, results in a similar response. As far as Janey is concerned, Susan dumped Bryan when she thought he had nothing left in him, and then couldn't stay away once he got famous. "She realized how much she screwed up and that I knew how to treat Bryan. So stupid."

Reaction to Ralph-PC: Janey is too self-absorbed to notice the resemblance between Ares and Ralph-PC and won't comment on it.

There is nothing else to glean from Janey. If the PCs break into her house when she's away at an audition (daytime) or party (night), the only items of interest to be found are pictures of Janey with Bryan at the same remote home pictured in Bryan's LA home and on Becca's phone and the film the PCs found in her car.

Eventually Janey gets tired of questions, gets defensive ("Who are you to ask me questions?!?"), then drops Ares' name ("Ralph said I didn't have to deal with this bullshit!") and slams the door on the PCs.

Susan Ortega



Central Los Angeles

When the PCs are out investigating, the weather is very hot and muggy. It is 90 degrees during the day with 75% humidity, which is different than the dry heat Southern Californians are used to. Muggy and stinky. Sweaty and sticky.

Susan Ortega is a 44-year-old stunt woman who dated Bryan for eight years before his deal with Ralph Ares shot him into instant fame. Unlike Janey, Susan is very friendly and will engage with the PCs—though she still resents Bryan for dumping her for Janey once he got famous.

Susan lives in a modest one-story home in Central Los Angeles. Her house is in a lower middle-class neighborhood with many homes built the '60s, most of which have bars on the windows. It's not a bad neighborhood, just run down.

Susan will answer the door with a beer in hand, leaving the metal screen closed, as she will be initially suspicious of the PCs. A PC in the industry may have worked with her and may recognize her, which would provide an opening. Otherwise, simply mentioning Becca's suicide and the PCs' desire to help her family will result in a friendly invitation to come inside, have a drink, and chat.

Whenever the PCs arrive, two ten-year-old boys are playing loudly in the pool out back, and Susan will invite the party poolside to enjoy the weather. ("My air conditioner broke last week and I haven't been able to get it fixed. So it goes," Susan will explain.) Everyone will be offered cold beers (regardless of time of day) and will sit around the shaded patio while the two boys yell and play in the pool.

As long as the PCs present themselves as honest and friendly people who are trying to help (**Reassurance** or **Fast Talk check**), Susan will answer any questions she can. Her relationship with Becca mostly included Becca fielding Susan's frequent calls for Bryan. Susan recognizes that she was kicked to the curb to make way for Bryan's career and still resents Bryan for that and has had a hard time letting go of the hurt and her jealousy of Janey. She supported Bryan through many years of local stand-up gigs, as well as staying true to him while he was on the road. ("And that didn't always go both ways, but that's just part of the game," Susan will say with a shrug.) She feels that she was

a key contribution to Bryan's success and was very hurt by the way he dumped her.

When asked about Bryan, Susan explains that Bryan used to have a different type of humor—more dry and observational, like Jerry Seinfeld or Steven Wright.

About two years ago, Bryan hooked up with Ralph Ares. ("I don't even know how Bryan got his name—it's like Ares just appeared out of the blue," Susan muses.) Once Bryan began working with Ares, Bryan's life turned upside-down. Ares sent a bunch of new clothes over to Bryan's house, with a fashion consultant to perform a fitting. Then Bryan suddenly had a handful of high-profile West Coast Saturday night gigs, which he previously hadn't been able to book locally.

Shortly thereafter Janey Lassiter showed up, and soon after that Susan was kicked to the curb. She has only seen Bryan a handful of times since then, including once when Bryan invited a few friends up to his house out in the hills. Susan met Janey there, got too drunk and made a bit of a scene. ("So I won't be invited back there—that's for sure," Susan says and shrugs her shoulders.)

Susan will then give the address and directions to Bryan's house in the hills, which both players and PCs will be very eager to find by this point in the scenario.

Reaction to Ralph-PC: If Ralph-PC is with the party when they meet Susan, she stares at Ralph-PC and merely asks, "Have we worked together before? I swear I know you from somewhere." Even if Ralph-PC indicates that they have worked together on some TV show or movie, Susan will shake her head, saying, "Yeah, but there's something else about you."

Use both this scene and Susan herself as the calm before the storm. She is here to present a contrast to Janey, as well as give some core clues in a non-confrontational manner. Play Susan as an ally to the PCs, which will add nice contrast to Janey, David Lee, and just about everyone else in the scenario. And since she gives the PCs the clue they are dying to find, the overall encounter should be strong and pivotal. However, if the PCs try to go to Susan as a first encounter, make her unavailable but hint that she would be around if they came back. Perhaps a call to her agent reveals that she's currently on set but is available the next day if the PCs came by then.

Ralph Ares, Future Self



Ares Entertainment
Hollywood

Ares Entertainment is located in a very nice office in a warehouse area in North Hollywood. The office is on the third floor, in a small but airy space, with a stunning blond receptionist (Vanessa, if asked) who will ring "Mr. Ares," speak to him briefly, then ask the PCs to wait.

While they're waiting, the PCs can examine photos on the walls of Ares with various comedians throughout the years who burned out too fast (Lenny Bruce, Sam Kinison, Mitch Hedberg, among others). Despite the years spanned in the pictures, Ares always looks the same. Once the PCs have examined all the photos, Vanessa will show the PCs into Ralph's office.

This may be the first time that the PCs notice the similarities between Ares and Ralph-PC, so play the similarities with appropriate weirdness and suspicion.

Ares' corner office is clean and modern, with just the bare necessities: a few very chic art pieces on the walls (Banksy, Annie Leibovitz and Picasso), a clean white leather sofa with coffee table, brushed steel desk and comfortable but ergonomically correct chairs. And the clock.

The clock (directly inspired by H.P. Lovecraft and E. Hoffman Price's *Through the Gates of the Silver Key*) sits in the corner of the room, looking quite out of place. You can directly quote Lovecraft here:

There ticked a curious, coffin-shaped clock whose dial bore baffling hieroglyphs and whose four hands did not move in consonance with any time system known on this planet.

The clock is Ares' connection to both the past and future. Use it as you wish—it is his time machine, his crystal ball, his telephone to the gods. It should just sit in the corner and be weird, unless you need Ares to open it up and show how weird it really is.

How this encounter goes depends on two factors: how far into the investigation the PCs have come, and whether Ralph-PC is with the party.

If Ralph-PC is not with the party, and the party has not yet met Detective Wrigley, Ares will be polite. This is his go-to behavior; unless confronted directly, Ares will be coy and

confident. Though he is sympathetic to PCs and Becca, he will not divulge anything about Bryan. He acts sincerely concerned, but states his trust in the Coroner's report with a shrug.

Ares says he does not suspect Bryan, but may admit that Bryan may be in trouble. He did help Bryan get some sweet gigs, but that's his job—Bryan is successful because Ares is successful. Ares has spent his life in Hollywood, plays the game and usually wins. He may concede that, yes, sometimes tragedy strikes but that is the way this city has always worked.

Ares is friendly but strange; he is not lying but not telling the truth. After 15 minutes of questioning, will receive another call, then wrap up business with the PCs.

If the PCs confront or threaten Ares, he laughs lightly and says, "You have no idea what you're talking about. Try bringing that to the police if you want." Then he smiles and blinks as black mist pours from the clock.

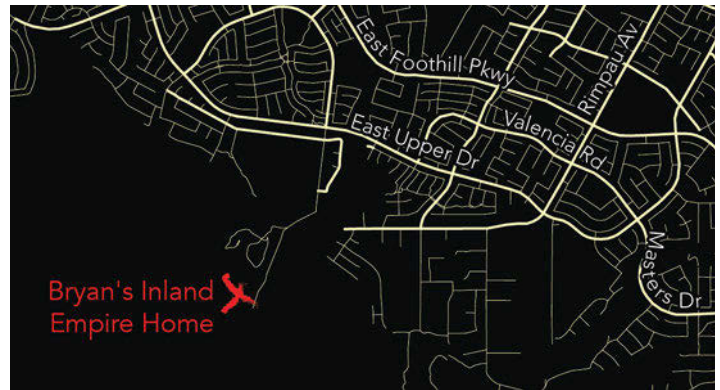
The PCs awake in a locked dumpster with thawing dead animals from the UCLA medical school. **Check Insanity**, of course. In order to escape, the PCs can either crack the corner open to yell to get someone's attention, or hurt themselves getting out.

