

Tales of Magick: Dark Adventure™



A Guide to Action in Mage: The Ascension®

Tales of Magick: Dark Adventure

Action Chronicles for Mage: The Ascension



Knight of Dynamism

Frustration is the fuse
The flame is hate
Tick, tick, tick,
Detonate
- L7, "The Bomb"

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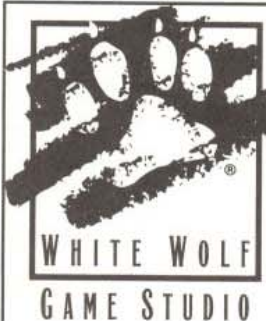
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Prelude

By Kathleen Ryan



Alexander Gericault waits patiently at the counter of a small bakery. He sips strong black coffee from a plain white mug and sets it back into its ring-stained saucer.

The quiet rhythm of conversation and cutlery around him shatters in a cascade of glass and china.

A heavy, thick-haired woman at the cash register shrieks and begins scolding the busboy. He fires back a stream of curses and complaints — half in broken English, half in his unrecognizable native tongue — ending clearly in, “I quit!” He spits on the floor before the cashier, throws down his apron and storms out through the kitchen.

Gericault keeps watch steadily on the front windows.

Directly behind him, at a table for two, an elderly lady digs through her handbag and pulls forth a pillbox. She fishes out two pale-green tablets and places them gingerly in her mouth. Her pink tongue flicks briefly over thin, cracked, red-painted lips, and she takes the medicine with a glass of water and a grimace. She stares hardily at the waiting cup, soiled plate and vacant chair opposite her own. With her right hand, she empties the pillbox into her husband’s coffee; with her left she picks up his spoon and begins stirring. Her expression never changes.

Gericault catches sight of his subject in the street outside. He pays for his coffee, tips well and rises.

As the Nephandus passes a young girl — a college student sitting alone at the table closest to the door — she wipes a fallen tear from her journal, stops writing poetry, and begins composing her suicide note. He smiles kindly at her and leaves the little coffee shop.

Gericault walks like a businessman today. In well-cut gray slacks and a slightly rumpled white oxford shirt, he looks like any other cubicle-dweller on lunch break — he even gives the impression that his coat and tie are hung up next to his keyboard, waiting. His face and hair are selected to match, and entirely commonplace.

He steps onto the sidewalk with the exact posture of a man who has worked desk and mouse one year too many, and not a soul looks at him twice. A wave of tourists surges past and he adjusts his pace to match. From the curb side, screened by the sightseers, he scans the group ahead.

He spots the red-haired alchemist easily: A tall, gangly, boyish man, head and shoulders above the crowd — slouching, then standing straight and moving well, but obviously uncomfortable with himself, his height and his fellow travelers.

To the young man’s side, a teenage-girl in overalls. She hops along like a broken spring, alert but easily distracted. She seems to do most of the talking.

She turns suddenly with an emphatic, double-handed, splay-fingered gesture and barks something at the other man walking beside her — the oldest of the three. He wears sunglasses, though the light does not quite call for them, and stalks along like a tiger, though there is no need for that, either. He tries to play it strong and silent, but the sharp-tongued kid beside him erodes his composure. His stony face breaks in aggravation and the two argue for a whole block.

An Asian man in his mid-30s looks back at the fight and throws the redhead a wry half-smile. He clearly means it to be reassuring, but too much worry shows through the mask. The younger man trots to catch up with the leader and they walk on, talking quietly.

The Nephandus notes the drama, almost grateful that Amanda has found these companions. If it were only her and the priest he had to follow....

The priest drops out of sight again, and Gericault curses.

With effort, he finds him — an old gray man in a pale-blue polo shirt and wrinkled twill trousers. He is the slowest walker, and says little. The stream of pedestrians winds around him without taking much notice, and even Gericault finds it hard to focus on the frail, stooped figure.

Beside the faded cleric, Amanda Janssen floats along the sidewalk like a pillar of fire. Men stare. Women approve or envy. Children smile and point at the pretty lady — and Gericault knows that not one will remember her clearly after her passing. If they see her again in other clothes, they will hardly recognize her; if he stops one of her admirers and asks what she looks like, the person will find no real words, only vague comparisons. Her features are indescribable and therefore as anonymous as his own.

The Nephandus tears his gaze from her reluctantly. At last he catches sight of his *other* quarry.

Two men walk at a peculiarly deliberate pace one half-block ahead of him, dressed in suspiciously bulky coats, their eyes fastened on the backs of Amanda and those with her. *There’s a pair who could use practice in the art of the Unseen*, thinks Gericault. He focuses his senses and takes their measure: There are minor wards protecting them, armor beneath their clothes and weapons at their hands, but these two are cannon fodder against real Craft. He smiles proudly, anticipating Amanda and her knives wading through the pair’s dumb flesh.

The tour group drifts up the steps of a museum. Gericault skirts the cluster, keeping an eye on the obvious hunters and scanning the crowd for others.

New parents push a stroller by him.

A trio of elderly men shuffles into earshot, debating politics on behalf of the entire street.

A tight knot of young people brushes past, laughing and mumbling about classes and dorms, parents and money.

In their wake, Gericault catches a gust of patchouli, a whiff of smoke and a blackened, bittersweet odor that he knows well. He breathes the scent in deeply. He lets the vapor rest on his tongue. *Burnt man-flesh — brands — old brands, and a greater sacrifice more recently. Beautiful children, whose are you?*

With the most cautious, fleeting touch, he probes the fringes of their clothes, their skin, their souls. He expects spelled-weapons and burn-wards and finds them. The rites for such magicks are common enough. But the girl laughing loudest carries a twisted, unnamable tattoo — burnt, cut and painted into the curves of her pelvis, back and belly. The Nephandus recognizes the thing and wonders what shadow-brother of his dared carve *that* sigil into living flesh.

He invades the girl's thoughts delicately, unwilling to reveal himself to whatever may watch over her. What he seeks is high in her heart — her skirt chafes her naked skin at every step, and with the pain she cherishes the memory of the knives, needles, hot coals and strong hands of the man who inflicted the scars. She cannot help but look for him, and Gericault follows the reverent glance to her idol.

He walks alone on the other side of the street, his black wool coat open to the wind. He wears dark-blue jeans, a hand-woven pullover and, despite the chill, sandals.

The silent observer withdraws from the girl and her master, and looks ahead. Amanda, he realizes, has seen something. She lays a finger on the priest's arm and soft words spread the alarm. The message passes up to the stalking man and leader. Quite casually, the six trade places. In loose formation, they continue walking. But now the fighters are at the points, the three weaker bodies are the center, and the team has eyes all round — even the rear is covered; the chatty teenager revives her argument and skips along half-backward.

Gericault approves of their preparations. They can handle the hired muscle, he is certain, and though the branded acolytes might be able to kill one or two members of the Second Seven, Amanda should survive.

At the next intersection, the Nephandus "influences" the traffic: Amanda and her party make it across and the bullyboys are permitted to follow — but the branded students have to wait. In his own turn, Gericault comes to the curb beside them and pretends to check his watch. He takes a silver pin from the cuff of his sleeve and pricks his palm. Before the bloody tip dries, he stabs the student closest to him in the nape of the neck. The tiny weapon nearly disappears into the skin. The

boy is dead without time to blink and Gericault starts the body walking when the lights change.

From the victim's cooling brain, he drags the name of the murder cult's master — their philosophy professor Shelton Bruntee — and enough of the trappings of their masses to recognize the hand of Helekar behind the hunt. Under the Nephandus' direction, the corpse follows its fellows from the crosswalk, but Gericault waits at the new curb. He then crosses the main street and sets purposefully after Bruntee.

The Euthanatos clearly anticipates an enemy. Though Bruntee walks quickly enough to keep his disciples in view, Gericault can feel the mage tracking the zombie, the pin, the slender thread of control — the thread coming closer, the power chasing after him.

Gericault catches up and the two walk abreast at the extreme edges of the sidewalk. By unspoken consent, they climb the steps of an old apartment house — each half-turned to the other, eyes lowered, defenses high — and enter the deserted lobby.

Face-to-face now, they study each other. The professor's body sags slightly with age — 50 will capture him soon, if Gericault does not — but the sloppy looking extra weight is muscle, and his left hand holds an old-fashioned straight razor. Bruntee stands ready, like an old lion. His hair is black, gray and wiry, brushed or blown back from the forehead into a wild mane, cropped raggedly at the shoulders. Five leather cords are visible around his neck — human skin, Gericault "remembers," tanned and toughened to hold amulets the dead boy saw. The Euthanatos' powerful jaws are red-raw, but scrupulously clean-shaven.

Neither mage looks to the other's eyes.

The attack comes without warning and without a movement — Bruntee strikes through the abyss — an assault like a battering ram forged of a black hole. Gericault, pleased by the challenge, resists in kind — the consuming ebon fires of the pit swallow the emptiness; their forces match precisely.

Bruntee draws on deeper magicks. The lance of his mind against Gericault's. The claws of his spirit on the roots of Gericault's soul. Even the fangs of his Avatar strive to drain Kali's lifeblood from Gericault's very being. The Nephandus counters them all and methodically brings more weapons to bear.

Sparks fly from Bruntee's hair, the floor cracks beneath his feet, tiny slips in time confuse him. Though he weaves his own shields, clasps his hand over the blade of his razor for blood and power, and destroys three amulets in the attempt, he cannot break the stalemate Gericault forces upon him. The process reveals every detail of his capabilities and knowledge. Sweat breaks out on Bruntee's forehead. The strain of the casting paralyzes the Euthanatos, and though no one or thing but the Grand Harvester Voormas has ever frightened him, Bruntee watches in terror as the mage before him steps closer....



Introduction

War makes rattling good history... peace is boring.

— Thomas Hardy, *The Dynasts*



There — Golden Lantern Dim Sum Snacks — in there! I burst through the front glass doors, setting the “someone’s here” chime into convulsions. I don’t look at the round little owner for more than a second. He’s not important. I crash past a young waitress carrying a plate of something orange and hot — it gets all over my shirt. The kitchen doors swing loosely at the back wall and I leap toward them.

By now the busboys and waitresses are pressed up against the booths; some fall into the laps of wildly yammering customers. Wonderful! I sweep at every plate I can as I dash by, knocking *har gao*, *siu mai*, *cha*

siu bao and especially the little pots of hot oil onto the floor.

The door chimes sound again, and if the cashier’s scream is any indication, it’s my little play-pals. I don’t look back. I don’t need to. Instead I flail at a couple of carts, hoping they topple, but don’t look back to find out.

The swinging doors slam into the walls and the noise beyond confronts me: angry voices yelling in Cantonese. Different voices commanding. Plates clattering. A radio station blaring something choppy. One of the cooks snaps out of his shock; he gets in my face, waving a cleaver and screaming in a rapid-fire stream of half-Cantonese, half-English: “Skinny

American kid — jackass little no-good shithead—” I tune him out and look around, trying to get a handle on where I am and how I’m going to get out.

The kitchen probably passes its health inspections, but barely — cracked linoleum, greasy counters... this is no place for a last stand. Things are frantic, but I can see the gas ranges that run along the wall, the deep sinks full of nasty dishwater, and the shelf with the goddamn radio above. The Yakuza, or whatever the hell the Chinese equivalent is, are just about to the kitchen and I haven’t found the back door yet. Whipping my head around, almost losing my glasses, I spot a likely candidate: a badly lit corridor with all kinds of crates cluttering it. Bet there’s a way out there....

But I’m too late. The head thug swings the door open casually, like it’s his door to begin with. For all the resistance the people in the kitchen put up, it might as well be. Everyone shuts up immediately. I’m toast. One geek, no matter how smart or talented, hasn’t got a prayer against three pissed-off thugs with knives. So I have to wing this somehow — that or get sliced into ribbons. I’m running out of ideas.

That is, until the leader puts his hand on the metal countertop. One of the dishwashers ducks aside and I swear I see him jostle the shelf with his shoulder. I know he does; the radio shouldn’t be able to stay there with that kind of bump — yes, it’s starting to wobble. The cord is long enough to reach the sink — it has to be! After that it’s just all pure, perfect science. The radio, the sink full of water, the metal counter.... As the radio finally tips over, I shut my eyes and hope. It’s science, it has to work. Oh fuck, this better work....

Judgment Day

Showtime. It’s you, the gang and the big purple book. Your friends want you to run a game. A **Mage** game. You have the rules. They’re huge. They’re complex. They offer more possibilities than Stephen Hawking on crack and you have a game to run.

What will you do?

Why not blow shit up?

I’m not kidding. Have fun!

Mage has an (undeserved) rep as a game of dudes sitting around contemplating Reality. Y’know, paradigm manipulation, meme-spreading, myth-raking esoterica, that sort of thing. But while the metaphysics are a very real part of the setting, the core of the game is based on human passions and human conflicts. Mages are people who have risen to the next level of potential, but they’re still *people*. And when the shit hits the fan, some people get off their asses and jump into the fire.

Hmmm. Meme-spreading. Butt-kicking. Which is more entertaining?

I know which is easier to run at the last minute.

Still, it’s easy to fall into predictable pitfalls. “All right, guys, let’s kick more New World Order ass!” Nah, we need more than that to make a good game. Setting up the baddies and knocking ‘em down is fun for about an hour. Then it gets really boring, not “adventuresome” at all.

So what do you do?

That’s where this book comes in.

What’s a “Tale of Magick”?



“How do I *play Mage*?” continues to be a frequent question. Confronted with this epic setting, a lot of people still seem to crave guidance, to want “adventure modules,” to look for chronicle suggestions that take advantage of the setting but move beyond the obligatory Technocrat-stomp.

Enter **Tales of Magick: Dark Adventure**, an idea-book of Storyteller advice, plot hooks, character concepts and backstage gossip from the magickal world. Rather than present a single “closed” adventure, this book sug-

gests a wealth of potential stories united by a single theme: adventure in the classic sense — wild settings, close calls, high stakes and lots of whup-ass. Best of all, these tales can be geared toward Tradition, Technocratic or non-affiliated magi — they’re based on the High-Adventure genre, not on beating the hell out of Group X. Given its rich background of intrigue and passion, **Mage** is a natural for high-stakes tales. After all, action flows from having an important goal, a time limit and some heavy-duty obstacles between the two.

How do magick and High Adventure go together? Between the intrigues of the Ascension



factions, the egos of the Awakened, fantastic Realms and creatures, and the ever-present wild cards of mortal antagonists and loved ones, it's a wonder a mage ever gets a chance to breathe! Still, setting up a good rousing adventure takes a bit of work — the old “You walk into a bar and...” thing is as dead as Sly Stallone's career. The challenge is finding the mix of goals, stakes and enemies that drags your troupe down the road to High Adventure.

Zen and the Art of Kicking Ass

Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.

— Anals Nin

This book takes no prisoners. It grabs the Awakened by the scruff of their enlightened little necks and throws them bodily in the path of a speeding Fate train. There is nothing subtle about this book, nothing refined, occulted or restrained. This book is all about action, not esoterica. Leave that “contemplation” shit for the sages and Ascensionites.

Still, a good Dark Adventure is a bit less predictable than a Jackie Chan film festival. We are talking about mysticks, after all! It's been said that the two pillars of drama are sex and violence. A rousing action-adventure story often has both. A rousing **Mage** action-adventure story features an additional element: mystery. The Awakened are human beings, of course, but their world is never as simple as the one most mortals see. Even the simplest gesture has a double meaning. Even the most natural event can foreshadow a coming crisis. In a world where reality rests in a thousand different hands, nothing is ever as simple as it appears.

High Adventure in a **Mage** game can be as straightforward as hanging onto the side of a Japanese bullet train, or as arcane as chasing spirits through a shadowy city. Either way, the action should be shrouded in uncertainty and ambiguity: Is the guy who's trying to kill you a good Samaritan who's had a vision of your blood on innocent hands? Was your loved one's betrayal motivated by greed, a spell or suggestions from a new and charismatic lover? Is that howling wind a hurricane, a storm-brewer's witchery or an impending blast of Paradox?

In **Mage**, things are rarely what they seem to be and are always more complex than you expect.

Mage is all about getting beyond the obvious. While the action-adventure genre has fairly simple conventions (that's what makes it so appealing), a **Mage** adventure should be a little odder and a lot less clear about who's doing what to whom, or why or how.

Action "Heroes"

In the center of these intense theatrics stands a small, dedicated and slightly masochistic bunch of folks: the "heroes." Drama in these stories depends on someone who's willing to get the shit kicked out of him for a good cause. While lesser folks — including many powerful mages — step aside out of fear or forbearance, the action hero shrugs his shoulders, wades into battle, takes his lumps, and (hopefully) comes out the other side leaving the world a better place.

Who is this person? He's a man (or woman) with a mission. Maybe he's a questing wizard, an avenging warrior, a crusading cyborg or a valiant scientist. He recognizes a threat that's too great to ignore and knows that he's the only one who can stop it. This guy's no saint, especially not in the *World of Darkness*; by the time the tale is through, he'll have broken every law in the book, killed a bunch of people, violated every kind of trust, and put himself and his loved ones straight in harm's way. Still, there's a method to his dementia: If the hero didn't do this, if he just sat back and pondered the morality of his actions, we'd all get creamed. Mage or mortal, the action hero is a bit above it all. He does a tough job for you.

The Bad Guys

There's a reason the hero does all this: Somebody, for whatever reason, is plotting to raise hell. For simplicity's sake we'll call her "the villain," even though she's rarely as "eee-vill" as that word implies. The villain poses a threat. The hero opposes it. May the best one win — it's gonna be a hell of a fight.

On her end, a good adventure villain has a vicious plan, ruthless methods, endless resources and a taste for treachery. She might convince herself that what she's planning is really for the greater good, or she might be vindictive, sadistic or flat-out insane. She could be a HIT Mark, a demon-witch, a righteous fighter or a megalomaniac. Like the

hero, she stands outside "common" morality and does whatever it takes to fulfill her ambitions.

Not that our villain has to be a mage or even a supernatural creature. Human antagonists can be every bit as problematic as magickal ones (and frequently more so). Although she might not be able to waste a wizard in a man-to-man fight, a Sleeper villain has many options... and she's not shackled by Paradox. She might be a witch-hunter, a zealous politico, a ruthless detective, a gangster... or something more subtle than that. A broken-hearted daughter, vengeful girlfriend or drunken barfly can provide lots of story fodder without hauling out shotguns and magnums. The key to villainy is selfishness: *Fuck the world, it's my way or no way!*

When you think about it, there's isn't much difference between the hero and the villain. You wouldn't want to get in the way of either, and they could both convince you that they're doing the right thing. That ambiguity is the essence of *Dark Adventure*: The lines between "good" and "evil" aren't drawn too clearly. Even the nicest heroes can be driven by greed, arrogance or lust, and the most frightening ones — like Verbena blood-mysticks or *Men in Black* — can be fighting for the greater good. The eerie and ambiguous nature of magick usually clouds a person's intentions and actions, too; when you figure in the possibilities of Entropy, Mind and Life spells, or the creepiness of chaos magick or pagan rites, the line between "good" and "evil" blurs to a fog.

Foggy or not, these characters must be drawn with bold strokes. An exciting adventure tale demands a grand villain, a charismatic hero, a pack of colorful supporting characters and a wild setting or three. Something important — magick, innocent lives, the future — must be at stake and the clock must be ticking. Sooner or later a firestorm sweeps across the landscape, the heroes and their opposites clash and the ground trembles with the impact. Considering the raw power of magick, it's not hard to see the epic potential of a mage's war. Mythology is full of such battles. Now it's time to bring a bit of the myth to your table.

Mage is based on willpower and determination. These are a hero's true weapons, wielded against overwhelming odds through sheer strength of personality and belief. The stage is set. Let the *Dark Adventure* begin!

Using This Book

Prelude: The most nefarious mysticks can still serve a worthwhile end. Even if his motives aren't exactly "pure," Gericault's not a bad guy to have at your back... so long as you know he's there.

Introduction: You're reading it.

Chapter One: Tick, Tick, Tick...: A pile of hints, plot hooks, themes and suggestions for setting up your Dark Adventures.

Chapter Two: You Hear Something?: When the clock's ticking, these techniques, character types and classic bits help you keep the tension high.

When the bomb goes off and the ashes settle, a few pointers help you wrap things up successfully.

Chapter Three: Boom!: The mystick is in motion. These plot hooks and crossover suggestions work your troupe's adventures into the ongoing events of the Ascension War.

Appendix: Bits and Pieces: So how do you do that "drop, roll and fire six times" thing? And what if you add magick to the stunt? This systems section offers a host of classic action bits, plus a selection of cool hardware, helpful systems and inspirational films.

Enough! Have fun!



Chapter One: Tick, Tick, Tick

*Time is like a fuse, short and burning fast
Armageddon is here...
— Metallica, "Fight Fire with Fire"*



I don't think I really like the taste of my own blood. When Johnson slammed me around, I bit my tongue and split my lip — violent introduction to a brick wall will do that, I guess. For the moment, I'm waiting. He's grunting and straining and sweating over me now, and he's going to get there in a few minutes — with all my "professional" practice, I know that breath. I know that pitiful little animal whine men make when they're close. So I'm waiting for him to be just about ready to come. Then, God help him.

Drops of greasy sweat fall from Johnson's forehead and the end of his nose to land on my cheek — this guy has more blackheads on his face than any high-school kid ever could. By the reek of him, I'd bet he ate onions garnished with garlic for breakfast. To take my mind off this maggot of a pimp, I mentally catalogue all the weapons I have. I've got my heavy knee-high black boots, my nails and my belt is lying off to the right somewhere. The metal rings on the belt should help some. But the single meanest thing I have is the year I've spent out here with this fat fuck who appointed himself my employer. It was either give

him whatever cut he felt like taking or get myself pounded into a pulp. Like today.

"Uh... yeah bitch... oh God—" I hear the blood whishing through his clogged arteries above me, and his lip curls up like some old dog's. He's there. I tense up — the second before he starts spewing inside me, I yank my knees up almost to my shoulders. Bracing my shoulders and arms out against the pavement, I kick with both feet and buck my hips. Hard. For all his weight, Johnson doesn't have half my strength — plus, he isn't expecting this.

He tries to pull me back under him, his jaw slack and his eyes glazed. Too late; I'm already on my feet. I can feel the hormones and endorphins percolating through his system and driving his blood pressure up — even better. I don't even bother to straighten my skirt before I take the first shot at him, a kick deep in the pit of his stomach. Johnson grunts and collapses, his cheek pressing the blacktop. How gratifying. I kick him again. I can tell from the hum in his spinal cord that I've damaged his innards. So I kick again and again, my arms flying, a vicious sneer pasted to my face. When I've ruptured his spleen and given his balls a few really good bruises, I stop, regaining my balance and my breath.

"Stop... Shell, help... no more, Shell—" The thing is actually begging me to help him.

"I don't think so, Johnson. Fun, isn't it?" Wiping the blood from my lip, I consider my options. Kick him hard enough in the chest and he'll have a heart attack. Pick up the belt and whip him to within an inch of his life and he'll have scars forever. Leave him where he is and he might come looking for me later. Stand here and hate him hard enough and his system won't be able to handle the shock. He'll basically liquefy inside, and who'll know it was anything besides some random beating?

I stare at the squirming thing on the ground for a minute. Then I narrow my eyes and hate him.

How High Is That?

Before we create High Adventure in a **Mage** game, let's define the term. What does "High Adventure" mean? Well, High Adventure is the opposite of what could be called "low adventure." Low adventure is what normal people might encounter in their everyday lives. Diving back into a burning restaurant to save a loved one or even an injured stranger is *low* adventure — it's heroic, true, but the kind of heroism that we ourselves would like to think we're capable of in the right situations.

High Adventure, on the other hand, is the trademark heroism of larger-than-life characters, amazing people who lead amazing lives.

Jordan burst through the skylight, shards of glass raining down on the mobsters as he dropped into their midst. Even as he fell, Jordan's fingers tightened on the triggers of his guns. A hail of bullets smashed opponents to the ground. Sprayed blood mixed with glittering glass. More of the boss' henchmen poured into the room, surrounding Jordan as he hit the ground, rolled and came up firing. It didn't matter how many of them there were — he'd sworn to Mari that he'd bring her father back alive. Nothing was going to stop him!

This is High Adventure. Like low adventure, it involves danger, but it's played on a broader scale and with higher stakes. In High Adventure, larger-than-life heroism is a lifestyle, not a reflex, and there's far more than your own life and happiness on the line. Other people are counting on you; the fate of a city, state, country or even the entire world may rest in your capable hands. You dare not fail, no matter what the odds (and they're always high — the greater the stakes, the greater the opposition). Fortunately, you have power on your side: phenomenal skill, indomitable will... and magick. Always magick.

Oh, sure, you're a badass. You have the balls to collar the local boss, the dexterity to weave your way through his maze of locks and traps, the strength and stamina to beat the living hell out of an army of bodyguards while staying alive yourself. But at the crucial moment — when you need to dodge that bullet, leap that alley or wring that last bit of information out of your stoolie, it's magick that gives you the edge other mortals lack.

We're not talking about earthshaking spells, here, although the occasional firestorm or cross-town teleport might come in handy on occasion. We're talking about small, fast tricks that give you the coincidental edge over the bad guys. Every so often you have to pull out the stops and throw your powerhouse cards on the table. Subtlety goes out the window when the local Syndicate Manager sends his best cybernetic assassins after your sorry ass. Still, the essence of high adventure is ass-kicking, high-tension danger, not floating castles or rampaging dragons. The enemies are human, the stakes are high and your best weapon is yourself.

How Dark Is That?

But this ain't James Bond territory. Superman is dead and he never came back. **Mage** takes place in the World of Darkness. Everything that seemed bad before is far worse now. Cops crack your skull for looking at them funny. Bangers cap you for less. People are cruel, selfish or completely apathetic, and your surroundings mirror malevolence. Here, *High* Adventure becomes *Dark* Adventure and the stakes get a lot nastier.

This is a world of swirling gray, where saints have bloody fingers and monsters harbor souls. Good and evil (whatever those abstractions mean) mingle blood at the same street corner: Heroes aren't pure, they're sullied and questionable. Villains have a sadistic edge, but they have reasons for what they do. Everything is somber, gritty, hyperviolent. Passions explode with raw force or simmer in dim-lit bars or crumbling cathedrals. An air of menace looms, even in shimmering offices or luxurious penthouses.

Welcome to Hell. Ain't it cool?

Dark-Adventure heroes are outcasts, not pillars of respectability. They've usually lost their loved ones, and ideals such as truth and justice are replaced by hatred and revenge. Rather than pursue utter victory, dark heroes strive to contain damage as much as possible, minimizing the losses. Protagonists keep horrible secrets and powerful enemies lurk around every corner. You can't trust anyone.

They damned near killed you. Not well enough, it seems. Now you stagger into a nearby restaurant, searching for food and refuge. Shit! The place belongs to the same guy who just tried to have you wiped. He's sworn a blood-oath to see you dead, and you're not feeling too forgiving yourself. Naturally, he's got his face buried in a plate of pasta, and he's surrounded by a dozen Made Men. Great timing... must be your night.

It all gets worse, as you knew it would. Hey, you tried to stay inconspicuous, but no such luck. A table and everything on it goes flying. Spilled wine sprays crimson droplets. Gunfire, deafening at this range. Bodies tumble — innocent folks out on the town. The wall behind you turns into Swiss cheese as you grasp your medicine bag and pray to the spirits of the North



Wind. At least something's going your way tonight — the bullets miss.

Where the hell is Delilah? She should be right...

Oh, there she is.

Your best friend's moonlighting with Mr. Big.

Sometimes it just doesn't pay to get out of bed.

That's Dark Adventure.

The bottom line is that in High Adventure, matters are clean and wholesome and the outcome is almost guaranteed. The hero may be defeated momentarily, but only so that he can learn his enemy's plans and screw them up at the last minute. Very few "good" people die, and those who do only fuel the hero's righteous anger. In Dark-Adventure, people are rarely what they seem — not even old friends can be trusted. The "hero" (who's usually slightly better than the people he fights) may very well be defeated, even crippled. Sure, he might beat the villain in the end, but the hero might get cacked himself and will probably take a lot of other folks with him. The body count is high; most of the hero's friends and allies who are foolish enough to get involved wind up dead, leaving the hero alone — assuming he survives at all.

All that said, Dark Adventure is often more fun than traditional High Adventure. Playing the dude in the white hat gets boring pretty quickly. Dark Adventure offers new twists and turns, unexpected problems and solutions. Your opponent doesn't fight fair and neither do you. The action is believable, not preposterous. Even if the stakes are *enormous, realistic people struggle for what they believe* is right. All that is easier to understand — and is more rewarding — than godlike individuals kicking ass for Truth, Justice and the American Way.

Dark Adventure is more human. Prick it and it bleeds.