The scene when Ralph-PC visits Ares is critical and requires some thought. The questions and reactions posed by the PCs will cut to the core of the scenario, as the PCs attempt to understand the connection between Ralph-PC and Ares. How you navigate this really depends on where the scene happens in the context of the story, as Ares is the most powerful character in the game, and can act however you need him to act.

Should the PCs, with Ralph-PC, meet Ares before they meet Wrigley, it's probably too soon to have the horrible truth revealed as the answer to the scenario. Ares might be confused—things are happening too soon, out of balance from the prophecy, and may just decide to get rid of the PCs by sending them to the dumpster out of his own confusion. This may be the best way to send the PCs after the other clues, but at least make their encounter with Ares worth something—have Ares speak of the prophecy and how he needs Bryan to complete his mission before everything is right in the world. This action would point the PCs squarely at stopping Bryan directly, which they'll find from Wrigley isn't the end-all, be-all they thought it might be.

Ralph-PC visiting Ares at the end of the scenario (after meeting Wrigley) is covered later in the Final Meeting section.

Bryan's House in the Hills



Inland Empire home
In the hills southwest of the city
Corona, CA 92883

Bryan's second house is out in the remote area of the Inland Empire, far from the hustle and bustle of LA (about a two-hour drive with no traffic, four hours slogging through brutal traffic during morning and evening commutes), in the hills south of Corona, high in the hills away from the rest of the rest of the world. This is the home shown in the various pictures in Bryan and Janey's homes, as well as on Becca's phone and camera. Although the house does serve as a nice reprieve from the big city, Bryan also keeps a dark secret here—a secret that cost Becca her life.

The house is large and modern, built from glass, brushed steel and dark concrete. The 2,500-square foot house is on a wooded four-acre lot, quite hidden away from everything (cell phones get no signal out here). Questioning the neighbors yields nothing—all they know is that some big movie star lives there and never talks to anyone. The property is protected by a 6-foot wrought-iron fence and automatic gate, but this can be opened with an **Electronics check** or climbed with **Athletics**. No one answers if the bell is rung (no one is home).

The property contains many trees, the house with a large back deck and hot tub, an attached garage and a bolted-shut metal hatch (2' x 4') in the hillside about 50 feet from the house, with no sound from inside.

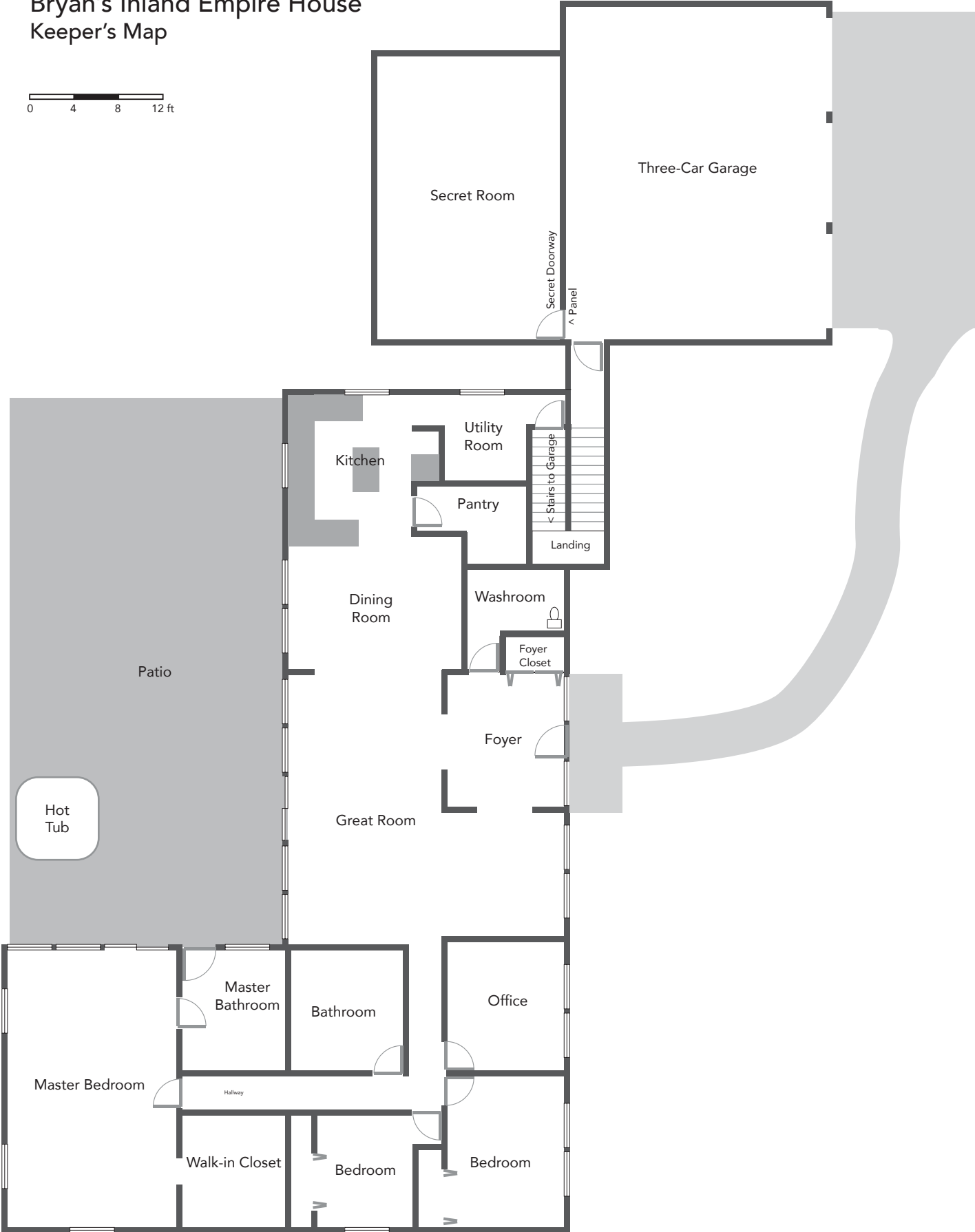
The house's interior is quite spare, with a few generic Pottery Barn decorations and some rotting food in the fridge and trash—this is clearly a vacation home. The only evidence of Bryan's work is a stack of mostly empty notebooks in the office, just a few filled with bad jokes written sloppily in pen.

However, there are quite a few items here that reveal Bryan's dark side. One is the pair of life-sized, dark-stone hyena statues that grace the foyer—a perfect match to the ones in his other home.

Although the statues are not real, they should immediately put the PCs (and players) on edge when they arrive at this house. Play this reaction for maximum suspense—everyone knows this is the bad place, so it's just a question of what's going to happen. Any PC that looks



Bryan's Inland Empire House Keeper's Map



into the darkened house through any of the windows may see a hyena walk down the hall. **Check Insanity**. There is no actual hyena, but play with what the PCs think they saw.

This all leads to the secret room Bryan has built adjacent to the garage, which is accessible from a secret door in the garage. Three bike racks hang vertically from the wall, but only two bikes hang from them. The third rack sits lower than the others and has more wear along its mounting—pulling the rack down swings the door inward, revealing a dark room. Inside, only a couple very small spot lights carve through the darkness in the windowless room, and anyone entering triggers a magical alarm for Bryan that will have him arrive momentarily.

The room is dark and the air a bit stale, with a few important items to be found:

- Dark, heavy curtains hang from the remaining walls but hide nothing.
- An ancient document sits on a little glass display in the middle of the room. The document has a spell written in Ye Olde English and is clearly labeled at the top as The Laughing Hyena. See the next section for description of the spell.
- A key on a small key-ring hangs on the wall next to the door. It fits the lock in the metal door outside.
- A large, circular drawing is on the wall (like the smudged markings on the wall of in Becca's living room, but with the detail still visible), which is the gate Bryan uses to travel back and forth when he is on the road.

Briefly reading the spell will reveal that it mentions something about making people laugh, but the PC exploring this will have little time to finish reading it, as the room begins to buzz and smell like sulfur. Another moment passes and the large drawing on the wall begins to light up, further crackling with light. The buzzing turns into the sound of applause, which overwhelms the room.