Magick and Adventure

Ah, but we're not just talking about your garden-variety Tarantino badass, now are we? This is **Mage** and your characters have powers mortals can only wish for. Then again, you probably deal with enemies who could mop the street with an army of *Reservoir Dogs* — homicidal cyborgs, chaos spirits, conjured demons, power-mad witches... you get the idea. In a **Dark Mage** Adventure, the players' characters square off against forces greater than anything a *Sleeper* could defeat. These heroes have an edge, but their adversaries are so much stronger...

Mage's world hovers on the brink of disaster. Demons conspire with cultists in the shadows; machine-men patrol the streets; mad pagans shower tree roots with blood-sacrifice; even mortals are corrupt. Worst of all, most people never see how close we are to the flames. In the light of TV screens and halogen lamps, everything looks so... controlled. But as any mage (no matter what side he may belong to) knows, Reality is anything but controlled. In a Dark

Adventure, chaos snaps its bonds and goes on a rampage. It's the mage's job to stop that rampage... or die trying.

Sometimes the fight is overt: The streets become a battleground of fireballs and mystic beasts, and outrageous fortune guts safety and sanity. Other times, the fight is quiet, a war of coincidences and feats that go just *slightly* over the edge. Magick, especially in a Dark Adventure, doesn't have to be about lightning bolts and demonic servitors; it can be subtle or straightforward, coincidental or vulgar, destructive or healing, dark or light. Magick can insinuate thoughts into the minds of pawns or it can be the weapon of choice in an all-out bloodfest.

When you think about it, magick presents perfect opportunities for rip-roaring action. After all, High-Adventure yarns go notoriously overboard. Bryce Grimm might not be a crack shot, but his "miss" can hit the gas pipe behind the villain; one cigarette and said villain becomes a pillar of flame. Grimm dives into a shark vat to escape the explosion. Now he has to deal with the man-eater, but he might survive when the collapsing complex bursts the tank. Such events are common in High-Adventure stories, and magick makes them all the more plausible... and survivable. Mere Sleepers would be toast, but a sorcerer can emerge intact.

In the World of Darkness, mystery lingers in the most mundane places. A bar on the Lower East Side offers refuge to a Man in Black; a London bookshop contains a forbidden alchemical text; a vacant lot in Harlem has become a secret, haunted burial ground; a back road in West Virginia marks the spot where Jennifer Rollins hitched a ride from a gang of rednecks (who lived to regret it). Magick is everywhere — any place the Awakened have passed can become a stage for adventure. Even so, a mystick must be careful in the mortal world. If his enchantments aren't coincidental, his ass is grass.

And then we have the worlds of magick: the bizarre Horizon Realms, the Infernal pits, the gleaming halls of Technocratic outposts and the twisting corridors of Nephandic Labyrinths. Dark Adventures can take your characters from the towering cliffs of Horizon to the under-sea hell of Drachus Vachor, with a side-trip to the Spy's Demise for a bit of information. Toss in the inhabitants of those Realms — dragons, demons, HIT Marks and Digital Dollz — and you have a supporting cast worthy of Baron Munchausen himself! The normal laws of Earthly reality do not apply in such places, and a mage survives a trip there by his wits and imagination. He can use the full force of his Arts in the Otherworld, but then, so can his opponents.

Oh, yeah... opponents. **Mage** offers ideal villains, too. The Nephandi, for example, are classic archnemeses — dark and twisted, often former heroes who've Fallen from grace. As their pawns charge out into the open, the Fallen Ones whisper sweet lies into the hero's ear... And then you have Marauders, agents of chaos incarnate who appear, wreck shit and vanish. Or the Technocrats, with their omniscient control of everything from media to ATMs to advanced weaponry. Or the Traditions, who would gladly plunge the world into a new Dark Ages just so they could have their power back. You have vampires and werebeasts and spirits and all kinds of unholy stuff just waiting to tear Reality to shreds. No matter which group the players' characters belong to, they have enemies in the night.

And all those elements boil down to another of the ultimate ingredients in a Dark-Adventure tale: *suspense*. Powerful forces loom just out of sight. Unnamable foes gather their strength. Reality itself cringes in anticipation. Anything can happen. As Hitchcock said, suspense is the bomb under the table — not the explosion, but the thrill of knowing that the bomb is there. **Mage** presents a world with a bomb under every table. As the Storyteller, you need only light the fuse.

The First Breath



Samantha Crow was shaping a world.

"Feel it," Jason guided her softly, somewhere nearby. "Let yourself experience it fully."

She did experience it — she was sure. Even through closed eyes, Samantha could envision the world, feel the slight spring of the earth beneath her bare feet, the warmth of the sun upon her upturned face, the faint feel of approaching rain dampening her skin. She could envision the land before her, the vibrant green of the grass, sprinkled with white and yellow splashes where wildflowers sprang up; the gentle roll of the ground leading toward an image

of distant mountains, blue and hazy, tipped with glimmering white.

"Do you feel it?"

She nodded, afraid to speak lest she shatter the image.

"Then make it real."

Samantha concentrated, bringing all of her will to bear on this place, forcing it from dream to reality, imprinting the image and flavor and texture onto the raw materials around her. And, though it taxed her, the ground slowly took on a springy feel, soft and forgiving. The sun's rays warmed her skin.

"Now open your eyes and let yourself into your new world."

She followed her teacher's directions, gazing out upon the land she had already seen in her mind, now made real. It was so beautiful it took her breath away — and failed to return it.

She gasped as her lungs emptied. Her hands scrambled before her as if to force air into her mouth. She became lightheaded, dizzy, her vision faded to black—

Then she was back, shuddering and choking in the studio Jason called home.

"A useful lesson," Jason stated flatly, seated near her in his customary cross-legged fashion. "You saw the world well enough, but you forgot to breathe it in, to receive any scents that would indicate air. Always remember: Even the smallest detail is crucial."

Magick involves choice. Your will shapes the world around you. You must decide how to alter the world, and in what way. The choice you make affects not only this moment, but all the moments and events that follow, other aspects of life and the world. Even the ways with which you view and react to situations are altered by what you do now. Every choice is crucial; two slightly different options may lead to entirely divergent results.

Storytelling also involves choice. In a world of adventure and magick, a multitude of stories wait to be told, to come to life and fill your senses. There are struggles for land, passion, influence and treasure. There are mysteries to solve, names to clear or guilt to prove. And there are fights — for freedom, for power, for revenge, for sheer kicks. Each story can lead in a hundred directions, and each direction can shape the characters just as the characters can shape their environment. So with so many stories and possibilities to choose from, which one is the right one?

There is no "right" or "wrong" story. Every idea, goal and destination can make a good tale and a good game if you handle it well. The road's often more important than the destination, anyway. All you really need to do is decide what kind of story you want to tell, and what suits the players, and run with that idea.

Before you can tell a story, you need an idea of where that story begins. The initial idea, the concept of the tale, is the first breath you take. This book focuses on Dark-Adventure tales; fortunately, a **Mage** game can spin off into some pretty kick-ass adventures. Choose a cool "foundation" for your idea and that first breath is easy. To begin....

- Decide what kind of a story you want to tell (a rip-roaring pulp tale, a gritty urban killfest, a noir tragedy, an action comedy)
- Pick some powerful adversaries (demented wizards, malevolent cultists, magical beasts, corrupt Sleepers, misguided "good guys," creatures of the night)
- Decide what kinds of magick you want to highlight (flashy powerplays, subtle enchantments, internal manipulation, high-fantasy quests)
- Set the stakes — the higher, the better (love, honor, an artifact, innocent lives, the future as we know it)

From there, your stories will tell themselves.



Adventure Concepts

So what kind of story do you want to tell? To find out, look to a theme that grabs your attention. Several story themes are common to Dark Adventures and to magick itself.

Personal Quests

These are usually intense stories, deeply rooted in the desires and emotions of the characters — revenge tales, atonements, love-quests, family obligations. Quests drive heroes, taking them beyond the bounds of propriety and moderation. Add magick and you get a tale of vision and determination — and of the power to make your desire come true on a sweeping scale.

Imagine a young Akashic Brother's passionate vengeance against his mentor's killer. The more involved he becomes, the more deeply he feels hatred, loss and anger. The more desperate the mage grows, the more of himself he loses and the more extreme his willworking becomes. Soon he'll pay any price and impose any reality to fulfill his goals.

Other personal quests involve the search for self-identity, traveling the long road to knowledge and acceptance; the honor-debt that must be settled, no matter what the cost; or the reclamation of some item (magickal or otherwise) that's important to someone the character loves.

Quest stories focus on specific characters, so events and other characters need to coincide with a protagonist's

objective. Perhaps all of the players' characters have the same goal, but for different reasons. A former Man in Black might seek out his one-time administrator for answers to his existence. Meanwhile, the ex-MiB's Akashic ally seeks to destroy the same enemy. The characters will clash one day and they both know it. But that's for another time. For now, they must find their mutual quarry.

Although it may not be clear at first, the personal quest is actually an investigation of a character's own identity. Although he seeks something in the real world, his reasons are his own. Fulfilling the quest is less a matter of accomplishing a goal as it is exploring personal identity and coming to terms with the self. In a Dark-Adventure story, a hero may believe he seeks revenge for its own sake, but he might actually seek to alleviate some tremendous guilt or to correct a perceived failing. Such a tremendous personal flaw marks the hero as different from the traditional High-Adventure protagonist, and the hero's magick puts his quest on an epic scale.

Missions

In Dark Adventure, things are always going wrong. In **Mage**, even a single willworker can cause widespread destruction. Someone has to prevent all this potential harm; she might even have to sacrifice herself to avoid calamity. That's where mages on missions come in.



Missions usually begin as impersonal tasks; the characters are sent by someone else, probably to fulfill an agenda other than the mages' own. Missions are rarely what they seem at the beginning, though; an Otherworlds expedition that begins as an inquiry into some strange attacks reveals an alliance between mysterious Bygones and members of the characters' own Chantry — the elders who requested the mission in the first place. Things go bad, of course, and now it's personal. Our heroes must complete the original mission while finding out what the elders had in mind... and surviving the experience.

When a character *does* have a personal agenda, it usually takes a back seat to the mission at hand. The sorcerer can't afford to think of herself when there's a bigger picture at stake. However, a cunning character finds ways to do her duty while remaining true to her own goals: A Progenitor who's assigned to an assault amalgam while her romantic rival remains behind with the Progenitor's boyfriend might find satisfaction by sending one of her targets off on a wild-goose chase after the rival. (No one said Dark-Adventure heroes were nice folks — they're simply potent and determined.)

Preparing a mission is easy. It can suit a variety of characters as long as they wield the magick required. Missions also usually have clear-cut goals and limitations, which makes plotting simple. The story might take only two weeks of game time; Chantry leaders may want the cabal's report before a crucial Council meeting. The pitfall of the mission is making the characters feel like pawns sent on someone else's errand. Their assignment should be important — no one else can do it — and in so doing, the characters find their own reasons for fulfilling the objective at hand.

Damage Control

In this variation on the "mission," the characters are dispatched to fix a situation that has spun out of control. Damage control has its own problems, though. Missions are attempts to prevent trouble; damage control begins after the trouble has already started. Matters must be salvaged before they get any worse: Malignant spirits have breached the Gauntlet and flooded into our world. Now a witch, a shaman and an Orphan are stuck trying to put them back where they belong.

Cleanup missions make for exciting, fast-paced stories — every delay allows the problem to grow larger, so decisive action is a necessity. Characters must be capable, commanding magicks strong enough to bring significant problems under control. Your average initiate can't stop that Umbrood horde — unless she's the only one who even knows about it....

Creating a damage-control story requires two things: You must determine what happened before the story begins. What went wrong? What problems arose as a result? How are other sorcerers reacting to it? The story must also be flexible. You can't anticipate how the characters will re-

spond or what their solution to the problem will be. You have to be fast on your feet, improvising around whatever they come up with. Damage-control stories are pretty high-energy and very active. In many ways, they're a perfect contrast to the personal quest; there's no time to worry about individual concerns — immense, pressing problems demand attention.

Training

Everybody has something to learn, and "training sessions" make great teachers. These stories differ from missions or damage control in that it's what you discover, not what you accomplish, that proves most important. Yet training is similar to the personal quest — it involves personal exploration and achievement. In tales of magick, the "training story" is a grand tradition; characters must learn their Arts somewhere, after all, and proper learning demands more than just a few long nights in study hall. Some mentors — mystick and Technocrat alike — believe in providing their students with the basics, then forcing them to learn the rest through trial by fire. That trial provides the adventure; there's no telling what dangers or horrors that initiates might face to prove their worth.

The best training exercises appear to be something else. Take the "red alert," for example: The safe house is attacked, the administrator disappears and it looks like a pack of mad pagans have him. A trail of slender clues leads to a rural farmhouse; when the characters bust down the doors, the "cultists" fall back and the administrator reappears, assuring his operatives that all is well. Naturally, a really devious instructor might even make a test out of the end of the test: Just when it looks like the adventure is over, some subtle clue hints that this "conclusion" is just one more misdirection....

Training stories are also ideal for bringing characters together. Adversity forms bonds that even the best instruction can't provide. Consider it a class field trip with an edge: Students may wander from the group and suffer the consequences, or discover things they never knew were expected of them. (A good teacher hopes his students take personal initiative, for both the sake of their own education and as a reflection of his wise instruction.) Young mages who prove themselves on dangerous tests prove themselves valuable for *real* assignments.

Disaster

Unlike mission stories, disasters just *happen*. Something important goes to hell, and no one with a shred of compassion or intelligence can just stand by and let it continue. Jodi Blake has formed a cult and her friends decide that a nice big sacrifice would be just the thing to put a smile on her face.... The characters must be close enough to notice the disaster in progress, and (depending on your players) might need some personal incentive — money,

power, loved ones — to make sure they actually do something about the crisis.

Like training tales, disaster stories bring characters together; even mages who would normally be enemies can find common ground when a crisis hits. It's not unreasonable to imagine a MiB, an Akashic, a witch and a Progenitor working together to prevent the mass sacrifice. Unlike damage control, the disaster story is more about preventing a mess than about cleaning it up. If our heroes can put aside their quarrels and foil the cultists, there might not be that much damage to control.

Unlikely Allies

The theme of two (or more) characters who hate each other's guts but are forced to work together is really a twist given to other story types. Take our collection of misfits in the disaster scenario, above. There isn't much hope they'll ever be friends, but the success of their efforts depends on their cooperation. If the MiB feels compelled to bust the witch, who despises the Progenitor's "abomination of life," Jodi Blake's demonic masters receive a nice big banquet of souls. In an "unlikely allies" story, the mission is secondary to the cooperation... even if the characters never see it that way.

These stories can provide the starkest dramas and funniest comic episodes — sometimes at once. Crises tend to breed intense personal bonds, such as close friendships and romantic attractions. Nurture those bonds with interludes between the characters in which they depend on or confide in each other. Then watch the "allies" theme take precedent over the "disaster" one.

Intense bonds often manifest as forbidden romance. After all, mages are only human. Now imagine the possible complications if the MiB starts falling for the witch — and she returns the feelings. The initial flirtations might be hilarious, especially if both characters refuse to acknowledge their attraction; sooner or later, though, they have to deal with the long-term consequences of their affair. Being lovers in a dangerous time can be wrenching, amusing and frustrating all at once. Add the normal complications of a friendship or romance between unlikely allies to an already perilous situation and you have a truly epic — and potentially tragic — Dark Adventure.

The Twist

Adventure tales rely on a strong enemy; the bigger and badder the foe, the more dramatic the story. However, in **Mage**, as in life, "good" and "evil" are abstract concepts. The twist comes in when the obvious morality of the story gets turned around: An "evil" mayor might be cracking down on the "Satanists" in his district by any means necessary, but he does it to protect his constituents or to avenge his daughter who was raped by cultists. Our mayor becomes a ruthless foe to any mage in his vicinity, and there's no denying that his tactics are brutal. Newspapers

feature lurid headlines about occult activities (many of which might be true!); cops bust heads first and don't bother asking questions at all; "questionable" religions like Wicca become magnets for "unofficial" persecution (letter bombs, picket lines, local laws enforced against "Satan cultists"); citizens' groups become vigilante mobs while the cops look the other way. Yet the man behind the chaos isn't *eee-vill*, and his ends justify his means, at least in his mind. But that doesn't keep him from being a thorn — possibly a fatal thorn — in the heroes' sides.

Twists run in the opposite direction, too. A valued ally might turn out to be the enemy after all. An "innocent" could be guilty as sin. The MiB's administrator is actually one of Jodi Blake's lovers and he fed the location of the agent and his allies to the angry mayor. The mayor's violated daughter was never actually violated at all, but staged the whole thing to get rid of the Wiccan church that would have opposed Jodi's plans... You get the idea. A really twisted tale might feature several reversals: Both the options above are true, and the mayor winds up becoming an ally of the heroes... at least until the fight is over.

Naturally, it's easy to overdo this sort of thing. Twist the plot in too many directions and it falls apart. Players like to be surprised, but an unending stream of paranoia is too much for even the darkest **Mage** chronicle to endure. If things seem too pat, freshen up the plot with a twist or two. Morality is never cut-and-dried in the World of Darkness, and few things are as simple as they seem.

Taking it to Heart

"I won't go!" Absinthe twisted free of the men at her side, darting between them before they could close in on her again. She was halfway to the door when her feet left the ground and dangled in mid-air.

"Put me down, dammit!" She twisted to glare backward, where Flax waited patiently. The pale sorcerer smiled and Absinthe fell to the cold stone floor.

"I don't know why you're fighting this," Flax commented, gliding forward to offer a hand up. "You know it's necessary. We need your help to do it."

"Fuck off!" Absinthe refused the aid and clambered up on her own. "You may think it's important, but I don't. This fight has nothing to do with me. I don't want any part of it!" She turned again and stormed to the door.

Once more, she was stopped. But not by magick. By words: "What about your father?"

"Why should I get involved?" That's one of the most common questions characters ask when confronted with a new threat, a new challenge. "Why should I risk my neck for this?" After all, powerful magick screams through the ether. Other realities spawn demons and alien monstrosities. Then there are this world's tyrannical empires, maniacal would-be dictators and ruthless politicians and business-



men. Any one of these enemies could kill a lone mage. So why should she feel compelled to step into their parlor?

Dark Adventures are built on earthshaking threats. Unless some hero puts her life on the line, uncountable people, innocent and guilty alike, will suffer. But to confront the problem, a hero has to suffer. And to be honest, very few people, fictional or otherwise, like to suffer if they don't have to. So what's to make the mage put her own welfare aside and enter the fray?

Personal stakes.

Unless the hero acts, someone or something she cares about will pay the price. Family members could be in danger, old friends might ask for help, her home might be endangered, her livelihood might be whisked away. The stakes could be more abstract — a violation of faith, an insult to honor, a piece of an important puzzle — but they must be important enough to drive her into danger.

Superheroes jump into the fire for abstract ideals of right and wrong. Dark-Adventure protagonists often need more personal motives. But once you address a mage's thirst for power, revenge, lust or satisfaction, he may accept epic challenges and fight impossible odds. The trappings of High-Adventure storytelling await the Dark-Adventure hero. They must simply meet his demands before he braves those dangers. Give the players what they need and want and they'll help tell the titanic story you lay before them.

Personal stakes might include (but aren't limited to):

- A loved one (or potential loved one) is in danger
- A character the mage values is involved; if the sorcerer throws in with him, she could get to know him better
- The honor or reputation of the character's Chantry/Construct/ Tradition/ Convention/ family could be ruined
- The mage's religion might be persecuted, besmirched or desecrated
- Something the mage values has been stolen
- There's a chance to make some rival of the mage look bad... or look dead
- If the mage acts she might make a healthy profit (money, magick, status)
- The authorities (cops, Church, Tradition) have gotten out of hand and must be opposed
- The mage suffers some insult or injury and the time has come for payback

Whatever "hook" you choose, make sure it's baited well. The more important it is to your hero(es), the more dynamic the story is.

Places, Please

"Lisa, your character Andrea walks into the bar, squinting in the dim light and grimacing at the stench of stale beer and cigar smoke...."

"I wouldn't go in there."

"What do you mean?"

"Andrea's rich and well-bred. She wouldn't be caught dead in some sleazy bar. And she hates cigars, so even if she did go in, she'd turn around and leave the minute she smelled the smoke."

"Right. Okay, okay... Bob, Greg, your characters sit in a corner, discussing the odd behavior of both of your elders, when you see a tall, beautiful woman with delicate features and expensive clothing. She comes into the bar, squints, looks around, wrinkles her nose in distaste and walks out again. What do you do?"

"I order another beer."

"I flirt with the waitress."

"Great."

Well, that didn't work, did it? One of the first tricks of a Dark-Adventure story is bringing the characters together. You may have an awesome plot planned, with irresistible motivation, desperate action and intrigue galore. It might be the very stuff of legends — the characters and players will love it — if they'd just see eye to eye. Each character has attitudes, personality and a background. These details and lifestyles can prevent heroes from having anything in common, making it difficult to explain how they meet, let alone why they work together.

In Dark Adventure, assembling the group is paramount. Everything's on an epic scale and a solitary hero

would probably get his ass kicked trying to fix the problems himself. In High Adventure, the hero is a veritable god, able to accomplish amazing feats single-handedly. In Dark Adventure, the heroes are flawed, human and often outnumbered. Even given their magickal gifts, it takes a group effort to survive the crisis.

Unfortunately, uniting mages can be difficult. The various Traditions have very different perspectives; some get along, others tolerate each other and yet others are completely at odds. Why would a Verbena witch and an Etherite Scientist want to be allies? It's not just that their clothes and mannerisms are different — they see the universe in diametrically opposed ways. Each mage would seem completely alien (and probably completely clueless) to the other.

So how do you unite heroes whose magicks and personalities clash? A few simple methods spring to mind.

A Common Enemy

The obvious choice: Someone has pissed off every hero in the group and they unite to kick his evil ass. The mayor described previously has declared open season on anything that even remotely smacks of the occult, and all the mages suffer for it. Individually, they might not get along — hell, they might not even want to be in the same room together! — but they have a collective foe. To defeat him, they have to put aside their differences for a while.





Common Origins

As the Storyteller, you can insist that all the characters belong to the same organization. There's still be plenty of contention — even people within a single Tradition are individuals with their own agendas — but the characters have certain common ties and methods. Even a cabal of Orphans shares certain notions, namely that survival and independence are paramount (see *The Orphans Survival Guide*).

The downside of single-group origins is that there's less variety among the characters; heroes who all share the same basic beliefs can take some of the diversity out of the game. You might account for this “threat” by playing up differences between factions within the group itself — say, by putting mages from the Hermetic Houses of Fortuna, Tylus and Thig in the same group. That way, the internal rivalries within that organization keep things interesting.

Insurmountable Odds

Epic threats demand epic efforts. A problem large enough to threaten every Tradition — the Nephandi waging a full-scale attack on Horizon or Chicago — unifies heroes. Overwhelming menaces are extremely melodramatic, the very stuff of Dark Adventure. When and if your heroes come through, they have accomplished something really important. It could change their lives in a big way.

Two problems: First, the threat might be too big for your characters to handle. If they're not strong enough to

take down the Nephandic badass in charge of the invasion, you might have to bring in “ringers” to defeat the enemy for them. How un-heroic. Second, the pace has to be rapid. The heroes can't lag behind for a moment or they're overwhelmed. If they clash, even momentarily, they might lose everything. If you hesitate, they might feel that other things are more important. You have to keep the stakes high and obvious while providing them with incentives to keep going, even though they might die.

Who knows? If these disparate mages can cooperate and build stronger bonds, they might even stay together after the threat has passed. What role models the characters would be to their associates... and what new adventures might arise from “breaking the rules” (think *Romeo and Juliet* with magick tossed in).

Sole Survivors

What if someone or something is killing all the mages in the city? Those who remain are likely to team up, even if only to protect themselves. The “sole survivors” approach is a variant on the “common-enemy” motif: The characters are the only ones to live through a major catastrophe and they band together for protection. Maybe they want revenge... or perhaps someone's trying to finish the job.

The difficulty here is the catastrophe. It has to be severe enough to disrupt the normal order, but survivable

enough to leave stragglers. If the characters were at ground zero, they should be dead, too. Perhaps they were each called or sent away — some force conspired to keep them from returning to the site in time to help... and to die.

The sole survivors must be cut off from everyone else or have a good reason to not trust anyone else. If the mages just sit around and wait for the Council Masters to rescue them, the disaster's urgency fades. If, on the other hand, the clock is still ticking after Doomsday and 911 doesn't answer, your heroes have to rely on their own skills and cooperation.

You also want to leave something behind on which the heroes can build. If the entire landscape is an irradiated wasteland, why bother fighting? There's no drama in futility. *Something* must remain — a troop of refugees, a pack of children, a Bygone who has returned to its old home, maybe even something as simple as the last flower in the forest. The characters' world may have been turned upside-down, but if they can get enough people to remember how things used to be....

The Seven Degrees of Separation

If the theory is true and everyone in the world is connected to everyone else by seven degrees, surely all Tradition mages (or all Orphans or Technocrats) are connected far more closely. The Awakening cuts them from the same fundamental cloth. All mages are one in spirit — regardless of whether or not they would admit it.

Even if individual characters refuse to acknowledge their ties to fellow magi, magical circles ultimately overlap. Characters inevitably have mentors, allies, friends or peers who share ties to other mages. Willworkers' social strata are simply too narrow to allow a mage to be completely isolated, no matter how alienated she might feel.

You can use these connections to unite characters: They come from the same city, were trained separately by the same mentor before she disappeared, or are put to a collective test at a Council meeting. After establishing this bond, confront the individuals with a situation that's too big for them to handle alone. When faced with daunting odds, any mages with half a brain between them should turn to each other sooner or later. Once the group is together, the players can handle things from there.

Crossing Threads

Another way to bring characters together is to arrange for them to cross paths... coincidentally. Get each character started toward a different objective or goal — one searches for her missing sister, another researches ancient Hermetic spells, a third tails an Infernalist, a fourth bears a grudge against the Order of Jadrax. Then let those elements coincide: It turns out that the sister was kidnapped by the Infernalist; he has stolen a tome of ancient Hermetic lore,

including a forbidden spell which opens a gate to the Abyss. The sister bears some mark of destiny and would make an excellent sacrifice to the demon Jadrax. Nobody's going to want this sacrifice to happen.

The characters may not know each other before their paths cross, but once they meet and learn that their interests coincide, they may welcome an information exchange. They may even work together toward a common goal, assuming their personal differences aren't severe enough to divide them. Each character wants something slightly different, of course, but since defeating the Order of Jadrax forms a common bond, the task should be enough to hold them together.

Baiting the Hook

Bringing the characters together and getting them started on their Dark Adventure can be tricky. You want to get their attention, but you don't want to overdo it. If you're too obvious, the players might do exactly the opposite of what you had in mind.

The bait on the hook should be tantalizing. Use too little and no one will care:

"Deena, you see a man running down the street."

"Is there anything unusual about him?"

"Well, he's dressed pretty normally. He isn't doing anything odd, other than running."

"Is he carrying a gun?"

"No, he seems to be unarmed. As you watch, he darts around a corner and out of sight."

"I let him go — if he's a crook the cops'll catch him. Maybe he's just a jogger."

Use too much bait and the players will suspect a trap:

"Deena, you see a man racing down the street. He's dressed in long flowing robes and carrying a gnarled staff."

"What? No way!"

"In fact, as you look more closely, you realize his feet aren't touching the ground — he's floating about a foot above the pavement! What do you do?"

"I get the hell away from there!"

"What? But he's obviously a mage—"

"Yeah, and a strong one. Anything that can make him 'run' like that is going to make mincemeat out of me. No thanks!"

Use confusing bait and the players won't recognize or understand it:

"'Beware the thin man,' the woman whispers as she glides past you. 'Tread lightly on the silver path.'"

"Huh? 'What do you mean? Who are you?'"

"She's gone without a sound. You see a faint after-image, as if she were a shadow on a screen. The night air is chill and damp, and you shiver in sudden dread. What do you do?"

"I'm going home. I have no idea what she's talking about."

When luring characters into a story, consider the nature of the characters and the interests of the players. Do they want power or are they more interested in pure knowledge? Do they love mysteries? Are they hunting someone or something in particular? Do they have a weakness for a particular kind of challenge or vice? Make your hook appealing to both the players and their characters. Offer just enough to tantalize, to suggest that there's more to be had, if only they go along with the game.

If coaxing the characters with a carrot isn't enough, you can always beat 'em with the stick. Elder magi tend to appreciate obedience and get testy if their apprentices screw around; cops have a way of showing up with arrest warrants; a rampaging ghost can decide that the witch's girlfriend makes a good "host body." Make it obvious that the heroes can't step away from their obligations. Fear of punishment can prompt action more quickly than can promises of reward.

In the end, your bait should be enough to get the story rolling. It may not initially appear to be the grist for an epic tale, but your lure should be enough to capture the characters' and players' interest. Once you have their attention, you can pit them against Technocrat machinations or Marauder hordes to your heart's content. After all, that's the stuff Dark Adventures are made of.

Settings

So you know the story you want to tell, the hooks you want to use and the ties that will bring the characters together. But where are the heroes and where must they go?

A good setting can make even the most mundane scrap seem cool. Take a fistfight; not too dramatic, is it? Now set it in a posh French museum; in a jet plane's cargo hold; on the top of a double-decker bus. See? The setting shifts the dynamics of the fight. Even though the systems, die rolls and kitchen table haven't changed, you've shifted your troupe's imagination to some other more exotic place.

What sorts of settings befit a Dark Adventure? Well...

Foreign Lands

Like a James Bond adventure, the plot takes our heroes to some exotic locale — Egypt, Mexico, Siberia, Niagara Falls. Familiar landmarks become backdrops (or props) for firefights, aerial battles, tense rescues or romantic encounters. For some strange reason, a chase through the Roman catacombs seems much more exciting than the same chase through the streets of your town. A new and remote location raises the stakes... especially if the mages are on hostile ground (Baghdad, the White House lawn); stuck in an unfamiliar country (Tibet, Peru); saving innocent lives (in the London Underground or the Hong Kong markets); or exploring wondrous mysteries (the Great Barrier Reef, Pueblo ruins). If nothing else, no visitor wants to piss off the locals!



Exotic locations usually demand a certain amount of familiarity, bullshitting skill or a combination of the two. If you have pictures, bring copies to the table and evoke the place with a combination of description and “local color” (tourists and guards around the White House... just watch out for the interns.) Remember: Getting there is often half the fun, and getting out is twice as hard as getting in.

Alien Environments

Oh, sure you can outfight that Nephandic cabal in the open air, but how good are you at fighting underwater? When a key scene in the adventure takes place in the Void, beneath the waves, on the polar icecaps or in a lightless cavern complex, the whole story goes to another level. In the movies, most good adventures set at least one scene in an area where humans don't often go — the Cliffs of Insanity, the Death Star trench, the hold of a sunken ship. The stakes go up dramatically when the heroes (and often the villains) have to contend with a hostile environment as well as each other, especially if the environment demands special equipment or magicks from its visitors. More often than not, that setting also provides a good demise — or escape route — for characters who've reached, shall we say, a stopping point in their adventures. That volcanic hellmouth makes a great bad-guy killer. After all, *nobody* could survive that, right?

For preparation, decide on a cool setting, figure out what the characters need to survive there (both in terms of gear and magick), and decide on a good reason to bring your plot to those strange shores. Secret bases, Doomsday projects and hidden Nodes make excellent reasons to brave such sites, and provide the heroes with something to do when they get there.

Otherworlds

Mages aren't limited to this side of the Gauntlet, and it doesn't take James Cameron to envision an epic adventure set in the corridors of Doissetep, on the flaming cliffs of the Fire Realm, in the jungles of Vali Shallar or on the decks of a Qui la Machinae. If the heroes are shamans, Void Engineers or Sons of Ether, so much the better — all those groups have long histories of travel among the Otherworlds. Perhaps a “routine” trip to a familiar Realm goes awry and the characters wind up somewhere else; maybe the villain has retreated to his patron's spirit dwelling; there might be a fellow mage trapped in a mindscape, Infernal cell or Paradox Realm; and let's not forget the prize that awaits somewhere in the Hollow Earth... a prize several parties would kill to collect.

If you want to breach the Gauntlet, there's a wealth of source material waiting for you. **The Book of Chantries**, **Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds** and **Digital Web 2.0** offer dozens of Realms and byways, and any one of them could make a grand setting for adventures. **Technocracy: Void Engineers** and the **Dreamspeakers** and **Sons of Ether Tradition** books provide details about the magi who plumb the





depths of the Otherworlds. An array of other supplements — **Umbara: The Velvet Shadow** and **Book of the Wyrms** for Werewolf, and **Sea of Shadows**, **Dark Kingdom of Jade** and the **Players Guide for Wraith** — offer a host of other possibilities. Just find a spot you want to explore, figure out a reason for your mages to venture there, and go.

Dangerous Situations

No action is simple when it's performed on top of a speeding bus. By adding a novel, hazardous setting to an otherwise mundane task, you up the drama factor exponentially. Even a chess game can become suspenseful when it's played with razor-edged pieces or when the stakes for losing include mutilation or death. Maybe your next gun battle takes place in a glass factory; the bad guy hides in a condemned building; that biker bar doesn't take kindly to a bunch of strangers messing with the regulars; or isn't it just like a Nephandus to ambush you as you flee a magically conjured hurricane?

Preparation is simple: Just imagine some really cool, dangerous circumstances for a straightforward scene, and figure out what kinds of effects that situation might have on the characters. See the climaxes of *Police Story* (a shopping-mall fight), *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (a chase ending in a foundry), *The Seventh Sign* (a chess game with Death played for innocent souls), and many other films for inspiration.

Other Time Periods

If mages aren't confined to this realm, why should your game be confined to this time? Alternate time periods make excellent and unpredictable settings for an epic clash, whether the heroes are 20th-century time-travelers or natives of the setting. Imagine a betrayal in the Court of Louis XIV, a magical duel on the Normandy beachhead, a murder at one of Lord Byron's mansions, or a spirit-battle in the caves of Lascaux. Geographically, these areas aren't that far apart. Chronologically, they're literally in different worlds.

For the most part, time travel is impossibly vulgar magick. If, however, you're the Storyteller, you can arrange things so that the heroes can do things that would normally be beyond them. Generally, the biggest hassle with cross-time adventures arises when characters try to muck with history. Depending on what you want to do, you might allow the tale's events to alter "known" history, you might declare certain important moments "fate, not fortune," or you could simply run a game in a different time period without any form of magical chronoportation. As far as background and inspirational materials go, check your local or personal library. As for the game setting, most **Mage** supplements include historical background, events and figures; **Mage: The Sorcerers Crusade** and **The Book of Mirrors: The Mage Storytellers Guide** both feature extensive historical sections, including timelines and alternate rules.

Adventures can happen anywhere, any time, to anyone. The most important elements are high drama and higher stakes. The rest takes care of itself.

Let Me Tell You a Story



"You awaken to the sound of dripping water. The throbbing in your head recedes only slightly. Your eyes grow accustomed to the gloom; soon, you can make out the shape of a room around you. It feels long and low, with walls uninterrupted by windows. The wall at your back is surprisingly warm and slightly soft. Oh, and your hands are raised above your head."

"What? Why are my hands up?"

"Well, the heavy manacles bolted to the wall probably have something to do with it, seeing as how they're fastened around your wrists. The wall is getting warmer, too. It actually seems to be pressing up against you."

"Damn! I look around more closely."

"Your vision clears and you realize you're not alone."

"What?"

"Four other bodies are chained in the same fashion. The wall behind each seems slightly brighter than the rest of the cell... almost glowing. The walls are pressing in around each person. You can feel yours around you, too, like a cushion more than a wall — and you're sinking into it."

"Hey! Anyone awake?"

"I am now. Bloody hell!"

"I think these walls are alive! And they're trying to eat us!"

Once you establish the premise and foundation of your Dark Adventure, concentrate on the telling itself. Mysteries, machinations and master plans are only interesting if they're presented in compelling ways.

So how does one tell a good story? Each Storyteller has a different answer, and there's no single correct one. It's really a matter of which tools and techniques work best for you. Use what you know and add to your repertoire whenever you can. You're never too old to learn a few new tricks.

Use All the Senses

Ten-by-ten rooms are boring. The game world should seem real to you and the players. That means it has more than one dimension, more than one means by which it can be perceived. Movies tell stories based on two senses: sight and sound. But there's also touch, taste and smell. Use them all.

For example, you could describe a scene as a movie would portray it:

You step into the silo. The floor is metal grating. The walls are bare steel, casting a distorted reflection of your image. Smoke wisps up from the depths beneath you. You put your dizzying height out of mind at the sight of the missile looming before you like a monstrous deity waiting to be worshipped.

Your players can see the scene, but the impact of the moment can be portrayed more vividly when all senses are brought to bear.

You step into the silo, your footsteps ringing off the grated metal walkway. Your teeth chatter from the cold, your moist breath steaming out before you. A deep rhythm pounds inside your head, forcing you to shake all the more. The vastness of the silo makes you feel insignificant by comparison; if you fell, would anyone hear you scream?

Suddenly the scene impacts on all of the character's faculties. He belongs to a multifaceted world in which dangers threaten from a myriad of sources, not simply from what he sees and hears.

Flaws Are Fun

No one wants to play a hero who never makes mistakes, and no one wants to oppose a villain who always wins. Why? It's boring. How many flawless victories can you score before life loses its challenge? To quote the morose General Zod of *Superman 2*: "I win... I always win."

Vulnerabilities help make characters fully realized. The Nephandus with the perpetually runny nose and the odd penchant for fake roses is more interesting than the Nephandus with the perfect features and polished manners. The first one's kinda neat, while the second seems plastic. However, the familiarity of the vulnerable Nephandus makes him no less terrifying. In fact, he's more terrifying when he's sympathetic on one hand and can thoughtlessly kill thousands on the other.

Now imagine a Dark-Adventure hero who's naive — a mage who tends to put his best cards on the table even with strangers. He's human, not subhuman or superhuman, and we therefore care what happens to him (which, if he keeps giving away secrets, will be something very unpleasant).

Character flaws make stories compelling in the same ways that using all the senses does. Subtleties and little details make events and people real as opposed to absurd or stale. High-Adventure figures who are perfect and two-dimensional are prone to ridiculous deeds and boring identities. Dark-Adventure characters should be anything but dull.

Subtlety is the key to flaws. Vulnerabilities should never be all-consuming. X344 can't hijack an Ethership if he's afraid of flying, and Jodi Blake can't scale Concordia's spires if she has a broken leg. However, something as trivial as an allergy can be devastating when the character needs to concentrate. Ever tried to summon Hell's legions when you have a runny nose?

Flaws also give your heroes (and possibly villains) something to overcome, while offering opportunities to their rivals. If Atropos knows about X344's acrophobia, she can use his vertigo to her advantage; if the cyborg has to get the Ethership away from an Umbrood stowaway, his fear adds another level of difficulty to his struggle... and more glory to his triumph. We are at our best when we can overcome our personal flaws, and epic adventures are full of such challenges.

Loosen Your Grip

The Storyteller establishes the premise of the story and the events that perpetuate it. However, roleplaying involves the whole troupe — no one player should have an iron grip on the outcome, not even you. Allow your players room to move. Let their characters explore their options. If those options are dead ends, the characters accomplish little or nothing. No one wants to sit around a table for five hours being frustrated.

"I'm going after him!"

"Are you sure? The cops will show up any second."

"I can catch him! I know I can!"

"You run after him flat-out, but you don't seem to be gaining on him. In fact, he's pulling away."

"What? I summon more energy to make myself faster."

"He's still getting further ahead."

"No way! I throw my sword at him! [rolls] A direct hit!"

"Just as you throw it, someone dumps a bucket of soapy water from an upstairs window. Your sword hits the water and gets knocked aside."

"Shit! I just tackle him, then!"

"Oops, he's darted around a corner."

"I rush after him!"

"When you round the corner, he's nowhere in sight. You've lost him!"

"Dammit, you just don't want me killing off your precious bad guy!"

A loose grip on the story allows the heroes to affect events. That's what heroes do. If you're just making them go through the motions while you move from one set-piece to the next, your co-collaborators are going to be pissed.

Steer the story, don't control it. You can adapt to changes, suggestions and requests while still retaining some measure of influence over the story. Maybe the character above *does* catch and kill the bad guy, but the body disappears from the morgue. The villain's family may seek revenge. Or perhaps the villain had a mysterious partner whom the characters knew nothing about. Remember, it's not just *your* game. The players are creating the story, too. If you work their contributions into your framework, the chronicle is a lot more enjoyable for everyone.

It Begins

Obviously, getting a **Mage** Dark-Adventure story up and running demands a lot of work and creativity, not just from the Storyteller, but from the players as well. A story is only as good as its opening lines — who wants to wait around for the conclusion if the introduction sucks? Hopefully these tips help you begin an adventurous yarn about magick, heroes and the worlds they inhabit. They'd better, because the story is just beginning....





Chapter Two: You Hear Something?

Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery.

— Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*



Mark nudged the steel door to the guard room open with his foot, his arms filled with jelly doughnuts, cookies and one Dr. Pepper. “Here’s your soda—” Before he finished his sentence, he spotted the monitor trained on the power-line area. “Jesus Christ! What the hell is that?”

Simms jumped out of his rolling chair and stared at the monitor. A young woman gripped one of the “towers of power,” as the security guards called them, her head flung back and her body rigid as thousands of volts of electricity jolted through her. “Oh my God... she’s going to die! What the hell is she doing?” Neither guard could move, their eyes fixed on the image of the suicide.

The halogen lights illuminating the lines didn’t compare to the crackling glow of energy around the woman. Her long curly hair stood straight out from her head. Sparks leapt back and forth between the metal eyelets of her sneakers and the power tree she held so tightly. The grainy picture, pathetically low-resolution, somehow picked up the expression on her face, a grimace locked somewhere between pain and ecstasy.

The woman’s expression did it for Simms. Grabbing the plastic rod used to clear debris from under the power trees, he pushed past his co-worker. “Call 911! I’m going to help her!”

Mark gaped. “Do what?” By the time the astonished words were out of his mouth, Simms was already out the door, racing through the power station.

The ground seemed unusually rough outside the building’s emergency exit. The chain-link fence was just ahead; the gate looked unlocked. Simms fumbled with the catch, nearly dropping the rod, and then was through. The station usually hummed contentedly, sending electricity out to homes all over the valley. Now it was popping and zapping frenziedly. The woman must still be hanging on, thought Simms — the power’s probably still grounding through her.

But there was no body. No one was at the base of the tower as he had seen on the monitor. He spun around, looking wildly for the woman — she ought to be dead, dammit! He spotted her in the far corner of the line area, draped over the fence. Thinking she must have fallen or been thrown, he began to move toward her, plastic rod extended to nudge her off the metal links.

She slowly stood up and turned to face him. Simms’ jaw dropped.

“No fucking way....”

The Epic Chronicle



The gloves are off. The blood has been spilled. You've done a wild one-shot and your players are happy. The quest for Ascension has spun across the cliffs of Dark Adventure and now you're pulling to a stop.

Now what?

Getting a game started is one thing. Keeping it moving is entirely different. Let's face it, we're the MTV generation. We have short attention spans. We want things to move and we want them to move fast. If they don't, we wait only a second or two before we click through to something more interesting.

How do you keep your players interested in a Dark-Adventure story or chronicle over the course of several weeks or months? Even Realm-shattering tales get real old, real fast if characters always succeed. Unless things keep moving, change pace and stay challenging, players get bored.

New Challenges

One way to maintain interest in an ongoing epic chronicle is to introduce new obstacles from time to time. Wait until matters seem fairly clear — events appear to be resolved and coming to a close — and then throw a wrench into the works. You could, for example, pit the characters against the members of a *barabbi* cabal one by one. The betrayers don't die easy, but the heroes show real imagination and strategy in all their fights. So it's down to the characters and the last living target — the leader. The characters burst through the door, ready for the final face-down. Awaiting them is not the single oathbreaker they expected but a whole roomful of goons with SMGs, HIT Marks and one hulking monstrosity they've never seen before. *Shit!* Where did all this come from?

Obviously, the new obstacle or twist should coincide with what's come before. It helps if you've planned things from the start, but it isn't necessary (that's what freewheeling storytelling is all about). Ideally, you want players to be satisfied by achieving the goal they set, but there's often just one more problem to be addressed if the characters want to get to the bottom of things once and for all.

The key to further leads and plot twists is to give the characters a breather; a chance to pat themselves on the back for saving lives, dispatching an obvious opponent, stopping a plot or fulfilling personal goals. But there's simply more work to be done and only the heroes can do it. Perhaps they capture a murderer and start packing for that beach vacation they've been talking about, when another person is killed the same way a few days later. A cult of killers? Who better to go after the entire group than the people who took down the first one? Unpack your stuff, guys.

Increasing the Stakes

Another way to keep a Dark-Adventure chronicle turning is to up the stakes. The characters get where they're going, do what they want to do. However, their success leads to something else, something bigger than the heroes first imagined. The murderer may be in prison, but the characters learn that he received instructions from someone else and that person is still on the loose. What's more, the murders have not only continued but become worse. Maybe things started with single kills and now someone's moved on to mass murders. The characters solved the original problem, but there's a much, much bigger fish out there and he's a hell of a lot more slippery than the original. And he has sharper teeth, too.

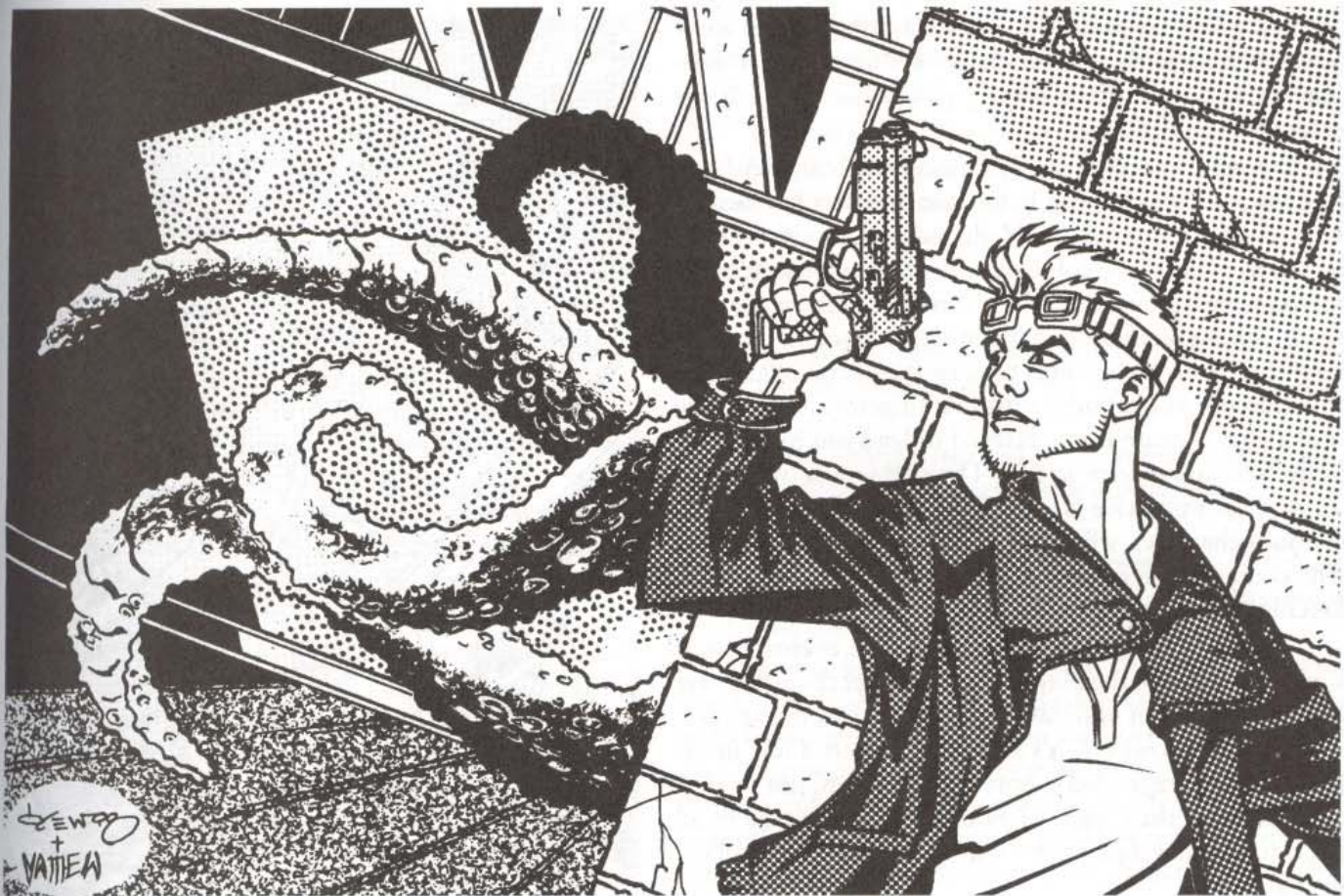
Perhaps no one knows about the mastermind — or believes the characters that he exists. Then, before the mages can get any confirmation from the killer or even tell anyone what they know, the guy hangs himself in his cell. Who knew prison pants could be knotted up like that? For that matter, how can anyone hang himself from a padded wall? There's some seriously bad mojo going on, and the only ones who know anything about it — the only ones even semi-equipped to deal with it in the first place, and certainly the only ones to believe such a crazy story — are the characters.

The killer's patron might not even be human; the protagonists must go beyond the mortal realm to deal with an enemy greater than any they've ever faced. What chance can mere mortals have against a force from beyond? Let the special effects begin.

What's Really Going on Here?

Players and characters both like to feel that they make a difference, like they're actually going out and saving something or keeping a specific person safe. Dramatic roles, capable characters — such things make a game worth playing. However, occasionally reminding characters and players that there are greater powers and plots out there than themselves has great dramatic impact. Even though they have the power to shape reality at will, the characters aren't always as pivotal as they might like to believe.

Revealing some of these higher powers and plots is a variant of upping the stakes. The stakes haven't changed, but the characters are now privy to a few more of the elements affecting them. It's like a jigsaw puzzle in the wrong box: You think you know what the picture is supposed to be, but something alien takes shapes when the pieces come together. The characters still fight for Ascension, a loved one's life (or their own!) or the continued existence of a Horizon Realm, but now there's a new player.



Serendipity

An ages-old adage states that “if it looks too good to be true, it probably is.” In other words, when things come too easily, there’s usually a reason or a price attached. Fortunately, that danger doesn’t stop many people from taking advantage of a situation and dealing with the consequences later.

Serendipity is extremely useful for perpetuating a Dark-Adventure story or chronicle, because it offers apparent solutions that keep events moving — solutions that must be accounted for in future plots. Say the heroes are Tradition mysticks who have been captured by the Nephandi and are all imprisoned in the same dungeon cell. This introduction brings them together and gives them a common cause, but it doesn’t get things rolling.

But wait — what’s this? The cell door is open! At this point players or characters might actually stop and say, “That’s too easy. Something’s wrong.” However, they would probably say it while they’re diving through the open door. Players might even realize that they’re being manipulated, but sometimes there just wouldn’t be a story if they didn’t bite the carrot at the end of the stick. After all, the characters can figure out what’s going on just as easily from outside the cell as they can from inside.

Perhaps the characters figure out that the Fallen Ones let them escape. Maybe some Tradition (perhaps even a Convention!) infiltrated the labyrinth and freed the char-

There’s a new unexpected force acting on the group, influencing its actions and trying to direct the outcome.

Try this: An international corporation tears up an ancient forest to build a skyscraper. The characters are told to stop or at least delay construction — but the development is actually a cover for an excavation; someone plans to retrieve a precious artifact from the site. While the characters wreak havoc like they’ve been told, a second group from their own Chantry is sent to steal the prize for its own purposes. What does the Chantry plan to do with the item, why would it be willing to sacrifice one of its own cabals to obtain the relic, and is there yet another shadowy puppeteer lurking behind the Chantry’s goals? These kinds of questions can be raised with a single story thread. When you reveal a bit more of the actual situation to the characters, a fresh, complicated, *active* plot line springs into being.

Revealing glimpses of greater powers and true goings-on can make characters realize just how high the stakes are. Such insights increase tension and add impetus to the story and excitement to the plot. The mages aren’t necessarily the movers and shakers they believed they were — there are other forces at work — but knowledge of such powers only motivates the characters to face the odds and to understand their place in Creation.

acters for some reason — to create a diversion for some other event or to observe the characters' ingenuity. Imprisonment may even have been a ploy to introduce a spy among the characters.

Serendipity is completely innocuous in High-Adventure stories. Doors happen to be open, guns are left nearby, vital clues lie around. In *High Adventures*, there's no reason to suspect such coincidences; they just make it easier to stomp the bad guy. In *Dark Adventures*, each convenient coincidence comes back to haunt the characters. The gun happened to be sitting there because the villain left it — so that the cops would find it with your fingerprints on it. You find a clue because it was planted to lead you into a trap. There's always a price to pay. The problem is, you never know what that price is until it's too late. Even the most cautious character, who accepts nothing at face value and who picks up convenient handguns only if she has a handkerchief, can be taken in by clever uses of serendipity.

This isn't something to use every time events in your story slow down or the players hit a wall. Let them discover their own ways out of situations before you lay the answers at their feet. However, it's still fun to insert a few unexpected and unexplained events now and then, just to keep characters on their toes. They can take advantage of an opportunity now, but when — and how — will fate collect its due?

Also consider that serendipity can work against heroes but still perpetuate your story. Say someone calls the police for their own reasons, and the Law happens to arrive just as the characters get the lockpick stuck in the library door. The story certainly takes a new, unexpected turn. Or what if the characters are about to be crushed by a Technocracy construct when the cops show up to answer a "noise complaint" — who's going to argue? That is, at least until the mages' mysterious benefactor turns up and expects something for his troubles. That's when characters learn to love and hate coincidence and players learn to appreciate the charm it brings to storytelling.

Hold the Cheese!

"You burst into the room and there, silhouetted against the window, is your old enemy the evil Dr. Kilroy. He turns as you rush in and stands triumphantly, hands on hips."

"'Hah! Gregor Montgomery, here to save the day! Well, you're too late!' Dr. Kilroy gestures to the wall. You see a row of blinking lights set in gleaming metal and a counter that reads '12:00.' It's counting down!"

"'I've already set my plan into motion,' he declares, striding confidently toward you. 'In 12 hours a massive tidal wave will wash across the country. The United States will be destroyed! When the flood has subsided, my laser-satellites will dry out the country and this land will be mine!'"

"He laughs and grins at you. 'A shame you won't be around to see it.'"



"Dr. Kilroy snaps his fingers and a door opens behind him. Twenty armed men pour in. Leading them is the villain's trained killer Capricorn. She has your girlfriend tied up, with a gun to her head!"

"Damn you, Kilroy!" I back toward the door. "This scheme won't work! I'll find some way to stop you!" I dive backward to escape. I need a plan — fast!"

Whoa! Here's one of the greatest dangers of a High-Adventure chronicle: cheese factor! With all those major villains, high stakes and phenomenal stunts, it's easy to go over the top.

What's wrong with that? If you go too far, your stories and chronicle lose credibility. Crazy villains with giant death rays and ridiculous world-shattering plans reduce your games to the worst kind of camp. No one wants to see these movies twice, so why would players want to come back for your next game session? No one can relate to impossible events; the shit's just plain stupid.

So how do you play a high-stakes game of magick and adventure without smothering your chronicle in Velveeta? Simple: Keep it *human*. A major crisis or two is fine. An earthshaking plot can be fun. Even a little *Pulp Fiction*-style violence can make for an entertaining session. But most events should occur on a more subtle level, even in Dark Adventure. Between universe-shattering dangers, stage more "manageable" events — saving a hardcase kid from the streets or making a significant personal discovery that forces the character to re-evaluate his place in the world. Keep the posturing to a minimum; strive for subtlety over the preposterous.

Okay, so it's easy to get stupid with mages. They're sometimes capable of levitating buildings, splitting bedrock or darkening the sun. That's grandiose all on its own — it doesn't take much more to go overboard. Thankfully, Paradox effects can be a wonderful de-cheesifying tool; put a dark spin on them, make them gritty and threatening, and they'll help scare the bejeezus out of mages prone to comic-book antics. Keep it real, folks.

You might even say the human angle is another interpretation of Dark Adventure versus High Adventure: The Dark-Adventure character may have tremendous power, but dangers that threaten the universe scare the shit out of him. Come on — if something can wipe out the Earth, what could it do to one person? Yet he must face that threat all the same. He has to find the strength to stand and use his power, even though it might burn him out in the process. The High-Adventure hero doesn't care about getting his ass kicked. The Dark-Adventure hero, on the other hand, knows exactly how much getting his ass kicked *hurts*.

Genre Conventions

"All right, Benjamin, I'm here. So what's this you had to show me?"

"Benjamin turns toward you. There's something wrong with his eyes. 'I was meaning to tell you 'bout that, Maestro.'"

"Tell me what?"

"Well, ya see... ' Now you realize what's odd: His eyes are moving in different directions, as if he were watching two different things at the same time. 'I got some good news and I got some bad news,' he says."

"What's the bad news?"

"I lied."

"He steps a bit closer, close enough that you can feel his breath. He's taller than you remember, and he smells of... is that tar?"

"Damn! Taking a step back, I concentrate, shaping sigils with my left hand and drawing my knife with the right. 'So,' I ask him, 'What's the good news?'"

"You know that demon you were looking for?' His left eye focuses on your signing hand and starts to glow an unsettling green. 'You don't have to look any more.'"

Everyone knows how movies go. There's a Movie Plot Handbook out there and there are only about 25 basic plots and a few subplots in it. So when you start a movie you can usually figure out what kind of story it's going to tell within the first half-hour — if not the first 10 minutes. There are patterns called genre conventions. They create rhythms in a story and they complicate the plot. You know what they are, even if you've never really thought about them before: in comedy, the unsuspecting twins who happen to end up in the same city; in horror, the pretty student who goes down to the cellar to investigate noises; in mystery, the smoking gun that bears the fingerprints of a variety of suspects.