Allow the PCs one action (usually running or freezing) before the circle grows very bright and they see a figure on the other side of the wall—then, with a zap, Bryan is in the room.

Bryan comes out of the gate as if he's coming on stage, waving to the loud applause. Before the PCs can do anything, he is telling a joke—his voice is loud, strong and penetrating. Even if the PCs cover their ears, they can hear his voice inside their head. The joke is funny—very funny—and the PCs are instantly overwhelmed with laughter. **Insanity checks** are needed as the joke just gets better and better; it is the funniest thing the PCs have ever heard. They cannot stop laughing.

With the spell under his control and full of energy, Bryan cannot be harmed by any means (until the PCs get the medallion discussed later in the scenario).

At this point a failed **Insanity check** might mean that someone has peed his pants, and everyone is literally rolling on the floor and wishing it would end. They are now under Bryan's control.

However, it is important at this point that at least one PC not be present (whether they get away or weren't with the party when they meet Bryan). This scene plays best with some hidden information, as you will read below, and so plan how you're going to make sure the entire party is not overwhelmed by Bryan.

One PC *might* be able to remain hidden from Bryan if, for example, he were near the door and able to duck out quickly or hide in a closet or someplace well away from the action.

Having one PC hide from Bryan is fine—but he should pass at least one of the **Insanity checks** as he attempts to run away. (Alternatively, some of the PCs may escape the joke because the party split up, and some PCs are still in LA, which works fine.)

The joke just gets stronger, and any PC who passed the previous one must pass a second **Insanity check**. Failure might mean vomiting or crapping one's pants. Regardless, Bryan makes his way through the house, finding all the intruders (except for one that might be hiding). The affected PCs then pass out.

If the entire party is at the house and tries to escape, just let the first person who mentioned it get out, or maybe the last person to make their **Insanity check**. Regardless, make sure at least one PC escapes Bryan's grasp. Make it tense, fast and confusing.

This may seem like railroading, but the players will follow you as long as you let one PC escape. Once the party has encountered Bryan and split (those who were overcome by Bryan and those who were not), move the story forward to the middle of the night and allow any PC still free to return to the house.

At this point, return the narrative to the PC(s) not overtaken by Bryan and leave the question of what happened to the rest of the party hanging.

Any PCs who escaped will probably do one of two things: find or call the police if they passed their **Insanity checks** (they will get the cops' usual assurances that someone is coming to help, but no actual response) or, if they failed the **Insanity checks**, drive away in a panic and roam the hills for hours until they find themselves, just as night is falling, by the side of the road near Bryan's house, cold sweat dried and fingers gripped to the steering wheel, with no recollection of the last few hours.

If no one escaped, but some PCs were still back in LA, let them approach the house with quiet dread. Either way, the PCs coming back to the house after the attack will find the house empty and Bryan gone, though the spell is still on its pedestal.

The scene should be creepy as the PCs return to the house and wonder what happened to their friends, finding

evidence of the PCs' previous breaking and entering, as well as Bryan's chase through the house. Let them search the house until they find or ask about the metal door in the hillside, then cut back to the rest of the party a few hours earlier.

The PCs who succumbed to Bryan's rampage awake as they're being dropped into the tank with the scorched bodies of Bryan's previous victims, sustaining bruises as they're unceremoniously dumped down the chute and into each other. Bryan climbs down into the tank and says, "I knew that killing that busybody was going to be more trouble than she was worth," before kicking one of the PCs in the stomach. "You all can stay down here and think about what you've done," he says. "I'll be back to take care of you later—after the final show, after... immortality." He then climbs out and closes the lid to the tank, leaving the PCs in the dark with the corpses. **Insanity checks** should be made here.

Reaction to Ralph-PC: If Ralph-PC is with the party, Bryan's reaction is a bit different, of course. He can see that Ralph-PC looks like Ares and doesn't understand why—he will most likely pick on Ralph-PC screaming at him, "Why do you look like him? It's not funny! Why?" before kicking him in the stomach on his way out.

Once Bryan has left, the PCs have some time to mull over their capture and look around the hot, stuffy tank. In the back of the tank are stacked six or seven scorched bodies that look like wood at the end of a campfire, all carbonized. Because the PCs probably haven't seen a picture of Becca's body, now they have a first-hand understanding of what their friend looked like in death. An **Insanity check** here is required, of course. The PCs also find Becca's broken Macbook Pro on the floor of the tank, cracked and inoperable (unless the PCs never talked to David Lee, in which case the Mac miraculously works, and the PCs find the clues revealed in the next section).

Then, finally, the party is reunited and can share their horror stories and return to LA. If somehow no PCs were able to escape and you have the whole party trapped, then it will be early the next morning when Susan comes to find the PCs and discovers them in the tank. Another **Insanity check** will have been required in the meantime. (This is just the backup plan – it is better to have split the party.)

If the PCs try to report the incident to the police by calling 911 from the house phone, they will get an agent who says she is sending someone right away, but no one ever comes.

Laughing Hyena Spell

The spell is printed on two pages of old, yellowing paper, and written in Ye Olde English. The paper looks and feels quite old, and an **Archaeology** or **History check** can tell that it is pre-Revolutionary American or English.

The spell, whose author is unknown, is composed of two parts: how to create the Chant of the Hyena, which gives

powers over people; and how to create the Curse of the Hyena, which is needed to gain the power needed to sustain continued use of the Chant.

The Chant of the Hyena is a spell that can vary in its effects depending on how much power and time its caster uses. The fundamental effect is that people who can hear the spell being cast are overwhelmed with laughter, the strength and duration of which is dependent on how long the spell is cast for and how much energy the caster exerts. Someone could cast the spell very quickly, perhaps just for a minute or two, or for much longer—hours in fact.

The caster must also decide how much power to expend when casting—while there are no specific game mechanics for this, gauge the spell's power depending on the story requirements. If Bryan just needs to nail a talk-show spot, for example, the spell uses up so little energy that a Red Bull puts him back in fighting form. However, when he casts it on the PCs after finding them in his house, it probably saps his power more than he would like. When Bryan needs to cast it for the big ending, he's going to use all of his remaining power – he would pass out at the end if not for the whole "being dispersed into space and time" thing.

People hearing the spell cast are overwhelmed with laughter, and not the funny kind. The laughter created by the Chant is forced, uncomfortable, like the kind when someone tickles you. Again, how powerful Bryan (or a PC) decides to make the casting determines the overall effect. Bryan can now throttle the spell over a two-hour period, interjecting it between his own jokes, and then extending its use at the end for a grand finale.

Hearing the spell cast for more than a few minutes requires an **Insanity check** (except when from Bryan, who can cast a very intense laughter instantly). Failing this roll makes the PC more susceptible to further rolls, while passing it just allows the PC to continue to attempt escape or fight Bryan (as Bryan now has enough power stored to use the spell with nearly limitless effects). Still, anyone listening is overcome with laughter. If the power is cranked up, another **Insanity check** is required. Failing this roll means the listener cannot control himself any more. It's like when your older sibling or cousin would tickle you past the point of comfort; you can't control yourself, you just want it to stop, and ultimately it makes you feel bad about yourself.

Failing both **Insanity checks** could result in soiling one's pants, vomiting or even tearing out one's hair. These are the effects that can take place while the joke is still being told; for those who have failed both rolls, the effects can linger even after the jokes are done. Someone could keep laughing a silent laugh, slipping into a comatose state; they could feel the need to cut themselves to make sure they're alive; or shave off all body hair in an effort to rid oneself of the filth. Whatever happens, the person feels dirty and exhausted.

If the PCs want to cast the spell—great, let them—but it causes things to go downhill very fast. Hold off on the

actual execution until the climax of the story is nearing. Then let them go crazy, becoming viral hits themselves, just starting out at the local open mic night, making people laugh.

Package from the Coroner

Having escaped what seemed like certain death and returned to their hotel after facing Bryan at his remote home, the PCs will find a FedEx package waiting for them at the front desk. Inside is a dented and tape-covered cardboard box containing 23 file folders dating back to the 1960s. There is also a VHS tape and a cassette tape in a manila envelope, both with the word "Lancaster" written on them in faded pen.

There is also a note from Lee with just the words:

Forgive me.