In storytelling, players can use genre conventions to recognize the story being told. That misguided college student is a sign of an impending hack-n-slash horror story. A dead body and an array of suspects mean that an Agatha Christie-style murder mystery is on its way. Players can also follow the swelling music, so to speak: When the plot begins to turn a certain way, they take the cues and gear up for a climax or a fight scene. Predictable, yes, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. The anticipation of a brawl can make the industrial-strength can of whup-ass all that much more satisfying once it's open. Waiting around, nerves on edge, can make the discovery of a murder that much more grisly — even though the characters knew it was going to happen!

You can use the following examples of Dark-Adventure conventions to tell your stories and to understand a story you're playing. These trends perpetuate your adventurous chronicle — they're fun to look for and enjoyable to combine in new and entertaining ways. They can even be used to steer events in chosen directions. After all, if a villain's crime spree just gets underway and the characters



interrupt it, they can expect some retaliation against their own friends and allies.

Contacts

Regular informants are a staple of the World of Darkness in general, but they're particularly appropriate to Dark-Adventure games. In fact, contacts in such stories often seek out heroes instead of the other way around, volunteering information because they themselves are afraid of an emerging threat and need the heroes to save their skins. Perhaps contacts come to the heroes as the lesser of two evils.

How can characters turn down free information, especially from a known source? There's usually a price to pay for such help. ("I'll tell you everything I know, but you gotta promise me you'll save my old lady first!") Of course, the information isn't always reliable. In fact, a contact in Dark Adventure can never be trusted. She may have a private agenda. The enemy may have identified the contacts and subverted them, feeding characters false information to lead them into a trap. Despite the dangers, it's always prudent to follow up on a lead, even if it is a trap. Something useful is always learned.

Examples: A messenger from a powerful mob presents a few tasty — and carefully selected — bits of evidence to the mages in return for a blank-check favor later; a kid hanging around the apartment complex sees the investigating heroes and offers to tell them what she saw the other day — but only if they take her with them.

Anonymous Tips

Almost as good as a contact is that mysterious voice on the phone, suggesting that "something interesting's going on." Then there's that unmarked envelope with only a street address inside. And what about those voices you keep hearing? They might be real in *Mage*, maybe spirits speaking from the Shadowlands or mysticks contacting you from afar.

What about the message that appears in flames above your bed, then vanishes a moment later? Who sent it and why? Whose side is the sender on? What are you supposed to do about it? There's no way of telling, but one thing's for certain — whatever's going on, you have an open invitation to poke your nose into the action.

Examples: A man drops a newspaper, conveniently open to a pertinent page, in front of your plate at a restaurant; whispered messages on an answering machine; the TV turns on by itself and shows a video with instructions on it.

The Smoking Gun

Heroes always seem to be rushing in and discovering dying people. Of course the hero kneels down, tries to stop the bleeding and gets blood all over his hands and clothes. When he sees the huge knife lying not far from the victim, he picks it up — naturally! It might be a clue! And of course, everyone else runs into the room right then, while the hero looms over a butchered corpse, murder weapon in hand.

Oops. Looks like someone just got himself stuck in the middle of a murder investigation.

Examples: The classic smoking gun; characters watch someone sneak into and out of the crime scene; a telltale scar or tattoo.

Threats

If someone threatens you, you must be on the right track. The mob sends a hit squad to fuck you up. An image of yourself, horrifically murdered, floats before your eyes. Your investigation must be hitting close to home. Threats are made to scare people off, but they never work for long in Dark Adventures. They might give the hero some pause, but in the end they only prove that he's close to discovering or achieving something important.

Examples: Potshots; mutilated corpses of animals showing up on the porch; arcane sigils scrawled on the front door; magical bonds holding the character motionless for several hours.

Lulls

Nothing's more unsettling than an inexplicable break in the action. Perhaps the Crip leader suddenly freezes, then the entire gang backs off — fast. Far from reducing tension, the lull adds to it — everyone watches their backs, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Are the Powers That Be negotiating a truce or jockeying for better positions? Did a major player just leave or enter, and what does that mean for everyone? Waiting is often the worst part; it gives you time to think up all the worst possibilities for what might be about to happen. If nothing happens for a while, you might start to relax, assuming it's all over — so the Traditions *did* ally with the Technocracy to beat back the Nephandi! But even so, there's a tiny nagging voice in the back of your head that says, "Maybe you should look a little deeper." You can't relax for a minute in case trouble suddenly reappears and catches you unprepared.

Examples: The Marauder looks up, then pops open a portal and disappears; 40 MiBs lower their guns simultaneously; the Dobermans stop growling and sit obediently.

Loss

Nothing makes an already bad situation worse than suddenly losing something or someone you counted on for help and support. It could be an object, a person or even just a feeling — the car breaks down, the character's guide disappears, or his sister is kidnapped. What if the mage's anger has kept him going and it suddenly passes? What if his mentor declares that she can't or won't train him any more?

Responses to loss depend on the circumstances and the character's personality. He might be terrified, incapable of action. On the other hand, he might be fueled by righteous

Remember That Scene in?

Movies, video games, books and comics are full of awesome scenes that beg to appear in your Dark-Adventure stories. Those sources are great for inspiration. However, don't steal from other media directly. If players recognize Jimmy the Saint from *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead*, they may be amused at first; if everyone who passes through your chronicle can be identified as a movie character, your troupe will probably be justifiably disgusted.

Yet borrowing a basic idea and using it as the basis for new ones is perfectly acceptable. You might even suggest that your players watch certain movies before a game or chronicle begins, so they have an idea of what to expect. You could rent a movie and have everybody over to watch it, and then create characters so that the movie's mood and themes are captured in the characters. A list of appropriately inspirational movies can be found in the Appendix.

fury — Oh, the nerve! Either way, the stakes are personal and the story becomes absolutely compelling.

Examples: The characters' Chantry is destroyed; a member of the group is killed; the players find out they've been on the wrong track all along.

Sudden Aid

"The shots tear away at the table you're crouched behind. Your cover is splintering fast!"

"Damn! What am I going to do?"

"Whatever it is, you'd better do it quick, because the gunfire — stops."

"What?"

"It stops. Just like that. All of it. And in the sudden quiet, you hear footsteps."

"I get ready to run!"

"A gloved hand grasps the edge of the table and hurls it aside. You stare up at a woman — waaaaay up."

"Do I know her?"

"Dyed-purple hair. A blood-red tattoo under her left eye. Long black cloak pulled tight around her. You've never seen her before, but she offers you a hand up. Her eyes are jet-black. She says, 'Deacon Patrick sent me. He thought you could use some help.'"

"Um, thanks..."

Unexpected aid seems a blessing on the surface. It might be, in any genre other than Dark Adventure. In these types of stories, such assistance is the last thing a hero wants. It only means more trouble, worse than any he faced before. One more monkeywrench in the works.

Whenever help arrives from an unexpected source, it's a good idea to wonder why. What's in it for the helpers? You won't like the answer, because sudden allies in Dark Adventure aren't really there to help. Whomever's behind this surprise assistance has a private agenda, and it may run entirely counter to your own. Tread lightly.

Examples: An enemy decides to change his ways; a mysterious gunman takes out Marauders in a battle; a mercenary asks to join the group.

Stock Characters

Certain character "types" seem to show up in a lot of Dark-Adventure tales. Everyone recognizes the cop from *The Crow* or the thugs from *Big Trouble in Little China*. They're an intrinsic part of the world. These people aren't necessarily flat, but they do have roles to play and the story just wouldn't be the same without them. These stock characters can also tie into the conventions discussed before: The Sullen Detective combined with the smoking gun helps get players into the mood of a mystery story. Characters might run into these people during the course of their struggles, or these folk might be contacts, allies or other Storyteller tools.

Although action-adventure stories tend to, shall we say, simplify human personalities into shorthand templates, you shouldn't shortchange your supporting cast. The people your mages encounter ought to have some degree of weight and personality, if only to make them more interesting than a room full of Traits. Naturally, no Storyteller can invest a full background history into every wino or gangbanger; all the same, good supporting characters have motivations, desires, prejudices and quirks. Storyteller characters without these facets leave no mark on their world — the game — and just end up as names and statistics. There's no tragedy to their deaths or value to their deeds. If they mean nothing to you, they'll mean nothing to the players' characters.

You don't need copious background notes about these people; a general motivation, description and a handful of personality quirks are all most Storyteller characters ever need. Really important roles should be fleshed out a bit more, of course, and might even warrant their own character sheets if their abilities come into play frequently. The majority of background characters, however, simply need personality and purpose — a *raison d'être* beyond their role in the story.

The Appendices of both the **Mage** rulebook and this supplement feature lists of character Traits, given by type. For a more detailed treatment of supporting characters, their motivations and their possible roles in a story, see Chapter Four of **The Book of Mirrors: The Mage Storytellers Guide**.

Hard-Nosed Cop

"Nice truck. You want to get out of it now? I said now. Hands on the hood, legs apart. Jimenez, search him. Rafe Vaughan, you're under arrest for aggravated assault, grand theft auto and murder in the first degree. I don't care if the cuffs are too tight. They're supposed to be. Now get in the car!"

The Hard-Nosed Cop is a fixture in any city; you can tell him by his battered appearance and no-nonsense attitude. He may be dirty, taking bribes from local crime lords, or he may be completely honest. Either way, he gets the job done, although his methods are very direct and often violent. He's just as happy with a forced confession as a voluntary one. He might even prefer the first — it lets him work out his frustrations. He's trying to set things right, but he knows his efforts won't make much of a difference in the end.

Boy Scout

"How can a corrupt police force uphold justice? How can anyone believe in the law if the people who are supposed to enforce it don't obey it themselves? To call something wrong, you have to be right. That's why I believe in the rules."

The exact opposite of the Hard-Nosed Cop, the Boy Scout believes that he can make a difference. Everything must be clean and above-board to really count for anything, so he upholds his principles without compromise — think Lieutenant Exley in *L.A. Confidential*. You can pick him out by the idealistic gleam in his eye and the resolute set of his jaw. Nothing will stop him from doing what's right. It doesn't matter how bad a place is, there's always at least one Boy Scout around, exhorting people to honor and glory and doing everything according to the rules. He may not last very long, but there's always another to take his place.

Sullen Detective

"Nah, leave him here. He'll come around, and a loser like him'll get picked up for something eventually. Come on, you want some coffee or a sandwich or something?"

You can hear the Sullen Detective grumbling long before you actually see him, but his appearance suits his words: rumped, defeated, resentful. Maybe he was a Boy Scout who abandoned his principles or a Hard-Nosed Cop who finally stopped trying. Either way, the Sullen Detective does only the bare minimum required, and only when anybody's looking. The only reason he's still here is because he doesn't know what else to do with himself, and he figures his long years of service entitle him to take it easy and let others do the work for him. He may still hope that he'll make a difference someday, but every defeat makes him that much more bitter.



Smooth Talker

"Yes, sir. We do have a basement, but it's mainly for storage. We keep packing material and office supplies down there, mostly. If you'd like to look at it, I could call the maintenance man and ask him to bring the key. I'm sure he won't mind coming out at this hour; he's a kind old man, even if the stroke did change him some. He could be here in an hour — he lives out in the boonies, but I could call him. No? I'd be happy to make the phone call for you, sir...."

Appearances make the man, and the Smooth Talker has the art down perfectly. It's all about playing the game, getting what you want any way you can. If you can do it without confrontation, so much the better. You can avoid most difficulties simply by talking and using engaging mannerisms to disarm even the most jaded of souls.

Of course, you should never trust a Smooth Talker; he tells the truth only when it suits him and has no intention of keeping any promises he makes. Underneath the charm, manners and wit, he's cold as a snake and twice as calculating. But he certainly makes it sound good.

Femme Fatale

"No, I'm not very good at flirting at all. I don't usually talk to men unless I'm really interested. I guess we must be special together, because I'm not afraid to tell you how much I'm enjoying being with you. Oh, no, don't pick up the check.... Well, all right, I guess. If you insist."

All curves, inside and out, there's nothing simple about the Femme Fatale. At times bold and brassy, at others vulnerable and frightened, she's always in control and always utterly deadly, but most of her victims never find that out until it's too late. Just as the Smooth Talker hides behind words, the Femme Fatale hides behind her looks and guile, using her allure to get what she wants. It's a weapon and she makes the most of it. Then, when she doesn't have any use for her pawn anymore, she eliminates him and moves on.

Innocent Victim

"Jesus, what was that thing? How did it get here? Oh, God, look at my shop! My shop, my house... how am I going to live? That thing took everything I had."

Every adventure has victims. Otherwise, who would there be to save? Some victims deserve what happens to them; they asked for it. Not so the Innocent Victim. Leading an ordinary life, minding his own business, the Innocent Victim is simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. He may die and invoke the hero's sense of righteousness, maybe sparking the adventure in the first place. Or the victim may survive, scarred for life, a sad reminder of what will happen again if the evil isn't stopped. Either way, the Innocent Victim is testament to the dangers at hand.



Not-So-Innocent Victim

"But I didn't mean I would actually kill him! It was just a figure of speech! He should have known that — it was obvious. And now look what he did. Who's going to pay for this, huh? Who's going to put my life back together?"

Not all victims are innocent. Some bring it upon themselves, usually by meddling with forces they don't understand or by pissing off the wrong people. Of course, in their own eyes they're innocent. How were they to know the mob would come after them? How could they know someone would take an empty threat seriously? Who can blame them for taking a little initiative, trying to get ahead? Most people believe themselves to be good and think they have valid reasons for doing things. In the case of the Not-So-Innocent Victim, actions backfire in a big way, usually injuring others in the process.

Turncoat

"I'm sorry, Research Director. I just don't think this project is going anywhere. I took the liberty of informing Supervisor Betson that progress is virtually nonexistent, and he was quite impressed with my proposal for getting things back on schedule. He even agreed to pay the laboratory a visit to evaluate your performance; he'll be here in a few minutes. Did you need me to mail something for you, sir?"

Nothing's worse than being betrayed by an ally. Turncoats, people who see the grass on the other side and think

it's worth sacrificing a friendship for, decide that success is more important than loyalty. Sometimes they have personal reasons or their ambition gets the better of them. They might believe that betrayal really is the best way. Maybe they secretly hope that they can beat the system and not succumb to its evils. Ironically, the Turncoat inevitably — and usually painfully — learns that the reward isn't worth the sacrifice he makes or is betrayed by the very people to whom he turns.

Plucky Mortal

"No, I'm okay. Really. What the hell was that thing? Never mind, I probably don't want to know. Here, you're bleeding. Wrap this around your arm and keep pressure on it. I'll watch the door, okay? Are there any more out there?"

Some people just don't know when to run and hide. They think everything is a game or they're brave enough to deal with trouble and keep going. The Plucky Mortal is the cab driver who gets shot at while driving you around... and still decides to help you. She's also the hostage who fights back against all odds. Plucky Mortals aren't exactly side-kicks, but they decide what you're doing is right and they stick around to help. Many a hero has been saved by a Plucky Mortal.

Lover

"You don't have to tell me where you're going tonight. I trust you. But come home in one piece, okay? I love you, and I'm going to spend forever with you. So come back to me, babe."

The Lover is maybe the main reason you keep going every day, working not only for money to support the two of you, but for the ultimate Ascension of all humanity. Really, all humanity doesn't matter much to you as long as your Lover is okay and makes it to Ascension with you. Maybe you've been together for years, or you might have just begun the relationship that you know will last the rest of your life, and maybe even longer. Whatever the case, you are inextricably tied to this amazing person. And she is just as devoted to you. Whether or not she knows about your life as a mage, she supports you and would do anything to help you, including sacrifice herself. This makes the Lover a perfect target for your enemies — get the Lover and the villain gets the hero. Hurt the Lover and the villain wounds the hero. But if the hero is killed or put out of action, the Lover can turn into a Vengeful Warrior very quickly.

Devoted Sidekick

"You're going to need help, and I'm coming with you. Hand me that pistol."

The Devoted Sidekick isn't necessarily a hero by herself, but she can sure hold her own in a fight. More importantly, she can watch your back when you need it. Think Gabrielle. Think Robin (in his better days), or even Alfred. Think Dr. Watson or Tonto. Not one of these characters is the equal of the hero, but each has saved the day several times just by being there, by being available to take down that one last goon when the hero was busy doing heroic things. This doesn't mean the Sidekick can't be a mage, though. Apprentices or other lesser mages can make very useful Sidekicks, as can other supernaturals, should you be so lucky as to run across one.

No matter how loyal, no Sidekick works completely for free. Some of the glory has to go to her, and the two of you often gain recognition as a team rather than as "a mage and that person who tags along." In the examples given above, the dynamic duos are just that — duos. If you don't take care to make your Sidekick want to stay around, she could very well leave and try to make a name for herself. A severely neglected Sidekick might even become a Turncoat.

Rival

"Actually, I don't think Meg will be available, sir. Didn't she say something about going on vacation that week with her family? But I can take the assignment for you if you want. And she said she didn't mind if I took over the Barger case; she's been pretty busy dealing with that DUI charge lately. Didn't I tell you about it?"

Friendly competition is one thing. Rivalry is another. The Rival has a personal grudge against you; maybe you

beat him up once and he wants revenge, or you got the scholarship he thinks he deserved, or you remind him of the father who deserted him. Whatever his motives, the Rival isn't just out to win, he's out to beat you in particular and he'll use any means to do it. Rivals can be villains in stories, but they're more likely to be pawns manipulated by a real villain in order to throw you off and get in your way. If that is the case and the Rival finds out about it, he might just declare a truce and work with you to get revenge for being used. However, as soon as that's taken care of, he guns for you again.

Inscrutable Stranger

"The bar is loud and smoky, and it's hard to tell where anyone comes from or where they're going. But the redheaded woman who just slid onto the stool next to you could have come out of nowhere, as far as you're concerned. She smiles. 'Didn't think this seat was taken. Listen, stay away from the south side tonight. Eddie Flint's looking for you.' Before you can offer to buy her a drink, she's gone."

Who was that masked man? No Dark Adventure could be complete without the mysterious figure lurking nearby, always watching but getting involved only occasionally. Like *The X-Files'* Smoking Man, the Inscrutable Stranger appears from time to time, offering terse suggestions or seemingly random scraps of information. No one knows who the stranger really is or how he knows so much. Maybe he's a powerful willworker, a wandering spirit, a vampire or even just a Sleeper who knows more than he should. Regardless, his very presence increases the tension; you can never be sure what he wants or why he's involved, but you know he wouldn't be there if it wasn't important. He might even help you directly from time to time, but don't ever ask why. The Inscrutable Stranger's reasons are his own.

Magickal Stock Characters

You can use genre archetypes in any story. But **Mage** is about magick, which means its characters are a little different from the classics'. You can adapt traditional roles to reflect **Mage's** themes: The Hard-Nosed Cop might be a Disciple who won't rise any higher because he lacks control and motivation, or the Boy Scout may be an Apprentice who's blinded by the possibilities before him. Or you can introduce magickal stock characters such as the Power-Hungry Mage or the Seer, who are specifically suited to reality altering Dark Adventures. As with traditional Dark-Adventure characters, use the following personae as foils, agents, informants and contacts for characters, perpetuating your stories and chronicle based on these people's behavior.

Power-Hungry Magus

"The last piece of the puzzle is in the Practicum of Marcus Blin. The only copy of that tome this side of the Gauntlet lies in the hands of the Order of Hermes. I need that book...."

This one has lost it utterly. Most people want power, and mysticks are particularly prone to it, but the Power-Hungry Mage is obsessed. She's quite strong, but it's not enough. She wants it all. You can tell a Power-Hungry Mage by the mad gleam in her eye, her wild stare and the crackle of energy that surrounds her. If you listen to her rant for even a moment, you know she's completely nuts, so far gone in her dreams of glory that she's lost all sense. Power-Hungry Mages are often villains because they won't let anything or anyone get in their way. The good news is such people usually self-destruct spectacularly. The bad news? Anyone close by is taken with them.

Seer

"Hmm? Oh, yes, sorry, I forgot all about it. I was going to fetch you that stone, but I found this bird cage instead. I was looking at it, and I think I could use it as a pattern for a summoning device. Maybe that would fix the problem I've been having with the balance of elements. But first I'd have to change this slightly... where's my chalkboard?"

Mysticks are always studying and searching, looking for answers of one sort or another. Some of them look a little too long. The Seer has been staring into the unknown so hard he's forgotten everyday reality. His eyes are half-glazed, always looking *through* things. His clothes are a mess; he probably hasn't washed in days or weeks. Mundane details are beneath his notice; he forgets to eat and drink unless someone reminds him. Not all Seers are fuzzy Time Masters, though; Dr. Emmett Brown from *Back to the Future* is a perfect example of a Son of Ether turned Seer.

But the Seer may be onto something. He perceives things no one else can, hears things others miss. That sensitivity makes the Seer dangerous; you can't predict what he'll do or even understand what he's reacting to. Seers make insane villains because their actions don't make any sense to others. They're more likely dangerous allies: useful if characters can get them going in the right direction, liabilities if they get off track.

Has-Been

"I used to be able to do that. I probably still could, but I haven't tried in a long time. I don't know; I haven't done anything like it in... oh... years, I think. But I used to be able to. See? Here's something I made when I was about 30. I was just trying a new technique and I came up with this. Isn't it wonderful? I rather like it."

It's sad, really. Magick is controlled by the will. Over time, even the will can fade. The Has-Been is usually clothed in the relics of the past, of his glory years — and they

were *glorious*. He was a force to be reckoned with. The skill and knowledge are still there, but the will, the self-confidence so necessary for magick, is gone. Without it, the Has-Been is a pale shell of his former self.

Has-Beens can be useful resources. They know a great deal and their aid can be enlisted occasionally, for what it's worth. The old power returns from time to time, but not often and never for long. Such events usually depress the Has-Been further; they remind him of what he once had.

Manipulator

"Now, would you look at that? Enviroprep Incorporated's stock has gone up 50 points! Good thing I invested in that yesterday, eh? Reading those industry journals really helps sharpen your business senses, I must say. And if you really want to make some money, read up on statistics and on horse care. Then go to the track, do a little math, look at a few ponies, and there you are!"

Most mysticks use coincidental magick; it's safer and often more reliable than vulgar effects. The Manipulator uses only such tricks. He never reveals his full ability, hiding the fact that he works magick at all. Most people simply shake their heads in amusement and disbelief, which is just the way he likes it.

The Manipulator's goal isn't to change the world, only to find an advantageous position for himself. Magick is simply a tool and his tools work best when no one sees them, so opponents can't anticipate or block his strikes. Manipulators are dangerous opponents. They always have a backup plan and you can't tell what they're going to do next.

Elitist

"I don't care what your neighbor thinks. You're the one who knows better, and your opinion is the only one that matters to me. Forget your neighbor, forget your husband. This is what's important, we're the ones who matter and everyone else can go hang. Got it?"

For some, willworking means membership to a club, the greatest of all. If you realize the club exists, you're already a member. The Elitist believes firmly in "Us" and "Them." After all, she recognizes the truth and can manipulate it. No Sleeper can do that. So she's special and should be treated accordingly. Younger mages, less experienced in the mystick arts than the Elitist, are included in "Them," though they are accorded a bit more respect than the average Sleeper.

The Elitist may dress in any fashion, although most wear expensive outfits. What really sets the Elitist apart is her attitude. She walks briskly, eyes straight ahead, and ignores everyone unless they're also Awakened. Lesser mages must content themselves with trailing along in her wake; Sleepers simply have to get out of her way — whatever they're doing can't possibly be important. Elitists make deadly opponents and dangerous allies because they



don't care about Sleeper casualties. An Elitist is quite willing to destroy a city to stop a single rival.

Insecure Apprentice

"I don't know. Do you think it's okay? I'd hate to piss him off. All right, I'll ask him if I can go. I just don't want to have everybody mad at me because I had to go to the bathroom and wasn't there when someone needed me. You know what I mean?"

Most willworkers are overwhelmed when they're first Awakened — so many new things, so much to learn and re-learn. Some adapt quickly, taking it all in stride and moving on. Others don't. The Insecure Apprentice can't believe what's happening to him and is convinced he isn't worthy. In fact, he privately believes there's been some kind of mistake, that he's a fake, and that everyone will find out.

Insecure Apprentices make excellent pawns. They listen to anyone who knows more than they do. They assume their superiors are in the right and they trust blindly, too afraid to ask questions. Of course, they also make good cannon fodder for the same reasons. If they survive, they eventually learn and develop confidence and trust in themselves.

Aged Master

"No! Stop! Do it again. I told you, use the blue stone for the west. You children never listen to me! I have never had such an

awful group of apprentices. If you children had read anything at all, this would all be second nature to you. Do you ever do anything but watch TV?"

Some people remember the past fondly. The Aged Master wants to go back. To her, the past is glorious, wonderful, perfect. Today, in contrast, is dirty, smelly and flawed. People are weak, soft and petty. The Aged Master knows a great deal, but unlike the Has-Been, her will is still strong. Yet the Aged Master can't accept that the past is gone or that the present has merit. You can learn a lot from her, assuming you can put up with her complaints and her constant reminiscing.

Vengeful Warrior

"What I think we should do is go in there and take him down by force. He was the one who organized the raid, and he's the one we should be going after. Talking isn't going to do anything to stop him, so I say we just take him out first, ask questions later."

The Vengeful Warrior is a threat to everyone. He's tough, strong and iron-willed, but he's also blindly fanatical and ignores reason or tact. The Vengeful Warrior is capable of walking into a crowded room and firing at his enemy, ignoring bystanders. He has no control, no logic... nothing left but blind rage and all-consuming hatred.

You can use the Vengeful Warrior as a weapon, but only as a cannon; there's no fine control. Beware the recoil.



Thrill-Seeker

"Whoa, that was way cool! Here, try this: First you throw the parachute out, then you count to five, then you jump out and try to catch it and put it on. All with your eyes closed and no jump suit!"

Power can be intoxicating. Some people try to grab all they can and ride the wave. Others use what they have to excite themselves. The Thrill-Seeker loves magick, not because of its potential, its implications or even its real-world applications, but because magick is cool. Magick lets her do what she wants, when she wants, without restrictions — it's the ultimate Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card. Thrill-Seekers thrive on danger, adrenaline rushes and near misses. Magick gives them greater opportunities for excitement, but it also makes "mundane" risks safe. How dangerous is a free fall if you can teleport to safety? Thrill-Seekers always seek bigger and better stunts. The problem, of course, is that someday the magick might not work the way the adrenaline junkie plans.

Never trust a Thrill-Seeker. They're not enemies, because they don't care enough to bother with agendas, but they can't be relied on, either. A Thrill-Seeker simply cares about his next rush, no matter at whose expense he achieves it. However, sometimes these reckless mages see or learn things that no one else would — frankly, no one else is suicidal enough to try.

Seducer

"Come on, you can get away for one night, can't you? You have to see this place; it's absolutely stunning. You could explore it all day and still have seen just the tiniest fraction of the sights. And the people! They're so friendly, and there are so many different kinds of them. I mean, it's just something you have to see. You can leave your books for a couple of hours, right?"

Magick is seductive — all that power, the ability to reshape the world as you choose, freedom from restrictions. That seduction is dangerous, because it has terrifying consequences. The Seducer knows this. He works on you, tempting you, offering you freedom and pleasure, but there's always a cost. The Seducer has his own goals, his own plans; you're just a means to an end. Like the Femme Fatale, he lures you in and gets what he wants, then kicks you aside. But the Seducer usually has bigger plans than does the Femme Fatale, and he may want more from you than your money or your keys. He may want your soul. Seducers are dangerous enemies; they're so convincing that it's difficult to say "no," even if you're aware of their true goals. Most Nephandi are accomplished Seducers.

The Craft



Sure, it's easy to say, "Here are all these storytelling ideas," but how do you actually work them into a game? How do you introduce the Inscrutable Stranger, up the stakes or use serendipity without whipping out the Velveta? More importantly, how do you keep events from getting stupid like this: "Okay, the man attacks you. Biff! Bam! Zap! You win," or this: "Yes, he's the villain — you know him by his black hat"?

The idea is to make your story complex and involved — and let it kick some ass. This is where you bring in the craft of storytelling. If you do it right, these storytelling techniques work like good special effects: They flow into the story, make it look cool, and get the players all pumped up — all at the same time.

Crosscutting

Crosscutting is basically the deep, booming voice saying, "Meanwhile—" and the camera panning over to another group of characters in a different place, doing their own thing. Here's the trick to crosscutting: There's "player knowledge" — what your friend Bob knows — and there's "character knowledge" — what Bob's Akashic Brother Begasi knows. Good players keep the two separate; they act only on what their characters know, not what the players themselves know. But nobody's perfect and player knowledge influences character actions a little, despite our best efforts. You, as Storyteller, can use that tendency for the story's benefit.

Here, watch: A group of characters is hot on the trail of a mystick artifact they think has been used to subvert their Tradition's strongest mages. Two of the young mages head off on their own to check out a business about which they've heard rumors. The other three stay at the Chantry, digging through the library for references to the strange item.

"Okay, Begasi and Lisa Rain reach the store without a problem. The sign in front reads 'Chapman's Curious Goods.' The windows are tinted, but there seems to be a light inside."

"I try the door."

"It swings open and a small bell sounds overhead."

"Cool! Let's go!"

"The two of you step inside, blinking in the dim light. Shelves line the walls. They're crammed full of books and various odd shapes that you can't make out."

"I take a look around!"

"Yeah, me too!"

"Okay... Meanwhile! You other three are in the Chantry's library, searching through its books for any reference to torques."

"Right — Johann is checking on ancient Talismans just in case."



"Melody's flipping through members' journals to see if anyone's encountered them."

"The hell with this! The laws of Chance always favor Harlan. He begins to chant, rubbing his finger across his lucky coin. He takes a book at random and sets it on the table, letting it fall open wherever it chooses."

"Nice move, Harlan. The book you've selected is called *Secrets of the Celts*. It falls open to a section about torques."

"I act nonchalant. 'I think this is what we're looking for.'"

"Showoff!"

"Hey, it worked. Don't knock it. What does it say?"

"It explains that torques are ornamental neck rings, like necklaces but much heavier and made of solid metal instead of chain. They're shaped like the letter C. The opening goes in front, over your throat. Most of them are made of gold, with precious stones inlaid in the engraving or decoration. They're hard to find now, considered antiques."

"Speaking of antiques... What are you two doing, Begasi and Lisa?"

"Browsing! What's here?"

"All sorts of things, from little plastic toys to beautifully carved wooden statues to costume jewelry to marble chess sets to stereos."

"Wow! This place is great! I check out the jewelry!"

"As you reach for a piece a dry voice behind you says, 'Can I help you?' The man standing there looks almost as old as some of the antiques — he's thin and slightly stooped. His skin is the color of old wood."

"We're just looking, thanks."

"Begasi, you notice there's something around the man's neck, under his shirt. It gleams slightly, even in the dim light."

"I point to the trinket Lisa was looking at. 'How much is this?'"

"He turns the tag and squints at it. 'Twenty dollars. That's real amber.' As he moves closer, you get a better look; his necklace seems heavy, solid metal, and there's a hint of red at its tips."

"Okay, thanks. I put it back and look at the rest of the jewelry."

"Okay. Now, Melody, the book goes on about how torques were worn by druids and consecrated to their gods. Different stones were used to indicate different deities. Each torque was said to have great powers."

"Huh. Say, what would — oh, I don't know — a red stone represent?" Harlan asks."

"According to the book, the only red stone is ruby, which is dedicated to Morrigan, goddess of war."

"Lisa, I think we should get out of here. Now. I have a funny feeling about that guy."

There. Even though Begasi (Bob) and Lisa Rain (Michelle) weren't in the library, the players couldn't help but let their characters' behavior be affected by what the



others found out. They might have been suspicious of the man in the store to begin with, but Bob's hearing about the torque added to Begasi's anxiety, increasing the tension. Begasi might not ask about the store owner's necklace now, because Harlan's simultaneous research reveals all that the players need to know: Morrigan's druids are involved.

You probably shouldn't use this storytelling technique too often or players might get used to being handed answers on a silver platter. However, crosscutting allows you to give out related information all at one time without boring repetition. When the heroes reunite, players can give their characters all the information about what a torque is, where to find one, and maybe someone to watch and follow just by saying, "We tell each other what we found." This technique allows the story to progress quickly, capitalizing on the dramatic tension you've just created with the new plot twist.

Foreshadowing

Drop occasional hints of what will happen further down the line in your chronicle to keep players interested. You don't have to explicitly say that the characters' friend will turn out to be a werewolf. You can drop general clues, though, ominous ones that suggest without telling.

"You notice that Rachel moves smoothly through the woods, gliding silently from tree to tree; you have trouble keeping up with her. You step into a clearing to see her standing in front of you, frozen in place, face tilted up to the moon, eyes closed."

That's enough to suggest that something is going on in the background of your chronicle, even if it's not pertinent to the events at hand. It's a sequel hook.

Cliffhangers

What better way to end a night's session than to stop at a high point, to make players wait impatiently to see how events turn out? Old serial movies end with cliffhangers, the hero about to crash his plane into a mountain or about to be run over by a train. The only problem is, the serials cheat. The next episode starts with the hero avoiding certain death miraculously. You're never told how he does it. Don't cheat — if the characters are in a car that hurtles over a cliff, end the session there. Start next week with the characters plunging to their death. Rehash the final scene before you start the new session — get the mood, the emotion, set back to where it was the week before. Hopefully the players have devised an escape after a week's feverish brainstorming. If not, well, those can be the stakes of a Dark-Adventure game.

A cliffhanger doesn't have to be life-threatening. A mysterious stranger appearing with crucial information, the death of a vital ally, a diametrical change in missions — these are all cliffhangers. As long as players are left shrieking, "But what happens *next*?" the cliffhanger has worked,

no matter what it's made of. Grab the group's interest, rivet them to the scene — and then make them come back for more.

Symbolism

If every villain wears a black hat, all of the trustworthy allies are in white, and morally questionable characters are in gray, where's the fun? Symbolism should be subtle, a faint hint that something means more than it outwardly suggests. Perhaps a book bursts into flames while you discuss delving into someone's past — a none-too-subtle warning to leave the person alone. That's pretty obvious, so where's the symbolism? Well, maybe the book is Shakespeare's *The Tempest* — a hint that the mage in question wants to be left alone for purely personal reasons; he isn't necessarily a bad person, just an intensely private one. On the other hand, if the book is a law dictionary, the implication is much more sinister.

Symbols are rarely certain, so they could mean all sorts of things. That's part of their charm. A symbol is intended to make players think, to examine circumstances more closely and to add a layer of meaning to events and objects. Sometimes players might come up with an interpretation that you, as the Storyteller, hadn't thought of — what's to stop you from incorporating their new idea into your game? Symbols are, after all, flexible!

Runaway Timelines

Remember that serendipity can work against characters. One way is the runaway timeline. Establish what's happening in the world and what Storyteller characters are up to. Set up a timeline for events and plans; decide how quickly events happen and what their repercussions are. Stick to that schedule.

Anything that players' characters don't interfere with happens as planned. So they never bothered to think that the fanatic on the street had a bomb with him — why should they? He's just a cardboard bystander, right? *Wrong*. They just happen to be in the area the next day when the bomb goes off. These "peripheral" events don't necessarily have anything to do with what the characters are currently involved in, but the mages don't know that. Let them get paranoid — it's fun.

Runaway timelines force the characters to keep a constant eye out, and not just on their own agendas. Unanticipated events serve to remind characters that they're not as central to the universe as they might like to believe, which is necessary on occasion to remain in the *human* purview of Dark Adventure. Runaway timelines also add depth to your stock characters: Gosh, they don't just sit around and drool into buckets when the heroes are off doing their thing, after all!

Real-time Action

An extreme way to make your story immediate and gripping is to kick the game into real-time. The players have only as much time in reality as their characters do in the game. If the characters find a bomb and the counter is down to five minutes, bring a stopwatch, set it to five minutes and start the countdown. The players and characters have that much time to disable the bomb or get the hell out of there. No fudging — if the timer rings, that fucker explodes! If the players sit around and argue about who gets the wire clippers, the characters have to be scraped off a few yards of brick. Sorry, but no hero survives a one-on-one encounter with plastic explosives. Suddenly your game is very tense and very real. Don't overuse this technique, though. Save it for genuine crises.

Red Herrings

Communism was just a red herring.

— Wadsworth the Butler, *Clue*

A man walks by, black trench swishing, and drops a business card on the street. Wait! Was that the Inscrutable Stranger? Nah. He's just full of it. But can the characters risk not checking up on his lead? There are rarely clear-cut paths in real life, and red herrings emulate that fact.

Red herrings are typically dead ends. However, they do bring depth to your game and once again remind characters

that they're human, not gods. The universe has its own agendas that exceed the deeds of even magick-wielding action heroes.

Then again, red herrings aren't necessarily useless. Perhaps something you happened across earlier — serendipitously, of course — turns out to be helpful later. Players and characters never know what might be important, which is why they can't afford to pass up most opportunities.

The key here is this: Never make a big deal about something that isn't ultimately useful. Red herrings should be asides. If a player chooses to make a big deal out of one, that's her decision, but you shouldn't actually mislead her.

The Tools of the Trade

A good mechanic masters the tools he needs to keep an engine running. A good Storyteller or contributing player must also learn the conventions and traditions of a genre to keep a story unfolding. Dark Adventure has definite conventions and traditions. The important thing to remember is that both Storyteller and player must learn to use these tools. The Storyteller can accomplish only so much by laying clues at players' feet or by introducing "bystanders" whose behavior suggests that there's more to these people than meets the eye. Players need to understand the type of story being told, look for pointers that perpetuate the plot, and run with them. The result is a kick-ass Dark-Adventure story in which everyone has a hand.

Firestorms



"The last thing that goes through the Marauder's mind is probably the leather thing that holds his nappy hair out of his face. The Harley can't stand up to the abuse any more and it disintegrates, sending the insane mage facefirst into a tree. He barely has time to scream — 'Ohhhh shit—' And then he's gone, his words fading on the morning breeze."

"Morning?"

"Yes. You glance around and realize that the sun is coming up. The battle of wills took the entire night. Now fatigue sets in; your knees threaten to buckle and your vision blurs."

"I lean against Lisa and prop her up at the same time. 'God, I thought we were toast!'"

All good things must come to an end. Games and stories are no different. Sooner or later everything falls into place and your story reaches its conclusion. This is particularly true of epic Dark Adventures, because you can't sustain a fever pitch too long before characters and players burn out. Even a major crisis must be resolved at some point. Otherwise the story turns into yet another comic book: "Yeah, I know he's trying to destroy the world, but he's been trying for the last 20 years. Why should today be any

different?" And with **Mage**, everything ultimately comes down to a battle of wills. Such battles are won or lost; they're too intense to hang in stalemate for long. The first to falter is crushed and tossed aside.

So what do you do when the end finally comes in a **Mage** Dark Adventure?

Endings versus Resolutions

Remember that the end of the conflict is not necessarily the end of the story. We're used to movies, which end immediately after the climax of the story — right after the visible threat is gone. But what happens to the characters the next day? What do they do after the cameras stop rolling? Their lives go on, but how? The resolution is when *all* of the threats are taken care of. Never assume that the most apparent threats are the most dangerous; the long-term ones are often the worst, especially since they might be overlooked until it's too late. The *real* threat may not be the mage who throws fireballs, but his tall, quiet ally with the faceted eyes — and *her* plan to rupture the Gauntlet. Players and characters quickly learn that there's more to a story than its explosive climax when loose ends come back to haunt them.

Success!

If the characters overcome the opponents and challenges they face, what then? Where does that leave things? You could end the story *Star Wars*-style, with the characters receiving commendations. Recognition is rewarding. But here's a Dark-Adventure tip: The greater the undertaking, the greater the cost. The hero is severely wounded for his efforts, one or more buildings are destroyed, and/or a lot of people suffer or die. The characters may destroy a demon, but not before it scars one of them for life, shatters another's worldview and murders the brother of a third — not to mention what it does to innocent bystanders and the characters' Chantry.

Exacting a toll for success doesn't mean you should announce, "Well, yeah, you beat him, but your life sucks now. Deal with it." The characters still win, so let them enjoy it. However, remind the mages that there's more to life than beating up bad guys, stopping invasions or discovering rich sources of Quintessence. Realizing what you've lost makes you appreciate what you've won.

Rebuilding after a devastating, if victorious, battle can also be a jumping-off point for a new chapter in the story. What if the characters are asked to help oversee the construction and reorganization of a new Chantry? What kinds of plots and challenges can grow out of that situation?

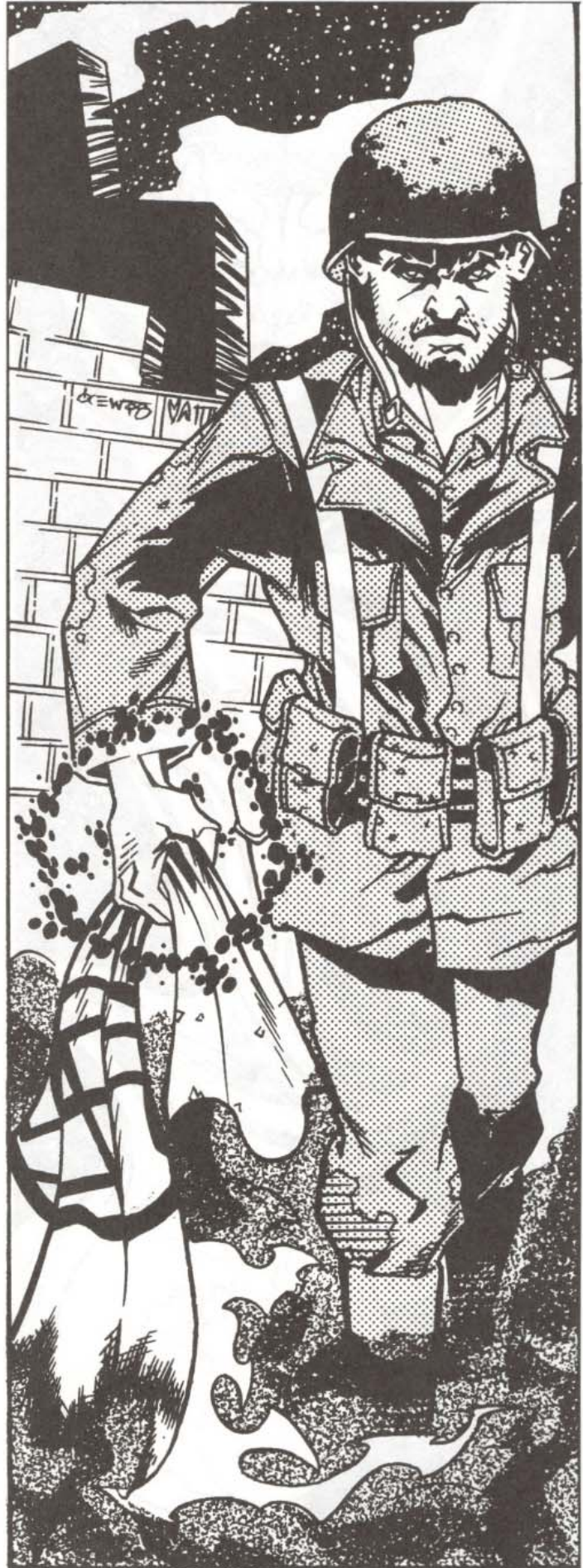
Failure!

Sometimes things don't work out for the characters, even if you fudge details a little for their benefit. They may fail to accomplish part or all of their objective. Don't coddle players or their characters. If they succeed at everything all the time, they won't appreciate each victory and they'll become careless and arrogant. Defeat and failure teach us a lot about ourselves and the world. In many ways, they're more instructive than victory.

Guilt trips over catastrophic failures can also be very effective story motivators. After the mages fall flat on their faces, they might want to make up for it (or at least prove to someone that they're not *total fuckups*). Bam! You have a whole new story ready to spin out: vengeance and redemption. The story ends in failure with personal ramifications, but the players can continue to contribute to the resolution and are active parts of the storytelling event.

Scorecards

The last one standing wins. But what if both opponents still stand when the dust clears? Does that mean the fight goes on? Not necessarily. One side may be defeated, but that doesn't mean he or she is out of the game completely or incapable of action. What if both sides are down? Did the one who took the least damage win? Can you even measure something like that?





Sometimes interpreting the outcome of a story or climax is as challenging as the actual conflict. You killed the murderer, so you win — but the Technomancer who ordered the murders gets away scot-free. Now that you're onto the real killer, you can guard against her efforts. However, you can't prove anything! The scapegoat is dead and you aren't strong enough to wrest the truth from the Technomancer. In the end, she didn't even have to pay or dispose of the assassin. You took care of that for her. So who's the real winner here?

Ultimately, it doesn't matter much who "wins" or "loses." Such terms are highly subjective, anyway. If you're pleased with the outcome of a story, you win. You may not have accomplished what you set out to (perhaps your brother's killer was already dead when you found her, so you couldn't exact your revenge), but you get something as good or even better (you find out why your brother died and come to terms with his death).

If you aren't satisfied with the story's outcome, you "lose" — for now. But there are always opportunities for rematches and revenge in storytelling.

A lot of resolution is based on attitude. Some people find the good in any situation and always win at least a minor victory. Others see only the negative and always consider themselves to have lost. In *Mage*, where the power of mind and will alter reality itself, success or defeat truly is a matter of perspective and what you choose to accept.

Change

No matter what the result of a story or conflict, whether the characters win or lose, the world changes. After all, transformation is the essence of *Mage*. In Dark-Adventure terms, things should never return to "the way they were before." The status quo should never be maintained. No one should be just as secure or vulnerable as he was before a story began. If characters themselves don't grow, learn, falter or fail at the end of a story, that tale has lacked the epic scope that makes Dark Adventures worth playing.

Dark-Adventure heroes are faced with extreme situations. They must dedicate themselves fully to the dangers at hand, which is immensely draining, requiring every bit of energy and focus. If characters put that much of themselves into something, they are affected profoundly when it's all over, regardless of whether they succeed or not. It might be necessary to sacrifice something a character holds dear — a person, an object, a belief — in order to succeed. (A mage who has sworn to protect all life may have to kill, or someone may have to pass on a chance for revenge and allow an enemy to escape.) Personal efforts and sacrifices make characters — and players — into different people: relieved, tormented, placated, regretful. The point is, something about the players, the characters or the game world changes; each story puts its own brand upon the game.

But Wait!

The story draws to a close. It's time to put away the characters, the setting and the game. Or is it? There's always more to tell, more to do. In fact, you may simply intend to tell a story and actually start down the road of a chronicle just by virtue of playing.

In the case of the young mages struggling against Morrigan's druids and the influence of the powerful entity inhabiting the torque, the characters might destroy the artifact and eliminate all the druids — or think they do. Sequel time! What if one druid lives and Morrigan channels into him? Now she's not only out to take over the world (again!), but she has a pretty hefty score to settle with the mages! Really believable Dark-Adventure antagonists just don't walk off the scene calmly, like they do in *Scooby Doo* — really good enemies never stop with, "And I would have gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for those meddling kids!"

So, can the now more experienced characters find the possessed druid and stop Morrigan's next plot before they fall prey to her bloodlust? Tune in next time!

There's also the idea of a spinoff series. If the players have enjoyed the game and really gotten into the setting, they might want to play it again with different characters. Telling a story again is exciting because it gives both players and Storyteller a chance to experience things from completely different perspectives.

You can also tell stories from both sides. A game that pits Tradition characters against a Technocracy plot could be followed up with a story about Technocracy characters recovering from a recent setback. Experimenting with story perspectives allows the players to enjoy new characters, attitudes and abilities in the very world they already know.


When you come right down to it, adventure is all about trying new things and seeing where they take you. The results can be pure magick — or some neat special effects, but this is Dark Adventure, so who can tell? If it's fun, who cares?



Chapter Three: Boom!

Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing... Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature.

— Helen Keller, *The Open Door*



<< REALITY DEVIANT
ALERT! COORDINATES: 6° N —
60° V — 100° H. INITIATE TER-
MINAL MEASURES>>

To the naked eye, the pair in front of me are friendlies. I even recognize them from meals in the Construct cafeteria: a pair of exo-jocks straightnamed Bruce and Patti. I always wondered if they caught the irony of their nicks.

According to the devo-scanner, though, they're sporting more than regulation hardware, and their smiles look pretty sick for a pair of Xers. Normally, their type have a faraway look to them. This pair radiates hardcore malice.

I always wondered how I'd do in a square-off with an exo. Now it looks like I'll find out.

"Hi, Agent Randall!" Patti's greeting is sharp and flat as a blade. Bright and cold as one, too. Bruce steps back a bit, flexing slightly in that he-man affectation bodybuilders seem to love. Red

light shines faintly from behind their eyes, but the light never reaches their steely grins.

Behind my shades, my own eyes pick out clues: Those "ate-your-cat-ha-ha" grins. Poses more arrogant than those of run-of-the-mill exos. Unhealthy tinges of gray in their otherwise flawless skin. They both carry a faint scent of decay, too... not death, exactly (I've met my share of walking corpses), but a far cry from the antiseptic buzz you normally catch around Xers.

<<ANALYZE THREAT — FULL ASSESSMENT>>, I mentally command the devo-scanner. To the exos, I offer a friendly, "Hey, guys! What's going on?"

"This is a restricted area, Agent Randall," chirps Patti. "You should know we can't let you through."

"Yeah," seconds her companion. God, I'll bet they even screw in stereo. If cyborgs screw, that is.

I tender my best "I'm with the Government and I'm here to help you" smile, waiting on the devo-prog to peel away the disguises from these two. "Orders suggest I get my tired ass to Sector Y before 05:00. You know how important orders are."

"We weren't notified," Bruce intones. "Where's your authorization pass?"

I fish out the all-purpose flash I carry for citizens. Technos are usually harder to fool, but exos aren't known for their brain capacity. A quick press on the keypad and the pass grants me instant access to the lab behind the borgies. "Priority B," I add for emphasis, giving the statement a firm gravity.

Any normal citizen would let me right through. I'm good at my job. These two just sneer like cats. I hate cats.

"That spook paper might be good for cops and tourists," Patti says, chipper as a stewardess on ecstasy, "but you should know better than to flash it at us." Subtle clicks betray hidden weapons shifting into place.

"We have to report you now, you know," Bruce adds, equally chipper. "Certain people will want to know what you're doing here."

Where the hell is that analysis? I need to know....

<< ALERT! SENSORS INDICATE CORRUPTION ON A MOLECULAR LEVEL: CONTRABAND BIO-TECHNOLOGY, PSYCHO-EMANATIONS OF A HOSTILE NATURE AND TRACES OF COUNTERPROCEDURE X5. FITS PROFILE OF SUSPICIOUS OPERATIVES. RESPOND WITH EXTREME CAUTION. TERMINATE IF POSSIBLE !>>

Great. I always wondered how well I would throw down against a borgie. As their miniguns slide into place and my holdout spits a G5 Needler into my palm, I figure I'll find out how I'll do against two....

Waves of War

Security is particularly absent in the world of the mage. Despite (or because of) the titanic power that individual sorcerers wield, security among the Awakened is truly an illusion. A mage might shut herself away in a distant monastery (as many Akashics do), wander the Otherworlds alone (as many shamans do) or sequester herself in a hidden Realm (as many wizards and Technocrats of all descriptions do), but sooner or later, the tides of conflict wash up on her shores.

Sometimes those tides rise from local currents, from dope dealers, eager cops, mystick rivalries or rampaging Bygones; other times, they swell up from deep waters, from the shadow-games of vampires and their ilk, the contests of great Umbrood, or from the eternal Ascension conflict. Regardless, adventure is the mage's lot. Granted, a young mystick is most likely to go jumping off cliffs and ducking gunfire, but some challenges — mad dragons, Technocratic purges and the like — are beyond the means of lesser magicians. Only the most powerful mages can stand against those waves!



The following “waves” can sweep through your characters’ lives, causing any number of Dark Adventures. Some are “stand alones” that should fit any troupe; others are based on events occurring in the “official” **Mage**

backstory. Within each suggestion, the “Options” section offers several variations on the basic concept, and “Resources” details other books that might come in handy when running the story.

Enjoy!

General Stories



When your chronicle needs jazzing up, when the guys are on their way over for a knock-down session, when the heaviness of paradigm-shifting and esoterica has left you a bit foggy, these “generic” adventures make great pick-me-ups. The specifics are left for you to decide; they could involve Tradition dust-ups, Technocratic missions, survival runs for independent magi, consor tasks or even (should you care to run them) unholy jaunts for Mad or Fallen characters.

“Mr. Big Is Unhappy. Very Unhappy”

Some important Sleeper has a grudge against the mages. Maybe he’s the mayor from Chapter One, waging a crusade against “satanic cultists”; or perhaps he’s a gang boss whose operations have been upset by the cabal’s activities. He might be a street crazy with lots of friends, a rich eccentric with subtle resources, a police chief who knows too much, or a witch-hunter who thinks he understands what he can’t even comprehend. “He” could be a “she,” of course, or even a “they.” The important elements are the powerful mortal adversary, the grudge, the adversary’s resources, and the means to give the characters hell.

The adversary in question isn’t stupid. Chances are he knows better than to simply send a team of stooges in to get creamed (although such diversions might tell him what he needs to know about the characters). An enemy who says, “Here I am, assholes!” to rivals who can use Correspondence or Time is dead meat. A really effective “Mr. Big” ought to remain hidden — too hidden to be traced by magick. His resources should include legal allies (cops, lawyers, judges and the press), illegal allies (gangs, terrorists, private enforcers), political influence (press coverage, religious institutions, “favors”) and hard cash. He probably sets up a screen of allies and misdirections around his operations, too — a bad guy who sends his goons around to “deliver a message from Mr. Big” isn’t in business for long. The mages may not even know what hits them, why, or where the next blow is coming from.

That’s part of the advantage of a mortal antagonist. While a powerful magus or vampire elder might try to take matters into his own hands, a mortal who goes up against the forces of the night probably has enough sense to keep his head down. He might not even know what he’s up against — surely there’s no such thing as magick! — only that his opponents have resources and talents that make them formidable. And as any smart fighter knows, it’s best to go in quietly if your opponent can blow you to hell. Smart strategies include conspiracies (“It’s in our best interests to eliminate those cultists, don’t you agree?”); stooges (“Here’s \$1000. Kill that man!”); societal pressure (“My fellow citizens, these people are a threat to us all!”); betrayal (“I know we were friends, but times change...”); misdirection (“What are you talking to me for? He’s the guy you want!”); seduction, sexual or otherwise (“A \$10,000 raise if you work for me...”); sabotage (“Why doesn’t my ATM card work?”), or a combination of the above.

How far is he willing to go? Your call. Maybe he just wants something the mages have, like an ancient artifact or a mystical tome. Perhaps he simply demands an apology, or a duel “to the first blood” in which no one suffers great harm. He could be looking for information, like a reporter scooping a big story or a detective pursuing a lead. He might be a thrill-seeker who desperately wants a piece of the action, even if he has to fight for it. Or he could be deadly serious — a disowned child, a survivor of a magickal fight, a person orphaned by the activities of the mages, or a wronged or jealous lover. Conventional morality may sympathize with the opponent — if a wizard killed your mother, you’d want blood, too! The authorities might very well take his side... especially if he can prove that the mages are a threat to society. Decide on your antagonist’s motivations and you understand what he’s willing to do to fulfill them.

“Mr. Big” adventures work best as short stories sandwiched between long-running plots. For extra spice, tie the tale to something that happened in a previous session: That kid killed in the firefight? She was the senator’s daughter. Those thugs who were trashed a few weeks ago? They’ve formed a pact with other gangs and have sworn to kill the mages or die trying. “Mr. Big” doesn’t have to be a remote figure, either. A story in which the antagonist turns out to be a disgruntled friend can be very powerful indeed....

Options

A chronicle could be built around a mysterious antagonist (or group of them) who dogs the sorcerers everywhere they go. Every so often, another scheme causes the characters some degree of heartbreak. As they search for the source of their problems, the enemy blindsides them with new and more devious attacks. As soon as they think they know his M.O., "Mr. Big" changes his tactics.

Maybe "Mr. Big" has already won. Perhaps the characters are on the run from an enemy they don't even know exists. The HIT Marks who trashed their Chantry were sent there on a tip from "Mr. Big," even if he himself didn't know what he was sending against his opponents. As they reconstruct what went wrong, the mages might discover they had — and still have — a secret enemy. But who, why and where? What can even a wizard do against a foe she can't see?

"Mr. Big" might not know who *he's* fighting, either. Chances are, he assumes the Awakened Ones are a bunch of annoying kids, pesky cultists or bad cops. What might he do if his operations uncover some Ascension War secrets, like Technocratic Devices or a magickal grove? Might he go to the police? The government? The press? What if he *is* the police, government or press...? Oh my, this could get complicated....