David

If the PCs somehow skipped interviewing Lee, the clues can come from Becca's computer, found in the septic tank at Bryan's house. The computer's drive was recoverable after all, and the clues are on her desktop in a file titled "Joke Master." (In case that this happens, the files appear to have been sent to Becca by Lee on the day that she was killed.)

After a number of hours spent reading through the files, the PCs will discover the following clues:

- All of the cases involve scorched bodies similar to Becca's.
- There are 23 cases, dating back to 1962.
- The cases spanning from 1964 to 1992 were all handled by Detective Ben Wrigley.
- The Coroner for all the cases is David Lee.

The film shows a three-minute clip of a comedian, sometime in the late 1960s, on stage performing. The scene starts wide, where you can see the large crowd doubled over with laughter, then focuses in slowly on the comedian's mouth, which is clearly reciting some sort of repetitive incantation.

The 46-minute cassette tape has only a three-minute interview with a man, who one would assume to be Lancaster. During the interview, the person asking the questions can barely be heard (only a whisper, even if amplified), making the conversation one-sided. Furthermore, Lancaster is incredibly agitated, as if on drugs, speaking quickly, repeating himself and often coughing. During the confusing interview, it's clear that Lancaster is trying to make some sort of confession, and the following facts come out:

- He admits to killing many people by just saying words.
- He feels he has made a deal with the devil, but doesn't say who the "devil" is--just a guy like us but he's really from the future.

- He was told that if he kills enough people he will become immortal, but now doesn't want to do that.
- If he dies, then it will just give more power to this guy, this devil from the future.
- He is trying to turn himself in, just to be put away so he doesn't harm any more people.
- He gets agitated when bluntly told no, he won't be arrested, and that he can go. He freaks out, and the tape ends.

Research for a comedian named Lancaster turns up a couple of references from 1966 to a Bobby Lancaster, a Los Angeles comedian who played a handful of large-profile gigs and then disappeared.

The day after the PCs receive the files (probably also the day after they visit Wrigley), they will see a news story on TV about the arrest of the Coroner, David Lee, for necrophilia. The story will dominate the local news cycle for days and show Lee, who now looks to be in his mid-80s. He has been taken into custody for his own protection and cannot be reached.

Detective Jim Wrigley, Rtr.



Thousand Oaks, CA

The detective lives in an old, dirty house in a run-down neighborhood. The house has faded, chipped paint and is overwhelmed by overgrown weeds and bushes. In the dim light of the front entry mail rots in piles, but there are no newspapers. The front door has a large, dusty "No Solicitors" sign on it, next to another one that reads, "Beware of Dog". Even after the PCs knock for the second time, it takes Wrigley a few minutes to grumble, "Go away." But if the PCs explain themselves in a rational manner, he will open the door to let them in.

Wrigley is 71 years old, with an overgrown beard and thin wisps of gray hair over his mostly bald head. Wrigley is pale and washed out, as the smell of decaying life pervades the cramped hallway.

Inside is like an episode of *Hoarders*: newspapers, boxes, bags filled with magazines, and more newspapers fill every corner of the house. There is little room to maneuver, and the PCs find themselves just standing in the small space still left in the entryway, as there is no place else to go. A



small black-and-white TV sits on a stack of newspapers and plays without sound.

From the entry way, the PCs can see that Wrigley uses his bathroom as his kitchen (because the real one is full of trash and inaccessible)—a very small fridge and microwave oven are stacked on the back of the stained toilet. He sleeps on a pad in a space carved out near the entryway, where he reads magazines and newspapers everyday, looking for more evidence of killings like the one the PCs are investigating.

The hall closet, however, is organized and dedicated to the investigation that he has been obsessed with for nearly 40 years. The closet is filled with a large filing cabinet full of clippings and evidence of Ralph Ares' (and his previous pseudonym's) malevolent deeds for as far back as Wrigley has been able to discover (the early 1960s).

Wrigley himself investigated 27 murders between 1968 and 1992 (24 years), starting at age 26 when he was promoted to homicide. As a detective, he slowly uncovered a pattern of grisly incinerations that continued regularly, regardless of Wrigley's interventions. In 1988 Wrigley realized there was a magical component to the killings, but could not convince anyone else on the force of this.

Finally, in 1992 he traced the killings to a comedian named Sam Kinison, who was using a spell to make people laugh that required regular ritual sacrifices that resulted in the scorched bodies. Using a medallion found in a Chinatown antique shop ("for quite a bargain, considering what it's capable of"), Wrigley was able to protect himself from the Laughing Hyena spell and ended up running Kinison down and killing him in a car chase. Wrigley was finally able to convince his superiors of Kinison's guilt—if not of the magics involved—when they found a number of scorched corpses stored in Kinison's garage.

It turns out that Kinison was just one in a long line of comedians being used to spread social mayhem through the years. Wrigley traced the spell back to Barry Maines, a Hollywood talent agent to many successful comedians since the early 1960s. The similarities between Maines and Ares are quite clear.

When Wrigley killed Kinison, he stopped the mayhem from becoming worse, but there were still riots. If comedians are still killing people in the same manner, Wrigley will explain, then the PCs need to stop Bryan before the big gig so it doesn't get worse. But he hints that killing Bryan might also trigger something else, so the party needs to be careful about the consequences.

With a **Persuasion** or **Reassurance check**, Wrigley can be convinced to help the PCs (reluctantly). He can tell his story about Kinison and Maines, and reveal that if a new comedian (Bryan) is doing the same sort of thing, only bad things are coming. He can fill in any plot gaps the PCs have missed, confirming any fears or suspicions about

Bryan. Yes, he probably plans to kill everyone at his big show and thinks he will become immortal after it. Ares/Maines is really the power behind the scenes, which is something Wrigley hadn't figured out until it was too late.

Wrigley had another part of the spell, but can't find it in the files. It talked about a man from the future coming back to meet himself in the past. If the jester was stopped from performing, then the future man or his present self would gain all the power and fulfill the prophecy. What prophecy? Don't know.

He tells the PCs he has something that can help, then goes digging in the closet, returning with a faded manila envelope that he upends to dump out a large, golden medallion. He will put the medallion on himself first, then look at each of the PCs suspiciously, finally removing it to give to them. The medallion, he will explain, protects from magic and should make them invulnerable to Bryan's powers.

Reaction to Ralph-PC: If the Ralph-PC is with the party, Wrigley won't notice anything strange about him unless it is pointed out. Then he will eye Ralph-PC suspiciously and quickly put on the medallion (or rush to go get it if he hasn't yet revealed it). Wrigley will grab Ralph-PC's face, playing with it until he seems convinced that he is not actually Ares/Maines.

Only if the PCs think to ask does Wrigley offer his copy of the Laughing Hyena spell—it's a faded photograph copy from at least 30 years ago, but it can do the trick.

He will also explain that Bryan will need to be killed in a certain way, and he will go back to the closet to root around, returning with a wooden box. Opening it, Wrigley presents the party with a hollow glass dagger that he says they must use to kill Bryan—and that whoever wields it must wear the medallion.

Soon after, Wrigley gets distracted by a thought and climbs up into the piles of newspapers, from which he doesn't return. The party should now have everything they need to finish the scenario, and the scene can end with them leaving Wrigley to his mess.

Medallion of True Sight

(šarrum lā šanān in ancient Assyrian; the King who cannot be rivaled)

Etruscan Lion medallion, large gold chain

The Medallion of True Sight is a large (5-inch diameter and 1.5 inches thick), circular piece of jewelry that provides the person wearing it with magical powers. Anyone can wear it.

It protects its wearer from any effects of spell casting and magic, allowing the wearer to see things how they are and affect them directly. For instance, someone using a spell to look like someone else would, to the medallion wearer, look like the original caster.

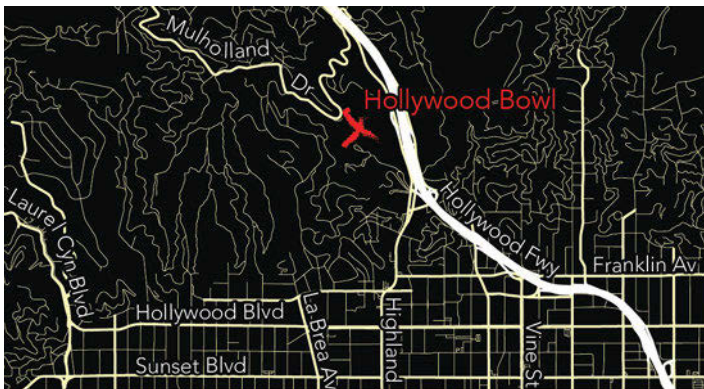
While wearing the medallion costs no **Insanity**, removing it does. When someone removes it, they must **check Insanity**—the success or failure of this **Insanity check** determines how someone reacts when they remove it. If they succeed, removing it has no effect. However, if they fail, when they remove it they will begin to question whether people are who they say they are, and will wish to wear the medallion again.