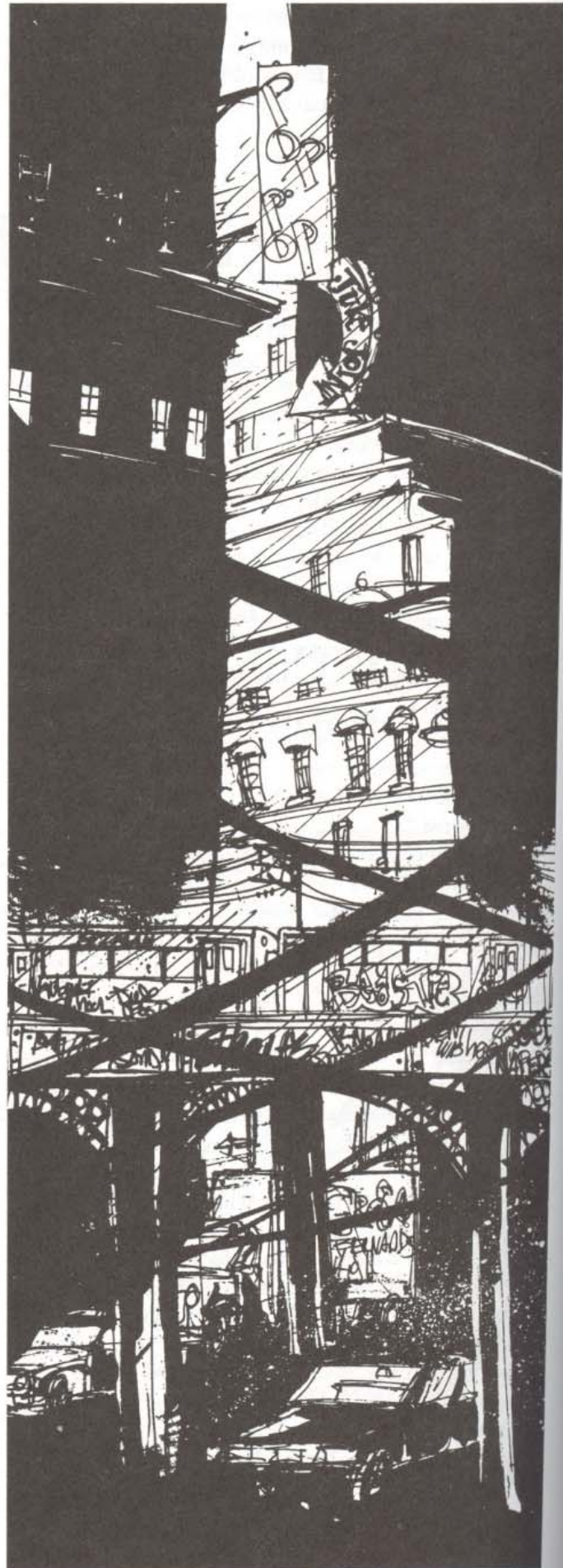
Resources

The Book of Mirrors, Destiny's Price, Succubus Club, The Orphans Survival Guide, Ascension's Right Hand, Halls of the Arcanum, Project: Twilight, The Inquisition or The Hunters Hunted.

To Walk Unhindered Shores

On the distant side of the Gauntlet lie lands ripe for adventure: Lost Realms like the Hollow Earth and Midrealm; wildernesses like the Seasonal Realms and Vali Shallar; esoteric planes like the Grand Hall, the Well of Souls or the Maya; and nightmares like the Hells, the Underworld and the distant Shade Realms. A cabal of plane-hopping magi can have all kinds of adventures, be they Void Engineers, Etherites, shamans or Verbena Wyck-travelers. All you need to do is get them beyond the Gauntlet, then provide them with a task and a place. The possibilities are literally endless from there.

The nature of the task depends on what your mages do and what they want. A group of Etherites could seek the Lost City of the Goro Monks, while an anxious squad of BCD marines might track a particularly noxious breed of "alien." A Deep-Universe expedition force could search for new worlds to colonize, while a pack of Verbena might journey to the Autumn Realm for a festival. Whatever the



characters want, make sure they have to sweat to get it. Nothing should come easily in a Dark Adventure.

Once the cabal has a reason to go where you send it, add a few complications: rivals who want the same thing, natives who want the invaders *gone*, strange creatures the mages have never seen before, a quarry that's on the move itself. The Goro Monks have many enemies and live in a land of dinosaurs and primitive tribes; "aliens" have a way of blending with the landscape that is their home; raw wilderness teems with perils, even for pagan pilgrims; and spirits watch *all* mortals in the lands past the Gauntlet.

The "lands" themselves can be dangerous as hell... literally! Footing is treacherous on the Bridge of Despair; the blazing caverns of the Fire Court present all kinds of obstacles; and even a mage has problems navigating in a Realm where gravity is a polite suggestion! Wherever you decide to send the heroes, make sure to emphasize the weirdness of the Realm. An Otherworld that's little more than another 10' x 10' room is no challenge to adventurers. Some "helpful" obstacles include: hostile elements (fire, water), titanic wildernesses packed with critters, severe weather (storms, frost, winds), crumbling ruins and precarious bridges, unearthly physics and sheer *otherness* (zero-G, Escher Realms, ephemeral "structures").

Otherworlds tend to have odd "laws," too: A traveler who eats a meal in Faerie is said to be bound to that place

forever, a mage who ventures into the Shade Realm of Spirit confronts her own Avatar, time passes slowly in the Digital Web, and only the wisest travelers can reach the Astral Epiphanies. It's a rare mage who understands all the laws of the "land," and as the Storyteller, you can add a few new ones he might not have heard about. Any Otherworld is an adventure in itself. Add a quest, a rival and a sense of urgency, and you have an epic in the making!

Options

Otherworld adventures make excellent crossover stories, especially for **Mage/ Werewolf**, **Mage/ Changeling** or **Mage/ Wraith**. With a good uniting purpose and a bit of expertise on the part of the characters, you could make an entire chronicle out of an Otherworlds quest. Imagine a few Verbena, Ecstatics and fae pursuing a Bygone through the High Realms. Or a Hermetic journey to an elemental Court, accompanied by sidhe nobles and a Stargazer werewolf. Or a stranded Void Engineer meeting with the ghosts of previous explorers. Or a Marauder woman literally running with the (were)wolves....

Back on the Earthly side of the Gauntlet, some spirits might begin to make themselves... annoying. Prodded by circumstance, the characters cross the Barrier to stop the problem at its source. If the spirits have a way of crossing over easily — a dimensional rift, a Node, a strange holiday when the Gauntlet lowers — this option might wind up as



a mad Gauntlet-hopping chase between the frustrated mages and their quarry. Depending on the mood you want to create, this adventure could be a whimsy (think *The Nightmare Before Christmas*), a madcap farce (think *Beetlejuice*), an eerie jaunt (think *Sliders*), or a horror-show (think *Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*).

Even without spirit tricksters, an Umbral quest might be nightmarish enough for even the hardest of wizards. Perhaps a Paradox Realm has swallowed one of the characters and the others have to find him. Maybe a loved one has made a bargain with unholy (or holy) powers; after the devil (or angel) has collected his due, the mages want to get their friend back. Or perhaps the life of an innocent depends on a secret formula... one that depends on ingredients from an alternate dimension. Again, it doesn't matter which "side" your players prefer. Provided the Gauntlet can be crossed, anyone can adventure in the Otherworlds.

Resources

Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds, Umbra: The Velvet Shadow, Digital Web 2.0, Horizon: Stronghold of Hope, The Book of Madness, The Book of Chantries, Technocracy: Void Engineers, Sons of Ether, Sea of Shadow or Book of Lost Dreams.

Betrayed!

Magick brings power. Power feeds greed. Greed spawns a downward spiral of selfishness. Thus, many of the most powerful wizards are extraordinarily selfish — not all of them, but enough to make a mage's life... interesting.

Now this selfishness has rebounded against the players' characters. Some powerful mage (or group of mages) has decided to use the players' cabal in his power games. Perhaps the characters have angered the Hermetic Master of their Chantry once too often. Maybe they've spoken out against injustices within the Convention, or pursue an "unorthodox" style of science. Maybe they're just considered expendable. Whatever the reason, the characters are stranded or backstabbed, left behind by someone they trusted. The Dark Adventure is twofold: First, the mages have to survive their predicament. Then they have to find who set them up, and fix things so that nothing like that will ever happen again....

This story works just as well (if not better) for Technocratic groups as it does for Tradition or independent ones. Mages who pay little attention to authority figures might simply be betrayed by friends, trusted associates, Chantrymates or even masters; Technocrats, especially ones with a sense of duty and conscience, may be sold out by their supervisors, their Symposium or even their Convention. The closer the characters toe the line, the greater the impact of betrayal.

The magnitude of the betrayal depends on the stakes you want to set. Dark Adventure being what it is, however,

those stakes should be pretty high — drama comes from near-death escapes, not inconveniences. The player-mages might be given over to witch-hunters, like the First Cabal which was betrayed by one of its own; they might be exposed as "abominations" in front of frightened Sleepers; they could be literally shot in the back or cut down in an alley ambush. On a more subtle note, they could be turned over for "re-education" or "re-training" at the hands of a harsh taskmaster. Even ridicule, the weapon that stings but does not kill, can come from trusted sources and could cost a mage important status.

When you set your betrayal plot in motion, choose your villain's motivations well. Even the most treacherous people rarely consider what they're doing to be "evil." Rather, your villain might justify his actions as necessary sacrifices to the Greater Good ("They might die, but the Construct will hold"), housecleaning ("They're just troublemakers"), expedience ("Things will move with essential speed once those guys are gone"), or as sad necessity ("Omelets and eggs and all that"). The cabal, of course, sees things differently... but then, different perceptions are what **Mage** is all about.

Options

Although the obvious tack to take with a betrayal-based scenario is to cry "You're screwed" and pour on the firepower, a subtle, secretive deception might work even better. A few returned checks, a "routine" tax audit, a round of snickering when the characters enter Marianna's banquet hall.... the players know something's wrong, but they don't know what it might be. When the betrayer also happens to be a mage, you can work in all kinds of mischief: the hallucinations that begin when the hero tries to meditate; the secret-invention plans that "just happen" to be leaked to *Paradigma*; the reports that "just happen" to get lost between the Operative's hand and the supervisor's desk; the Paradox backlash that strikes when the hero needs her magick most. As Tolkien said, wizards "...are subtle and quick to anger." Begin your adventure with subtle treachery and let your players discover it through hard work... if they discover what's going on at all.

Once they do, you can spice up the action by making the traitor a well-protected ally. Great! Dr. Spence dicked you over! What're you gonna do, *attack* him? So The Matriarch fed your amalgam to the werewolves; do you have what it takes to pull her plug and live to tell about it? If you speak out against Red Cloud's treachery, it's your word against his. He's an elder, you're just a spoiled new kid.... You get the idea. To gain any measure of peace or satisfaction, the characters have to either strike back carefully or learn to watch their backs while keeping an eye on their enemy. They could run, of course, but wouldn't that just make them look guilty?

Betrayal stories make marvelous crossover adventures, too. Imagine the machinations of the vampire prince who

decides to dispose of those annoying magi and those irritating neonates at the same time. Or the Pentex board member who's noticed that the hired help has stumbled onto her Syndicate connections. Or the ghost who was betrayed by the same guy who left the knife in the mages' backs.... Treachery makes a great motivating force to bring different characters together. Normally, that Nephandus, the witch, the Man in Black and the dragon would have nothing to do with each other. Once the guy who screwed them all over is dead, they'll probably turn on each other, but for now, well....


Naturally, confronting the enemy should be dangerous. While you as the Storyteller could arrange things so that the villain waits in his sanctum, ready to be blown to bits by the heroes, chances are he's a lot more resourceful

than that. Our Benedict Arnold probably has a backup plan, and it might involve a counter-betrayal — like the Technocrat who sells out his Construct to cover his escape from the surviving Hollow Ones, or the secret Nephandus who maneuvers her enemies into fighting each other. If nothing else, your betrayer might have an escape pod ready, a small army at his side or some other form of "insurance"; that Progenitor administrator has a nice new clone that looks just like you. You gonna give him an opportunity to use it?

Resources

The Book of Mirrors, Destiny's Price, Horizon: Stronghold of Hope and any of the **Tradition or Technocracy** books.

Current Events



Mage presents a world in motion, where epic events shape the lives of the Awakened. When Doissetep falls or Technocrat battles Technocrat, everyone hears the thunder, even if they never see the storm itself. A truly adventurous Storyteller might drop the mages into the heart of the tempest,

offering them a chance to dance with Destiny... or to fall in its wake.

The following events are "official" occurrences in the World of Darkness; if they seem too epic or intrusive to your plans, simply ignore them or modify them as you see fit. Ultimately, the game is your own. The books merely present a backdrop. You perform the play.





The Concordia War

In 1466, the Great Betrayer Heylel Teomim Thoabath was executed body and soul, scattered to the four winds for crimes against the newly formed Council of Traditions. In the late 1990s, a powerful, mysterious mystick appears out of nowhere, claiming to be the reincarnation of Heylel, and declaring war upon both Traditions and Technocracy alike. With puzzling displays of magick, he commandeers the airwaves and issues an ultimatum to the Council and Inner Circle: Surrender or die! In the same message, he invites young mages to rebel against their elders, to shake off the Ascension War's genocide and replace the corrupt old wizards with fresh faces and new ideas. Although most people ignore him, a dedicated few join "Heylel," storm the Council's home city of Concordia, and lay waste to the citadel. (As portrayed in *The Fragile Path* and *A War in Heaven*.)

The fight is the most brutal conflict Horizon has seen since the Daedalean invasion of 1475. Magical beasts and hovercraft wage a desperate battle in the skies as young rebels and their Council elders hurl spells and maledictions at each other. A bizarre band of shapechangers runs amok, ripping Concordia's defenders to bits. Although the Realm's citizens outnumber and overpower the forces of "Heylel," the attackers have surprise, ferocity and years of experience on Earth's battlegrounds. The Council forces, isolated in

their paradise, fall before the invaders. Eventually the fight climaxes in the Council chambers themselves. Before the fight ends, many Council Primi are slain and the city of Concordia is in flames.

In the "official" chronology of *Mage*, the Great Betrayer's forces are stopped in the Council chambers by a small but powerful group of Tradition mages. A surviving colleague of Heylel's pronounces the invader an impostor and kills him/her. Once the battle ends, the rebuilding begins. A new Council must be chosen, stragglers must be pursued across the vast reaches of Horizon's Realm, rivalries must be quelled and a new Concordia must be constructed. Despite the unifying nature of the task, splinter groups take the invasion as an opportunity to address old quarrels — sometimes with intrigues, assassinations, looting or vandalism of the wards.

A further complication arises when a group of Hollow Ones is discovered among the dead invaders. Led by an influential Darkling, Jeremy Case, the group includes a number of former Hollow emissaries to the Council; using their prior trips and privileged access, Case and his followers led the rebels straight into Concordia. Although many of the Darklings were killed in the fight, Case himself escapes, along with a pack of Orphans and Tradition renunciates. After the smoke clears, defenders of the Council must track Case's band through the wilderness of Horizon

— a wilderness that dwarfs Earth's most rugged reaches. Case's betrayal sparks a manhunt-*cum*-guerrilla war across the Realm, and wrecks the Council's relations with the Hollow Craft.

Options

If you want to take your chronicle "out of time," you could run the invasion itself. Although brief, this epic clash becomes one of the largest battles of the Ascension War, and ironically pits Tradition mages against each other. In a "war chronicle," the outcome of the fight is uncertain. It could be that "Heylel" wins, displaces the Council and shifts the entire balance of the mystick conflict....

Although it might seem proper to place the players' characters as the Realm's defenders, "Heylel" has a legitimate point. The Traditions *are* corrupt. The Primi *are* mired in internal politics. The Ascension War really *is* a genocidal mess. Young magi truly *are* the future. Perhaps this "Great Betrayer" has the right idea. Maybe your heroes want to join him/her. They might be Orphans, renunciates, Hollow Ones or simply Tradition mages who've become disgusted with the status quo. A rebellion-based chronicle provides a lot of high drama, as former apprentices face off against their past masters, old grudges ignite and former friends and lovers clash. If the cabal has had experience with the Council Primi (either good encounters or bad ones), that experience can throw the rebellion into a whole new light.

Wars don't simply go away when the shooting stops. Their echoes resound across the landscape for years, often decades. If the Concordia War is over, your Dark Adventures could center on post-war intrigues, the rescue of injured or enchanted parties, occasional spats between Traditions, or hunts for surviving rebels. The mages might be asked to track down escapees in the mortal world and haul them back to Concordia for justice... which raises questions about how much authority a hyper-powerful cabal of Otherworldly magi *ought* to have back in the mortal world.

Not all of the invaders have left, of course. The characters could search for Jeremy Case instead, trying to minimize the effects of his guerrilla campaign while keeping the three entrances of Horizon barred. Maybe Case manages to send for help and a new band of attackers creeps through the Otherworlds to assault the Realm. You could muddy the waters further and cast the mages as Case's own "troops," as rebels against the Council. Now they have to get home alive, or maybe continue the war in a hit-and-run fashion... a brutal option in a grand, wild Realm where everyone hates them. And what if Case is insane, a megalomaniac Colonel Kurtz who fights to *your* last breath? The players might find themselves on a *truly* Dark Adventure then....

Resources

Horizon: Stronghold of Hope, The Fragile Path, The Ascension Warrior and War in Heaven (both novels), and possibly **The Orphans Survival Guide**.

The War of the Ruins

Doissetep has fallen... from the inside out. The Shade Realm of Forces and the ruins on Mars are up for grabs. (See **The Ascension Warrior** and **The Book of Worlds**, Chapter Five.) Once the smoke clears, the scavengers move in: Hermetics hope to salvage something from the greatest Chantry in existence; other Tradition mages try to scare up some loot or to rescue survivors; Void Engineers take advantage of Doissetep's broken wards to descend on the ruins; and, of course, Fallen Ones — who dwell in the Void — hope to capture a strong link to the Earthly plane.

For several months, the War of the Ruins rages across Mars' dusty surface and in the cataclysmic storm-Realm of the planet's shadow. Etherships, Void Engines, Bygones and mind-shattering obscenities converge on the area, hopping between the tempestuous Realm and the barren planet. Demented spells and high-powered hypertechnology, magicks far too vulgar for Earth to withstand rip the Martian night. No Umbral war has ever been so fierce, no clash so open since the early days of the Ascension conflict. Dozens of mages and hundreds of spirits, consors, alien entities and walking enigmas pick the bones of Doissetep. If your characters are strong enough, brave and enough and crazy enough, they might join the fight.

How do they get there? As usual, that depends on the characters. If they're members of a Technocratic amalgam or strong supporters of their Tradition, they might simply be issued marching orders and be transported to the front. If they're independents, they could arrive in any number of ways — an Ethership, an Umbral gateway, a long, twisting walk in the spirit worlds, or a portal that once led to Doissetep but now leads to its shell. The war rages on both sides of the Martian Gauntlet, so there's very little chance that they get to the ruins without being swept up in the conflict.

Once they arrive, the mages have to deal with two of the most hostile environments imaginable. On the Martian side, extremely hot and cold temperatures, thin atmosphere and constant storms turn the planet into a mirror of Hell. An active volcano, ripped from the rock by the destruction of the Chantry and the subsequent War, sends pillars of fire and streams of lava cascading across the area. In the Umbral overlap, the "normal" tempests of S.R. Forces spin wildly out of control. The bombardment of magicks and the untethered hatred of the combatants whip the land into a frenzy. In the chaos, elemental spirits rush among the warriors, killing and maiming indiscriminately. Some sorcerers try to bind these Umbrood into service, but others

prefer to hide. Although the air is breathable on this side, the wind, lightning and firestorms reach Biblical proportions. Without magick, no human can survive long in this wasteland.

The combatants who remain include some of the most ruthless war cabals in the Tellurian. Dressed in heavy armor or cloaked in survivor's magick, they brave the tempest in small, determined packs, sabotaging each other's outposts or waging short, savage firefights. A few magicians (mostly Nephandi, but occasionally Marauders) ride dragons, Raamas Ka and even the odd Watchers in the Deep (see **The Bygone Bestiary** and **The Book of Worlds**, respectively) into battle, ripping into all sides with equal ferocity. Between the elements and the constant attacks, the armies have a hard time keeping installations intact. The Etherite outpost that once investigated the Martian civilization has become Fortus Fitz-Empress, a heavily shielded barracks and armory named in honor of Master Porthos of Doissetep. Three prefab Void Engineer security outposts are set up and reinforced — Martian Venture Security Stations Beta, Delta and Epsilon — and several others have been annihilated. Deep in the rock, a Nephandic Labyrinth, Kasaa Shaaron, is dug by a troop of animated corpses. New gates, wards and portals are thrown up and torn apart every day, and the few warriors who have survived more than a week in this Otherworldly hell act like Rambo on crack. New recruits are always welcome, but aren't given much respect. On Mars, you earn respect by surviving your tour of duty.

Weirdly enough, most of the survivors consider this essentially voluntary mission a military operation. Falling into a hard-bitten soldier's mindset, they dig themselves into their own private purgatories. It's as if the frustration of keeping the Ascension War "quiet" back on Earth has erupted on Mars. The result is a demented cross between *Apocalypse Now*, *King Lear* and the War of the Ring. Newcomers may be swept into the madness quickly; the Resonance of the war, the Forces Realm and the lingering self-annihilation of Doissetep birth an emotional storm that matches the elemental one. Here, all passions — hate, fear, even love and lust — ignite into violence. No one can come here and walk away unscathed.

In the distance of the Void, a bright-red star appears in the deepest reaches of space. According to the charts of the Voids and Etherites alike, this star is new. It shines brighter in the Shade Realm, but anyone on Mars can see it. The appearance of the star heralds an almost frantic rash of celebrations among the Fallen; every few days, they hold wild orgies and excruciating sacrifices in honor of "Qwl'haqqa," an entity they claim resides at the juncture between "what was," "what is" and "what will be." Supposedly, this god/spirit/demon inspires all the other demonic hordes with the example of its ineffable madness. Captured Nephandi speak of the coming arrival of Qwl'haqqa, who is supposedly growing larger, bringing the Final Unification



between light and darkness; past, present and future. Several Void ships and Ethercraft sent off to affirm the nature of this star disappear.

Who's the villain of this adventure? Take your pick! The rival groups are obvious enough, and they attack each other night and day with very little warning. Walls melt, heads explode, mystick wards collapse and titanic creatures descend from the sky (or rise from the rock) with nauseating regularity. Within the ranks of the "good guys," new villains await — battle-hardened commanders, war-shocked madmen, possessed berserkers and treacherous comrades. Maybe the camp guards decide that the characters are too suspicious to be left alone. Perhaps two allied rivals decide to fight it out among themselves, splitting their camp. The mages have to prove themselves, no matter which side they might favor, and that proving is arduous. And what happens if you introduce a betrayer to the camp? No weapon is too subtle or too vicious — not for the Warriors of the Ruins, and not for you.

Options

Perhaps your characters end up on Mars by accident. Um, oops... now what? Well, for starters, they have to get home — not an easy thing to do when you're under siege, especially when that siege occurs in deep space. Provided the cabal survives the battles it's sure to encounter, it has a long adventure just trying to get home.

Doissetep was a massive stronghold in an even more monumental Realm. Surely there were survivors of the devastation. Maybe the characters were actually in Doissetep when the final fight went down, and have hidden in the ruins for months, sustained by magick and the massive food warehouses of the Chantry. Will the mages who discover the players' characters be friendly, or will they try to kill, enslave, shanghai or sacrifice any survivors?

What *about* those survivors? Doissetep was home to dozens of wizards (many of them damned-near insane) and hundreds of servants, consors and magical beasts. What have they been doing since the Chantry self-destructed? Do they need help? Do they *want* help or have they adjusted to their new lives? What if a powerful wizard has gone insane and stumbled across the library of Porthos or the secret weapons of Caron Mustai? A fascinating "post-holocaust" chronicle can run through the shattered halls of Doissetep; the characters exist in half-light, clad in rags, and dodging spirits, lava flows, elemental disturbances, other survivors and would-be looters. Imagine what a once-ambitious Hermetic mage might make of living in the ruins of his Tradition's greatest monument... or what a member of another Tradition might do amid this display of the Council's incompetence. And what will survivors do when the warriors above manage to break into the area where the refugees have hidden? No matter which option(s) you

choose, an adventure set in the ruins of Doissetep promises to be a harrowing and exciting experience.

Resources

The Book of Chantries, **Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds**, **Technocracy: Void Engineers**, **Sons of Ether** or **The Book of Madness**.

Project Invictus

Not that the Technocracy is without its own internal problems. As **Technocracy: Syndicate** reveals, the Special Projects Division, a small but influential branch of that Convention, holds ties to the world-corrupting multicorp Pentex. For several years, the links between this semi-secret corporation and the moneybox of the Technocracy have been shrouded by diversions, influence, Wyrms magic and hypertechnology. Recently, a few dedicated Technocrats have weeded out the truth from between the lies. The Technocratic Union, a bastion of order safeguarding the Masses, has been infiltrated by Reality Deviants of the worst kind. With mind-body-and-soul warping efficiency, these Deviants spread a taint of contamination throughout the Union. (See **Technocracy: Syndicate**, pages 36-40, 54-56 and 64.) An open conflict within the Syndicate would be disastrous, but something must be done.

That "something" is Project Invictus, a deeply secretive counterstrike against the Special Projects Division and its allies. Since no one knows how high the corruption runs, the project has been masterminded by a small group of influential Technocrats. Skillful, trusted Operatives have been assigned to infiltrate the SPD's ranks and facilities, contain suspicious projects, obtain proof of corruption and the parties responsible, and neutralize Reality Deviants without exposing the mission.

It's a fantastically dangerous game, and the stakes are as high as the future of humanity itself. The Syndicate administers world financial matters; an internal war would almost certainly spill over into the global marketplace, smashing economies like crockery. Although the SPD is provably contaminated, the rest of the Syndicate may or may not be affected. The Technocrats in charge of Invictus don't dare provoke the Cash Convention, especially since many Syndicate Ops are probably innocent. Invictus strikes must be small, quiet and untraceable. Operatives have been instructed to make the damage look like Reality Deviant attacks, and to either eliminate all witnesses or to abduct them for questioning.

Some of the greatest minds in the N.W.O. have prepared a scanning program to detect traces of metaphysical corruption (known to werebeasts as "Wyrms taint"), and have set up a grueling interrogation program for captured Reality Deviants. Invictus Operatives have been equipped with these scanners, some capture gear and self-destruction

apparatus. An Invictus Op who falls into the hands of SPD agents is supposed to kill herself (or be killed by her supervisor) before the taint can be spread to her. To keep the project a secret, very few records of any kind are kept; teams are briefed by their direct supervisors, and a web of technomagickal procedures and simple misdirections has been woven to protect Invictus' integrity.

Naturally, the SPD and its allies have noticed the infiltration. Nobody's perfect, and the Reality Deviants suspect the Technocracy is onto them. No one knows the details about anybody else, though, and Invictus Ops are generally good about covering their tracks. At the moment, both sides fight a covert war in a haze, jumping at shadows and desperately seeking the enemy before he blows them away. At the same time, all sides must be subtle. Pentex cannot reveal its existence and survive, the SPD cannot function without the rest of the Technocracy, and the Union cannot risk a market-crashing war. And *nobody* wants the Traditions, werewolves or other enemies to find out about the fight!

What a glorious mess!

The heroes of this adventure are agents devoted to the Technocracy — the Technomancers, HIT Marks and other Operatives so often seen as faceless enemies. Although they'd just as soon shoot a Tradition mage as look at her, these folks are dedicated to protecting the innocent and preserving the world marketplace. The abominations within

the SPD are as bad (if not worse) as rampaging night-monsters and mystick psychotics, but the Invictus Ops don't dare begin a purge. Walking a wire of secrecy, they move into hidden Constructs, Pentex front companies and restricted SPD sectors, collecting data, eliminating Reality Deviants and spoiling the schemes of their corrupt comrades.

The villains? The shadowy pawns of the SPD, many of whom have no idea what they serve. Some are dedicated but deluded Technocrats; others have opened their hearts and bodies to corruption, becoming the Reality Deviants called "fomori." (See *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*.) Imbued with mad powers, they spread their affliction with obscene procedures or tainted gadgets. These beings feed on all the worst kinds of passions; ridden by evil Bane spirits, they enter a downward spiral of material and moral degeneration. The fact that some of these Deviants used to be trusted members of the Union makes their corruption that much more intolerable.

Options

The obvious route for an Invictus chronicle involves covert war within the Technocracy. The heroes must keep a low profile while uncovering obscenities within their own ranks — sort of like a mad mixture of *The X-Files*, *La Femme Nikita* (the TV series), *Aliens* and *The Firm*. A less obvious



choice might follow the exploits of a Technocratic group that stumbles across the SPD's corruption but that knows nothing of Invictus — or a collection of Operatives affiliated with the SPD that either defends the organization (with members possibly becoming fomori in the process) or that turns on the SPD when its true nature is discovered.

A variant chronicle could entangle a cabal of Tradition or independent mages in the shadow war. Let's say a Virtual Adept uncovers the link between Pentex and the Syndicate, then leads her friends on a mission inside the conspiracy. Operatives on both sides would be very glad to waste an outside cabal that knows too much.... Another option allows Tradition and Technocratic characters to ally against Pentex. A really wild game might even create an alliance of werewolves, mysticks and Technocrats. If your troupe prefers to play villains, a united but covert group of fomori and corrupt Technocrats (see **Technocracy: Syndicate**, pages 61-64) presents a sick but entertaining option. Either way, the mood of the tale should emphasize paranoia and a looming sense of menace set amidst the sterile halls and cavernous warehouses of the SPD. Everyone's a suspect, no one is safe and gleaming precision hides eldritch corruption.

Resources

Technocracy: Syndicate, *Book of the Wyrms*, **Monkeywrench: Pentex**, **Freak Legion: A Players Guide to Fomori and Technocracy: The Players Guide** (the last has not been published as of this writing, but is underway).

The Hunt for Helekar

The idea of losing a Chantry is troubling enough; if that Chantry happens to be an ancient stronghold of mystick killers, that "oversight" becomes a threat to all mages. When that stronghold also happens to be run by one of the most powerful wizards in the Tellurian, one who is destined to curse his slayers, that threat becomes an epic quest: the Hunt for Voormas, Master of Helekar.

For centuries, Voormas and his cabals of murderers defended the flanks of the Euthanatos Tradition, hunting Nephandi, Technocrats and all other threats to the Council. Their efficiency, secrecy and dedication to the mystick cause sheltered them from suspicion. They might have been pure in their intentions once, but those intentions have turned deeply sadistic in recent years and the modern Chantry bears little resemblance to the original "Friends of the Soul." Now Voormas considers himself a living avatar of Shiva, Kali or both, dedicated to the Age of Iron and the destruction of the modern world. Not long ago, an outcast Hermetic revealed the depths of Helekar's depravity. When the Council sent a mission team to investigate the report, the Chantry was gone. However, the twisted Realm it had



inhabited bore plenty of proof to support the allegations. The hunt began.

Since that time, the floating Chantry of Voormas has been spotted here and there. Hovering through the spirit worlds like a malignant ghost, this citadel alights long enough to seize a Node or lash out at a Realm before rising into the sky and disappearing. The formidable magicks powering Helekar's flight must be sustained with stolen Quintessence; the Chantry's sacred sites were cut off and seized by the Euthanatos and their allies. To remain free, Voormas must invade other Chantries or link his citadel to Earthly atrocity sites. Unfortunately, there are more atrocity sites than there are hunters. No one can guard them all. Although the Chantry occasionally manifests on the Earthly side of the Gauntlet, it usually remains hidden on the spirit side. Yet even then, the citadel's power bleeds through the Barriers. Every so often, people in Cambodia, Russia, central Africa or the North American plains sense a massive, horrific presence nearby — the Resonance of Helekar.

Naturally, the Council has a reward posted for the destruction of the Chantry; the Euthanatos take its activities as a personal affront, and now dedicate a good deal of their resources to tracking down Helekar and purging its inhabitants. Unfortunately, the Concordia War and other Earthly concerns have weakened the Traditions' ability to do much against the Grand Harvester of Souls. For now, the House of Helekar remains free.

Who's gonna take it down?

That's where the adventure begins.

Your heroes are on the trail of the Grand Harvester and his associates. Maybe they've actually been assigned to the task, perhaps they have some personal grudge, or they simply cross paths with Helekar by accident. If they want to take Voormas on, they'd better be powerful — he's an inhumanly accomplished archmage with a vicious crew of underlings and a large, flying stronghold. Subtlety and wits might succeed where raw power would fail, though; the renegades are used to overt challenges or helpless victims, and a guerrilla assault might confound them... at least for a while. The hunt for Helekar might range from a detective-style chase (following the ruins the Chantry leaves behind and second-guessing its next appearance), to a "Holy shit! What's *that*?" style encounter, to a grudge-match showdown. It'll be a Dark Adventure in the epic sense, a battle in a nightmarish citadel, waged against the most vile kind of opponents.

The villains of the piece are kind of obvious: Once, they were dedicated to cleansing Creation of imperfections, but they were carried away by their bloodshed and zeal. Killing became the answer to every problem, and soon it began to be fun for its own sake. Now these mages are the embodiments of Black Magick, living caricatures of the "Good Death" and its adherents. Blood rites, necromancy and exquisite torture have become fine sciences in Helekar's halls, and the Grand Harvester of Souls has begun to take his job a bit *too* seriously.... Despite their spiritual corrup-



tion and inconceivable cruelty, Voormas and his fellows are not Nephandi; in fact, the Fallen have been the subjects of most of the renegades' most horrible experiments. The true villains here are reflections of Ascension gone awry, mages seduced by their own power until nothing else matters.

The setting is one of the most dementedly magnificent places in the World of Darkness. Voormas' citadel weaves Asian, Indian and European elements into a floating monument to insanity. Ornate chambers and exquisite perfumes contrast with hellish dungeons and rotting finery. The Resonance of death and sadism has wrapped itself into the walls themselves; like the ruins of Doissetep, this place has been poisoned by the worst magickal passions. Titanic spells move Helekar through the Umbra; a tale that begins outside Wounded Knee could climax above the plains of Malfeas or in the endless sky between the Astral and Middle Realms.

Although a Helekar-based adventure fits the high-fantasy mode, it also demonstrates the ultimate payoff of power-gaming: Voormas and his followers grew too powerful in isolation, and became abominations to all for which they once stood. There's another level to the lesson, too. Some of the hunters on Voormas' trail want to take up where he left off. Supposedly, the Grand Harvester bears a curse: The person who kills him will become even more bloodthirsty than he was. Several parties who hunt the Master of Helekar want to see if the prophecy is true... and how bad they'll become if they fulfill it.

Options

Naturally, the Euthanatos want Helekar purged. The players' characters could be members of that Tradition, or might be allies hired on a bounty, or both. Some interesting conflicts might arise if the hunters have different motives for the hunt: One wants to erase the stain on his Tradition's honor, another wants revenge for a friend killed by the house, a third is in it for the money, and a fourth secretly

covets the treasures that must be floating within the Chantry. By giving the characters different reasons to chase Voormas, you intensify the drama that arises when they find him.

Voormas isn't stupid; he's on the run and needs allies. Perhaps the House of Helekar has struck bargains with other parties, like Sabbat vampires, Black Spiral Dancers, powerful Umbrood or human killers. What if Voormas spreads his Age of Iron by inspiring serial killings, genocide or even wars? The hunters might have to wade through rivers of blood — metaphorical or literal — before they get anywhere near the Grand Harvester and his people.

Before its exposure, the House of Helekar rooted itself in several Earthly headquarters. Although the Council has been purging those places, there's nothing to keep Voormas from establishing new outposts. Who's to say where he might decide to establish his next front? A Bosnian rape camp? The streets of Bangkok? The crack house down the street? Imagine the surprise if your mages discover that the nightclub they've been hanging around is actually the new staging ground for Voormas' Age of Iron!

Like Project Invictus, the hunt for Helekar is a secret matter with far-reaching consequences if outside parties get involved. If you really want to make a mess, bring a Technocratic amalgam or pack of Orphans into the hunt. Werewolves, vampires, hunter-types... any or all of them could have reasons to join the chase. Hell, imagine what might happen if a group of un-Awakened cops were to stumble upon proof of a genocidal archmage and his magickal citadel — and were to encounter the other wizards who try to track him down. Or if Voormas were to chuck subtlety and bring the whole Chantry through the Gauntlet in front of the Sleepers....

Did someone say "end of the world"?

Resources

The Book of Chantries, Horizon: Stronghold of Hope and Euthanatos.



Appendix: Bits and Pieces

Life creates order, but order does not create life.
— Saint-Exupéry, *The Pasquier Chronicles*

Character Templates

(See also “Stock Characters” in Chapter Two.)

The following stats represent broad ranges of character types. Note that any of them (including Streetwalker and Call Girl) may be of either gender. The Attribute and Ability listings are pretty straightforward; the third listing represents additional skills that such characters *may* have. Though few have more than two of

these optional Abilities, experienced specialists might have as many as four. The equipment listings reflect items each given type could have within easy reach.

Type Explanations

Beat Cop covers the average police officer, while the *Detective* and *SWAT Officer/Riot Cop* rate specialists at law enforcement.

The *Thug* listing can cover any number of character types — club bouncers, Blood Dolls, minor gang members, pimps, thieves, serial killers, barroom bullies. More competent street fighters usually rank as *Gangbangers* or even better.

Streetwalker refers to girls and boys who work the streets, while the *Call Girl/Stripper* type covers the better classes of prostitute, specialists (dominas, masters, submissives) and exotic dancers.

Vagabond/Street Person types live by their wits and the kindness of strangers, while the *Urban Shaman* and *Cultist* actually have some knowledge of the hidden world and how to deal with it.

Although the *Assassin* stats represent hyperskilled human killers (ninja, secret agents, elite hired guns), some of these folks may have powers beyond those of mortal men



and women. (See Chapters Four and Five of *Ascension's Right Hand*.)

Average people have stats of 2 across the board for the most part, and whatever Abilities their professions might suggest (Artistic Expression, Athletics, Craft, Bureaucracy, First Aid, whatever).

Beat Cop

- Physical 3, Social 2, Mental 2
- Alertness 2, Brawl 2, Bureaucracy 1, Computer 1, Dodge 2, Drive 2, Firearms 3, Investigation 2, Law 2, Leadership 1, Melee 1, Police Procedure 3, Stealth 1, Streetwise 2, Technology 1

Common Traits

Most supporting characters have Attributes of 2 or 3, with the occasional 4 if there's some reason for it (ratings of 5 are possible, but really unusual). The following Abilities are pretty common; most badass characters, if they're at all involved in the world around them, have two to five of these Traits.

| | | |
|------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|
| Alertness | Dancing | Area Knowledge |
| Athletics | Drive | Culture (Street) |
| Brawl | Fast-Talk | Hearth Wisdom |
| Carousing | Gambling | Law |
| Expression | Lockpicking | Linguistics (Slang, Ethnic Languages) |

| | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| Intimidation | Melee |
| Scrounging | Survival(Urban) |
| | Seduction |
| | Streetwise |
| | Subterfuge |

Common Merits & Flaws

| | |
|-------------------|--------------|
| Code of Honor | Addiction |
| Concentration | Dark Secret |
| Acute Senses | Hatred |
| Fast Learner | Hero Worship |
| Black Market Ties | Ward |
| Police Ties | |
| Underworld Ties | |

Allies, Influence and Resources are the only Back-grounds that most street-level Sleepers have. Some unusual characters may possess Destiny, Dream, Mentor or even Arcane if they have a touch of the otherworldly about them.

Really significant supporting characters, or un-Awakened protagonists, can be built with the usual mortal point base, if you wish. (6/4/3 Attributes, 11/7/4 Abilities, 15 "freebie points." See *Ascension's Right Hand*, *Halls of the Arcanum*, *The Hunters Hunted* or *Project Twilight* for details.)

- Area Knowledge 3, First Aid 1, Linguistics 1 or 2
- Lt. revolver, pump shotgun, billy club, handcuffs, badge, flashlight

Detective

- Physical 3, Social 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 3
- Alertness 3, Brawl 2, Bureaucracy 2, Computer 2, Dodge 1, Drive 2, Firearms 3, Intimidation 1, Investigation 4, Law 2, Leadership 2, Linguistics 1, Lockpicking 2, Melee 1, Police Procedure 4, Stealth 2, Streetwise 4, Subterfuge 3, Technology 2
- Computer Hacking 1, Disguise 2, Fast-Talk 1, Interrogation 2, Intrigue 1, Scan 2, Search 2, Sense Deception 3
- Lt. revolver, handcuffs, radio, lockpicks, badge, flashlight

SWAT Officer/Riot Cop

- Physical 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Mental 2
- Alertness 2, Brawl 3, Bureaucracy 1, Dodge 2, Drive 2, Firearms 3, Intimidation 2, Investigation 1, Law 2, Melee 3, Police Procedure 2, Scan 2, Stealth 1, Streetwise 2, Technology 1
- Climbing 2, Demolitions 3, First Aid 2, Heavy Weapons 1, Lockpicking 2, Pilot 2
- Lt. auto pistol, riot vest & helmet, submachine gun or pump shotgun, billy club, plastic riot shield or rappelling gear, radio, badge

Thug

- Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Social 2, Mental 1
- Alertness 1, Brawl 3, Dodge 1, Drive 1, Firearms 2, Intimidation 2, Law 1, Melee 2, Streetwise 2 to 4
- Area Knowledge 2, Carousing 2, Gambling 2, Interrogation 2, Lockpicking 1 to 3, Scan 2, Scrounging 1, Stealth 1, Torture 1
- Knife, brass knuckles, club, lt. pistol, drugs

Gangbanger

- Strength 3 to 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3 to 4, Social 2, Mental 2
- Alertness 2, Area Knowledge 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Drive 2, Firearms 2, Intimidation 3, Law 2, Melee 3, Streetwise 4
- Carousing 2, Dancing 2, Demolitions 2, First Aid 2, Gambling 2, Interrogation 2, Investigation 1, Leadership 2, Linguistics 1 to 3, Lockpicking 3, Stealth 2, Survival (Urban) 2, Torture 2, Traps 2
- Hvy. pistol (auto or revolver), submachine gun, knife, razor or brass knuckles, drugs, gang colors, lots of cash



Streetwalker

- Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Social 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 2, Wits 2
- Alertness 1 to 3, Brawl 2, Law 1, Melee 1, Seduction 1, Streetwise 2 to 5
- Athletics 2, Dancing 1, Fast-Talk 2, First Aid 1, Linguistics 1 or 2, Misdirection 2, Scrounging 1, Search 2
- Sleazy clothing, small knife or razor, makeup, purse or wallet, cheap drugs

Call Girl/Stripper

- Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Social 3 to 4, Perception 2, Intelligence 2, Wits 3
- Alertness 1, Brawl 2, Law 2, Linguistics 1 to 3, Melee 2, Seduction 3, Streetwise 3 to 5
- Acrobatics 2, Athletics 2, Carousing 2, Culture 1, Dancing 1 to 3, Disguise 1 (Transvestites), Escapology 2, Etiquette 2, Expression 2, Intrigue 2, Scan 1, Search 2, Style 2, Torture 2
- Provocative clothing (or lack thereof), cosmetics, mace, drugs, props (whips, restraints, mask, ropes)

Vagabond/Street Person

- Strength 1 to 2, Dexterity 1 to 2, Stamina 2 to 3, Social 1, Perception 3, Intelligence 1 to 2, Wits 1 to 2
- Alertness 2, Brawl 1, Linguistics 1 to 2, Melee 2, Scrounging 1, Search 1, Stealth 2, Streetwise 2 to 5, Survival (Urban) 3 to 5
- Area Knowledge 3, Artistic Expression 2, Awareness 1, Camouflage 2, Intimidation 2, Intuition 3, Lore (any kind) 1 or 2, Subterfuge 1 to 4, Tracking (Urban) 2
- Cast-off clothing, prized possessions (anything from real valuables to junk), cheap alcohol, concealed weapon (mace, razor, small knife)

Urban Shaman/Cultist

- Physical 2, Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Mental 3
- Alertness 1, Awareness 2, Brawl 1, Expression 2, Hearth Wisdom 2 to 4, Intuition 1 to 3, Linguistics 2, Melee 2, Occult 2 or 3, Stealth 2, Streetwise 3
- Animal Training (Cats, Dogs, Birds, Rats) 2, Artistic Expression 1 to 3, First Aid 2, Fortune Telling 3, Herbalism 2 to 4, High Ritual 2, Instruction 1, Lore (any) 1 to 3(!), Misdirection 2, Scan 2, Sense Deception 3; perhaps even 1 to 4 in some Hedge Magic Path
- Ritual objects (knives, drugs, musical instruments, icons, beads, paints), ethnic clothing or robes, herbs or incense, pets



Assassin

- Physical 3 to 4, Manipulation 3, Perception 3, Wits 3
- Acrobatics 3, Athletics 3, Awareness 1, Brawl 3 to 4, Climbing 3, Culture 2, Dodge 3, First Aid 3, Lockpicking 3, Melee 3, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 2 to 4
- Archery 3, Blind Fighting 2, Camouflage 3, Crafts 2 to 4, Demolitions 3, Disguise 4, Escapology 4, Fast-Draw 2, Fast-Talk 3, Firearms 2 to 4, Herbalism 3, Hunting 2, Interrogation 3, Mimicry 3, Misdirection 3, Scan 3, Secret Code Language (Ninja Clan) 2, Seduction 3, Sense Deception 2, Sign Language (Ninja Clan) 1, Tracking 3, Traps 4
- Appropriate clothes, exotic weapons (custom guns, metal claws, sai, ninja-to sword, throwing blades), mission gear (rope, climbing tools, poisons, guns, special devices)

Classic Stunts

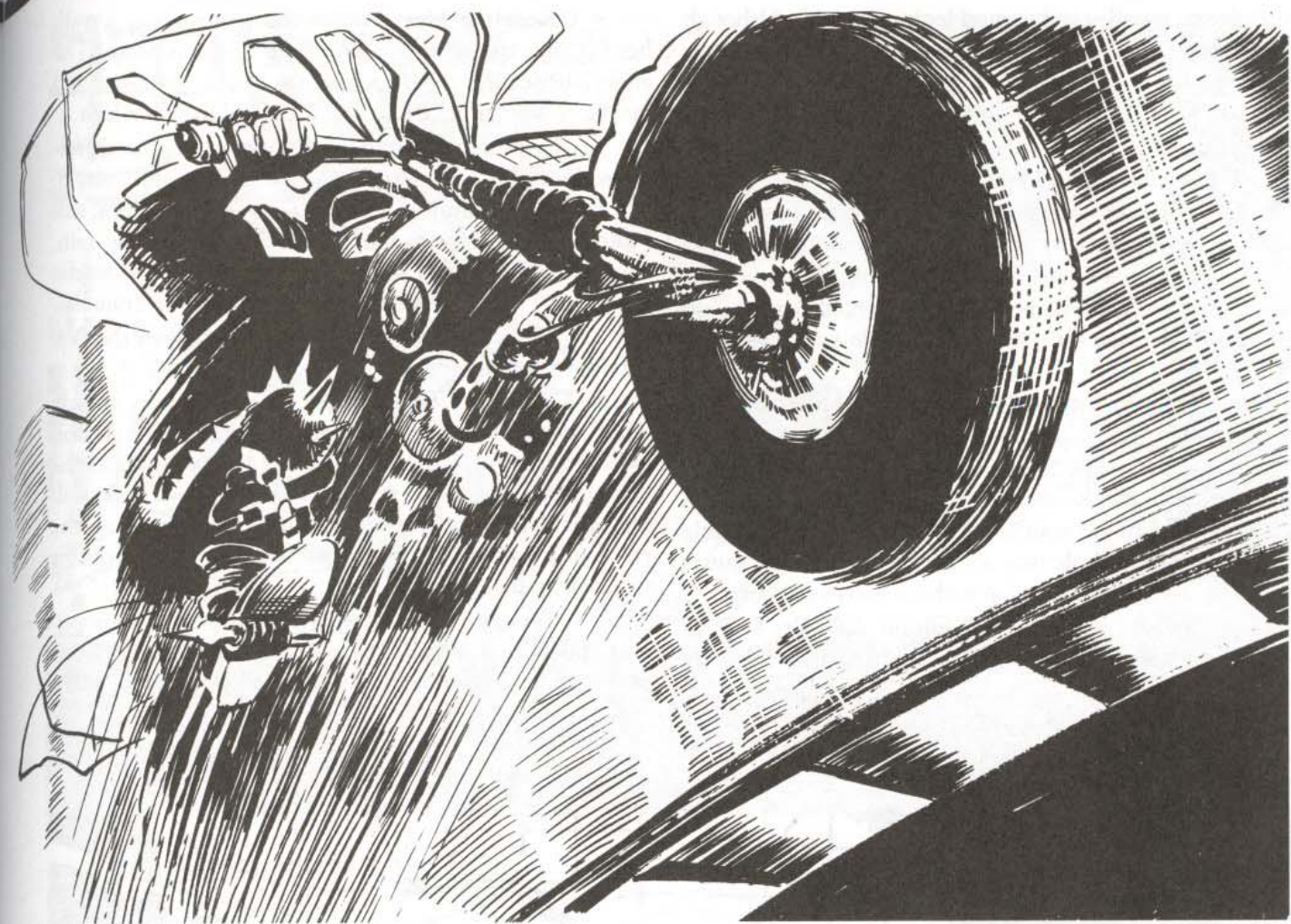


Everyone pulls off one or two absolutely amazing feats now and then. Sometimes it's luck, sometimes it's good planning, and sometimes someone has a trick or two up her sleeve that no one's expecting. Whatever the case, here are some suggestions for heroic — dare we say, even Hollywood-esque — feats that could save your hero (or your villain) in the nick of time.

These tricks are available to anyone, Sleeper or mage; magick simply lets the character pull the stunt off that much more easily. You don't need to be a mage to perform some amazing tricks, and even beginning mages have some pretty good mojo at their fingertips to help them out. So long as it suits the flavor of your game, let skilled mortals fly through the air, guns blazing, just like mages.

Action films are such staples of popular cinema that the following tricks are usually considered coincidental (if improbable) if magick is involved. Naturally, a mage has to cast an Effect before it can help him — such things do not happen automatically! Generally, a character has to be able to use either an “action-oriented” focus (a gun, blade, lucky charm or armored vest) to channel his magick, or work without a focus at all. It's pretty hard to jump through the air if you're calling the corners at the same time. For details about using magick to assist mundane rolls, see “Magick Enhancing Abilities,” in *Mage*, page 175, and “Magick in Combat,” pages 260-261.

Although the following tricks come directly from the action-adventure genre, some of them are pretty wild, even for mages. Depending on the tone you want for your game, certain stunts might be a little too campy or unrealistic. Feel free to disallow anything you think goes out of line. Players should also feel free to come up with their own heroic feats — at the Storyteller's discretion, of course.



- **Alone in a Crowd:** You have enough room to stage an uninterrupted fistfight with your archenemy, even though you're in the middle of a crowd. It's almost like the crowd gives you six feet in each direction. People are so nice these days, and they don't even get in the way.

System: Manipulation + Intimidation, difficulty 8. One success: A couple of people pull back to give the combatants room. Three successes: Everyone draws away a few feet. Five successes: Everyone in the area moves back about six feet, too awed by the fighters' near-animal ferocity to even think of getting closer.

Magick: Mind 1 gives one automatic success.

- **And Then...:** Everyone's engaged in their own conversations, paying no attention to you as you waltz into the bar (or restaurant, park, whatever). You start to talk, telling someone an amazing story; the entire bar falls silent slowly, listening to you. Now everyone knows about the biggest damn Mexican you ever saw, walking into a bar... and you're the one who told them.

System: Charisma + Expression, difficulty 8. With each additional success, more and more people drop what they're doing to listen to you. Botch and no one pays any attention.

Magick: Mind 2 or Forces 2 decreases the difficulty of the roll.

- **Bad Aim, Buddy:** *Bam-babam-babam!* How the hell did those shots miss Vincent and Jules in *Pulp Fiction*, anyway? And how did Van Damme duck behind that arrow in *Hard Target*? Like them, you manage to step aside just before your opponent pulls the trigger... or maybe he has such terrible aim that he couldn't hit his own face if the muzzle of the gun was in his mouth.

System: Dexterity + Alertness, difficulty 8. Success means your opponent misses one shot. This stunt works only during the first turn of attack.

Magick: Correspondence 2, Entropy 1 or Forces 2 all decrease the difficulty of this maneuver.

- **The "Broadway":** As you and your buddies leap into the fight, your moves coordinate perfectly. Punches, kicks, even gunshots fly in exact synchronicity and fall right on the beat. If someone were to turn on a radio, your actions would fit perfectly with the music. Sharks and Jets, eat your hearts out!

System: Dexterity + Alertness or Do, difficulty 8. Roll once at the beginning of combat; each success is one turn in which all characters may act on the best initiative rolled. If one player rolls a botch, the coordination fails and

the characters all stand around looking stupid. Although they can defend that turn, none of the associated characters may attack.

Magick: Entropy 1 or Mind 2 decreases the stunt-roll difficulty.

- **The Chow Yun Fat:** Leaping through the air with both guns blazing, you manage to hit multiple targets and land where you want to without getting shot.

System: Dexterity + Firearms, difficulty 8; you hit one target per success, but for only normal damage; no additional damage for successes. Possible with pistols or SMGs.

Magick: Entropy 2 or Forces 2 add successes to the attack roll.

- **Core Dump:** Something about you just invites people to pour out their hearts. Sometimes you get valuable clues that might aid your search; other times a tragic tale leads you into a whole new adventure. Either way, things just seem to fall into your lap without you even trying.

System: Charisma + Intuition, difficulty 8. Picking the right person and offering to buy her a drink is largely a matter of instinct.

Magick: Mind 1 or 2 or Entropy 1 decrease the difficulty of the roll.

- **Crumbling Mortar:** You throw a rock at a wall, hoping that the mortar holding the bricks is loose. The enemy beneath it isn't looking up at the moment, and maybe he won't notice that a wall is about to fall on him....

System: Perception + Alertness, difficulty 7, followed by Dexterity + Athletics or Firearms, difficulty 8. The first roll determines whether you see a weak spot; this roll can be modified to take into account darkness, rain, whatever. The second roll is to see if you actually hit the weak spot. The better the roll, the more the mortar crumbles.

Magick: Entropy 1 or Matter 1 decreases the Perception-roll difficulty.

- **The Duke:** There comes a time in every vehicle chase when a seemingly unavoidable barrier — a demolished bridge, a stalled truck, a pile of boxes — blocks the character's path. You don't care; with a burst of luck, skill and suicidal determination, you leap the gap, jump the truck or bust through the boxes. Your pursuers probably won't be so lucky....

System: Dexterity + Drive (or Pilot, if appropriate), difficulty 8. Yes, Willpower can reduce the difficulty of this (or any other) roll. A failed roll wrecks you, and a botch wrecks you badly.





Magick: Entropy 2 or Forces 2 reduces the difficulty of the roll.

- **The Grand Entrance:** They say there's a pause in conversation every seven minutes. In a crowded room, it sometimes happens that every conversation pauses at the same moment. Just as everyone stops talking, the door opens. You and your cabal sweep in regally as though this moment was created specifically for your entrance. Well, it was.

System: Patience is the key. Roll Wits + Alertness, difficulty 7, while listening at a door or some other convenient place. Each success allows the characters to time an entrance better: one success, and they walk in during a collective breath. Five, and the room is deathly silent.

Magick: Entropy 1, Forces 1 or Mind 1 reduces the difficulty of the roll.

- **The Jackie Chan:** You look left; you look right. One HIT Mark coming at you from either side. Two MiBs coming in the door. You drop into a crouch and wait. Just as the machine-men get to you, you get out of the way, grab them by the backs of their heads and crack their metal skulls together. The MiBs pause for a second, not believing what they saw. Yes, you're a brilliant martial artist, capable of pretty amazing stuff. But more importantly, people think you're hilarious. The only thing missing from your fights is a soundtrack.

System: Dexterity + Performance, Do or Athletics, difficulty 8. You have to, for example, simultaneously execute a perfect flying jump kick and get that anime gritted-teeth look on your face, letting out a wild cartoon "Hai-yah!" just for show.

Magick: Correspondence 1 or 2, Entropy 1 or Forces 2 all decrease the difficulty of the Dexterity roll.

- **The Knockout Blow:** In one mighty punch, you deck almost any opponent.

System: Dexterity + Brawl or Do, difficulty 8; roll five successes or more, and you knock any human opponent out cold for one turn per success. Inflicts normal damage + knockout. Does not work on really tough opponents, like werewolves or vampires with Fortitude, although normal damage still applies.

Magick: Forces 2 or Life 3 add successes to the attack roll, or to damage if the knockout fails.

- **Out of the Fire:** Hurtling through the air, the car bursts into flame. It hits the ground, rolls a few times and comes to a stop against a concrete divider. Smoke envelops the destroyed vehicle, blocking everything around it from sight. But just as the engine explodes, a figure appears, walking out of the destruction. You've somehow managed to escape a crash that should by all rights have been fatal several times over. Aren't you glad you wear your lap belt?

System: Stamina + Athletics, difficulty 9. Each success allows the character to soak an additional Health Level of damage.

Magick: Entropy 2, Forces 2 or Life 2 decrease the difficulty of the roll.

• **Right Here, Sir:** A really good butler doesn't need to ask what his employer wants for dinner, which shirt he feels like wearing or which common household object he might need for a project. A really good butler just *knows* — he pays attention to his master's mood and body language; he keeps subtle tabs on the activities of the household. This little trick is invaluable to making a house or a covert operation run smoothly — anticipating others' needs and being prepared to fulfill them quickly is a rather useful skill.

System: Perception + Alertness, difficulty 8. The more successes, the more precisely you pinpoint what's needed. A botch indicates that you've brought a completely inappropriate object — what does mayonnaise have to do with auto repair anyway?

Magick: Mind 1 decreases the difficulty of the roll.