For this scenario, the PC who is the past version of Ralph Ares looks like Ares himself, and vice versa. Or do they? Instead of choosing, pick one and change it, confusing the PCs and players. Perhaps, up close, the Ralph-PC seems to have stitches around their face, as if it could be removed (though it cannot). There is no hard-and-fast rule to how the PC looks like Ares, so do what is best to sow doubt and suspicion.

Anyone wearing the medallion sees Bryan as cracking at the seams, his anger and energy nearly boiling over. Bryan's head looks like a hyena, rotting and bloody, with his skin peeling off (**Insanity check**). His eyes pulsate, veins bulging with black electricity, his world is about to collapse on itself and it shows.

Because the wearer is immune to magic, wearing the medallion is the only way to approach Bryan and Ares. For the scenario finale, the medallion will keep a PC protected when he goes to kill Bryan in a (hopefully) dramatic and explosive finish.

The Hollywood Bowl Gig



Hollywood Bowl, Hollywood

Bryan's big gig is scheduled for the Friday after the Sunday funeral, giving the PCs just enough time to organize themselves before they attempt to stop Bryan.

The PCs should now understand that Bryan has reached a new level in his fame, and that—if he goes through with his plans—he will likely annihilate the sold-out crowd of 17,300 people. At this point, they should have all the information necessary to stop him before or at the show, which should serve as part one of the climax.

They know that Bryan will be returning to Los Angeles for a large showcase gig, where it seems that he would be able to sacrifice a large number of people. According to the spell, a person using the spell to tap into thousands

of people's energy can use the energy to finally transform himself permanently into the Hyena—a powerful being capable of making anyone laugh at any time.

Really, all that is required to stop this massacre is for a PC who is wearing the medallion to stab Bryan in the heart with the hollow glass dagger. The fun part of this final scene will be how the PCs organize themselves to commit cold-blooded murder. Don't be shy in reminding them that murder is what they plan, and sow doubt in the players as to the gray moral zones they have wandered into.

But for the scenario to be completed, the party really does need to kill Bryan, so how the PCs plan to do it should take up the few scenes before the finale. They can track Bryan down ahead of time, when he arrives at the small Burbank airport, ambush him en route to the Bowl, or just plan to sneak into the show and find him either backstage or wait until the final moment when he is on stage. Bryan is popular now and has an entourage, but let the PCs get past it with a **Sneak, Disguise, Fast Talk or Intimidate check** (or a combination of those) and excellent role-playing. Any option is possible. Let the players come up with a crazy plan, and as long as you make them jump through some narrative hoops (with accompanying die rolls) to explain how they will do it, let them kill Bryan however they want.

Killing Bryan should be one of the scenario's final scenes, so make it big, dramatic and a bit scary. It should end with one PC wearing the medallion—thus unaffected by a panicking Bryan—and plunging the dagger into Bryan's chest, after which Bryan's chest erupts in a wall of blood, overwhelming anyone nearby, and the scene cuts to the final interaction with Ares.

If, for some reason (this never happened in play-testing) the players decide not to kill Bryan, just move to the final scene with Ares, just finish the scenario with Bryan unleashing his magic on 17,300 people, all of whom die in a huge, final flame, Bryan included. The guilt should be worth a couple **Insanity checks**, certainly.

And so, while Ares won't gain the power required to travel to the future, there is still an opportunity for a final confrontation with Ares, who will want to return to his own future with Ralph-PC in tow.

Final Meeting

Ares Entertainment

If all goes well, the party has dispatched Bryan and has now come to finally confront Ares. They may have met him earlier in the scenario, but armed with more information from Wrigley, the PCs are here to put a stop to Ares—whatever that means.

This is the final, climactic end to the scenario, and should be played as such. However, there is not one specific direction the story needs to take—it is up to you to determine what is needed to wrap everything up neatly.



At this point, though, you should have a few components to help create a fun and entertaining climax.

- The PCs should be well convinced that Ralph-PC is somehow related to Ares. They may think that killing Ralph-PC will stop Ares.
- They know Ares is the one who gave Bryan his powers, and is the true power behind the scenes.
- They have successfully used the medallion and glass dagger to kill Bryan before or during his big gig.
- They have come to Ares to confront him and solve this mystery once and for all.

With these factors, you should have all you need to bring the story to an amazing and weird climax—one that could include time travel, ancient magics and a PC facing the future version of himself.

At this point, Ares is hoping for one of two things. First, if the PCs are successful in killing Bryan, then all of Bryan's power should flow into Ares, providing him the ability to willfully move across space and time (not just to the past)—this is what Ares is expecting to happen before the PCs show up at his office for this final scene. However, Ares is really hoping to meet the past version of himself, and hopefully Ralph-PC has come along for the final confrontation. Ares wants to bring Ralph-PC with him into the future, not understanding that doing so puts his plan at risk.

Without Ralph-PC, the party has little power over Ares. He will let them come in, just as before, and entertain their conspiracy fancies. He may even offer them a trip in his strange clock. If they continue to press him on who he is and where his powers came from, he would be glad to show them.

Otherwise, he can just discuss his trip from the future and who he is until the moment Bryan is killed (however you need to time it), when all of Bryan's power flows into Ares. Then, Ares will wait until the opportune moment to trigger a massive earthquake centered on Los Angeles, 9.8 on the Richter Scale, known hereafter to Californians as The Big One. It is the stuff of legend—a region-wide earthquake that fundamentally alters life at and around its center. Los Angeles begins to crumble into the sea.

If Ralph-PC is in the party that arrives at his office, Ares reacts much differently. Ares is delighted to meet Ralph-PC, extremely polite and wants to know all about him (is he ready to travel to the future and gain forbidden knowledge?). He will answer any questions Ralph-PC has, and ultimately offer to have Ralph-PC join him in traveling the universe. Yes, it means that a lot of people here will die, but isn't that but a small price to pay to understand the secrets of the universe?

Ares will offer to take Ralph-PC into the future with him, which presents problems that Ares himself does not quite recognize. The party can stop Ares in one of two ways – destroy the clock (usually with explosives), or have Ralph-

PC enter the clock without Ares. Taking either of these actions will prevent Ares from triggering the Big One and gaining the power that comes with it.

The best options for the climax are that the PCs try to kill Ares in a cinematic way, hopefully along with Ralph-PC (one playtest group blew up Ares Entertainment and everyone within it with explosives), or the party is able to get Ralph-PC into the clock without Ares.

If Ares is able, he will offer to bring Ralph-PC with him into the clock, which takes them far into the future, across time and space and into some unknown, new world.

The key here is to center the climax around Ralph-PC and how the party will help him reconcile his relationship to the story's main villain. This is an opportunity to bring forth any character elements developed during the scenario and resolve them, or just have the whole thing end in with a massive earthquake that kills a lot of people.

While there is some potentially complex timing involved, including in Bryan's death and the passing of power to Ares, you are free to play with the scene to achieve the most suspenseful and cinematic ending. When and how the earthquake actually happens should depend on the PCs' plans and how they confront Ares.

Ideally, everyone will want Ralph-PC to sacrifice himself along with Ares to bring the scenario to a gripping conclusion. Just make it thrilling, suspenseful and weird—the players will follow along wherever you go.

Epilogue

Assuming there are still party members standing at the end of the story, there should be one final scene to provide the appropriate denouement. This really depends on how the scenario itself ended, which should determine the overall tone of the scene.

If the PCs failed to stop Ares, the story could end with Ralph-PC wandering the broken wreckage of an earthquake-ravaged LA, where posters for Bryan's final gig cover a toppled fence outside Ralph-PC's home. If most of the party died in a massive explosion to kill both Ralph-PC and Ares, perhaps the game ends with a few of the remaining PCs picking up another PC from the hospital, for either mental or physical trauma, weeks after the whole thing is done.