General Action Rolls

When the heat's on, no Storyteller (or player) wants to keep track of every little attack roll, damage roll and soak roll. In the heat of the moment, a good Storyteller takes inspiration from the mass battles of action-adventure movies: A gang of minor bad guys rushes the hero; guns blaze, blades flash, bodies go flying and Our Hero steps out from a pile of corpses while survivors run away. Oh, one or two dudes might give her a hard time, but for the most part the opposition melts away in a welter of blood and gunsmoke.

In game terms, you may want to use a *general action roll* — a single roll that decides the outcome of an unequal contest — rather than a turn-by-turn dicefest. The success or failure of that roll determines how successful (or unsuccessful) the character is in dispersing the bad guys. From there, you narrate the results in story terms. Although it can apply to any situation in which a character performs a series of related actions, the general action roll works best in combat against inferior opponents.

To use the roll, take the hero's Dexterity + (combat Trait) and use it in a resisted roll against the opponents' Dexterity + (combat Trait). For sanity's sake, just assign the enemies a single Dice Pool and roll normally. "Combat Traits," of course, refers to whatever weapons or tactics the characters are using; a gunfight would use Dexterity + Firearms, a martial-arts battle would use Dexterity + Brawl (or perhaps Do). If the hero wants to dodge or move, divide her Dice Pool normally.

Examples: *Atropos gets in a barroom firefight with a bunch of skinheads. They want to kill her, she wants to kill them. Her Dexterity + Firearms gives her eight dice; the Storyteller gives the*



General Action Rolls

| Difficulty | Task |
|------------|---|
| 7 | Easy (fighting in the open) |
| 8 | Challenging (fighting in close quarters or under cover) |
| 9 | Hard (fighting under difficult circumstances) |
| 10 | Damn Near Impossible (fighting under really harsh conditions) |

skinheads a Dice Pool of six and sets the difficulty at 9 (they're shooting at each other in a dim room while hiding behind tables and such). The player and the Storyteller roll off: Atropos gets one success, the skinheads get none. Muzzles roar, glasses shatter, bullets careen off bar fixtures. Two skinheads drop to the floor, the others run. Atropos wins.

Later, she needs to swing through a maze of hanging wires and hissing pipes. Rather than go through a series of Dexterity + Athletics rolls, the Storyteller merely has Shadow, Atropos'

player, make one roll at a high difficulty. The maze is pretty intricate; difficulty 8. Shadow picks up her dice and smiles....

A player who wants her mage to use a magickal edge should add an Effect to the Traits. (Again, see "Magick Enhancing Abilities" and "Magick in Combat," in the **MAGE** rulebook.) General action rolls are supposed to keep things simple, though, so don't overcomplicate the task.

If the bad guys lose, a handful of them should just keel over dead while the others run away. If the villains win, the player's character should suffer some setback — she's shot, knocked out — that incapacitates but does not kill her. In that case, you could either roll one attack's worth of damage normally and allow the player to soak it, or simply announce, "You're hit! The room spins, blood bursts from between your fingers and you fall to the ground, unconscious." Unless you want your players to crucify you, we advise against using the second option unless you have something in mind for the hero... something she can survive. No protagonist should die because of a single bad die roll. Heroes are made of sterner stuff.

Cool Stuff



Explosions. Car chases. Brawls fought with pool cues, shards of glass or even chainsaws. These are the trappings of adventure tales. Gunfights in plain rooms get boring after a while; add a burning laboratory, a few exotic weapons and a suped-up Harley-Davidson to the mix and you have the makings of an exciting game session.

(Note: Yes, many of the following entries have appeared before in other books. They're included here because some Storytellers might not have **Destiny's Price** or **The Technomancer's Toybox** laying around, and it would be unfair to require them to buy two more books before they could run a Dark-Adventure chronicle.)

Street-Fighting Gear

Dark Adventures tend to occur in tense situations and close quarters — bars, clubs, alleys, warehouses. More often than not, characters have to use whatever happens to be nearby or have to protect themselves with found objects or light armor. A dude running down the street in Kevlar armor and waving an M-16 gets a lot of attention from local police, hero or not!

The Street-Fighting Weapons chart offers a wealth of potential "tools of opportunity" that might be available in a Dark-Adventure setting. Naturally, Matter and Forces magick can reinforce such objects, making them stronger or

more destructive than they might be otherwise. A HIT Mark in riot gear? A Nephandus with a chainsaw? You can bet money that those items are a bit more potent than ones you could scan off your average riot cop or lumberjack.

Isn't magick fun?

Explosives

Like the Introduction says, lots of things blow sky-high during a Dark-Adventure tale. It's hard to imagine a face-off in an Etherite's laboratory or a climatic battle in a fuel refinery without envisioning the towers of flame and showers of shrapnel that come with the territory in such situations.

Explosives make wonderful "cover" for Forces Effects, too. When all else fails, the Technocracy resorts to demolition weapons to make its deadliest Devices coincidental. Even so, the Inner Circle avoids making big messes unless all other options have failed. An explosion demands an investigation; a building that blows leaves a mountain of paperwork, backpedaling and evidence suppression for the Operatives responsible for the blast. More often than not, nuking the site from orbit (so to speak) is more trouble than it's worth.

Worse, from the perspective of a dedicated Technocrat, is the risk of innocent casualties. Explosives are notoriously careless about who they kill. A raid that murders Sleepers while the reality criminals flee gets someone into very hot water. As you can imagine, the Council of

Street-Fighting Weapons

| Weapon | Difficulty | Damage | Conceal | Notes |
|-------------------------------------|------------|-------------|---------|--|
| • Blunt Weapons | | | | |
| Baton/Tonfa | 4 | Str +2 | J | |
| Bottle | 6 | Str | I | Breaks after 1 blow |
| Brass Knuckles/ Roll of Quarters | 6 | Str +1 | P | |
| Chain | 8 | Str +2 | P | Can grapple, +1 diff. |
| Chair | 7 | Str +2 | I | Breaks after 3 blows |
| Lead Pipe/Crowbar | 5 | Str +2 | J | |
| Nunchaku | 7 | Str +1 | J | |
| Plaster Cast | 7 | Str +2 | I | Breaks after 4 blows |
| Pool Cue | 5 | Str +1 | I | Breaks after 2 blows |
| Sap Gloves/ Steel-Toed Boots | 7 | Str +2 | I | |
| 2x4/Baseball Bat | 5 | Str +2 | N | |
| Trashcan | 7 | Str +3 | N | "Breaks" after 3 blows |
| Trashcan Lid | 5 | Str +1 | N | Also good shield |
| Weighted Bag/Sap | 6 to 8 | Str +1 to 3 | I | |
| Wrench | 6 | Str +1 to 3 | I | |
| • Sharp Objects | | | | |
| Broken Bottle | 6 | Str +1 | P | Breaks after 3 blows |
| Car Antenna | 4 | Str +1 | P | Extends reach |
| Hatchet | 6 | Str +3 | J | Can be thrown 10 yds., +1 diff. |
| Machete | 5 | Str +3 | J | |
| Nail-studded Glove | 6 | Str +1 or 2 | P | Hurts to use |
| Punch Knife | 4 | Str +2 | P | |
| Razor | 5 | Str +1 | P | |
| Sheet of Glass | 5 | Str +4 | N | Breaks after 1 blow |
| Switchblade | 4 | Str +1 | P | |
| Sword Cane | 5 | Str +3 | I | |
| Throwing Blades | 6 | Str +1 | P | Range: 10 |
| Whip | 6 | Str +1 | J | Can grapple, +1 diff. |
| • Power Tools | | | | |
| Hand Drill | 8 | Str +3 | J | Cannot slash |
| Large Drill | 8 | Str +5 | N | Awkward; can't slash |
| Hand Saw | 7 | Str +5 | T | Botches hurt |
| Chainsaw | 8 | Str +7 | N | Botches hurt <i>bad</i> |
| Hand Stunner | 6 | 4* | P | See "Taser" |
| Nail gun | 7 | 3 | T | Ranged attack (Rate: 3/ Range: 8/ Clip: 30; see chart.) |

Concealment: I = obvious, but looks innocuous; P = hides in pocket or concealed holster; J = hides in jacket; T = hides in trenchcoat; N = cannot be hidden on person.

Firearms

| Weapon | Difficulty | Damage | Range | Rate | Clip | Conceal |
|-------------------|------------|--------|-------|------|---------|---------|
| Mace | 7 | * | 1 | 1 | 3 | P |
| Taser | 3 | 5*† | 10 | 1 | 1 | P |
| Fire Mace | 5 | 4‡ | 2 | 1 | 4 | J |
| Zip Gun | 8 | 3 | 8 | 1 | 1 to 3 | P |
| Sawed-off Shotgun | 6 | 8 | 10 | 2 | 2 | J |
| Concealed Gun | 7 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 1 to 10 | I |
| Concealed SMG | 8 | 7 | 100 | 3 | 50 | I |

* = -2 to victim's Dice Pools for 1 turn/success.

† = no adds from successes.

‡ = sets things afire.

Protective Devices

(Versus melee or brawl only; firearms negate all but riot vest.)

| Item | Armor Rating | Penalty |
|---------------------------|--------------|---|
| Biker Jacket | 1 | 0 |
| Reinforced Leather Jacket | 3 | 1 |
| Riot Vest | 3 | 2 |
| Motorcycle Helmet | 3 | 0 (head only) |
| Trashcan Lid | 2 | (None, but requires a Dex + Melee roll — diff. 6 — to use.) |

Nine also frowns on blowing shit up unless innocent bystanders are cleared from the area first. Marauders and Nephandi, on the other hand, don't really care who gets hurt in the course of a mission. The latter love to set off truly heinous explosions, then plant evidence linking the disasters to the Traditions, the Technocracy or both.

Systems

When something blows up, it shoots flames or scatters debris across a wide area. To reflect this, plant the full damage amount at the center of the blast and subtract one success from the damage pool for each yard from the center. If several characters get caught in the blast radius, simply roll the damage once and subtract one Health Level per yard as the blast fans out.

Example: Cyborg X344 hurls a grenade at Jennifer Rollins, Atropos and Dante. The Virtual Adept stands at ground zero, while the two women are three and five yards away, respectively. X344's weapon does 12 dice of damage; the Storyteller's roll comes up with a total of nine Health Levels of damage.

Dante absorbs the full nine Levels (he can soak it, but we won't go into that right now); Jennifer, standing three yards from Dante, gets nailed for six Health Levels and Atropos takes four.

The mages are hurt, perhaps badly, and X344 readies another grenade....

Some of the explosives listed below have been rated in terms of Blast Power. Each point of Blast Power is worth one die per pound of the explosive. Nitro, which has a Blast Power of 3, causes three dice of damage for every pound of nitro that goes off. Each listing also mentions whether or not the explosive burns without exploding, and includes descriptions of the things that set the material off.

Blasting Powder

Modern gunpowder, used in many small-arms ammunition types. This explosive is legal in small quantities in the U.S.

Blast Power: 1

Detonator: Flame, heat

Burn: Yes

Concussion Grenade

A less deadly variation on military-issue weapons. The blast rocks the area with a deafening bang and a blinding flash. Not generally fatal, but a real pain if you happen to be on the receiving end.

Blast Power: 8-die explosion
Detonator: Internal timer
Burn: No

Dodging the Blast (Optional Rule)

Mages, being masters of coincidence, can often “duck and cover” from blasts that would kill a normal human. At the Storyteller’s option, a mystick with Entropy, Forces, Matter, Life or Time may make a Dexterity + Dodge roll to avoid an explosion’s worst effects. She “found that last bit of cover,” “rolled with the force of the blast,” or experienced some other barely coincidental stroke of fortune. (See the average action-adventure flick for examples of such luck.) This dodge is instinctive, a reflex rather than a spell. Success means the mage takes half damage or — with a really good roll — none at all.

Massive blasts — like those that wipe out whole city blocks — cannot be dodged this way. Naturally, the mystick could still use vulgar magick to survive the explosion, but that carries its own risks. A coincidental Effect, cast normally, might shield her from some damage, too: The collapsing wall just happens to absorb the impact; the floor drops her into the basement as the bomb goes off. See the “Fast Casting” modifier on the Magick Difficulties Chart, *Mage*, page 171. Still, a mage shouldn’t walk into a killzone expecting an easy time; depending on the circumstances, and the mage’s focus and magick style, a last-ditch spell might not be possible.

Difficulty Size of Explosion

- 6 Small detonations (grenades, Molotov cock tails)
- 8 Large explosions (gas tanks, small bombs)
- 10 Huge explosions (artillery rounds, tanker trucks, vehicle bombs)

Dynamite

A stabilized mixture of nitro and charcoal, the ever-popular TNT can be carried safely and makes an excellent demolitions weapon. Dynamite that undergoes severe temperature shifts or long storage becomes “sweaty”; crystals of pure nitroglycerin form on the outside of the stick, turning the normally waxy surface shiny and slick. At this point, the TNT is slightly more stable than a similar amount of nitro.

Blast Power: 3 (6 dice per stick)

Detonator: Primer

Burn: Yes



Fragmentation Grenade

Standard military-issue frag grenades. Pull pin, throw and duck. The explosion rips the container apart, creating a rain of hot metal fragments in addition to the blast — a fact the movies often forget.

Blast Power: 12-die explosion

Detonator: Internal timer

Burn: No

Gasoline

The really explosive part of gasoline isn't the liquid, it's the fumes. Packed into a sealed container (like a fuel tank), gasoline ignites in a roar; spread out in a trail or pool, it burns but does not explode.

Blast Power: 2

Detonator: Fire

Burn: Yes

Gas Grenades

Smoke grenades release large clouds of thick white or colored smoke. Tear gas canisters loose similar clouds of chemical irritants. The former simply cover an area, marking targets and concealing movement or escape. The latter can incapacitate most normal humans with a burning, stinging, choking mist. Neither weapon actually explodes; instead, the gas escapes through holes in the canister. The resulting cloud fills a 10-yard-by-10-yard area within a minute, and lasts roughly 10 minutes in still air.

Tear gas causes living beings to gag, cough and essentially go blind for several minutes. Characters doused with the gas lose two dice from all Dice Pools until the cloud clears and the irritant is washed away. Gas masks protect the wearer's face, of course, but most forms of tear gas still burn exposed skin. Standard smoke clouds reduce all sight- and smell-perception Dice Pools by two dice, but do not inflict harm.

Blast Power: None

Detonator: Internal timer

Burn: No

Molotov Cocktail

A perennial favorite among urban guerrillas. The old gas-in-the-bottle trick turns a regular glass container into an incendiary device. A rag provides the wick; light the rag, throw the bottle and run. The resulting spill explodes into a small but potent blaze. A cocktail's blast radius is half the usual size, but the fire burns until it is either consumed or put out.

Blast Power: 8-die aggravated explosion

Detonator: Fire

Burn: Ignites on contact with flame

Napalm

Mean stuff. This material clings to whatever it hits and burns until it's consumed. Made from jellied gasoline, napalm comes in canisters, flows through flame-throwers and explodes from fragile projectiles. Anything — or anyone — within the blast area is set aflame and burned to a crisp.

A target hit by napalm is covered in fiery goo; the Storyteller rolls one die to determine how much of the victim burns, then rolls that many dice per turn for 10 turns (a roll of 5, for example, means five dice are rolled per turn for 10 turns). This damage is aggravated. If the troupe uses the optional dodge rule (see box), the target can try to "dodge" the flying napalm. The player's dodge successes are subtracted from the napalm's initial die roll result. If she gets three successes, for instance, a roll of 7 becomes 4 (which is still bad, but not as bad as 7). Water does not extinguish napalm; the only way to get it to stop burning is to move the burning object to a place without oxygen, or to wait until the napalm burns itself out.

Blast Power: 0

Detonator: Fire

Burn: That's the point

Nitroglycerine

A clear, oily liquid that's easy to make if you know how. It's pretty unstable stuff, and often goes off by accident if you're not careful with it. A character with the Demolitions Skill or Science: Chemistry can try "safety-packing" the nitro, but the explosive remains a real health risk to those who use it. A botched Dexterity roll, a hard fall, a bad hit — all of these shocks can set nitro off. Whomever's carrying the stuff had better be light on her feet and have her life insurance paid up.

Blast Power: 3

Detonator: Shock, impact, bad luck

Burn: No

Plastique (C-4)

A putty-like substance that explodes when primed. This explosive comes in a variety of strengths, from home-produced "blasting wax" to military-grade plastique, and can be molded to fit around doors, slipped into cracks or packed into shells or pipes.

Blast Power: 1-20

Detonator: Primer only

Burn: Yes

Primacord

Instant fuse material. This explosive, created in string form, can be used to either set off other materials or to be packed into tight, intense bombs.

Blast Power: .5

Detonator: Primer or open flame

Burn: Ignites on contact with flame

Vehicles

For the most part, you don't need statistics for the various vehicles that come and go in your world. They're best handled as story elements, not as lists of stats. Even so, it is occasionally helpful to know how thick that tank's armor is or how easily an F-14 can overtake a Lear jet. For those times, we present the following optional rules.

Mage (pages 252-253) offers some brief systems for vehicles and stunt driving. The systems below offer a few additional specifics to those Traits.

- **Safe/Max Speed:** This Trait, which can be found in the rulebook, defines how fast a character can drive the vehicle safely, and how fast the machine in question goes when driven at top speed.

- **Maneuverability:** The Maneuverability Trait (also presented in the rulebook) shows the maximum Dice Pool a driver can use behind the wheel or at the controls.

- **Crew:** The minimum personnel it takes to drive or pilot the vehicle. Passengers (pass.) are in addition to crew.

- **Armor:** The number of successes a damage roll needs before it can penetrate armor. Anything less simply bounces off the side of the machine.

- **Weapons:** This is obvious.

Super-Vehicles

Mages rarely leave well enough alone; in many cases, willworkers (especially Technomancer-types) customize their vehicles with special sensors (Rank 1 Sphere Effects),

weapons (Forces 3/ Prime 2 cannons), hidden compartments, or even cloaking screens (Arcane 5, or Forces 2/ Matter 2/ Prime 2). Assume a vehicle with custom Devices has an effective "Arete" of 5 when you roll to see how well a technomagickal Effect works.

Such toys need to be maintained by someone who understands the principles employed by the vehicle's designer; a Verbena has a hell of a time getting that MiB's special motorbike to work right, even if she does know how to ride. The Storyteller might require a character using an "enhanced" vehicle to belong to the group that built the machine. At the least, she should have two or three dots in Technology before she can employ anything other than the vehicle's Armor and basic systems. As an option, the Storyteller might let the character fool around with the vehicle until something happens; that Verbena may not know how to bring the bike's systems online, but it could be fun to watch her try.... Exactly *what* happens when a character experiments with another mage's vehicle is completely up to the Storyteller. Maybe she can figure it out with a Wits + Technology roll... maybe not.

Inspiration

As is probably obvious, **Tales of Magick: Dark Adventure** owes its existence to action-adventure movies. After various enthusiastic debates over "What would be a good **Mage** movie," we decided to make a book about bringing our favorite choices to the gaming table. Some of those films include:

Vehicle Reference

Wheeled Vehicles

| Vehicle | Safe Speed | Max Speed | Maneuver | Crew | Armor |
|------------------|--------------|--------------|----------|------|-------|
| Bicycle | 3 x Strength | 8 x Strength | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| Compact | 70 | 130 | 6 | 1 | 2 |
| Mid-sized Car | 70 | 120 | 5 | 1 | 3 |
| Sports Car | 130 | 170 | 9 | 1 | 2 |
| Race Car | 140 | 240 | 10 | 1 | 2 |
| Limousine | 70 | 110 | 4 | 1 | 4 |
| Mini-van | 70 | 120 | 6 | 1 | 2 |
| Van | 60 | 100 | 5 | 1 | 3 |
| RV | 60 | 80 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| Small Motorcycle | 75 | 130 | 8 | 1 | 0 |
| Large Motorcycle | 90 | 170 | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| Off-road Bike | 50 | 80 | 9 | 1 | 0 |
| Pickup Truck | 70 | 110 | 5-8 | 1 | 3 |
| Large Truck | 60 | 110 | 4-8 | 1 | 3 |
| Tractor-trailer | 70 | 110 | 4-8 | 1 | 4 |

Super-Vehicles

All additional modifications are custom-made Devices.

| Vehicle | Safe Speed | Max Speed | Maneuver | Crew | Armor | Weapons |
|-----------------------|------------|-----------|----------|------|-------|----------|
| Badass Hypertech Bike | 120 | 200 | 7 | 1 | 5 | # |
| Backpack Ornithopter | 120 | 200 | 10 | 1 | 3 | none |
| Black Helicopter | 200 | 400 | 10 | 4 | 10 | # and & |
| Bullet-proof Limo | 80 | 120 | 4 | 1 | 8 | (custom) |
| Reinforced Van | 50 | 100 | 5 | 1 | 10 | (custom) |

Aircraft

| Vehicle | Safe Speed | Max Speed | Maneuver | Crew | Armor | Weapons |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------|----------|--------------|-------|---------|
| Small Prop | 110 | 170 | 5 | 1 (3 pass.) | 3 | none |
| Medium Prop | 180 | 230 | 4 | 2 (10 pass.) | 4 | none |
| Large Prop | 270 | 380 | 3 | 3 (50 pass.) | 5 | none |
| Lear Jet | 350 | 450 | 4 | 2 (20 pass.) | 4 | none |
| Fighter Jet | Mach 2 | Mach 2.5 | 7 | 2 | 3 | * |
| News Copter | 140 | 220 | 6 | 2 (2 pass.) | 2 | none |
| Large Helicopter | 150 | 240 | 6 | 2 (8 pass.) | 3 | none |
| Attack Chopper | 180 | 300 | 9 | 2 | 9 | & |
| Military Utility-Copter | 180 | 280 | 7 | 3(10 pass.) | 5 | # |
| Hot Air Balloon | Wind | Wind | 0 | 1 (3 pass.) | 0 | none |

Weapons

* = Four Sidewinder missiles (Difficulty 8, Damage 15, Rate 1, Range 3000 yards), six Sparrow missiles (Difficulty 8, Damage 20, Rate 1, Range 3000 yards); 20 mm cannon (Difficulty 7, Damage 15, Rate 3, Range 1000 yards), 14 250-lb. bombs (Difficulty 8, Damage 40)

= Two .30 caliber machineguns (Difficulty 6, Damage 12, Rate 1, Range 800 yards, Capacity 100 shots), or two 30 mm cannons (Difficulty 7, Damage 15, Rate 8, Range 1200 yards, Capacity 100 shots), or six 2.75" rockets (Difficulty 8, Damage 15, Rate 1, Range 3000 yards, Capacity 1 shot) and two .30 caliber machineguns

& = 30 mm cannon, 16 TOW missiles, 16 2.75" rockets

• *Batman* and *Batman Returns*: Okay, they're not very **Mage**, but the original Tim Burton films are pretty dark, and "those wonderful toys" make great inspiration for Etherite or Technocratic Devices.

• *Big Trouble in Little China*: An excellent example of High Adventure turned Dark. Jack is far too flawed to be a true hero, but he's the best we have at the moment and he's in way over his head, with demons, sorcerers, demigods, magic potions and all that kind of thing. But he survives it all and even triumphs, based purely on gut instinct and old-fashioned stubbornness — hey, "it's all in the reflexes."

• *Blade*: Ooo, no one had a copy of **Vampire: The Masquerade** in their hands when *this* movie was made, did they? Seriously, aside from a few loopy plot points (par for the course in action films, unfortunately), this dark little ditty seriously rocks.

• *Bladerunner*: The ultimate cyberpunk movie and one of the first with a real anti-hero — Dekker does his job because he's good at it, not because it's right. The villains have their reasons, too; the noblest character in the movie is the major villain Roy, who strives to change the very nature of his existence.

• *Dark City*: Dark Adventure with definite **Mage** overtones. (I defy anyone to tell me the hero is anything less than a true willworker, suddenly Awakened!) Extremely gritty setting, very "noir" in style, a hapless and confused hero, and ominously mysterious opponents with terrifying powers.

• *Face-Off*: An excellent example of High Adventure gone twisted — a real "good guy" who has to become "bad" to catch the bad guy, and who risks losing himself in the role. A cruel and nasty world with unexpected depths; the "bad chick" and her arms-dealer brother are surprisingly sympathetic, and even the villain has a deep attachment to his

younger brother. And don't miss the Progenitor-style experiment that sets up the plot....

- *Hard-Boiled*: It wasn't the first, it may not have been the best (*A Better Tomorrow* is a superior film), but the movie that introduced Chow Yun Fat to American film goobs remains one of the grittiest over-the-top action flicks ever. Not *Mage*, but amazingly inspirational to this book nonetheless.

- *La Femme Nikita*: Truly dark, with several twists and turns and a heavy dose of personal anguish. Very psychological; there's a lot less violence than you might expect from a movie about an assassin. The TV series, featuring a cast too beautiful to live and some of the most intricate backstabbing this side of the soaps, is even better. If you ever wanted to know what day-to-day life inside the Technocracy is like, here it is.

- *The Long Kiss Goodnight*: Although Kathy Ryan disagrees, Phil sees Amanda as a quieter version of Charlie, the hyperskilled killer in this high-octane Dark Adventure. The heroine's peaceful life comes crashing down as she learns that the world — and she herself — is much more corrupt and violent than she believed. Watch this movie for great examples of coincidental magick: How do they

survive that fall into the icy lake, or that explosion at the end? How can some of those stunts work? Who cares?!

- *Mission: Impossible*: More of a High Adventure, although the initial deaths give it a hard feel and personal edge. Great for a sense of intrigue, for its constant plotting and counter-plotting, and for its general feeling of desperation and rage.

- *The Professional*: Gritty, with a flawed but admirable hero who recognizes that his choice of action will probably destroy him, yet he does it anyway because it's right.

- *Strange Days*: A bizarre movie with intense paranoia; the general public alternates between apathy and mass hysteria while amoral folks try to survive the mess. A great example of a hero getting in way over his head, and events spiraling out of control.

- *The Terminator*: One of the original big-budget Dark-Adventure movies. The hero is only slightly more trustworthy than the villain. The bad guy is an unstoppable killing machine from the future. The heroine is a ditz. And the body count just keeps rising. An excellent example of the violent side of the genre. Oh, yeah; don't forget *Terminator II: Judgment Day*, either.



Tales of Magick: Dark Adventure

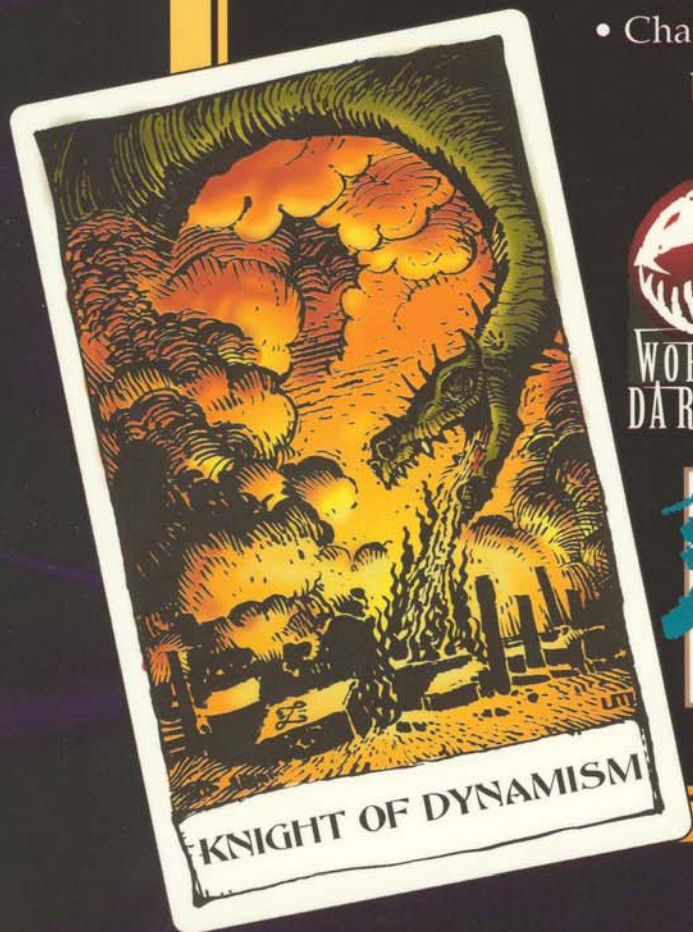
Kick Ass!

Some people think the Awakened sit around dreaming about Ascension. Wrong. Dead wrong. When reality itself is on the brink of destruction, you don't contemplate your navel. You fight — and sometimes die — for the sake of the future.

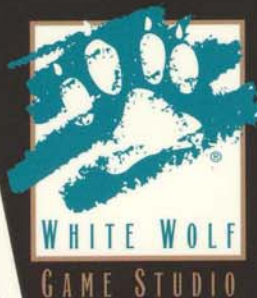
And Live to Tell About It!

Tales of Magick takes Mage from the realm of abstraction and kicks it screaming into high gear. If you ever wondered how to run an exciting chronicle, check this out:

- Story ideas for high adventure in the World of Darkness
- Earthshaking events in the world of Mage
- Character templates, cool toys, classic bits and more!



WORLD OF
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