In one playtest, the final scene allowed a PC who had taken Ares' up on his offer to travel back in time to change his own past with another PC, resolving his unrequited love. Another playtest had the PCs wandering LA with their own version of the Laughing Hyena spell, going between open-mic nights and spreading madness with them, right before the Big One destroys everyone.

Again, however things end, use the opportunity to make things weird and thrilling and provide just enough resolution before ending the scene and story for everyone.

Appendix I: Cthulhu Dark

By Graham Walmsley

Your Investigator

Choose a name and occupation. Describe your Investigator. Take a green Insanity die.

Insanity

Your Insanity starts at 1. When you see something disturbing, roll your Insanity die. If you get higher than your Insanity, add 1 to your Insanity and roleplay your fear.

Doing Things

To know how well you do at something, roll:

- One die if the task is within human capabilities
- One die if it's within your occupational expertise
- Your Insanity die, if you will risk your sanity to succeed

If your Insanity die rolls higher than any other die, make an Insanity roll, as above. Then your highest die shows how well you do. On a 1, you barely succeed. On a 6, you do brilliantly.

For example: You're escaping from the window of an Innsmouth hotel. On a 1, you crash on an adjoining roof, attracting the attention of everyone around. On a 4, you land quietly on the roof, but leave traces for pursuers to follow. On a 6, you escape quietly, while your pursers continue searching the hotel.

When you investigate, the highest die shows how much information you get. On a 1, you get the bare minimum: if you need information to proceed with the scenario, you get it, but that's all you get. On a 4, you get whatever a competent investigator would discover. On a 5, you discover everything humanly possible. And, on a 6, you may glimpse beyond human knowledge (and probably make an Insanity roll).

For example: You're investigating your great-uncle's manuscripts. On a 1, you find the address "7 Thomas Street" (the next location in the scenario). On a 6, you find that, from February 28 to April 2, many townspeople had dreams of gigantic nameless creatures. Simultaneously, a Californian theosophist colony donned robes for a "glorious fulfilment." The dreamers included Mr. Wilcox of 7 Thomas Street.

Failing

If someone thinks it would more interesting if you failed, they describe how you might fail and roll a die. (They can't do this if you're investigating and you must succeed for the scenario to proceed).

If their die rolls higher than your highest die, you fail, in the way they described. If not, you succeed as before, with your highest die showing how well you succeed.

Returning to the earlier example: You're escaping from the hotel window. This time, someone thinks it would be more interesting if your pursuers caught you. When you both roll, the other player gets the higher die. You are caught.

Rerolling

If you included your Insanity die in the roll and you're not happy with the result, you may reroll (all the dice). If you didn't include your Insanity die before, you may add it now and reroll.

Afterward, look at the new result. As before, the highest die shows how well you do. If your Insanity die rolls higher than any other die, make an Insanity roll, even if you made one after your previous roll.

Cooperating and Competing

- **To cooperate:** Everyone who is cooperating rolls their dice. The highest die, rolled by anyone, determines the outcome.
- **To compete:** Everyone who is competing rolls their dice. Whoever gets highest die wins. If it's a tie, the person with highest Insanity wins. If Insanity is tied, reroll.

As before, if your Insanity die rolls higher than any other die you roll, make an Insanity roll. If anyone is not happy with their roll, they may reroll using the rules above.

Suppressing Knowledge

When your Insanity reaches 5, you may reduce it by suppressing Mythos knowledge. For example, you might burn books, stop rituals, destroy yourself or impede investigation.

Each time you do this, roll your Insanity Die. If you get less than your current Insanity, decrease your Insanity by 1. You may continue suppressing Mythos knowledge when your Insanity drops below 5.

Going Insane

When your Insanity reaches 6, you go incurably insane. This is a special moment. Everyone focusses on your character's last moments as your mind breaks. Go out however you want: fight, scream, run or collapse.

Afterward, you can either make a new character or continue playing, madly, but retire the character as soon as you can.

Other Clarifications

If you fight any creature you meet, you will die. Thus, in these core rules, there are no combat rules or health levels. Instead, roll to hide or escape.

Skills within human capabilities include: picking locks, finding Ry'leh, deciphering carvings, remembering something, spotting something concealed, rationalizing something horrific.

Skills outside human capabilities include: casting spells, understanding hidden meaning, doing things in dreams.

You can try using these skills if you have the opportunity. For example, if you sense patterns, you can try to follow them. However, you won't get the Within Human Capabilities die and might just roll your Insanity die.

A highly successful roll never short-circuits the investigation. That is, it never takes you to the end of the scenario, skipping everything in between. Thus, in the example above, even if you rolled a 6 while searching your great-uncle's personal effects, you would not find the co-ordinates of Ry'leh, where Cthulhu sleeps.

When you make an Insanity roll and succeed, getting your current Insanity level or lower, this means you keep it together, not that you are fine. When your Insanity roll fails, getting a number higher than your current Insanity, you can't keep it together.

To play without a character sheet, use your Insanity die to keep track of your Insanity by keeping its highest face turned to your current Insanity.

Unanswered Questions

Who decides when to roll Insanity? Who decides when it's interesting to know how well you do something? Who decides when something disturbs your PC? Who decides whether you might fail?

Decide the answers within your group. Make reasonable assumptions. For example, some groups will let the Keeper decide everything. Others will share the decisions.

These rules are designed to play prewritten scenarios, run by a Keeper. If you try improvising scenarios or playing without a Keeper, let me know.

Finally

If you write Cthulhu scenarios and you'd like to turn them into standalone products by including Cthulhu Dark free of charge, email me at graham@thievesoftime.com.

Let me know how these rules work for you. My email is graham@thievesoftime.com. On www.thievesoftime.com, you'll find more Cthulhu Dark rules.

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Appendix II: Playing Cthulhu Dark and House Rules

Rolling the Dice

Cthulhu Dark is an ideal system for running a Lovecraft-inspired investigation game with few rules and a lot of flexibility. However, unlike running other Cthulhu genre RPGs, Cthulhu Dark isn't as clear-cut about when to make rolls for success. Even with the addition of my Skills house rule, it isn't always clear when to make rolls.

For this scenario, I provide two elements to help:

- Where possible, I have indicated with bold text points where a character may **check** for success. These indicators can relate directly to finding clues, navigating NPCs, or just identifying places where players tend to try to accomplish things. Regardless, the formatting should provide an idea of where to make a roll.
- The Skills house rules (below) also provide a great method for leveraging rolls, because the players can attempt to use a particular skill to accomplish something (as in other RPGs). Of course, not all rolls require a skill, but using the skills when relevant can help everyone understand more clearly what the roll means. Where possible, I have **bolded** the skill.

Skills House Rule

Although Cthulhu Dark is great to run out of the box (as it were), I have found with playing that players really latch onto having some restrictions as to what skills they can use. This rule replaces the die roll for occupational expertise in the Cthulhu Dark rules.

For this house rule, provide every PC six skills, which can be pulled from any number of resources. Use common Cthulhu RPG skills (from Call of Cthulhu or Trail of Cthulhu), modified for the modern environment, but don't get too specific. Traditional skills such as Athletics, Firearms, Languages, Driving, History, Occult, Chemistry, Reassurance, Navigation, Mechanical Repair and Sneak all work very well. Don't make players choose specific languages, hand-to-hand fighting, or histories unless they ask for them. You want the skills to cover more ground than less, and make for easy gameplay without getting bogged down in semantics.

For this modern game, you can also create new skills like Pop Culture, Computer Use, Art (Performance), Pyrotechnics and Electronics to represent the 21st century. For my pre-gens, I first assign the PC an occupation, after which it's very easy to pick four or five skills to match. Then throw in one or two personal expertise skills and you have a modern PC.

Another great resource for skills is Graham's *Stealing Cthulhu*, which discusses Cthulhu investigators and appropriate skills starting on page 52.

The goal here is twofold: first, provide details that help flesh out the PCs and give context to their lives, just like any other RPG; and second, provide boundaries for the players to use when rolling – not everyone has the same skills and you want to use the skills to allow players to interact with the story differently.

Advancement House Rule

One of the (very few) limitations in using Cthulhu Dark is its lack of advancement for PCs. The system doesn't even allow for combat with monsters (a good thing in my book), so developing a new system for how to get PCs experience is antithetical to having a two-page rule system.

However, if you end up playing an ongoing campaign using Cthulhu Dark, you should create some system for rewarding players for keeping their PCs alive and sane (other than just being alive and sane). Players like to have some sense of reward, even if it's just growing their skills a little bit, as in Call of Cthulhu.

One idea is to give some tokens for a free reroll. Reward PCs who survive with one or two (not more) of these tokens, which will allow them to reroll one die per token. Another idea is to create and document the NPCs that the party meets, and allow these as resources that can be more readily called upon in moments of crisis. For instance, if the PCs survive this scenario and are still friends with Susan Ortega, write her name and occupation on an index card. Once per game, if the PCs are trying to get onto a back-lot or find stunt-work in LA, they have her as a resource. You could even give her one or two skills to be used once per game as an additional roll.

The key is to reward good roleplaying with something tangible. It doesn't have to be much. Just give the party something they can use in a future adventure and your game will continue to expand.

Appendix III: Kickstarter Backer List

The following good folks were very generous in their support of the HWLL Kickstarter project in February—March 2014. This game would not be possible without them. Many, many thanks.

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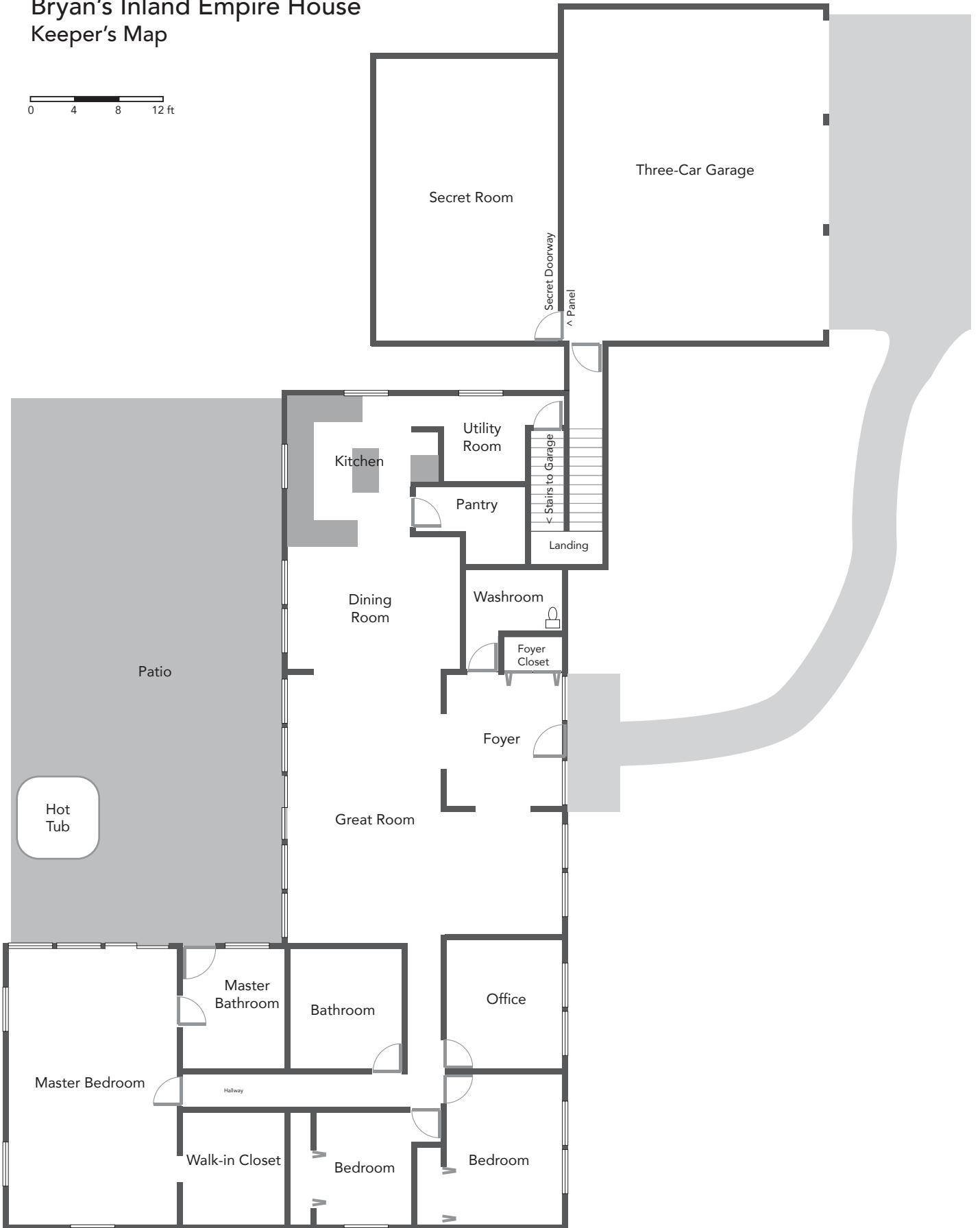
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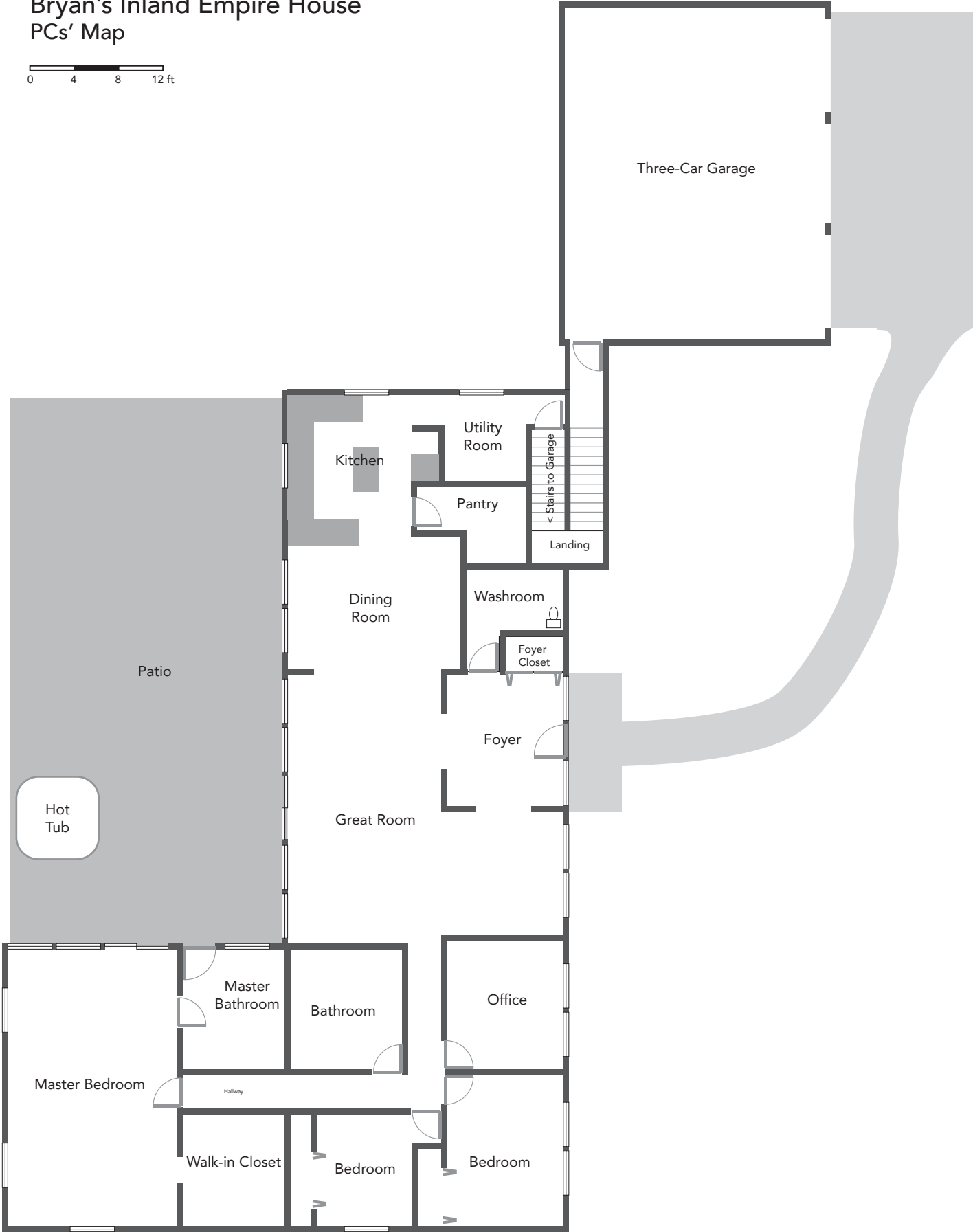
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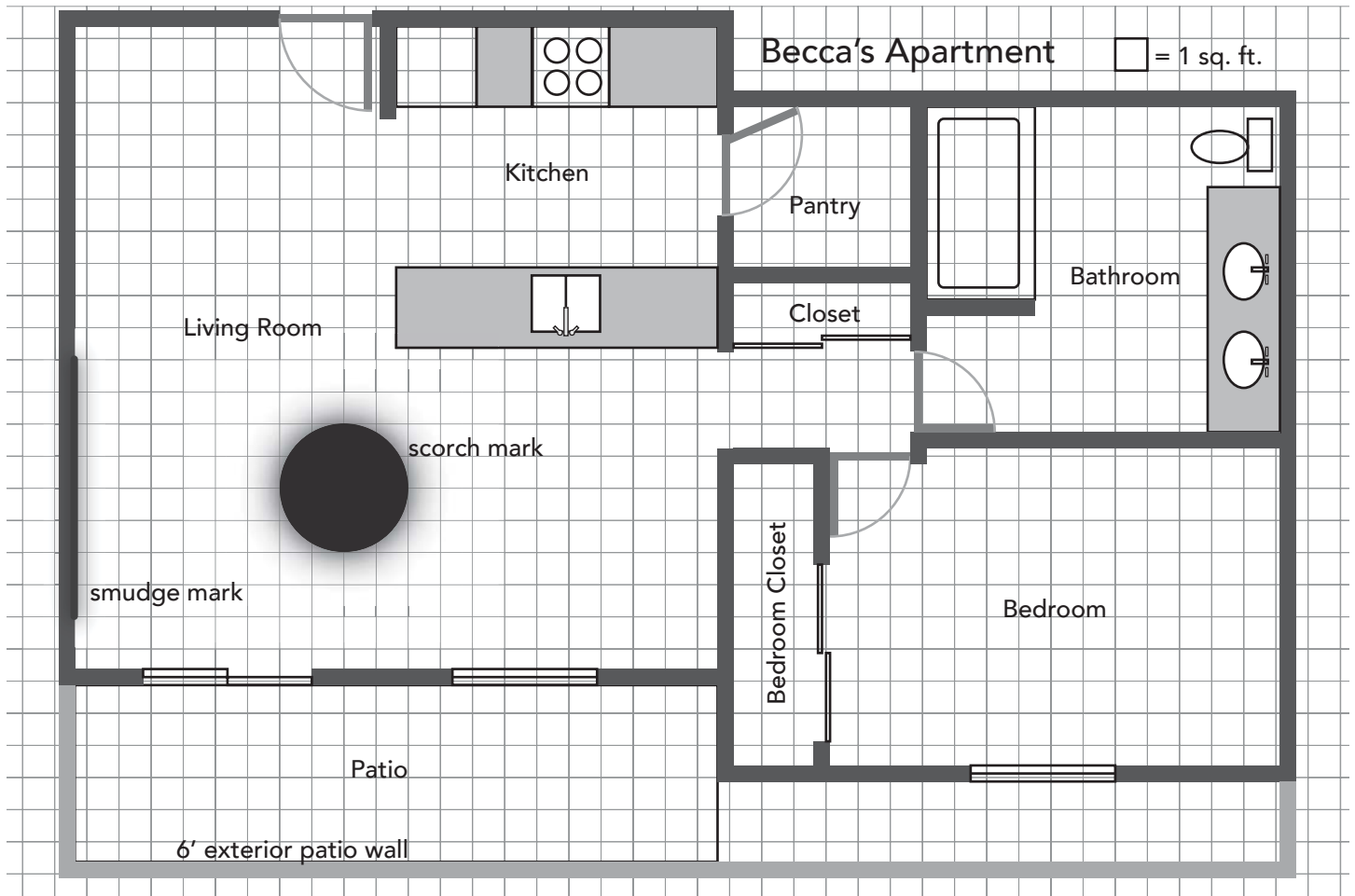
Appendix IV: Floorplans

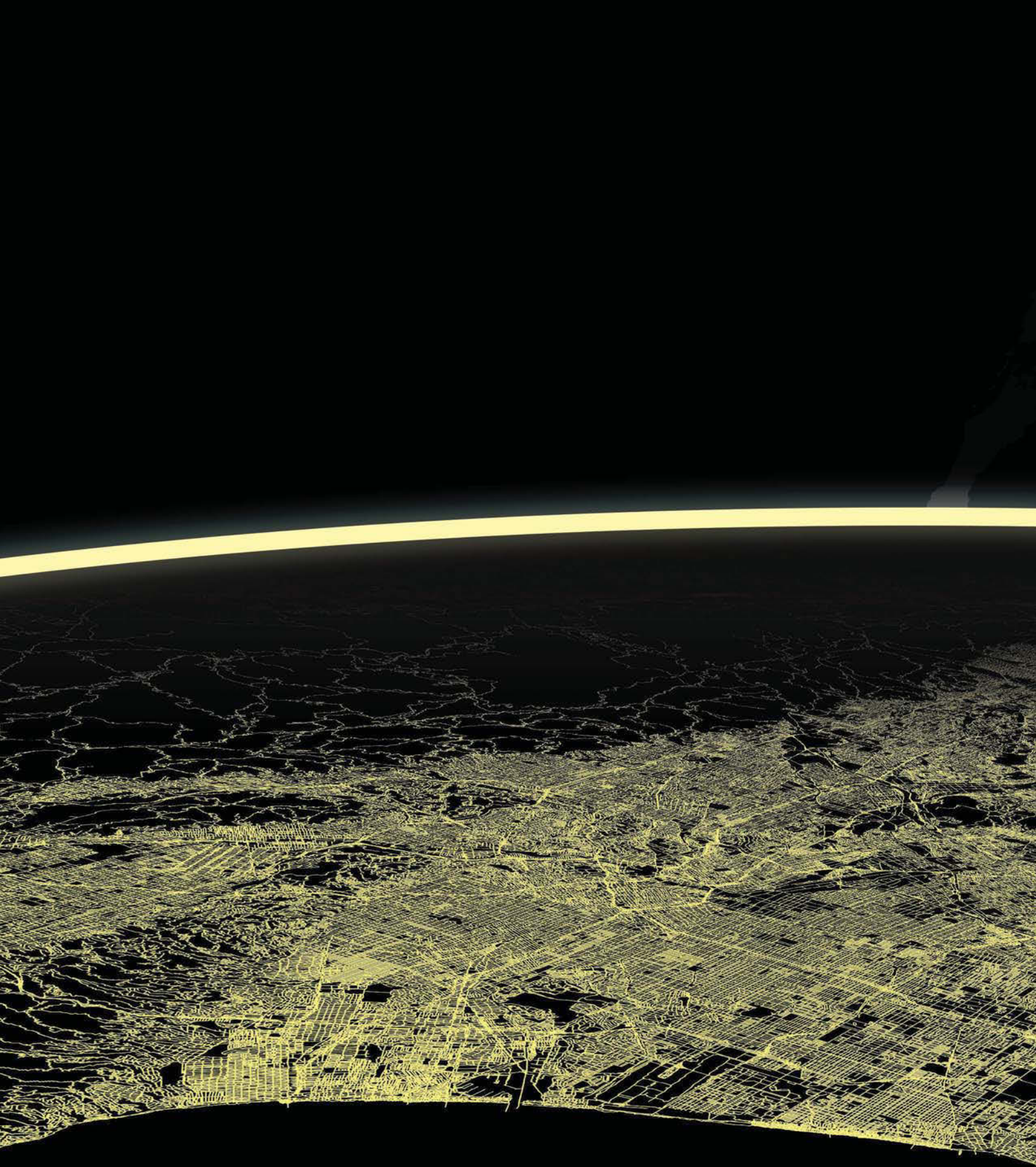
Bryan's Inland Empire House Keeper's Map



Bryan's Inland Empire House PCs' Map







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